When news of the Conclave crossed Thedas, a nobleman—Trevelyan—called a meeting of Mages, those who were Apostates before the fall of the Circles. He offered them a chance to speak on their own behalf at the Conclave. They send an Apostle young enough to safely pass as a member of the Trevelyan family without raising too many questions, and with a clean enough record that she’s genuinely an example for the ‘does-no-harm’ Apostle. Unfortunately, the Conclave does not end well. Young!Inquisitor.
Seekers of Truth. The name itself is self-explanatory, but it does little to lend to the scope of what a Seeker must actually do in pursuit of the truth. Detaining Varric Tethras was a menial task, though interrogating him had been a daunting process...not morally, but mentally. The man blathered on and on in circles, and just when it seemed his words were mere ramblings, he brought it right back around to the point of the interrogation. Hawke, the Champion of Kirkwall, their capabilities and the tale of their involvement in sparking the Mage Rebellion.

And ultimately, how he had absolutely no idea where to find the Champion.

All in all, his interrogation was the very least of what a Seeker could do—*should* do—to unveil the truth of any matter.

Thoughts lingering on the face of her most current prisoner, Cassandra Pentaghast wished for the umpteenth time she could thrash that damned Dwarf. Maybe Andraste would convey her wishes to the Maker and he would flip the scenario on them—that it would be Varric receiving the full extent of a Seeker’s wrath, and this...impossibly young-looking *girl* could be given the courtesy of a chair and a chat with the Lady Seeker.

But no. That was not how this story unfolds. Varric was somewhere on Haven’s Chantry grounds, probably spinning a yarn and having a drink with the men who were assigned to guard him, while Cassandra Pentaghast knelt in the lowest levels of the Chantry preparing herself for what had to be done.

“Blessed are they who stand before the corrupt and the wicked and do not falter,” not as her voice did as Cassandra kneeled with hands clasped, alone outside the door to the gi—the prisoner’s cell. “Blessed are the peacekeepers, the champions of the just.”

"You’re going to want to see this, Cassandra.”

Leliana’s voice was quiet and certain when she’d approached the Seeker after her scouts’ return to Haven from the Temple of Sacred Ashes. Cassandra had been in the ‘war room’. What an awful thing to have in a Chantry. It wasn’t the room itself’s fault, it was just the biggest and most convenient focal point, where they could plan, or attempt to plan how in the Maker’s name they were going to handle...this.

A hole in the forsaken sky. An explosion at the conclave—the Temple of Sacred Ashes and all who had been inside obliterated.

Behind Leliana came two Inquisition soldiers and between them, a woman, head lolled back in unconsciousness, left hand blazing with the kind of veil-light that rend the sky in twain.

No. Not a woman. Well on her way, but no—this was a girl, she could not have been older than Cassandra had been when she’d begun her training to become a Seeker. Younger possibly. She should be somewhere worrying about what to wear to the next ball or if the boy she likes will ask her to dance, not...committing acts of terrorism? Treason? The mark on her hand could be no coincidence—and something annoying in the back of the Seeker’s mind spoke in Varric’s voice ‘caught green handed, you could say’. She couldn’t.

And then the mark sparked, crackling to life and casting a sheen of sickly Fade-green across the hard grey stone of Haven’s walls, prompting Cassandra to draw her sword, fulling
expecting the green glow to summon Demons into the room, but no, no Demons, the only thing the mark summoned was the Seeker’s reaction and the feeblest of pained whimpers to drop from the girl’s lips, her face contorting in agony before she fell lax again in the hands of her captors.

The Apostate Solas, the Elf that approached the Inquisitions soldiers with an offer of assistance, took over the girl’s care—he was her cellmate after all. Cassandra thought it too coincidental that the Elf was so near when the conclave exploded, but readily offered knowledge and help on how to deal with this breach in the sky. So, he was cast into Haven’s dungeon, and the girl soon after. The Elf quietly intoned instructions to his guards who, under the watchful eye of Leliana, carried out Solas’s wishes, bringing him fresh water and dry cloth, Elfroot, and any Lyrium that could be spared as he attempted several different magical and traditional techniques to stop the Mark from spreading such that it killed the girl before she could be questioned and brought to the Breach to test the Mark on her hand—if she could close it.

There was a hanging implication that such preventive treatment would be stopped after questioning and closing the breach, and that such a thing would be merciful for a girl facing charges of treason, settled a cold dead weight in the Seeker’s stomach.

“O Maker, hear my cry: Guide me through the blackest nights. Steel my heart against the temptations of the wicked. Make me to rest in the warmest places,” the Chant sounded like a plea more than a prayer, Maker she had to be right, this had to be what was right it was her duty. “O Creator, see me kneel: For I walk only where You would bid me. Stand only in places You have blessed. Sing only the words You place in my throat.”

She would interrogate the prisoner soon. Solas had confirmed she would be rousable within the next few hours. Maybe less. This girl, chained and crouched on the cold dungeon floor.

This was not personal. And yet it was. Divine Justinia was everything, and this girl should mean nothing, especially if she had carried out the attack on the conclave.

If.

“My Maker, know my heart: Take from me a life of sorrow. Lift me from a world of pain. Judge me worthy of Your endless pride.”

She would have to do whatever it took to get the truth from this girl. Questioning would be a kindness that could be quickly ripped away, beating, torture—Solas had been reticent to confirm the aura of magic that emanated from the girl, it wasn’t the Mark it was her, she was a Mage.

He had nodded gravely when the Seeker ordered him to ensure the girl was administered a draught of Lyrium before questioning. That the glowing blue liquid would be coursing steadily through her bloodstream by the time Cassandra woke her from her days-long slumber. Both women had to be prepared for the Seeker to use her gifts if necessary.

“My Creator, judge me whole: Find me well within Your grace. Touch me with fire that I be cleansed. Tell me I have sung to Your approval.”

She would light a fire in this girl’s veins, burn the truth from her blood if she had to. It was her duty. And then she would lead her to the Breach, by force if necessary, and make her close that damned thing if it killed her.

“Blessed are the peacekeepers, the champions of the just.”
“She is ready, Lady Seeker, whenever you are,” the Elfin Apostate said in clipped syllables as he steadily met the gaze of the Human woman standing just outside the dungeon doors. Inquisition soldiers—guards—flanked him, ready to escort he and the Dwarf Varric to the forward camp. They’d both volunteered to be of assistance, regardless of their treatment at the hands of the Inquisition, the hole in the sky made every injustice seem inconsequential.

Cassandra had finished her prayers. Her vocal ones, anyway, the ones handed down through the Chantry that everyone said. Her internal monologue which projected eternally to the Maker, however, did not quiet even as she said, “Very well.” Politeness put a ‘thank you’ readily at her lips but it died in her throat. The courtesy of a ‘thank you’ felt crass given what the gratitude covered.

*Thank you,* for keeping a young girl alive long enough so that she could be questioned and tortured if need be.

*Thank you,* for preparing her blood so that it may burn in her body until truth spills from her until she has earned the right to breathe without the air in her lungs tearing at tissue like knives tracing the lines of her every vein.

*Thank you,* for being complicit to the demands of the Inquisition.

Solas gave her one of his very regal nods. The motion struck her oddly, like the respect he placed in the act was meant to mock, not to regard someone in any high esteem. Or perhaps it’s that it seemed a gesture a king would give to dismiss a lesser man. Then, head held high despite his voluntarily captured state, he led his guards down the dark hallway, ready to face the Breach.

Leliana emerged from the dungeon then the door closing silently behind her. Blue eyes were hard with determination that spoke of hatred. Cassandra’s resolve wavered but for a moment more as the thought glanced her mind that perhaps the Lady Nightingale would be better suited for questioning the girl. As in, perhaps the red head could better stomach the task of interrogating their prisoner and all that may involve.

But no, the glimmer of hatred in Leliana that would allow her to do unspeakable things to any she thought had brought harm to Divine Justinia, would blind her to the truth. It would take little to convince the woman that this girl killed her mentor, and then nothing would convince her otherwise—regardless of what may actually be.

Angered and hurting as Seeker Pentaghast was, as much as she desperately wanted this girl to be a monster hell-bent on the destruction of the world, if she was nothing more than an innocent bystander, some strange girl with a glowing green birthmark that fell out of the Fade because that’s what she usually does on a Tuesday, Cassandra would be able to accept either of those truths, and any in-between.

So, Leliana at her back, Cassandra Pentaghast stormed into Haven’s dungeon, ready to seek the truth.

She’d been burning for days. Her left hand, sometimes further up her arm, and at one point burning in her chest, creeping ever closer to her heart. And then hands, cool and soothing, with long, fine fingers that’s touch brought healing and comfort, would douse the flames, set back the burning until it was just a flicker in her hand. It was contained, it could not be extinguished, but she was grateful for what little had been done. *Thank you,* to those hands, and whoever they belong to.
She thinks they belong to the voice—the voice was nice. Calming. Masculine but gentle, it spoke with certainty and short syllables like he was used to speaking in the rhythm of another language, his mouth was not made to speak the common tongue of Humans, but he deigned to, in order to tell her…something. Stories maybe. That’s what it felt like—something in his tone implied he was launching into a great Epic, and sometimes she actually understood the words he was saying—catching phrases describing fields of flowers, colors that name could not be given to, and for some reason ‘griffons’ were a consistent theme, that was something she noticed through the haze that left most of his words heard but not comprehensible to her pain-clouded mind.

She lulled in and out of conscious, like a child’s toy, yo-yoing between agonizing darkness, and blacked out nothingness. She couldn’t see when she was ‘awake’ or as much as she could be. She wasn’t sure if perhaps she’d been blinded, or if it was just heavy lids she couldn’t feel to raise. When the burning wasn’t consuming her weary attention, the aching did well to make up for it. Her shoulders, chest, back, even her legs ached. She was kneeling, crouched on something solid and cold, knees pressing into chest, chest curving inward as shoulders hunched lax and unmovable. Her body felt like lead. Burning, aching lead.

She was so tired.

Until the hands carded through her hair and then tilted her head back. They’d done that a few times before to administer fluids—sometimes broth, or water, or the occasional potion that eased her aches. But this time was different.

Cool magic slinked seductive down her throat. Lyrium.

That was…nice. Good even, her bones felt less heavy. Her magic was appreciative, drinking it up like a person dying of thirst, it sang pleasant songs in her blood.

But then the hands were gone. They took the voice with them.

That felt…lonely. Sadness seeped between the cracks pain had left in her chest. The pleasant singing of magic changed its tune to something meant to soothe. She was not alone, she had her magic, and the Maker—neither would leave her.

CRACK

Green flame sparked brighter, and brighter still as pain flared even stronger in her left hand. Fear ignited in her veins and for the first time in the days that weighted her like years, she felt alive, and aware. Jerked from her dazing half-sleep, she could finally open her eyes, and her body wrenched upward of its own accord only to be slammed back down against the stone floor of what she realized was a prison.

The bars were one clue.

The chains that restricted her every movement, keeping her crouched on the floor, were another.

The armored guards wielding swords all pointing at her throat, were a rather solidifying suggestion that yes, she was in prison.

Huh. On their journey to the conclave, the Noble Mage from House Trevelyman had bragged about his night in a cell in Val Royeaux. Being a noble gave him certain allowances, he’d been allowed to leave the Circle to visit family in Orlais and he’d used the liberty to get rowdy in the open-air pub, had too much to drink, and too many encouraging friends, so he’d brandished his
manhood for all to see.

Somehow, she didn’t think she’d be bragging about this stint behind bars. He’d at least had a funny story to tell any who would listen—she…she wasn’t even sure what she did.

She certainly didn’t have a manhood to brandish in public so that was one probability down the drain.

Maker, why couldn’t she remember?

The Conclave. That’s where she’d been, she could remember that much.

There was a new-found hope among Apostates—the Conclave, and Divine Justinia, the head of the Chantry, had given them reason to believe that maybe, just maybe Mages and Templars could sit down and build new bridges to better places. Perhaps the Circles would serve as places of learning Mages actually wanted to pursue, rather than prisons they were forced to serve life sentences in simply for being born with what the Chantry claims is supposed to be a gift from the Maker Himself. Maybe Apostates could see a future where they did not live in fear of being found by Templars—maybe they could live their lives as anyone else did, in the public, doing whatever it is they found their niche in.

That the price for unruly magic could be patience and practice, not Tranquility—that the ultimate loss of self was reserved only for those who truly wished to do others harm.

She’d gone to the conclave as a representative of…well…Apostates. Not all of them, obviously. Ones that had been Apostates before the rebellion. And even then, it was really just those who had gotten together in the Free Marches, at the meeting.

Apostates were constantly on the move to stay out of sight of any who would suspect their magic or report them to Templars, but a great many of them knew of each other, either through association, rumor, or the occasional face-to-face encounter.

When news of the Conclave ran through the community, there was a meeting of sorts. Rumored meeting. That had almost resulted in her being eaten by a bear. Several bears. It was a saga in and of itself, the journey from a small Nevaran village to a cave nestled in the Vimmark Mountains in the south of the Free Marches, where the single largest group of Apostates she’d ever seen in her life, gathered. One of their own—a Trevelyan of all people, who rebelled in the Circle at Ostwick, had called them to this place and claimed to have heavy ties to the Chantry in Ferelden. Ties that could get the Apostates a moment with the Chantry’s higher-ups, and quite possibly, with Divine Justinia herself.

Of course, Trevelyan was going as a Representative of Ostwick’s Circle. But he’d come to know and meet many former Apostates in his time in the Circle, and felt it was a duty owed to his fellow Mages to offer the same chance he had at having a voice at the Conclave.

They’d argued for hours. ‘They’ meaning her fellow Apostates, she wasn’t one for yelling, or giving orders for that matter. She was just a kid. She’d just gone to listen. She had been worried their din would have alerted outsiders to their presence in the caves—but that was likely why they were in the middle of nowhere and not a nice, warm pub with drinks and any number of witnesses.

Some of the Apostates wanted nothing to do with the Conclave and were merely there to naysay—no one should go at all, it was dangerous! And what the hell did a noble like Trevelyan know about Apostates, this was obviously a Templar trap. Others thought they should all show up in force, and demand to be heard in front of their Circled brethren and Templars alike, with the ear
of the Chantry provided by their noble ally.

What they’d settled on, was a single ‘Representative’ of their own. One of them would go, watch, listen, and be a voice for their fellow Apostates. Trevelyan was pleased with the decision and confirmed getting one of them in would be absolutely “no problem”. In fact, the clan Trevelyan was so large it would be easy for them to just go along and get to meet with the heads of the Chantry under the guise of a member of Trevelyan’s family.

“Ellie.”

She’d been listening very carefully, but her name dropping from the mouth of an elderly Mage—a woman with kind eyes, a sharp tongue, and once upon a time, the guts to hide a young magical child in the kitchens of her Ladyship’s House until the Templars went away—that still surprised her enough to jolt like she’d been half sleeping.

“What?” a shouty one, an Elfin man, no Vallaslin over his dark features.

No one answered him really, but a dozen or so other faces in the crowd, familiar faces, began to chime in with affirmations.

“M-me?” she’d asked and drew the gaze of all seventy some odd Apostates huddled in the just cave just clinging to the light of the setting sun.

“Yes you, fool girl, you’re practically a poster child for good Apostates,” the hedge Mage who’d offered her name as tribute. “You don’t cause trouble, you’ll not start a fight or make us all look like barbarians. If you identify yourself as an Apostate, you’ll certainly be painting a picture the Chantry has never clearly seen. Apostatehood aside, you’re not a criminal, you have control over your magic without the guidance of a Circle, and you just want the right to live as anyone else. You’ve stated your case rather eloquently in the past.”

Yeah. To Templars. And only to distract them long enough while she built up the nerve to Mind Blast them. Gently. Just enough so she could escape—she’d not been trying to kill them, they were just doing their jobs. While she didn’t appreciate their job descriptions, she at the very least could respect them as Human beings.

Trevelyan had appraised her silently, though there was something like acceptance in his face. She would do.

But no, she couldn’t possibly! She was maybe fifteen? Years were hard to count when you were the only one keeping track. They couldn’t honestly think sending someone like her would make the Chantry see Apostates in a different light. Unless that light made Mages look like they should all be in playpens and had no business being out of the house after dark. In which case, the Circles were doing just fine, no need for correction at all.

Her objections were cut off when the one voice that had gone unquestioned all evening sounded, the one that sealed Ellie’s fate.

“Yeah, send the kid.”

He was a man Ellie recognized from a bar in southern Antiva. He ran the place as an underground operation to help free Apostates stay free. It was the last resort of desperate men or the luxury of well off Apostates—you absolutely have no other options, you can’t get the Circle’s dogs off your back, or you simply didn’t want the hassle of handing another big move. So, you go to his bar, order Blue Templar. He pours you a shot, you hand over more money than most make in
a year. Then you knock back the shot, and the ghastly stuff knocks you out like a light and next thing you know, you wake up days later and you’ve been somehow smuggled to a new town to live a new life, and it’s your job to keep it safe.

Ellie was really, really glad she only ever asked him to let her fill up her water skin with the pump out back. She didn’t think she’d like blacking out and waking up in a new life.

Correction—she could now confirm she did not like blacking out and waking up in a new life.

Why was she in prison? Was she still at the Conclave? Where was Trevelyan?

BANG

Oh Maker, she really did not like blacking out and waking up in a new life.

Anger incarnate came bursting through the dungeon doors. The woman looked like wrath—sharp cheekbones, a jawline that could cut glass, dark eyes like smoldering coal. For a moment, Ellie wondered if perhaps this was not a woman, but a Spirit of Rage here from the Fade, made flesh.

“Tell me why we shouldn’t kill you now,” she seethed, in what Ellie could almost assuredly place as a Nevarran accent.

She couldn’t help it, her arms began shaking in their restraints, shivers coursing up and down her spine, cutting deeper into the soreness in her muscles. With panic, she thought her magic might rear up inside her to protect her, and she clenched her eyes shut and put her best efforts into quieting it—somehow, she didn’t think adding fire to this situation would help anything. Her magic teasingly played through her body that she wouldn’t have released fire, but ice.

Oh, to chill Rage’s temper. Ha ha. No, ice wouldn’t be helpful either, she assured her magic.

Everything in her went still and silent once this woman of wrath gave explanation for just why exactly Ellie was being held prisoner.

“The conclave is destroyed, everyone who attended is dead. Except for you.”

Destroyed? Everyone was…what?

Bile blazed a path up her throat. Everyone? All of the Mages, the Templars—the heads of Chantry and…oh Maker, not Divine Justinia! Not…

Not Trevelyan. No please no.

“Nervous? Don’t be. Just stick with me, kid, and you’ll be fine.”

Swallowing hard and then gasping for air she looked up into her interrogators face, meeting her eyes as she begged to know, “W-w-what do you mean everyone’s dead?”

Her question was not met with an answer. Instead, Rage took her shackled left hand sharply by the wrist and yanked it up for her examination.

“Explain this.”

It was the first time Ellie properly saw what exactly was causing her hand to burn so, waxing and
waning from the feeling that her hand was being stuck directly into fire, to hot sand being ground into an open wound, and back again.

Green, shining light that sputtered and spat, gaping from her hand.

“I-I can’t,” oh Maker that was not a helpful answer, the hand around her wrist tightened and Maker she could feel it bruising, the bone questioning if it should crack. Her magic surged, wanting to protect, but the girl took a deep, deep breath and forced it back. “I don’t know what that is, or how it got there.”

Tighter. Maker, Maker, Maker that hurts, but then her wrist was released, flung back at her face as Rage exclaimed, “You’re lying!” and her hand raised like she would strike the girl, but her fingers met like she intended to snap them.

It was then Ellie noticed the red head. A woman in purple-silver armor, she seemingly materialized from the shadows, striding forward to place a hand on Rage’s wrist and halt the snapping motion with the cry of, “Stop!”

“Leliana,” the Nevarran woman objected.

“Don’t! We need her Cassandra.”

Ahh, Rage had a name. Cassandra. Pretty—she was pretty too in a ‘I could kill you and you would thank me for the honor’ sort of way.

Cassandra growled, and her eyes blazed with something that said she would be yelling at the woman named Leliana in private for interfering with her interrogation. “I know.” Was all she ground out, for now. There was something in what little she said that implied ‘I was hardly going to kill the girl’.

There were worse things than dying though.

Worse things than dying…everyone is dead.

She couldn’t quiet herself. Sniffles, sobs worked through her body as she tried to still herself, cease her carrying on. But good god.

Everyone was dead? Everyone?

“I-I can’t beli-eve it. You’re certain everyone is dead? My- I was with my fr-friend. Trevelyan. Y-youngest of his H-house.”

Youngest of his House, save the few baby nieces and nephews he had. That he adored. The noble Mage from House Trevelyan had taken their travels to the conclave like a grand adventure shared between two upbeat kindred spirits. He’d chattered most of the time, about what would happen at the Conclave, all his relatives that would be there, and most reverently revealed a multi-faceted locket that unfolded several times over, holding tiny perfect portraits of his beloved nieces and nephews. He’d rattled off their names, their favorite colors, who could walk and who was learning, what their first words were—and even offered her an invitation to meet them sometime when this mess was over.

You’re technically a Trevelyan now, he’d joked, you should meet the rest of your ‘long lost’ family. Wouldn’t that be a laugh? I have so many cousins, introducing a total stranger as one even to actual members of the family would likely go unquestioned. You’ll probably be claimed by some poor aunt or uncle out of their minds trying to keep track of all of their actual children.
Their children. Thank the Maker, thank everything that is holy out there no little ones had been brought along to the meeting of the Conclave.

Everyone was dead.

Except for her?

Why?

She hadn’t realized her internalized “Why?” had torn from her throat and exposed itself before her captors, laced with all her sadness, her anger.

Who would do this?

Cassandra looked at her prisoner, assessing her as Trevelyan had that day in the cave. Apparently, there was something to be seen in Ellie, some truth, and she gave Leliana a nod. The red head came to stand before the girl.

Where Cassandra had been rage, this woman—closed off, reserving resentful judgement until now—was something akin to compassion as she spoke.

“Do you remember what happened? How this began?” she asked.

It took a moment, curse the sniffling gasps that held her words hostage. Ellie took another breath, and tried to speak clearly, and calmly. “My name is Ellie. I was attending the Conclave as a guest of the Mage Trevelyan, to represent my people.”

“Your people. As in Mages? Or an organization?”

“My people as in Mages. Apostates, specifically.”

“Charter.”

The name summoned a pretty Elf woman, her red hair was woven into intricate braids atop her head, and Ellie absentmindedly wondered what Leliana did with her own locks under her hood.

Charter held a clipboard with several sheets of thick parchment hooked on it, her eyes scanning pages and flipping them to reveal the next, and then the next before she held the clipboard out for Leliana’s appraisal.

“Ah. You are listed here as Eleanor Trevelyan?”

“I’m just Ellie. The Trevelyan is borrowed. I’m not a noble, I’m just a Mage. Ser Trevelyan called a meeting of Apostates and said he wanted to give us a chance to speak for ourselves at the Conclave. They decided I should go, and he lent me his family name, so my attendance wouldn’t be questioned, and I could get the chance to talk to members of the Chantry, and…and if Templars were looking to start snapping up Mage attendee’s, my supposed noble status would make me a less vulnerable target,” she rambled.

But Leliana had picked up on one thing in particular. “Talk, to members of the Chantry.”

“Oh, oh no I really do mean talk, honest! I would never hurt anyone—that’s why I was sent! To make a good example and prove we don’t have to be a danger! I’ve never once thought of killing anyone! Ever!”

“So, you arrived at the Conclave. Then what happened,” Leliana continued.
her eyes clenched shut, and a wave of nausea passed through her as she tried to remember, "I’m sorry, I’m sorry. I’m trying to think. Trevelyan and I got in line to enter the Temple of Sacred Ashes…we got in pretty early—the line was much longer behind us than it was before us. He introduced me to a few Chantry Mothers and then one of them—Mother Penelope? She said she wanted to introduce me to…Dory I think she said. Trevelyan didn’t know who that was, and we were separated—he wasn’t allowed to come for some reason.”

He hadn’t liked that, he’d immediately suspected her cover had been blown somehow. He made it clear that he didn’t like his ‘young cousin’ being whisked away from his supervision. *She’s my responsibility,* he’d said. And something warm had settled in her chest, that she had an ally nearby that was looking out for her.

Dead.

“Dory is not a name she used after her promotion, it is used like code now. Mother Penelope told her fellow Chantry Mothers who she was taking you to see without tipping off those who needn’t be in the know. You must have been surprised,” Leliana said.

Ellie shook her head. Both as a negatory, and to clear it. “I don’t know. I can’t remember much after that. I-”

Her mark crackled again, sending even Cassandra taking a step back and placing her hand on the hilt of her sword.

Ellie pulled her hand as close to her body as she could, as if to keep it from sparking at anyone else, “Sorry sorry sorry,” she half-hissed as her hand burned. “I don’t know why it does that.” I don’t know what it is.

“Do you remember anything else? Anything at all?” Leliana asked.

“I don’t know…it’s strange. Weird-strange. It might have just been some kind of nightmare when I think of it, but I remember…running. Things were chasing me, and there was this woman…”

“A woman?”

“She reached out to me, and then I…I fell? Something like that—I remember rubble, air that smelled like rain. There were people shouting maybe? I’m not sure. Then there was the burning, and the hands with the nice voice, and then the whole—bang! With the door there.”

Charter covered her mouth with her clipboard, like she might laugh at the girl’s summary of her time in…wherever she was.

“Leliana.” Cassandra spoke then, “go to the forward camp. I think it is time I take the prisoner to the Rift.”

Rift? Oh Maker, Rift?

There was a Rift somewhere near by?

And she was being taken to it?

Was it wrong that Ellie could picture Cassandra bringing her to a Rift, only to throw her in? She wasn’t a seer by any means, but the probability of such a thing happening in the near future seemed high.
Guards, swords now sheathed, stepped forward undid the chains that held their prisoner in place, but her hands were quickly captured again by Cassandra as she tied them together at the wrist, then hauled Ellie to her feet. The girl worried she may have bitten a hole in her lip to keep from screaming along with her muscles’ protest. Her bones felt hallow, and what little toned bulk gathered around them was little more than mush beneath her skin. Her legs tingled like electricity traveling up and down them as blood more freely flowed to the recently underused appendages, waking them from their own achy slumber.

But she stumbled along, trying to keep one foot in front of the other as, with an affirmative nod from Cassandra, she followed her captor out of the dungeon.

The stairs were just. Not nice. They were long, and her legs didn’t understand why she insisted on stepping so high, and then resting her weight on just one leg at a time to pull her body up and forward of all things when they just wanted her to lie down.

But she became awash with something both haunting and welcome at the top of the stairs. Once they were on the main level of the building, she realized she was in a Chantry of all places. It was…unnerving that a Chantry had been her prison where she’d felt so much fear. But it was soothing that she was somewhere ordained for the worship for her god. Somehow, the idea made her silent prayers for salvation feel more heard.

She followed Cassandra out of the Chantry, and her eyes widened at the sight.

The sky was…gone? No not gone just covered.

The heavens were awash in glowing green light—in places the light faded, the blue of the sky was corrupt with a haze of green making it look almost sickly. Like an infected wound.

“We call it ‘The Breach’. A massive Rift into the world of Demons that grows larger with each passing hour. It is not the only one—but it is the largest—and all were caused by the explosion at the Conclave.”

Explosion? That’s what killed everyone at the Conclave?

So, someone had blown open the sky—and these people thought Ellie had done it.

She liked the sky the way it was before this Conclave mess, thank you very much. Maker, she loved the stars, and she couldn’t see how they’d shine with all that hell-scape polluting the sky with unnatural light.

“How the Breach may grow until it swallows the world.”

And then the torn sky rumbled and crackled, and pain ripped through her left hand, sending her to her knees with a scream, cold-wet seeping into her pantlegs. Snow, cold snow, maybe it would cool her hand…

Cassandra kneeling before her distracted her from that line of thinking. The woman looked…less scary than before. Like she was trying to appeal to Ellie as opposed to forcing her.

“Each time the Breach expands, your Mark spreads, and it is killing you. You say you went to the Conclave with no ill intent—but the Mark on your hand is somehow connected to the Breach in the sky. Regardless of how it got there—it may be the key to stopping the Breach, but there isn’t much time.”

Ellie looked at the Breach overhead. It was only by the grace of the hands and their voice
that she was alive right now. The Breach would grow stronger and she would die—may still die even if she manages to do something about it and Maker it’s huge how do these people even begin to think Ellie could have done this, and then look at her and say ‘ah yes, we think you can seal that world-swallowing hole right on up just zippity zap’?

But then she met Cassandra’s gaze. This woman believed the Mark on Ellie’s hand could stop this, not Ellie herself. She wasn’t sure what this thing burning her to death was exactly, but maybe it could be of help to someone. Maybe she could spend her few hours before the Breach consumed her either in its victory, or its closure, doing something that would help people.

“I understand.”

Surprise was definitely a new look for the Nevarran woman.

“Then…?”

“I’ll do what I can. Whatever it takes.”

Maybe when this was all over, she would see Trevelyan again, and that was a comfort. Maker preserve their souls.

Cassandra escorted her prisoner through Haven’s estate. She would have to talk to Leliana later, about their joint interrogation technique. While she was admittedly…glad to have spared the girl her special talent with Lyrium, she didn’t appreciate that Leliana thought she had so little control over her own abilities. She had been merely going to jolt the girl in the hopes of getting more out of her before she had to take things to the next level. A flash of her power, and she knew the girl would have become a fount of information. She was a Seeker, the title is hardly one they just hand out, it has to be earned. And she had earned it, with everything in her—the title Seeker of Truth was more her identity now than her own name, than her place as the Right Hand of the Divine.

Though Leliana’s approach, asking the girl questions so calmly after Cassandra’s fury, had left the girl practically rambling off every last thing she could possibly remember—the desired result procured via a different method.

Eleanor Trevelyan…and the Trevelyan was merely borrowed. The girl was obviously young, her parents…she hadn’t mentioned them being at the Conclave, but surely, she must have parents. Did she have a last name of her own? Or was she just as she said, ‘just Ellie’?

It was hard to believe the girl was ‘just’ anything, with that Mark on her hand.

But Cassandra had seen the truth in her. When the Seeker informed Eleanor of the demise of the Conclave, she’d been truly shaken—grief, and not the sort Cassandra had seen in guilty men realizing the full consequences or true horror of their crimes, but genuine shock that such a thing had happened, and true grief for those lives lost. The girl’s face…it had been almost like a mirror of her own, when Antony…

Eleanor hadn’t gone to the Conclave to cause the sort of havoc that had ensued. So, the Mark on her hand, it had to be somehow coincidental—she’d gotten caught up in the explosion in some way that left her Marked but spared for the moment, perhaps.

For the moment. Solas did not believe he could keep the girl alive indefinitely. The Mark
would eventually kill her, so long as the Breach continued to grow. He hoped that the Mark could close the Breach and believed that quite possibly the Mark would either vanish on its own at that point, or at least stop spreading.

And as Cassandra walked alongside Eleanor through Haven’s camps, watched her grief, how she shrank back from the glares and resentment pouring from those around her, she allowed herself to, for a moment, hope beyond hope the girl’s life could be spared, and she would be proven innocent.

But the most she could do for now was silently vow to protect the dying girl with her life, and offer quiet words that may bring her some peace. “They need to believe you did this. They are angry and hurt just as we are, but they have a focal point for that anger, while we still scramble for the truth. It grounds them, gives them purpose.”

Eleanor for her part gave a subtle nod and looked like she might have offered a smile to the Seeker but thought better of it. Which was likely for the best—it would unsettle, and possibly unhinge any who saw the girl and thought her a cold-blooded killer, the destroyer of the Conclave, smiling at her captor while being led to what they were hoping was her punishment, her death.

When they made it to the bridge that would lead them out of Haven proper, Cassandra brought the girl to a halt, and drew her knife.

The girl flinched, closed her eyes as she gasped and then braced herself, as if accepting… what? Oh goodness.

Cassandra took hold of her prisoner’s hands, so she could cut loose the ropes around her wrists. When her bindings slipped to the ground at her feet, Eleanor opened her eyes and looked down at the hand holding her own before meeting the Seeker’s eye.

“There will be a trial,” she promised.

That seemed to settle it for the girl. She nodded, confirming that she understood the Seeker had no intention of murdering her anytime soon. Cassandra released her hand and resumed leading her unbound captive.

“Open the gates,” Cassandra ordered, “I am taking the prisoner to the forward camp.”

Inquisition soldiers pushed open the heavy wooden doors, and Eleanor followed the Seeker onto the dirt road, interrupted every so often by barricades, more soldiers stood their ground while a few were running back towards Haven with cries of “It’s the end of the world!”.

It truly did seem that way, didn’t it?

Regardless, they were going to the forward camp, and onward to the Breach. If the world decided to end in that time, well then, that was the Maker’s business.

The sky rumbled, and to Cassandra’s dread, the Breach expanded yet again. It’d been less than half an hour since the last such pulse, maybe it wouldn’t…

“AHH!”

Cassandra turned to find the girl, Eleanor, fallen straight onto her bottom, clutching her hand to her chest, all color gone from her face—her complexion practically turning gray.

The Seeker went down on one knee, and with care not usually found in her motions, she
laid a hand on Eleanor’s shoulder.

“Has it passed?” she asked. They couldn’t sit here for long, but…Maker—she was just a girl.

Eleanor took a deep breath. “S-sorry, sorry. Yeah, I-I’m okay.”

Cassandra, used her other hand to brace Eleanor’s arm before rising to her feet and bringing the girl with her, and then both hands were giving Eleanor’s shoulder’s what the Seeker hoped was received as a reassuring squeeze. “The pulses are coming faster now.”

“Well then,” the girl said, now steady on her feet, she beamed her own reassurance in the form of a smile, “we’d better get a move on, huh?”

The Seeker of Truth nodded, and set a faster pace for them, hoping the girl could keep up. She began explaining to her, about just how Eleanor had found herself locked in Haven’s dungeon—she had fallen, just as she’d claimed, and Inquisition soldiers found her. They brought her to Haven and said she’d fallen out of the Breach itself. They too, had seen a woman in the Breach behind her.

There were already some mumblings going around Haven’s camp that it was Andraste—that Eleanor had been caught by the Maker and delivered by his bride to receive justice for her hand in the Divine’s death.

Cassandra left that theory out of her explanation—though there wasn’t really a chance to say much beyond “You fell out of the sky, we found you, and yes, there was a woman like you said,” when they began crossing the second bridge.

Green light hurled from the heavens and Cassandra sent a hand back, pushing the girl away in the hopes she would find solid footing on uncollapsed bridging, but the effort was in vain. They both went toppling onto the ice below with the rubble Fade fire had left in its wake.

And then, as if there weren’t enough obstacles in their way, a Demon appeared.

A mere Shade, but a Demon was still trouble. Cassandra drew her sword and ordered the girl to stay back, while she handled the cursed creature herself. It clawed and screeched, knocking taloned fists against her armor, and it moved like water, trying to strike her while not being struck itself. But it was no matter, she almost had it down, it’s movements becoming more sluggish with effort after a few slicing blows of Cassandra’s blade.

Movement, fast, dark, clawing, and most definitely coming from behind the Seeker, distracted her just a split second, and one of the Shade’s claws met its mark, tearing at the flesh of Cassandra’s cheek.

But then lightning struck both Shade creatures and gave the Seeker the opening she needed to finish the creatures off herself.

And then she found herself face to face with a wide-eyed, weaponized Mage. Eleanor had apparently found a staff.

Cassandra leveled her blade at the girl’s throat, and commanded, “Drop your weapon, now!”

The staff fell from the girl’s hand immediately and she tucked her hands behind her back in surrender, to show she wasn’t going to summon any form of vicious spell that might free her from
“I only—they were trying to kill you, and you didn’t see the second I…I only meant to help,” Eleanor promised. “Are you alright?”

The Seeker let out a dismissive sound—not quite disgusted, but close. “I am behaving like a fool,” she admitted quietly before sheathing her blade. She knelt down and picked up the staff, extending it to the Mage. “You need protection and I am not best equipped to offer that all on my own. We must work together.”

Eleanor gave her a small grin as she timidly took hold of the offered staff, as if half expecting she was being tested—like if she took the weapon Cassandra would turn on her.

“I should remember you came willingly,” Cassandra offered. It wasn’t one of the girl’s ‘sorry’s but it was as close as the Seeker would have liked to get to an apology at the moment. Well…almost as close. She barely thought to stop and consider her actions more fully before offering from her personal arsenal of healing draughts to this girl she’d already allowed a weapon of all things. “Here. These will help if you are injured—we must use them wisely, we do not know what we will face.”

She tucked almost all of the bottles away in the pockets of her Mercenary Coat, with the exception of one, and Cassandra began looking her over more closely—was the girl injured from their fall? Had the Demon attacked her before turning on the Seeker? She should have been paying better attention, two lesser Demons were hardly a challenge.

“Liquid Elf-root, right?” Eleanor asked as she held the bottle in the light for examination, then uncapped the vial to sniff its contents.

“Yes, drink it if—” Cassandra’s hand flew to the hilt of her sword when one of the girl’s hands drew too close to her suddenly, and something wet swathed across her cheek followed by the slightest tingle of…oh come now.

The wound on her face was closing up.

Eleanor had jumped back immediately after her impromptus application, re-stopping the bottle of draught before tipping into her pocket. “It looked bad, Elf-root can be used topically even in liquid form—better than downing the bottle when you’ve only got littler dermal injuries.”

Huh.

“Do not do that again,” Cassandra warned, “I could have snapped your neck out of pure reflex.”

“Thanks for heads-up, I’ll have to keep that in mind in case that trial thing doesn’t work out in my favor,” she said with a grin. “You know, a broken neck is a swifter death than burning at the stake or something.”

Was she jesting? Fool girl. Well, a sense of humor in the midst of all of this wasn’t the worst thing in the world.

Cassandra and her prisoner walked side by side then, the girl keeping a firm grip on her staff as they picked up the pace. More Demons fell from the Breach, groups of three or four scattered across the landscape between them, and the forward camp. Seeker Pentaghast had been leery of arming Eleanor—though she supposed most Mages did not need staffs to truly cast all magic, she’d suspected the girl, being an Apostate, would be highly untrained and incapable of
magic without the assistance of a staff. But as they fought together, she came to realize that perhaps the girl was more qualified than she’d originally appeared. Not ‘tear a hole in the sky’ powerful, surely, but capable. After the first few Demon skirmishes, the girl had politely asked the Seeker if she would object to Eleanor including Cassandra in her own personal Barrier spell—she had apparently been mindful that her captor may not appreciate being cast upon without consent regardless of the magic being used.

Cassandra had grunted and insisted she needed no such assistance, but she would not object.

She almost had second thoughts about that the first time she felt the girl’s magic wash over her. Cool comfort swept across her skin and sent a wave of security through her, almost enough to make her lose focus on the active danger before them. But she was prepared for the feeling as they moved forward and found it beneficial both physically and on a mental level—after her initial encounter with this spell, she found the added feeling of safety took some level of unnecessary worry from her mind and allowed her to focus more on the task at hand—more on fighting and not just surviving.

There were sounds of battle just up ahead—a smaller rift had been reported in the area, and Cassandra could hear the distinctive sound of Varric’s crossbow Bianca firing, and the din of Solas’s magic sending crackles and booms through the air over the sound of the Rift itself hissing and spitting green flame.

Cassandra reached out for Eleanor’s arm, bracing her by the elbow and dropping with the girl over the steep drop off that led to the field where their allies fought against the Demons and their Rift.

The human women joined their fight, Eleanor casting her barrier wide to assist the Inquisition soldiers before slamming her staff into the ground and setting several Demons aflame.

Varric, for his part, shot down yet another of the Shades and called out, “It’s about time you got here, Seeker!”

That seemed the be the last of the Demons for now, the Elf—Solas took two long strides to Eleanor’s side and captured her left hand in his own. “Quickly! Before more come through!”

And then he raised her left hand to the sky.

Zap-crackle-CRACK

The world felt still for a moment. The Rift had sealed completely, leaving nothing but the smell of atmosphere in its wake.

The Mark worked. It could close these things.

It could close the Breach.

“Well done,” Solas said to the girl as he released her hand.

Maker, she could close the Breach, Cassandra felt almost giddy with relief.

But the closed Rift seemed to be a secondary priority to Eleanor. She looked at Solas with widecast eyes and then a blinding smile broke out across her face.

“It’s you! You’re the hands with the nice voice!” and then she proceeded to bounce in place before launching herself at the Elfin man, wrapping her arms around his neck in a bracing hug.
For his part, Solas seemed startled and unsure of exactly what to do. He finally settled at awkwardly patting the girl on the back, which seemed to be appropriate since she released him then, though she stayed close, still bouncing on the balls of her feet.

“You’re the one who helped me while I slept. Thank you, er—” she seemed to only notice his ears then and she performed a sort of bow, arms bent at the elbow, casting her hands out wide at her side—well, her left hand, in her right she still held her staff—and she said, “Ma sereanas.”

“Andaran atish’an, Da’len. I am glad to see you are well. You speak Elvish?”

Eleanor blushed and admitted, “Not fluently, just enough for niceties—to say hello, or offer help, ask for directions and the like.”

“Well, I am Solas, if there are to be introductions.”

“Ellie, it’s a pleasure.”

A high-pitched whistle brought their attention to the Dwarven man in their ranks. “Hey kid, thanks for the help, I thought we were gonna be ass deep in Demons forever.”

Ugh. Varric.

Eleanor turned to look at the Dwarven man as he holstered his crossbow on his back. “No problem, I wouldn’t want to be ankle deep in Demons, myself,” she said with a shrug.

“I hear that. Well, you’ve met Chuckles,” the Dwarf said, gesturing towards Solas to indicate that he nickname was, in fact, for him. “I’m Varric Tethras—rogue, storyteller, and occasionally unwelcome tagalong.”

And then he winked. At Cassandra.

The absolute nerve.

For her part, Cassandra let out a disgusted grunt.

The girl giggled at the Dwarven man’s antics and dipped a small bow his way, “It’s very nice to meet you, Varric. That’s a beautiful crossbow you’ve got there.”

“You noticed Bianca, huh?”

“Is Bianca her name? It’s lovely.”

“I’ll tell her you said so,” Varric said as he looked at the Mark on Eleanor’s hand, and then around the girl as if he expected to find someone else with her and the Seeker before he looked up at Cassandra like he’d just put the pieces together—he hadn’t been given much information about Eleanor when she’d been brought in, only told that a suspect had been found. Solas may have informed him of the Mark. At the very least he’d seen it in action now.

“Oh Maker’s balls Seeker, this is your prime suspect? Shit, she didn’t rough you up or anything, did she kid?”

“You’re a Seeker?” the girl asked Cassandra. Ah. She hadn’t offered up her title, had she?

“I am.”

Eleanor seemed pleased? Relieved? Had she thought Cassandra a random entity working
alone, who enjoyed capturing young girls and interrogating them? Upon reflection, perhaps she should have been more forthcoming with her title in their interaction back at Haven, perhaps that would have loosened the girl’s tongue faster if she’d known she was in the hands of the proper authorities.

“Cassandra was just doing her job,” Eleanor said then, “I just wish I remembered something useful.”

“Shit, really, you don’t remember anything?” the Dwarf asked, and at Eleanor’s affirmative nod he sighed, “and you told the Seeker that?” again, another nod. He sighed, “Damn kid. You should’ve spun a story.”

“That is what you would have done,” Cassandra seethed, in fact she still suspected that was precisely what Varric had done. She had no proof, and she had followed up on every lead his cockamamie tale had held, but something told her he was still holding back on what he knew of the Champion of Kirkwall.

Despite the long, very detailed, three act saga he’d practically performed for her when she’d questioned him. She knew far too much about Hawke’s sex life, and little to nothing about his current location.

Which was why she’d kept Varric captive, so he could tell the Divine herself, to her Most Holy’s face that he couldn’t help her find the Champion of Kirkwall and mend the rift between Mages and Templars. Justinia had a way about her that made Cassandra certain that, despite the Dwarves attitude, he would have told her the absolute truth. Sans Hawke’s more carnal exploits.

“Perhaps we should keep moving,” Solas interjected, sensing Cassandra’s patience, or lack thereof, was wearing with the Dwarf. “You were headed to the forward camp, were you not Lady Seeker?”

“Yes,” Cassandra looked to Eleanor then, “it is good we have confirmed the Mark’s abilities to seal Rifts. Now we must use it to seal the Breach—come.”

“Right,” the girl affirmed.

The four of them pursued the path to the forward camp. There was a barricade, some wood paneling put up in an attempt to contain the Demons from the Rift Eleanor had just closed, blocking their path. Solas, with his long legs merely leapt over it and held out his hand as offering to those behind him—Cassandra nodded, acknowledging the hand but not using it to assist her own assent over the fence. Varric belligerently used both hands to push himself up and over the fence, gripping the wood board tightly so he could flip his body over the fence and plant his feet on the other side before letting go.

Eleanor did take the hand Solas offered and used it to help her step up on top of the fence, only to discover the incline was steep and drop farther on the other side, it made her pause and she wobbled a bit. Varric stood just a head above the fence and held up his hand for her to steady herself—she smiled her thanks and placed her hand in his gloved one but she still ended up tumbling from her precarious perch with a surprised yelp, and an overlapping:

“Shit!”

“Lethallan!”

“Eleanor!” came Cassandra’s own startled cry.
The girl caught herself on her hands and knees, her hair, which had been in a falling pony tail for the better part of her time in Haven, whipped back and fell loose when her head shot up and she began laughing as she sat back, her bottom against the heels of her feet as her laughter subsided into giggles and she brushed her hands together to rid them of the mixture of dirt and snow.

“Are you injured?” the Seeker asked.

Her prisoner quieted her giggling and smiled up at her. “Nah, I’m okay, sorry! That was just about as graceful as I get.”

“Jeeze kid,” Varric said, “at least the Demons aren’t challenging us to a dance off.”

For all his teasing, he and Solas both offered their hands again and helped her to her feet.

Cassandra eyed her carefully. The girl was shaking a bit, obviously weary, and the Seeker wished they’d had more time—that matters weren’t so pressing that they could spare even a moment to rest. She’d only let them chatter so long because it got introductions out of the way and it allowed the girl a moment to gather her bearings before pressing on. But the closer they drew to the Breach the more concerns came to mind. The girl hadn’t had a meal in days, since whenever she ate the day of the Conclave, Solas had provided her some level of sustenance with broth and potion but she had to be famished, and her in and out of conscious state had obviously not been very restful. And all the potion in the world, it did little to quench thirst, Cassandra knew from experience it often left her throat dry, could even dehydrate you if it was a potion that used the water in your system to work.

Water. That was something she could offer. That was a concern that could be dealt with.

“Here,” she said, the word coming out more roughly than intended but never the less she uncapped her canteen and held it out towards the girl.

Eleanor looked at the canteen and then the Seeker for a second as if not entirely sure what the woman wanted her to do, but she took the canteen in hand and raised it to her cracked lips. She took a drink, a big gulp she swallowed quickly before wiping her mouth with the back of her hand and returning the canteen to Cassandra.

“Thanks,” she said with a smile.

Cassandra held her hand flat in refusal, instead offered up the cap to the girl, “Keep it, should you have need.”

The smile on her face grew into something blinding and hauntingly familiar to the Seeker and to some level of horror she felt a pang of warmth-mixed-grief in such a way she hadn’t felt in years.

It was the sort of smile she’d only received from one other in the entirety of her life. Antony had smiled like that—like the sun. He’d had a way with people, with Cassandra, that made one feel like they could do anything. Even as her features were soft, where his had been jarring, and her hair curled unruly and auburn where his had always been pin straight and smooth and even darker than Cassandra’s black locks, this Eleanor smiled at Cassandra the way Antony had, with a level of warmth and light that Cassandra could only scarcely remember now, tucked away in the fading portrait of an old locket.

Capping the canteen, the girl used the strap that had been wrapped around it to sling it over her shoulder. Cassandra nodded, seeing it sit secure at the girl’s hip before turning on her heel and
marching forward to continue their progress to the forward camp.

Combat was a welcome reprieve. There was nothing confusing about the motives of Demons—they were Demons, and you had no options when it came to their handling. Either you killed them, or they killed you, and there were no trials or interrogations, or emotions involved.

It seemed beneficial, having the girl fight alongside a fellow Mage. Eleanor appeared to be taking Solas’s example and keeping to the high ground to cast her offence. It was a marked improvement from earlier when she’d followed Cassandra’s lead—running headlong into Demons and casting while simultaneously using her staff to physically strike the creatures. Up high, behind Cassandra seemed safer for the girl, and that was what was important. They could not lose her, not with the Mark meant to close these damned Rifts.

“You fight acceptably, Ellie. Your barriers are quite impressive,” Solas said as they walked from one battle to the next, it felt. “In which Circle did you train?”

“Wait, let me guess,” Varric interjected, “You sound like a Marcher—from the east maybe? Your accents got that eastern lilt to it like you’re from Ostwick or Ansburg, one of their Circle’s I bet.”

“Neither,” Eleanor said with a shake of her head. “I’ve never been Circled. I just learned what I could, where I could.”

“What of your parents?” Solas asked the question Cassandra herself had been reticent to ask. The girl had only given the name of Trevelyan as someone she personally mourned the loss of at the Conclave, but she hadn’t mentioned parents or family at all.

“Dunno,” Ellie said lightly with a shrug. “It’s always just been me. There was a sweet Mage, Ava, who kept an eye out for me when I was littler, taught me what she could, and even built my staff. She was from Ansburg. Hence, lilting eastern accent.” She asked Cassandra, “There wasn’t a staff with me when I was brought to Haven, was there?”

“If there were it would be held as evidence, and you would not be permitted its return—you’re allowed the staff you have now for the duration of our fight against Demons, but it will be confiscated the moment there is no need,” Cassandra made sure she knew she was still a prisoner, not an ally. But she did add, looking at the girl out of the corner of her eye, “However, there wasn’t one. Our soldiers saw you fall from a Rift, with just the clothing on your back.”

Cassandra wasn’t expecting to see the girl’s chin begin to quiver at the news. She’d wept openly when she’d been told of what had happened at the Conclave, but the Seeker hadn’t thought the loss of a staff to inflict itself upon the girl like she’d lost a relative.

But Eleanor didn’t cry, not as she had before. She bit her lip and hastily swept a hand at the corners of her eyes. “It was just a staff.”

“Hey kid, don’t sweat it,” Varric said, patting the girl on the arm, “if I lost Bianca I’d be a blubbering mess. You’d have to scrape me off the tavern floor.”

“From the looks at things back in Haven, you already have an affinity for the floor at taverns,” Solas jested in an obvious effort to assist the Dwarf in lightening the mood.

“Ha-ha! Good one, Chuckles. See? I knew you’d be funny.”

“Hilarious,” Cassandra deadpanned drily.
Eleanor actually snorted, and shook her head, smiling at their antics. 

And then she was gasping, clenching her left hand and her footsteps faltered momentarily, swaying on her feet before catching herself and standing firm as she shook out her left hand. 

“Shit. You alright?” Varric asked, trailing after her as she resumed lumbering up the snow-covered steps leading them further along the trail to the forward camp. 

No, Cassandra thought, she could not be ‘alright’. That was the fourth pulse in under an hour. The Mark had engulfed the entirety of her hand and was now trying to creep up past her wrist. 

But Eleanor grinned and said, “That one wasn’t so bad. You should have seen me earlier; I thought Cassandra was going to have to piggy-back me to the Breach.” 

“Ha, I’d pay real gold to see that,” Varric said. 

At the top of the stairs their banter died, Demons were waiting. More Demons, was there no end to them? Cassandra had been keeping an eye out for Leliana along the path but had yet to see a trace of the Lady Nightingale. Hopefully she was already through this mess and waiting for them with Chancellor Roderick. 

This was Cassandra’s hope. Leliana would likely prefer being ‘ass deep in Demons’ than spend even a minute enduring Roderick’s company alone. 

“I think there’s another Rift nearby,” Eleanor warned them as they dispatched the last of the Demons on their path. Did her Mark tell her this? Her jaw was set, Cassandra noted, the way she herself often when she was dealing with pain kept silent. The Fadelight ingulfing her hand flickered more wildly, in a way similar to its movements when the Breach expanded. 

And there was, indeed, another Rift. Just before the entrance to the forward camp. 

“We must seal it, quickly!” Solas said as his stance spread, and he cast his barriers across their party, Eleanor flipped her staff around to slam the butt of her staff into the ground, sending bolts of fire flying through the air to rain down on a wraith’s head. 

Cassandra ran to take down a Shade under cover of Varric’s fire. After the initial awkwardness of their first few fights, the four of them were now working together rather smoothly. Like a team, rather than strangers fighting alongside one another purely due to circumstance. 

When the Rift stopped dripping with fresh Demons for them to fight, Solas drew Eleanor to his side and she nodded as he gave her advice on how to use the Mark on her own without his hand to guide. 

She raised her left hand to the sky, tremors working through her arm as green light blasted from her Mark and into the heart of the Rift, zapping it shut. 

The girl looked relieved even as she slumped forward, standing with her hands on her knees as she took a moment to catch her breath. 

“Well done,” Solas commended her as he placed a hand on her shoulder. 

“It’s over,” Cassandra called to the soldiers still standing dumbstruck by the gates to the forward camp. “Open the gate!”
The Seeker’s sharp command seemed to jolt the soldiers and they immediately went to task.

“We’ll regroup and press on to the breach,” Cassandra said as she came to the girl’s side. Eleanor stood up straight then, wincing slightly, and it was then the Seeker realized there was a tear in the side of girl’s mercenary coat, blood was seeping from a gash left by some Shade’s claw. When had that happened? “Here. **Drink it,**” she sternly intoned as she passed a vial of healing potion to her prisoner.

“Oh, thanks,” the girl said, with such surprise Cassandra thought she may have forgotten the Seeker had potion, had even given her some for herself.

Though the sinking feeling in her stomach said that chances were, the girl was still surprised the Seeker would deign to see her wounds tended, despite her actions.

“Is everyone else alright?” Eleanor asked.

“I am well,” Solas said as Varric confirmed, “All good here.”

The girl nodded and then downed the potion in one go. “**Oh gosh,** that’s so much better,” she said with obvious relief, “thank you.”

And again, the only response Cassandra could give this grateful girl, someone who could seal Rifts, make bad jokes, and had a smile like actual sunlight, was a dismissive grunt.

Cassandra wanted nothing more than ignore her task of bringing the girl to Roderick. She simply wanted to keep the girl from Chantry clutches, seal the Breach, and see her freed. Something in her said Divine Justinia would have agreed with such actions.

Duty drew the Seeker into the forward camp with her prisoner.

That Elf-Root was something else. Wow. Maybe she hadn’t realized just how badly she’d been feeling, but as the potion from Cassandra (Seeker and now officially a Saint in Ellie’s book) coursed through her veins the ache in her head died away, and her limbs felt lighter and no longer ached from their sudden use after being prone for so long. She could breathe easier and feel the gash beneath her ribcage beginning to itch—which meant it was at least starting to heal. Light and itchy was better than the feeling that giants were taking turns stomping her into the ground and bleeding out. Even her magic was feeling relieved as it thrummed pleasantly under her skin. It liked how much use it was getting today, and with Ellie feeling better it seemed her magic half expected her to perform the equivalent of magical cartwheels.

Cassandra led them into the camp and brought them to a supply point where she retrieved more potion and began passing them around, to Solas, and then with some reticence, to Varric.

“Here,” she said.

“Thank you, Seeker,” Solas said with sincerity as he tucked his portion of potion in the pockets of his vest.

“Yeah, real thoughtful of you,” Varric said albeit sarcastic.

There was that disgusted sound again—though Ellie wasn’t sure what Cassandra had against the Dwarf, he seemed perfectly nice. Sweet, even. Like a plushie bear with an overtaxed
liver and the mouth of a sailor.

She was very…rough, this Seeker. Oh gosh, an actual Seeker. Ellie’d had this weird mix of excitement and horror—she was in the presence of one of the most seriously badass women humanity had to offer, but all that badassery was targeted at finding the murderer of the Divine and right now Ellie was still at least on the list of suspects because, well, there was just no one else. But a Seeker.

And Maker was it ever a relief to find out just who she was being held captive by. There were obvious Chantry markings on Cassandra’s armor, but still, the confirmation that she was actually an agent of the Divine was beyond reassuring. Until Varric had given her title, Ellie hadn’t been super sure what was happening, who had her, who exactly was going to be doling out this ‘trial’ Cassandra had spoken of.

The burn climbing up her arm told her she didn’t have long. Her death was certain to her, like a truth you knew in your bones. It was a certainty that made her magic frantic in her blood—like it was fighting against an invisible enemy, mourning her, and trying to console her all at the same time. which was getting to be exhausting—it was hard to differentiate where her magic ended and Ellie began, sometimes the things it felt bled into her own feelings, but that was often useful. It worked both ways—it just took a lot of focus and some patience.

But she could be glad of some things, and so she led that thought to her magic. She’d met some of the most interesting, incredible people in these last few hours of her life. Solas—an Elfin Apostle with incredible magical knowledge that had been implemented on her first hand. Varric—the Varric Tethras, the published author who wrote stories everyone across Thedas enjoyed, an adventurer who’d lived such a colorful and vibrant life that lead him somehow to the Breach.

And to top it off, Cassandra. Ellie could only hope that if she’d had the chance to, she would have been half the woman Cassandra was. Just…maybe less scary. The Seeker had every right to be scary, and it was in fact her job to put the fear of the Maker into those who sought to destroy the Chantry, but Ellie didn’t think she could ever do ‘scary’ well herself.

Some people knew only nothingness, or pain, or terror in their final hours. Ellie…she got to know people, and the hope that when she was gone, the world would still keep moving forward to brighter and better days.

That notion quelled her magic’s panic and made it…thoughtful? It quieted drastically, and coasted smoothly along its usual path, its orbit through her body around her mana pool.

Peace and acceptance. Her magic would be there to help her no matter what they faced.

As for her list of amazing people, it expanded further still. Leliana was affirmed as a member of the ‘amazing’ column of the list. She was at a table set up with maps of the valley and a few books with Chantry symbols emblazoned on the covers, with a Chancellor, Ellie guessed by the imperious robes he wore. Leliana had been arguing with a Chancellor when they entered the camp and was holding her own admirably without punching the man, which it seemed the Seeker would rather do, from the way Cassandra’s fists clinched upon spotting the red-faced…was it buffoon, she’d muttered under her breath as they approached?

This Chancellor actually created a ‘not amazing’ column on Ellie’s list. He was…well, mean. And rude. And loud. And was unfortunately under the impression that she shouldn’t be taken to the Breach—but instead to Val Royeaux to await her trial. And wanted her back in irons, which her wrists certainly wouldn’t appreciate. Nope, she was not a fan.
The arguing quieted as Cassandra stormed up to their war table with Ellie in tow.

Leliana shared a look with Cassandra that conveyed their shared…was hatred too strong a word? Or not strong enough? Either way, Chancellor Roderick had obviously worn out his welcome with the two women.

“You made it,” Leliana said with relief. She gestured to Ellie. “Chancellor Roderick, this is—”

“I know who she is,” Roderick snapped, ignoring Ellie as he addressed Cassandra in a tone that she supposed was intended to make him sound all-powerful, “As Grand Chancellor of the Chantry, I hereby order you to take this criminal to Val Royeaux to face execution.”

Cassandra stepped forward to be in front of Ellie, her stance like she was posed to go into actual battle with the man. “Order me? You are a glorified clerk. A bureaucrat!”

“And you are a thug, but a thug who supposedly serves the Chantry.”

“We serve the Most Holy Chancellor,” Leliana corrected, “as you well know.”

“Justinia is dead!” he snapped, “We must elect her replacement and obey her orders on the matter.”

Anger on behalf of the Divine and those who were working to fix this mess being impeded by this man’s garbage bureaucracy reared its ugly head in Ellie. How dare he be so blasé about Divine Justinia—she’d only just died! The world was still in the wreckage of her demise, and as far as Ellie was concerned, even in death she was still Divine, not just ‘Justinia’. And just why did he care so much about the Divine election anyway? He certainly wouldn’t be called upon for the role. The Breach was a much more pressing issue.

“Hey!” Ellie snapped, her magic riled up at this, like a wing man egging her on as she railed at the man, “Divine Justinia is dead, hundreds of people are dead, and more will die if we don’t deal with that hole in the sky.” She raised her glowing hand eye-level with the Chancellor. “This thing is killing me, I won’t live to see your trial. You can either throw me in a cell to die, or you can let Cassandra and Leliana do their jobs. Get me to the Breach, seal it, and neither it nor I will be of any concern of yours anymore. Then you can hold your precious election.”

Solas made a noise like he’d swallowed a surprised sound and attempted to make it sound like a cough. Varric just whistled lowly and muttered, “Damn, kid.”

Cassandra was staring at her like she wasn’t sure if she should throttle Ellie for her unwelcome intrusion, or back her up.

“And how do you propose we do that? Insolent brat,” the Chancellor groused. “Our forces are outnumbered here, we must retreat—”

“We will take Eleanor to the temple, and she will seal the Breach. Our forces are enough for one last push,” Cassandra inturrupted. Ahh. No throttling for Ellie right now, that was nice.

“Charging may be too dangerous,” Leliana said, “our soldiers can distract the Demons while you take the girl through the mountain path.”

“We lost scouts out there, and our soldiers cannot distract the Demons for long—time is of the essence we must move quickly,” Cassandra countered, and then quieted as she turned and faced Ellie. “What would you propose we do?” she asked.
“You’re asking her?!” Chancellor Roderick cried in outrage.

“I kinda have to second him on that,” Ellie admitted, nervously, “I don’t know anything about soldiers or fighting or how to win a battle.”

“But you do know the Mark, and the stakes we face,” Cassandra said. “The mountain path will take the longest and though we did lose sights on our scouts there, it may be the safest way for you to reach the Breach. Charging would be more dangerous for you personally, but fastest. You said the Mark is…you would be the one most aware of the time we have left to get you to the Breach.”

Ellie held her hand close to her chest, her Mark flaring again, and if Chancellor Roderick wouldn’t absolutely delight in a display of her weakness, she would have screamed at the pain that shot through her body, fighting against her own magic as it carved a zigzag path across it.

“Charge. Definitely charge,” was her vote.

Cassandra regarded her thoughtfully for a moment and placed a firm hand on her shoulder before looking back at the Chancellor.

“Then we shall charge.”

Charging, in retrospect, might not have been the best idea in the world. There were Demons, lots and lots of Demons. She even had to seal another Rift and that was no picnic—it hurt. Like ‘everything in me is on fire’ hurt.

Though when it was over, that was nice—kind of like the feeling you get after letting off a huge sneeze, much more painful, but afterwards your whole body sort of relaxes. And Solas’s praise of her proficiency in sealing the Rifts replaced the burn of the Mark with a soothing warmth.

But then Ellie was faced with something most frightening. As soon as that Rift was sealed and the Demons dispersed, a Templar approached them.

A Templar. In armor, and feather pauldrons, and everything!

Ellie shrank back and away from the golden-haired man as he approached, she practically knocked into Solas, and her hand clenched the sleeve of his shirt—as if the best way for a Templar not to notice an Apostate was to stand right next to another, even more obvious, Apostate.

But the Templar didn’t even comment on her magic, or on her at all really. He instead offered congratulations to Cassandra for closing the Rift which was mildly insulting—Cassandra certainly helped but she wasn’t the one slowly burning to death to close those things. Rude!

“Do not congratulate me,” Cassandra said, “this is the prisoner’s doing.”

Oi! Traitor! Ellie would have appreciated Cassandra’s correction of the Templar if it hadn’t drawn his eye to her, and her glowing hand and her staff and her Apostate Elf friend.

But all he said was, “Is it? I hope they’re right about you. We’ve lost a lot of people getting you here.”

Oh, Maker he was talking to her. At least he hadn’t immediately jumped to slap chains on
her or something, but what was she supposed to say?

“I’m willing to try, I’ll do my best.”

“That’s all we can ask,” he said, was that warmth in his tone? Was he being nice? Templars weren’t nice, they yelled and chased.

“The way to the temple should be clear, Leliana will meet you there?” he confirmed with Cassandra.

“Yes, she’ll be along with forces to face the Breach. Keep them off us, Commander,” the Seeker said.

The Commander nodded. He looked over the four of them, “Maker watch over you—for all our sakes.”

As he left them, Ellie slowly released the sleeve of Solas’s shirt, and smoothed the crease she’d left in it with an apologetic smile.

“That was Commander Cullun,” Solas dropped the name quietly into her ear, “I have had scarce contact with him, but he left the Order—a former Templar.”

“That’s…kind of comforting,” Ellie said, and then she met Solas’s eye, as she spoke softly, “Solas, what will happen once we close the Breach, do you think they’ll keep you captive?”

Cassandra had started moving then, Varric, Solas and Ellie followed after.

“My hope is that they will remember that I offered assistance when I could have turned a blind eye to save my own skin.”

“Just run,” Ellie implored quietly.

“Pardon?” the Elf asked.

“You’ve more than done your part. If you would like to face the Breach, do so, but the second its closed, just run for it. If I can, I’ll make a distraction—it’s me they’re wanting to give a big fancy execution.”

Solas slanted her a small smile. “You face your fate admirably, da’len. I appreciate the sentiment, but I believe I shall see what the future holds.”

“Okay, but just say the word, and I can whip up a spectacular distraction—I once faked a heart attack to evade Templars on my trail.”

His smile grew, and he shook his head at the preposterous notion. “Surely you jest. I may not have previously had this much contact with Humans, but no one would think someone as young as you could be suffering heart failure. You’re not a day over twenty.”

Ellie giggled. “Well, you’re right about that—I’m several days under twenty.”

“We guessing ages now? I’m almost as good at that as I am with accents,” Varric chimed in. He’d seen Solas and Ellie talking and started chatting Cassandra up to give them more privacy…or to annoy her to the point of violence which wasn’t the brightest idea Ellie thought since the woman had a firm grip on the hilt of her sword. He hung back a bit to walk more closely with his three fellow prisoners and put on a thoughtful look. “Hmm, I’d say you’re younger than
Ellie scrunched up her nose and shook her head. “You’d better stick with accents,” she said.

“Sixteen.”

The trio looked at the Seeker as she firmly offered her own guess.

Ellie smiled at her. Well, at her back, Cassandra did not look back as she led them, her hand was no longer on her sword but hanging at her side, clenched tightly.

“Oh wow, close!” Ellie said, “She beat you good Varric. Let’s see…” thinking on it, she’d gotten into the habit of updating her age with the change of year. “It’s still 9:41 right? Fifteen, then.”

Varric cleared his throat. His voice was…off when he spoke what sounded like he was trying to make a joke, but it rang with accusation;

“Guess you win, Seeker.”

Cassandra had nothing to say to that.

“This is the Temple of Sacred Ashes,” Solas announced.

“This is where you fell out of the Fade and our soldiers found you,” Cassandra said.

Ellie was confused at first, they’d approached an area of just…pure rubble and ruin.

She’d had heard of the Temple—it was hard not to, Andraste’s ashes were a pretty big deal for anyone who even remotely had any love for the Chantry, or at least the Maker. Trevelyan had told her just about anything a person could care to know about the temple—its founding, what it was built with, which of his family members helped in its foundation. He’d had a wealth of knowledge on the subject but none of that had even remotely prepared her to stand at its doors—the temple of Sacred Ashes had been massive, a true monument to the Chantry and to the Maker. The sight of it as they came up over the hillside—the sun had just been rising and the world had been quiet, peaceful, and the valley was drenched in the beauty of sunlight, and its reflection off the Temples many golden sigils and stained-glass windows. It had been all fine silk draperies, golden images of Andraste, and slick marble floors. It felt like just hours ago she’d been clinging to Trevelyan’s arm like it was a lifeline, he’d offered it to her ‘like a gentleman’ and she’d been glad because otherwise she feared falling flat on her face.

Now there had been no grand view, no warning before they were suddenly upon the ruins. The temple was gone. In its ashes, it left jagged stone that pressed into the soles of Ellie’s shoes, and she was more fearful of the aftermath of such a fall—before she’d just have bruised her ego, but now she might actually lose an eye or something to the cracked rubble.

And then there was the smell.

Corpses littered the ruined ground—burned and burning alike, some had become molten statues forming the shape of their agony when the Conclave collapsed.

When the sight and stench finally hit her, Ellie stopped in her tracks and crouched down,
torso curled around her knees, left hand pressed against her stomach as her right hand flew to her mouth and she fought not to vomit—she wasn’t sure what would come up exactly, she didn’t really have anything to throw up. Her magic was crying in her blood, sorrow spilling through her veins, and then something wet slipped down the back of her hand and she realized she was crying.

“Ellie?” Solas asked, his worry translating clearly as he tentatively placed a hand on her shoulder.

“Seeker!” Varric’s voice called and he went to Ellie’s side.

Cassandra’s boots crunched the rubble underfoot as she quickly moved to join them, she stood somewhat between Ellie and Varric, placing her hand on the shoulder opposite the one Solas’s hand occupied and said, “Eleanor. I know this is difficult, but we are close. If you’re going to be sick we’d best get it over with, yes?”

That had Varric backing up big time, but he didn’t stray too far, and he smoothed his retreat over by pulling Bianca from his back like he decided to guard them from sudden attack, instead of turning tail at the mention of sickness up.

Ellie took a shuddering breath and moved her hand away from her mouth, Cassandra clasped that hand in her own and held it as Ellie went to her knees and retched and sobbed. Someone rubbed soothing circles on her back.

She’d been right—she’d already metabolized any potion or water she’d taken on before. Her stomach heaved but all it offered up was acidic bile and a mildly concerning trace of blood as it splattered onto the rocks before her, and then dry heaves worked their way through her body.

Solas offered her a handkerchief when she stilled and all that was left was Ellie sniffling from her tears. She wiped at her nose and mouth, and then tucked the handkerchief into a pocket when Solas quietly said she was free to keep it. He was then busy digging through his satchel with both hands, looking for something, and it was then Ellie noticed the hand on her back still continued its ministrations—rubbing a circular path between her shoulder blades. Cassandra’s hand, she realized, and the Seeker was still holding her right hand, firmly but not painfully—no trace of the violence she’d used on Ellie’s wrist during her questioning.

“Here, it isn’t the most pleasant, but it should help,” Solas said as he extended a vial of thick, translucent goo to her. She stared at it dumbly, not quite comprehending what he intended for her to do with it, and the man uncapped the vial and dispensed some of the gunk onto the pad of his index finger.

Oh, it was something that smelled strongly of heavy, almost sour, mint. Eucalyptus? He carefully dabbed the gel over the bow of her top lip, just under her nose and it went a long way to shield them from the stench of the valley and her own vomit.

Cassandra’s hands detached from Ellie’s hand and back and the Seeker took a hold of the water canteen hanging at Ellie’s hip, handing it to her. Ellie did take a careful drink, grateful to wash out her mouth a bit and clear the burn from the back of her throat, and her stomach didn’t do anything in protest.

“Can you stand?” Cassandra asked as the canteen fell to Ellie’s hip again.

She didn’t have much of a choice, did she? She kind of just wanted to lay face first in the rubble and die, but maybe she should at least seal the Breach first. So she nodded, not trusting her voice, and the Seeker helped her to her feet.
“We’re almost there, kid, you’ve got this,” Varric said as he rejoined them, he gave Ellie’s elbow an assuring pat.

“Can we…” Ellie grasped for words, and she hated how she was shaking now. This was really it, they were about to approach the Breach, and she would hopefully seal it shut. But with everything, everything that had happened, there was so little left in her to give, her vision wavered, and her magic was trying its best to still be useful for casting while attempting to keep her…well…alive basically. The only thing she relied on more than, or at least as much as, her magic, was the Maker.

Prayer. That’s what she wanted. And somehow Cassandra seemed to hear the word Ellie had only just realized she’d meant to say.

“This situation calls to mind Andraste’s Sermon at the Valarain Fields,” Cassandra spoke with all the certainty her years studying the scriptures lent her. She placed her hands on Ellie’s shoulders and bowed her head so their foreheads touched. “Transfigurations, 10:1.”

Ellie closed her eyes and listened to the Seeker’s chant;

“Many are those who wander in sin, despairing that they are lost forever. But the one who repents, who has faith unshaken by the darkness of the world, and boasts not, nor gloats over the misfortunes of the weak, but takes delight in the Maker’s law and creations, she shall know the peace of the Maker's benediction.”

Cassandra’s hands gripped tighter, and her conviction was clear as she continued their prayer: “The Light shall lead her safely through the paths of this world, and into the next. For she who trusts in the Maker, fire is her water. As the moth sees light and goes toward flame, she should see fire and go towards Light. The Veil holds no uncertainty for her, and she will know no fear of death, for the Maker shall be her beacon and her shield, her foundation and her sword.”

And then, after a beat, “Or, her Staff, should she prefer,” the Seeker allowed.

“Thank you, Cassandra,” Ellie said, wiping at her eyes before they spilled over again. She was good now, she was ready. “Really.”

She was going to seal the Breach.

The Breach was monstrous from a distance. In person, at its very core, it was indescribable the level of hell it brought to Thedas. It was just so massive.

Eleanor, in horrifying juxtaposition, was small. Tiny. Only Varric was shorter than she, but he easily outweighed her.

Cassandra stood alongside the girl as their party stared up into the Breach. Nothing could be seen past the haze of Fade green that illuminated the crater left behind where the core of the Temple had once stood.

And it contrasted horribly with the bright, blazing scarlet chunks of Red Lyrium growing along the crater’s walls.

Leliana was a welcome sight in comparison, flanked by soldiers of the Inquisition.
“You’re here! Thank the Maker,” Leliana breathed as she joined them.

“We haven’t much time, have your men take up positions around the temple,” Cassandra ordered. Leliana nodded and turned to her soldiers to give some orders of her own.

The Seeker looked at the girl then. Eleanor was staring up into the Breach, her mouth ground into a grim line, glaring at it—with such fervor, it was little wonder the Breach didn’t seal under her gaze. That would certainly be a welcome surprise.

She’d stopped shaking, and Cassandra was glad of it. Her tremors had stilled after the Seeker’s offer of prayer, and she was admittedly pleased to have been able to provide for her. She was still much too pale—even Solas had more color to his cheeks from the bitter cold. Eleanor was just sickly white, even the freckles on her face seemed translucent. She was bruised, and bloodied, and burning. But was she ready?

How could she be?

“This is your chance to end this, Eleanor. Are you ready?”

“Yes,” she said with finality. Her brow furrowed then, and she looked to Cassandra, “How exactly am I supposed to get up there though? Please don’t say Human ladder.”

Solas gave a low laugh and said, “You’ve no need to go up, Ellie. The answer lies below,” he gestured down deeper into the crater, and Eleanor’s eyes followed to look at the Rift at the base of the Breach. “That Rift was the first and is the key. Seal it, and we may just seal the Breach.”

“Then we must find a way down,” Cassandra said, eyeing the trail blazed in Red Lyrium. “Carefully.”

The girl was clumsy, that much had been seen on their journey—Cassandra did not have enough fingers to count the number of times the girl had tripped or skidded or slipped and nearly flattened her face. It would do her little justice to topple into the crater head first and die from some shoddy footing. Her earlier quip of fearing Cassandra would have to piggy-back her to the Breach came to mind, and for a moment the Seeker seriously considered doing just that.

As before, Cassandra led them down into the crater. Either through some level of mercy, or sheer circumstance, there was a path that sloped down and around the outer edge of the gaping hole. Mercy would be too kind a word—perhaps conspiracy was more accurate. Because the path was littered in Red Lyrium, heat pouring off of the vile substance in waves as they made their way to the Breach.

“Seeker. That’s Red Lyrium,” Varric hissed at her as they traversed the rocky path.

“I can see that, Varric,” Cassandra seethed sharply. It wasn’t like the foul stuff was invisible. It literally glowed bright red, almost in warning of the danger.

“But what’s it doing here?”

“Magic could have drawn on the Lyrium beneath the temple and corrupted it,” Solas supplied.

“It’s evil,” Varric insisted, and he made sure Eleanor was listening when he intoned, “Seriously, whatever you do, don’t touch it.” he’d been trailing behind Eleanor and Cassandra, alongside Solas, but he picked up the pace and walked on the girl’s other side as if to keep a barrier between her and the larger shards of Red Lyrium that jutted from the ground around them.
Any affirmative Eleanor was about to give the Dwarf was cut off by a deep, booming voice echoing out across the crater, pouring from the Breach.

“Now is the hour of our victory. Bring forth the sacrifice.”

Solas almost ran into the girl when she came to a full stop at the sound of the voice. They all stopped to follow her gaze up into the Breach.

“What are we hearing?” Cassandra asked Solas, as she placed a hand on Eleanor’s shoulder. More so ready to push the girl back and behind her should they be attacked, than for comfort.

“At a guess, the person who created the Breach,” Solas said.

“Have you heard this voice before, Eleanor?” Cassandra asked the girl.

She shook her head. “N-no,” but she looked conflicted about the answer. “I don’t know really, I can’t remember.”

Cassandra released her hold of the girl and led their party forward, deeper into the crater.

“Keep the sacrifice still.” The voice from the Breach commanded.

And then a voice Cassandra had thought she would never hear again cried out:

“Someone, help me!”

It sent Cassandra running forward automatically, the call of her vows rang strong in her blood as she drew her sword. The path came to an end at a drop that would cast them down to the Rift Solas labeled a key, and she stopped in her tracks, her prisoners catching up shortly after.

“That is Divine Justinia’s voice!” Cassandra cried.

Without a moments more hesitation, the Seeker dropped down into the lowest level of the crater. It took a second for her to realize she’d essentially abandoned her prisoners up above, but Solas had stepped up and with a hand cradling Eleanor’s arm, he assisted her own dissent to reach the Rift. Varric, surprisingly, followed suit.

“Someone, help me!” the breach repeated Justinia’s plea.

“What’s going on here?!” Eleanor’s voice.

Cassandra turned to look at the girl. “That was your voice. Most Holy called out to you. But…”

Eleanor’s Mark crackled again, bringing a surprised cry from the girl’s lips, and then the Rift before them began projecting an image, some ghostly scene, a memory trapped in the Breach.

It was an image of Divine Justinia, magic bindings keeping her arms held taunt and a large creature, a mass of black smoke with glowing red eyes looming over her. They were in the centermost worship hall of the Temple of Sacred Ashes. The doors swung open and through them, came Eleanor.

“What’s going on here?!” she snapped, a staff in hand, prepared to defend the Divine.

But the ghostly image of Justinia shook her head, “No! Eleanor, run while you can, warn
The ghastly red-eyed thing spoke with that deep voice they’d first heard upon approaching the Breach. The man or monster Solas suspected of making the Breach.

“We have an intruder. Kill her, now.”

And with that, the Rift crackled and went dormant, the scene before them disappeared.

“You were there!” Cassandra…hadn’t exactly meant for it to sound as accusatory as it did, but urgency robbed her of her cool, “Who attacked? And the Divine, is she…?” Eleanor had survived somehow. Was the Divine truly dead? “Was this vision true, what are we seeing?”

“I don’t remember!” Eleanor promised desperately.

“The Fade bleeds into this place, what we saw appears to be echoes of what happened at the Conclave, Lady Seeker,” Solas said, coming to the girl’s defense. And then he refocused them on the task at hand. “We must continue. This Rift is not sealed,” he brought their attention back to the Rift before them. “It seems to be closed, albeit temporarily. I believe with the Mark, the Rift can be opened and then sealed properly. However, opening the Rift will likely attract attention from the other side.”

“Meaning Demons,” Cassandra concluded. She could see Leliana’s men had taken position around the crater—archers up high while swordsmen held their place at key points surrounding the base of the Breach. She raised her voice to echo across the crater, “Stand ready!”

Archers knocked arrows, ready to fire, their fellow soldiers drawing their blades.

Solas pulled Eleanor close and began instructing.

“This will be the most trying use of your Mark yet, da’len. You must ignore your every instinct and rip open the tear in the veil. Your magic…may not wish to cooperate. It isn’t exactly desirable, calling Demons to attack.”

“Yeah, it’s not real high up on my list of favorite things,” Eleanor agreed. “Any chance ripping open the veil will rain chocolate? Or puppies?”

“I could go for a nice ale shower, myself,” Varric said.

“Unfortunately,” Solas said, “no such thing shall happen, but perhaps pretending it will could assist in garnering your Mark’s cooperation. You must find a desire to open the veil and pour that will into your Mark.”

“Opening it will give us the ability to properly close it,” Cassandra recited Solas’s earlier deduction. Eleanor looked to her. She almost felt foolish for saying it, but with the girl’s gaze on her now, seeking guidance, she pressed on, “If it is the Demons you fear, remember that you have many surrounding you who are more than capable of handling them, who will defend you. We will remain at your side. Focus your mind on the end goal: opening the Rift to seal the Breach.”

The strength with which the girl flung into her caught Cassandra off guard, knocking her back a step, but her arms came up automatically which was surprising since she hadn’t been hugged since…well, it had been a long time. The motion was a bit awkward since she still had her sword in hand. The girl squeezed her arms around Cassandra’s waist, though with her armor the effect wasn’t much, but it seemed to make Eleanor feel better, using her unarmed hand, Cassandra patted the younger woman on the back.
“You’re amazing, you know that right?” Eleanor asked. She loosened her hold on the Seeker and smiled up at her. “Thank you for everything. Whatever happens, I’m glad I got to meet you guys.”

Eleanor stepped away then, faced the dormant Rift overhead, Marked hand raised to the sky.

Solas and Varric flanked the Seeker, weapons drawn as they watched.

Cassandra’s advice had evidently helped.

Fade light burst from Eleanor’s hand and into the dormant Rift, sending the tear rippling and fluctuating erratically until it burst open, a full-blown rip in the veil, and the Demons emerged.

Or Demon, singular.

A Demon of Pride.

Eleanor screamed in fright and was already backing away from the great hulking purple scaled monster as Cassandra rushed to get between she and the beast.

Electricity passed between the Pride Demon’s hands, and then a great crack resounded through the crater. It had cast a barrier of its own, protecting itself from its enemies.

“Stay back, let the warriors handle this!” Cassandra barked over her shoulder as she heard the whirring of a powerful blast coming to life in the Demon’s hand, it would charge and unleash lightning upon them all if they weren’t careful.

“Lethallan, use your Mark to strip its defenses—manipulating the Rift will weaken the beast and aid our companions,” Solas instructed.

Cassandra saw green light fly overhead and into the Rift, and just as the Demon was about to cast off his spell, the rift fell in on itself, and then spilled open again, sending a wave of pain through the Demon that sent it to its knees, and knocked the barrier it had made away, his uncast spell dying in his hand.

“Now!” Cassandra called out to her soldiers.

Arrows began raining down on the Demon of pride as warriors rushed forward and beat it back with their swords, Cassandra felt the familiar wave of security spread over her as Eleanor cast her own Barrier spell doubled by Solas before the Mages began working together to cast an offense against the beast to the rhythm of Bianca firing off in Varric’s grip.

They’d made progress with allaying the Demon when the Rift shifted once more, and the Demon stood tall, reviving its lost barriers.

Eleanor cast her Mark once more, pouring power against the Rift, and it began to fluctuate, but then the burst of light was cut short—the Demon’s barriers were unaffected, the Rift didn’t collapse like last time, and a startled cry of pain tore from Eleanor’s lips.

Cassandra turned her attention from the raging Pride Demon to Eleanor running as fast as her legs could carry her from two Shades. When had they appeared? She should have been paying better attention, not trusted Varric of all people to watch after the girl Solas’s help or no.

“Eleanor needs help!” she shouted, and Dwarf and Elf alike turned focus to the Demons
The girl stumbled and fell, skidding on her knees before rolling onto her bottom, and the closest Shade was just within clawing range when the Seeker forced her way between them, standing firm with her back to Eleanor as she shouted unintelligibly into the creature’s face, sending it reeling back as if struck before Cassandra came down on its forearm with her blade, slicing the offending appendage off. Solas’s blast of ice froze the second Shade while Varric shot the creature through with bolts, and Cassandra absently wondered if the Dwarf just had an endless supply of the things.

Fadelight shot overhead as the trio worked together to defeat the Shades. Eleanor cast against the Rift once more, and this time she was uninterrupted, and the Pride Demon’s defenses came crashing down.

Cassandra turned and saw the girl was still on the ground, pulling her left hand close to her chest once she’d finished manipulating the Rift.

“Well done,” Cassandra commended, offering an arm to the girl and pulling her to her feet. Once she’d risen the girl’s staff slammed into the solid ground and Cassandra expected fire to fly from the top but nothing so spectacular occurred, the girl instead leaned her weight against the staff, more like a crutch at the moment.

“Kick that thing’s butt,” Eleanor said.

And ‘kick that thing’s butt’ she did. Cassandra ran to get back the mix with the Demon of Pride, and this time, its barriers stayed down as the creature was bombarded by Inquisition forces, and finally slain, its great body evaporated into fade ash and floated back up into the Rift.

“Now! Seal the Rift!” Cassandra called to the girl. This was their chance.

Standing tall, Eleanor raised her hand to the heavens once more, and light shot from her Mark, deep into the Rift, her arm shaking with the effort to keep held high and casting, she relinquished hold of her staff and used her right hand to brace her arm and she screamed the way Cassandra found herself doing when face to face with a Dragon—a battle cry.

The Rift sealed shut and sent a quake up through the entire Breach.

And then Eleanor collapsed.

And despite his earlier jest, Varric Tethras found nothing amusing as Cassandra hoisted the unconscious girl onto her back and carried her away in their retreat.

The Breach hang, stationary and repressed, but still high in the sky, marking the world.
The Threat Remains--Waking Up in Haven

Chapter Summary

Ellie's first week in Haven. She's the Herald of what now? She's about to learn her place in all this Breach business and get to know the people who will help her rise to the occasion.

Chapter Notes

Hello! Thank you for reading, and leaving Kudos and Comments! This is coming a few days earlier than I thought it would (coming in at a whopping 43 pages in Word, sorry!). In this chapter there are a few things marked * which indicate that it will be covered in the end-of-chapter notes, along with translations of any Dalish used. Enjoy!

Three days had passed since the events at the Breach.

The journey back to Haven had been brutal. The beat of Eleanor’s heart thrummed erratically against Cassandra’s back, her breath coming out in weak wisps or harsh gasps in the Seeker’s ear, and the forehead resting in the crook of her neck burned with fever.

And then she stopped breathing altogether. They’d had to stop and Solas resuscitated the girl, laying her in the snow, her head in Cassandra’s lap as the Elf worked emergency spells to pull air into and out of her lungs, trying to coax them to resume breathing on their own. Never before had twenty seconds felt like an eternity to the Seeker.

Leliana had word sent ahead and Healer Adan awaited them upon their return to Haven, ready to assist in tending the girl.

Then came the never-ending work—Leliana brought her friend, Josephine Montilyet on, and Maker bless her, the woman was a force of nature. Cassandra was amazed at how quickly things were falling into place with proper management. Josephine was quickly acquainting the Inquisition with Ferelden allies, and had already began talks with contacts in Orlais. Cullen seemed pleased with the progress his recruits were making, Leliana’s Nightingales were working around the clock to gather information—anything that would help them in navigating the war between Mages and Templars—and trying to anticipate outside forces attempts to assassinate the girl under their care.

Two such attempts had been made.

Rumors innumerable had spread like wildfire after the events at the Breach. Eleanor had been widely proclaimed the ‘Herald of Andraste’ sent by the Maker to save them from the destruction of the Conclave.

A Templar hadn’t been able to stomach the thought that an Apostate could represent the
Maker. Many held issue with the idea, but he’d taken it to task to do something about it. He’d broken into the Chantry in the dead of night, and attempted to murder Eleanor while she lay thrashing, mumbling unintelligibly in tortured half-sleep.

Healer Adan had reported a marked improvement in her vitals and was hoping to expose the girl to outside stimulus. Cassandra had spent some time at the girl’s side when there were lulls in her own work.

The Seeker had been mildly uncertain of what exactly to do, talking to someone who wouldn’t be responding wasn’t her forte. She’d thought perhaps reading to the girl would comfort her, but her own collection was scarce at the moment and full of books that would either risk boring the girl to death with instructional texts…or scarring her for life with smutty literature. She’d settled on reciting the Chant of Light from memory.

Unfortunately, keeping in communication with the Chantry alongside Leliana, arguing for hours on end with Chancellor Roderick about what to do with their prisoner, took up most of the Seeker’s time.

Varric of all people, had apparently taken to sitting with the girl when she’d need of company. He had no problem talking the ear off of someone lying comatose. He’d alternated between idle gossip he’d gathered from around Haven and making up stories to fill the time.

So, when the Templar struck, Cassandra had been in the War Room getting a headache.

Which grew exponentially when a cry of rage broke out in the hall outside, and then the sound of Bianca firing and Varric shouting, “SEEKER!”

Cassandra flew from the War Room mid-shouting match, and into the bedroom just off the hall. The door was heavier than usual, and with a loud grunt the Seeker forced the door open to find the intruder pinned to the other side with bolts trapping his arms and legs, screaming abuse about the supposed Herald. Varric made a creative suggestion on where to shoot the man next.

Eleanor had done little more than whimper in her sleep and thrash for a moment, her breath catching before settling back into a smooth rhythm. But that had taken the Dwarf’s attention off of the man and had him holstering Bianca so he could adjust the covers where they shielded her feet exposed from her sleep-kicking. Once he was certain the girl wouldn’t be cold he carefully patted her hair and said, “Hey, shh, it’s all good Tumbles, Seeker’s got ‘im.”

Tumbles? Was that Varric’s chosen nickname for the girl? Eleanor may have something to say about that upon waking.

Of course, even with what little Cassandra knew of the girl, she had a feeling that receiving any nickname from the Dwarf would send her smiling.

Tumbled from a Rift, tumbled off a fence, tumbled across the snowy countryside all the way to the Breach. It did suit her.

After the Templar was done being a door wreath, he’d been questioned thoroughly before Leliana had her people take him away. The man was likely deceased.

Leliana posted one of her own as an undercover guard—a small, jittery Elf girl. Marehis*, a city Elf that joined the Inquisition from within the ranks of Leliana’s spies, she was plain—pretty, but ordinary, and she earnestly believed with all her heart that their prisoner was truly heaven-sent, hand delivered by Andraste to save them from the Breach. All these things, along with her affinity
for knives and strong set of lungs made her perfect for protecting Eleanor. She tended to the girl, fetching things for Healer Adan, cleaning up around the room, looking for all the world like she was merely a handmaiden.

A handmaiden who shouted down the house and stabbed a Haven refugee in the neck when she made her own misguided attempt at taking Eleanor’s life. Revenge for a husband and a daughter lost at the Conclave. Sad, but Eleanor should not have been her target.

That thing, that monster with horrible red eyes and a voice found in nightmares, that was who the people should turn against. Whoever he was. Cassandra wasn’t sure if she hoped he’d perished at the Conclave, at the hands of his own evil, or if she wished to track him down herself and tear him limb from limb, pull penance from his bones with her bare hands.

At any rate, upon thwarting yet another assassination attempt, Cassandra suggested moving the girl from the chantry may misdirect such attacks. The room she’d been occupying had only been a temporary arraignment anyway—the room had been allotted for noble guests to the inquisition at Josephine’s insistence. Many would want to see the Inquisition before allying with them.

So, the room was left empty for now and Cassandra, alongside Cullen and two of his men, quietly transported Eleanor to one of the small cabins on the outer part of Haven’s walled-in estate.

Solas and Varric offered a distraction while the move took place—the two quarreled in the tavern in such a way it drew the attention of any who would have been watching the Chantry for any sign of ‘the Herald’. The Chantry courtyard was empty for the first time in days, the streets of Haven practically barren save for the large crowd that had gathered around the tavern, and Cassandra heard the sound of breaking glass and Solas shouting something in Dalish, followed by Varric oh-so-intelligently replying in gibberish mocking the Elf’s words with the addition of, “your mother!” at the end.

All said and done, Eleanor was safe and sound under watch of Leliana’s agent in the care of Healer Adan, and Varric had to pay for Solas’s drinks for the next month.

Adan insisted the girl would wake soon. But amid yet another argument with Chancellor Roderick, the minutes passed like hours, and Cassandra was impatient for something to happen—for either the Chancellor to expire from a hysteria-induced aneurism, or Eleanor to rise and bring a level of legitimacy to the people’s claims that she was the Herald.

It was something that would safeguard her life from the Chantry. The Inquisition would have to work to protect her from other forces. They needed her to close the Breach.

And after everything they had endured getting to the Breach, and the things they’d learned from the Fade vision they’d witnessed, Cassandra and Leliana—both the Right and Left hands of the Divine—believed the girl was innocent.

The War Room door received a firm knock, before opening a crack just big enough for a slender Elf girl’s face to slip through—Leliana’s agent, Marehis peeked inside the War Room and caught Cassandra’s gaze.

Eleanor was awake.
When she opened her eyes, she wasn’t sure what to expect. She was dead, wasn’t she? Consciousness returned slowly, she became aware of...was that an actual mattress?...cradling her as she slept, the soft blanket tucked around her.

The low, steady burn in the palm of her hand.

The light was almost blinding at first, but as her eyes adjusted she realized it was just low lamp light from a lantern on the table beside her head.

She was tired—not bone wearily exhausted, more like she’d just gotten over being sick. She perked up as her magic seemed to realize she was awake and started sending waves of relief—it was trying to convey something like worry and the fact that she had been in danger.

Danger?

Hmm...where was she?

The Breach!

Ellie sat up quickly and the unfamiliar room spun before her eyes, she shook her head and tried to focus. What had happened? Where was everyone?

What happened to the Breach? Was it sealed?

“Oh!” a surprised cry caught her attention, it was followed by the clatter of something hitting the floor.

There was a waif of a girl, an Elf. She’d been carrying a box which she’d dropped, and she stared at Ellie with something like awe and relief.

“I didn’t know you were awake!”

“It’s alright, I just wo—” she swallowed her words when the girl fell onto her knees the way she’d seen Chantry Mothers when overwhelmed by the glory of Andraste.

“I beg your forgiveness, and your blessing. I am but a humble servant.”

“Oh...you’re okay, I’m not upset, just confused. Where am I exactly?” Ellie asked.

“You’re back at Haven, my lady. They say you saved us. The Breach stopped growing, just like the Mark on your hand. It’s all anyone has talked about for the last three days.” She rose to her feet and tentatively came forward to her bedside. “I am Marehis. I’ve been appointed as your handmaid, are you well my lady? Should I fetch the healer?”

Ellie shook her head, both at the notion of having a handmaid and the idea that this person should fetch anything for her let alone a healer. She felt fine, a little sore, and her hand still burned but...

She looked at her hand. The Mark was still there but it was different, better. At this size it looked almost pretty—like a miniature Rift, she carefully traced her fingers over the palm of her left hand, half expecting her digits to pass through the Mark and into the Fade, but all she felt was the callous years of wielding a staff had left along the heel of her hand. Her Magic passed along through it, on its usual path circulating her body, and it felt like it had accepted the new addition to her hand as an ally now that it wasn’t trying to kill her, the connection between Mark and Magic added a pleasant thrum that took away from the bit of pain the Mark itself caused.
“Marehis you said your name was? I’m Ellie,” she said offering her right hand to the girl. She’d been going for a hand shake, but the girl was on her knees again, taking the hand and kissing her knuckles.

“Seeker Pentaghast will want to know you’ve woken. She was to be told ‘at once’, she said.”

Cassandra? “Where is she?”

“In the Chantry with the Lord Chancellor. If you are well, I should escort you to join them.”

Roderick? Maybe she wasn’t feeling better after all, in fact she was self-diagnosing herself with Roderick-itus, she was allergic to the Chancellor and if she went within shouting range of such a man her throat would close up and she’d break out in hives.

But…she had questions, and she needed to know what was to happen to her. She should go to Cassandra.

And Cassandra wasn’t one for taking Rodericks crap. Maybe Ellie would get to see her lay into him again, that would clear her Roderick-itus right up.

“That sounds good,” Ellie said, moving to get up from the bed.

Her legs wobbled a bit when she put her weight on them. Marehis supported her for a moment, Ellie gave her a grateful smile.

“We should get you cleaned up, make you presentable, yes?” Marehis asked.

Cleaning up sounded like heaven for the ever rising itch in her scalp. She was sure her hair was a nightmare. The last time she’d left her locks to their own devices for so long, without brushing or cleaning, it resulted a matted mess that she’d had to cut.

Marehis had her strip—of clothing foreign to Ellie. She hadn’t realized she’d been changed out of her Mercenary coat and leggings— it’d all been brand new, provided for her journey to the Conclave, and the last she remembered it was torn and stained and honestly looked and smelled like it’d been fished from a sewer. The clothing she was in now, or was stripping of and carefully laying aside on an actual bed, Maker it was big and soft!

The Elf girl had her sit on the floor in front of the fire and brought over a large bowl full of water setting it on the floor alongside a pitcher of more water. The box she’d been bringing in actually had potion from ‘Healer Adan’ Ellie was to take upon waking, and a few bars of soap wrapped in wax paper. Marehis unstopped the potion for Ellie and timidly informed her that Adan said to drink it all.

Hmm…she’d already felt better but left-over aches abandoned their claim on her body and she was feeling a bit more awake now.

The Elf then took up a cloth, soaked it in water, and wrapped it around a bar of soap, washing Ellie’s back while Ellie scrubbed her arms and legs with a wet cloth, feeling so much better as she watched her skin turn red from her scrubbing.

Water was poured onto her head then. Marehis insisted her hair would survive, it just needed a good cleaning, so Ellie sat with her knees tucked up under her chin while the Elf worked with the bird’s nest on her head.
Her left arm was wrapped up in a bandage, something cool and wet was slathered between the bandage and her skin, she peeled the cotton back to peek at her injury, but it was just a bruise. **Bruises**, four rings of varying length around her wrist, a smaller fifth on the opposite side. Surely, they were not something to be bandaged?

“Does it hurt still?” Marehis asked as she poured something that smelled like flowers into her hands, rubbing them until it became a thick lather before massaging it into Ellie’s hair.

“Oh, no, I was just looking,” she said, smoothing the bandage back into place.

“Healer Adan was amazing, my lady. Your wrist was broken when he first examined it—hairline fractures he said. That was three days ago. It was in a cast the first two days, the bandage now is just to keep from getting the ointment for the bruising everywhere.”

Ouch, yeah. She remembered popping her wrist good when she’d gone toppling off the fence, but she hadn’t realized it’d been *broken*—the pain lost to too much adrenaline and healing elixir. Having a healer on hand was nice, she’d have to seek him out later and thank him if she could.

Ellie squealed in surprise when the entire pitcher of water was poured over her head, rinsing the soap away.

“Apologies my lady, I should have——”

Ellie’s squeal dissolved into giggles, and she cut the girl off. “Thank you, Marehis.”

“Thanks aren’t necessary, my lady,” the Elf girl said as she worked to dry Ellie’s hair.

When the Elf was done with her work, Ellie’s hair was clean, brushed, and *braided*, of all things.

Marehis was a Mage, she simply *had* to be—some level of magic had to have been involved because Ellie’s hair either sprang out in every direction or could be forcefully trapped in a hair tie, there was *no* in between.

Then the clothes she’d woken up in. A button-up tunic and pants made of soft gray linen, the material almost felt like pajamas it was so comfortable she realized once she redressed.

And the buttons. The buttons weren’t like any Ellie had seen before—they were like stone. Gem stones. They were heavy, and they *sparkled*.

Maker she’d blacked out and woken up in another life. *Again.*

She may still be headed for execution but at least it was in style?

Magic did not find that funny in the slightest. Worry wart.

“Shall we, my lady? Seeker Pentaghast will be pleased you’ve waken.”

Ellie nodded and Marehis held open the cabin door for her. What she found on the other side was astounding.

A crowd of people were gathered at the entrance to her cabin nestled just to the left of the gate for Haven. They were lined up on either side of the path to the Chantry, and they all stood in silence, armored ones that looked like soldiers stood with a fist to their chests in salute, and they
watched Ellie as she emerged from her quarters.

She was suddenly very embarrassed, and so very glad Marehis had insisted she clean up before leaving to meet Cassandra. Maker, why were they all just staring at her? Then she was overwhelmed with the fear that these people might be about to riot—throw rotting food at her, call for her death, spit in her face.

She felt Marehis standing at her side and began following the path to the Chantry, barred on either side by a wall of people—all of Haven, just lined up to look at her.

“That’s her!”

“She’s the one who will seal the Breach.”

“They say the Maker sent her…”

“…why did Seeker Pentaghast have her in chains?”

“Hush!”

Murmurs broke out among her audience, and very little of it made any sense, but everyone seemed excited and pleased with her? She certainly wasn’t going to question it.

She pushed open one of the doors to the Chantry and Marehis followed her inside, closing the door behind them and then Ellie looked to her.

“What is happening, exactly?” Ellie asked.

Marehis gave her a reassuring smile, and took a hold of Ellie’s hands, squeezing them. “Everything will be explained, you’re safe here. Seeker Pentaghast has seen to it. Come, I’ll take you to her. She’s in the War Room.”

She released Ellie’s hands and started leading her through the Chantry, down the main hall all the way to the door opposite the entrance. Shouting could be easily heard through the door—Roderick screaming about how the prisoner had failed, and she should be sent to Val Royeaux for trial and execution.

The Elf gave the door a knock before popping her head inside, after a moment she opened the door fully and gestured for Ellie to enter.

She’d been wondering what a War Room was. It was apparently a room with a big fancy table with lots of books and maps, and people shouting at each other over who to kill.

Cassandra and Leliana stood around the table with Chancellor Roderick, red faced as ever. The Seeker met Ellie’s gaze and gave her an approving nod, Leliana even sent a small, pleased smile her way.

Chancellor Roderick had his own way of expressing his exuberance at Ellie’s recovery.

“Chain her!” he commanded the guards standing at the entrance to the War Room, “I want her prepared for travel to the capital for trial.” Hadn’t anyone told him it was rude to point?

“Disregard that, and leave us,” Cassandra ordered coolly, the Inquisition soldiers saluted her and left the room.

Roderick glared at the Nevarran woman, “You walk a dangerous line, Seeker.”
“The Breach is stable, but it is still a threat. I will not ignore it,” Cassandra warned.

“The Prisoner is still a threat!”

“Am I still a suspect?” Ellie asked. Her Magic wasn’t afraid of her execution anymore—not that it had accepted it was happening, but more like it was certain it wouldn’t happen.

Roderick turned his glare on her, and it had her shrinking back, she would have stepped backward if Marehis’s hand hadn’t gone to the small of her back.

“You absolutely are,” Roderick seethed.

“No,” Cassandra firmly corrected to Ellie’s great relief, “she is not.”

Leliana spoke then: “Someone is responsible for what happened at the Conclave, someone Most Holy did not suspect. They may have died with the others or have allies who yet live.” She stared directly at Chancellor Roderick, leveling an accusation.

“I am a suspect?!” Roderick asked, appalled.

“You, and many others,” Leliana assured.

“But not the prisoner?”

“We heard the voices at the Temple,” Cassandra defended. “The Divine called out to her for help. I saw with my own eyes, Eleanor come to the Divine’s aid. She has assured us she had no ill intent in her attendance of the Conclave and we have since verified her testimony.”

“Really?” Ellie asked, surprised that…well…she’d been able to do that. How?

“Of course, Eleanor,” Leliana said, chuckling lightly as she explained, “you were most earnest in your interrogation, and you’re a sweet girl but that alone isn’t enough for anyone to take you at your word. Under the guise of fellow mages, my agents were able to track down members of Ostwick circle who knew the Mage Trevelyan, and Apostates present at the meeting he called. There was such a meeting, Eleanor was in attendance, and she was selected to represent them peacefully at the Conclave.”

Ellie had to keep herself from rambling off all the questions that came to mind. Who had they spoken to? Was everyone okay?

What about those who’d known Trevelyan? Did they know he’d passed?

Had his family been told?

“Thank you,” she decided to say instead, “that must have been so much trouble.”

Roderick had other thoughts on Leliana’s work. “You have the word of criminals to back up the word of a criminal? Ha! What of that thing on her hand? Her survival of the Conclave—of that so called ‘attempt’ to seal the Breach?”

“I thought I was going die sealing the breach,” Ellie insisted, “I did everything I could—”

“And yet you live.”

Ouch. That had Ellie shutting right up.
Cassandra looked as if she might strike the man. “Have a care, Chancellor,” she said in low dark tones. She turned her gaze to Ellie directly then. “Listen well,” she stressed, “Eleanor’s survival was providence. The Maker sent her in our darkest hour.”

Ellie’s first instinct was outright refusal, but Cassandra had been trying to say something she couldn’t say in front of their audience. She wanted Ellie to confirm her accusation.

Okay. She was not about to say she was some sort of savior sent by the Maker.

He was the Maker. He might strike her down where she stood!

Instead, she offered up something that had yet to fail her, the Chant: “Though all before me is shadow, yet shall the Maker be my guide.”

“We lost everything,” Cassandra said, and there was a light to her eyes that said she was very pleased with Ellie’s cooperation in front of the Chancellor. “Then out of nowhere, you came.”

“The Breach remains, your Mark is our only hope of closing it,” Leliana added. “The Left and Right hands of the Divine pronounce you innocent of all crime in relation to the Conclave and offer our assistance in sealing the Breach.”

“Divine Justinia is dead! You have no such authority, no resources, this entire thing is a farce!” Roderick hollered, his face turning an even deeper shade of red as he gestured wildly to the walls around them. “These people following you, they work for the Chantry, these soldiers were here for Justinia, and they will follow me back to Val Royaue to serve whoever we elect Divine. You two, are done. The Prisoner will be coming with me.”

Cassandra laughed…in a way that wasn’t pleasant, that made Ellie mildly afraid of what the woman was about to say. It was a dark, humorless sound that spoke of the Chancellor’s foolishness.

Ellie wasn’t sure where the woman had been keeping the book that seemingly materialized in her hand then, but Cassandra slammed down a thick, heavy tome with the eye of Andraste emblazoned on the cover. It fell on the table with a thud.

The color left Chancellor Roderick’s face then.

“Where…where did you get that?” he asked.

“You, are the one who has no authority on this matter. Predating the Divine’s death, Justinia bequeathed this writ to us, with well documented commands to call to order the reinstitution of the Inquisition,” Cassandra said. “Those soldiers, our commander, spy master, ambassador—we are all recruits under the flag of the Inquisition.”

“Surely the Prisoner—”

“Eleanor,” Cassandra stressed the name, “was never a captive of the Chantry. She was our prisoner and now, she will act as an agent of the Inquisition,” Cassandra’s eyes met Ellie’s then when she added, “should she so choose.”

“Really?” Ellie asked. “Y-you want me to work with the Inquisition? As what? Designated Rift sealer?”

“We can discuss a proper title later,” Cassandra said, a lilt of amusement in her tones, “but yes.”
“This is utter nonsense,” Chancellor Roderick objected, weakly.

“Never fear Chancellor, we want no quarrel with the Chantry,” Leliana said, dismissing the bearish man. “Once you’ve returned to Val Royeaux, take some time to regroup. We’ll be in touch.”

Roderick grumbled under his breath before pounding his fist on the table, but he stomped away. Marehis’s hand shifted from its place at Ellie’s back, to her elbow to pull the girl out of the way before the man could knock into her as he barreled blindly from the room.

“Thanks,” Ellie said quietly to the Elf girl, she returned her attention to Cassandra and Leliana. “So… the Inquisition? You really want me to join?”

“We do,” Leliana said, “your Mark is vital to sealing the Breach. We have people now working on figuring out what went wrong with your original attempt. In the meantime, Rifts have appeared all over Thedas. They need to be sealed.”

Ellie nodded. “You got it.”

“There is more to it than just the Rifts, than even the Breach, Eleanor,” Cassandra said. “The Divine had other reasons for calling the Inquisition to order, you understand.”

It dawned on Ellie then, “Oh! Divine Justinia reinstated the Inquisition before the Conclave—but she couldn’t have known the attack or the Breach.”

“We can’t ignore the Breach, so it is now our primary concern,” Leliana confirmed, “however Justinia called for the Inquisition for a single purpose.”

“We’re going to bring peace to the rebellion,” Cassandra said, “And if you are willing, you are to help.”

“Me?” Ellie asked. “I mean, I get I’m a Mage but…I mean, I’m just me? How am I supposed to help you end the rebellion?”

“After the events at the Breach, you Eleanor, were proclaimed widely as a ‘Herald’ sent to us from Andraste, delivered to us to save the world from the Breach,” Cassandra explained. “In these times, people need a symbol of hope, and a vast majority has decided that you are that symbol.”

Oh. That is why Cassandra hadn’t wanted Ellie to refute being sent by the Maker in front of the Chancellor. Whatever abuse he spewed over the Inquisition, his insults would carry the rumor of the Herald into validity.

Maker.

“Your job would not just to be to seal the Breach Eleanor,” Cassandra continued carefully, “We are asking you to represent the Inquisition, as the Herald of Andraste. We would use that status, and your efforts with the Inquisition to help bring peace to Thedas end this war between Mages and Templars.”
Cassandra had been concerned about throwing so much at the girl all at once. Eleanor was visibly shaken by the news of her...well, fame. She’d gone from being accused of the single-most horrific act of terrorism in modern history, to being named as an actual Herald of Andraste herself.

It was a major swing, and much would be asked of her.

Marehis had intervened in the midst of the talk, putting her arm around Eleanor, and suggested they give the girl a moment. It was then the other women in the room realized the girl had been shaking, about to topple over. Cassandra pulled a chair from the side of the room and instructed Eleanor to sit, to breathe because it looked like she’d forgotten how.

“I know this is a lot to adjust to, Eleanor. Were the situation not so dire, I would not dream of even proposing such a thing,” Cassandra said quietly as she knelt before the girl. “Are you feeling unwell? Shall Marehis fetch the Healer?”

That seemed to grab Eleanor’s attention. The girl’s head snapped up and Cassandra was actually surprised at the anger her question had put in Eleanor’s eyes.

“Marehis doesn’t fetch, and just what is this handmaiden nonsense?” Eleanor snapped, she looked to the Elf woman and amended, “It isn’t that I don’t truly appreciate you, I mean you’ve been so great, and helpful, and you’re wicked good at braiding hair,” she insisted, “but you’re a person, you shouldn’t serve anyone!”

Oh goodness. Did the girl think Marehis a slave?

“Everyone serves something, Eleanor,” Leliana said, clearly amused. “You don’t yet understand the gravity of the situation, of your role with the Inquisition, but Marehis’s job is vital. If it would trouble you less, you should know that Marehis is not necessarily a handmaiden.”

That had Eleanor looking up at the Elf woman questioningly. “Then...well what are you, then?”

Marehis leveled the girl a gentle smile, but then she hid the grin behind her hand as she physically fought openly laughing. A fight she lost.

“I’m sorry,” Marehis apologized as she calmed, “I-you just- you realize that’s the Lady Seeker you’re s-snapping at like a Mabari pup? Ohh,” she deftly wiped the corners of her eyes, “Da’len, I work for Leliana—I’m a Nightingale agent. I’ll act as an undercover bodyguard for you —my job is to ensure your safety as well as assist you with day to day tasks. My position as your handmaiden gives me cover to always be at your side without revealing myself as an actual threat to any who would seek to bring you harm. You’ll come to find the element of surprise is extremely beneficial. Too, I’ll be more easily able to interfere in attempts to kill you through the servant staff if I’m considered one of them.”

That had the girl blanching ghostly white. “Bu-but who would want to kill me?” Eleanor asked, “Do people still think I killed the Divine? Won’t the Inquisition finding me innocent uh... fix that?”

“Yes and no,” Cassandra said. “We can offer facts, but we cannot control people’s minds. There will be those who hold resolute to the idea you are responsible for the events at the conclave. However, there is also your newfound Herald status. While many find hope in the prospect of a Herald, there are those who see you as a threat. And there are also the people behind Conclave explosion to consider.”
“Once they realize you not only survived their attack but can also thwart their plans and seal the Breach, they will come after you,” Leliana assured her.

That was hardly the way Cassandra would have put it to the girl, she was scared enough as it was. Yes, the threats against her were numerous, but she would not face them alone.

“The Inquisition will protect you, Eleanor. You must trust us, and follow our orders, especially when it comes to your personal safety. This is all very frightening I’m sure, but we are prepared to help you in every way we can,” Cassandra promised. “For what it is worth, I myself along with Sers Solas and Varric have volunteered to be members of your personal party.”

“It’s not the kind of party that involves dancing, is it?” Eleanor asked, as if despite her inherent clumsiness, she half hoped it were.

“No, though if it were, Varric would surely spike the punch,” Cassandra said, attempting to joke with the girl, perhaps it would help stop her from looking like she was still staring death in the face. It seemed to work, as Eleanor did smile at least a little then. Good.

“Your party,” Cassandra went on to explain, “refers to the group of people who will join you in your journeys to close the Rifts and assist our allies in times of need.”

“Allies?” Eleanor asked.

“If you’ll allow me a moment, would you care to meet someone who could better explain that?” Leliana asked. Eleanor nodded, and Leliana left the room.

She’d gone to get Josephine no doubt. Perhaps Cullen as well. it would appear Eleanor was about to get a crash course in how to save the world.

“Are you truly well, Eleanor?” Cassandra asked while they had a moment.

“I’m alright,” Eleanor said, though her reassuring smile seemed to take more effort. “I mean this is all just…crazy, I’m pretty sure I’m still in a coma or something or maybe dreaming some crazy story Varric’s put into my head.”

“You remember him sitting with you when you were ill?” Cassandra asked.

Eleanor nodded, and she kicked her legs a bit. A sign of nervousness? Or restlessness? Ahh, nerves. The girl said, “I remember you too. At least I think it was you—you recited the Chant for a while, I’d hear it every now and again. It was nice.”

“I am glad it was of comfort,” Cassandra offered. “And your Mark, does it ail you?”

Eleanor seemed to debate that for a moment, looking at the glowing Fadelight in the palm of her hand. “No, nothing like it did before. It still burns but it’s kind of like…like I scrapped my hand up or something. It’s loads better—it was all the way to my elbow just before I tried closing the Breach, it’s practically tiny now,” she said holding out her hand to Cassandra, so the Seeker could get a better look.

A sense of relief washed over her as she examined the glow of Fadelight glimmering peacefully in the palm of Eleanor’s hand, no longer the all-consuming threat it had appeared when the Breach was spreading.

“That is good. You are to tell someone if it begins to spread again, or the pain becomes too great. Healer Adan is remarkably skilled and will be glad to assist you.”
“He’ll want to see you now that you’re awake,” Marehis said. “Give you another check up to make sure everything is as it should be.”

Leliana returned then, followed by Josephine, and Commander Cullen.

Eleanor went a bit pale when she saw the Commander—Cassandra had heard Solas’s assurance to Eleanor that the man was a former Templar, but the girl had been running from them all her little life. It was a wonder she didn’t start throwing spells and attempt to get away on instinct alone. She didn’t have a staff, but in true urgency, Cassandra had seen Mages capable of casting without.

But no, the girl instead rose to her feet and welcomed them.

“Eleanor, this is Lady Josephine Montilyet, and Commander Cullen Rutherford—our Ambassador, and our forces Commander.”

“A pleasure to meet you, Lady Herald,” Josephine said with a curtsey.

“We met briefly in the field,” Cullen said as he held out his hand to the girl. “I am pleased you survived.”

“Me too,” Eleanor said as she shook his hand. And then as if worried she’d said something wrong she elaborated, “I mean—I’m glad you survived too, not just me.”

Cullen chuckled lightly, half smiling as he said, “Well thank you for that. I look forward to working together.”

Eleanor’s attention turned to Lady Josephine then and her hand went to the top button of her tunic, “You’re the Lady Josephine that got me these clothes? They’re lovely.”

“I am pleased you like them,” Josephine said, she began scribbling something down on the clipboard she held in hand. “Now that you’re awake we can schedule a proper fitting—I’ll make arrangements to add some more variety to your wardrobe. Would tomorrow afternoon work for you?”

Eleanor’s eyes widened at that and she seemed like she wasn’t entirely certain how to respond. “Um…sure? But uh, why?”

Josephine visibly tried to parcel out what exactly the girl was questioning. “A fitting—a tailor, a maker of clothing, will come and measure you so they can design outfits that will fit you appropriately.”

Eleanor giggled. “I got that part, but this had to be expensive,” she gestured to the clothes she had on now, “why do I need more?”

“Ahh. My apologies my Lady,” Josephine said, having the grace to flush at her assumption of the girl’s knowledge or lack thereof. She rested her quill in the inkwell atop her clipboard and said, “As ambassador for the Inquisition, I’m to acquire us Noble allies. You, as the Herald of Andraste will be a point of interest for them. You will sometimes have to go meet with them personally, while others will come to visit Haven—they’ll want to actually see the Inquisition before offering their assistance, and they will want to be introduced to you. You must be able to look the part while entertaining their company.”

“You really want me to represent the Inquisition like that?” Eleanor asked as if she thought us all mad. “I mean, I’m just…me. I’m an Apostate. I don’t have any kind of uh…formal
upbringing. You can pile all the fancy clothes you want on me but putting lipstick on a nug doesn’t make it a lady.”

“Oh, my,” Josephine hid a smile behind her hand at the girl’s…very eloquent way of putting things.

“I do not believe it would be much at all like putting lipstick on a er…nug,” Cullen said, Cassandra could practically see the gears turning in his mind as he sought through his own experiences having a sister and giving her a compliment that wouldn’t embarrass or insult her. “The clothing will help your image, but you’re a lovely girl all on your own.”

“Oh, yes certainly, I did not mean to insinuate otherwise,” Josephine assured the girl.

Oh. Did they think the girl disparaged her looks? Did Eleanor think she wasn’t suitable? She was awfully skinny yes—concerningly light when Cassandra had carried her from the Breach—but she was hardly ugly. She was a little awkward, but no more than any other girl her age. She was pretty, even.

“Cassandra informs us you are fifteen?” Josephine asked. Eleanor nodded. “What sort of education have you received?”

“Not much other than some instruction on magic from fellow Mages,” Eleanor admitted. “I uh…moved around a lot.”

She ran from Templars a lot, Cassandra suspected she meant, but hadn’t thought it polite to mention in front of the Commander.

“I will see to it you receive tutelage in the ways of proper society,” Josephine said. “You’ll learn basic etiquette, and how to carry yourself in front of our Noble allies.”

“Solas has offered to help you train magically,” Cullen said, then nodding to Cassandra he added, “We’ve spoken of it at length, and Cassandra and myself would also like you to study other forms of combat—self-defense training, really.”

“You are quite capable with your magic,” Cassandra elaborated, “but should something happen, and you cannot cast to defend yourself, you will have something else to fall back on.”

Eleanor looked mildly alarmed.

“I understand you might be uncomfortable with my being a former Templar,” Cullen said, “Cassandra would do a majority of the instructing I would just be there to assist her with demonstration.”

“Oh, golly, no it’s not that!” Eleanor assured him, shaking her head. “I just…I mean I don’t much like the idea of hurting people.”

“There is a war going on Eleanor, you may well have to fight people, though we would see to doing that for you as much as we can, we cannot leave you incapable of doing it yourself,” Cassandra said. “You must remember, there are those who would see you dead, you will have to stop them from succeeding, even if it means the loss of their life instead of yours.”

Eleanor was quiet for a moment, thinking their words over carefully. “You're right, I understand. I’ll be happy to learn what I can from you, Commander, Lady Seeker.”

“Aside from your schooling, there are other benefits you will receive from the Inquisition,”
Josephine said, gesturing for Leliana to take up the explanation.

“You will be paid just like any other Inquisition agent, Josephine will render your money to you every week,” Leliana said, “The cabin you woke in is yours, and you have the run of the estate. You may go anywhere you wish though we ask you to not stray too far from the property for safety sake. Marehis will take you to meet Flissa once we finish up here—she runs Haven’s Tavern, where you can take your meals. Then there is Seggrit, he keeps commerce going within the camp with his shop. Quartermaster Threnn is stationed just outside the Chantry, you should go to her if you’ve need of anything such as blankets or toiletries.”

“I will see you meet Master Harritt,” Cassandra added, “he is our blacksmith, we need to outfit you with proper armor and weaponry.”

“Oh, yeah, I didn’t see the staff I had at the Breach back at the cabin,” Eleanor said.

Ahh. “Do not misunderstand Eleanor, you were not unarmed intentionally. I merely did not think to pick up your staff when we made our retreat from the Breach. I do apologize.”

“Oh gosh, it’s no problem—I’m just glad you thought to pick me up before retreating,” Eleanor said. “The Breach was scary. I’m pretty sure if I hadn’t absolutely had to face it, I’d have forgotten my own head running from it ‘every man for himself’ style.”

Cullen actually barked a laugh at the idea. “You were so resolute in facing the Breach, and here I was thinking you had nerves of steel.”

Eleanor shook her head her smile sheepish as she said, “Nah, they’re more like mush, but the whole ‘end of the world’ thing firmed them up a bit.”

“I believe that covers everything. You will have anything you need to carry out your duties to the Inquisition, Eleanor,” Josephine said. “Welcome to the Inquisition, Herald of Andraste.”

Herald of Andraste. That was just. Crazy. Blasphemous even. But the Maker hadn’t fried her yet, so Ellie was going to take that as the ‘okay’ to play along. So far, being a Herald wasn’t so bad.

Marehis led her through Haven, taking her straight away to the Tavern to meet Flissa when their meeting ended—Ellie’s stomach finally acknowledged that she was in fact awake, and it wanted fed now. Flissa was said to have food, so Ellie already liked her.

She liked her even more once they were introduced. She was sweet, and really pretty, and she only minorly freaked out about the whole ‘Herald’ thing. For a moment, Ellie had worried the woman was going to bow to her or something, like Marehis had when she’d woken up.

Huh. That was super weird. Marehis was already back to behaving like a timid servant girl waiting for orders to be barked at her. When they’d been in the Chantry, in the War Room with the ‘advisors’, she’d been different…more certain and almost powerful, like she was strong and capable, and she knew it.

But Ellie noticed how people regarded the Elf that followed her everywhere. Or more like how no one regarded her—that was probably what that was all about then. Marehis didn’t want to
be seen as a threat, so she played skittish, for that ‘element of surprise’ thing she’d talked about.

Ellie didn’t really get it, but she was grateful no matter what. Marehis was kind, and she enjoyed her company. She always had her magic with her, but there was something different about walking around Haven with someone like a friend at her side—it reminded her how she felt traveling with Trevelyan.

Oh…she missed him…

“Is something the matter, my lady?” Marehis asked. Ellie realized she’d been seated at the bar just staring into space instead of eating the stew Flissa had placed in front of her. Flissa was staring at her now, as if afraid she’d done something wrong.

“Oh! No, sorry! I’m a real space-case sometimes,” Ellie said, hoping that smiling at Flissa would make her stop worrying, though the red head only truly relaxed when Ellie took up her spoon and tasted her stew. “Oh wow! This is delicious, thank you Flissa.”

“Oh, yay,” Flissa said, a little breathless. “I’m glad. Should you need anything more just let me know,” she said as something over Ellie’s shoulder caught her attention, and she took up the pitcher on the counter and went to refill someone’s mug.

When Ellie was done—eating every last bite leaving the bowl clean after Flissa offered her a roll to mop up the last traces of stew—she waved good-bye to the bar maiden and followed Marehis up the stone steps to Healer Adan’s cabin.

She stopped at the top of the stairs and a happy gasp escaped her lips, followed by,

“Solas!”

“Lethallan!” Solas greeted her just as exuberantly, obviously pleased to see her awake. He more readily accepted the hug Ellie half-strangled him with, throwing her arms around his neck and squeezing. “I’m glad you’re well, da’len, how are you feeling?”

“A lot better now! What about you? Were you hurt at all at the Breach?” she asked.

Solas shook his head. “Nothing of note but I thank you for your concern. You’ve seen the Seeker?”

Ellie nodded. “Uh-huh, I just got done meeting with her, and Leliana, and Commander Cullen—you were right, he’s nice—and I met Lady Josephine, she said you were going to teach me?”

The Elf seemed nervous, shuffling his feet a bit affirmed, “Ahh, yes. While I have no formal magical education myself, I believe if we worked together we would benefit from the practice, perhaps I have experience you could learn from,” Solas explained. “I believe I’m to meet with Lady Montilyet this afternoon to discuss final details. She’s to compose a sort of schedule for you—so you can divide your time between all of your studies.”

“Mmhmm. They apparently want me to learn proper etiquette and hitting people.”

“That sounds counter intuitive, but I trust the good Ambassador’s judgement,” Solas said jovially. “I do hope you find our lessons beneficial, some of what I do can be…rather boring I’ve been told.”

“Well, you’re being told now that I think we’ll have fun, I’m excited to learn,” Ellie
promised.

“You may change your mind once we start on meditation,” Solas said, “but that is for later. Now, I shouldn’t keep you, you were on your way to see Adan I suppose?”

Ellie nodded. “I’ll see you later, okay? Oh! Varric isn’t around, is he?”

“The Child of the Stone has a tent—if you pass the Tavern to head for the gates, you should find him there, if he isn’t in the Tavern proper.”

Huh, Child of the Stone? Solas sounded kind of snippy, like he wasn’t all too happy with Varric at the moment. “Thanks, I wanted to check in on him, too. I’ll see you later, alright?”


Adan was a brilliant healer…and also very grumpy, but that was sort of endearing really. He had this gruff-caring manner about him, which Ellie supposed made him best suited for the job he had. He had to be no-nonsense and clinical, but still care enough to have compassion when his patients needed it.

“Glad to see you’re still breathing. You’re welcome for that by the way,” he grumbled when she and Marehis entered his cabin.

“Oh yes, thank you so much,” Ellie said in earnest.

“Eh. Just my job. Let’s see, take a seat and we’ll go over a few things. shall we?”

By seat, he meant on top of the desk in front of him, so she was seated eye-level with him, her legs dangling. He asked her question after question as he scribbled furiously on his own parchment covered clipboard.

The Inquisition was doing a great deal of boosting sales for office supplies, that’s for sure.

He used a little wooden hammer to test her reflexes, and then took her bandaged wrist to check her pulse before examining beneath the bandage and he was pleased with how it was healing. He asked her questions all the while, trying to discern what level of amnesia she was dealing with that kept her from recalling the events at the Conclave.

“All in all, you’ve no physical injury keeping your memory at bay,” Adan reasoned out, “it seems whatever happened your mind wishes to protect you from. You may never recall what happened at the Conclave, or your memory may return to you, only time will tell.”

More questions came then. How much and how often did she consume alcohol? Had she ever lived in an area afflicted by the Blight? When was her last menstrual cycle?

Her what?

“Hmm. Need more meat on your bones—you should have begun bleeding years ago, but I suspect in time, with proper nutrition, it’ll happen. When it does, come see me for draught and bandaging, though Threnn has stores for that specifically, as well. Regardless we should likely discuss birth control methods. Are you active?”
“Oh yeah, all the time,” Ellie said, “I mean I’ve been sleeping a lot lately, but usually I’m pretty much always on the move.”

Adan was really quiet for a moment.

Her magic thrummed with amusement at her expense.

Marehis laughed.

What was so funny?

“Ah, no,” Healer Adan cleared his throat, “I meant sexually active.”

Maker! Ellie could feel herself turning bright, bright red. “I don’t—that isn’t—I mean—gosh. No!”

“Nothing to be embarrassed about,” Adan assured her, “it’s just important to keep track of. Sexual health is just like any other kind of health—you’ve got to be safe and it would probably be best if you avoided pregnancy right this minute.”

Yeah, pregnancy was a big Nope!

“Not a problem!”

“Do uh…do we need to have the talk or anything? You know how everything works, yes?” Adan asked.

She’d spent the better part of her life moving around taverns and squatter camps. She’d seen enough to know what was what. “Yup, yup, yup. I’ve got the gist of it, we’re all good.”

Something seemed to occur to him then and the Healer said, “Pregnancy may just be a worry when coupling with men, but it isn’t the only concern. There are also sexually transmitted diseases you can come by whether your preferences are male or female.”

“My-I- that doesn’t particularly matter to me. Gender I mean, not STDs—you can catch some wicked stuff that messes your magic big time when you’re a Mage,” Ellie was quick to explain, “I just haven’t…I never stay in one place too long, and the whole ‘one-night stand’ thing—it just hasn’t ever appealed to me.”

“Well. Good. If there are any changes and you have questions or have an interest in protection let me know.”

Yeah. That was gonna happen. Ellie was pretty sure after this conversation she’d bleed out before willingly setting foot in this cabin again. Sexually active. Gah! Just embarrassing!

Adan, however, thankfully moved on, “Now, let’s take a look at your Mark.”

An Inquisition messenger had interrupted her check-up to tell her Cassandra was waiting for her with the blacksmith. Which offered an excellent excuse to leave the moment Adan was finished.
Marehis was still way too giddy over Ellie’s nice little ‘safe-sex’ chat with the Healer. Way. Too. Giddy. The nerve! The Elf girl was practically cackling as Ellie left the Healer’s cabin, still three shades redder than she’d been when they arrived. Her magic was still giggling in her blood.

“That was not funny!” Ellie insisted to both as she stomped away, heading up the path towards the front of the Chantry, and diverting down to head for the gate.

“No, not at all, my lady,” Marehis said, mirth practically seeping from the words.

Ellie groaned in frustration.

“Tumbles! You’re alive!”

“Varric!” Ellie had been about to go down the stairs to the gate, when Varric’s voice had her spinning around to look at him. The Dwarf was standing by the fire going in front of his tent, she’d almost forgotten Solas saying that’s where she’d find him.


“I feel a lot better—thanks for keeping me company when I was sick,” Ellie replied.

“Don’t sweat it,” Varric said with a dismissive wave of his hand, “it gave me the chance to test out some new story material.”


“All this shit is weird, I figure I should write it all down at some point,” Varric said with a shrug. He looked at the Elf following Ellie around, “Got yourself a shadow?” he asked.

“Oh! Yeah, this is Marehis—she’s my uh, handmaiden,” Ellie said, introducing them, “Marehis, this is Varric Tethras.”

“Oh, an honor to meet you, Master Tethras!” Marehis greeted enthusiastically with a bow.

“Handmaiden, huh?” Varric asked in tones of doubt. “Lady Nightingale’s good. Smart. Keep an eye on Tumbles for us, yeah?”

Marehis smiled and gave him a subtle nod.

“Wait,” that was twice now. “Am I ‘Tumbles’?”

“Yup, the nickname muse has spoken, and that’s what you got, you okay with that?” Varric asked.

Ellie laughed. “Eh, I’ve been called worse.”

“Yeah well, anyone does, just let me know and Bianca will have a word with them,” Varric said. “Seeker tell you about uh, partying together and whatnot?”

“Uh-huh!” Ellie giggled at his phrasing, “Yeah, she said you and Solas volunteered to go with me to seal the Rifts.” And then she had a thought, “You um… you did volunteer, right? It sounded like you weren’t exactly here by your own will earlier. You’re not still captive, are you?” she’d have to do something if he were.

She wasn’t sure what. She was decent at escape plans by now. Off the top of her head she could think of five that would get her out of Haven by nightfall, but she wasn’t quite sure how well
they’d work for Varric. Three involved a great deal of climbing, though the other two would require flirting with key guardsmen, and he seemed the persuasive sort.

“Nah kid. Don’t get me wrong, you’re not the only one the Seeker kidnapped and interrogated, it’s a hobby of hers I guess. But she’s made it perfectly clear I’m welcome to leave anytime. Figured I’d stay where the story is. I want to get that thing out of the sky and figure out what the hell all that Red Lyrium was about.”

*Red Lyrium?*

“That awful red stuff at the Breach? That was really *Lyrium*?”

She’d never seen anything like it. She remembered hearing rumors about Knight Commander Meredith from Kirkwall—that she’d gone mad with power after using some sort of devil’s Lyrium and turned into a large…*statue*…but Ellie hadn’t been quick to believe such a thing.

After seeing the Breach though, anything seemed possible. And if the Lyrium at the Breach had been the same thing rumored in Kirkwall, well…it was definitely something evil. Ellie had never been so cold in her life, and the hellish heat rolling off that stuff sent shivers down her spine.

“*Creepy* Lyrium. Makes people super powerful, and super crazy—I’ve seen it first hand, it’s…bad. And I uh, well I have my own ‘people’, they keep reporting that crap is popping up all across Ferelden. Orlais too, nodes of the stuff that need destroyed.”

“If we find any, we’ll blast it up real good, promise,” Ellie said, offer her hand to shake on it.

“Sounds like a good deal,” Varric said, shaking her hand. “You busy now? I’m thinking of heading over to Flissa’s for a drink.”

Ellie shook her head. “Thanks, but I’ve got to meet Cassandra at the smiths. Solas might join you though.”

“Oh, I’m sure he will, since I’m buying for him,” at Ellies inquisitive look he said, “Eh. Said something I shouldn’t’ve—you don’t want to know.”

“Try to stay out of trouble, yeah?” Ellie asked.

“I can try Tumbles, but trouble’s pretty good at finding me,” Varric said, winking before he headed for the Tavern.

“Varric Tethras huh,” Marehis said, “Do you think he’d sign my copy of *Tale of the Champion*?”

Cassandra had been ready to storm the grounds of Haven in search of the girl, when she emerged from the gates, Marehis in tow, laughing about something Varric had said.

Ahh. The Dwarf had kept them. Typical.

“Heya, Cassandra!” Eleanor greeted brightly. The Seeker was glad to see the smile on her
face was easily brought, and genuine. Their rather extensive conversation in the Chantry War Room had been arduous and Cassandra thought that if she’d been in Eleanor’s shoes, she would have run.

Perhaps the girl didn’t think she could—thought the Inquisition would hunt her down. Or perhaps she stayed because she’d been told she would be cared for. She hadn’t spoken much of her life before the Conclave, but it had sounded like one of solitude, running from Templars, and inconsistency in safety, meals, and comfort.

“Good, you’re here,” Cassandra said, nodding to the young ladies as they joined her. “Harritt is ready to meet you, if you’ll just follow me, we’ll see you get proper armor.”

What unfolded was rather amusing to say the least. Harritt was usually a man of few words, and people not working the forge were almost immediately ejected from the area. But two minutes of Eleanor’s exuberance and outright fascination at the inner workings of the forge had Harritt proudly giving them all a tour of his facilities. He explained what each workstation was for, how Eleanor herself would be able to use some of them if she wished—the man promising to assist her with any project she took up, and to make sure she didn’t leave the forge with fewer fingers than she arrived with.

The Seeker wasn’t wholly certain the girl should actually use any of the forge’s machinery at all. So many moving parts, and tools, and chances for the girl to hurt herself, but she seemed to take Harritt’s words of caution and safety protocol to heart.

He then led them to his cabin, popping open the door and giving the one roomed space a thorough look around, checking the security of the boards over the windows—nailed shut for the cold months—before he left them, telling Marehis where she could find measuring tape and parchment to take down Eleanor’s sizes.

Cassandra offered the girl privacy and watched the door as she stripped and let Marehis measure her. For some reason it reminded her of her own days as a young lady at court—or a young lady with overbearing aunts trying to trick her into presenting herself at court.

“Stop fidgeting, da’len.”

“I’ve got my tits in the wind here and its freezing.”

“I’m almost done and—cut that out, no tip-toes. You’re the height the Maker made you, deal with it,” the Elfin woman chided.

“Make sure to hold your breath when she measures around your ribcage,” Cassandra offered the advice suddenly.

“Huh?” Eleanor questioned.

“The armor guarding your vital organs will be not very pliable. If it is made to fit snugly when your lungs are full of air, it will always allow you to be able to breathe easily with it on,” the Seeker explained as she thought back to her own first fittings. While hers had been for some horrendous dresses Cassandra was apparently to wear in order to ‘catch a man’, it was a similar concept, with dissimilar results she hoped. She’d never actually worn the dresses, she hoped Eleanor would be happy to wear the armor Harritt would craft for her.

Cassandra heard Marehis scratching lines through her parchment before resuming her measuring.
The Elfin woman worked quickly and soon Eleanor was fully clothed and doing some sort of half-skip walk back out to the forge and rushing over to where Harritt stood next to the fire, arms tucked to her chest as if she’d caught the heat in them and was clinging to it.

She truly had been ‘freezing’ as she’d put it. Her clothing was long sleeved and legged, but perhaps Cassandra should put in a reminder to Josephine to see about getting the girl a proper coat. Her armor would be fitted with an over coat, but the girl did seem to chill easily. She wondered briefly if perhaps Threnn would have extra blankets on hand.

“All finished? Well done, I’ll have your armor to you shortly,” Harritt said. “In the meantime, let’s see about a staff. What kind of core are we looking for? Elemental or Spirit? I’ve got most everything at hand for Fire or Lightning, but Seggrit owes me good. You’d have to wait a while for the staff to be crafted, but he’d get you Ice Essence if you needed.”

“Oh, no need,” Eleanor assured him, “I think…” she looked to Cassandra then, “I know I’ll be expected to fight, but I can still do that with a Spirit focused staff—I’ve got a few fire spells and one wicked cool lightning spell under my belt.” Ahh. Cassandra recalled her lightning spell, and supposed if she were more comfortable with magic, she too would term the feat ‘wicked cool’.

“Having a Spirit focused staff though,” Eleanor continued, “would lend to more attacks on the interior of a person, and even more so to just acting as a defensive caster rather than offensive. Barriers, dispelling, and the like.”

“You know your capabilities better than anyone else,” Cassandra said, measuring her words carefully. “I do understand the sentiment—but if you believe I’d think you a coward for seeking to defend the party rather than work on the offensive line, you’re mistaken. I know you are brave, and I trust you to do what needs to be done.”

Eleanor blushed at being called ‘brave’ apparently, “Oh gosh. That’s sweet of you to say, but I was asking for uh…a tactical outlook I guess. What would best suit the party.”

Cassandra thought it over. “Spirit will do, Solas is our only other Mage, and his staff is Elemental—Ice oriented, I believe.”

“Spirit it is then,” Harritt said, “I’ve a few on hand you can choose from. If none are to your liking, just take one for now and we’ll set to crafting a custom staff—it shouldn’t take too much time, it mostly depends on the materials needed.”

The blacksmith had Eleanor examine the staffs he had. With his permission she held each one in turn and sent a pop of magic would emerge from the palm of her hand into the staff, and she watched carefully how it coasted both up and down the length of the staff, as if testing how her magic would glide from it in combat. Two of the staffs she took from the forge and walked down the dirt road in front of Harritt’s forge, going past his cabin to test them in the clearing that dipped down towards the docks sitting atop Haven’s frozen lake. She tested them more vigorously, casting larger spells—Barrier, Cassandra assumed from the lack of visual response from the staff, and then a spell that spilled fire before the girl.

In the end, she picked the staff that had produced the lesser amount of fire when she’d cast with it—a tall, dark wood rod capped with something that reminded Cassandra as the head of a mace, only the points more rounded than sharp.

“It’s more my speed. The other uses just a bit too much of my magic for where I am right now,” she leaned a little on the staff as she explained, and her skin gleamed a thin layer of sweat from her testing. She must still be weary from the Breach, she’d only just recovered, and Cassandra worried she’d pushed the girl too soon—she hadn’t realized all that would go into selecting a
weapon. She’d thought Eleanor would just look at the staffs and pick whichever one appealed to her visually, though now she realized that had been a foolish assumption. She, herself, would never do such a thing when selecting a sword.

“Then you’ve chosen well, Eleanor,” Cassandra said with, what she hoped came across as encouragement. “I have a meeting soon with Leliana. Do you have need of anything?”

The girl shook her head. “All good here. Thanks for introducing me to Harritt and helping me pick out a staff.”

“Yes, well. I suppose we will speak later then,” and then, “I do not believe there is anything else that needs your attention today if you wish to rest. Josephine will have your schedule delivered to you later this evening. Dinner is usually ready in the Tavern by six, Flissa keeps it warm well into the evening for late night shifts.”

Eleanor scratched the back of her neck—a nervous habit Cassandra knew, the Commander did the same thing when he was nervous. Was she embarrassed at being caught feeling tired? “Yeah, I could probably go for a nap right about now. Oh!” she looked to her Elfin companion then and said, “Unless, er, would that bother you? Would you be bored?”

Marehis gave the area around them an appraising look before speaking more candidly, “I am sure I can find something to occupy my time. You needn’t worry so, my lady.”

Cassandra walked alongside the two as they made their way back through Haven’s gates to return Eleanor to her cabin.

The Seeker paused at the steps leading up to the Chantry yard and watched to make sure the girl made her way safely inside her quarters.

The following week was…interesting.

Pinpricks hurt, but punching can hurt worse.

Marehis was amazing.

And Druffulos will hunt you down to the ends of the earth if you disturb their naps, but they have an all-encompassing love of Elf Root that makes them forgive any sin.

Ellie’s own nap after meeting Cassandra had turned into lying comatose for neigh some eighteen plus hours.

She was startled awake by a very very very Orlesian tailor starting her fitting as she slept—she woke up to measuring tape wrapped around her wrist and a thick Orlesian accent asking if she was a fan of ruffled sleeves. Josephine had scheduled her fitting for the afternoon, but Madam Florna Vanoran was subject only to the Maker’s will, therefore time had no meaning and there were no such things as personal boundaries.

She’d been measured six ways to Sunday*—much more invasive and chat-riddled than Marehis’s work. Lady Josephine appeared moments after the tailor, yawning discreetly and apologizing that she hadn’t perceived Madam Florna’s early arrival—‘I’m not early darling, the
Inspiration is upon me, the Maker fills me with His vision for our fair Herald now! —and began taking up the job of fielding Madam Florna’s bajillion questions about Ellie’s tastes.

Her tastes consisted of what was available and fit alright. The Mercenary coat Trevelyan had outfitted her with was so warm the most sturdy clothing she’d ever hoped to own. Then the Inquisition—Josephine—had provided the most beautiful clothing she’d ever been in the presence of let alone worn. So, Ellie stood as still as she possibly could even though she really really had to pee, and half listened to the back and forth between tailor and Ambassador as they discussed her future wardrobe at length.

As they continued to talk she realized just why Madam Florna had been selected as tailor. She’d heard of what happened at the Conclave, heard the rumor of the Herald of Andraste, and then, when Josephine had put feelers out for a tailor, physically leapt at the opportunity to serve her Maker by tailoring for, what she termed, ‘the love child of the Maker and Andraste made flesh delivered to save the world from the Breach’ which made Ellie’s flesh crawl. It was equal parts blasphemous and yuck.

Anyway. The woman, eccentric as she was, was a well-established tailor who covered her own traveling expenses and would provide the Herald of Andraste with clothing free of charge. Though Ellie suddenly suspected the woman would exact her payment in blood when she started in with the pins. Ellie had slept in a nightshirt Marehis had gotten from the Quartermaster. Madam Florna came already prepared with nightgowns and something she termed ‘play clothes’. Apparently, they were more plain garments meant for roughhousing—she could get them dirty and torn and it wouldn’t particularly matter, she was to wear them for training with Cullen and Cassandra.

She tried every single one on, and Madam Florna made sounds of disapproval or elation depending on…whatever her internal thought process was working out. She tsk’ed and ‘ah-ha’d while cheerfully pinning the clothing to fit Ellie better, though this resulted in quite a few accidental jabs. The first caught Ellie by surprise, made her flinch and hiss a little “Ouch!”

That resulted in Madam Florna dropping her pincushion altogether and falling to her knees apologizing profusely for ‘spilling her sacred blood’. It took the Ambassador a moment to convince the woman she hadn’t…er…sinned? And Ellie promised she wasn’t upset, and even picked up the pincushion and offered the woman’s weapons back.

She kept quiet and still throughout the rest of her fitting ignoring any accidental pricks as the woman finished her work. She gathered her pinned garments carefully and followed Lady Josephine to the Chantry where she would sew them up to fit Ellie.

As soon as they disappeared from Ellie’s quarters, Marehis reappeared with a tray of breakfast—that was two meals in a row!—and a mug of something warm full of milk that made Ellie feel like she could run laps around Haven for days. Coffee, Marehis informed her, and it was grand.

It did, however, make sitting Ellie down for etiquette lessons…difficult. She’d been bouncing out of her skin while Josephine sat with the patience of a saint and taught her how to sit, stand, and walk like a ‘lady’. Day one passed with very little sitting, no actual standing still, and a very unladylike, fast-paced walk back and forth along the confines of Josephine’s office. Throughout the week though, her lessons improved, and she was well on her way to differentiating between the shrimp fork and the dessert fork, due in no small part to Marehis taking the initiative to start Ellie’s morning off with a bracing glass of water and saved the coffee for after Josephine’s lessons. In time for her combat instruction from Cassandra and Cullen. Coffee and combat actually
Madam Florna had made quick work of her ‘roughing clothes’ and Ellie changed into the plain grey pants and whitish long-sleeved tunic—one she could just pull over her head, no buttons gemstone or otherwise. They were perfect, warm and comfortable, and the Orlesian tailor was absolutely elated with Ellie’s praise of her work.

Cassandra and Cullen awaited Ellie at Haven’s gates mid-morning, every morning. By day three she’d been hoping maybe they wouldn’t show up, maybe cancel her lessons, or at least maybe her sore limbs would fail her, and she’d fall and crack her head open, never to lift her arms to punch or her legs to kick, ever again.

Day one, she’d been on the tail end of her coffee high, had a few left-over jitters that went towards fueling her nerves over her lessons.

Firstly, there was the whole ‘fighting’ thing. Commander and Seeker both assured her that she would not come to harm in their lessons, right out of the gate—literally, they said this as they led her through Haven’s gate, out onto the practice field, to train in the empty space to the left of their soldier’s tents.

“Oh gosh, I didn’t mean I was afraid you’d hurt me—it’s fighting I’m gonna get hurt sometime,” Ellie explained; “I don’t want to hurt you!”

That declaration had ended in Cullen chuckling and scratching the back of his neck as he looked to Cassandra for some sort of appropriate joint response. The Seeker, however, snorted and gave a half-laugh before turning her back on Ellie as if she could hide her amusement.

“You uh…you don’t have to worry about that much, Eleanor,” Cullen offered.

Cassandra cleared her throat, and was all business when she faced Ellie again, “Most surely not. We are professionals—we have been fighting and taking hits since well before you were born. Put that worry from your mind.”

That out of the way there was also the matter of…well…the instructors themselves.

Cassandra was intimidating and Cullen…well, he was a Templar. Former Templar whatever, Magic did not trust him. It was a fight they were having—Ellie trying to reassure her magic that Cullen was on their side, Magic trying to convince Ellie that they were in danger every minute they let that man lull them into a false sense of security. It sewed doubt in her blood, made her have to stop and breathe through the moment of panic that spiked through her when the man was too close, moving too fast, and she knew he was going for the kill.

That backfired on Magic, in the end.

It had taken a handful of times—she’d passed it off as simply not being used to the routine, she’d only woken up yesterday from being so sick, and she didn’t usually fight like this. That had been believable only so many times in so many minutes—they’d gone from Cassandra getting ready to sling Ellie over her shoulder and bodily forcing her back to bed if she was wearing out so easily, to Cullen motioning for the woman to give them a minute, and slinging an arm over Ellie’s shoulder, sitting her down on the short flight of stairs that lead to Haven’s gate.

He sat her down, and he asked,

“Do you know, Eleanor, where a Commander keeps his armies?”
She thought about it. It was a rather broad question—here, Inquisition forces had tents, some of them may even live in the cabins around Haven. The practice fields? The battlefield? Was he referring to himself, or to Commanders in a general sense?

So, she answered as honestly as she could, “No,” she said, because, she didn’t know.

Cullen gave her the most solemn nod and sighed as if he’d expected as much but hoped for better. Patted her on the knee reassuringly. And then he looked her in the eyes and stoically answered:

“He keeps them in his sleeves.”

...what?

Was he on something? She knew Templars took Lyrium, did it make non-mages loopy or—

Oh Maker, Andraste, and all the Dalish gods. Armies. Arm. ies. He keeps them in his sleeves.

“What is so amusing?” Cassandra called over to them from where she’d been pacing, back and forth between the soldiers’ tents and Harritt’s smith.

Ellie was having too great a giggle fit to answer the Nevarran woman properly, but Cullen just shook his head with a smile and waved her off that it was okay—they certainly hadn’t been laughing at her.

Though the lady Seeker too, did indeed keep her armies in her sleeves.

“I’ve been told humor is a decent ice breaker,” Cullen explained, “Rift sealing didn’t seem to do the trick for us, and neither did our polite exchange of white lies in the War Room.”

White lies?

Oh. When she’d promised she was fine with his being a former Templar.

It hadn’t totally been a lie, she assured him. She was fine with it. Or she wanted to be, at least. She might just have a little bit of bad experience when it comes to her being an Apostate Mage and dealing with Templars.

And then he told her he didn’t trust her either. She was an Apostate, who’d never been Circled let alone been through a Harrowing. His every instinct said she could be demon possessed in a heartbeat, that practicing with her like this—with fists and eventually with blades, anything could happen, bruises were a definite and ultimately, either through bloody noses or split lips or slashes through flesh, blood was a certainty at some point.

But they had a common goal, a shared affinity for bad puns, and a place to build mutual respect. So, he promised her he would ignore his Templar principles and see her fully trained to face the challenges ahead. And she pinky swore that if she was about to get demon possessed, he’d be the first to know—after all, what sort of demon would ever laugh at ‘keeps his armies in his sleeves’?

Magic relaxed more about Cullen after that—mostly because it feared he’d just sit it down with Ellie again and have another chat because that was definitely not the goal it had in mind, but regardless, it stopped with the panic making and took Ellie’s lead in regard to the Commander and how much she trusted him.
Their lesson continued much more smoothly, until Cassandra insisted Ellie show her how she might usually throw a punch. Ellie informed her she hardly ever threw anything other than spells, and once (regrettably) a whole cooked chicken to defend herself.

The Lady Seeker insisted it was all wrong, watching Ellie punch the thin air, and assured her she’d only manage to injure herself balling her fist with her thumb tucked between the palm of her hand and her fingers.

Ellie got the whole ‘proper fist’ thing down. In the ‘hold your up your fist to me. Yes good’ way. But in actual practice, it didn’t help much at first. In their first spar, Cassandra had removed her gauntlets stripped of the metal breastplate, leaving her purple leather armor—still no fun to hit, but Ellie was supposed to be less likely to hurt herself than if the Seeker had worn metal.

The woman could have worn a thick layer of cotton wool. Ellie still would have forgotten, struck out of her usual instinct, and ended up with a broken thumb because the one blow she managed to land against the woman had been a punch, was done, as Cassandra had warned her, ‘all wrong’.

Their first lesson ended with a trip to see Adan, who’d wrapped up her hand and given her potion that tasted like chalk and dirt. Cassandra and Cullen dropped her off at the Tavern for lunch afterward with promises that they’d pick up where they’d left off later, and surely, she would get better as they practiced. By the end of the week, yeah, she was doing marginally better—Cassandra dubbed her suitable enough for a full-blown party outing soon. She was doing well with her training with Solas and could in fact hold her own sans magic in an absolute emergency should she have to.

Varric, Solas, and Marehis always kept her company during lunch. Josephine even made the odd appearance in the Tavern when she learned the Herald was eating there instead of having her meals delivered somewhere less…crowded, as Josephine usually did, having Flissa send her meals to her office. Josephine had not disliked the experience and said she would do so again, but also passed along an open invitation to the Herald to have lunch in her office sometime. Ellie put it in her mind to take her up on the offer—Josephine was nice and compassionate, and she was always so soft spoken in a way that soothed even Ellie’s magic. But she liked eating in the Tavern at lunch with her…well…friends?

Marehis was always around during her lessons—mostly somewhere she could keep an eye on everything going on around Ellie, while looking like she was cleaning, or reading, or simply watching Ellie get knocked on her butt (socially, physically, whatever). She sat next to Ellie every day at lunch and quietly discussed the things she observed about Ellie’s lessons—how she was doing, and if they had the place mostly to themselves as they sometimes did, the Elfin woman offered advice. Like good advice. While Cassandra and Cullen were wonderful and patient with her, it was Marehis’s advice that rocketed Ellie’s improvement in her training with them, bless the woman.

Varric made a point of eating lunch with her—Ellie realized as much on day four when he’d stumbled into the Tavern, just finishing up tying his pants and clad in his night shirt, his usually neat-ish bun completely fallen, hair hanging disheveled around his face, and he looked like he was still asleep even as he staggered into the bar, Solas at his back, looking like he’d taken a blow to the face—a book, she found out later, had been thrown at him for his trouble when he’d gone to wake the Dwarf at Varric’s own insistence, for lunch. Poor Solas.

He too joined their lunch brigade. Day one he’d been in the Tavern with Varric, politely sipping at a mug of tea Flissa had misguidedlly given him. She saw ‘Elf’ and thought he’d
appreciate a cuppa, though apparently, he disliked tea altogether. He’d appreciated the sentiment though, so he’d accepted it. Varric suggested he put some whisky in it. Solas suggested he would, if the Dwarf didn’t drink the Tavern dry of the stuff.

For all that the nickname Chuckles was to be ironic, Ellie thought Solas had a wicked sense of humor.

It became habit, a common sight in the Tavern, the Herald sandwiched between two Elves, and seated across from a half-asleep Dwarf.

Ellie did try her hand at…well…matchmaking to some extent. It was hard to do when one of the people was just about as dense as they come to romantic advances, and the other had the eyes of a hawk, ever seeing every intention behind everything. Marehis had appreciated her attempt at making it so she and Solas could sit across from each other—maybe the position would prompt more discussion between the two—but she could get her own dates. Ellie didn’t see how the woman had any time for dating when she was constantly hanging around her. But Marehis insisted she needed no such thing.

Ellie would succeed though, she was sure. Solas didn’t mind Marehis’s presence at all he’d said at one point during their lessons, which Ellie took as a massive sign that the man had some interest in her guard. And Solas was so tall, and had a nice voice, and was gentle in his mannerisms, and just so very, very smart. Ellie would have a crush on the man, she thought, if he were not so um…older…and perhaps less bald. His head admittedly looked like a hard-boiled egg and while that was wholly shallow…it just didn’t do anything for the girl except make her think of breakfast. Which was good, such an infatuation would be entirely inappropriate and likely unreciprocated. Solas, she found, did not exactly fit in with most Elves, but she saw him. He didn’t have eyes for any of the Humans, man or woman, and there were plenty of handsome and beautiful people working with the Inquisition, Dwarves, Humans—Lady Josephine was almost breathtakingly beautiful, but like his egg-shaped melon did nothing for Ellie, the human form did little for Solas.

Would it be so bad for the two Elves to…keep each other company? The Inquisition was hard work, and it was easy to get lonely even when surrounded by an entire army of people. Surely no harm would come of a little romance with the Elf.

Matchmaking aside, Solas and Ellie did well in their practice together.

They worked mostly inside Solas’s cabin unless they were using a great level of magic that needed open space or generated enough heat on its own to keep them warm in the elements. Solas did not seem to mind the cold, though he insisted it was just as much to his benefit as it was to Ellie’s that they meditate by the fire. It also made Marehis’s job a little easier, Solas offered her a chair, and she sat in the entryway, just before the cabin door.

Marehis turned pink when Solas removed the vest of his apprentice coat and dropped it over her shoulders with the concern that a draft often swept up under the door and might chill the woman.

Ellie briefly wondered then what she should do if the two did start a romantic relationship. Could Marehis afford a moment of privacy? Or would Ellie just have to stop up her ears and close her eyes or something so the two could kiss or whatever? Maybe she could meditate.

Despite Solas’s earlier worry that Ellie would be entirely bored with their lessons, he seemed pleased to find that just the opposite was true. ‘I told you’, Ellie had said. She was a Mage of her word!
Meditation was a major focus of their work together, especially the first few days, though it was something they always began, and sometimes even ended, every lesson with. When the man first described the practice, it was…boring sounding. But after a bit of fidgeting—finding the most comfortable way to sit on the stone hearth next to Solas—and some much-appreciated assistance from Marehis who started humming, no words though the sound in her throat sounded like if there were, they would be in Dalish from the tone, the cadence, Ellie began to more easily slip into a state of just being, and being still. It was…pure relief.

Ellie could usually find something good in most anything—she had to, if she didn’t she’d just be miserable her whole life. There was lots and lots and lots of good with the Inquisition. Lots, she wasn’t nutters. But there were these thoughts that sort of twisted a path across her conscious mind.

She wasn’t worthy, she deserved none of the good the Inquisition brought, how dare she benefit from this, how dare she survive when all others had lost their lives at the Conclave? How dare she live the best sort of life she’d ever had at the cost of some hundreds of lives?

And everything was happening so quickly. What if she failed? She already had, she’d failed to seal the Breach before the Maker and everyone. But they were giving her another shot? Why? What if she failed the Inquisition further? Embarrassed them in front of their potential allies? Brought shame to them through her weakness in the field?

What if she just couldn’t do it?

What if she couldn’t be the Herald?

What if she should have just died on that mountain, with Trevelyan?

And yet you live. Roderick had said.

Meditation did not banish those thoughts from her mind permanently, but for a while she could sit and plunge her mind deep into her magic where thought couldn’t follow, which suited her just fine. It was beyond relief to be still for a moment every day and not feel anything about her thoughts—good, bad, benign—to find peace from the words swirling ever constantly in her mind the way they did from the moment she woke to the moment she tried to get some sleep.

Magic may have made her biased, but Solas’s lessons were by far her favorite.

When they weren’t meditating they either worked on spells they knew together or practiced ones they were learning—the Elf knew much more than Ellie, but Solas seemed to be purposefully incorporating spells they both did not know into his lessons. The best way to learn was through teaching, he reasoned, and they both benefited from looking at the spells and seeking to assist each other in better understanding how they would work.

And when they didn’t cast, they talked shop. Of theory and the Fade—Ellie did not actively seek out the Fade in her sleep as Solas did, but she loved the tales he had to tell from his own experiences. Marehis would even ask them questions from time to time that promoted their discussions into interesting directions with a non-Mage trying to better understand magic, and the Mages themselves.

The idea that demons were multifaceted creatures—beings with higher purpose that had merely fallen from their intended place was beyond fascinating. Wisdom and Purpose sounded like spectacular forces to encounter in the Fade, and Ellie listened openly to Solas’s somewhat stilted explanation that he believed demons were merely spirits corrupted from their original purpose. He
delivered what was basically a speech on the subject with tones of defense, as if he expected Ellie to tell him he was a fool for thinking such a thing or make a mockery of his ideas.

When she confessed she’d wondered the same thing—if there were Spirits and there were Demons, was there some connection between the two other than being opposing forces, were they related or were they one in the same on some level? They discussed the definite idea that Spirits could be corrupted and turn demon and debated whether or not such a thing could work in reverse. Solas was skeptical—people did not change, why should demons be any different?

Ellie argued that his view was full of logical fallacy. The concept was: Spirits can change into Demons. They already changed—proving change itself was possible. Was it so silly to think that if they could become evil, they could also become good again? Be reminded of their former purpose and be reunited with it?

That conversation had them talking long into evening—Marehis had actually looped her arms through theirs, pulled them up off the floor of Solas’s cabin and escorted them to the Tavern for dinner, the two debating the entire way hardly noticing they’d changed location. It was only when dinner was before them and Marehis cleared her throat sharply, that their attention returned to something other than their discussion.

Marehis offered only a few reminders for Ellie to not speak with her mouth full. It was fruitless, and even Solas was guilty of the act—catching himself and quickly swallowing his food half-chewed so he could finish his sentence with little interruption.

In the end, the Elf woman settled their argument for them. No matter Solas’s opinion on the matter, Marehis believed if Ellie sat down with a demon the way she did Solas and talked their ear off for the better part of seven straight hours, they’d ‘become any Spirit she damn well pleased’ just to quiet her.

That had Solas agreeing with Marehis, and Ellie sticking her tongue out at both of them.

Her entire afternoon wasn’t solely for studying with Solas—there was a block after lunch for about two hours Josephine believed she should dedicate to her practice with magic. After that… well, sometimes, Josephine said, there would be important meetings or dinners she would have to attend, though that could be said any day at any time, Josephine would keep her schedule up-to-date, so she always knew where she needed to be and when.

For her first week though, she did have time free and clear to herself after her lessons with Solas—which sometimes wound up being dedicated to debate with him—but more often gave her the opportunity to check out Haven. She stayed mostly within the walled portion, visiting the Chantry, exploring the place with Marehis. The furthest away from the walls she would go was to the warmth of Harritt’s forge to watch he and his own recruits work—though he’d banished her when she discovered he was working on the final touches for her armor. He only wanted her to see work ordered specifically for her to be seen once it was complete—which she supposed made sense, that’s how it worked for everyone Harritt crafted for, they hardly had the time to pop around his smith and check over things. Sometimes, if they did not seem busy, Ellie would stop by the field tents and chat with Cassandra or Cullen—though he was usually always occupied, she often just sent him a friendly wave. Her talks with Cassandra were usually short, the woman seemed like she was pleased to chat with Ellie but did not always have much for conversation. She was very reserved when it came to questions about herself—Solas had been too, at first, but Ellie got that. He was an Apostate too, casual details dropped carelessly in conversation could mean life or death, getting to stay in town for the night, or being on the run from Templars before you had the chance to settle.
Everyone had stuff, baggage or whatever, so she didn’t take offense when Cassandra likewise treated Ellie’s questions with suspicion, as if she thought the girl wished to pry information from her to use against the Seeker.

That sounded more like Cassandra’s thing to be honest. It was kind of her job description. Ellie just wanted to know more about the woman because…well…they’d be working together. She hadn’t worked much with others before, but her time with Trevelyan had taught her that people worked together better when they understood each other. Like he’d gotten her fear of spiders out of her and handled them for the most part when they did encounter the creatures while passing through a cave that was supposed to be a short cut to the Temple of Sacred Ashes.

That had revealed Trevelyan’s poor ability to navigate. Ellie was no scholar, but she was decent at following a map, so she’d taken over their course from then on. Knowing where one was weak, meant knowing where the other needed to pick up the slack.

Truth, to some extent, was Cassandra’s strength, so Ellie just went with that—being honest about why she wished to know about the Seeker made the woman return the favor. Ellie learned she’d been correct about Cassandra’s accent—she was Nevarran born and raised. Cassandra’s parents had passed when she was young—executed for treason, she admitted. That was…sad. Ellie hadn’t known her parents, sometimes she wondered, but if she’d actually known them and lost them, she wasn’t sure how she’d feel.

She did remember an orphanage when she was little. Really little, she’d been booted from the home when her Fade dreams started. She couldn’t say where the orphanage was if her life depended on it—she’d been so young, and it had been in the actual middle of nowhere.

“You were a ward of the state, but the authorities didn’t contact the local Circle?” Cullen asked. He came to join them when he heard the sort of questions Cassandra was asking—where was ‘Eleanor’ from, what of her parents, when did she know she was a Mage?

“We were sort of in the dead end of nowhere. There wasn’t a local Circle. The cost alone associated with getting word to the Templars would have been more than I was worth.”

“More than you were worth?” Cassandra asked, darkly.

That had been an option discussed. Selling her off. She didn’t know what that meant then, she was only little. All she knew was her dreams were scary and none of the caretakers wished to hold her when she cried, not like she’d seen them do with the other children. They’d been afraid to touch her.

Honesty was good with Cassandra, but there was something a little too honest about all that. Thinking about it too hard made her head swim, and her eyes itchy, and her magic just…sad.

So, she smiled and breezed by the question with, as honest as possible, “They settled on just giving me the boot—it was free, and so was I. I don’t remember a whole lot.” Being hungry, and sad, afraid. “Then I realized I had Magic. I couldn’t use it, not really, but I felt it you know?” Magic had come to her comfort, gave her guidance where it could. “I ended up getting a ride to another town, and from there another. I was only little so people were sympathetic. I could say I was lost, or trying to get to family, and people had no problem allowing me to travel with them.” Not all of them with the best of intentions but wild spurts of magic had often been her saving grace in those instances. “If I didn’t mention that I’d been kicked out of an orphanage, or why, I usually got food or a place to stay for a while.”

There had been people—good, kind people—who openly made an effort to adopt her but…
they would find out. If she stayed too long, if her dreams became too much to keep quiet, if her magic dared manifest itself unexpectedly, she would be discovered as a Mage and have to leave. Be kicked out again. She rather liked leaving on good terms—or at least, leaving after everyone had fallen asleep, bid her goodnight with the happy prospect of seeing her in the morning in mind. It was better to leave them with a perfected idea of her, than with the bitter truth. When people found out what she was, there was always hurt—like she’d lied to them, like they’d mistrusted her, and she knew those sentiments were true. Few just told her to get out. Some called on Templars to capture her. More than she’d care to admit had tried to take her life over her misguidance.

“The woman who crafted your former staff, she raised you?” Cassandra asked.

“Uh-huh pretty much,” Ellie said, “Ava, she was a hedge mage who lived in a town right up on the Marches-Nevarran boarder, but she was from Ansburg originally. Talked about it a little, about the Circle there. Anyway, she couldn’t officially take me in or anything—she was allowed to stay in town because she didn’t cause trouble, healed their sick. Saved the town from a flood once. They were grateful but not ‘let you bring more freak-mages into the fold’ grateful. Her village was too close to Tantervale* to be super safe for Apostates. She looked after me though, and as long as I didn’t blow my cover and reveal myself as a mage to anyone else in town, she made sure I didn’t starve, so I stuck around there a lot when I was younger. She was the first person to give me any kind of magical training. I traveled around more as I got older—it was just safer for both of us—but I always went back to visit when I could.”

“Have you heard from her since your time in Haven?” Commander Cullen asked.

Ellie gave the Commander a confused look. Because…what?

“She wouldn’t know where to reach Ellie,” Merhis spoke up, looking to Ellie, “you haven’t sent any letters since you arrived.”

Letters?

“Ahh yes, I did not think to offer it,” Cassandra started, “while Haven is not exactly a central hub of civilization we do send and receive mail. A visit so far north is not plausible at this time, but if you wish you could send word to this Ava, let her know you are safe.”

Oh. She should have explained better.

“Oh, um thanks. I appreciate the thought, but uh, no that’s not necessary,” Ellie admitted, “Ava passed away a few years ago.”

The three adults seemed to scramble for a moment, overlapping “Oh!”’s came from Commander and Cassandra.

Merhis’s hand went to Ellie’s shoulder as she said, “Ir abelas, da’len.”

“I am sorry for your loss, Eleanor,” Cassandra offered.

“My condolences,” Cullen said.

“It’s okay. Ava lived a long life—she was actually a hundred and two when I first met her.”

“Truly?” Cassandra asked, more surprised than skeptical.

“Uh-huh,” Ellie laughed as she said, “she was pretty amazing. Survived like three blights, grew up during the Blessed Age—which she claims was named such because of her birth, and I
genuinely believed her for a while because I was…oh gosh I was maybe six at the time?”

That had them laughing, and not looking like they felt badly for her. Her Magic curled up like a cat settling in for a pleasant nap around the memory of Ava, sitting on her porch with Ellie at her feet, telling her stories of different brave and courageous Mages she’d come to know in her youth, people who believed in free mages and had fought for their rights. Many to the death. Most, to the death. Ava was the last of her friends.

_Yet you live._

Her magic wasn’t so comfortable anymore.

“Eleanor?” Cullen asked. “Is something the matter?”

Ellie smiled up at the Commander, and Seeker who’d been about to ask after Ellie herself. “Oh gosh, I didn’t mean to keep you. I’m actually kind of cold, I think I’ll head in. Have a great night!”

She didn’t hear their response as she set a brisk pace for the gate, Marehis rushing to keep up with her. She stopped once they were at the cabin and Marehis opened the door, for her—eyes sweeping across the single room swiftly before stepping back against the door to curtsey and gesture for Ellie to step inside.

Ellie sat in front of the fire for a while, kind of trying to meditate but it wasn’t working as well as it did with Solas’s instruction. Or maybe it was his company that helped. She wasn’t sure and settled for being warm and quiet. Marehis didn’t seem certain why Ellie was being so quiet, but she respected it, only prompting the girl to speak as dinner hour approached.

“Shall I send in an order to be delivered?” she asked.

Ellie shook her head. “Oh, no. We can go to the Tavern for dinner if that’s okay with you.”

“I am well as long as my lady is,” Marehis said. It was as close as she got to outright asking Ellie to tell her what caused her…well…moodiness. It wasn’t a _mood _really, she was just tired.

Magic expressed some concern at that for some reason. People got tired. She lived on an increasingly intense schedule now, she was always doing something, and everything, everyone was so new. It was normal.

A polite knock sounded at the door. Marehis answered to find one of the men that helped around Flissa’s Tavern with the night rush—Danner. He was nice, talkative, and always pleasant to Ellie and her friends. He stood just outside, holding a tray laden with covered dishes and a goblet of drink.

“Oh dear, there seems to be a mistake,” Marehis said in her put-on frantic tone—like a servant girl fearful her mistake would result in a slap—it caught Ellie’s attention and had her watching as Marehis stood firmly in the doorway as if to block Danner from entering. “I didn’t put an order in for my lady.”

“Ah, you’re right, must have been a mix up,” Danner said apologetically.

Marehis was just dismissing him and getting ready to close the door, when he surged forward, the door slamming against the wall, knocking Marehis back off her feet as he charged into her with the tray.
“Marehis!” Ellie screamed, hand reaching back for her staff as the man made to bound across the room towards her.

But he hardly made it three feet in the doorway. As soon as Marehis was down she was back up again, the Elf rolled backwards and popped up on her feet, tackling the man and taking his neck into the crook of her elbow choking him. In her hand she had a knife pressing dangerously into his throat—the blade not piercing but dipping a visible dent in the flesh with every intention of lodging the knife there should he continue to struggle. She got the man to his knees and held him in a chokehold until he was passed out on the floor.

Marehis came to crouch at Ellie’s side then, “Are you alright, da’len?” she asked, a hand running through Ellie’s hair while the other lifted the girl’s chin to pull her attention from the supine man and focus on her guard’s question.

“Uh-huh. He didn’t hurt me,” Ellie said, mind reeling. Danner was…he was nice, why had he tried to hurt her? And then she looked over her bodyguard about to ask if she was alright when a startled cry escaped her—“You’re hurt!”

Marehis’s shirt was soaked in blood.

Magic pooled in Ellie’s hands and she was ready to cast anything that would keep her friend from bleeding out, “Help! We need help!” she screamed at the top of her lungs. Inquisition soldiers came rushing into the room then, and Marehis evaded Ellie’s hands, to stand and face the guards.

“This man made an attempt on my lady’s life, please escort him to the Lady Nightingale at once,” she said. The men nodded and hauled the unconscious man up, slinging his arms over their shoulders to carry him off to Leliana for questioning.

“Marehis!”

“I am fine, da’len, look,” Marehis said, pulling up the hem of her shirt. The skin beneath the stain was intact, save for a few old scars across her side, but nothing brand new. “There was a goblet of wine on the tray—it spilled on me, that’s all.”

“Oh,” the word fell dumbly from Ellie’s lips as she relaxed where she sat on the floor, magic retreating from her hands. “Whoops.”

Marehis held out a hand and pulled Ellie to her feet. No sooner was she on her feet, than she immediately hugged the Elf woman.

“Everything is alright, Ellie,” Marehis said, rubbing Ellie’s back as the girl clung to her, “Things like this happen, it’s what I’m here for. Leliana will find out his reasoning and take care of it. You’re safe.”

“Yeah,” Ellie said as she pulled away, “Thanks to you.”

“It is no trouble. Now, how about we see to actual dinner, yes?”

Ellie wasn’t very hungry now, but she nodded. Marehis had her change since the wine had stained her own clothing as well from their hug. She’d still been wearing her training clothing so that was all well and good—she hadn’t messed up something meant to be kept clean.

They entered the Tavern arm in arm, Ellie waving to Flissa when they walked in, and they took a seat at their usual table, Solas was already seated there. Dinner wasn’t a steady date like
lunch—sometimes it was just Marehis and her, and sometimes everyone including Cassandra and the rest of the Inquisition Advisors joined them.

“Ahh, Ellie, Marehis, good evening,” Solas said as they sat across from the Elf man. Solas sniffed and his eyes went to the drying blotch on Marehis’s shirt. “I take it you had a quarrel with a wine bottle?”

“There was an incident,” Marehis explained lightly, “a wine glass was involved, it was handled.”

“An inci—” Solas looked to Ellie, “I trust you are well da’len. Were you hurt? When did this happen?”

“My lady!” Flissa cried out, rushing over to their table empty handed, kneeling at Ellie’s side, and Ellie saw one of Leliana’s people leaving the Tavern as Flissa profusely apologized, “I do not know what happened. I’m so so incredibly sorry. I thought Danner was taking a tray to Lady Josephine, I never imagined—Leliana assures me further security measures will be put in place. You aren’t hurt, are you?”

“I’m fine,” Ellie promised, “he didn’t even get to me, I was very well protected. I’m just glad no one else got hurt. It wasn’t your fault, and Leliana will figure out how to keep that from happening again.” Saying it out loud was supposed to help Flissa feel better, but somehow it made the concept feel more solid to Ellie. She’d sort of felt panicky the whole way to the Tavern, even sitting with her friends, something in the back of her mind said she was in danger but it was slowly sinking in that she really was safe. “Don’t worry about it, okay?”

“Yes well, I’m relieved you’re alright,” Flissa rose to her feet, smoothing her apron with shaking hands. “I’ll go see to your meals straight away. Would you care for anything to drink?”

“Water, please,” Ellie said, and Marehis nodded that she’d have the same.

Flissa left them then, hurriedly setting about getting their food.

“You were unharmed I hope,” Solas said to Marehis then.

“I’m well,” she answered with a small smile, “thank you.”

“Eleanor!”

Cassandra’s voice, a bit loud for her usual greeting but she and Cullen joined them and the Nevarran woman came around to look Ellie over before she and the Commander took seats across from each other, the Seeker sitting next to Marehis. They didn’t talk about Danner, and when Flissa returned with food and water for everyone, they set about eating—though Ellie just kind of pushed her food around her plate. They sat in relative silence until Solas struck up a conversation with the Seeker and Commander about what he was planning to incorporate in Ellie’s lessons, and how they thought she was progressing with her lessons with them.

“There will be a meeting come Sunday, with the Herald and the Advisors,” Casandra said, “we will discuss our first party outing, to the Hinterlands I believe.”

That got Ellie’s attention, she dropped her fork and looked up at the Seeker, “Really?” she asked.

“Yes. I do not have many of the details—Leliana will fill us in at the meeting. Harritt sent word that your armor is ready, would you like to retrieve it tomorrow?”
“Yes!” Ellie enthused, “Oh wow, he’s really done already? I can’t wait, he wouldn’t even let me take a peek!”

“Your schedule is free tomorrow, yes? If you like, we can meet before lunch,” Cassandra agreed.

Ellie nodded, “Sounds great!” and she saw something akin to relief pass among the adults at the table when she picked her fork back up and actually ate the food she’d been given. Her stomach didn’t feel so bundled into knots like it had earlier, and Flissa’s food was good—she’d have felt badly if she’d left without touching her food entirely.

She nearly choked, however, when the Tavern door was thrown open, banging against the wall as Varric Tethras stormed into the place, crossbow in hand.

“Who messed with Tumbles? Bianca wants a word.”

Ellie was absolutely in love—full blown, till death do they part love—with Inquisition Master Blacksmith Harritt. He wasn’t anything close to Ellie’s type, but if he asked, she would marry the man, as it was the only way she could ever begin to properly thank him for what she was wearing now.

It was the most beautiful, warm armor she’d ever even dream of owning. It fit perfectly. She loved everything, the high collar, leather gloves, thick woolen leggings, and the gorgeous leather boots her toes were currently basking in the warmth of. It even came with a thick leather overcoat—and it was green! Not the scary Fade green, but a pattern of dark green and olive that were some of her most favorite colors.

How had he found that out? She remembered Josephine asking her about colors she liked but she thought that was just for the clothing Madam Florna was working on.

The man was a genius. Bless him and his mustache.

She was so warm! She could kiss him!

And she did, popping up on her tip toes she kissed the old blacksmith on the cheek. “Thank you, thank you, thank you! It’s the best!”

The man’s cheeks pinked, and he ducked his head bashfully as he said, “I hope it will serve you well, Lady Herald.”

“It truly is some of your best work, Master Harritt,” Cassandra commented as she stood side leaning against one of the forge’s wooden pillars as she watched Ellie practically vibrating out of her skin with excitement over her new armor. Next to Cassandra, Cullen sat on top of a supply crate beside the low stone wall surrounding Harritt’s forge.

“I think it’s fitting, you look very much like a Lady Herald, representative of the Inquisition,” Cullen complimented the girl. Ellie smiled at him.

“I certainly hope so, everyone’s gone through so much trouble to make it so,” she said, “I feel badly for Madam Florna, she’s been working on clothing for me all week but I’m pretty sure
I’m never ever ever taking this off.”

“Oh, you’ll most certainly take it off, da’len,” Marehis assured her laughingly as she approached. She’d left Ellie in the care of the Commander and Seeker when Leliana summoned her to the Chantry for a debrief about Danner’s attack. “You must bathe, we can’t have you scaring our allies away with the smell.”

“I do like baths. I suppose I’ll part ways with my sweet armor sometimes,” Ellie said with a put-upon sigh, she patted her own shoulder as if to reassure her outfit she’d always be back.

“Come now,” Marehis said, “we should get you to lunch.”

Ellie nodded. And then she had a thought, “Are you hungry, Master Harritt?” she asked. Come to think of it, she’d only ever seen the man in his forge. Did he ever leave? “Would you care to join us?”

“Ahh, I appreciate the offer Lady Herald, but I’ve work to tend. Flissa sends my meals to the forge.”

This information resulted in Ellie rounding up the lunch brigade, picking up food from Flissa’s, and returning to the smith.

The closed off blacksmith had been reluctant at first when Ellie showed up with her friends in tow, but when he’d voiced the concern that he didn’t necessarily have a place for them to eat, he usually just ate standing up, holding the plate Flissa brought him, Ellie had simply smiled and plopped down on the stone cabin floor, and motioned for everyone else to do the same. It worked out well, they sat together, in somewhat of a circle, and ate their meals together—Solas, Varric, Marehis, and she even talked Commander Cullen into joining them, though the man had a time of seating himself on the ground in his armor. Cassandra had a meeting to attend with Lady Josephine, but she’d bumped against Cullen as they parted ways and with a hand over her mouth whispered for him to let her know how it goes. She wasn’t sure how well the blacksmith would take to being bombarded by Ellie and her motley crew.

But overall, it was very pleasant. To Varric and Ellie’s utter delight, the man was a bit of a storyteller himself. Harritt had tale after tale—funny incidents in the forge, more serious stories about interesting things that he’d witnessed back in Ferelden during the Blight, and he had twin niece and nephew who his sister wrote to him about, that were apparently always getting into some sort of trouble. His stories were just little ones about things he’d seen or experienced, but it was the way he told them that was truly captivating—something in his voice that pulled those listening in, wanting to hear more.

Eventually though, he truly did have to return to work. He thanked them for joining him and said they were free to stay or leave as they pleased.

They cleaned up and returned their dishes to the Tavern before everyone went their separate ways. Ellie, in her new armor, decided she wanted to go exploring a bit now that she was better outfitted to face the cold.

So, she and Marehis set out down the path leading from Haven’s gate, going past the soldier’s tents, into the wooded area thick with snow-laden evergreens.

“Oh wow, there’s so much Elf Root!” Ellie said, she kept finding strong Elf Root plants popping up out of the snow-covered ground, and she knelt to pick the leaves. “I wonder if Adan has people who collect from around here. We should take this to him.”
“A healer can never have too much Elf Root,” Marehis agreed, she stood with her back leaned against a tall boulder jutting up from the ground and watched over Ellie as she plucked Elf Root leaves and tucked them away in the pockets of her overcoat.

“Does someone live out here?” Ellie asked. Marehis joined her where she stood at the place where the path circled ‘round a cabin in the middle of the woods.

“I recall the healer—the one the Inquisition originally hired on, I think he kept quarters out here, but I’m not certain. He passed at the Conclave, Adan was his apprentice and took over after that.”

“Oh,” Ellie said quietly. She approached the cabin then and gently rapped the back of her fist against the door before pushing it open and finding the cabin empty of occupants. It was still furnished, a little dusty but no one lived here anymore she guessed. “I think there’s something in here.”

“What do you mean?” Marehis asked.

Her Magic sensed something—it sort of bounced in place trying to guide Ellie forward, towards something it thought was important.

It led her to a desk on the far side of the cabin, tucked into its own little nook area. There were papers scattered atop it. There was though, a packet of papers, folded together and held closed with twine.

Ellie picked it up and untied the twine to look over the parchment. Marehis approached and stood looking at it over her shoulder. Ellie looked at the words scribbled out on the page, and down at a picture drawn of elf root and a glass bottle.

Her Magic insisted it was important.

“What do you think it is?” Ellie asked.

“It’s a recipe for Lyrium potion,” Marehis said, pointing at the words at the top of the page. Oh. That's what it said. Oh!

Lyrium, that was important. Adan should see this!

“We should pass it along to Adan then,” Ellie said, folding the parchment again and retying the twine that held it all together before tucking it into an inside pocket of her overcoat.

**Inside** pockets—Maker bless Harritt.

They left the cabin then, it felt sort of weird poking around a dead man’s things. They followed the path around the cabin and found another gate, that lead further from Haven—to the opposite side of the frozen over lake.

There were Rams galloping around, picking through the snow for grass underneath. They were so cute. They paid Ellie and Marehis no mind as the two looked around, following the path, going down to the docks and looking out across the lake.

Ellie was filled with a sense of amazement as she took in the sight of Inquisition headquarters from a distance. She could just make out Cullen’s men sparring, and the man himself even—none had quite the curly blonde mop he sported. The walls of Haven looked small at a distance but somehow…seeing it all at once made it appear so big. The Inquisition was big. The
biggest thing Ellie had ever been a part of at least.

They followed the path up from the docks, and deeper into the woods to find a clearing, snow as far as the eye could see, and at the very edge of the clearing there were mountains—tall tall mountains surrounding the area.

And there were Druffalo, big, huffy brown fuzz balls the size of ten men, they grazed like the Rams did, chomping on grass and snow. A rather large one was lying down in the snow, actually snoring, and a few smaller baby Druffalo chased each other around in circles.

“They’re so cute!” Ellie half-squealed. Little babies! Precious gifts from Andraste!

She seemed to get one of their attention because a baby Druffalo stopped their game and wandered over to the girl and her Elf friend, sniffing all the way as if they’d caught the scent of something.

“Oh my gosh, Marehis fair warning, if I get to pet a real-life baby Druffalo, the amount of happiness I will feel will actually kill me.”

The baby came near, and got close enough to knock into Ellie lightly, sniffing her and nuzzling at the pockets of her overcoat.

“Oh!” Ellie reached into the pocket and fished out a handful of Elf Root leaves, “Do you like these? You want a snack, huh?” she crouched down and held out her hand to the Druffalo, its lips tickled her palm through her glove as it took a mouthful of leaves from her hand. Tentatively she reached out with her other hand and petted the baby’s head as it chewed.

“Are we still among the living, da’len?” Marehis teased.

“I can feel my soul ascending, this is it for me,” Ellie assured her giddily.

“Any last wishes then, my lady?”

“Yes! I want you to marry Solas and name your children after me.”

“Fenedhis!” Marehis shouted the swear in surprise, slapping a hand over her own mouth in shock at having sworn at Ellie. She dropped her hand and continued, “Forgive me, da’len, but the things you say!”

Ellie just giggled in response, and the baby she’d fed made a small, happy mewling noise. “See, even he agrees with me—”

There was an angry huff, then. But it wasn’t from Marehis.

The great napping Druffalo had been unprepared to wake from his slumber, apparently, and was greatly displeased.

Even more so, by the sight of the baby Druffalo being so very close to two strange people. People tended to hurt and hunt.

“So, um…do we run or play dead?” Ellie asked quietly.

The Druffalo stomped its hooves, preparing to charge.

Marehis grabbed Ellie’s arm. “Run!”
The girls ran at break-neck speed, towards the gates out back of the old healer’s cabin, but the Druffalo caught up to them and cornered them in the cleft of the mountain side the wooden gate was built to connect with.

“Ellie, if you’ve been waiting to reveal some sort of super-secret mage power, this would be the time,” Marehis said, though she did look surprised when Ellie held out her arm.

The Druffalo paused and sniffed.

And then, almost with an air of haughtiness, it took a bite from the Elf Root leaf Ellie held out to him. Then he came back for the rest of the leaf, and Marehis was almost concerned Ellie was about to lose her hand, but the girl was quick enough to release the leaf before that could happen, then her hand went back into the pocket of her coat and she held out a handful of leaves as offering to the Druffalo.

In the end, the Druffalo meandered away from them, almost dizzily like it was slightly intoxicated. Regardless, it seemed to deem them a non-threat, and forgave them for waking him from his nap.

To be safe though, they headed back to Haven’s gates with the silent agreement that they wouldn’t be venturing back out to the Druffalo’s field any time soon.

At least, not without a fresh supply of Elf Root.

“Maker’s breath, where did you find this?”

They’d sought out Healer Adan the moment they returned to Haven. He now held his Master’s improved Lyrium recipe, flipping through the pages delicately, holding them as if he thought they might vanish if he was not careful.

“There’s an abandoned cabin. Off in the woods past the soldier’s tents,” Ellie explained. "We looked around and there it was."

“Thank you, for bringing this to me,” Adan said as he folded the parchment closed. "You ever need this cooked up, just say the word.”

“All right?” Ellie asked, “Do you think… I know you’re busy, and I actually—I’m no healer or anything—but I can follow instructions pretty well. I make a mean burn salve. If you showed me, I could make them myself and save you the trouble.”

“This isn’t a blighted school house,” Adan snapped, “but,” he relented, “you do as I say and keep out from underfoot... yeah. I guess I could show you a thing or two.”

Sunday brought about Ellie’s first official War Room meeting. She woke up as soon as
grey early-morning light pierced the gaps of her cabin’s boarded up windows, sitting up and breathing in the chill night swept into her room after her hearth’s fire died.

It was weird. Everything was quiet and cold—the air felt heavy with silence, like no one else in all the world was awake just now. Which was silly, and impossible. She absently wondered where Marehis was at this hour. The Elf woman was always there with breakfast each morning, and she did not leave Ellie’s side. At night, when Ellie would prepare for bed, Marehis sat at her desk and wrote up a storm—reports for Leliana, she said, on everything they’d done that day. Ellie fell asleep to the sound of quill scratching across parchment.

Surely the woman slept. But where? Ellie’s was the only bed in the cabin. Did Marehis have quarters elsewhere?

As if summoned by Ellie’s thoughts, the door to her cabin swung open and in lumbered a yawning Marehis, carrying a bundle of firewood suspended by a leather strap she clasped in her hands, she kicked the door closed behind her.

“Oh! Good morning my lady. Did you sleep well?” Marehis asked cheerfully as she made her way to the fireplace and stirred up the ashes, prepping it for fresh flame.

“Where do you sleep?” Ellie asked instead of answering.

“Hmm, there are servants’ lodgings in the cabins near the Chantry. I sleep there with the others. Why? Did you have need of me in the night?” she asked, stopping her work to focus on Ellie, looking her over as if searching for something out of place.

“Oh! No, no I was fine, I just wondered is all,” Ellie explained.

Marehis smiled kindly and returned to getting a fire going. “Good. If you do ever need me, when I leave for the evening there are guards posted at your door. They will send for me.”

“Huh,” Ellie hadn’t thought of that. Somewhere in her mind she supposed she thought her Elf friend…omnipresent. She hadn’t known there were others working to protect her even as she slept.

Ellie yawned then and stretched a bit before leaning back, supporting herself on the palms of her hands.

“Do you wish to sleep some more? Your meeting with your advisors isn’t scheduled for hours yet. Flissa won’t have breakfast out for a while, but if you’re hungry I can whip something up.”

Huh. That made Ellie wonder when Flissa slept. Or ate? The woman ran the Tavern, but Ellie had never seen her take a meal herself. Someone should check on her. Maybe she’d eat lunch with Ellie someday, if she asked.

“My lady?”

“Hmm…I’m awake now, I don’t think I can go back to sleep,” Ellie admitted as she pulled her legs up, hugging her knees to her chest. “I… I’m kind of nervous about today. Do you think I’ll do alright? Meeting with the advisors I mean. I’m not sure what they expect me to do. I don’t know anything about…well…anything. Are they just going to tell me what to do?”

Marehis was thoughtful, she seemed to be mulling it over as she rose from where she’d been crouched before the fireplace, dusting her hands off as she stood before placing them on her
hips. “The Advisors job is to advise. However, they know what needs to be done—they’ll likely give you the direction you need to go in, and options for how to go about it. just listen to them and don’t be afraid to ask questions should you have them. Cassandra will be with you, she—like Cullen, Leliana, Josephine—is there to help you.”

“Are you sure you can’t come with me?” Ellie asked.

“Now da’len, you have the aid of some of the best and brightest Thedas has to offer—if you had me to top it all off, there’d be no hope for the bad guys, we should cut them at least a little slack eh?” Merhis teased with a wink, smiling when Ellie giggled. “Besides,” she continued, more seriously, “you’ll be in the care of those I trust to protect you, it will be one of the few opportunities for me to debrief Leliana’s people on your security protocols. They need updating, and that will be the best time to do so.”

“Alright,” Ellie said. “Well, maybe I can bathe? Breakfast should be ready at the Tavern once I’m done.”

“Hmm, a sound notion. Your hair could do with a wash,” Marehis said and set about getting water and soap.

“There’s little rocks in it,” Ellie commented as she stopped scrubbing her arms with the bar Marehis gave her. Was this some form of threat? Had someone sent her a bar of soap with rocks in it in the hopes she’d scratch herself all to the Fade and die of infection or something?

“It’s Orlesian, my lady,” Marehis said as if that explained it, “an offering from Madam Florna.”

“But…why little rocks?”

“They’re grains, da’len, they’re meant to exfoliate the dead skin away and allow your skin to grow healthier,” Marehis said, amusement lilting her words as she massaged shampoo into her hair, “I would not have you harm yourself, they’re perfectly safe.”

“Orlesian’s are weird.”

“You may not want to share that thought publicly,” Marehis teased.

“Oh yeah, Lady Josephine would want me to say something like,” Ellie cleared her throat and in her most embellished impression of polite stilted speech rephrased her words, “Orlesian’s are a class all their own. Unique—singular if you would.” Singular was a new word for her, Lady Josephine used it when she meant something was ‘one of a kind’ in a bad way but didn’t want to be rude about it.

Marehis chortled. “Yes, something like that.”

Ellie much preferred Madam Florna’s other offering. The first of her new outfits was ready and Lady Josephine had approved it for Ellie to wear for their meeting today. Ellie didn’t know when it had arrived, Marehis just pulled a garment bag off a hook by the cabin door the girl hadn’t seen hanging there before and laid it out on the bed for further inspection. There was a little note attached with Josephine’s looping script.

Ellie made herself busy with opening the garment bag and pulling out her new clothing, asking casually, “What does Lady Josie say?”

Marehis took up the note and read, “To my Lady Herald, I’ve found my confidence is at its
best when I feel I look my best. May your day be well and Andraste watch over you, signed Lady Josephine Montilyet.”

The clothing was…gorgeous. Just beautiful, so much so Ellie almost did not want to put it on—what if she got it dirty? Madam Florna was…eccentric, but brilliant. She loved it almost as much as her armor from Harritt.

Almost.

It was a tunic cut similarly to the one given to her upon waking up in Haven, only the fabric felt thicker—oh! It was lined! There was warm fluffy wool on the inside, bless the woman! Instead of solid gray, the outer layer of tunic was a warm, deep blue with swirling floral vines in a pale silvery blue throughout. The buttons were cut oval gemstones, dark blue with speckles of silver in them like they were miniature night skies full of glittering stars. The front of the tunic fell at her waist, but the back had more length to it, falling to the back of her knees, her pants a matching dark blue with stripes up the sides of her legs, lined in similar gemstones and the blue-silver floral pattern of her top.

Wearing that with the warm, black gloves and boots Harritt had fashioned for her armor, and Ellie could definitely understand Josephine’s idea of looking your best making one’s confidence soar. For a moment, even her Magic sang with the certainty she could take on anything and she had half a mind to march down to the Breach and give it what’s-for.

But there was breakfast waiting, and that seemed more realistically doable when she thought about it.

“Hold on, da’len, I’m almost finished,” Marehis said, working Ellie’s almost-dried hair diligently, weaving it to hang in a thick braid of curls over her shoulder.

“Won’t I get food in my hair?” Ellie asked.

“Consider it incentive to eat with the manners Lady Josephine is trying to instill in you.”

“I do!” Ellie insisted, and under Marehis’s critical stare she conceded, “Alright, I do but only when eating with Lady Josephine. Other times I eat…just a bit less proper.”

“Like a thing deranged. Your dinner is already dead on the plate, you needn’t attack it to make certain,” Marehis teased as she led Ellie from her quarters into the early morning. The air was just starting to warm from grey to yellow pale as they made their way to the Tavern.

Varric was just about to stumble into his tent when they passed—had he been out all night? What did he do?

“Good morning, Varric,” Ellie greeted cheerily. “Or should I say good night?”

The Dwarf turned to say hello and did a bit of a double take. “Tumbles? Shit, you getting married or something?”

Ellie giggled. “Madam Florna made this for me, isn’t it great? And it’s warm, see?” she rolled up her sleeve a bit and offered the arm for Varric to touch the woolen lining.

“Madam nut-case did a pretty good job,” Varric commented, “glad you’re up and chipper today. You got that meeting later with Ruffles and them? Want me to tag along and keep the Seeker off your back?”
Ellie shook her head, “Oh, no that’s okay, you get some shut eye yeah? Besides, Cassandra isn’t bad, she’ll be looking out for me.”

Varric looked at her like he thought she was crazy. “If you say so kid, just be careful. Don’t uh…don’t be so quick to trust your helpful government officials. That’s usually the safest bet.”

“The Inquisition isn’t a government-run,” Ellie said, confused.

“Tumbles, it’s the Chantry—Inquisition whatever, it’s an organization sanctioned and operated by Chantry officials. And if you think the Chantry isn’t a branch of the crown, they’ve got your head buried deep in the sand.”

This ended with Varric tagging along with Ellie and Marehis to breakfast and giving them a breakdown on…basically every conspiracy ever, it felt like. She wasn’t sure what the purpose was, and she certainly didn’t believe most of it—though his thoughts on Qunari black powder were intriguing, the idea that Qunari had actually developed the stuff centuries ago but only revealed it openly in battle because they were working on something better and keeping it under wraps by distracting their enemies with an old threat. It was the more plausible of his ideas of government-kept secrets.

Solas joined them towards the end and seemed to find the Dwarf’s enthusiasm amusing, he asked earnest sounding questions and gulped down oatmeal around contained laughter.

“We should be going, my lady,” Marehis said, bringing a halt to Varric’s lecture. “You’re due at the Chantry any minute now.”

“Oh, gosh! Is it that time already?” Ellie asked.

“You’re to discuss this week’s adventuring, yes?” Solas asked.

“Uh-huh, wish me luck,” Ellie said as she took up her empty bowl to clear her place.

“Best luck to you, lethallan,” Solas said with a nod of acknowledgment.

“You remember what I said Tumbles, don’t drink the Chantry wine.”

Ellie bent down and kissed the well-meaning Dwarf on the cheek. “I don’t much care for wine, anyway,” she said before linking arms with Marehis and dropping off their dirty dishes with Flissa.

“Good day, lady Herald,” Flissa said, waving them goodbye.

“Thanks for breakfast Flissa, it was great!” Ellie called over her shoulder.

She examined the length of hair hanging over her shoulder then to see if she’d spilt anything in it, and found something…green? She’d had oatmeal? What did she even do?

“Don’t disturb it, my lady, it’s Elf Root,” Marehis said when she saw Ellie trying to get a better look at what she’d gotten in her hair. She explained further as they entered the Chantry, “Elves do have another name for it, but it is an herb held in high regard among my people—Dalish and City Elves alike. I picked it by the stem and cleaned it to weave into your hair for health, luck, and protection. You could do with all three today I think.”

Ellie hugged her friend tightly then, standing just before the War Room door. “Thank you, Marehis,” and then, pulling away, “Good luck in your own meeting, knock ‘em dead.”
“Seems counterproductive but I’ll give it a try,” Marehis teased, smiling pleasantly before taking her leave of the Chantry hall.

Marehis had said it was time for her meeting with the Advisors. So, taking a deep breath, and getting a little encouragement from her Magic, Ellie stepped forward and pushed open the War Room door.

“…know what we’re capable of, I assure you. Suppressing the Breach will be far safer than seeking the aid of the Mages—oh,” Cullen stopped short, he cleared his throat. “Eleanor. Hello.”

“Lady Herald, good, we were just discussing how best to approach the Breach,” Josephine said. “I see you found the clothing Madam Florna has finished? They are to your liking I hope.”

“They’re so lovely, thank you—and Madam Florna too,” Ellie said, “But you were discussing the Breach? Solas and I have talked about it. He said pouring power into the Mark would make it strong enough to seal it closed.”

“Yes, we were just talking about how best to approach the Mages for their assistance,” Leliana said.

“We were discussing how best to proceed,” Cullen said, as if to imply that while that was true, Leliana was incredibly wrong. “I was just suggesting an alternative. Templars are capable of suppressing Mage’s powers. If we approached the Templars, they would hold back the Breach while you sealed it closed.”

“And I was just about to inform them that neither of those options are currently viable,” Josephine cut in before Leliana could round on the former Templar—the Lady Nightingale visibly deflated at their Ambassadors interference. Lady Josephine continued, “Neither camp will speak to us. We’ve yet to acquire the alliance of anything or anyone that would make us a force to be reckoned with. What we need, is a clear relationship with the Chantry—for them to back us as the Inquisition.”

“The Inquisition was founded by the Divine herself and its headed up by both her Left and Right hands,” Ellie said. “Shouldn’t that be enough to get the Chantry on our side? I know that Roderick fellow wasn’t…exactly cooperative, but surely there are others who would support our cause.”

“Unfortunately, Chancellor Roderick has complicated things for us,” Josephine said. “He’s railed against us such that his fellow clergy are taking his side. The Chantry still calls for your execution—they believe your claim of holiness blasphemous, and us equally so for harboring you.”

Oh. Ellie realized then, what Josephine must be getting at.

This week had been simultaneously one of the best and hardest weeks of her life. Relief that the responsibility the Inquisition wanted to rest on her shoulders would soon be a thing of the past overwhelmed the thought that everything everyone here had been doing was soon to be a waste. What was the point of the lessons and clothing and security protocols if they were just going to have her killed? She supposed they’d been trying to find an alternative all week, had hoped beyond
hope that Ellie could be spared. That made Ellie feel badly then, for the Inquisition advisors. They’d gone through all this trouble, and she was certain they’d tried their best to find another way.

But it was no matter. What must be done, must be done, and she wouldn’t have them feel guilty over it. If she learned anything from the events at the Conclave, death was a certainty, and there were things bigger than herself that no one could control.

“I see.” Ellie said quietly. And then, looking at the people around her at the War Table, she smiled and resisted the urge to release the tears that threatened to spill themselves—they weren’t going to help anything. “It’s the for the best, then, really. You guys did a really great job—I know you tried, and I’m forever grateful.”

“I’m sorry, Lady Herald, I’m not sure I understand what you mean,” Josephine said as the adults in the room looked at Ellie like she’d just started spouting nonsense.

“You…you’re going to hand me over to the Chantry as a sign of good faith, right?” Ellie asked, “Use their backing to approach whoever you want, and then you use your Ambassador-ness to convince them to let me seal the Breach under their custody. They get the credit for closing the breach, and once it’s done they can execute me on the spot if they’d like. Boom, everyone’s back to their old lives in time for Wintermarch*.”

What followed was dead silence.

And then Cassandra, looking about as enraged as she’d been when Ellie first met her down in Haven’s dungeons:

“We will do no such thing!” Cassandra roared, and Ellie shrank back as the Nevarran woman snapped at her, “Do not offer up your life so cavalierly again, Eleanor, never.”

“B-but I’m the problem,” Ellie said, had Cassandra misunderstood? “I’m why the Chantry won’t back us.”

“Maker preserve us—you are hardly the issue,” Cullen insisted in scathing tones like he’d very much like to hit something, “Roderick is.”

Oh. He’d like to hit a someone. Ellie thought it might be rather fun to see the former Templar deck the Chancellor.

Finding her voice Josephine added, “Yes, quite. The Chantry is not likely to listen to my Ambassador-ness, as you put it. If we did offer you up to the Chantry you would be killed without reservation, and there would be no way of sealing the Breach. It is not you in particular they find issue with, but you are on their list. Leliana and Cassandra, Commander Cullen—even the late Divine Justinia herself, are among the reasons Chancellor Roderick has convinced the Chantry we are not to be allied with.”

Oh. Ellie had misunderstood then. Oh wow, she’d really stepped in it hadn’t she? “I’m sorry,” Ellie said, “I…wasn’t trying to be cavalierly.” She wasn’t sure what the word meant, but the way Cassandra had spat it at her made her think it was just about the worst possible thing a person could be. “I just thought that was what Lady Josephine was getting at.”

“Roderick has turned the Chantry against us,” Leliana said, “but there are those who would aid us in gaining the Chantry’s favor. In the Hinterlands there are refugees being ravaged by the war between Mages and Templars, and among them, is Mother Gisselle. A Chantry Mother who is assisting the people of Redcliff. If we reach out to her, introduce her to you as the Herald of
Andraste, she will lend us her aid. If we secure her alliance, she could be invaluable to our reestablishing positive ties with the Chantry.’”

Ahh. So, their efforts hadn’t been a waste—she was to use her new armor and etiquette lessons to help the Inquisition. A scary and intimidating task, but on some level better than dying, she supposed.

“So, I’m to go and meet with her then,” Ellie reasoned out, more accurately this time.

“Yes,” Leliana said, “Mother Gisselle is in a rather precarious position. She’s in the thick of it between Mages and Templars, it is equal parts introduction and rescue mission—you’re to go to the Hinterlands and meet Mother Gisselle as well as assist the Inquisition in securing the area at large. If we help the refugees Mother Gisselle will be more than willing to lend her aide, and if we are successful in our efforts in Redcliffe, it will spread the word of the Inquisition and what strength we possess.”

“Do not pass up on opportunities to spread our name further,” Cullen added, looking as though he were trying to think of any advice he could give that might help. Oh. Cassandra was going to go with her, she knew, but Cullen would be back in Haven. He seemed like he wished he could be of more help…for all the qualms he had with Mages he really did wish Ellie well. “Anything might be significant—if you find those willing to take up a sword in your name, you are at liberty to recruit them.”

“Recruit them?” Ellie asked.

“Yes,” Josephine said. “Do not bandy about the ability just anywhere, but if you genuinely believe someone suitable to assist our efforts, you may do so. We will trust your judgement.”

“Cassandra will be there too,” Ellie said, “I’m pretty sure she’ll make certain I don’t accidentally recruit an axe murderer or something.”

“Yes, all my years as a Seeker has made me most capable of detecting axe murderers, specifically,” Cassandra drawled. “I am glad you would seek my opinion, I will do my best to assist you.”

Leliana said, “My scouts have already secured an area for an initial outpost for our forces. You will go with Inquisition soldiers and further secure the Hinterlands under the flag of the Inquisition.”

“Take the day to prepare yourself, Eleanor,” Cassandra instructed. “we will leave at first light tomorrow morning.”

Ellie nodded. “To the Hinterlands,” she said, affirmatively.

“To the Hinterlands.”

Chapter End Notes

Dalish used in this chapter:
Direth Shiral=go in peace, a common farewell.
Fenedhis=an untranslatable Dalish swear word, though just from phonetics, it looks
like it something to do with the Dread Wolf, due to the prefix of ‘Fen’ ‘ed’ implies strength (the only other word in the Dalish language I’ve encountered that has ‘ed’ anywhere in it, has it in the middle, and that is the word that means ‘strength’ Suledin), I couldn’t get a read on ‘his’ however a common idea in the fandom, possibly contributed to by the creators, is that ‘Fenedhis’ holds a similar connotation to ‘crap’ or ‘shit’. That in culmination with ‘Fen’ and ‘ed’ lends to the idea that the word means ‘Dread Wolf’s strong-smelling shit!’ or ‘Wolf’s shit!’ for short.

Ir Abelas= I’m sorry/my condolences.

Noted things:
*Marehis=in case there’s any confusion, I just picked a Dalish name and gave it to the girl we see at the opening of the game, when the Herald first wakes up in Haven, and gave her a bit more of a role, playing off of what the writers laid down.
*Sunday=Thedas uses a different calendar system than RL, however the day names are the same, as exemplified in party banter, once when the day Tuesday is mentioned, and again when Bull talks about (I think, casual?) Fridays in some context or another.
*Tantervale=an in-canon city near the Nevarran-Free Marches border that cracks down heavily on Mages and Apostates. NOT the sort of place one wants to be caught out as magical. It’s one of the top three most influential cities in the Free Marches, and they enforce Chantry law to the extreme, you get caught as an Apostle and you’re not gonna have a good time.
*Wintermarch= the Theadas equivalent of January. It hosts the celebration of the new year on the 1st . While you might expect the reference to mean Christmas, from the setup of the DA calendar, it seems the closest thing they would have to a Winter Holiday actually follows the New Year, so the celebrations are reversed. First Day=New Years, and the following month Guardian (February) bears Wintersend which seems to be a sort of celebration like Christmas (in that it is celebrated in a single day, unlike, Las Posadas, Diwali, Kwanza, Hanukkah, etc). While I’m uncertain when exactly in 9:41 the Conclave is held, I’m putting it in August since it’s sort of a holy month for the world. (DA uses regular August for the 8th month. Originally it was planned to name the month after Andraste—who at the time, they planned to name Augusta. However, they settled on Andraste, but named the month August as a tip of the hat to an old idea I suppose)* the first day of August is the holiday “All Souls Day” which I thought might be a nice touch to the terror factor of the Conclave, however I cannot find confirmation on the actual date of the Conclave, and after reading a little more about the concept of All Souls Day, it is not the sort of day they would host such an event on, at least not in my opinion. So, the Conclave in this story falls around the end of August—enough time for those who celebrate All Souls Day to make it to Ferelden from their respective homes/places of worship. I’m still planning out the timeline for this story, it may fall within the similar timeline found in canon, the New Divine is Elected in 9:42 (marking the end of DA:I base game), but I’ve got 27 chapters planned out, and I’m accounting for semi-accurate travel times since, if one were actually in the world of Dragon Age, Fast-Travel isn’t likely a thing. Ya walking or going by horse/horse-drawn carriage. So. Realistically, I’m not sure the events in-game, completing a good portion of the missions, would be possible within a one to two year time frame, but we’ll see!
*I’m a big nerd, thanks for reading!

Questions? Concerns? Feel free to message or comment below! <3 Next Chapter

EDA: 7/18/18
The Threat Remains--Into the Hinterlands

Chapter Summary

Ellie's adventures in the Hinterlands. Still reeling from her sudden whiplash of fate, Ellie and her party journey into the Hinterlands, where there are Refugees in desperate need of just about everything, in the middle of Mages and Templars raining terror in the Crossroads, an Inquisition in need of horses, and a lone Warden in need of hunting down. There's quite a few quest markers to check off, as it were, and things can quickly get more than a little overwhelming.

Chapter Notes

Thanks again for the Kudos and comments! Enjoy! * notes and translations at the end!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Roderick had done a great deal to ensure the Inquisition’s reputation was...less than sparkling with the Chantry. And without their cooperation, the Inquisition on its own was not able to approach either Templars or Mages for assistance with the Breach. Mother Gisselle, a Chantry Mother aiding refugees of the war between Mages and Templars in the Hinterlands had heard of the Herald and wanted to help the Inquisition create positive ties between it and the Chantry.

So. Cassandra, Varric, and Solas at her side, Ellie stood in the middle of an Inquisition campsite, in all her armored glory, trying not to shake with the overwhelming mix of excitement and fear that filled her head to toe.

She was supposed to lead her party to Mother Gisselle, assist the refugees, and speak to the woman on behalf of the Inquisition in order to secure her alliance.

Maker’s breath they were serious. They wanted Ellie to do this. They were crazy—Josephine needed Healer intervention if she thought Ellie was capable of doing this.

“You okay there, Tumbles?”

“Me? Yeah, pfft,” she snorted, “I’m great. Peachy. Is that a good thing? I’ve never had peaches, so I don’t know if peachy is actually a good thing.”

“A bit too messy for my liking, but peachy does mean ‘good’,” Solas confirmed, he stood with his staff to the ground, leaning against it as he spoke, “You are nervous, Ellie, yes?”

“Just a little bit,” Ellie admitted. “Everyone has worked so hard to get me here, I’m afraid I might just embarrass you all.”

“You will do no such thing,” Cassandra assured. “This meeting with Mother Gisselle is to
be considered a practice run for more delicate alliances in the future. Precious little will sway her from assisting the Inquisition. You are simply introducing yourself and giving her the confirmation that you are the Herald of Andraste, working as an agent of the Inquisition.”

“Herald of Andraste?” a pleasant, feminine voice asked, Ellie turned to see pretty Dwarf woman—ginger hair braided in a way that seemed popular among Leliana’s scouts, that was an indication of who she was before Ellie saw her armor, or the woman herself confirmed, “I’m Scout Harding, it’s an honor to meet you. We heard what you did at the Breach. Everyone’s a little nervous around Mages right now, but you’ll get no back talk here,” she promised.

“Ellie, it’s a pleasure to meet you Scout Harding,” Ellie introduced herself.

“Harding huh? Ever been to Kirkwall’s, Hightown?” Varric asked.

“I can’t say I have,” Harding replied.

“Really? That’s too bad, you’d be Harding in-”

“Varric!” Ellie reprimanded halfheartedly. The joke itself was crude but…funny. But unnecessary!

“Ugh,” Cassandra offered up her patented disgusted groan.

“Ignore him, he’s a little sleep deprived,” Ellie apologized, “please, continue. Leliana said you would have a report for us?”

“I do,” Scout Harding continued. “Mother Gisselle is down at the Crossroads helping refugees. The fighting has spread there—Mages and Templars are waring all throughout the Hinterlands. Corporal Vale has been working to protect the people, but it’s getting bad. We’ve been trying to secure horses for the Inquisition from Master Dennet—I grew up around here, and Dennet has the best horses this side of the Frostbacks. Only trouble is, we can’t get to him—we can’t even get confirmation if he’s alive.”

Oh. That was just awful. Ellie didn’t have a particular place she felt was ‘home’ exactly, though she thought if war tore apart Ava’s village, she’d feel terrible. Maker, all this was happening, and what did the Inquisition bring to aide Scout Harding’s community? A kid-Mage with a weird glowing hand. She was sure it wasn’t at all what the Dwarf woman had been expecting when she’d heard the ‘Herald of Andraste’ was coming to save the day.

“Don’t worry,” Ellie said, and offered Scout Harding what she hoped was a reassuring smile. “We’ll see to it the refugees are taken care of and get Mother Gisselle to safety. Then we’ll see about Master Dennet. I know it’s not the ideal—but no news can be good news, we’ll find him and get the Inquisition proper mounts. I’ll tell Master Dennet you were thinking of him, yeah?”

“Gosh, I’d certainly appreciate it, Lady Herald,” Scout Harding said, “Thank you, and good luck. Maker watch over you.”

“You as well, stay safe out there,” Ellie said.

Ellie felt sick—like she’d been forced to swallow a large stone and it settled a dead weight
in her stomach, left her throat feeling raw. She was tired again, like she just wanted to lie down and stay there until everything was back to normal again.

They’d made their way to the Crossroads and found just what war did in the worst of ways. Mages and Templars killed each other and whoever else was around—if you weren’t an Apostate they knew, the Mages attacked. If you weren’t a Templar, you were dead as well. And in the middle, people who just wanted to live and let live.

Inquisition forces had been protecting the refugees. When Ellie and her party arrived, they’d been fighting off the Mages and Templars—neither party would listen to reason, the Templars did not even think twice when attacking even after Cassandra called for them to reconsider. The Mages…Ellie could see how easy it would be to lump them all together and label them evil and be done with it. It made her wish she could hide her staff, made her wish she hadn’t brought it with her at all.

She killed someone. A Mage boy with Inferno heading right for Cassandra, the Seeker pinned between two Templars, with Solas and Varric focused on backing her up. She hadn’t thought it would kill him, the jolt of lightning she’d cast, but he’d shaken, his body seized up, and he fell dead. It was only a second, there was no preamble, no great effort on her part, no warning just…dead. It’d been easy, much much too easy and surely life could not work that way, death was *not* just that easy to deal out. It couldn’t be.

It felt like everything was upside-down—usually Ellie was the voice of reason between she and her Magic but now, all she could think about was how that boy could have been someone—could have lived to choose a different path, and she’d robbed him of it, while her Magic said Cassandra—their ally, someone who was already on a righteous path—might have died, and that boy wouldn’t have spared it a moment’s thought except maybe something self-congratulatory for having taken down a Seeker.

“It is over—is everyone alright?” Cassandra called out across the field.

“I am uninjured, Seeker,” Solas replied as he went to join the woman where she stood just before the little pool of water in front of the statue that stood in the center of the Crossroads.

“Gimmie a second, potions kicking in,” Varric said as he limped over to sit on a rock by the pool, restopping the draught he’d taken and tucking the empty vial away into a coat pocket.

“Eleanor!” Cassandra called out for response. Ellie didn’t realize she’d been called until the Seeker had her hands on her shoulders, crouching a bit so they were face to face, the Nevarran woman searching her for injury. “Were you hurt?”

“Tumbles? Leg hurts like shit kid, don’t make me come over there, say something.”

It was a feeling like falling—the way it feels to have a dream when you fall in your sleep that jolts you awake. Ellie felt as if she’d sort of fallen back into herself, jerking a bit as she looked around and realized she’d just been standing stock still and silent in the middle of the road, staring into space, staff held lax at her side.

“Varric’s hurt?” she asked, whipping around to get a look at the Dwarf, Cassandra followed close behind as Ellie went to kneel at Varric’s side. “What happened? Do you need potion?”

“*Took* potion kid. I’ll be all good in a minute, shit, are you okay?”

Ellie nodded. “Sorry, yeah I’m fine. Just got distracted,” she stood then, holstering her staff
on her back, and looked around them as if in search, “I was wondering where Mother Gisselle is,” it wasn’t a lie exactly, she did wonder that now—it was the whole reason they were here after all. “I thought I saw a Chantry Mother when we arrived.”

“You should meet her, if you’re ready,” Cassandra said, something in her tones sounded doubtful, like she wasn’t certain she should prompt Ellie to seek the Mother out just yet. “The area is secure for now. You are certain you are unharmed?”

“Does anything hurt, Ellie?” Solas asked gently.

Ellie shook her head. It took a second to realize the negative might be taken as an answer to Cassandra’s question and she quickly amended. “I’m fine. Let’s go meet Mother Gisselle, yeah? Cassandra can come with me—Solas maybe you should stay here and make sure Varric’s leg heals up okay.”

“As you wish,” the Elf said softly.

Ellie could practically feel Cassandra looking at her. How was she doing that? The woman was leading her across the road and up a flight of wooden steps, Ellie following after, but it felt like the Seeker was watching for any sign Ellie had been mortally wounded and was somehow keeping it from her.

At the top of the stairs, a Chantry Mother was tending to man laid out on a cot. A Healer—a Mage—stood at her back, and the man seemed to be refusing treatment. Didn’t want magic to touch him for fear it would be to his detriment.

Ellie felt for all the world like she could will the ground to swallow her up whole. She should have asked Solas to hold her staff—these people had just been traumatized by Mages and here she was with a literal beacon on her back screaming ‘look at me, another Mage coming to pillage your village’.

Of course, leaving the Elf man with two staffs may only incite panic. And end with Solas attacked.

“Come now, their Magic is surely no more evil than your blade. Let the Healer ease your suffering, and you will be well soon,” the Chantry Mother soothed. She was old, dark skin wrinkled with age and weariness, though she smiled when the man consented to being treated by the Healer’s magic. She rose to her feet and regarded the women that joined her.

“Seeker Pentaghast,” the Chantry Mother said, nodding reverently to Cassandra.

“Mother Gisselle, I presume. May I present to you Eleanor, the Herald of Andraste.”

“A pleasure to meet you, Mother Gisselle,” Ellie said as she offered a hand to the elder woman. “Thank you, for agreeing to meet with me.”

“Thank you, for bringing the Inquisition to aid these people,” Mother Gisselle said, taking Ellie’s hand to hold it rather than to shake, squeezing the hand as she ran her thumb across the back of Ellie’s gloved knuckles. “These are trying times. I wish to offer assistance as I can.”

She pulled Ellie along and the two walked out of range of the healer and his patient.

“You aren’t…you aren’t against Mages?” Ellie asked quietly as they walked, giving a voice to her surprise.
“Not on principle. Magic is dangerous, but no more so than any other weapon. The fear should be of those who would wield it for other’s harm. You, for example, came to the aid of these refugees. They may be wary of your magic, but they will be grateful to you.”

“Leliana said you wish to assist the Inquisition, but the Chantry has denounced us. You think differently than your fellow clergy?” Ellie asked.

“I have heard of what transpired at the Breach. I do not claim to know the Maker’s will, but I know this: the Breach must be stopped, and those who caused it must be brought to justice. As it stands now, you are the only viable way of sealing the Breach, and it is the duty of the Inquisition to seek those who sought the world harm. The Chantry has no Divine, no direction. The voice that speaks loudest is the one being followed and right now that is Roderick. So, I offer this—go to the remaining clerics, introduce yourself to them as you have to me, show them the facts Roderick’s charges lack.”

“Introduce myself…to the grand clerics?” Ellie asked.

“In Val Royeaux, yes. At the very least you give them reason to dissent—their greatest advantage right now is their unity, but if you can give them reason to question, they will argue amongst themselves—those who are against you will be too busy defending their position, and those who see reason will lend you their support. In the meantime, I will go now to Haven and help Sister Leliana as I can and make the appropriate arrangements for you to address the clerics. I have names of those in the Chantry who may already be willing to help your cause, I am sure she put them to good use.”

Maker, that was so far. The journey from the Vinmark mountains to the Temple of Sacred Ashes had been the farthest she’d ever traveled—but to Orlais? The Orlesian capital?

Trevelyan had talked about Val Royeaux. Told her about what the city and its people had been like, painted a picture of blues and golds, lion statues and a dangerous game of societal subterfuge.

She nodded politely and wished Mother Giselle well on her journey to Haven, told her to see Flissa when she arrived for a good meal.

And then the second Ellie and the Seeker were out of earshot the girl rounded on the older woman and looked up at her, imploringly, as if Cassandra could somehow forbid her from doing something like traipse off to Orlais. For a moment she felt like one of those girls who got invited to an outing she did not want to attend and sought her mother’s refusal as an excuse not to go.

“Sorry, Mother Giselle, while I’d just love to go chat up Roderick’s buddies, Cassandra said no. So, I guess I’ll just be in my cabin, in Haven, under my blankets where it’s safe and Marehis braids my hair.”

“What is it, Eleanor? That went perfectly well, did it not?” Cassandra asked.

Eleanor let out a little squeak and then, “Not! Cassandra, she wants me to go to Val Royeaux! That’s! Like a million miles from here!”

“Two hundred and fifty*, give or take,” Cassandra corrected, “but yes. It is a great distance. We’re hardly packing you a lunch and sending you on your way, Eleanor. Varric would love nothing more than to see you acquainting yourself with Orlais of all places, the man may expire from his glee at your exposure to the culture that produced the likes of Madam Florna. And Solas would not see you traverse such a journey alone. Neither would I. We will discuss this back at
Haven with all of your advisors, but I do believe Mother Giselle’s plan to be viable.”

_Sorry, Mother Giselle, while I’d love to go chat up Roderick’s buddies, Cassandra said yes, she’s a traitor, and I lied. I’d rather jab a rusty fork directly into my brain than meet the grand clerics, so I guess I’ll just be in my cabin in Haven under my blankets where Marehis braids my hair and helps me plot my revenge against a certain Nevarran backst aberr._

Oh. Marehis—maybe she’d put a stop to this. Yeah. Trusty Marehis, Maker bless that beautiful badass. Watch Cassandra try to drag Ellie half way across the world once Marehis puts her foot down. Ha!

“Come, we should regroup, and introduce you to Corporal Vale. He can give us a better idea of what needs done,” Cassandra said, already leading Ellie back to where they’d left their companions.

Varric was already back up on his feet, he and Solas both asking after Ellie’s meeting with Mother Giselle.

“It was fine,” Ellie said, “She’s going to help us win over the Chantry—heading to give names to Leliana as we speak.”

Cassandra led them up a stone paver path to a place where Inquisition soldiers were training, and next to one of their tents, stood the man she introduced as Corporal Vale.

_Corporal Vale was…steady, reassuring. The refugees were hungry, and there was a food shortage, they were cold and there were no blankets, they were sick and there was no steady healer, Mages and Templars blazed hell through their fields, and there was no end in sight. But for all their problems, Corporal Vale seemed to whole-heartedly believe there was a solution. If Ellie were in charge, she’d be a freaked-out mess, running around like a chicken with its head cut off. This man just accepted the reality at hand and hoped for the best._

_What he got was Ellie. But she would certainly try her best. So. Off she went._

_Cassandra watched the girl carefully. When she’d seen her in the aftermath of their first battle in the Crossroads…concerned didn’t quite do the feeling justice. In a moment of overwhelming panic, the Seeker feared something horrendous had happened to the girl—that she would fall over dead before Cassandra could even think of how to help. She’d been as pale as she was when they faced the Breach, and she’d just stood there still, like she was petrified. The girl said she was fine but that was the problem—many people had severely different opinions on what ‘fine’ was, ranging from perfect contentment, to ‘I’m not dead yet’._

_She’d shared her displeasure at Mother Gisselle’s plan to see her meet the high clerics, yet she’d termed the meeting as ‘fine’. That did not boost Cassandra’s confidence in Eleanor’s definition of the word._

_But she must not be badly injured, if she was injured at all—the moment Corporal Vale finished his list of Refugee needs, Eleanor had given the man a salute (not a proper one for a Corporal in the Inquisition’s army, but it wasn’t anything insulting, just something they may need to cover in her etiquette course should she ever interact with military higher-ups from other nations). Then she’d hop-walked down the hill and struck up conversation with just about..._
everyone in town, her party in tow.

She strode up to an Inquisition soldier that Corporal Vale had pointed out to them and asked him about what he would need to keep the refugee’s warm. While he was rather brusque though he lamented that they were not in a city where he could simply steal blankets for them (how well were they vetting Inquisition recruits? They could not have their soldiers actively engaging in petty crimes in the middle of major cities no less). However, he did offer the helpful suggestion of abandoned Mage caches he’d seen around. He marked a few locations on the map they’d been given to help them navigate the area and said they should look there.

 Mage caches. Ugh. Wonderful.

And then Eleanor was off looking for more information on how to help the refugees, by chatting up the people themselves. She waved down an elderly man, asked how he was doing, prayed with him, and then asked where their village hunter was. He led them to a man crouched by what looked to be a potential campfire. It was kindling and firewood, and the man held two sticks, one in each hand, and was sawing them together to create friction. Eleanor knelt beside them and held out her hands as if to show she meant no harm and asked if he would be alright with her helping him. He nodded, and Cassandra’s hand went to the hilt of her sword. If Eleanor used magic so close to this man he may not have the best reaction.

But she didn’t use magic. Ahh. The elder man had mentioned the village’s hunter had perished in the initial Mage-Templar takeover, but he’d passed the tradition onto his son. Passed along the tradition, but not all of the life skills it entailed. Teach a man to fish…or build a fire, as it were.

The young man looked almost embarrassed. He promised Eleanor he did know how to hunt, he could kill and clean anything they asked, but it was his father who had handled fires when nights got cold or they cooked out in the field.

Eleanor gave him a reassuring smile and told him he’d done an excellent job assembling most of what he needed. She held up an index finger and disappeared over the steep drop into the field beside the houses the young man had set up camp between, and reappeared not a minute later with a length of wood no longer than her forearm, and a sturdy twig. She held them up and explained that he needed to always make sure this portion was of matching wood before she laid the larger piece down and knelt, so it was trapped between her knee and the stone platform before planting the twig firmly against it and swiftly rolling it between the tops of her palms and lower knuckles.

She bared her hands for that task, removing the gloves Harritt had crafted her, revealing the Fadelight permanently Marking her hand, and the young man’s eyes widened as the reality sunk in that the Herald of Andraste was teaching him how to build a fire.

Eleanor breezily led him into a discussion of the food shortage problem as she worked, asking him about where he and his father had hunted in the past, what would most likely be in high population and last the longest, what could be most widely shared. By the time she had a proper coal smoking low from the larger piece of wood, she had Varric offering up their map, and the young man marked down a few places they would find a good population of Rams. A great many Mages and Templars too, he warned, which is why he himself hadn’t ventured out, but if they thought they could handle it, the refugees would truly appreciate any Ram meat the Inquisition could send their way.

Eleanor tipped the coal into the kindling he’d collected and blew into it before handing it off to the hunter.
“Blow gently and fan it through the air until it sparks. Once it does, drop it into your fire pit— it’ll do the rest. Be careful not to burn yourself, once your kindling gets going it goes,” she said, holding out her right hand so he could see the bit of puckered, always reddish skin she was sporting on the inside of her index finger. She pulled her gloves back on as she promised, “Just keep that fire going, and before you know it you’ll be cooking up a proper ram steak.”

“Thank you, Lady Herald,” he said nodding to her. “Maker watch over you.”

A distressed looking Elf man was Eleanor’s next target. She heard violent coughing and while Cassandra’s instinct was to usher the girl away from whatever foul illness might spread through their numbers, Eleanor followed the sound all the way to a hut opposite where the hunter was now enjoying his fire. Inside the hut was an Elf man, sitting at his wife’s bedside, holding her hand and murmuring to her in Dalish—Cassandra could not understand what was being said, but his tone was obviously meant to soothe.

Eleanor knocked a fist against the open hut door to get the man’s attention without startling him. “Antishan las vunin,” she said politely.

“A peaceful day to you as well,” the man offered in return.

“My name is Ellie, and I’m an agent of the Inquisition. We’re working to get a proper healer for you, but your wife is badly sick yes? We have draughts of Elf Root if that would help,” Eleanor said, drawing a vial of potion from its place in the belt Harritt made to accommodate her potions supply. She held it out to the Elf, but the man sadly shook his head.

“I appreciate the offer, miss. But you see, this is a recurring illness my wife has—like cobwebs in her lungs, she struggles breath past them, it makes her weak. Our son makes a potion that clears her spells right up. But he is away, joined a cult of Andraste that carries on south of here worshiping a blighted Rift and the Breach. I have tried sending word to him, but nothing makes it through the warfare topped off with demons and bandits mucking about.”

“Well, I haven’t tried yet,” Eleanor said with confidence, “We’ll be heading that way while we’re here, let’s see if we can’t get word to your son, yeah?”

“If you could that would be a blessing ser, truly.”

“Then I’ll do my best and return with good news,” Eleanor promised him. “In the meantime, do you happen to have a tea kettle?”

“Ahh, I do yes—I wouldn’t wish to seem unhospitable but I uh, I could only offer hot water to you, and your companions,” the man said, nervously as he rose to his feet, prepared to heat water for them anyway.

“Oh no, I wasn’t asking for tea,” she assured, and followed him as he went to the fireplace and pulled the kettle from the mantle. Eleanor took the kettle and looked inside to make sure it was empty before pouring water from her canteen into it, and then the potion the man had earlier refused, and dug into her pockets to withdraw Embrium blossoms she’d gathered along their way and popped them into the kettle. She hung the kettle on the hook over the fire already going in the fireplace and said, “Bring it to a rolling boil then pull it off the fire and remove the lid. Have your wife breathe in the steam—the Embrium might clear her lungs entirely on its own, but if not, it will surely help her breathe easier and vaporous Elf Root will assist with any pain she’s in.”

“Mas serannas, Ellie did you say your name was?” the man asked.
Eleanor nodded. “It’s no trouble,” she said as she handed him a full vial of potion, and more Embrium blossoms, “just in case the pot runs out before we return, this should tide you over. Be sure to mix it with water—it should be equal parts potion so…” she took the empty bottle of potion she’d administered into the kettle and filled it with water before restopping it. “Here. You’ll be all set.”

The Elf man took the vials of potion and water into one hand, and the blossoms in the other, so very carefully as if worried they might break apart. “Dareth shiral, mah falon.”

Eleanor gave him a nod before leading her party from the hut. It was only when they were out of earshot that she looked to Solas and asked, “Um, I know he said safe journey, but ‘falon’?”

“Ahh, it means ‘friend’, da’len,” Solas supplied. And then he saw fit to comment, “I am surprised you would learn how to build fire when you could just use magic—and that trick with health potion and Embrium, it is not necessarily basic first-aid.”

He said this almost as if he’d caught Eleanor in a lie, as if he expected her to confess to some higher education outside of the little magical training she’d received in her life.

Ahh. Wait. Did he suspect a demon was somehow at play? That Eleanor had gleaned the information through some subtle blood magic unbeknownst to her companions?

Eleanor did not seem offended, or perhaps she did not hear the hint of accusation in his words. Cassandra would not have followed Solas’s line of thinking if she hadn’t spent the better part of the previous week combating Cullen on Eleanor’s training and his concerns at what might happen should the girl bleed.

She had bled—thrice during their training, and nothing had come from it other than Eleanor’s apologetic attitude towards having to bring pause to their lesson to bandage a cut or see Adan about her thankfully bruised and not broken nose.

No demon had surged forth then, and it was not the case now. Eleanor actually gave a small mirthless laugh and said, “The cold, and a grumpy fisherman taught me how to build a fire when I was little. I only started casting Inferno maybe two years ago, and my little pyro spell is something I picked up from Trevelyan,” she paused then. She’d mentioned the Mage Trevelyan in her interrogation. It had sounded like they’d been friends…she must miss him. “And uh, the Elf Root-Embruim remedy is just from personal experience. I’m no healer but it sounds like his wife has asthma—she might not have much in the way of attacks, that isn’t unusual as you get older, but they make common sicknesses a bear. Ava taught me how to use Embrium to combat respiratory illness.”

“Did your Ava suffer from asthma?” Solas asked. Cassandra restrained herself from slapping the Elf on the back of his bald head. Was he being cruel? Did he wish to make Eleanor think on those she’d lost to a point it saddened her?

For a horrified moment Cassandra thought Eleanor might reveal that it was such an illness that had taken Ava from her.

And then suddenly, she had to restrain herself from congratulating the Elf man, for his line of questioning had proven useful, blessedly so, because Eleanor said,


Had she informed Healer Adan? Or her Marehis? Had she thought to tell anyone in the
Inquisition? What if she’d had an ‘attack’ as she’d called them? Or fell ill and needed further assistance than would usually be rendered? Cassandra found herself mentally repeating Eleanor’s earlier instructions to the Elf man, over and over to commit the treatment to memory.

“Be sure to inform us if it troubles you,” Cassandra cautioned.

Eleanor gave her a brilliant smile and said, “It’s not serious or anything—”

“I hate to break it to you Tumbles, but that follows the lines of ‘what could possibly go wrong’ and those are some pretty famous last words,” Varric said.

“I haven’t had much trouble with it since I was little,” Eleanor said, “Now it’s just a pain if I have a cold or something.”

“Aha!” Varric declared, “Our hero brought low by a treacherous cold. Perhaps she needs someone who can keep her warm?”

Cassandra gave the man a disgusted grunt. Eleanor was young. And at the center of a great world-wide turmoil. The last thing she should be concerned about was romance.

“Come on Seeker, don’t be that way. What about that hunter? Huh? Big brave woodsman—can’t light a fire in a hearth, but maybe he can light a fire in our hero’s heart?”

“Varric, I love you, I really do,” Eleanor said all-too-sweetly, “but if you try to set me up with someone, your new book is going right up your butt.”

Cassandra loosed a laugh at that, Solas seemed equally amused, even more so when Eleanor’s rather eloquent threat caused Varric to pout.

“Oh, come on! Every great hero has a great romantic interest! Hawke has Fenris!”

Fenris. And Isabella. And three different workers at the Rose. *And* an implied liaison with the Arishock but Cassandra suspected Varric only said something of the sort for shock value, having grown bored during his interrogation.

“I am not your ‘great hero’, permission denied, no stories about me—”

“Tumbles, the story kind of centers around you—”

“Around *us*! You lot have been here since before me anyway, make Cassandra the hero, she’d look cool in a cape, I’d just trip over it and probably strangle myself. Or Solas, pop his character on a fiery griffon and call it a day.”

“You’re killing my vision here kid,” Varric grumbled.

Eleanor stuck her tongue out at the Dwarf.

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Two weeks. They dedicated two weeks of their time so far, to the troubles plaguing the Crossroads, and their efforts had not been in vain.

It started off with more problems than they had fingers between the four of them, it
seemed. And then, they’d encountered the skulls.

Glowing skulls. With holes drilled into the backs of them, so that one could peer through it, and a hallow eye socket, like a macabre telescope of sorts, and apparently, they revealed the location of…shards. Blue glowing, singing things. Keys, Solas said. To what, he did not know, but they collected them as they encountered the things, Eleanor standing tip toe to peer through the Ocularms, was apparently their name, according to a tome Solas read from at one of their sites. They gathered what information they could and sent it along with a shard for examination by Leliana and their people back at Haven. Perhaps they could make something of the bizarre artifacts, they’d been hidden and made to be found for a reason.

This discovery resulted in several instances where she thought the girl would die of her clumsiness. It sent her climbing up on high rocks to fetch shards, getting into precarious positions that sent her sliding down entire hillsides, and once, sent her falling headlong into a gulch.

Maker bless Solas and his quick casting. Barrier, at the last minute, had spared her then.

Cassandra personally preferred the Astarariums they found. Look out points to the stars, that allowed one to peer through an actual, proper telescope, and examine the heavens. If you looked upon the constellation shown and were able to name it properly, the contraption glowed and shone light that directed you to other such constructs, and ultimately, they found, a treasure trove unlocked through the Astararium’s activation.

Eleanor had been absolutely delighted by the things. For all she lacked a formal education, she knew about the stars. Apparently, it had been something of a hobby she could afford to have—always being on the move meant navigation was a priority for the girl, and the cover of night often served a level of security to someone on the run from magical law enforcement. So, when it came to naming the constellations, it had been more of a fun test than some daunting task of connect-the-dots.

It was unlike their pursuit of an end to the chaos caused by the Mages and Templars warring in the Hinterlands.

They’d hunted the Mages to their cave in Witchwood, and the Templars to their encampment to the west. Clearing their respective lairs put an end to the ceaseless fighting that had burnt half the homes in the Hinterlands to the ground.

In their search for Mages and Templars, they also found large shards of Red Lyrium, much to Varric’s equal parts delight and despair. He hated that there was Red Lyrium to be found but loved the sound of the cursed stuff being destroyed beyond repair.

They’d also hunted ram. There were now full bellies among the Crossroad Refugees, and Varric further teased Eleanor that she should give the hunter boy a chance. Eleanor threatened to tell Bianca on Varric if he did not cease his teasing, and for some reason that shut the Dwarf up. Cassandra wished she’d thought of such a threat but thought it might be something that only worked when it came from Eleanor. Bianca was an inanimate object, after all.

Annoying and thoughtless, selfish, careless, as the Dwarf had proven himself to be…when it came to Eleanor he was obviously protective, and cared very much so, about the girl and her wellbeing. It dawned on Cassandra, that Varric’s teasing about kindling a romance with that hunter boy may have been out of genuine concern for the girl. Did he think her lonely? Was she lonely? Romantic attachments could prove tremulous at best, and dangerous at worst, and she seemed rather young to have something with no attachment.
Young love was fire and passion and vows to be together forever that usually dissolved into being with other people before the week was out. Or betrothal at a young age, serious vows taken till death do they part. This prompted the rather horrifying thought that Lady Josephine might see fit to arrange a marriage for Eleanor, should such a thing benefit the Inquisition, but then she thought better of it. Lady Josephine would not do such a thing—she knew well what they demanded of Eleanor, she would not burden the girl with a matrimonial entanglement that would outlast their problems with the Breach.

It was no one’s business but Eleanor’s, at any rate. If the girl chose to pursue a romantic dalliance, it would only involve the Inquisition insofar as her safety was concerned. Varric should stay out of it and allow the girl to do as she pleased.

Although, should someone come along and break the girl’s heart…well Cassandra might just look the other way while Varric took his vengeance.

With the rebel Mages taken care of, their caches had been even safer to loot for items the refugees could use. They’d been able to return to the Crossroads with blankets and warmer clothing to circulate among the refugees. While they searched for these caches though, they had come across recruits, and the cure for the Elf refugee’s wife.

There was an Inquisition scout keeping watch on the road south of their initial campsite. He’d expressed concern over the disappearance of his fellow Scout, a woman named Ritts. On their way to search for more supplies, they found a viable campsite for their forces to spread out to—assisting in furthering their hold on the Hinterlands—and found…a rather horrifying scene. A young noblewoman with her head crushed in. They searched her for identification—someone would seek her when she did not show up wherever she was expected to be, they should get word to her loved ones.

This led to ultimately, the recruitment of the dead noblewoman’s lover. When their party reached the cult of Andraste, congregating around a Rift, worshiping the Breach as if accepting the end of the world would somehow save them, they found a man in search of a woman matching the noblewoman’s description. Eleanor had very gently informed the man that they’d found his love, offering up the letter they had found on the dead woman’s body as proof.

And then she offered him something to turn his focus to. His life did not have to end because hers had. He had a crew of men that worked for him, people trained and capable in battle—he could work to make the world a better and safer place, under the flag of the Inquisition. Thus, Lord Berand was recruited into the Inquisition, and the man was sent to Haven to receive orders from Commander Cullen.

Eleanor sealed the Rift, and that seemed to prove she was heaven sent to the cult members. Their leader turned their allegiance to that of Eleanor herself, and she asked that they work to help the refugees however they could.

Solas sensed an Elf Artifact nearby, that he said would prove useful to protecting the area from veil tears. This resulted in Eleanor following Solas around the entire Cult of Andraste compound until they made it to the uppermost level of the buildings northern tower, and found a…metal orb thing, that glowed with the same Fadelight burning in Eleanor’s hand whenever she followed Solas’s instruction on how to activate the thing.

During their trek searching every nook and cranny of the compound, they found the Elf Refugee’s son among the cult members, and he entrusted the recipe for his mother’s medicine to Eleanor, to deliver to his father.
Which spawned a rather strange turn of events where Cassandra and Varric actually... worked together. Not that they weren’t working as a team already, but that was full of mutual resentment, and hard feelings. They very willingly worked together, and afterwards felt some of the contention lessen between them, when Eleanor had gone to sleep that evening, and Cassandra slipped the recipe from the pocket of Eleanor’s coat. Varric caught her, only because he himself had been going to do the same thing. Cassandra handed the recipe off to him, and the Dwarf copied it down, word for word. They would see it to Healer Adan, so such a thing could be on hand should Eleanor ever have need.

When Eleanor woke the next morning, she was none the wiser.

They could have simply asked to see the recipe, been forthright about the whole thing, but Eleanor was...extremely independent. Almost annoyingly so. She fought against anything she thought was overbearing and was reticent to ask for or receive help. She would have insisted that she would never need such a thing, and that Cassandra and Varric were being ‘worry warts’, as she’d taken to calling them when they, quite justly, were worried.

So. What she didn’t know, may just help to keep her alive someday.

They traveled from the cult of Andraste, further south, in search of a Rift that needed closing, and another Mage cache, when they discovered the missing scout, Ritts, fighting off demons attacking from the southernmost Rift.

It had taken all of two seconds after the last demon was down, for Eleanor ask the woman if she was alright. She hadn’t been hurt, but Eleanor persisted...ahh.

Eleanor had not meant physically. The girl saw the picnic, blanket, and dead Apostle woman and had put two and two together. Cassandra herself hadn’t caught on until Ritts was admitting to having been ‘passing the time’ with the woman now lying dead after the demon attack. She’d evidently slipped off after her shift and spent the night under the stars with the Elf Apostle, only to waken sunshine, bird song, and demons fresh from the Fade.

Where Eleanor had been sympathetic, Varric had been impressed. He suggested if the woman was able to ‘talk an apostate out of her pants in the middle of the war’ she should put her skills of persuasion to better use for the Inquisition.

Eleanor had agreed and told Ritts to report back to Leliana for reassignment—after touching base with her scout friend who’d been so worried for her.

They ended up seeing Ritts safely off and returned to the Crossroads to get the potion recipe to the Elvish man. He thanked them profusely, and Eleanor lent him a hand in preparing the potion, the man reading the instructions aloud while Eleanor collected ingredients, chopped, stirred, boiled. Apparently, she’d spent an afternoon with Adan where he had given her some instruction in the finer parts of potions crafting, and the effects of his instruction showed in the very precise and clean way the girl was able to follow the directions the Elf man orated. Solas had been impressed enough to allow the girl to assist him whenever he refreshed their supply of health potion—it cut his work in half and sped the process exponentially.

Not only did their recruits and resources grow as they ventured in the Hinterlands, but their party grew as well.

Word came from Leliana, a message for Eleanor who’d handed the letter to Cassandra saying she trusted the woman to read it, and that she’d want the Seeker’s opinion on whatever Leliana had to say.
After some disturbing reports from her Scouts, it had come to Leliana’s attention that the Grey Wardens had disappeared. Absolute silence from all quarters—with the exception of one man. A Warden Blackwall, last sighted in the Hinterlands. Leliana wanted them to investigate the Wardens disappearance. It wasn’t uncommon for Warden activity to die down after the Blight, but to disappear entirely was unheard of, and just what made this one warden special, why had all but he fled?

So, Eleanor led them south of the Crossroads, where they found another area perfect for another Inquisition camp. They saw to it and had reinforcements securing the area as quickly as possible, before they continued on further south to the lake, over the hill from their new camp.

There was an abandoned home on the opposite side of the lake. And before this abandoned home, stood a lone Grey Warden, with conscripted recruits—refugees—helping them to help themselves against bandit forces threatening to take what little they possessed.

The man had been barking orders at his conscripts when their party approached. Eleanor called to him when he took a breath, and that had the gruff, greying man marching right up to her and demanding to know just how she knew his name.

She didn’t get the chance to answer right that moment. His shield arm shot up, startling the girl and saving her—the bandits he’d been preparing his conscripts for had arrived and came in firing, arrows meant for Eleanor’s head planted firmly in the center of the Warden’s shield.

Their party assisted the refugees in disbanding the bandits, and Warden Blackwall told them to take back what the bandits had stolen from them and return to their families capable of defending themselves.

And then he rounded on Eleanor once more, demanding to know just who she was, and how she’d gotten his name.

“I know your name, because I’m an agent of the Inquisition,” she’d said.

That had Warden Blackwall examining Eleanor hard, as if he thought perhaps his eyesight was failing him. She was rather young, Cassandra supposed, to be an agent of anything.

Eleanor seemed to realize this as well, and she removed her left glove to bare her Mark to him.

The Warden was shocked to say the least, “Andraste’s tits,” he’d sworn, and then coughed as if he could cover his curse after the fact.

“Andraste’s Herald, actually,” Eleanor gently teased as if to assure him he hadn’t offended, and she put her glove back on as she said, “You can just call me Ellie.”

Eleanor explained how the Wardens had suddenly disappeared after the events at the Conclave. She wasn’t accusing them of being responsible for the Divine’s murder, but she was accusing them of being absolutely no help—wasn’t that what Wardens were for? Yeah there was no Blight right this very second, but didn’t that leave them time to help with things like a gaping hole in the sky?

Maker preserve them all, the girl stumbled over herself apologizing for things unnecessarily half the time, and then she went foolheartedly into confrontation with bold statements when she felt the slightest bit of conviction over what she was speaking of. Cassandra resembled that—at least the ‘foolheartedly’ part, so she could hardly rebuke the girl.
And neither, it seemed, could Warden Blackwall. The man saw the girl’s grievance against he and his fellow Grey Wardens seemingly ignoring the Breach and the threat it possessed towards the people they were supposedly sworn to protect. He agreed, and while he could not offer any useful information—he was a recruiter, and traveled alone, the Warden’s disappearance had been news to him—he could offer his sword, and his connection to the Grey Warden treaties, edicts that would allow the Inquisition to conscript people and resources the way that wardens could in times of the Blight.

Eleanor shook the man’s hand and welcomed him to the Inquisition. And then, there were five traversing the Hinterlands together.

With a good portion of the threats in the Hinterlands cleared—including a rather excruciating Rift at the waterfall just before Dennet’s farms—they were finally able to make contact with the Horse Master.

That is, after setting up camp and resting. Between the five of them, they’d used up nearly all of their healing potion during their battle against the Rift at the falls.

The last of their potion was used in direct application—a shade claw had lodged itself deep into Eleanor’s left thigh. When it was removed she began bleeding so profusely the only thing they could think to do was for Solas to pour potion directly into the wound itself and have Cassandra apply pressure until the potion proved to seal the injury closed, or mostly so. Just the barest of reminders left—a thin circular divot in her skin that would surely scar. Nothing that spoke to the gush of blood that stained Eleanor’s leggings, the ground, and Cassandra and Solas’s armor.

Needless to say, they were weary and to Cassandra’s surprise…though she supposed it should not have been such…Varric offered to take up first watch and allowed the others the opportunity to rest. There was none of the usual resistance from Eleanor. Something about being sent to bed early made her feel like they thought her a child—she was a child—but allowing the girl to take first watch did no harm, it was better than interrupting her sleep or waking her early. Eleanor loved it, especially if one of the others stayed up as well and would chat quietly with her as their comrades slept.

Cassandra had thought the notion daunting at first. When the girl had been dead asleep in Haven for days, she could just recite the Chant to have something to say. But she found that the likes still applied to a conscious Eleanor as well. Conversation came surprisingly easy between the she and the Seeker, and when Cassandra found their silence anything less than comforting, she would throw out a verse of the Chant and Eleanor just reveled in it, seemed to love learning everything the Seeker could possibly share with her about different portions of the Chant of Light. The girl had been somewhat versed in their religion’s doctrine and had rather interesting ideas and speculations about what she knew, and as Cassandra shared her own knowledge, Eleanor returned in kind with her way of thinking about the Chant. It was somewhat like a worship service, only instead of a Chantry Mother delivering a message no one could question, two people of similar faith shared in scripture and discussed it in depth which was…much more preferable to the former, Cassandra found.

There had been one particularly difficult day in the Hinterlands, when, by the time they settled in for the night, everyone had been feeling the weight of discouragement on top of their duty to the people they felt they were failing. Cassandra was not one for song—at least, she was no bard, or a Chantry Sister who could take up the task of singing alone before the congregation, in the congregation she was fine, her voice lost in the mix of all the Maker’s children. But that night, when there was no other comfort to be found, Cassandra found herself singing, very quietly, along with Eleanor. ‘Steel your heart, the dawn will come…’ it was a beautiful hymnal, if not a bit over
used by Chantry Clerics—a lovely tear jerker that had eyes watering and devotion pouring from pockets in the form of gold coin into the offering plates. But that night it had seemed somewhat fitting. In the morning, they’d gone on to seal two rifts, and secured bountiful ram meat for the entire village.

Now, they had victory after victory behind them. But they’d come so close to failure at that last Rift—when Eleanor had sealed it, Cassandra stopped breathing for a moment, her mind racing back to that day at the Breach where the girl had collapsed practically dead.

This time, the girl had fallen to her knees, and been back on her feet after the four adults had all somewhat bombarded her, asking how they could help, where she was injured, if she needed potion, or to be carried. She’d ground her staff into the wet earth of the river bank and determinedly used it as a crutch to limp all the way to where they were now camped out near Dennet’s farm. Today was trying no matter their victories, Cassandra found.

Varric took first watch with Blackwall, and no refusal was heard from Eleanor. She plopped down in the grass as soon as Varric made his offer to take watch.

“Are you well, Eleanor?” Cassandra had asked, the girl seemed ready to drop off to sleep.

“‘m fine,” she mumbled and then laid back in the grass, and promptly fell fast asleep, not particularly caring that she hadn’t so much as removed her pack from her back.

They hadn’t the camping supplies with them other than their personal bed rolls, they’d lit a fire with brush that made the smoke a particular shade of blue, signaling that they’d found another foothold for Inquisition forces. Reinforcements would arrive with actual tents, and all the amenities that made up a proper campsite.

Until then, they made do. Eleanor would surely wake up unable to move for the pain in her back if they did not do something, so Solas took up the girl, his hands under her armpits as he hoisted her so Cassandra could unloop the girl’s arms from her pack and set it aside.

Eleanor then lay wrapped in their parties collective bedding, tucked between Cassandra and Solas for warmth. She was sickly pale, and Blackwall had practically jumped out of his skin when he lay the back of his bare hand against Eleanor’s forehead to check her temperature—her skin was frigid to the touch.

She had lost so much blood. Solas lamented they hadn’t pressed her to take on fluids before she’d laid down, and she would become dehydrated—if anything they needed to get an appropriate balance of water and salt in her to aid in the regeneration of her blood. But they’d all been rather bleary minded, Cassandra could feel what potion she’d taken slowly easing the cracks in her ribs, Solas was quickly recovering from an actual blow to his head, it had slowed his thought processes a bit initially.

His thoughts seemed to be clearing now though as he set about trying to more properly treat Eleanor.

Solas gently shook the girl’s shoulder, and said, “I know you are weary da’len, but you must wake even if just for a moment. You must drink.” He gestured for Cassandra to hand him Eleanor’s canteen, and Varric was already thinking ahead and had gathered up everyone else’s water skins to refill them—if Eleanor did not need all of it, refilling their water supply would be one less thing to do later.

Eleanor was a generally pleasantish person to wake—she was not exactly a morning person,
but it was not in her to be unjustly unkind to anyone, so she usually offered up a sad little groan at
being told it was time to wake and sympathized with her fellow traveling companions over their
shared misery in the early hours their time in the Hinterlands demanded they rise. Flissa had seen
fit to send them on their way with a plentiful supply of coffee, though Cassandra suspected
Marehis’s hand in that decision. One cup of the stuff and Eleanor was running around their
campsite looking for all the world she could take on a dragon if they set her loose to find one.

Cassandra saw the tell-tale signs that there was, in fact, a dragon somewhere in the
Hinterlands. To the north, past their furthest most camp, but she did not share that information with
anyone, especially a caffeine riddled Eleanor.

Now though, Eleanor did not jump up ready to face any task, or even offer her morning
groan of remorse for being awake. She did not rouse at all, her motions were lax under Solas’s
hand, which had gone from shaking her shoulder, to supporting her upper back, pushing her to sit
up, and calling more insistently that she should wake.

Cassandra shifted then, so she could sit supporting the girl against her chest to free the
Elf’s hands, so he could do whatever he needed to help Eleanor.

“’m fine,” the girl had said just before falling asleep, or unconscious it seemed. The
moment Eleanor was well, Cassandra would throttle her and put an all-out ban on her use of the
word ‘fine’.

“She must be worn out, sealing a Rift can’t be a simple task and she’s sealed two today,”
Blackwall offered up, hoping that was the reason they could not rouse the girl.

“No, no something is wrong,” Solas insisted, panic slipping into his tones as he said,
“Eleanor. Ellie, you need to wake up.”

The girl did groan then, her head lolling to the side as she tried to do as Solas asked.

“Shit, Seeker!” Varric’s voice called out, echoing up the hillside from the ravine below.

“We are handling it, Varric!” Cassandra shouted back, regretting having shouted directly
into Eleanor’s ear.

The girl groaned again and lurched forward, Solas’s hands went to her arms to support the
girl, before she fell face first into the dirt. Was she trying to get to her feet?

“Eleanor, still yourself,” Cassandra reached to uncap the canteen, hoping to get the girl to
drink.

Eleanor opened her eyes then and spoke low, her voice strained and cracking from her lips,
like her throat were in the vice of some unseen hand.

“Stop, the demon…wolf-”

Solas’s face drained of all color and he released his hold on the girl as if she burned him.
Eleanor fell harshly to her knees and slumped over to the side, Cassandra narrowly able to shield
the girl’s head from cracking against the ground.

“Solas!” Cassandra cried in alarm, what had gotten into the man?

He backed away from them, shaking.
“We need backup!” That was Blackwall’s voice. Where had the Warden gone?

“Seeker I’m serious, I need help!” Varric called again.

It was then she realized she could hear Bianca firing off, and the howl of a wolf rang out across the fields.

Solas turned to look where the din was coming from and he seemed almost relieved? He drew his staff and cast Barrier down towards his fellow party members as he said, “There are wolves, Seeker, a pack of them.”

“Go, I will guard Eleanor,” Cassandra instructed as she made sure the girl was lying secure before rising and drawing her own weapon. Solas was already down in the ravine with Varric and apparently Blackwall, fighting the wolves Cassandra could hear snarling and snapping like things possessed.

Possessed.

The three men returned to their camp after a moment, sheathing weapons, Varric was sporting three claw marks across his chest, and Blackwall was limping slightly as he walked.

Solas looked as if he might be ill.

“What the hell was that?!” Varric exploded. “What kind of wolves fight like that? Maker’s balls!”

“Could they have been possessed?” Cassandra asked, getting Solas’s attention. “Eleanor, she said something about stopping demon wolves just now.”

“A demon…” Solas breathed sharply as realization dawned on him. “an active, powerful demon nearby—working to possess the wolves. Varric, did you see where they came from?”

“They just showed up across the river—north. There’s some caves on the map there right?”

“We have to hurry,” Solas said, “I believe whatever demon is possessing those wolves has his sights set on the Herald.”

Cassandra rose then, “I will go with you, Varric, Blackwall, one or both of you should stay with Eleanor, guard her.”

“One, Seeker,” Solas said, “those wolves are many and fierce.”

“Shit, I’m good to go, just got scratched up, Warden’s the one gimping it,” Varric said, albeit resentful. Ahh. He did not like the idea of leaving Eleanor alone in the care of a man they’d only just met. Becoming a Warden was a noble thing…but often the path that came before was rife with, usually, crime. Horrendous crime escapable only by the Warden’s oath.

“I’ll guard the Lady Herald with my life,” Blackwall insisted, pounding a fist to his chest.

Varric unholstered his crossbow and for all he was much shorter than the Human man, he looked as though he were staring him down, “Yeah well, watch yourself, Hero. I come back and even a hair is misplaced on that girl’s head, Bianca’ll change your name to Warden ‘Lacksballs’.”

But Varric fell in line alongside Cassandra, as Solas led them down the hill and across the ravine to the caves—ready to destroy the Demon.
No matter where he went, or who he met, his first words were always, “Warden Blackwall”. It was more of a greeting for him than a name. People recognized the words as a name when he said it, and just accepted it as his. But no one had ever just walked up and given the name to him.

Then, like a bad joke about a bar, an Elf, two Humans, and a Dwarf walk in.

And the littler Human—a girl, Maker’s breath, a child—had led them, stood before him and called him by that name. Warden Blackwall, no silent quotation marks involved. Somehow, it made it seem like it wasn’t a lie.

She was an Agent of the Inquisition she’d claimed, it made him think his eyes were playing tricks on him. She didn’t seem to type to lie, but who would recruit someone so young? And then she’d revealed her Mark.

He wasn’t a sociable man, but even he had heard the news of the Herald of Andraste—not only what she’d done at the Breach, but what she’d been doing since. Going around the Hinterlands, saving the refugees from Templars, Mages, Rifts, and the elements themselves. When he’d conscripted those men, it had been her name on their lips when they prayed before battle—Maker bless the Herald of Andraste, may we be as bold as she.

Then, by some twist of fate, she appeared. Like their prayer had somehow beckoned her, the Herald of Andraste came to their aid, and saw them be made capable of saving themselves.

And Maker, she was bold. No sooner had she gone from lilting laughter and telling him he could call her ‘Ellie’, then she was railing at him, at Wardens in general because how dare they ignore the Breach, see the Divine and her people die and do nothing to help because it was Red Lyrium, and not Darkspawn, pouring up from the ground.

And then the true twist of fate. The moment she finished speaking, his next words had been those of volunteer, offering himself to her cause. He hadn’t even realized what he’d done until it was done. She shook his hand and welcomed him aboard.

She asked questions, like if he’d had other initiatives in the Hinterlands, things he needed done, if he had everything with him or a camp of his own to stop at and gather his things, and if he’d eaten yet today—the girl offered up an apple she’d had tucked away in a pocket she said she’d been saving for a snack but she’d be happy to share if he wanted to go ‘halfsies’.

*Halfsies* turned out to mean she sliced up the apple, saw that the Warden ate the half offered to him, and then cut the second half into four pieces between herself and the others.

When he admitted to searching for Warden artefacts, she’d immediately promised they would do their best to find them while they were here, took up his quest without question, had him marking locations on her map, when he marked the one near the ruined tower east of the lake she’d smiled and spoken to what an excellent coincidence this all was. She’d planned on ‘swinging by’ the place to look around and seal a Rift the scouts had reported sighting there.

Then she led them towards the glow of Fadelight flickering in the east. She chatted with him as they walked, he’d seen she was a Mage back in the bandit skirmish, and she asked if he would be alright with she and the Elf, Solas, including him in their Barrier spells. She would
understand if he was uneasy with strangers casting their magic upon him.

“Cassandra says it’s a bit weird the first time, but she doesn’t think anything of it now.”

“I did not say it was weird,” the Lady Seeker corrected, “it was merely not what I was expecting. It is not unpleasant, and Solas and Eleanor’s barriers are strong, have given us an advantage in many of our fights we may have otherwise lost without them.”

He didn’t have anything in particular against magic or Mages, he wasn’t certain what to expect, but he would accept the help.

When demons appeared from the thing, she drew her staff, and he felt a wash of energy bubbling over him head to toe, and then a bracing sense of security like he was untouchable, and in fact he was.

He thought she would to fall back then, let them handle the fighting. She did take the high ground with Solas, and the duo cast in time with each other—while one had mana recharging the other was casting larger spells.

He fell in line. Fighting alongside the lady Seeker—impressive warrior she—was admittedly odd. He hadn’t fought with a team, not like this in years. This morning he was a lone Warden looking for a place where he could help and move on. Suddenly he was part of a group—a party, Ellie called it.

There was a breakdown of their routine when a greater terror teleported, tore a portal in the earth and popped up across the field a half second later, knocking Blackwall flat on his back. Solas and Ellie’s barriers had worn down and he expected a claw to the face.

Then he heard a shout of, “Hey!” and then saw the gleaming end of a staff whack the demon across the back of the head, sending the thing stumbling, and saw Eleanor atop the high rock she and Solas had been casting from, holding her staff more like a sword.

It gave him the opportunity to get back on his feet before the demon regained its own footing.

When the demons were dealt with, Ellie cast against the Rift, light pouring from her hand until the Rift snapped shut. That was...something. It felt like one of those things one should be fortunate enough see at least once in their life—magic strange and powerful doing something that would otherwise be impossible. She shook out her hand once it was closed and he wondered if the Mark was a painful thing, but she didn’t say anything of it, just turned to face her group and grinned as she congratulated them on a job well done, that Blackwall was a welcome addition to their fights. They regrouped then, ready to move on and search the ruin for anything related to the Wardens. Ellie though, did hand the Warden a vial of something green, telling him he should drink it if he were injured before she began her search.

His back was stiff from being knocked down, and his head ached something fierce, he had the feeling if he ran a hand through his hair it would come away bloody, he’d cracked his head when the demon knocked him down. So, he downed the potion in one go and reveled in the relief that worked its way through him, clearing his thoughts.

“Oh! These are maps I think, is this something?” Ellie was calling then, and lo and behold, she’d found a crate of Warden maps tucked away in an abandoned makeshift camp, left abandoned by what he could only speculate was a fallen Warden. No one would just leave maps like this if they could help it.
“Excellent find, these could be useful to your Inquisition,” Blackwall said.

The girl grunted when she hoisted the crate up to carry herself, but Blackwall wouldn’t have that—the Seeker either it seemed, the Nevarran woman had been about to take the crate from the girl herself—but the Warden stepped up and said he would carry it. He wasn’t sure where to, but it turned out they’d set up an Inquisition camp just below the lake. Ellie led them back to camp and introduced him to the soldiers there, telling him he could leave the maps there and he could decide what to do with them—whether they should see if they could be used in the Hinterlands, or if they should be shipped off to Haven.

She sat him down then, with a scout, and the Lady Seeker and they discussed terms. What would his role be in the Inquisition, what would he need in Haven, and his payment. Blackwall had objections to that—he’d volunteered, he hadn’t expected to be paid on top of being provided a place to lay his head. Ellie relented on that, but struck him with a compromise—he was to take an equal share of anything they found in their journeys, much was sent back to Haven or spread out across their forces in the Hinterlands, but a portion was kept for the party itself, and he would have access to that, ‘no buts’ she said.

The scout took down what Ellie dictated and when they were through, he rolled up the contract and said he would see it be in their Spymaster’s hands before the week was out.

Blackwall was given his own stock of health potion then, and Ellie asked that he help them keep an eye out for ingredients because one could never have enough Elf Root, and did he know that Druffalo liked Elf Root? He hadn’t, and this prompted the girl to tell a tale of a woman named Marehis, and their close encounter with an angry Druffalo father.

“That’s definitely going in the book, Tumbles,” Varric said as he laughed.

“You do well keeping Marehis ever on her toes, lethallan,” Solas agreed jovially.

“Really, Eleanor.” Cassandra sighed in exasperation. “I was wondering why your security protocols had such a ridiculous update to them—I thought perhaps Leliana was overthinking and considering every possible demise you could suffer. That created a new position, you realize, ‘Druffalo feeder’. We have scouts leaving offerings of Elf Root and feed to that herd.”

That made Ellie beam, she was practically bubbling over with her glee, bouncing in her seat as she asked excitedly, “Really? Oh wow, that’s so great, the Druffalo must be loving it! Oh gosh we’ve been gone so long, I wonder how big the babies have gotten—they were so little!”

It made Blackwall almost sick. The girl faced down apparently every single big bad that had been threatening the Hinterlands, had the responsibility of an entire world-saving operation resting on her shoulders, and here she was, giggling and cooing over baby Druffalos, the very picture of childlike innocence. She should be…Maker, somewhere! Home! Where were her parents, how could they be letting her do this? What sick bastard Marked her of all people for this purpose? She should be in some village somewhere, in a proper bedroom not some campsite in the woods, going to school worrying about dates and dances and homework, not demons and wars and the end of the world.

She’d spared a moment for fun with her companions, giving them the opportunity to rest and resupply, and the relief of a funny story before she stood and said she was ready, if they were, to make the final push to Horse Master Dennet’s farm.

“There’s a Rift, a nasty one, wreaking all kinds of havoc around there. I would like it cleared, and the farm secured before we go asking the man to supply our forces with his steeds. It’s
our job to seal it anyway, but it may as well serve to help our appeal to Master Dennet,” Ellie said, “I think with the added help our new friend can provide, we can take that thing down.”

It nearly took them down, is what it did. There were moments when he thought they might retreat, but they pressed on. Every time that blasted Rift produced high level demon after demon, Ellie dug her boots—literally at one point—into the ground and faced them without question, casting against the Rift when she could to weaken their opponents.

A shade sunk its claw into the girl’s thigh—Blackwall had meant to dismember the limb before it could strike her, but what resulted was the Shade reeling back in pain, raising its hand as black blood gushed from the place its finger had been removed. He killed the Shade and Ellie didn’t stop, didn’t retreat even as he thought the girl might fall over dead—they were all wounded, and almost out of potion.

And then she raised her hand to the sky and sealed the Rift.

Maybe it was his sins come back to haunt him. Destiny saw fit that he would look to his leader, follow who he should want to be, and see a child braver than Thom Rainier had ever been.

It was one thing after another then. Just when they thought they’d gotten to safety, had secured the girl, something was wrong. She’d bled so much, Blackwall himself had some on his boots, but surely not that much, not so much that the girl was in mortal peril.

But she wouldn’t wake up, couldn’t, it seemed. And then Varric called out and Blackwall went to his aid—wolves of all things had descended upon the Dwarf when he’d gone to refill their water supply.

And now the Elf, Solas, was saying that they were demon possessed, and that they must be dealt with and the demon destroyed because he believed it was laying claim on Ellie’s mind, trying to take possession of her when it sensed her blood spilling with magic that called its attention to a worthier target than a pack of wolves.

He wanted to go, wanted to gut the demon himself, but a wolf had done a number on his leg—damn thing tried to bite his leg off at the knee. He could stand and fight, hold ground if he needed to—but Varric was the better suited for going with the others to face the demon.

Varric, evidently, hadn’t liked the arrangement either. Warden ‘Lacksballs’, huh? He had to admit, he did agree with the sentiment—any who would harm someone like Ellie deserved such a punishment.

He sat on one of the smaller of the rocks that formed barrier in a semi-circle around their designated campsite. The girl lay where Cassandra had left her, lying on her back in the grass, her expression lax.

Maker, she was just a girl. And now there was some Demon mucking about, trying to get in her head, and there was nothing to do but wait for others to aid her. What if the wolves hadn’t attacked? What if Solas and Cassandra hadn’t figured out what was wrong, and she’d been possessed?

He couldn’t think of that. If Ellie became possessed…well he was pretty sure he’d just let her kill him.

He couldn’t do anything, save sit and stay and protect. And apparently, overthink.

He busied himself, paying close attention to the fire, keeping it tended so it burned warm,
the Hinterlands could get chilly. He didn’t suppose Varric would take offense if he laid one of their blankets over the girl—she had been ice cold before, when he’d checked her for fever. So, he went to the fire and shuffled the logs with a stick to keep it going strong, and took up a blanket, carefully covering Ellie before returning to his post.

It was maddening, the wait.

And then it was outright terrifying when Ellie screamed sitting bolt upright, eyes open wide.

“Ellie?” he questioned hopefully. Screaming was not entirely a reassurance that the girl was herself.

She stopped her screaming, and her hand went to grip at her throat as if the sound had surprised even her, her breathing haggard as if she’d just been running for her life. She looked around shaking, her expression so very grave.

“Ellie?” he asked again, and this time she turned more, saw him sitting nearby and relief came over her face.

“Everyone?” she asked, her voice hoarse.

“They went to kill the demon,” Blackwall said, “are…are you alright now?”

She swallowed as if her words caught in her throat, and she nodded. “Mm-hmm.”

And then her chin quivered, and he found her tears more horrifying than when she’d screamed.

Screaming was fear—one could usually conquer or kill a fear. Crying was more complicated, and he wasn’t sure he could kill anything and make it better.

So, he got up off his rock and his leg shouted it’s protest as he knelt at the girl’s side and put a hand on her back, patting gently. “It’s okay, Ellie, you’re awake now, it’s okay.”

He’d meant to console, to comfort, but Ellie began sobbing then, covering her mouth with a hand as she tried to quiet herself while she hunched forward and wept.

Maker’s balls.

“What the hell did you do to her you asshole?!” Varric’s voice bellowed.

Maker’s balls.

“Calm yourself, Varric~” Solas tried to reason.

“Chuckles, get off me! I’m just gonna shoot him!”

“Eleanor,” Cassandra’s voice sounded next, and the Nevarran woman was in the grass, sliding on her knees to be before Ellie, her hands on the girl’s shoulders, “Eleanor calm yourself. The demon is gone.”

Varric and Solas came to stand with them. Solas was holding the Dwarf’s crossbow, lugging it on his shoulder and out of reach of her owner.

Ellie shook, removing her hand from her mouth she sobbed out, “I-I-I couldn’t talk, I
couldn’t wake up that thing was t-t-trying to get in me, take over my mind and,” she let out an awful sound, and then, “It said all these horrible things and tried to trick me into letting it in—it said you were in danger, that it would send the wolves and kill you. I tried to wake up, I tried to warn you but when I did it only got worse—called me…it said more awful things and then it said I’d been too late that you were all dead and it showed me—made me see just horrible—” she squeezed her eyes shut. “I woke up and d-didn’t see anyone, I thought you were all-”

Blackwall didn’t think she could speak anymore if she tried. Cassandra realized as much and pulled Ellie into her arms and hugging her fiercely, tucking the girl’s head beneath her chin, her gauntleted hand gently running down the hair at the back of Ellie’s head, “Shh shh shh shh shh, it is alright. You are alright now, and so are your friends. We are all safe. Just…let it all out, we can discuss anything you wish to later.”

It was dreadful. The girl cried as if the world had ended, and Blackwall wondered where demons went when they died, if they were gone forever or if they returned to the Fade. He stood conflicted between hoping that thing was gone for good, and praying he could get his hands on that thing and rend it limb from limb, make it feel tenfold the fear and pain it had inflicted on the Herald.

His hand slipped from its place on Ellie’s back, so Cassandra could hold the girl more tightly, and the woman rocked a bit, side to side as she began rubbing circles on Ellie’s back.

“They didn’t want to kill you,” Ellie told them pitifully. “The wolves. They saw people and thought they should h-hide, but it made them, forced them to attack, it wanted to force me too—it said it would m-make me kill, use my Mark to free its friends from the Fade.”

Varric swore, which got Blackwall’s attention for fear the man had decided to attack him after all, but he adverted his gaze when he realized the Dwarf might be crying a little. Solas looked sullen, full of weariness and regret.

She did stop crying, after a moment more she hugged Cassandra back and squeezed before pulling away and wiping at her eyes. “Sorry, sorry, I’m okay,” she said.

Solas withdrew a handkerchief and handed it to the girl who sniffled and with a small, wet smile she said, “At this rate I’ll use up all your handkerchiefs.”

“Then it is good they are not difficult to make,” Solas said, and that seemed to get the girl’s attention, she blinked up at him and asked,

“You make these?”

At her amazement the Elf man’s ears pinked at the tips, “I do. They are just squares of cloth, da’len, it is a skill of little note,” Solas said.

“Mmm, I think you just offended professional handkerchief craftsmen everywhere, Solas.” Ahh, joking, that was a good sign.

“And should I meet one, I shall apologize. Are you well, da’len? You should drink water if you are settled, you lost much blood not to mention…well,” he seemed hesitant to say ‘you cried until it looks like you have nothing left to cry’ for fear it might actually send the girl to tears again.

“I am a little thirsty,” she admitted, in a way that implied she was a lot thirsty. Cassandra handed her the canteen she’d tried to get her to drink from earlier. “Thanks,” Ellie said before proceeding to drain the thing dry.
And then a stranger’s voice cried out,

“Name yourselves!”

Blackwall, Cassandra, and Ellie surged to their feet, the girl stumbled, and shot an arm out to Cassandra for support as she swayed and then steadied herself.

A bald, dark-skinned mustached man approached from the direction of the farmstead, armed with longsword—at his side stood a small, elderly woman armed with a rake of all things, looking for all the world she could defend her homestead to the death with the gardening tool.

“Master Dennet?” Ellie asked.

“Who wants to know?” the elderly woman groused on the man’s behalf.

Ellie let go of Cassandra and held up her hands in a reassurance she meant no harm.

“My name is Ellie, and I am an agent of the Inquisition.”

Master Dennet was super sweet once he…you know…put the sword away.

Ellie tried her best to explain the situation—they were with the Inquisition, and they’d just sealed the Rift west of his property, and that awful screaming that had brought them running armed to fight, she was super sorry for that!

Master Dennet’s wife, Elaina had this very stern manner about her. When Ellie told them who they were and their hopes that Master Dennet would lend them the aid of his horses, the woman barked at them to get in her house ‘so help her god’. So, they were invited into the Horse Master’s home, and a man named Bron came and took a look at Blackwall’s leg, cleaning the injury. Eliana had just a beautiful garden out front of their home, and in it were a few Elf Root plants, she was kind enough to let Ellie pick a few leaves for Bron to press over the tooth marks surrounding Blackwall’s knee and secure them beneath bandaging.

“Here. It isn’t quite as good as potion, but if you chew on it, it should help somewhat,” Ellie said, handing an Elf Root leaf in each hand to offer to Varric and Blackwall respectively. Poor Varric and his chest hair, she hoped the Dwarf wouldn’t be discomforted by any scaring the wolf’s claw would leave across his chest. She thought it would look rather dashing, like something the man could play up to impress a lover.

Knowing Varric, the man already had the exact way he’d deliver such a tale worked up in his head, ready to deliver to whoever took his fancy.

Now they—Cassandra, Solas, Blackwall, and Varric—were seated with Ellie around a small kitchen table in the Horse Master’s house, discussing his possibly helping the Inquisition.

Master Dennet’s wife, Elaina, was motivated to make Ellie eat something. She had soup simmering on the stove, and she’d already served them tea. Ellie didn’t particularly dislike tea, not as Solas did, but the Elf was steadily nursing the drink politely, while she was busying herself talking. She was nervous, having taken the lead on these discussions, and she worried if she added anything to the mix of nausea and exhaustion she was feeling at this point, she would sick up in the
middle of Elaina’s house and that wasn’t exactly charming behavior was it? Josephine certainly wouldn’t approve.

“We’ve been told your horses the best this side of the Frostbacks, Scout Harding said,” Ellie related to the Horse Master.

“Harding…” Master Dennet was thoughtful, “the tailor’s girl?"

Ellie wasn’t sure, she felt a bit badly she didn’t know more about the woman, but she said, “She’s a Dwarf, red hair, cute freckles.”

“Rowdy little Lace Harding is an Inquisition Scout?” Eliana asked, as if doubtful.

“Yup, the best!” Ellie said. “Really, she helped lay the groundwork for everything we’ve done here in the Hinterlands, none of it could have happened without her efforts to scout the area.”

“I’m glad to hear she’s doing so well for herself,” Eliana said, “maybe all the years of shooting practice arrows at miscreant boys’ backsides will serve her well.”

“Miscreant boys?” Ellie asked.

“A combination of boyhood crushes and the uncertainty of what exactly to do with a Dwarf girl running around underfoot,” Dennet explained. “They teased her relentlessly—she took it all in stride and corrected them with welts the size of tomatoes on their backs.”

Ellie couldn’t help but laugh at the thought of a miniature version of the Dwarf girl she’d met running around Redcliff shooting at people’s bottoms of all things.

“Well then, I suppose we should discuss terms. I do have steeds perfect for aiding the Inquisition’s efforts,” Dennet said.

“If you would allow me?” Ellie asked. At Dennet’s gesture for her to go ahead, Ellie sat up straight in her chair, removing her hands from the warmth of the mug to rest in her lap as she spoke.

“We’ve sealed the Rift down the way from here. I saw another just beyond your armory, I’ll see it sealed as well once my party and I have had a chance to gear up for another fight. We would like to settle a camp—for Inquisition forces, back where you found us earlier. It would be a help to us—giving us a place in the area to rest and resupply when we have work here—and it would serve to secure the area around your farm, our soldiers would defend your land, and should you need anything the Inquisition could provide, they would get word to the right people if they could not help themselves.”

“That is what you offer in exchange for my horses?” Master Dennet asked.

“That is what I offer in exchange for your allowing us to have an Inquisition camp on your property. I know we caused quite the commotion earlier, but I assure you we’re relatively quiet neighbors,” Ellie said. “I wanted to get that out of the way and settled so we both have the security that the Inquisition can do its job, before we discuss your steeds.”

“Eliana,” Dennet prompted.

His wife stood leaning against the entryway to their kitchen, eyes closed, listening as Ellie had spoken.

“Sounds reasonable to me. You want to camp near the road anyway, we don’t use that area
for anything, it may as well be good for something,” Eliana said, opening her eyes and nodding.

“I agree,” Dennet said, “your people are welcome here.”

Ellie smiled, relieved, and she held out her hand across the table to the Horse Master, and they shook on the first of their deals. “Then it’s a deal. Now, as for your steeds,” Ellie said, “name your terms. They are the effort of your hands, I want you to feel confident in your decision to support the Inquisition with their use.”

“I’ve been attempting to secure the Hinterlands—give us the means to defend ourselves,” Master Dennet started. “I appreciate the Inquisition’s efforts, we haven’t had much in the way of news lately but what has been able to get through has been word of what you’ve done here. But we should be able to rely on ourselves, you understand?”

Ellie nodded, and prompted him to continue.

“We have weapons and even something in the way of armor that we would like to distribute to the locals, but before I arm the poor sods I’d rather have a stronger foundation set up for them to build from—in form a proper militia we need the ability to scout out the area and have communication between patrols across the Hinterlands. Would the Inquisition be able to assist my men in constructing Watchtowers?”

“Oh golly, yeah!” Ellie said. She’d been concerned the man was about to ask for the moon or something, but Watchtowers, that sounded doable. “Do you have anything in the way of materials? Or is it just manpower you require?”

“Bron has some recruits rounded up, but we would appreciate a few more hands on board. We’ve nearly got all the materials—wood, concrete. Bron’s got the plans all drawn up, we’ve nearly got all the materials though we haven’t found a good source for nails, supports, the like.”

“The Hinterlands has a Master Horseman, but the Inquisition has a Master Blacksmith—Harritt can get you nails and anything else metal cast. If Bron wouldn’t mind, our scouts could make a copy of his plans and materials list to send along to him Haven. I’ll get word to Commander Cullen, he’s the head of Inquisition forces, and I’m certain he can get some more helpful hands for building the towers.”

“Excellent. That would be most appreciated.”

“Tell her about the wolves,” Eliana stressed to her husband.

“Oh, yes love. There are wolves that have been attacking our farms as of late. It’s unusual—they’ve never behaved this way before…are you quite alright?” Dennet’s question had the adults in the room looking at Ellie.

She’d felt she might sick up for a moment, and her heart did a funny little turn in her chest, it stopped beating for a moment and then suddenly it pounded in her ears like she was running.

She shook her head and smiled, “Oh! I’m fine,” Cassandra let out something of an angry huff when Ellie said that. But the girl continued, “We uh, met your wolf problem earlier. It’s been dealt with. There was a demon who possessed control of the pack, ordering them to attack. The demon and its wolves won’t bother your farms again.”

“Ahh, well then,” Master Dennet looked to his wife, “is there anything else to add?”

“Nothing I can think of.”
“Then it’s settled. The Inquisition will assist in the construction of watchtowers for the Hinterlands, and in return, they have all the horses in my stables, as well as good hands to go with them. Including you and your travel companions,” Dennet said, “when you’ve time, I’ll take you to the stables and we’ll see you get a proper mount. You’ve been traversing the Hinterlands on foot all this time, haven’t you?”

“Oh yes,” Ellie said, while her feet screamed YES. Her poor boots, they’d been so shiny and new, and now she wasn’t sure they’d make it all the way back to Haven. Harritt had worked so hard on them, and she was worried she’d have to ask the man to repair them or provide her new ones altogether.

And there was already the hole in her leggings, but she could patch that up she thought. It would be an insult to Harritt’s handiwork, and Josephine might have something to say about it like it didn’t look appropriate or fashionable or something, but armor was just supposed to work. Though she did certainly appreciate the beauty of the armor Harritt had crafted for her, it was glorious.

“Well, we can’t have you lot hoofing it across the Hinterlands and sundry. My horses will serve you well.”

“Thank you, Master Dennet,” Ellie said. And then hesitantly… “You must really love your horses, don’t you?”

“Ahh, I suppose I do. They’re noble beasts and I take a great amount of pride in their rearing.”

“This might not be my place,” she looked between Dennet and Eliana and offered, “but…if you would like, there is no one better to care for your horses than you yourself. While I’m sure you have complete faith in the stable hands you’ve offered, no one is going to take as great care as you would—you raised them, you know what suits them best. Would you consider coming to Haven? Working as our Horse Master?”

Master Dennet considered that, a moment. His hand smoothed over his mustache as he contemplated the offer.

“You are Andrasten, are you not, Master Dennet?” Cassandra spoke then. Ellie looked to the Seeker, wondering where she was going with this.

“I am,” the Horse Master said, “I believe in the Maker, and I would like to think my work serves him.”

“Would your work not serve his will with a higher purpose, working directly with our cause—coming to work at the call of the Herald of Andraste herself?”

“Herald of Andraste?” Dennet questioned, as if Cassandra had just brought up a random topic. Oh. Or he thought she was speaking of someone who wasn’t here.

Ellie removed her glove, revealing the Mark on her hand for the elderly couple to see.

“You?” Dennet asked. “You are the Herald?”

“That’s what they tell me,” Ellie said breezily. “I don’t want to pressure you, I understand wanting to be with your family, to not want to necessarily be in the thick of things. But if you wanted to follow your horses, care for them, and serve the Inquisition directly, we’d be more than happy to have you on board.”
Dennet looked to his wife then, the couple having some sort of silent conversation. It ended with her giving a little smile and kissing her husband on the top of his head before returning to the stove. She began dishing out soup into bowls for everyone.

“I would be honored to serve the Inquisition,” Dennet said.

“That’s so great!” Ellie exclaimed and then caught herself in her excitement and cleared her throat, and sitting up straight she continued more calmly, “I mean, excellent, we’ll draw up a contract for you and get it sent to Haven. Shall we discuss those terms?”

“You shall eat something, child, before you pass out on my floors—we’ve just mopped mind,” Eliana said as she put a bowl of soup in front of Ellie. “Food first, you’ve said enough words for now.”

It smelled delicious and Ellie found her stomach wasn’t so very upset any longer, now that they’d not only secured a camp, horses, and a horse master for the Inquisition. The worst of it was over, the negotiating and the nervousness that hung in one’s stomach until they knew how things were going to work out. Everything had. Worked out, that is.

So, Ellie thanked her for the meal, and held out her hands to those sitting next to her, Solas was seated on her left, and Varric on her right. Everyone joined hands and Master Dennet led them in prayer before they dug in.

Tumbles was by no means a businesswoman, she’d be eaten alive if she tried any of that crap with anyone from the Merchants guild.

Well. With the exception of Varric himself, maybe, but he was more a wanted criminal of the Merchants Guild than a member at the moment.

Regardless, Tumbles really shouldn’t press her luck—and that was it, sheer dumb luck that she just went along with the Horse Master’s requests, zero negotiation, and it didn’t totally blow up in her sweet little face. Just. ‘Sure thing, we’ll build you some watch towers! Oh golly, would you like a job too?’ jeez.

Maybe he should talk to Ruffles about adding him to the kid’s school roster—Street Smarts 101. Just call him Professor Tethras. Lesson one—the world is garbage, trust no one. Lesson two—negotiation is war, take no prisoners, give no giggles. Lesson three…hmm, maybe he should teach her how to pick locks? She might be good at it, she was smart and her small, deft hands were perfect for working with fine tools. Tumbles could take on a double meaning then—she’ll tumble down your hills and work the tumblers in your locks.

Oh well, she’d gotten the job done. They would have horses.

Bah! He was going to have to get on a horse. At least then he wouldn’t have to walk as much, but still. Maker made him short for a reason, he wasn’t supposed to get up much higher than that. Ellie wasn’t much better—half a foot taller than him at the most—she shouldn’t be getting up so high either…now that he thought about it he was kind of worried she’d come tumbling off a horse.

Heights aside he had to admit, he was surprised how well everything had gone. He sure as...
hell didn’t think Ellie would pop up and start delicate negotiations with the Horse Master all of two seconds after having a total breakdown.

Didn’t anyone else think maybe the kid needed a minute to maybe breathe? Have a stiff drink? Maybe cry some more? He hadn’t liked her crying, it was honestly one of the worse things he’d encountered in the Hinterlands, but she was just a kid. None of this shit should be happening.

Someone blows up the sky and kills a bunch of people, she gets blamed for it. Suddenly the sky-hole says she’s innocent, and now she’s Herald of An-freaking-draste. Inquisition needs someone to gather allies to win over the Chantry of all places, well let’s just send the girl they want to kill! Everyone’s got a problem? Just hand it off to Ellie! Her hands aren’t nearly full enough, it hasn’t killed her yet. She gets tormented by a demon and…what? She gets to cry it out for two minutes before being thrown back into handling the Inquisition’s business for them again?

Seeker should be doing this shit. This was all her doing, all her fault. She’s the one that got Ellie involved in this bullshit to begin with. And Ellie just took it, was just fine with it, thought Cassandra was looking out for her, was her friend.

Maybe the Seeker wasn’t actively working against the girl, hell Varric knew the Seeker had a soft spot for her, would die defending her, but she was just…she definitely wasn’t Ellie’s friend. ‘Herald of Andraste’ was a tool, a weapon of the Inquisition, Ellie was just part of Cassandra’s mission.

Seeker couldn’t admit to herself that Ellie was just a kid and shouldn’t have all this bearing down on her—if she did that, she might actually have to feel convicted over her part in the never-ending debauchery that was probably going to land the poor girl in some expensive ass therapy if she was lucky.

Some asshole made it so that she was the only one who could seal the damn Breach, but why drag her all across the world, into countless danger? Keep her in Haven, take care of her, and bring her out when necessary, don’t use her like a little pawn to make nice with the Chantry. Damn.

He sometimes thought about ‘after’. There didn’t seem to be an immediate end in sight, but he had to believe Ellie would seal the Breach, and live, and have a life after this.

He believed in the Maker. Not his jackass people, or the those tall-hats that claimed to represent him, but he believed in the Maker, himself. And the Maker could not put someone through all this bullshit just to cut their life short, give them nothing but death in return.

But what would happen once the Breach was sealed. Would the Seeker hand her over to Templars? Would she be Circled?

Nope. Not on his watch. Pardon his Orlesian, but fuck that for sure.

No, Breach sealed, Ellie gets to hightail it out of this joint and do whatever she damn well pleases. Kid could spend her days lounging around eating chocolate and playing with puppies all day for all he gave a damn, he’d fund that in a heartbeat. Had she had any chocolate since joining the Inquisition? He’d have to fix that. He had cocoa connections for days, he might as well put them to good use.

He wasn’t a responsible adult figure meant for blah, parenting, or something. But he had money and money was good for providing. If she would let him, he would provide for whatever plans she might have for later on. She was just fifteen, but how old would she be when this shit was
over? Would she want to go to an actual school? A college somewhere, to study magic, or art, or science or whatever the hell she was interested in. She’d have to go to Tevinter for Mage college he figured, he should read up about it. Ellie didn’t seem the sort to want to just sit around and do nothing all day. She’d probably study or work somewhere—she was pretty good at that potions stuff. He didn’t know shit about it, but Chuckles said she ‘showed promise’ so, that had to mean something.

The kid was sitting on one of the rocks that surrounded their new soon-to-be campsite. Inquisition soldiers would be here soon. She was chatting with Blackwall, again, the bearded bastard.

She really needed those street-smart lessons.

Varric didn’t trust him. Not that he had a whole lot of people that he truly trusted—he could count them on one hand. Two were Bianca. One was Hawke. One was himself. That didn’t leave a lot of fingers left over, and Ellie was steadily laying claim to that one.

But this guy was a Warden. Not that he had anything in particular against Wardens. Hawke’s sister Bethany, good old Sunshine, was a Warden.

He might be an okay guy, but Ellie was just a kid, and she somehow still had this sense that people were inherently good.

Wardens, however, didn’t usually become Wardens because they were the most sparkling example of what humanity had to offer. Varric had a feeling that ‘I went to the Deep Roads to save my family from crippling poverty and got Blight-sick’ wasn’t a wholly common recruitment story. Sunshine was an outlier and she should not be accounted for.

Whatever his sins, hopefully they were in the past and stayed there. If Ellie got attached to the guy and then found out he’d done something awful…it would crush her, and then Varric would have to figure out how to crush him.

Him and his dumb pointy beard. Were Wardens not allowed to shave? Oh shit, now the mental image of Bethany with pit hair she could braid was permanently burned into his brain. The Hero just got another point against him.

“Does your leg hurt still?” Ellie asked. Her feet hung a foot off the ground and she swung her legs restlessly as they talked. “Reinforcements should be here soon, and we can get you some proper potion hmm…I thought I saw some Embrium growing around here somewhere—they’re the really pretty plants with red and green flowery blooms. Its nectar mixed with Elf Root makes a nice salve that’s really supposed to clear the sinuses, but I’ve put it on cuts before—things that needed stitches, but I didn’t have access to anything like that—and they healed up just fine.”

Oh, for the love of Andraste, if he had her go traipsing across the farms looking for plants Bianca was gonna—

“You needn’t trouble yourself. Whatever your people have on hand will be just fine,” Hero said.

Okay. He gets half a point back. Bastard.

Ellie wrenched a hand at the back of her neck, “Oh, sorry, I guess I’m being a worry wart huh? You’re a warden, you’re probably used to toughing it out.”

“Hmm, yes I’m no stranger to ‘toughing it out’, though it was more my days at tourney that
built my tolerance for injury,” Blackwall said.

“You competed at tourney?” Varric almost hated himself for asking. But damn him he loved some tourney talk.

The Warden looked up at Varric and nodded, “In my youth, before my oaths, yes,” he said. “I was rather caught up in the thrill of money and acclaim that could be won from the chance to best others in battle. Now though I’m merely a spectator—less than really, I’ve not seen it in years, but I try to keep up.”

Makers balls, they had a common interest. Shit. Varric found himself ugh…chatting with the Warden, and it wasn’t awful. Maybe the guy was okay. He wasn’t a total imbecile when it came to his top picks of competitors. And the man seemed grateful for the gaps in his knowledge of recent years proceedings being filled by someone who could really keep up to date with the latest competitions. A lot of money was won and lost, and Varric liked winning, so he paid attention and attended the events proper when he could.

And it was almost fun—once the men got over the initial horror—when Ellie asked;

“What’s tourney?”

Man and Dwarf looked at her like that question was somehow the weirdest thing about her—not her mage shit, not the glowing Mark on her hand—her lack of knowledge of one of the single most important sporting events of the modern world. Seriously? He knew she hadn’t had much in the way of an upbringing but…how the hell had she not heard of tourney? She was from the Free Marches for Maker’s sake!* She had heard of it, it turned out, but only in passing, from arguments between men in bars, or kids chattering excitedly about their favorite competitors winning. She didn’t realize how big it was or how many different arenas of fighting it covered, and Blackwall and Varric were glad to share their knowledge of the subject. It was actually fun, tourney wasn’t a super serious topic, it was something that could take their minds off the Inquisition and the hole in the sky. And it gave Varric a taste for what it would be like to actually teach the girl—kid was smart and enjoyed learning. He’d have her picking locks and negotiating circles around the best of them in no time.

Though no matter how well their conversation served to take their minds off their responsibilities, Ellie came hopping down off her perch next to Blackwall, and the men realized Inquisition soldiers had arrived with supplies, ready to set up camp.

“Good to see you! How was it, getting here?” Ellie asked a scout, Ellie helping them unload the large pack that bore a folded-up tent hanging off the back of it.

“We had no trouble, my lady,” the Scout said politely.

“I’m glad, I think Seeker Cassandra has some ideas for where she’d like tents set up, Cassandra,” Ellie called over her shoulder, only to find the woman was already there, ready to give order and direction. Ellie left her to it and started checking in with everyone else, helping unload, Solas was talking with a soldier and assisting her with getting their potions set up assembled and ready for use.

“Is there anything I should be doing?” Blackwall asked then.

“Nah, just sit tight, I’m sure your leg hurts like shit anyway. Besides, this is usually how it goes down—Ellie runs around trying to help everyone with everything, and Solas and Cassandra
do their best to keep up. I just sit back, stay out of the way, and enjoy the show,” Varric said.

“Where does she get the energy? I tire just watching.”

“That’s something to keep in mind,” Varric decided to caution the man. He didn’t seem like a bad guy after all, so maybe he’d listen. “Kids got a lot on her, and she doesn’t know when to take a break. She’ll work herself into the ground, and dig her way to Orzamar, if we let her.”

“Not preferable, but I’m sure that’d be an amusing sight—Dwarves who’ve never so much as seen a human before have one crashing through their ceiling, ‘Hello, Herald of Andraste here, don’t mind me I’m just passing through,’.”

Varric snorted. “Yeah, that’s about right. Dunno if they’d kill her on sight or start a cult. She has a cult now you know? They were worshiping the Breach, but five minutes and one sealed rift later, they’d walk off a cliff if she bid it.”

“Warden Blackwall,” Ellie said as she approached again, leading a human soldier to join them, “This is…Jacob, yeah?” she asked.

“Yes, my lady,” the man said, surprised. He evidently hadn’t reintroduced himself to the Herald.

Ellie was attempting the futile task of remembering everyone’s name. Everyone’s. Kid could be heard humming the tune she’d made up to keep track to herself as they walked along in the Hinterlands, sat around the fire at night.

Hmm. Maybe after this mess she’d study music.

Ellie handed out bottles of health potion to Varric and Blackwall to refill their personal stores of the stuff, and said, “Jacob’s a medic, he’ll see to your injuries. It’s just awful a wolf practically bit his leg off!”

“Well let’s just see what we can do,” Jacob said, and he crouched to begin examining the injury for himself.

“Hey Varric?” Ellie asked.

“What’s up kid? Need something?”

“Nothing major, there’s a new requisition to be filled and I was wondering if you’d look it over with me,” Ellie said.

Requisition? Cassandra usually read those things over with the kid, but the Seeker did look pretty busy with setup. Scouts usually said whether a requisition was important or could be put off, so maybe it was something Ellie wanted seen to right away.

“Sure thing, Tumbles. Whatcha got?”

Night had fallen over the Hinterlands. Inquisition soldiers patrolled the area around their camp—at least those who were not asleep in one of their tents. Cassandra sat at the requisitions table, taking down notes of their travels that day, Blackwall joined her, assisting with recounting
the day’s events.

Solas sat, legs crossed before the fire, though meditation did not come quite so easily when he found himself intent upon listening to the conversation at hand—Varric’s conversation, with Ellie, the Dwarf man growing ever insistent with the girl from where he stood in the middle of their camp. Ellie, ever trying to be the tallest, even if it was due only to the height of what she was on, had climbed up onto the highest boulder that surrounded their new camp, sitting with her knees tucked up under her chin, arms wrapped around her legs.

“Go to bed kid,” Varric was saying. He had been endeavoring to persuade the Herald of Andraste to sleep for the better part of five minutes now.

“Noope.”

“Eleanor, you’ve had a trying day,” Cassandra said as she continued writing.

“I’m keeping watch!” the girl persisted.

“You needn’t keep watch,” Cassandra reasoned, “we are in camp; our soldiers will keep watch. We’re secure here, save for the Rift, but we will address that tomorrow. Once you’ve rested.”

“I’ll rest. In like. I dunno, an hour or something. What time do you think bad guys go to bed?”

“Da’len?” Solas saw fit to ask. “Are you concerned of…” he did not wish to embarrass the girl, so he decided perhaps the Elvish term would suit her better, assuming she would understand, “enfanim-eras?”

Fear-dreams. Nightmares.

Ellie sighed, and then hesitantly, she nodded.

Ahh. He knew too well how so very close to possession she’d come. That she had been able to hold the demon at bay, and for so long, it was no small challenge. The Fade called to mages in their sleep, and it was a place made of spirits and demons, and the memories created in the living world. Her ordeals today created plenty of draw within her mind to call forth something horrific while she slept.

He should not have been so careless. Rifts had torn the heavens all across the Hinterlands, demons running amok was to only be expected, Ellie’s blood...there had been so much, and even a drop could elicit attention from demons. He’d seen how she’d endured her illness and injury when facing the Breach—her sudden collapse, even after facing such a formidable Rift, should prompted closer examination of the girl immediately.

His shame felt new when he thought of his reaction to the girl’s words when she’d been struggling. She fought a demon actively attempting to take her mind, intentionally gaining ground and losing it to garner the chance to warn her companions of the demon’s plans to attack them. Had he grown so concerned with his own skin his mind jumped to only impossible conclusions so quickly?

She’d warned him plainly, but it had taken Cassandra to realize Ellie had meant there was a demon at play.

There was nothing to be done now. Like with the Breach, he could only move forward and
do what he could to deal with what had come to pass.

“Would you care to meditate with me for a while?” he asked. Quieting her mind before attempting sleep may do well to shield her from reliving her demon encounter as she slept.

“Oh, yeah actually, would you?” Ellie asked in return.

Did she think he only offered in the hopes she would say no? Perhaps he should give her a blanket invitation, he would meditate with her whenever she wished. He could hardly refuse her. Marehis had seen fit to stop by his quarters late one evening after Ellie had fallen asleep, to mention that the girl often tried meditating herself after trying days and found the practice difficult on her own.

He had to admit he’d been…albeit disappointed that she wasn’t there for a more personal reason.

There had been…flirtations. Nothing inappropriate in front of young Ellie, of course. Subtle glances, the occasional game of…he believed the Humans called it ‘footsie’, while taking their meals together—especially when they did so sans Ellie while the girl was in lessons, which allowed for more outright expressions of shared interest. While a city-Elf, Marehis spoke Dalish fluently and the two spoke rather plainly to each other within the privacy the language allowed them in the company of Shemlen.

“Yes,” Solas said in answer of the girl’s question, “if you are willing to come down. While I have enjoyed meditating when doing so high up in mountains, you’ve had a long day. I fear you may fall should you try to climb down afterward; the exercise is meant to relax you.”

“Kinda worried she’ll fall regardless,” Varric chimed in.

“I will come down off this rock and fight you, Tethras!”

“Would you care for a hand, Ellie?” Blackwall offered, coming to stand beneath her and holding up his hands.

Ellie let her legs hang over the edge of the boulder and scooted closer to the edge before leaning down and putting her hands in his and hopping down. The man turned as he lowered her—he’d been so close to the boulder there was no place for her there—and he set her on her feet just behind their tents.

“Thanks!” she said with a little laugh, before going to join Solas, sitting across the fire from him. “Would any of you like to join us?” she asked the rest of the group.

Solas couldn’t see Varric being much into the practice, nor was he certain of Wardens, but he was decently sure there were many branches of Chantry and Templar hierarchy that practiced meditation as part of their initiation processes.

“Nah Tumbles, I’m good. There’s enough going on up here,” Varric said, tapping his temple as he took a seat on a stool near the requisition table, “I don’t need to start digging through it ‘with intent’.”

“I have never had an affinity for it,” Cassandra admitted, “but it is not a wholly unpleasant practice. I will join you if you’d like.”

“Can’t say I’ve done it myself,” Blackwall said, “but I can give it a try.”
“Great!” Ellie said, and she patted the empty earth on either side of her as she instructed, “Just sit criss-cross applesauce, and we’ll play ‘Solas says’.”

“Not exactly the textbook definition,” Solas mused, “but in essence, yes. Be seated and we’ll see how we fare, shall we?”

It went surprisingly well. His own lessons with Ellie had been an unexpected delight—he’d thought a young girl would find meditation dull, struggle to be still and silent externally let alone internally. Cassandra had thankfully been versed in the basics, and Blackwall took instruction well, and it was actually beneficial to have the Seeker’s and Ellie’s input to aid Solas’s explanation.

After some time, there was silence shared by those surrounding the fire.

When they were done, Ellie was openly yawning, and it was only Lady Josephine’s strict instruction that had the girl snapping a hand up at the last minute to cover her mouth as she did.

“Sandman finally calling you kid?”

“I’d pop any man who thought he should sprinkle sand of all things in my eyes to make me sleep, right in the throat. Cassandra’s taught me how to punch good,” Ellie informed him as she stretched.

“I have taught you how to punch, I would not necessarily class it as good,” Cassandra said dryly, “but it is passable at the very least.”

“Liver punches are much more efficient,” Blackwall saw fit to inform the girl, “you may surprise or momentarily choke someone striking them in the throat, but catch a man in the liver, you’ve got them flat on their backs.”

“I’ll have to remember that,” Ellie said. “Does everyone know how they’re sleeping tonight? I can sleep ou-”

“In the tent with Seeker, Tumbles,” Varric cut her off, “Hero here can bunk with Chuckles and me.”

“Go prepare for bed Eleanor, I will be along shortly,” Cassandra said. Ellie held up her hands as if to say ‘alright, alright’ and took up her pack, entering the tent to change out of her armor.

They were all quiet for a moment, only the crackle of their fire, and the sound of nocturnal wildlife could be heard within their camp.

And then the Seeker spoke, gravely,

“We nearly lost her today.”

Her statement was met with silence, thick and heavy, loaded with the words rattling around unsaid.

“We cannot lose her.”

That was met with Varric’s bitter snap, “Of course not. Can’t have the Herald of Andraste biting the big one before she seals the Breach-”

“I do not mean the Herald of Andraste!” Cassandra rounded on the Dwarf in
uncharacteristically shrill tones before falling octaves into deep conviction, “We cannot lose Ellie!”

They had endured much together since they met under the threat of the Breach. This, was the most vulnerable the lady Seeker allowed herself to become, never had he heard the woman sound so…well he had the urge to offer her a handkerchief. She was not in tears, but her voice was thick, and Solas suspected if she were pushed, it was not so inconceivable that they may well see the Seeker cry.

Solas was not going to push. Blackwall hardly had such motive to.

Varric was another matter but…to no small measure of surprise, he did not push either. In fact, the Dwarf was looking at the Seeker as if he were mildly horrified and ultimately relieved that his snipe had dragged such a truth from her.

Seekers often dealt in truth. But they very rarely were the ones to divulge it.

“She is-” Cassandra’s voice wavered, and she gave pause. Then, with certainty, “We must be more careful. Whatever comes of this, she must be safe.”


That night, while the Herald of Andraste had fallen straight into her bedroll, armor be damned, and laid fast asleep in the comfort of her tent, like a bad joke about a bar, an Elf, two humans, and a Dwarf gathered in the Hinterlands and took a solemn vow to guard the girl from whatever the harm, at whatever the cost.

—

“Let’s see…there’s Annie, and Misha, and David, and Liam, oh—baby Dana, she’s six months old and I swear, hand to the Maker, she calls me uncle.”

Snow fell gently as Ellie and Trevelyan tread the path through the wintry landscape. They were surrounded by thick woods—beautiful evergreens guarding them as they walked, further and further to arrive at the Conclave in time. The sun was still high in the sky, they had hours of light left to travel by. It was cold, but they walked closely, Trevelyan radiated warmth, and the Mercenary Coat he’d gotten her fit well and did an excellent job keeping the cold at bay. The boots he’d given here were thick and she liked the sound they made as they walked—a steady, soft crunch of snow underfoot.

She liked the way it felt to be walking side by side with a friend. Aside from Ava, Trevelyan was the best friend she’d ever had. She missed Ava…

She missed Trevelyan.

Wait, what?

She shook herself of the strange thought and went about teasing the man, “Hand to the Maker?” Ellie asked.

“Yup! Andraste strike me down if I lie—Dana Trevelyan has looked me right in the eye and called me unc-key. Which everyone knows is baby talk for uncle.”
“She could be trying to say yucky. Which everyone knows is baby talk for ‘you smell’,” Ellie said, leaning in and taking a loud sniff of the man’s arm, “ugh! And she’d be right! You’re wretched, Trevelyan! If we show up at the Temple of Sacred Ashes with you smelling to high heaven, Andraste really will strike us down.”

“Brat!” Trevelyan called her with a laugh, “You’re one to talk, you’ve still got spider sludge on your cheek!” he said as he swiped a gloved thumb across her left cheek to wipe away some of the drying green slime.

“We shouldn’t have even been in that cave! At this point they’ll have the Conclave without us. You’ve literally been locked away in a school for years, how is it exactly you don’t know how to follow a map?”

“Sorry I’m not little miss world-traveler-extraordinaire-”

“The Free Marches are hardly the world. And if extra-warden-whatever is a fancy way of calling me a bad word, I’ll slap you right upside the head with my boot Trevelyan, I swear I will.”

“You’d have to be able to reach my head, short stuff,” Trevelyan sniped back, and then explained, “Extraordinaire is the fancy Orlesian way of saying extraordinary.”

“Extra ordinary? Ouch, I’m still an Apostate, that ought to count for something.”

“Outside the realm of the ordinary,” Trevelyan corrected her, “Excellent. It’s a compliment, kid. I’d sooner spit at my mother than call a lady a ‘bad word’.”

Ellie snorted. “I’m not a lady. You’re not going to say I am to the Chantry people, are you?”

“Noooo,” Trevelyan insisted, his tones rife with sarcasm, “I would never dream of telling the Chantry people that my dear, dear cousin Eleanor is a Lady. That would totally blow your cover. As a Lady.”

“Okay okay, I just…feel badly. I don’t really like lying—I mean they’ll be Chantry Mothers for goodness sake.”

“Worried the Maker will smite you?” Trevelyan teased.

Ellie giggled. “Well it’s certainly not the best way to die if you’d like to join the Maker in the afterlife.”

“And yet you live.”

“Huh?” Ellie asked, she stopped in her tracks when she realized Trevelyan wasn’t walking alongside her anymore. She turned around and saw him just standing in the path arms limp at his sides, his head was hanging down so that she couldn’t see his face.

“Trevelyan?” she asked, “What’s wrong?”

It was then she saw blood ooze and spread across his tunic, dripping wet into the snow, and Ellie screamed, “You’re hurt! Help! Somebody we need help!” Wait? Who was she yelling for? She ran to Trevelyan, hands searching as she tried to figure out what she should do.

His hands wrenched around to grip her forearms like a vise, squeezing, and then squeezing tighter still, and a distant thought rang through her mind—it was her thought, but it was like the
memory of thought going *Maker, Maker, Maker that hurts!*

Suddenly the air was thick with the heady smell of atmosphere the Fade brought to the world when a Rift was near, and the earth beneath them was rubble.

“It was all your fault! I had to die, *Ellie,*’’ Trevelyan sneered her name. “I had to suffer. I was in pain, and now I’m dead. The Divine is dead. Thousands of people are dead, dead, dead and **you** get to walk around playing Herald when you are nothing but worthless street trash. Lady Herald? How about Liar. Garbage. *Traitor.* I thought we were **friends** *Ellie,*’’ the man seethed as his fingers dug deeper into her wrists and Ellie was horrified to find his hands were like Shade claws, implanting themselves deep in her arms, she could feel them crumbling a path into her bones, blood welling up and pouring out from her flesh surrounding his puncturing talons. “You left me. You left us. To **die!**”

And then suddenly it wasn’t Trevelyan screaming in her face. He was replaced by the mage boy she’d killed their first day at the Crossroads. Oh Maker, he was young.

“Who gave you the right? It wasn’t enough you survived the Conclave—you of all people. Now you walk around killing people in the name of your Inquisition, how many have to die before someone sees you for what you really are? You think Cassandra, or Varric, Solas, even that Warden—Blackwall—wont figure you out, take you down themselves? They’re noble people. Someday they’ll realize you’re nothing but apostate-trash, a freak mage, that you’ve done nothing but take advantage of their Inquisition—playing Herald to keep food in your belly and a roof over your head. Seal the Breach? You can’t seal the Breach. How long will they keep letting you coast by on your little Rift trick? They’ll see, and they will hate you, and then they will kill you themselves.”

Then he was just gone, and hand wound its way around her throat—a large, spindly fingered hand of a Great Terror wrapped around her neck and pulled her up to be face to face with the creature. She couldn’t **breathe.**

“You wretched little bitch. You should have let me deal with your friends. You think I’m gone? You may have kept me from stealing your mind, but I will always be with you, always waiting in some small corner of your consciousness. One day you won’t be so lucky, one of my brothers will take you and you will serve us.”

She wanted the scream, wanted to refute the beast and call for someone, anyone to help her. But like before, when the demon had clawed at her mind, tried to take possession of her body and her Mark, he’d stolen her voice—this time by squeezing it from her as opposed to stealing every ounce of focus and effort she could muster to keep him at bay. He wrenched her head to the side and to her horror she saw a pile of bodies in the midst of the burning field of carnage outside the Temple of Sacred Ashes, or what was left of it.

These bodies, they were her friends, her companions, Cassandra, Solas, Varric, even Blackwall, their battered bodies lifeless and **broken.**

“When!” the demon roared in her face.

**What?**

“Eleanor, child, wake up!”

Cassandra’s voice, clear as day, and Ellie shot awake, sitting bolt upright, almost smacking her head into Cassandra’s face the woman had been so close, shaking her awake.
Ellie gasped in as much air as her burning lungs could hold—had she actually stopped breathing as she slept? Her head felt light and her chest ached something fierce.

As she slept…sleep, she’d been asleep and all of that had just been a horrible dream and she found herself being pulled against the Seeker’s chest, Ellie’s cheek resting against her shoulder—Cassandra was in the warm linen shirt and leggings she’d taken to sleeping in—and the older woman’s arms wrapped around her, a hand rubbing circles on her back as Cassandra made low shushing sounds. Oh. Ellie realized then she was crying a little.

“Um, I-I’m alright really, I’m sorry. Did I wake you?” Ellie asked as she returned the hug.

“No. Though even if you had there would be no reason to apologize, Eleanor,” Cassandra half-reprimanded the girl, squeezing her more tightly before she pulled away then to look at Ellie. The tent was dark except for the pale morning light creeping in through the half-undone tent flap.

“Oh, were you going somewhere?” Ellie found herself asking. Oh. That was nosey wasn’t it?

But it didn’t seem so to Cassandra, apparently, as the Nevarran said, “I wake at this hour daily, it is when I stretch and take prayer in preparation for the day ahead.”

Wow, this early? She bet the sun wasn’t even visible on the horizon yet! “Oh! Gosh, you should go then, I’m fine now-”

“Eleanor,” Cassandra reprimanded, “as you have said that word in reference to your wellbeing before falling into demon-induced coma, I will no longer accept it to mean you are well. You had a nightmare, yes? Do you wish to speak of it?”

A refusal rose to her lips, but Ellie stopped, and then pulled her knees up, wrapping her arms around her legs and resting her chin on her knees. She was still in armor huh, she vaguely remembered stumbling into the tent last night, and falling into her bedroll as she unrolled it and she’d been out like a light.

“I’ve had the dream before, it’s like a memory at first,” Ellie said, “Trevelyan and I, on our way to the Conclave but…but then he isn’t himself at all, and he gets so angry with me.”

She recounted the dream for Cassandra, the Seeker sitting on her side, elbow on the ground as her hand supported her head, and she listened quietly as Ellie explained.

“Do you dream like this often?” Cassandra asked quietly, when Ellie finished.

“Not every night or anything but…kind of. The Trevelyan part I dreamt off and on after waking up in Haven. The mage boy started after…well while we’ve been here. The demon part is relatively new,” she said as if she were trying to joke but it fell flat.

“Have you spoken of this with anyone? Marehis, or Healer Adan?”

Ellie shook her head. “Why would I tell anyone? I mean it’s kind of embarrassing. I’m not a little kid, and I know it’s just a dream.”

“A nightmare, Eleanor, of things that are honestly concerning. I-” She seemed uncertain what to say and she nixed whatever it was, and started over, “You must wake me if you have another, the only thing I can think to aid you is to give you opportunity to discuss it. When we return to Haven, I ask that you inform Adan of your troubles. There is potion that would assist in your sleeping peacefully.”
“Really?”

“Yes,” she seemed hesitant. But she rose to sit with her legs crossed before her, like they had when meditating, and she regarded Ellie silently for a moment.

“When I was a girl, my elder brother Anthony was a mighty and fierce Dragon Hunter—as is a trademark of the Pentaghast name.”

Oh. Cassandra had never said she had a brother. She’d mentioned her parents, and occasionally had a funny little anecdote about her distant relatives trying to marry her off or persuade her from her position with the Chantry to be a housewife, but never a brother.

“Apostates sought Dragon blood to use in their blood magic and Anthony refused them. They killed him, and I bore witness to the act.”

“Cassandra,” Ellie breathed, she tentatively put a hand on Cassandra’s knee, and she felt her chin quivering, tears welling up in her eyes again. “I’m so sorry.”

Maker, could she really have been going to the Conclave in the hopes of getting them to see Apostates in a positive light? Was there any positive to find in them? Good lord, how could Cassandra so much as stand to even look at Ellie, let alone fight at her side?

Cassandra shook her head and raised a hand, thumb swiping away a tear from the corner of Ellie’s eye. “It was a long time ago. I did not tell you so that you might feel sorry,” she said, “I only say these things to explain that I too have experienced traumatic things, things that gave me nightmares. Potion did a great deal to help with that,” she seemed to be considering her words carefully before she offered them, “I also found that there is potion for the emotional imbalances that can occur, especially when coming to terms with past grievances. I myself have suffered bouts of depression even in my adult life.”

“Oh,” the statement sort of knocked the wind from Ellie’s lungs. She hadn’t expected the woman to admit something so personal, and everything she’d just said had been...really, really personal, Ellie felt like she’d just said had been...really, really personal, Ellie felt like she’d sort of been caught trespassing where she should not be. But she wasn’t, Cassandra had offered the information freely, though Ellie wasn’t really sure why. Oh. Wait.

“Oh! Do you need to go back to Haven? You can’t go back by yourself, and we’re still settling things here, but maybe we could send soldiers with you? Or we could send word to Adan, he could send what you need. Ugh do you need a break or I dunno...do you get days off? I’m the Herald of Andraste I think I can give you days off if you need to rest or-”

“Eleanor, breathe,” the woman instructed, and Ellie shut up and set about doing just that as Cassandra said, “I am well. My disclosure was in effort to perhaps prompt you to consider speaking to Adan for yourself and measuring out if you would have need of such assistance. That is all.”

“Oh, me?” Ellie asked.

“It would not be unusual,” Cassandra said carefully, “You have more than enough cause, and even people in the most pleasant of situations can still suffer from such affliction. My own treatment was recommended to me by an Aunt who had rather a good and comfortable life, and yet she found herself feeling empty, she tired so easily and there were times she could not get out of bed for lack of will.”
Her magic had been rather quiet lately. Not gone or ignoring her just...a pleasant silence—keeping her appraised to danger and letting her know when it was worried about her, but for the most part it sat back and just enjoyed that Ellie had company other than it now. It liked her friends, trusted them. But now her Magic stirred at Cassandra’s explanation, like it was saying ‘see, see?’.

Oh. Oh gosh. Like that day when Danner attacked. She’d had a moment to herself and she’d used it to just...sit and stare and if she could have stayed there like that, she probably would have.

She tried to keep on the move as much as possible. Even yesterday when they’d had nothing to do she sought something to occupy her time. When fear did not jolt her from her sleep, it was only the knowledge that she absolutely had to get up, had things that needed done that allowed her to pull herself out of bed in the morning, and even then, she thought perhaps if Cassandra or her other party members weren’t around to keep her accountable, and sometimes physically pull her from bed, nothing would get done.

Empty...she’d been feeling a lot of that lately. Not all the time, but more and more as things went on. She could see the good they were doing in the Hinterlands but even their greatest victories had more often than not just...not resonated with her. She smiled, she knew when they’d done well, and she congratulated her companions and the soldiers and scouts, but she didn’t actually feel any great sense of pride or joy or excitement, she just knew how to act like herself, how to keep the others from worrying, or at least she thought she had. There was something there, but it was like all her emotions were just...turned down sometimes. Like someone had put a veil between she and them, she could make out their shape but there was no way to connect to them, make them whole. Just...yeah, empty seemed the word for it.

“Um,” Ellie said then, even to her, her voice sounded small. “I...I’ll talk to Adan when we get back.”

“Good,” Cassandra said. She put her hand on Ellie’s shoulder and then, “You may speak to me if there is anything you ever wish to share. Or if you have questions, I do not have much medical knowledge but if I can answer I shall. And too, I do think you should let Marehis know. She cares very much for you, and your wellbeing is important for her to keep appraised of.”

Ellie nodded. She wasn’t sure if she would though...she’d only spoken to Cassandra because the woman had witnessed her in a moment of weakness, she otherwise wouldn't have outright approached the Seeker and told her what was going on. She wasn’t even sure what was going on—Cassandra had given her words to put to feelings. Adan might be able to help but wouldn’t Marehis knowing just worry her? How could she begin to explain this...whatever it was?

‘Hey Marehis, the woman who guards me every day and provides for my every need! I know I’m being protected and provided lodging and food and the nicest clothing I’ve ever owned and an education to boot, and almost every second of every day I’m surrounded by people I would gladly call friend, but I find that I’m sad and empty and just want to...’

Die wasn’t necessarily the word. She just sort of wanted a break from existing—like if she could pause her life, go do nothing for a while, and then come back and start where she’d left off, no consequences, no notice of her absence...that would be amazing.

“If you’d like, you could clean up,” Cassandra’s voice brought her from her thoughts. “Leave your leggings and I shall see to it they are repaired before we go to seal the Rift and meet the Horse Master. Once you’re decent, you could join me for my morning prayer.”

“Yeah, I think I will.”
Sleeping in a tent with Solas and Varric had been...interesting, to say the least. Solas was polite but Varric...while not outright offensive, was still distrustful of him. Blackwall understood, of course, though he did find it a bit much when the Dwarf insisted they sleep side by side—lying facing the sides of the tent, instead of the entrance, with Solas laying in the back exit of the tent, and Blackwall between he and Varric who insisted he ‘sleeps with one eye open and his finger on the trigger’ and laid like a guard dog blocking the entrance of their shared quarters.

All in all, their arrangement was as warm as it was awkward, and they slept rather soundly. Blackwall found he did sleep well, while he was guarded. He found security in that as opposed to sleeping alone, having to truly sleep with an eye open, to be on guard for anything—demons, bandits, darkspawn. Though there hadn’t been any of the vile creatures in the Hinterlands, at least what he’d seen so far. Regardless Varric’s intent, he did like that he could just sleep, no matter that it was sandwiched between an Apostate Elf and a shady Dwarf.

He was thankful that he’d slept so soundly. Some nights his dreams woke him violently, and he didn’t necessarily want to be caught so vulnerable by his new...team mates? This sleeping arrangement had him wary. But that night, only whispers of his nightmares glanced across his mind when he dreamt, and he stayed asleep.

They weren’t nightmares, not truly, they were exact memories. The day a carriage rolled down a path its passengers did not think dangerous, the sound of children singing. It would haunt him for the rest of his days and he deserved nothing more. The only hope he had was to try and serve higher purposes. He’d thought he found that with the Wardens...now he believed he might find that with the Herald.

He didn’t want to be forgiven of his sins or alter whatever sort of afterlife might wait for him for his crimes, he just...he couldn’t put life back into those little bodies. He couldn’t tear the sin from his men’s souls. There was no way to fix what he had done. But maybe, just maybe, he could create opportunities for better things to happen—he would do no further harm to the world, and he would work to save people who would otherwise be doomed without his help, bring hope to those who would otherwise have none if not for his blade. He could dedicate his life to the service of others, and when he died, the only souls he would beg the Maker to spare would be those of his men. Their only crime had been following a man they should never have trusted, should never have aspired to be like.

When they’d woken, they armored themselves in the confines of the tent. Though Blackwall, could not find his breeches. He’d removed them—his underclothes were enough for sleeping in, and he rather thought they might well be ruined after being torn all to hell and bloodstained from knee to ankle.

He had thick quilted armor leggings he wore over his breeches, and plates over that that—not to mention his underthings, so he was hardly walking with his bits in the breeze, but he suspected the lack of breeches some strange prank Varric was pulling on him.

However, upon leaving the tent under the watchful eye of Prison Warden Varric, Blackwall found his breeches.

Ellie and Cassandra sat by the low-burning campfire—the Seeker armored for the day, while Ellie sat in a white linen tunic and pants, sleep clothes he supposed, her hair was soaking wet
and she sat with her back to the fire to aid in its drying, and she was humming a tune to herself. In
the Seeker’s hands were Ellie’s leather armored leggings, and she was steadily sewing a patch to
cover the claw-driven hole in them. At her side though—between she and Ellie—were the
Warden’s missing trousers, neatly folded, repaired, and stain free.

He wasn’t sure how the Lady Seeker had gotten his pants from their tent, and he felt wholly
embarrassed at the prospect of having the Nevarran woman deign to do something so menial as
mend and wash his clothing.

“I’m no tailor but I could have mended them myself, you didn’t have to go through the
trouble, Lady Seeker,” Blackwall said, and Ellie looked up at him, and the others as they
approached, quieting her humming, which was kind of too bad, it had been rather pleasant, though
now the wordless tune was sort of stuck in his head.

Cassandra let out a dismissive huff and said, “I have been occupied mending Eleanor’s
armor. She is the one who thought to repair your things while we had the supplies out to do so.”

“I told you I could fix my own stuff, but you wouldn’t let me,” Ellie complained, “I may as
well been doing something.”

“The needle is much larger and sharper, that which is required for binding hide together
with leather string. It will be more secure and not fray as softer thread might. I would not have you
stab yourself trying to work with unfamiliar materials.” The needle in her hand was more dire
looking than the one Ellie likely used.

“And just how did you uh…” Blackwall absently wondered just how they’d managed to
steal his breeches.

Makers balls, he was investing in sleep clothes—full set of pajamas to cover him head to
toe as he slept, just what had the poor girl been subjected to?

Thankfully, nothing, apparently, save their tent’s guard-Dwarf.

“Varric woke up when I went to your tent and handed them over,” Ellie said.

“I thought you were going to burn them,” Varric complained, “commit some arson and live
a little kid, not jab your little fingers up trying to play housemaid.”

“Sewing is not merely a housemaid’s skill,” Cassandra seethed as she continued paying
careful attention to her work, “anyone who owns anything they care to last them long should have
the ability to take care of it.”

“And I did not jab up my lit- my regular sized fingers,” Ellie insisted, equally offended as
she held up her hands as if to prove her point. Blackwall had to admit, his eyesight wasn’t the best,
but he couldn’t see any injury other than the green mark on her left hand. “I’ve been sewing my
own things since…well…always, thank you very much. A few little holes are hardly advanced
cryomancy.”

Always? He supposed that must be true. Blackwall hadn’t wanted to pry with her, and
Varric was rather tight lipped about anything other than tourney, but Solas had informed him that
Ellie was apparently an orphan, she was a Mage, but she’d never been Circled. The only
information on her Varric offered up, was a sharp point about the girl’s age—as if the Warden
would dare presume a girl as young as she would take a fancy with him! The thought made his skin
crawl, that there were men his age that would look upon the girl and think themselves suitable for a
fifteen-year-old. He would have to make a point to punch out any such man that made a pass at the Herald.

“I should hope with proper training, you’ll be capable of advanced cryomancy as well someday, lethallan, then you’ll be rather unstoppable,” Solas said.

“Woah now, let’s not get crazy,” Varric said. “Tumbles can already sew—if word gets to our enemies she can do that and perform advanced cryo-whaty they’ll turn themselves in and do our jobs for us.”

“I suspect our job will never get done if we don’t have breakfast,” Solas took the opportunity to suggest.

“I could handle that if you’d like,” Blackwall said, feeling compelled to contribute something worthwhile for them other than just ‘go here and hit things that try to hurt the Herald until they fall down’.

“I believe there are eggs in the cold chest. Salted Ram’s meat, bread,” Solas listed helpfully, showing Blackwall to the chests they kept their food in, there were two—one spelled to stay cool, while the other was actually freezing, white ice lined the inside.

“Think you can cook, Hero?” Varric asked. “If I get food poisoning, your britches are going right in the fire.”

“Oi! Watch it Tethras, I worked hard on those, throw your own britches in the fire,” Ellie griped.

Blackwall chuckled at that and began digging through their food supply, picking out what he’d need. “I’ve killed lots of people in many different ways, but food hasn’t been one of them,” he promised.

He tried to take count of how many Inquisition soldiers and scouts were with them in the camp and make a mental calculation of just how much food he should prepare. It was rather different than just making a meal for himself—slap an egg in the pan, fry up a few slices of bacon, down some ale and he’s good to go. Ale might not be a breakfast food for Ellie though.

“Oh! I can make the coffee!” Ellie offered, which was met with a rather unified response: “NO!” was called out by Cassandra, Solas, Varric, and the Inquisition soldiers within the vicinity. Blackwall almost dropped the eggs he’d gathered up—Solas had practically shouted in his ear.

“The last time you made coffee we were all flying high as kites and jumping out of our skin every time we heard a twig snap or the wind in the trees, or footsteps—our own footsteps, Tumbles,” Varric complained.

“I make it a little strong,” Ellie said with a shrug.

“Eleanor, I am Nevarran, we make our coffee strong,” Cassandra said, “You make coffee that could level mountains and seal the Breach if it had a mind of its own.”

“Come on Tumbles, lets leave these squares to scrounge up breakfast,” Varric said, gesturing to Blackwall, Cassandra and Solas, before gathering up their water skins and canteens. “You and me can hit the river. We’ll top off our water supply and look for some good stones for… uh…” he paused and looked like he’d gotten caught at something, and Cassandra leveled him a
mildly threatening, questioning look.

“Stones for what?” Cassandra asked lowly.

“Decoration!” Ellie jumped in for the Dwarf. “We need stones to decorate the camp! Josephine says grey on green on…beigey tan tents is very in this year,” Ellie rambled, already backing up and motioning for Varric to move with her, she declared, “We don’t have a slingshot!”

And with that reassuring statement, the duo bolted down the hill for the ravine. In search of stones. For decoration, Blackwall was sure.

Sealing the Rift on the other side of the farm was a less dramatic affair than the day before. This worst this Rift had to offer were a few lesser terrors and one rage demon—everything else were mere shades or wispy spirits.

Though Blackwall had to admit, he wasn’t sure he’d ever get used to the sight of a Rift being sealed. It just seemed like…like a fluke—it wasn’t possible to close them, it was just sheer luck or accident that Ellie had successfully sealed up three in a row.

But there it was, the Rift was gone and now, the pleasant farmstead in the Hinterlands was that much safer. No more Rifts, no more Wolves. Soon, no more horses as they were all sent off to the Inquisition.

Starting, with their horses. Ellie reported to the Horse Master as soon as the Rift was dealt with, and the man led them down to his stables that stood under the watch of his daughter Serena.

Ellie had apparently never ridden a horse before. Not ‘for real’ she said and upon further pressing, she disclosed a tale of how she’d once fled a town on the back of a horse, sans saddle, clinging to the beast’s neck only to be thrown moments after and wake up several hours later in a muddy ditch.

How the girl lived long enough to survive that day at the Conclave was…well…it refreshed his belief in the Maker, for surely, he was at play. Some level of divine intervention was the only explanation for how the girl was alive today.

They got to go into the stables and examine the horses themselves. Ellie seemed taken with the creatures, taking the opportunity to pet each horse and ask about them—what were their names? Did the Horse Masters think their horses would enjoy their work with the Inquisition? What were their favorite snacks? Did horses get sick? Would Healer Adan be able to treat them or were their special Horse Healers? Did they like Elf Root?

Serena took up the task of answering Ellie’s questions, and she seemed pleased to do so, she was patient and thoughtful with her answers—names, favorite snacks, and yes—they were all very excited to have such a purpose serving as the Inquisition’s steeds.

When it came time to select a steed for the Herald, her lack of experience was taken heavily into consideration, Master Dennet and his daughter lobbed options back and forth at each other, there were several horses that they felt could serve the girl without bringing her harm.

In the end though, it was Blackwall’s opinion Ellie sought.
“Me, my lady?” he’d asked rather dumbly. She’d plainly asked his opinion, but the question had caught him rather off guard. Her party had been silent as they toured the stables.

Ellie nodded. “Uh-huh, you know about horses, right? You talked about your days at tourney yesterday, how you’d actually competed in it. You said you’d gone about picking a horse to compete with you for things like jousting or horseback riding. You’ve sort of done this before, so I’d appreciate your input, if you’re willing.”

“You competed at tourney? Good man!” Master Dennet said congratulatory, clapping a hand to Blackwall’s shoulder. “What year did you compete? I believe I had a cousin who tried his hand at tourney but that was back in the Blessed Age.”

“Ahh, it was another lifetime ago,” Blackwall quickly deflected, and turned his attention to Ellie’s statement. “Of course, my lady. Let’s see these horses and I shall endeavor to give a worthwhile opinion.”

Master Dennet could raise a fine horse—these steeds truly were the best this side of the Frostbacks, and beyond possibly. When it came down to it though, a chestnut stallion was his pick for the Herald. He had this quiet intensity, and a sort of bright intelligence gleaming in her eyes—he was mature enough to not dally about and play around with Ellie, as the girl might easily give leeway to. After confirming with Dennet and Serena that the stallion was capable and could lead just as well as being led, it seemed the perfect fit. At least on paper…or, well, more so in conversation. No paper was involved.

Ellie’s only criteria for accepting the horse as a worthy applicant was asking his name. Which was Russel, apparently. Serena had named him such because of his coloring—a more reddish brown—resembled rust but Russel was more dignified than ‘rusty’, and Ellie agreed, Russel was befitting the noble steed.

Ellie spent some time petting Russel’s face and chatting with him as if the horse could amply respond, and then, she agreed to attempt riding him.

It took a stool, the assistance of Master Dennet and the Lady Seeker offering their hands to support the girl in her climb, and the cheerleading provided by Solas and Varric, to get the Herald sitting securely in the saddle of the beast. Russel was patient, didn’t jaunt around or even huff while the girl struggled to climb into her seat, just stood still and waited. She was obviously nervous, her legs tense around the horse’s sides, hands gripping the reins like she feared death if she loosened her grip in the slightest—not the best way to start out but it was a good test for the horse himself, they were sensitive creatures and Blackwall had been thrown just for sitting astride one with a bad attitude once. One could easily spook their own horse if they had too much trepidation in riding it, but Russel was as relaxed as his rider was tense.

“He is a good horse, Ellie,” Blackwall said then, standing before them and petting the horse’s snout. “He won’t see you fall. You might feel unbalanced, but that’s perfectly normal, you’re not use to the height, or riding in general. Your saddle is secure, and I promise, if you relax your legs, and loosen your grip, you will stay seated.”

She should not trust him so terribly much. It almost startled him, how quickly the girl had listened to his instruction, released her bodily grip on the horse and relaxed, trusting Blackwall’s words implicitly. But at least it was for her own good. He gave her guidance on how to sit in the saddle more securely and then, when she was ready, Serena made a few clicking sounds and walked alongside Russel as he followed after the woman, Ellie astride him, and let the girl get use
to his walking gait.

Cassandra trailed after them and then stopped. And then seemed like she would follow. But stopped herself again. She was obviously nervous about the growing distance between the party and their Herald, but there were Inquisition soldiers all around, and Serena would be keeping them within the perimeter of the farmstead.

Which gave opportunity for the party members to select horses of their own.

Cassandra was an easy match—she’d taken an immediate liking to a strong, tall mare with patching coloring of black and white. Solas was more reticent and took the suggestion of Master Dennet, who offered the Elf a pale grey stallion—the creature seemed a bit mischievous, like he would guarantee his ride be kept on their toes—however, the horse was rather responsive to Solas, listening well to his new master’s commands.

Varric…did not want a horse. Or at least, did not want to actually be as high up as a horse would put him.

For a second time today, more surprising than the first, Blackwall was asked for his opinion.

“Tumbles was right, you know your stuff,” Varric grumbled, as he suddenly became very interested with the dirt on his shoes, looking at them rather than the Warden, “And you did a decent enough job finding her a horse. So. Make with the matchmaking. Read their hooves or sniff their manes, or whatever it is you do to pick a horse that won’t throw me for demon fodder.”

Trust. Not like Ellie’s that was young and blind and unfathomable. A test of trust, really. So Blackwall considered it.

Varric ended up on the tallest damn horse the entire stable had to offer.

And he loved it. Hand to the Maker, Varric Tethras sat astride the tallest steed, a dark brown stallion that just dripped with the kind of attitude only the shady Dwarf could respect. He’d threatened to do something unsavory to Blackwall with Bianca when the man had first suggested the horse, but after actually lumbering up onto the creature—which required a saddle that’s stirrups were doubled, with an upper and lower set, and handholds on the bottom lip of the saddle so the Dwarf could reasonably and quickly mount on his own—he loved it.

Blackwall found he’d actually attracted the attention of his horse—the thing chose him. A young, pitch black stallion that huffed and cuffed the man on the back of his head with his snout before following up with nipping at his hair to get his attention. He was a foolhardy thing, and he had the air of a young recruit—in over its head, but eager to learn.

By the time saddles had been secured and the party in them, Ellie came trotting back on her own horse, flush faced and giggling up a storm that left her breathless and beaming at her companions.

“That was so much fun! Can we go again? Are you coming with us?” Ellie asked.

“Yes, we thought we might take a turn around the farmstead, shall we?” Cassandra asked.

That seemed agreeable to the Herald. Master Dennet saw them off—Serena joined them on horse of her own, taking the lead and they followed her around her father’s land.

Ellie was telling them all about her beloved steed. “Russel can go fast! And its so much
fun, and he’s so smart—arent you boy? Mwah!” she dropped a kiss to his mane and patted his neck.

“Fast?” Cassandra asked, not caring for the sound of Ellie racing around on a horse with so little experience under her belt.

“We tried out a nice canter—not too fast, but a test of how well the Herald can handle speed, she did rather well,” Serena said.

“He can go faster?” Ellie asked incredulously.

“Yes, my lady, but don’t worry, you’re right Russel is smart, he’ll keep you from harm—if he progresses to a speed you may not be comfortable with it will be because it is an emergency. With time and practice, you’ll be able to manage anything he may throw at you.”

“Practice. Hear that Tumbles, more school,” Varric said, “Just try to keep some time freed up—I sent word last night to Ruffles, to add me to your schedule.”

“Really?” Ellie and Cassandra asked in unison—the Seeker’s more full of doubt and apprehension than Ellie’s curious but optimistic tones.

“Street Smarts 101,” Varric announced.

The Lady Seeker did not mince words, and when she could, she would merely groan or grunt as a form of conveying her thoughts. With Varric it seemed the woman had a disgusted sound ready to use for whatever nonsense came from the Dwarf’s mouth.

“What?” Varric asked, defensive. “The kid needs some savvy-ing up, and besides its mostly to teach her Rogue shit. You and Curley teach her how to hit people with fists, Chuckles here helps her with her magic mumbo jumbo, and I can teach her how to hit people with sharp objects from a distance and uh…other roguish…stuff.”

“Lockpicking you mean,” the Nevarran woman groused, though she did not seem to wholly disapprove, and apparently, she didn’t. “Such a skill could be of use to her in the field. I presume the slingshot you do not have, is a part of your lesson plans?”

“No, we don’t have slingshot, because it’s fun,” Varric corrected, “Though that is a good idea—kid consider not-slingshot practice a lesson in hitting shit from a distance.”

“Cool! I mean,” Ellie thought for a moment before producing what she thought might sound like a more ‘Herald appropriate’ response, “That sounds amenable, I look forward to our lessons, Master Tethras.”

“Ruffles has done a great job teaching you that politeness crap. It’s gonna be fun grunging you up again.”

“You will do no such thing,” Cassandra snapped. “And Eleanor has never been grungy. She was under-bathed and malnourished, but never grungy.”

“You make it sound like I was some Mabari pup you found dying in the street and took in,” Ellie said.

“That’s almost literally what the situation was, Tumbles. Just. More kidnapy and less ‘the good-Qunari’-y.”
Blackwall only half-heard their chatter, his mind had begun working something over the moment horseback riding and lessons had been brought up. He wasn’t sure he should offer, the Inquisition was obviously grooming Ellie to handle political and martial demands—they may want someone like Master Dennet to tutor the girl, but he would be in charge of taking care of the Inquisitions horses. Blackwall wasn’t certain there would be much for he himself to do in Haven, he’d signed on for accompanying the Herald to seal Rifts, Haven wouldn’t hold much meaningful work for him. Her other companions, it sounded like they all had taken up the mantel of teacher for the girl…he wasn’t sure who ‘Ruffles’ and ‘Curley’ were, though he assumed those were not their proper names, but they taught her too.

“I could teach you, if you’d like,” Blackwall said suddenly, again, extending an offer he hadn’t been fully cognizant he was about to give. The others looked at him, and he’d obviously interrupted their little…was it a spat? Or just banter?

But Ellie seemed to catch his meaning, “Oh! Horseback riding?” she asked.

“I’m no master horseman but I’ve plenty of experience,” he said, and Varric guffawed at his choice of wording, so the Warden snapped, adding, “with horses!” Oh. Maker’s balls. Now Serena was having trouble not laughing as he’d only further stepped in it.

That didn’t really help, except it offered up the hope the Dwarf might fall off his horse from how hard he was cackling.

Though Ellie didn’t pay that any mind as she excitedly asked, “Really? You’d teach me?”

“If the idea is agreeable to you,” Blackwall said. “I’d be happy to.”

“I’ll see that Josephine makes time for such lessons in your schedule,” Cassandra said slowly, as if taking care with her words. “I agree these lessons are important to your role in the Inquisition, but do not hesitate to let us know if you require a break of pace. Meetings with our noble allies will be more difficult to move around, but should you need it, there would be no harm in taking time for yourself.”

“You feeling okay, Seeker?” Varric asked. “Because I swear you just told Tumbles she could play hooky whenever she wants.”

“Not hooky,” the woman insisted, “Reasonable, requested days off. Everyone has limits, Varric, I would not push Eleanor past hers.”

Something sort of strange settled between the Herald’s companions then. Realization dawned on the Dwarf’s face almost as it happened in Solas and Blackwall as well. The Seeker was worried, outright concerned about Ellie—concerned about something she did not wish to disclose in front of others like Serena, or perhaps even disclose to them in front of Ellie herself.

“I’m sure Josie—Lady Josephine—will make up a doable schedule, there are only so many hours in the day after all,” Ellie said. “But um…I appreciate the offer and I’ll uh, just let you know yeah?”

“See that you do,” Cassandra said shortly.
“Alright spill.”

Night had fallen in the Hinterlands once more, and after a long day of sealing Rifts and horseback riding, Eleanor had limped off to bed, practically asleep on her feet. Cassandra had the girl clean up and change into proper sleep clothes before they sat down to the evening meal—sleeping in her armor would be poor for her circulation. And it was hardly comfortable, for all Harritt’s talent, armored sleepwear was just not a possibility.

She’d felt…well as close to motherly as she would ever care to. She’d never considered having children of her own—such a thing usually required having a man in one’s life. But Eleanor was her ward, and she felt a strange familiarity—like how she thought her own mother felt from what little she could remember of the woman—when Cassandra instructed the girl to wash her hands before she ate, to eat everything on her plate before sending her off to bed.

Now that Eleanor was out of earshot, Varric was making demands for Cassandra to ‘spill’ something. She knew well what, so she motioned for the men to follow her, and walked with them down the hill, to the ravine, where, if they spoke quietly amongst themselves, she was certain they wouldn’t be overheard by anyone else, save the nugs that were nibbling at foliage lining the riverbed under cover of darkness.

“I had a discussion with Eleanor this morning,” Cassandra sighed and regarded the men for a moment. “I am only disclosing this because she trusts you, and may well do so herself, and if she does, I would rather you be prepared and have an appropriate response ready. Especially you Varric. This is not a joking matter, and if you do anything to dismiss her feelings…just, don’t. This is a serious.”

“I wouldn’t joke about something serious—”

“Varric.”

“Okay yeah maybe giving me a head’s up not to crack jokes is a half-decent idea,” the Dwarf relented. “What’s going on Seeker, is something wrong with the kid?”

“Eleanor has been suffering from nightmares since the Breach. I woke her from one this morning, and she confessed that she has been struggling, with handling the things that have happened, and keeping up with things as they are,” Cassandra said quietly, “I expressed concern that she may be dealing with some sort of depression as well. She’s shown symptoms I have seen before—her apologetic nature, unnecessary guilt, loss of appetite, and there have been days in the Hinterlands I suspect she lacked sleep entirely. After speaking of it, she has said she will be consulting with Healer Adan upon our return to Haven.”

“Shit,” Varric swore softly. Solas and Blackwall were silent, though Shit seemed to just about cover it.

“Marehis has expressed similar worries, she just did not have a name to put to the issue,” Solas said, “it is why I offered meditation last night, Marehis says it has proven helpful for Ellie, at least, with constancy. I regret we have neglected it so long during our travels.”

“We should make time for it then when we are out as a group,” Cassandra decided, “As for in Haven, you meditate during your lessons yes?”

Solas nodded. “Yes, though her schedule is slowly building with more demands, I don’t know that we’ll continue having lessons every day.”
She worried the same thing. The demands on Eleanor’s abilities would only grow, especially as the Inquisition continued to gain prestige.

“I’ll have a word with Josephine about securing free time for it,” Cassandra said.

“Is there anything we can do?” Blackwall asked, “Anything else that might help her uh feel better?”

“With things such as these, we have no bearing on her wellbeing in this regard—our journeys could be full of sunshine and rainbows and she would still suffer so,” Cassandra explained. “She might confide in some of you, and should she need medical assistance, Adan may prescribe potion—Eleanor could experience swings in her mood, might be more easily distraught or frustrated as her mind adjusts. Be patient with her and take up the slack, listen to her, and give her our support as we can,” Cassandra said. “That, is all we can do.”

Chapter End Notes

Dalish used:
Da’len=child
Antishan las vunin= a peaceful day to you (greeting)
Dareth shiral, mah falon= safe journey, my friend
Lethallan=a term of endearment used between friends
Enfanim eras= fear dreams/nightmares. Enfanim=Fear, and Eras=Dreams

*After consulting several maps of Thedas, Val Royeaux is 248 miles from the Hinterland Crossroads, rounded up to 250 because Cassandra is good but like damn who knows the exact exact mileage off the top of their heads, realistically? But maybe I underestimate the Lady Seeker
*Embrium=okay, so apparently in canon there’s backstory to Embrium, where the flower was found to have medicinal properties when the daughter of a noble family was dying of respiratory illness. Her family gathered at what was supposed to be her death bed, and filled her room with Embrium blossoms as decoration, they’re pretty, and the sight might soothe her, send her off into her death surrounded by something beautiful. Lo and behold, she gets better! Turns out, Embrium has specifically respiratory-centered health benefits, and can be used to treat ailments such as congestion, pneumonia, asthma, etc.
*Tourney is held in the Free Marches—which I think I knew once, but while writing this chapter I totally blanked on where exactly Tourney took place, so I thought it’d be a good idea to throw that out there in case anyone else didn’t know! It’s held in the Free Marches, and its pretty popular world wide, or at least the more human-influenced parts of it anyway.

Thanks so much for reading! Chapter 4 EDA: 7/22/18
The Threat Remains--Return to the Chantry

Chapter Summary

 Mostly Housekeeping, preparing for their conquests in Val Royeaux. New Recruits settle in to Haven, Ellie has a bit of a new routine now that she has new teachers and mentors, and she's reaching out to those around her for help with her struggles in her role as the Herald, slowly but steadily.

Chapter Notes

 Thanks so much for the comments, kudos, and reading! Enjoy! * Notes and Dalish at the end!

They stayed only one day more in the Hinterlands before word arrived from Leliana that they needed to return to Haven ‘post-haste’. The time to decide how best to approach the Chantry was upon them, and they needed the Herald back to discuss their options.

 Blackwall was a welcome addition to their team, Cassandra came to find. The man had already taken up the mantle of Eleanor’s riding instructor, and the girl showed vast improvement, as well as a new level of comfort in riding as they traveled. On their last day in the Hinterlands, the Warden took time to talk Eleanor though the experience of being thrown from a horse, how to properly fall and how she may find herself in a situation where she has to actually jump from her steed as it rides on without her. They found an open field where the earth was soft and Solas cast a barrier around Eleanor as Blackwall had her practice how to roll with a fall and catch herself.

 Blackwall had run the idea past Cassandra before he and Solas rode off with Eleanor for her lessons in falling. It had taken all of five minutes of Eleanor’s absence to have Varric looking around the camp for the girl and asking Cassandra where she was. He’d begun pacing and practically gnashing his teeth while he railed on and on about how idiotic he found the idea, what if Eleanor got hurt, and did Cassandra really trust the Warden, and no he didn’t feel much better that Solas was there too, because ‘Chuckles seems to like the guy’.

 “You appear to have grown a liking for him as well,” Cassandra had commented drily.

 That sent the man on a tangent over how he didn’t like any of them. Save Leliana because she scares him ‘shitless’, and Flissa because she keeps the booze coming, and Ellie. Because she was a ‘good kid’ and ‘someone has to watch out for her’.

 Which Cassandra had thought she’d been doing, but apparently Varric considered himself a sole savior, a shining knight defending the girl from injustice (the Chantry) and the influence of unsavory characters (Blackwall, specifically). And then he was ranting again. Cassandra preferred the man’s words when they were on paper—they were much more elegant and…quiet.

 Though when the trio came riding back to camp with Eleanor proudly recounting her
lessons and how she was ‘hardly scared at all anymore’ of falling. Varric’s ire turned to open laughter at Eleanor’s rather sorry state, the girl had twigs caught in her unruly mane, dirt caking one side of her face and a good portion of her armor was dusty and muddy, and Solas was working to quietly remove a centipede crawling up her shoulder unbeknownst to Eleanor.

She did find out a centipede of all things had been on her, and that thought was the one that spurred her into the action of bathing vigorously in the ravine. Not the head to toe grime, or the bouquet of foliage sprouting from her hair, but the fact that a bug had crawled on the outside of her armor.

The journey back to Haven was much shorter now that they had proper mounts, and as they traveled, Eleanor seemed to come to terms with the fact that she would be expected to journey much farther than the Hinterlands, and that it was in fact doable. As far as Val Royeaux sounded to the girl, ‘a million miles away’ Cassandra believed Eleanor had termed the distance, with her new, beloved steed, the girl seemed more sure that the journey would not be quite so arduous as she once thought.

It was no small mercy that Master Dennet had agreed to join them in Haven. The man was able to quell Eleanor’s worries over their horses. She was concerned for their ‘poor little hooves’ and ‘didn’t they get awful tired lugging us around all day?’ at one point she asked if there was a way to transport the horses. As if they could somehow piggy back the creatures to Haven, it sounded like she meant. Dennet did well in addressing her concerns—although when she flat out asked if the horses could be carried a portion of their trip, the man had to work at containing his laughter. In the end, Eleanor was reassured that their horses were perfectly fine, that they were in fact born for this kind of work, and that she was doing very well in her care of Russel.

Varric may not have been able to play matchmaker for Eleanor in the Hinterlands, but she did leave them with her heart fully in the hooves of horse named Russel. Cassandra, in a rare moment of outright friendliness with the Dwarf, had commented that perhaps Russel would be the great love of Eleanor’s life he could write into his story.

It was awful—she’d spoken in jest and the man had laughed. Ugh. Might they actually be becoming friendly? She certainly hoped not. She was positive she couldn’t trust the man any further than she could throw him—and the Dwarf was rather dense, both figuratively and literally.

They set aside time for meditation on their journeys, calling it quits earlier than they might usually, which Eleanor thought odd, but she didn’t suspect the reasoning behind it. That was likely for the best. Cassandra had a feeling if the girl thought for a moment she had any bearing on something that slowed them, she would feel badly, and insist she needed no such lenience, and push herself harder to prove to them she was ‘fine’.

Cassandra also found the girl enjoyed joining her in the morning for silent prayer, and even took up the practice of stretching to start the day—which was beneficial especially since Eleanor was unused to horseback riding especially for such long hours. Meditating in the evenings seemed to help the girl lose hesitancy when it came to going to sleep, and their morning ritual seemed to give the girl something to look forward to every morning—something to get her out of bed other than the crippling burden of dealing with the aftermath of the Conclave and the responsibility of the Inquisition.

The meditation did seem to help her sleep peacefully—only twice more did Cassandra find herself waken in the night, once because she’d heard Eleanor cry out in her sleep, and another because the girl thankfully took Cassandra’s instruction to heart and hesitantly woke the woman when she had another nightmare. Their morning prayer worked to improve Eleanor’s distress over
the things her dreams clouded her mind with, and Cassandra was glad of it.

It was…unexpectedly enjoyable for Cassandra as well. She used to long for the solitude she found in her morning routine, rising at an hour when all others still slept while she took time to find counsel and relief in the Maker, and steel herself for the day ahead. Now, she felt a sense of loss at the prospect that, upon their return to Haven, Eleanor may not have the time to join her in the mornings.

They made the final push to Haven early one afternoon. Scouts had kept Leliana appraised to their movements, so she and Marehis were awaiting their arrival at Haven’s gate.

Eleanor swung off her horse and bolted for the gate, an excited squeal pealing from her lips as she crashed into the Elf woman giving her a most fierce hug.

“I missed you I missed you I missed you! Tell me everything! How are you? Did anything happen while I was away? Have you been to see the Druffalos? I met a whole herd in the Hinterlands Master Dennet owns and they are the sweetest! Oh! I have a horse now! His name is Russel and he’s just the best!”

“I missed you too, da’len, it’s good to see you,” Marehis said laughingly as she hugged the girl tightly. “I’m happy to have you back in Haven my lady, we should get you cleaned up and to the war room as soon as possible, but once you’ve completed your duties there, we’ll catch up. I want to hear all about your Hinterland adventures.”

And then Cassandra witnessed something that made her feel…rather like she had the strangest urge to squeal, herself, over what she saw because it was so very fitting and so very unexpected.

Marehis looked over Eleanor’s head and her gaze went to Solas dismounting his horse, his eyes immediately sought hers and he gave a soft smile and raised a hand to the woman who nodded at him in return.

Had the Elves…coupled? Eleanor had lamented to Cassandra that she’d tried in vain to play matchmaker between the pair and that Marehis ‘wouldn’t budge’ on her stance with Solas. But the warmth that had just passed between the two Elves, subtly welcoming each other as to not be obvious, perhaps just in front of Eleanor, but maybe because others were around as well, had been palpable. It was the smallest gesture, but Marehis’s eyes held relief and excitement to see Solas well and back in Haven, and Solas…well Solas was actually a little pink around the tips of his ears, and Cassandra did not think it was because of the cold.

Never in her life had Cassandra ever felt like a gossip, but in that moment, she almost felt like a school girl who’d picked up a juicy secret and had to divulge it to the next person who would listen. More specifically, she felt like sharing the information with Eleanor. She wouldn’t—Marehis and Solas were adults and they obviously did not want their liaison known to Eleanor or anyone else for that matter, but Maker—the pair they made was just. Ugh. It was so romantic, dare she say, cute even.

“Welcome back,” Leliana said as Cassandra joined her. “Josephine and Cullen are waiting for us in the War Ro- oh, Commander.”

Josephine was. Apparently, Cullen had seen fit to greet them at the gate. Cassandra wasn’t sure why, all she knew was the former Templar came rushing from Haven’s gate and as soon as his eyes landed on their party he looked to Cassandra and said, “You’re back, uh, good,” and then he cleared his throat and turned to Eleanor, “Lady Herald, it’s good to see you looking well!”
Ahh, perhaps he enjoyed Eleanor’s company as she did, and had missed the girl while they’d been away in the Hinterlands. The fact that their Herald was a Mage had initially been off putting for the man, and he still struggled with the idea that she could be trusted without going through a Harrowing.

But she had now, really. Cassandra felt almost violent over her conviction that Eleanor had more than proven herself a force to be reckoned with against demon influence. The girl had been nothing short of tortured by the wolves’ demon master, and she’d held it off admirably. Cassandra had immediately sent a report directly to Commander Cullen of the event and made it clear that if he dared to ever suggest they subject Eleanor to a Harrowing, a suggestion he’d made more than once to Cassandra during Ellie’s time in Haven, he would be made to regret it.

So, perhaps he’d lost all reticence in his stance with Eleanor—truth be told he was fond of her, that was plain enough to Cassandra.

Eleanor looked at Cassandra and smiled with something almost mischievous gleaming in her eye before looking back up at the Commander and saying, “Heya Cullen! Good to see you too! So much happened in the Hinterlands—we have a Horse Master now and a whole bunch of horses for the Inquisition, and we really worked hard to secure things for the refugees—Cassandra can fill you in on all of it, yeah? You two should catch up!” and then she linked arms with her handmaiden and said, “Come on Marehis, I should go get changed!” and then she practically skipped away, arm in arm with the Elf woman, heading into Haven.

Whatever was that about? Cassandra certainly would not mind informing the Commander of their trip to the Hinterlands, they were all to be debriefed of their work anyway. But Eleanor had seemed almost…conspiratorial? Like she had some plot afoot Cassandra wasn’t aware of.

“We should meet Josephine then, in the War Room?” Leliana asked, a lilt to her voice like she’d seen something she thought amusing.

“Certainly,” Cassandra said baldly, she and Cullen following after their Spy Master to the Chantry.

Marehis had missed this. The past few days she’d been stopping in on Ellie’s cabin, making sure everything was ready for the girl’s return—clean sheets, bedding, enough wood to keep the fire going for a month straight. She’d cleaned the place top to bottom and back again and made sure all of Ellie’s clothing was clean and organized. This morning when Leliana confirmed a Scout had spotted their party nearing Haven, she got the fire going to her cabin would be nice and warm when she got in.

She had other work she saw to while Ellie was away, with her lady out of Haven, Marehis was able to go back out into the field. The girl had been gone a month—Elgar‘nan an entire month. In that time, Leliana had sent Marehis to Orlais to scope out the Chantry Clerics Mother Gisselle named for them and compile dossiers, personal lives, histories, their work and standing in the Chantry hierarchy, anything that struck her as a red flag not to pursue them, anything she found that might point them in the right direction how to get them to side with the Inquisition.
She enjoyed the thrill of her job, but she was glad to have Ellie back, safe in Haven. She’d been in her role as Ellie’s guard little more than a week before she was sent off to the Hinterlands, but Marehis found she missed her, missed spending the day at her side, missed listening to her chatter and braiding her hair. Even when she’d gotten to go out, perform duties familiar to her, be back in the thick of things with the travel and work that drew her to her initial role as one of Leliana’s birds, she’d thought of Ellie, wondered if she was safe, and well. She wanted to write to her, to keep up some form of contact with the girl but she couldn’t do so without compromising her work in Orlais.

She’d returned to Haven with correspondence from the Hinterlands waiting for her. From Solas, actually. Marehis thought she might expire from the embarrassment alone when Leliana, all smirk and barely contained laughter, plopped the stack of letters on her desk and informed her she may want to tell Solas to mark his mail moire carefully, it had been caught in the mix with Scout reports, new agent contracts, and correspondence from Cassandra on their progress in the Hinterlands, and Leliana had gotten a rather telling eyeful of the first of Solas’s letters.

“Rather poetic, this Solas,” Leliana said, “I was tempted to read his work aloud to the rest of the advisors.”

True to her word, Leliana had kept the letters quiet. From the Commander, at least. Josephine blushed the first time Marehis saw her again after returning from Orlais and had congratulated her and Solas as a ‘rather fitting match’.

She could kill the man for his misstep while they’d been trying to be discrete.

She’d settle for kissing him. While it had been embarrassing to be caught red handed by her boss of all people, Leliana was right…Solas had a way with the written word. And Elgar'nan bless him, he kept her appraised to Ellie’s wellbeing. Cassandra made regular reports to Leliana but having her…having Solas’s perspective was welcome. Cassandra’s reports had been more so about their work and accomplishments, whereas Solas shared more personal views on how Ellie herself was faring.

A few of his letters had been troubling. He noticed some of the things she had, when Ellie was under her care—sometimes it seemed the girl didn’t sleep well, or she could be caught pushing her food around her plate instead of properly eating every once in a while. Stress, he surmised in his earlier letters. And then there was the last letter he’d written before wrapping up their time in the Hinterlands and returning to Haven made it so he hadn’t the chance to write again, it had been truly nerve-wracking. Some horrible Demon had tried to possess Ellie, had attempted to trick her into letting it in by threatening to kill her companions, leading her to believe that it had killed them, when she continued to resist it. Her companions had comforted her, he assured, and he had just finished meditating with her before bed, in hopes she would sleep peacefully.

The fact that he knew Marehis would want to hear about her ward, would worry and had done something, written to her, to quell that worry made her…pleased. It spoke well of his character, and his regard for Marehis.

But no number of letters could beat the real thing—having Ellie back safe and sound was a relief. To see her whole and actually being able to be at her side, see that she was alright after even her most arduous adventures in the Hinterlands left Marehis grateful to her gods and to the Maker.

And once the girl was in her cabin for the evening, Marehis could more appropriately express her gratitude to Solas, for his thoughtfulness.

Marehis was working with Ellie’s hair after the girl had cleaned up from her time on the
road, they sat on the floor of her cabin together. The change in her ward was noticeable. She looked healthier, physically. After facing the Breach, her time in Inquisition captivity, and whatever sort of life she’d been leading before the Conclave, the girl had been almost skeletal. Now, she had a new softness to her features, a healthy fullness in her face, more muscle tone in her frame, her hair was shinier, and so much time under the sun had added strands of gold to her red mane and revealed an olive undertone to her skin.

“Have you eaten, da’len?” Marehis asked as she braided.

“We ate lunch on the road,” Ellie informed her, “Blackwall—you haven’t met him yet, but you will later, he’s a Grey Warden, and he’s offered to help the Inquisition as a party member when I have to go seal Rifts and stuff. Anyway, Varric gives him a hard time—I don’t think he trusts Wardens very well—and Blackwall made sandwiches for lunch and he put like…what’s that red, spicy flaky stuff Flissa puts in her tomato soup? Uh…”

“Red pepper?” Marehis supplied.

“Yeah! That! We got some as a gift from a refugee, and Blackwall put a whole bunch of it in Varric’s food! Varric turned bright red and I thought his head was going to pop off! It was kind of mean but it was soooo funny you know?”

It sounded like it. “Be sure to remind me not to make this Blackwall upset with me.”

“Oh gosh, I don’t think he’d do something like that to you, you’re always so nice to…well everyone I think, and if he did he better sleep with one eye open. I know where Varric keeps his razors and shaving cream, Blackwall can kiss his beard goodbye if he pulls such a trick on you!” and then, after a moment of thought, “Actually we might want to keep an eye on Varric I have a feeling he might shave the man himself for making him cough up a lung.”

“Shall I tell the guards to be on the lookout for a vengeful Dwarf storming Haven armed to shave?”

“Mmm…nah, they can have a little prank war if that’s what they need to settle their differences. I think the pepper was payback for the worms Blackwall found in his bedroll the other night.”

Ellie’s hair was dry and braided the way she liked. She’d changed out of her armor into one of the formal tunics and pants Madam Florna had made her, and now she was ready for her meeting with the advisors.

“They want me to go to Val Royeaux,” Ellie said quietly.

Marehis crawled around her to sit facing the girl, taking hold of her hands. They were bare, and the thrum of warmth from Ellie’s Mark was a little strange, but not harmful to the Elf woman so she squeezed her hands tight in reassurance. “Leliana told me as much. How do you feel about the idea?”

“It’s just…it’s so far,” Ellie said, “and I’d be meeting with people like Roderick…I don’t know if you ever met him, but he hates me, and I just don’t understand how going to meet with people who already hate me is a good idea. Won’t it just make them angrier at the Inquisition, rubbing me in their faces? What if…what if it’s a trap and they plan to take me, execute me for the Divine’s m-murder.”

Marehis pulled the girl to her and hugged her. “Cassandra will be there. Do you think she’d
stand idle-by and let the Chantry do such a thing? Or Solas or Varric for that matter?"

“What if I g-get them hurt or k-killed, they risk so much protecting me in the field and-”

“Stop, da’len, you’re telling yourself scary stories.” It worried her. Had the demon’s toying with her left Ellie with constant fear for her companions lives? Dread Wolf cast that wretched thing deep into the Fade, never to return. “The worse the Chantry can do is yell at you, and don’t you think you should be more worried for them? Imagine if you would, Cassandra, or Varric hearing a cleric badmouth you.”

“Oh…” Ellie sniffled and gave a little laugh, thankfully her little jest had cheered the girl, “yeah, Cassandra might just threaten them but Varric, he might throw punches. Or bolts.”

“You will all be safe and suited for any danger that may befall you. Leliana is good at her job, so are Lady Josephine and Commander Cullen, they would not advise you to your detriment. Do you trust them?”

Ellie nodded. “I do.”

“Then trust their judgement, da’len, they would not lead you astray. Here,” she rose and went to the washbasin, dousing a clean cloth before crouching before Ellie and patting the cool cloth to her cheeks before handing it over with instructions, “close your eyes and put the cloth over them, it will take the redness away.”

“Sorry, I didn’t mean to get so freaked out,” Ellie said as she did what she was told. Ellie would be embarrassed if her advisors knew she’d just been crying before their meeting.

“It is fine, Ellie. I’m sure it is less embarrassing here than it would be if you’d gotten so upset in your meeting—though there is nothing to be embarrassed for. This would be overwhelming for anyone.”

“Thanks for letting me have my little freak out here then, are my eyes better?” she asked as she pulled the cloth away and looked at Marehis.

“Beautiful,” Marehis promised. She checked the watch at her wrist. Lady Josephine would be expecting them along shortly. She wished she’d been firmer—insisted Ellie should be given more time to rest after her journey, but the Advisors were eager to handle this mess with the Chantry. and it was important, if the Inquisition was to succeed. Marehis just hated that it was on Ellie to do so.

She was of half a mind to insist Ellie take a nap, relax for the rest of the day, and go tell Lady Montilyet if she wanted the clerics addressed so badly she could go herself.

But it was not cruelty Lady Josephine worked from, their Ambassador did have Ellie’s well being in mind, and worked tirelessly to ensure Ellie’s job could be made as non-tremulous as possible.

“If you’re feeling better we should get you to the War Room.”

A sign of hesitation on Ellie’s part and Marehis would feel compelled to march to Val Royeaux herself and tell that Chancellor Roderick where he could stick his problems with the Inquisition.

But Ellie didn’t hesitate. She nodded, and they rose together, the girl linking arms with Marehis and they were off to see the Advisors.
“My lady, you’re here, excellent!” Lady Josephine greeted as a guard held open the War Room door for Ellie and she stepped inside.

Cassandra was there, standing across the table from her advisors, and Ellie liked that. It sort of made her feel like she wasn’t the focus of the advisors and had an advisor for dealing with the advisors on her side if that made sense? Someone on her side, to help her sort through whatever Inquisition’s leading trio had to throw at her.

“Hello, Lady Josephine, Commander, Leliana,” Ellie said, and she bowed politely. “I’m glad to see you all again. Gosh, it’s been a month Cassandra said.”

“Yes, and your time in the Hinterlands was vital to our efforts here in Haven,” Leliana said.

“The agents you acquired have been of great help,” Cullen offered up, “and those horses,” he let out a low whistle, “you even convinced Master Dennet to join our cause.”

“Cassandra helped sway Dennet, he was really on the fence about it until she stepped in,” Ellie thought to say.

Ha! Solas and Marehis might be hopeless but Ellie saw! Cullen practically fell over himself trying to see with his own eyes that Cassandra made it back okay. He’d been way too excited for just a casual ‘glad my fellow coworker is alright’ thing.

Cullen looked mildly surprised, and then very, very impressed, “Really?” he asked, “Excellent work, Seeker Cassandra.”

Cullen was crushing. Big time.

Cassandra huffed and shot Ellie a look—not like the ones Marehis gave her that said ‘stop meddlig’!, just a look that said she thought Ellie just said something ludicrous.

“I was hardly the tipping point for the man’s decision,” Cassandra said, “Eleanor won Master Dennet to our cause, it was she who laid the foundation for his loyalty—I merely pointed out that Eleanor is considered the Herald of Andraste, and perhaps it might please his god should he serve her cause.”

“His name at our side strengthens our credibility,” Josephine said, “and the lord you met—Berand he is from a powerful Ferledan household, his family has agreed to back the Inquisition, as well as the family of his late fiancée Lady Vellina, they send their regards and their thanks for providing them the confirmation of their daughter’s death and the location of her body. They were able to properly bury her in their family crypt, thanks to your work securing the Hinterlands, they were transport her to their homestead.”

“Oh, how is Lord Berand? And Lady Vellina’s family? Is there anything we can do for them?” Ellie asked.

“Lord Berand and his men are a welcome addition to our forces, he’s doing well, grieving but the Inquisition gives him purpose and he is grateful,” Cullen said.

“I took the liberty of sending a floral arrangement to Lady Vellina’s funeral and a personal
message of condolences from the Herald and the Inquisition,” Josephine added, “Her parents, as well as Lord Berand’s family have already made arrangements to journey to Haven and meet you properly.”

“Oh gosh, they don’t have to do that,” Ellie gasped.

“My lady, such visits will be commonplace soon enough, they wish to see the cause they’ve chosen to lend their political weight to and meet the Herald of Andraste.”

“It is a good thing, Eleanor,” Cassandra said suddenly. Ellie looked to her, and the Nevarran woman said, “It will hearten them, to see the Inquisition and give them hope that the passing of their daughter is not meaningless. If Lord Berand does well, if the Inquisition does well, it will bring relief and validation to those who mourn her.”

Ellie nodded. “I look forward to their visit, I hope we can do that for them.”

“They will arrive in a few weeks’ time—they wanted to meet with you personally.”

“Oh golly, that’s a terribly long time to travel, they live that far from Haven?” Ellie asked concerned, trying to think of an alternative…maybe she could meet up with them at a halfway point, or they could send uh…pictures? There were so many people in the Inquisition surely they had someone with the ability to draw some nice portraits of Haven and their troops, maybe Varric could write a narrative…informative…something?

“Oh no, they hail from Highever my lady,” Josephine said. North? Like super north for Ferelden, but Ellie was decently sure it wasn’t weeks and weeks of travel away. “I informed them it would be your next available appointment in Haven.”

“Because I’m going to Val Royeaux,” Ellie completed the thought.

“Yes, that is what we are here to discuss,” Josephine said, “I understand your reticence, Val Royeaux is a rather larger journey than your venture to the Hinterlands.”

“Just a little bit bigger, yeah,” Ellie said. “But…do you think it is the best way to get the Chantry on our side? Leliana? Commander?”

“Val Royeaux is in an uproar,” Commander Cullen said, shaking his head. “the Chantry Clerics have the people in such a state mobs run our agents out of the place.”

“Like, flaming torches, pokey pitchforks?” Ellie asked.

“In essence,” Cullen said, though ‘pokey pitchforks’ did tug his lips up a bit. “It would be dangerous to send you.”

“She would not be alone,” Cassandra cut in, “I will be with you Eleanor, Leliana has been corresponding with the clerics Mother Gisselle named for us, yes?”

“Mother Gisselle has given us valuable leads on allies in the Chantry, and we have been able to approach a few of them so far,” Leliana agreed, “they have agreed to get us into Val Royeaux—the remaining clerics, a majority of them, have taken Roderick’s cries against the Inquisition seriously. With the help of our allies, we can get you in to Val Royeaux to sway the remaining clerics, or at the very least, create enough discord to break their hold on the people.”

“If we can get the Chantry to at least implode on itself,” Josephine said, “it may give us the chance we need to approach the mages or the templars for their aid against the Breach.”
“So, I’m hearing two against one? Or does all of this make you feel better about the plan, Commander?” Ellie asked Cullen.

The man sighed, running a hand over his face as he took a moment to think. “The plan is… sound. You will have your party with you?”

“Yep! Cassandra’s already on board and I mean, I’d like to see someone point a pitchfork at her and live to tell about it,” Ellie enthused, “I’ll have to ask, but Varric and Solas will probably be down for going with me, maybe Warden Blackwall too.”

“We—myself and the rest of our party members—have discussed the possibility that you would be called to Val Royeaux at length,” Cassandra said then, “any of them would join us.”

When had they done that? When she was asleep? Did everyone do everything when Ellie was asleep? When did they sleep?

“Cool! Hmm, maybe we can all discuss it together? Marehis and I are going for dinner at the usual time, will you be free Lady Seeker? I’m going to be checking in on everyone after we’re done here, I’ll invite them too plus it might be nice for Blackwall to have some friendly…” Varric came to mind and she amended, “…mostly friendly faces to eat dinner with his first night in Haven, it can be hard being somewhere new and not knowing anybody.”

“That is agreeable,” Cassandra said.

“So, it is settled then.” Josephine asked, “You will travel to Val Royeaux?”

“Yes,” Ellie said. “When do we need to head out?”

“Leliana and I will need a few days to finalize things with our allies in Val Royeaux,” Josephine said.

“Once we have confirmation they will be prepared for your arrival and get you in, you’ll be on your way,” Leliana finished.

And then, Josephine said, “I have received requests—one from Master Tethras and one from Cassandra on behalf of Warden Blackwall, they will be added to your lesson plans, which can resume tomorrow. I’ll see Marehis receives your updated schedule if that is agreeable.”

“It is,” Ellie said, “so…is that everything? Is there anything else I need to do?”

“We shall take it from here, Lady Herald,” Josephine said, “the day is yours to do with what you will.”

Marehis was waiting for her once she left the War Room.

“How did it go?” she asked.

“It went pretty well,” Ellie said, “um, I’ll be leaving for Val Royeaux sometime this week.”

Marehis placed a hand on Ellie’s shoulder and gave it a little squeeze, smiling reassuringly. “It will be fun, you’ve never been to Orlais, have you?”
Ellie shook her head. “I’ve never been this side of the Waking Sea before the Conclave.”

“Well, it’ll be a brand new, interesting experience. Val Royeaux especially, is beautiful,” Marehis said. Ellie nodded and she and Marehis began walking the Chantry hall, headed outside.

Ellie linked arms with Marehis and lead them around the winding path towards Haven’s gates. Josephine had said Harritt offered to let Blackwall bunk in his cabin, so she assumed the man would be around there settling in. “I actually wanted to check in and make sure Blackwall was settled, and invite him, Varric, and Solas to join us for dinner tonight. Is that alright?”

“Oh, of course, my lady, I’m excited to meet your new Warden friend,” Marehis said.

“You’ll like him,” Ellie promised.

Blackwall was standing out in front of Harritt’s cabin…well, his cabin too now, she supposed, staring up into the Breach. it was a lot closer here, than it had been in the Hinterlands.

“Kind of scary, huh?” Ellie asked, getting his attention as they approached, and she came to stand at his side, looking up at the Breach. “It doesn’t do anything,” she said, “just sits there spinning, you don’t have to worry about demons falling out of it or anything, it stopped doing that.”

“Was it doing that when you faced the Breach?” Blackwall asked, surprised.

Ellie nodded, whoops! She thought he’d known. “Yup.”

“You actually…” Blackwall fell silent as he looked at her, and then back up at the hole in the sky. “It looks so big from here, I can’t imagine what it would be like up close.”

“I don’t know how exactly we’ll end up closing it,” Ellie said, “but if you don’t want to go when we do, you don’t have to. I wouldn’t go if I didn’t have to.”

“The offer is kind, my lady but dings my pride a bit. I can hardly ask you to face it if I were not willing to do so myself,” Blackwall said. “When the time comes, we’ll all be ready to face that thing together.”

“Speaking of facing things together,” Ellie said, coming to stand in front of Blackwall and take his attention off the Breach, “Dinner. Marehis and I usually eat at around…”

“Dinner hour have been starting as early as four recently, my lady, we usually go to Tavern at six,” Marehis supplied.

“Right! Six!” Ellie said, and then, “Oh! This is Marehis, Marehis this is Warden Blackwall, sorry, that was rude wasn’t it, not introducing you right away?”

“You’re just fine, my lady,” Marehis said gently before dipping a curtsey to Blackwall, “it is an honor to meet you, Warden Blackwall.”

“The honor is mine,” Blackwall said, bowing slightly to the Elf woman, “Ellie had quite a lot to say about you—all good, mind.”

“She did, did she?” Marehis asked, looking amused.

“Yes, I’d officially joined the inquisition, and the moment my contract was flying off to Haven, Ellie launched into a tale of your encounter with angry Druffalo.”
“While terrifying in the moment, it’s rather a fond memory now,” Marehis said. “She has had no end of good things to say of you since she’s arrived back in Haven, I’m glad she has another person she trusts watching over her in the field.”

Blackwall looked very grave then, but Ellie supposed he was just being serious as he nodded and said, “I am honored to serve the Inquisition, and to help the lady Herald in her quest.”

Ellie scrunched up her nose at that. “Quest makes it sound like one of Varric’s stories, I’m hardly questing, more like, just running around doing my best to not let the world end while having no clue how to do just that,” she said laughingly. He seemed to loosen up at that, and she was glad—she was almost worried they’d offended him somehow, he’d been looking so serious. “Oh gosh, I got way off track—dinner! I was inviting you to have dinner with us. Well, me and Marehis, and Cassandra, and Solas, and Varric. Sometimes Lady Josephine or Commander Cullen have dinner around that time so they might be there too…Leliana hasn’t joined us,” she gasped then, and her hand shot out to Marehis’s arm as she looked to the Elf woman for confirmation, “Oh gosh, I’ve never seen Leliana in the tavern—is she eating? She eats right?”

“She takes her meals in her command center out front of the Chantry,” Marehis promised. “She eats. Everyone in the Inquisition is being well fed, da’len, you really needn’t worry, she’s hardly a puppy you’ve forgotten to feed,” she said as she petted Ellie’s hair.

“Oh, that makes sense,” Ellie said, feeling silly then. “Sorry, anyway, will you join us for dinner? We’re planning on talking about the upcoming trip to Val Royeaux.”

“In the Tavern? At six?” Blackwall managed to pick up out of all the twists and turns her focus had taken.

“Uh-huh, do you know where it is? Has anyone shown you around?” Ellie asked, she should have offered him a tour before, she just hadn’t thought to.

“Ah, yes, your Leliana sent someone to give me the rundown on the place.”

“Great!” That was a relief. “Is there anything you need? Are you all settled in here? I can run up to Quarter Master Threnn if you need blankets or pillows,” she leaned in and stage whispered conspiratorially, “she’ll say she’s out of pillows, but there are always more pillows.”

“I’m well, my lady. I have everything I need, Quartermaster Threnn can keep her hoard of pillows.”

“She does, I swear, she hoards them somewhere like a dragon!” Ellie exclaimed. “Alright then, if you need anything, Blacksmith Harritt is super helpful, and really anyone should be able to help if you ask. I’m off to make sure Varric and Solas will join us for dinner, I’ll see you tonight okay?”

“I look forward to it,” Blackwall promised.

Ellie nodded and took Marehis’s arm again. The two stopped to say hello to Master Dennet who was tending to the party’s horses, and Ellie introduced Marehis to the Horse Master and Russel. Her guard was immediately enamored with the horses, and Russel was more than happy to have she and Marehis petting his face and kissing his cheeks, the Elf woman actually cooed over him.

“He’s a gentle fella, isn’t he? You’ll take good care of my lady, yes?” Marehis asked him with all seriousness as if he could understand her. Ellie rather thought he could, Russel was a
clever horse. He let out a certain sounding huff and bobbed his head up and down as if to say ‘yes’ he would.

“Do you have everything you need? Quarters have been set up for you, right?” Ellie asked the Horse Master.

“Yes, my lady, I’ve a cot in Master Harritt’s cabin so I can be near the horses.”

Oh gosh, she hoped Harritt didn’t mind having not just one but two new roommates. Though the man had seemed sort of lonely, maybe they’d form a gruff old man club. Maybe Blackwall would shave his hair and beard and they could all be bald with matching mustaches!

Regardless, hopefully they got along well, and weren’t too tightly packed. Did they have enough space in Haven? What would happen if they ran out of room? More tents? Could they build more cabins?

Varric was their next stop, the man was sitting out front of his tent by the fire, scribbling furiously into a leather-bound book. He seemed rather focused, so Ellie just asked if he would eat dinner with her and the others tonight—he absently gave a ‘uh-huh, I’ll be there Tumbles’ and didn’t look up from his work. So, she made sure Solas would swing by the Dwarf’s tent to pick him up for dinner later when she extended the invitation to him, he promised to do so.

“Lady Josephine retrieved some texts I expressed interest in—magical theory and historical research on the Fade. If you’d care to join me I’d be happy to share,” Solas offered, holding the door to his cabin open wider to invite them in.

Textbooks…might not be Ellie’s strong suit.

And there was only so much time left in the day, especially before dinner, and she still had something she had to do.

“That’s super sweet of you, Solas, but uh, I actually have something I need to do before dinner, but you have fun and we can talk all about what you learn,” Ellie said, feeling a bit badly, she didn’t want Solas to think she didn’t want to hang out with him or something.

But he smiled and said, “Another time then, I’ll see you at dinner.”

She waved goodbye and he closed his door to the chill, leaving Marehis and Ellie standing…well…right around where she needed to be. But she didn’t necessarily want to go.

“What is you need to do, my lady?” Marehis asked her. “We’ve a little time before dinner. Oh! Goodness, did you want to go check on the Druffalo herd?” she guessed, looking amused at the prospect that Ellie skipped out on a chance to peruse magical tomes with Solas to play with the little Druffalos.

“Oh yeah! But um, not today,” Ellie said. The rest of the day was hers, Josephine had said. She wasn’t sure she really wanted to do this, but…she’d promised Cassandra, or at least said she would do it and she wasn’t going to go back on her word.

“My lady?” Marehis asked quietly. “What is it?”

“Um. I need to see Healer Adan, actually.”

Maybe not the best way to start that out—Marehis raised a hand to check Ellie for fever and her eyes were searching for any sign of injury. “Were you hurt on your trip? Do you feel unwell?”
Ellie shook her head. “Um I’m fine, I’m not hurt or sick not uh, not really. I uh…” she looked around and gestured for Marehis to follow her.

They ended up beside the Chantry, behind the wood stack there. Marehis leaned with her back against the wood stack and waited for Ellie to talk.

“So. Uh. I’ve been kind of…struggling with everything,” Ellie started out uncertainly.

Marehis put a hand on her shoulder then and suddenly everything was spilling out of her—she was so angry about the Conclave explosion, she missed Trevelyan, and she hated that she was the only person to survive. She felt so guilty for having lived, and then she felt guilty for feeling guilty—she should be grateful that she survived, shouldn’t she? And the Inquisition was doing so much for her and helping her and providing for her, and she just felt like she was failing even though everything else said otherwise—they’d done so much good in the Hinterlands, so much and all she could focus on was the numbers they killed, of those they couldn’t save, on their losses and close calls. She was afraid everything was going to be wasted on her, that she couldn’t possibly live up to their expectations of her, and what if, after everything, she couldn’t seal the Breach?

And the thing was, when it came down to it, she was happy, she was. She was glad to have met the Inquisition, she liked her new life, but her mind kept focusing on all of the bad, all the death, and the destruction, and the guilt. And then when it came to the good stuff, her friends, the satisfaction of being able to help those affected by the war and the Breach…nothing. Just. everything felt hallow—she knew these things made her happy but there was that disconnect. She could smile, she could acknowledge that these were good things but Cassandra’s word, ‘empty’, seemed to qualify there. When she wasn’t just so sad or angry, she was empty with a few moments of genuine happiness sewn at random.

And she hated admitting these things to Marehis of all people. Marehis did everything for her, was always protecting her.

And now, to top it all off, Marehis understood her. She didn’t snap at or rebuke Ellie for her feelings. The Elf woman folded her into a hug and when Ellie was calm, she asked a few questions, about her and Cassandra’s conversation and what she wanted to do.

So, with Marehis at her side, they went to see Adan.

Marehis had known something was hanging over her ward since they met. Like a great weight suspended on a thin string, hanging over Ellie’s head just straining to snap and crush the girl. She’d been admittedly worried, but she wasn’t sure exactly what was wrong. Ellie had been through a horrible ordeal, with the Conclave and then being a prisoner, and then being revealed as a Herald.

Marehis was not Andrasten, but she did believe in the Maker—Elf gods handled Elf business, just as the Human god handled theirs. She knew, knew in her bones Ellie's survival of the Conclave was the product of divine intervention. That she could struggle in this way, endure the things that had happened and still keep moving, keep working towards sealing the Breach, it spoke to what her god must have seen in her, what drew him to guard her in his hand and bring her from the Conclave Marked to save them.
When they first went to Adan the man had been expecting them, which seemed to confuse Ellie until he started asking her about ‘asthma’?

It was the most conflicted she’d felt in her line of work with Ellie. When the man gave her an ‘out’ of sorts—she could say she was just in to talk to him about her medical history—Marehis saw Ellie’s hesitancy, the girl saw the opportunity to skip out on asking for his medical opinion on her more pressing issues. Marehis was torn between her different duties to Ellie—part of her job was keeping Ellie safe, but another was keeping her confidence. She would sorely dislike damaging Ellie’s trust in her, but for the sake of her health Marehis would risk it.

Thankfully, Ellie was forthright.

She glossed over the asthma issue—she hadn’t even known he would have reason to talk to her about it, and Adan said he’d received a recipe for some sort of remedy for respiratory illness, and instructions from Cassandra to have it brewed up, and have Embrium kept on hand in case Ellie should ever need it. She thanked him, and then informed him that wasn’t why she was here to see him.

Marehis sat beside Ellie, on Adan’s examination table, and held her Marked hand as she relayed her problems to the Healer. Struggling with appetite, stomach aches, heart racing, trouble falling asleep, and when she did sleep she was often woken by nightmares. And those were just the physical manifestations. The recurring nightmares, compulsive negative thoughts, focusing on death on dying.

Elgar’nan.

Adan was quiet, only speaking when Ellie fell silent, and asking questions—how many hours of restful sleep did she think she was getting? How often did she skip sleep altogether? How severe were her stomach pains? He focused on that for a while and cautioned her to come to him immediately if they got worse or didn’t go away.

Then, he gave her his insight, that what she was describing sounded like symptoms of depression and anxiety. Which resulted ultimately, in his prescription:

Potion for calming her stomach and keep her from developing an ulcer, potion to encourage healthy brain chemistry, and potion for calming herself—he recommended only using that potion in particular during the day if she experienced unprompted, debilitating panic, but that it might be something she would find beneficial to take before her sleeping draught to relax at the end of the day.

Ellie hadn’t been one for drinking, from Marehis’s experience, but Adan had stressed to them that the girl should avoid alcohol for the time being as it could have unpredictable results with the potion promoting healthy brain chemistry, and if mixed with the calming or sleeping draughts would intensify their effects in a way that he warned might be habit forming. Ellie nodded and profusely agreed—alcohol would be a no-go.

The appointment had been arduous but Marehis was grateful that Healer Adan had been patient with Ellie, hadn’t batted an eye at the amount he was increasing his workload to help her, especially in the coming week. Marehis saw fit to mention that Ellie would be leaving for Val Royeaux, and the man just shrugged and told Marehis to keep him appraised of the Herald’s itinerary, and he would get enough potion worked up for her trip.

He also explained the complications that might come up, that her new potions regimen could cause mood swings, a worsening of symptoms before they got better, that acclimating might
take time, but if had someone she trusted monitoring her closely, and the patience to bear through, she would see improvement. She would feel better, and hopefully in time her mind would respond to her treatment by re-learning how to create a healthy chemical balance on its own.

Someone she trusted monitoring her brought to question: in Haven, Marehis would monitor her, but what about the journey to Val Royeaux?

Marehis felt certain she could join Ellie unquestioned—she wouldn’t have to give a reason to the Inquisition Advisors other than the mission was fitting of her job description. But Ellie offered up her concern, she didn’t necessarily want to advertise her ‘problem’, she termed it, to everyone, and Marehis joining them might do just that. If not to the Advisors, then to her party.

“I am your handmaiden da’len, and you’re going to Val Royeaux of all places. You will be addressing the Grand Clerics, and I have little doubt you will end up meeting with potential allies for the Inquisition either through Lady Josephine’s arrangement, or purely from the interest you’ll likely generate from your visit alone. If your companions raise suspicion, I’m merely tagging along to braid your hair, command your wardrobe, and make sure you eat with your mouth closed.”

That argument won her a grateful smile, and Ellie’s agreement to the arrangement.

They left with Adan’s promise that by the time they returned to Ellie’s cabin for the evening, his assistants will have dropped off potion that would help her sleep—they, like the others, would have to be brewed, and Adan would see to them first. Then he’d clapped the girl on the shoulder, and even gave it a reassuring squeeze, an act not exactly characteristic of Adan, but it left Ellie looking a bit less grave.

Tomorrow, Marehis would retrieve the rest of Ellie’s potion, as well as instructions for when and how each potion should be taken.

By the time their meeting with Adan was over, they were running late for dinner—if only by a few minutes.

“We can reschedule—they’ll understand. You just got back from a long trip, we can just say you’re tired and decided to eat in your quarters, take an early evening,” Marehis offered as they left the Healers.

But Ellie shook her head, “No, I promised. Plus getting together tonight was my idea that’d be pretty crummy of me to ditch out at the last minute, it’s bad enough we’re late. I uh…” she paused, but nodded her head as she said, “I feel a lot better now, having talked with Healer Adan. And dinner with everyone will be nice—we’ll have serious stuff to talk about, but they’re my friends too, you know? I like spending time with them.”

“Then dinner with your friends it is,” Marehis conceded.

“And my best friend,” Ellie added, popping up on her toes to kiss Marehis on the cheek before linking arms with her. Marehis smiled, and while the admission was a little childish, she did feel honored, and there was a certain warmth settling in her chest that Ellie put there.

She loved this girl, loved her dearly, would die for her. She couldn’t imagine what sort of Maker would allow her to suffer something that deadened her own emotions, while she could still go around freely invoking strong, positive, blessings of feeling in those around her. She made Marehis happy.

And when they entered the Tavern, it was plain as day that she did the same with every
single one of her companions.

They entered the Tavern to see Blackwall, Cassandra, Varric, and Solas already seated at Ellie’s usual table by the fire. They looked to be sitting in mildly awkward silence, Cassandra was keeping careful watch of the entrances to the Tavern in search of Ellie’s arrival, sort of half-seated like she was ready to jump up to go looking for the girl. Marehis was grateful—she knew the Lady Seeker took her job of protecting Ellie seriously, but seeing how the woman relaxed upon seeing them enter the Tavern, it spoke to the fact that Ellie truly had someone working with her in the field who held the same regard for Ellie that Marehis did.

“Eleanor, Marehis,” Cassandra greeted warmly, raising a hand to wave them over to the table.

Announcing their arrival worked much like a spell.

“Tumbles!” “Ellie!” “My lady.”

Varric, Solas, and Blackwall’s own greetings overlapped each other, at Ellie’s appearance, suddenly everyone at the table was feeling chatty, the awkward air immediately dissipated, replaced with warmth and comradery and genuine excitement.

“You worried us there for a minute, Tumbles, bout broke my heart—I thought you might be standing us up,” Varric joked.

“More fool the woman who stands up Varric Tethras,” Ellie quipped. And then she apologized, “I am sorry we’re late, I lost track of time,” and she caught Cassandra’s eye before saying, “I had something I had to do.”

“Good,” Cassandra said shortly, but relieved. “It went well?”

Ellie nodded. “Yeah,” she said quietly. Reaching her hand out across the table, “Thank you.”

Cassandra returned the gesture, taking Ellie’s hand and squeezing it gently.

The men at the table didn’t dare question their vague conversation, and instead, they started chatting about their upcoming trip to Val Royeaux. They ate as they talked, Marehis keeping careful watch over how much her ward was or wasn’t eating. She was pleasantly surprised to find Ellie steadily eating, though maybe going to see Adan had been more like ripping off a sticky bandage, she seemed…hopeful.

It was Ellie who casually brought up the possibility that Marehis would join them on their trip.

“Since we’re going to Val Royeaux, Marehis and I thought I might need her help. I mean, I’m going to be talking to some important people, in front of Orlesians,” Ellie explained, as she skewered a bite of chicken onto her fork, “and we all know I wasn’t exactly the picture of elegance and grace traipsing across the Hinterlands with mud on my everything and this haybale on my head.” She used her chicken adorned fork to point at her hair before popping the bite into her mouth.

She did manage chewing with her mouth closed the entire meal, which was a lovely habit she’d apparently perfected during her time spent being less than elegant in the Hinterlands, Marehis mused.
“We’ll have to run it by Leliana and the other Advisors of course,” Cassandra said, “but I see no problem with it. Marehis will be a welcome addition to our party. Don’t you agree, Solas?”

Seeker of Truth indeed. Marehis nearly choked on her own food when the words left Cassandra’s mouth, but she suppressed the urge, opting instead to quietly take a sip of water, shooting Solas a glance over the rim of her mug.

“Oh, very funny, Lady Seeker,” Solas was quick to jest. “Yes, I suppose it would be nice to have another Elf traveling with us, we certainly can’t outnumber our human counterparts, but at the very least we’ll tip the balance of the Dwarf-Elf ratio.”

“Damn it Chuckles don’t abandon ship—we have a real nice Dwarf-Elf coalition formed here! What happened to the brotherhood? What happened to the love?” Varric dramatically lamented, one hand clutching at his heart while the other gripped Solas’s shoulder.

“You can join a coa-whatever with me, and my weird glowing hand,” Ellie offered.

“Ha! Hear that?” Varric asked, straightening up and popping the collar of his coat, “Keep your Elf woman, Chuckles, I’ve got Tumbles on my team. Her hand can seal Rifts and double as a nightlight!”

“Yes, we should advertise her Mark for its nightlight capabilities, then we will most surely have the allies flocking to join us,” Cassandra drawled.

“’s’why I signed on,” Blackwall offered with a shrug. Cassandra actually turned her head to look at the man as if trying to gauge if he was serious.

That set silence over their table.

“Did Hero just make a joke?” Varric asked.

Ellie started laughing, which held a sort of domino effect, setting her companions laughing with her. And Marehis saw, she could see the genuine light in her eyes as she laughed. Really, truly laughed, for perhaps the first time in a long while.

Ellie was hopeful, and so was she. Just as she faced the Breach, and braved the Hinterlands, her ward would see this through.

When they all finally settled down with their chatter, it was only because Ellie yawned. Marehis hadn’t even realized until then that they’d taken up lively conversation until the late hours of the evening—four, nearly five hours spent alternating between their plans for Val Royeaux, and just…talking. They recounted to Marehis some of their adventures in the Hinterlands and worked their way up to their excitement for the coming week’s lessons. Varric was excited to actually be incorporated into Ellie’s school schedule. Blackwall as well was pleased to announce he’d be instructing Ellie in Horseback Riding, which Marehis realized was probably why Josephine had advised she would be sending her a rather different schedule for Ellie to follow in the coming days.

They said their goodbyes and went their separate ways, though Solas said he’d be along after them in a moment—let Ellie prepare for bed, and then he would come meditate with her before she went to sleep.
When they returned to Ellie’s cabin, there was sleeping potion waiting for her. Marehis crossed the room quickly and took the bottle up to examine it for any possible interference before unstopping it and sniffing its contents—Valerian root, lavender, Elf-Root…vanilla? Valerian root could be pretty ghastly tasting, was Adan going soft?—before smoothly passing it off to Ellie. She didn’t want to alert the girl to just how many different ways people had or would use to kill her—she kept most of her security efforts subtle, especially in regard to things she would rather Ellie not become wary of. She didn’t want the girl growing leery of eating or drinking for fear she may be poisoned.

Ellie downed the potion in one swallow and Marehis helped her get ready for bed. She was already visibly drowsy by the time Solas rapped at the door, ready to begin what he informed Marehis would be a nightly ritual of meditation.

Ellie and Solas sat quietly before the fireplace while Marehis wrote up her daily report to Leliana. By the time she was finished, Ellie was practically asleep where she sat, Marehis had to give the girl a hand up and tuck her in—she was fast asleep the moment her head hit the pillow.

Marehis was conflicted again. She would be sending a runner with her report to Leliana anyway. Perhaps she should stay the night in Ellie’s cabin, sleep in a chair in case the potion and meditation didn’t keep her nightmares at bay and she needed comfort in the night.

Solas, in a moment of boldness wrapped an arm around Marehis’s waist, pulling her back against him, and pressed a kiss to her hair.

“Come. She should sleep soundly, and you should seek to do the same. Your job requires a level of alertness lack of sleep will dampen.”

“I suppose you’re right,” Marehis said, taking his hand and leading him away from Ellie’s bedside. She released his hand when they met the door and stepped out into the frigid night air. Guards were already at their stations and Marehis instructed if they heard Ellie wake in the night, they should seek Marehis out as she handed off her report to the scout waiting to take it to Leliana for her.

She walked Solas back to his cabin, the man quietly commenting that it was an added luxury this arrangement allowed—Solas meditating with Ellie just before she went to bed gave them the opportunity to spend time together at the end of the day.

She opened the door to Solas’s cabin, inviting herself in.

“I take it Ellie went to see Healer Adan,” Solas said, speaking of the thing weighing on her mind. “The Seeker saw fit to inform us, should Ellie need help or reach out to us on her own.”

Before she could answer, his arms were around her, pulling her back with her head tucked under his chin.

“You’ve done everything you can, Marehis, you’ve done well,” he commended her, holding her more tightly. She realized she was crying then, tears falling onto the soft material of his shirt.

“I just feel so useless—I can kill assassins, prevent her being poisoned, I can thwart attempts to bring her harm before a hand has been laid on her. But I can’t actually do anything to fight off something inside of her, I can’t hit or kill disease. Elgar’nan she’s been dealing with this since she woke from the Breach and I saw, I saw all the signs there I just didn’t know what it was.”

“You are brilliant, but you cannot be expected to know everything,” Solas said, “You may
not be able to challenge illness to a duel, but you can watch over her, help her follow the path to recovery, keep her counsel—potions, hugs, a listening ear, all of these things are blows against this particular beast. You’re doing all you can to help her now, and she will get through this, we’ll see to that,” Solas promised.

Marehis leaned back to look up into his face then. “Ellie is right, you are ‘so very, very smart’,” she complimented, smiling up at him. “It was one of her selling points on why we should ‘totally date’.”

“Oh really now?”

“Yes, along with your gentle mannerisms and the fact that you said you didn’t mind my presence ‘at all’.”

“Hmm, I don’t huh?” and then he captured her lips in a kiss.

No, he didn’t mind her presence at all.

8am combat training, meet Cassandra and Commander Cullen at Haven’s Gate

10am horseback riding, meet Warden Blackwall at the forge

Noon—Lunch in the Chantry, see that the Herald leaves her lessons with time to bathe and change—I recommend Orlesian colors. Lunch will be held with the Marquis Louis Marchand and his wife Jacquelin, reverent and affluent members of the Chantry, they wish to meet the Herald personally before opening their home to our lady and her party while they are in Val Royeaux.

Topics to avoid: conflict with the Imperium, the current discourse over the Orlesian throne (should this topic come up, the Herald is to remain neutral but if she must, she should compliment without committing, in favor of Gaspard de Chalons). Also, please avoid anything to do with the color yellow.

2pm Street Smarts 101—Professor Tethras will await the lady Herald in what he insists I take note of as ‘the world’s classroom’: The Tavern.

3pm See Solas in his cabin for Magical training

5pm onwards, free time, dinner, etc.

10pm Nightly Meditation

A runner brought the Herald’s schedule to Marehis as soon as she rose for the day. She worked to commit the thing to memory as she made the brisk walk from the servants’ quarters to Healer Adan’s cabin. The man was already up for the day…though perhaps he hadn’t gone to sleep at all, he made a fine example of looking like death warmed-up. The haggard man was stoppering up the last of the batch he’d prepared, blue potion in triangular inch tall vials, when she entered the cabin. He put them into a bag that clinked as they knocked against other vials, and then handed her written instructions in case she needed it for later reference. He pulled out four vials—three tiny ones, and one regular sized vial.
Yellow for depression, white for upset stomach, blue for calming nerves, and the larger vials contained purplish potion she recognized from the night before as sleeping draught. Ellie was to take the yellow one with food every morning, and he made up enough white and blue potion to be used a maximum daily amount Ellie could take—four times daily, but they were to be used only as needed. *Needed* for the stomach draughts was stomach aches of course, the blue should only be used if she was experiencing debilitating panic or directly before bed.

He would schedule an appointment for Ellie to see him upon her return from Val Royeaux for a checkup and see where she stood then. If there was any need for adjustment, they would do so and have a standing appointment every month until such a time it was no longer necessary. If she or Marehis had any questions or concerns his door was open anytime he assured her…as he was very insistently ushering her out, so he could have a moments rest before quote ‘Mother Gisselle sends her Chantry goons to hassle him for free labor. Pious thugs!’.

She gulped down a bowl of oatmeal and a cup of coffee while Flissa put together a tray of breakfast for Ellie, the sun had just barely peaked over the horizon, and she was well on her way to her lady’s cabin to dismiss the night watchmen and wake the Herald for her busy day.

Her heart stopped for a moment when she saw the guards were not at their post, and it took less than a second to assess that there was no struggle, no sign of a fight.

The tray and bag of potion were abandoned in the snow as Marehis rushed to the cabin, blades in her hands as she kicked open the door—it had been mostly closed but unlatched, it knocked into the wall with a *bang* followed by Ellie screaming and the sound of a blade being unsheathed zipped through the air.

“Oh, it’s you.”

Two voices, the same sentence, spoken in unison, with equal measures of surprise and relief from both parties.

“Seeker Cassandra,” Marehis said as she nodded to the Nevarran woman standing in the middle of Ellie’s cabin with sword raised to defend her.

“Marehis,” Cassandra greeted her in kind. The women cautiously sheathed their blades.

Ellie was sitting on the floor in front of the fire, peeking around Cassandra’s legs.

“Is…is everything alright?” she asked, timidly.

“The guards weren’t at their post,” Marehis spoke blandly, she wasn’t sure if she was still outraged, or if she was relieved. Her panic was hardly quelled, *Fendehis*. It had certainly not been alright.

“I dismissed them when I arrived and was going to stay,” Cassandra explained.

Oh had she.

Evidently, Ellie had taken to rising when Cassandra did while they traveled and joining the Seeker for silent prayer and stretching. When Cassandra woke to do so this morning she’d checked in with the Herald just in case she cared to join her still, found her awake and they’d been sitting in prayer when Marehis burst in.

“Very good, please, carry on, I’ll see to breakfast,” Marehis said lightly, leaving them.
The bag of potion was thankfully intact, nothing broken, nothing tampered with. The tray she’d collected for her lady was slopped in the snow. It was no great matter, she had to return to the Tavern to collect breakfast for Lady Cassandra anyway. She gathered the mess on the tray and offered her sincerest apologies to Flissa who merely laughed it off and happily prepared another for the Herald and her guest.

Marehis…well she wasn’t about to start a fight with the Lady Seeker. Ellie was very religious she’d found, and she must enjoy the morning ritual if she chose to wake so early to partake in it. Marehis was hardly going to deny her something that could bring her comfort. But this…she did not think she could laugh this off as Flissa had. This could not happen again, and Cassandra would be made to understand that. Elgar’nan, she’d thought the guards had been compromised—either paid off to abandon their post or they themselves gone rogue. She thought that she was too late, and Ellie had already been captured, been killed.

The solution was presented by Ellie herself, upon Marehis’s return, in the form of an invitation. Marehis did rise early enough, she could join them in their morning routine—they could all eat breakfast together, either in her cabin or the Tavern whichever they preferred—she knew Marehis was religious too, and Dalish gods respected prayer just as the Maker did she was sure.

“I pray to Elgar’nan too already, anyway,” Ellie said with a shrug, as if to suggest Marehis’s addition of the Dalish religion would be no big deal.

“You do?” Cassandra asked with mild surprise as she and Ellie took seats on the floor and ate their breakfast.

“Of course! I ask the Maker to watch over you and Varric and Blackwall, and well, everyone including Solas and Marehis. But they’re Elves, so I ask Elgar’nan to watch over them too, you know, just to be safe,” Ellie explained, though quick to assure them both, “I don’t think the Maker is racist or anything, I just wouldn’t want to be disrespectful to the Dalish gods—just asking the Maker feels like I only credit him for their collaborative work.”

This resulted in an interesting conversation where Ellie laid out that she didn’t need the Chantry or the Chant of Light to tell her the Maker existed, she knew he was her god in her soul. That didn’t mean he was the only god, even though the Chant made sure to say he was because ‘that was the deal’ struck by Andraste to save mankind from empty afterlives.

“We,” Ellie said gesturing to herself and Cassandra, “have to hail the Maker as the one and only god over humanity,” she stressed, “we’re locked in, thems the rules. But Humans aren’t the only people in the world. Qunari, Elves, Dwarves—if any of them choose to declare the Maker their god, become Andrasten, cool, they fall under his godly jurisdiction—but they all have their own religions they can turn to. It would be foolish to think they were praying to thin air—not more than we are when we pray to the Maker.”

“I hadn’t thought of it in that way,” Cassandra said slowly, working the thought around in her mind, with no small measure of doubt true, but she was taking it under consideration.

Regardless, Marehis agreed, she would join them. She would handle the change of guards as she was supposed to, every morning, and see her lady’s security was uncompromised.

The moment Cassandra finished eating she bid them good morning, saying she’d see them in a bit for Ellie’s lessons, Marehis retrieved a yellow vial of potion from the box she’d placed on Ellie’s desk when she brought them their breakfast and slipped it into Ellie’s hand when the girl handed the finished tray up to her.
“You’ll take that every morning after breakfast,” Marehis said, quickly relaying the instructions Adan had given and showing her the little vials, which she immediately regarded with relief—Ellie had apparently worried she’d be toting around ‘tons’ of ‘great honking bottles’ across the empire and back, she liked how discrete the tiny draughts would be. She could take them without drawing attention.

“You’re to let me know if you have need of the others during the day, I’ll have them on hand,” Marehis promised.

Ellie nodded and unstopped the bottle, giving the yellow concoction a little sniff.

“Well…healthy brain chemistry smells like sweaty socks,” she said a bit doubtfully, but she downed the first of her potion without further hesitation. “Doesn’t taste like sweaty socks though, so, neat.”

“Very good, my lady,” Marehis said.

Ellie changed into her practice clothing, and Marehis briefed her on her day’s schedule as they made the short trip to Haven’s gates. Marehis sat up on the high ledge that bordered the steps and watched over her charge as she trained.

The improvement was great, since her first week’s lessons in Haven. Her time spent in the Hinterlands had obviously…well, she’d gotten a lot of practice in, apparently. It made Marehis proud, especially when she clocked Cullen good right in the jaw and caught the former Templar by surprise, but she was also extremely glad she would be accompanying her to Val Royeaux. The reports she’d read, stories she’d heard, Ellie had been in such great danger. Marehis would feel better about it all if she were with her, capable of physically being able to help and protect her in the field.

Another improvement was found in the fact that Ellie at least waited until the end of her sparing match with Cullen to check if she’d hurt him. It had been a concerning habit Cullen and Cassandra had worked to break her of—they couldn’t have her stopping mid-fight in the field to ask if she’d hurt her opponent when…the whole point…was yes, hurt your opponent.

The man just rubbed at his sore jaw and leveled her a smile, clapping her shoulder as he commended her for her improvement.

And then Ellie made a rather enthusiastic statement that the Lady Seeker and Commander made just the best couple of teachers she could ask for, they were just so very good at instructing her and she was so grateful for them.

It would seem she was back at playing matchmaker again. Cullen and Cassandra, being her chosen targets this time. Marehis bit her lip to keep from laughing as the Seeker and Commander began demonstrating a new move for Ellie to master. Ellie usually needed to see the move in action a few times before jumping in and trying it out for herself, but this time she scratched the back of her head and gave them an apologetic “Oh gosh, I’m sorry, I just don’t get it—could you try that one more time?”

One more time became three more times before Ellie, ‘finally got it’!

Elgar’nan, and the girl thought Varric was a nuisance for encouraging her to see that hunter in the Hinterlands. If Cullen found out he’d just been grappled into a chokehold half a dozen times for the purposes of manipulating him into an inter-organizational romance with the Lady Seeker, he may see fit to wring Ellie’s neck.
Marehis wouldn’t blame him, she’d certainly stop him, but she wouldn’t blame him.

Though he might just thank her, should things work out. Marehis had to admit…she was rather happy with her current rapport with Solas. She wasn’t necessarily broadcasting the relationship for all the world, because…well…Solas was a rather discrete person in general, as was she, and she didn’t want Ellie to find out and take it into her head to try and give Marehis time alone with the man—evade her handmaiden or anything else that might put the girl in harms way in an attempt to give she and Solas space. Her responsibility to Ellie was more important than any personal relationship, and things as they were, were more than ideal.

Blackwall came and stood beside the ledge where Marehis sat as Ellie’s lessons went on, her time with Cullen and Cassandra would be up soon. The Warden watched the last of their training session with keen interest.

“Heya Blackwall!” Ellie called as her last match came to an end, throwing up her arm and waving at the Warden before jogging to join him at Marehis’s side.

“Good morning, Lady Herald,” he greeted politely with a nod. “You fought well.”

“Oh golly, thanks!” Ellie said, “Marehis says I have lessons with you at 10 is it that time already?”

“Indeed it is, shall we get started?” Blackwall asked.

“Uh-huh, lead the way!” Ellie said before turning around and waving at her combat instructors conversing on the practice field, “Thanks again, I’ll see you two later!”

Cassandra and Cullen waved them off, and Ellie and Marehis followed Blackwall to the horse pen beside the forge.

“Hi Russy!” Ellie cooed, petting her horse’s face and pecking him on the cheek. “How do you like Haven, boy? Are you having a good day?” Her horse huffed affirmatively. “Good.”

Blackwall hoisted Ellie’s saddle onto the horse, but he stood back and let her secure the saddle herself, though he did double check to make sure she’d done so tightly enough before giving her a hand to get up into the seat.

Marehis joined her, slipping into the saddle behind Ellie, as Blackwall mounted his own steed and led them around the frozen lake, past the abandoned Healer’s cabin, and to the area they’d found the Druffalo in.

It looked a bit different now, there were little obstacles set up in the clearing, log stacks of varying heights to jump, and a line of poles to weave a path around.

Blackwall, Harriott and Horse Master Dennet had teamed up in the early hours of the morning and constructed the course for Ellie to practice on. They made sure to keep it at a distance from the larger portion of clearing where the Druffalo roamed, but they could be seen grazing and playing.

“I discussed criteria for your lessons with the Lady Josephine and Cassandra,” Blackwall explained, “We feel you should be made prepared for an emergency, should you ever have to ride off on your own to evade capture or get to safety quickly, working on maintaining your seat even at great speeds or jumping could make all the difference.”

The Warden ran the course first, giving Ellie an example to follow before suggesting the
girl make an attempt at handling the lower sets of jumps a few times, though Marehis may want to sit out for that.

Marehis dismounted and Blackwall, actually did as well, dusting the snow off of a rock so Marehis could sit, before he went to Ellie and gave her instruction. Advice on how best to hold herself to keep on her horse, having her practice lifting herself in the saddle, supporting her weight in the stirrups and lifting her butt off her seat.

She tried out the smaller jumps, wide eyed, when her horse completed the first jump she’d let out a surprised yelp, falling back into the saddle, and laying forward hugging her steed with her elbows, as if clinging to him so would keep her from being dismounted.

“Up, Ellie, sit back up in your saddle girl, you’re fine,” Blackwall called out firmly.

Ellie did as she was told, it took her a moment, but she sat up and did the jumps again, and again, until she could do so without so much trepidation in her form.

Blackwall waved her down after a while and Russel trotting up to meet him, Ellie as breathless as she got when training with Cassandra and Cullen.

“That was good Ellie, you feel more confident with the lower jumps for now, yes?” Blackwall asked.

Ellie nodded as she caught her breath.

“Landing sort of knocks the wind out of you huh?”

“Just a little,” Ellie admitted with a grin.

“It’ll get better with time and practice,” Blackwall promised, “Lady Josephine said I would need to keep our first lesson short, something about needing you presentable for lunch? That sounds a bit concerning.”

Concerning?

“Well, the Inquisition has been making a point of fattening me up,” Ellie returned, jovially, “consistent meals, snacks, the works.”

Elgar’nan Humans had a morbid sense of humor sometimes.

“Ellie will be eating, not being eaten,” Marehis cut into their banter, “we should be heading back, you definitely need a bath, da’len.”

“I could really use some water too please.”

Of course she could, she’d done nothing but sweat for hours now. Marehis should have been prepared for that. Cassandra had given Ellie her own canteen ‘for keeps’ Ellie said, when they met, and the girl kept it on her at all times in the field, but she wasn’t in the habit of taking it with her in Haven. Marehis should have thought to fill it and bring it along—she’d brought Ellie coffee to start her day since it helped the girl wake up and gave her a nice jolt in preparation for her combat lessons, but that wouldn’t do anything to hydrate her—the potion she’d taken would dehydrate her, she should have had her take on water with it.

“Here.”
Blackwall was handing up his own waterskin to Ellie and she smiled gratefully and gulped down...well, Marehis certainly hoped it was water or she’d knock the Warden into next week.

But Ellie was all smiles and gratitude, and apologies that she hadn’t thought to bring her own water supply, and did Warden Blackwall need a new water skin because this one seemed ‘oldish, no offence’?

“None taken, I suppose I’ll keep an eye out for a new one,” Blackwall said lightly.

This resulted in, the very moment the horses were unsaddled and receiving water of their own, Ellie bounding up the steps of Haven and going directly to Seggrit’s little shop. She and the man had an interesting rapport, from what Marehis had seen before Ellie left for the Hinterlands.

“Canteen. Big, for the field. Fair warning—my haggling skills consist of crying and shin-kicking.”

“Brat, you’re a brat you know that, Lady Herald?” Seggrit sniped. Ellie held his gaze, her grin never slipping, and he sighed. “Fine. Here,” he handed her a canteen that did look worlds better than the Warden’s water skin, “Just take the damn thing. I don’t need Andraste telling the Maker I can’t play nice with her whelp.”

“And Andraste blesses you for it,” Ellie promised solemnly. “Especially if you wouldn’t mind having it run over to Warden Blackwall, he’s at Harritt’s.”

“Fine.”

Ellie leaned across the table, supporting herself on the palms of her hands, and the man very belligerently rolled his eyes, but ducked down so she could kiss him on the cheek.

“Mwah! Thanks Seg, you’re the best!”

“Yeah yeah, keep it to yourself.”

Adan was a life saver...he’s a Healer so that’s sort of his job description already, but Ellie had an ever-growing appreciation for the man and his healing capabilities.

Marehis did a great job getting Ellie ready for her lunch meeting with the...Marquis Louie? Louis. Louis! Yeah, him, and his wife Jaqueline. Anyway, Ellie was still beyond nervous, so much so she thought she might sick up rather than eat anything, and her stomach just burned horribly. The white potion—thick tasteless, nonetheless glorious gunk—had soothed the burn immediately. Maker bless Adan.

Lady Josephine met them outside the Chantry. She wanted to take a moment to quiz Ellie on topics to avoid and lean towards and gave her an appraising once-over to make sure she was suitable before throwing open the Chantry doors and introducing their guests to the Herald of Andraste.

Their Ambassador hadn’t thought it proper for the Marquis and his wife to eat in the Tavern, and the Inquisition ‘sorely lacked a formal dining hall’ so, her solution was clearing the Chantry hall—the entire main corridor of the Chantry acted as a dining room, with a long table in
the center encased in a white table cloth—Ellie couldn’t see the table legs, and she thought perhaps Lady Josephine did so to hide the fact that they weren’t eating off a mahogany Orlesian made whatever table, but simply the same tables they had in the Tavern just lined up and covered to look fancy. A bit drastic, Ellie thought, there would be so few of them, was this really necessary? Maybe their guests would enjoy the genuine Inquisition experience?

Most likely not though, Ellie soon realized.

Orlesians were…an interesting people. Madam Florna had only been the tip of the iceberg. Her noble guests were wearing masks. Creepy, porcelain masks that covered their entire faces save their mouths. For eating. Which was nice. Except the food offered was just as strange as her guests.

Appetizers came out as two snails in some kind of green sauce. The salad course consisted of a single spinach leaf, an olive, a radish, and a sprig of lemon grass. Then a tiny tiny bowl of what looked like cream with rosemary floating on top? Tiny, like a bowl one would put bird feed in. There were seven courses total, each stranger than the last, but Ellie followed Lady Josephine’s lead.

Who did this? Who made this? Who thought this was how people were supposed to eat? Flissa would never do this to her, blessed woman, where was she and why was she sitting idle by while someone came into Haven with their sociopathic idea of a menu? If Lady Josephine hadn’t been there for Ellie to take cue from, she’d have eaten each course in single bites—but Lady Josephine caught her eye and very purposefully took teensy tiny bites of each and every course.

Thankfully, while their guests were eccentric and fancy, they were still kind. Theirs were some of the names Madam Gisselle had given Leliana. While they had not the political weight within the Chantry itself, they were affluent members of society and devout followers of the Maker. They had a ‘mid-spring’ home in Val Royeaux they were considering allowing Ellie and her party use while mediating with the Chantry Clerics.

“We have just heard so many rumors of the Hearld of Andraste,” Marquis Louis said, “we wished to see you for ourselves before committing to aiding your cause.”

“Perfectly understandable, we appreciate you taking the time to meet with us, your visit has been most anticipated,” Lady Josephine said.

“Oh yes, thank you, I really am glad to meet you both,” Ellie spoke up. She wasn’t really sure what she should be doing or saying, Josephine had given them a tour of Haven, and the couple hadn’t asked Ellie many questions.

But Marquess Jaqueline giggled in delight and looked to her husband, “I for one think the Herald is simply darling,” she crooned, fanning herself with an ornate lace fan…Ellie wasn’t sure the point her mask wasn’t conducive to feeling the simulated breeze. “Isn’t she just darling my love?”

“She’s simply precious, not in the least the haggard peasant that Chancellor Roderick has been trying to make her sound like,” her husband agreed.

Haggard peasant? Peasant, yeah Ellie could give him that, it was more a statement of fact than an insult, but haggard was just straight rude.

“When you show up in Val Royeaux—why you will simply deflate Roderick’s arguments against you.”
“We should send word for the servants to air out the house, prepare it for the Heralds arrival.”

“Oh darling, we must redecorate—all our mid spring home decor is out of season, and opening it pre-spring…hmm, oh I’m so excited we must get started right away.”

It took Ellie a moment to catch up—the Orlesian accent was quite the thing to get a handle on understanding, and the couple spoke so excitedly, so quickly she almost didn’t realize what they meant.

“You’ll let us stay in your home while we’re handling things in Val Royeaux?” she asked for confirmation.

“Oh, most certainly,” Marquis Louis assured, nearly overlapping his wife’s own declaration;

“We would be delighted!”

Ellie looked to Lady Josephine. That meant it had worked, right? She somehow hadn’t embarrassed herself at this fancy schmancy lunch and blown Lady Josephine’s hard work to smithereens?

“Thank you, Marquis Louis, Marquess Jaqueline,” Lady Josephine said, giving Ellie a nod.

Oh! “Yes! Thank you so, so much!”

“Shall we retire to my office to settle the details?”

“Of course,” Marquis Louis said, rising from his seat, which prompted everyone else to do the same.

“Very good, Lady Herald, I believe your next lesson will begin soon. Thank you for taking time out of your busy schedule to meet with our guests,” Lady Josephine said, dipping a curtsy to Ellie.

Taking time out of her busy schedule? Josephine put her schedule together. Though Ellie supposed she wanted the Marquis and Marquess to feel special, like Ellie thought their meeting so important she’d prioritized it regardless of convenience or something.

“It wasn’t a problem,” Ellie said quickly, bowing to her guests, “Thank you again for coming out to see me, if I don’t see you again before you leave, I hope you have a safe journey home. Maker watch over you.”

“Food!”

Varric had been sitting in the Tavern with Blackwall and Solas. The trio ate in relative silence for a while before the Warden started chatting them up about lessons with Ellie. She did well at her horseback riding lesson. Which wasn’t a bad place to start, talking about literally the only thing all three men had in common, their interest in Tumbles’s wellbeing. Solas started talking about the implications of Ellie getting better at riding, that she may be capable of casting from
horseback, and perhaps they should have some form of joint lesson sometime to test the theory, once the kid got a better handle on staying in the saddle.

Varric had been disappointed when Hero showed up in Ellie’s stead—apparently, she had some kind of lunch meeting with Orlesian nobility of all things.

Though you wouldn’t think she’d had any lunch the way she burst into the tavern, saw the uneaten roll leftover on Varric’s plate before she saw the men around the roll, shouted ‘Food!’ like she hadn’t seen the stuff in eons, and plopped down in the chair next to Blackwall, across from Varric and Solas. She stole the roll off his plate and started breaking it apart, stuffing it in her mouth.

“Hey there Tumbles, slow your roll…no pun intended,” Varric said.

“Sorry,” Ellie mumbled around a mouthful of bread, raising a hand to cover her mouth as she did. “I think we’re going to starve to death in Orlais.”

“Fancy lunch, tiny portions?” Varric asked.

“The tiniest! I’ve eaten better out of the garbage.”

Varric could see the question on Blackwall’s lips and shook his head, trying to subtly motion with his hand to not say anything. Poor bastard was still new. Ellie did this from time to time—just casually dropped little details about her life before the Inquisition like they were no big deal when they were usually just straight up depressing. Her companions had just sort of let these things fall light, Ellie wasn’t distressed by them, so they didn’t want to bring it to her attention that sometimes her upbringing was just…sad. Hero was gonna get a swift kick in the family jewels if he brought that fact to the kid’s attention.

“Orlesians are nuts kid, you sure you wanna trek all the way out to Val Royeaux to play nice with the Chantry?” Varric asked.

“Not really but we kind of have to,” Ellie said with a sigh, but she perked up to report, “The Marquis and Marquess were super sweet though, they’re going to let us use their home while we’re in Val Royeaux, and they want to ally with the Inquisition,” her face scrunched up a bit when she said, “They think I’m ‘just darling’.”

“Ahh Tumbles, don’t take it personal, you’re like the Inquisition’s mascot. And just like any mascot you’re measured on a scale from ferocious beast to cute and sweet. You fall closer to the cute side, unless someone tries to get between you and your daily caffeine intake.”

“Or another roll, you think Flissa has any left? I can feel my soul dethatching from my mortal form,” she lamented as she laid her head down on the table.

“I believe the Orlesians love of the dramatic must have rubbed off on you, Ellie,” Solas teased warmly, turning a page of the little book he’d been pouring over since he’d finished his meal.

Marehis appeared then, Varric hadn’t seen her come into the Tavern, though the Elf woman was always attached to Tumbles at the hip, she must have come in when Ellie had, just gone in search of more food for the kid. And for her as well, she had a bowl of stew for herself, and a plate of rolls she set in front of Ellie before sitting down next her. Though the moment Marehis was seated, she tore open a roll and used it to sandwich a few pieces of meat from her stew in, before handing it to Ellie.
“Have some protein as well, Elgar’nan your meal plan has been wildly derailed today, I’ll have to talk to Lady Josephine about scheduling meet-and-greets that don’t involve snails.”

Orlesian bastards. “They made you eat snails, Tumbles?”

Ellie’s nose crinkled up and she nodded her head as she set about eating what her shadow put in front of her. Shadow, huh, maybe that would be Marehis’s nickname? His first instinct had been to go with something that represented her stabbing tendencies—but Varric wasn’t sure if anything that could be related to blades, or knives for that matter, could be considered racist. But thinking back, it had been what he’d first called her—someone who was hired to shadow Ellie for her safety. It sort of fit, may even help with her cover—anyone hearing him call her that would assume he was making fun of the fact the wisp of an Elf woman was following Ellie around like a tag-along, an eager servant living to please her ladyship.

He checked his pocket watch then, he was pretty sure he wasn’t scheduled to start lessons with Ellie for a little while longer. But the second his watch struck II, these losers had to beat it. Chuckles and Hero already got their time to teach the kid, he didn’t want them clunking up his time teaching her the most valuable life lessons he could impart upon another person-being.

Mostly, he just didn’t think the Warden or Apostate would have the same level of appreciation he did for the finer art of lock picking, or…well, it wouldn’t kill the kid to have some practical street skills either. Being able to swipe stuff off of people on the sly. Knowing how to lie well, no matter the circumstance—Ellie had a weird mix of being able to lie convincingly one second, and horribly the next. Kid had a guilt complex—if she thought her lie would protect someone she could get it off without a hitch, but if she felt guilty about lying things went sideways.

Shit ever really hit the fan with this Inquisition, someday she might have to lie to people she considered her friends, people she would feel guilty about lying to—like Seeker, or Curly—in order to get out in once piece, non-tranquil and away from any newly reinstated Circle.

Anyway. Ellie was also way too trusting, she would also need to learn how to spot a lie. Varric might not always be around to shoot people trying to take advantage of the kid.

Ellie chatted them up about her little lunch date Ruffles arranged with the Marquis some more, but then she got on to the topic of her lesson with Blackwall—she’d had fun even though jumping was ‘scary but kind of thrilling’ and he’d been ‘super sweet’ to let her use his water skin when she got thirsty, and had Seggrit sent him his replacement canteen yet?

Huh, Varric had noticed the Warden had some new hardware on his hip. Nice new canteen.

Hero got real flustered, his face was so hairy there was hardly anything visible to turn blush—man practically had beard up to his eyebrows—but the little jagged points of visible cheekbone glowed bright red.

“My lady it was hardly worth the trouble, I…I will not have you paying my way, what do I owe?” he haltingly demanded to know.

Tumbles strikes again, Maker’s breath, he hoped the kid hadn’t just dumped out the contents of her purse and given Seggrit a promotion to boot in exchange for something for Blackwall. Shit. If the kid was so pressed to do something about it, Varric would have bought the sorry sap a new whatever.

But then, Ellie giggled and waved the Warden off with,
“Oh gosh, it wasn’t any trouble. Seggrit gave it to me, free of charge. Unless you count a kiss on the cheek as currency.”

Kiss? On the cheek was just barely okay, and it sounded like she’d kissed the older man, but he’d punch the daylights out of Seggrit if that big human oaf thought it appropriate to put the moves on Tumbles.

“That was after you informed the man your haggling tactics would be crying and shin kicking,” Marehis added drily.

Oh, shit Tumbles did know how to negotiate, at least on a basic level. He could work with that.

“Point is, don’t feel badly, it wasn’t any trouble and you needed it, just consider it an early Wintersend* gift,” Ellie said, leaning over she rested her chin on Blackwall’s shoulder and hit him with some straight up Mabari puppy eyes. Kid had all kinds of tools in her bargaining arsenal. Nothing that would cut it in the big-time, but he’d get her thinking like a cut-throat business woman.

“Very well,” Hero reluctantly agreed.

“Yay!” she said, before sitting upright in her seat and turning her attention to Varric. “I have lessons with you next yeah?”

Varric grinned. “Yeah, Tumbles, it’s about that time,” he said, checking his watch. “Hey Chuckles, Hero. Hit the bricks.”

Leliana had received so many resources from their success in the Hinterlands, she’d been able to procure proper lockpicking sets, little leather pouches full of anything one might need to tease a lock open. When Varric floated the idea of teaching Ellie to pick locks her way, she passed along two such kits to him.

In a summation, these kits were wicked sweet.

“Oh wow!” Ellie said upon opening the leather pouch Varric set in front of her, brilliant smile on her face, “Thanks so much this is sweet of you, Varric!” and then, looking up at him with just a little bit of uncertainty, “Uh…what are they for?”

…

Kid had no clue what she was looking at. For all she knew they were junk. Why did that make him feel like he could have given her a box of rocks and she’d thank him for it? Keep them on a shelf in her cabin and name them? She mentioned Wintersend earlier when placating Hero, but had she ever gotten a present before in her life? She’d been given clothing and armor and weapons from the Inquisition, but those were just things they needed her to have for her job, not gifts for gifts sake.

She was officially on the Wintersend list. He should also figure out when her Name-Day*
is. Shit, wait, it was ‘birthdays’ for Humans, right? He’d check with Ruffles, she might have taken it down for documentation or put it on the calendar or something.

“They’re picks, Tumbles, if I’m gonna teach you how to lockpick you need the tools of the trade.”

“Oh! Cool!” Ellie said brightly.

“You don’t know the half of it.”

He pulled out his own kit and they sat there at their usual table in the Tavern, and he showed her each and every instrument, what they were called, how each one could be used. He unfolded a piece of parchment he’d stuffed in his coat pocket, where he’d jotted down the names, instructions, and even a little labeled picture of the picks for her to keep for reference.

Ellie nodded when he spread the paper out on the table and looked at it with keen interest while he told her she could take it, he’d made it for her to keep for reference.

“Uh, thanks,” she said, carefully folding the parchment as it had been before and when she found her fancy duds from Madam Florna didn’t have pockets, she looked to Marehis who said she’d take care of it and tucked it away in her back pocket.

Then the real fun began—Varric took Ellie and Marehis to the Chantry, down stairs to the basement, it was the only locked doors in the joint. Well, the doors in Haven could be barred, but there weren’t actual locks on the doors except for the few celled doors on the rooms in the basement. And in the dungeon but he didn’t think he’d want to take her there.

Leliana provided keys to the room outside the dungeon. He took out the proper picks and showed Tumbles how it was done. It had admittedly been a while since he’d last cracked open a lock, but he got it open, and then used the keys to lock the door up again.

“Wanna take a swing at it?” Varric asked.

Ellie nodded and crouched before the door. It took five minutes and a little encouragement and instruction from Varric but kid actually did it. Not bad for her first time. They practiced for a while, locking the door and then having Ellie unlock it, and soon she got it down pretty well. Well enough that, should she ever need to, she could break someone out of prison. He’d keep an eye out for other kinds of locks she could take a crack at when they were out and about.

Next, he took her out to the practice field. They used one of Seeker’s beaten-down dummies for target practice, Varric armed with Bianca, and Ellie with their no-longer-secret slingshot. Marehis watched from her favorite vantage point, on the ledge by the steps to Haven’s gate.

He thought she’d get bored of still targets, and she should practice on something that moves, but when he suggested taking aim at the local wildlife Ellie just about turned the slingshot on him.

“No! That’s awful! You leave those poor little nugs alone, Varric Tethras!”

“Alright, alright Tumbles, sheesh.”

“You are the one who wanted a moving target,” Cassandra drawled from where she stood watching them from her usual post by the soldier tents, “perhaps Eleanor should practice on you.”

“The Lady Seeker has a point,” Ellie seemed to be taking the thought under consideration.
“Tumbles!”

“Oh golly, but rocks’d be mean though.”

And then something hit him in the chest. Cold, cold something. It was soft and broke apart on impact and was followed up by two more, and giggling.

Rocks would be mean. Snowballs, apparently, were fair game in Tumble’s book.

“Oh you wanna play it like that, huh?”

Holstering Bianca, he scooped up a handful of snow and pat it down, sending the thing flying blind at Ellie who squealed and dove to take up more ammunition.

It was all fun and games until one of Ellie’s snowballs accidentally flew backwards out of her grasp, and directly into Seeker’s face.

Varric froze, he actually dropped the snowball in his own hand, and Ellie was turned, looking at the Seeker, hands slapped over her mouth as she gasped and waited for Cassandra to react.

If it had been Varric, Seeker would drop-kick him into the next age.

But it was Ellie.

So, Cassandra raised a hand and briskly thumbed the snow off her cheek.

And then in the blink of an eye she’d made a snowball of her own and it smacked Ellie square in the face.

“Oh!” Ellie squealed in surprise before letting out the most delighted laugh.

Snowball fight became a snowball war, then. One between Cassandra and Ellie, verses Varric and Bianca, and Maker bless her, this Bianca didn’t throw snow.

He swore he could hear Marehis openly laughing at his expense as the Human women took turns throwing snow at him, sometimes at each other, but mostly at him while he tried, very valiantly, mind, to fight back, but four arms were better than two.

He didn’t think he’d been happier to see Chuckles, when the Elf became concerned waiting for Ellie to show up at his lesson and gone to investigate what was keeping her.

Maker, it’d been fun—lots of fun. The whole while, Ellie was free and bubbly, like a kid her age should be. But Varric, was an admittedly…not old, but getting there, man. A very wet, cold, not-old man, and he needed hot cider and a maybe a nap. Definitely a nap.

“Having fun, Ellie?” Solas asked, bringing the girl to a halt, “Lady Seeker?”

Cassandra dropped her snowball and dusted snow off her hands as she cleared her throat, mildly embarrassed to be caught participating in something like a snowball fight.

“Target practice, helping Eleanor grow proficient with her aim.”

“Her enemies will cower at her snowball firing prowess, most surely,” oh Chuckles was beyond amused.
But Ellie blushed and looked chagrined. “Sorry, I got carried away goofing around. I’m late for my lesson with you huh?”

Shit, she’d clamed up real quick, like she felt badly that she’d been having fun for a minute. Not feeling guilty for having gotten caught—feeling bad because she’d been doing it in the first place.

Solas waved her concern off. “You are entitled to a bit of fun every now and again, being late to your lessons with me does little harm, in fact I agree with the sentiment Cassandra expressed—not all spells assist you in their casting as far as aiming goes, more difficult casting rely solely on your ability to aim. Snowballs are a safer practice tool than actual spells.”

Thank you Chuckles, leave it to him to be able to serious-up snowball fighting. In this case it worked to make Ellie stop looking so damn guilty. Tumbles really needed to learn it was okay to cut loose sometime and be able to let go of all this Inquisition responsibility bull for a bit.

Ellie looked to him then, “Thanks for teaching me today Varric, I learned a lot.”

“Glad to hear it Tumbles, you did good today, be sure to study that little cheat sheet,” Varric said.

She had kind of a weird look on her face for a moment. That faltering gaze that was one of her major tells tat she was about to lie and felt bad for it. But then she didn’t say anything, she just smiled and nodded and leaned down to kiss Varric on the cheek.

Apologies did not come naturally to the Lady Seeker.

She had found it within herself to apologize before to Eleanor, when it was befitting. In fact she often felt like apologizing to the girl even needlessly, when with others she would not. Because there was no amount of ‘sorries’ in all of Thedas that could cover the grievances Cassandra had to make up for with the girl. She had reviled her before all, labeled her a murderer and a terrorist, imprisoned her unjustly, interrogated her harshly—she had seen the dark purple rings she’d left on Eleanor’s arm, had been sick with horror when Adan pronounced it fractured, but when the girl had spoken of the injury she believed it to be from her fall on the way to the Breach. Cassandra… she wasn’t so sure. But could not bring herself to say so to the girl. It was pointless now after so much time passed…first shame had kept her silent, pushing it ever from her mind, and then the realization that if she did bring it up, Eleanor would either insist Cassandra was mistaken or…or worse. Absolve Cassandra of fault, give her an excuse and forgive her.

She’d had her resoning, in the moment, for the level—Maker, the level she’d nearly taken it to, Leliana’s hand on her arm, halting her Lyrium power, had been an annoyance in the moment, but now she was beyond grateful Eleanor did not live in fear that Cassandra could at any time cause the Lyrium in her blood to burn her into madness.

All of her reasons for her methods, her willingness to inflict her Gift on Eleanor all seemed futile now. She worried her prejudice had gotten the better of her—that she’d seen Eleanor was a mage and jumped to so many horrific conclusions, treated her so very obscenely, because she saw Apostatehood as a mark of evil, darker than the Mark that caused the suspicion that Eleanor may have been responsible for the Conclave.
And after all of that, it was Cassandra’s decisions that foisted the title of Herald upon her, set an impossible task before her. Every loss Eleanor endured, every injury, every disappointment, every level of suffering—physical, mental—she endured for this cause, Cassandra felt responsible. Because she was. It was what was necessary, Eleanor could not be freed from these responsibilities, not while that Mark still burned on her hand, and Cassandra found she could not express how absolutely she regretted their situation.

But she could express her regret in her earlier misstep. She found herself constantly questioning her own capabilities, her own decisions when it came to Eleanor’s care, she always tried her best in the moment, but looking back all she could see was mistake after mistake. And she had seen something like that in Marehis today—saw that the Elf woman felt as Cassandra did, that they had to think of every last thing they could to protect the girl, that their efforts were not nearly enough. That she lived with the fear that someday the small mistakes would lead to the ultimate loss.

So Cassandra Pentaghast stood in wait while Solas and Eleanor completed their nightly meditation, leaning with her back against the wall of the log cabin to the right of Eleanor’s.

The evening guards came and took their places at Eleanor’s door, and shortly after, Marehis emerged with Solas close at her back, and a scout came bounding down the stairs from the Chantry to retrieve Marehis’s nightly report and run it up to Leliana.

“Marehis?” Cassandra addressed the Elf woman who…well she’d seen Cassandra, she was hardly unobservant. Even if Cassandra had been hiding, she was certain the Elf woman would have been aware of her presence. She had been almost pointedly ignoring her, though she did look to Cassandra as she approached. “If you would not mind the intrusion, I wish to speak with you,” Cassandra said.

Marehis nodded and looked to Solas, the Elf man giving them both a regal looking nod of farewell before he went on ahead to his cabin.

“Here?” Marehis asked, shortly.

Ahh. Marehis had been cordial with her earlier, but Cassandra had suspected, rightly so, that the Elf woman was indeed, hmm Varric would term it ‘pissed off’ with her.

Cassandra cleared her throat, trying to go for politeness. “If you would walk with me?”

Marehis did not say yes, in fact her jaw clenched like she was restraining herself from yelling at the Seeker—if only to avoid accidentally waking and alarming Eleanor. When Cassandra began walking, Marehis followed her to Haven’s gate, and they meandered the path down, past the field she used for Eleanor’s lessons, to stand at the frozen river edge.

“I apologize. For this morning, Marehis. I would not have caused you alarm intentionally. When I dismissed the guards—I knew Eleanor was safe in hand, I did not consider that you would see the lack of guards and may imagine the worst.”

“But I should have,” Cassandra stopped her, hoping to explain herself before this turned into something ugly, that would bleed into the coming days. “Marehis, if I had seen Eleanor’s guards missing from their post I—” fear, just the ghost of possibility, stole the breath from her lungs for a moment. “I would have assumed the worst. You came bursting in armed to fight—that you did not attack me is truly a wonder. Roles reversed, there is precious little that would have kept
me from throttling someone who, even in err, caused me to believe for a moment Eleanor had been brought to harm, killed because I was not there to protect her.”

“Precious little. That sums Ellie up nicely,” Marehis admitted with a bit of a rough laugh. “And had I not realized in the same instant I saw you that she was there, bearing witness, I likely would have ‘throttled you’. Or attempted to, anyway.”

Cassandra smiled at that, “Truly? Huh. Yes, roles reversed, Eleanor would have kept me from violence as well.”

“I read reports about your time in the Hinterlands. I forget you were the one…acting in my stead, really, while she was away. Your regard for her is the same as mine.”

“Regard?”

Marehis sighed, hugging herself a bit as she looked out across the frozen ice. “We love that child.”

“Ahh.” Cassandra herself could not have termed it as such, the word hadn’t even occurred to her. In fact having the idea laid bare before her sent something like panic through her she did not…she liked few people. Had had relationships of all sorts—mentors, friendships, her fair share of romantic interests, lovers. Though the latter seemed ironic because she had not loved any of them. Cared for, and certainly interested in but, there were scarce few she’d allowed herself to love in her life. She could barely remember loving…she hoped…her parents, at least. Antony, most assuredly, even now the ache of it lingered after all these years, could be made to feel fresh like an open wound if she thought on it long enough. She had loved him most in all the world, and none after him until Divine Justinia. And even then, it did not compare to her love for her brother.

But her…Maker, her love for Eleanor. It made something Cassandra thought died with her brother demand to be heard—the something that said love could exist for her, that it could result in painful things when those you loved were lost, but that did not mean it was worthless in the first place. To know Eleanor was to love her, and to not know Eleanor? Cassandra could scarcely believe there was a world out there where their paths had never crossed, where Eleanor remained alone and fending for herself, and Cassandra spent the rest of her days with the loss of love leaving her closed off to the idea entirely. She always held back in her regard for those who drew close to her for fear that such a thing would happen, that she would come to let them be important, too important and then she would lose them.

Eleanor. When she laid eyes on her that day after the Conclave, limp and lifeless in the hands of Inquisition soldiers, she thought she would hate the girl, would eventually see to her death, perhaps even kill her herself. She hadn’t steelied herself against loving the girl because the idea was so very far from her mind and then surely enough, it happened. She loved this girl, freely and unreigned in a way she had not dared to. Not since Antony, and she thought never again.

“When you left for the Hinterlands,” Marehis said, “I woke up the next morning, got a tray of breakfast from the tavern, went to Eleanor’s cabin. The guards were missing then obviously, but I wasn’t alarmed because on an intellectual level I knew her schedule, knew she was away, but the rest of me just hadn’t caught up yet. I had a fire going, a plan for what she was to wear, how I was going to do her hair, and was just getting ready to wake her when I fully realized she wasn’t there to wake. It was pure habit, I thought nothing of it.”

Cassandra looked to the Elf woman, not sure why she was sharing such a thing, but was willing to listen if it meant Eleanor’s guardian would be more at ease with her.
“Perhaps I was too quick to judge,” Marehis said then. “Your actions this morning, waking and thinking immediately of her, wanting to share in something you enjoy doing together that you know helps her—it is much like my routine. And in my case I certainly don’t think twice sending the guards away because I know she is safe in my care, as I’m sure she is in yours. You did not act out of thoughtlessness for her safety, or my job.” Marehis sighed. “We care for her such that we blame ourselves for things that are out of our control.”

Ahh. That loosed something in Cassandra’s mind—the whirlwind of thoughts ever pressing in the back of her mind that told her she had to do better. Be better. Take better care of Eleanor. What happened in the past was entirely out of her control now. She could not go back and still the hand that bruised the girl, anymore than she could go back and stop the one that Marked her for her fate now at the Conclave. She was certain she’d made mistakes in her care of Eleanor but…blessedly, they were both still around for her to learn from them. And some of the things—some, not all—were things she should not blame herself for because, they simply were not her fault. Out of her control from beginning to end.

“You are too hard on yourself too, I believe,” Cassandra said then. “You are amazing in your care of Eleanor. You cannot perceive of everything that could befall her, cannot be with her every hour of the day, if you tried you would only diminish your capacity to help her as you do.”

Marehis blew out a breath like she’d been holding it hostage for a moment. “I… I thank you, Lady Seeker.”

“Consider calling me Cassandra,” she called her ‘Marehis’ after all.

“Cassandra then,” she shifted slightly, back and forth on her feet and then, “I do understand about the morning prayer, truly. If you wish to take over the change of guard…” she left the invitation open ended.

“Ahh. Would you care to sleep in? Your work is tireless, if you wished for more time in the mornings—I could see to it she gets breakfast, our lessons are her first in the morning, if you wished to join us then.”

“No no, that isn’t necessary, I just meant if you would prefer for me to not interfere in your prayer ritual, I would just bring breakfast for you and Ellie—”

“And yourself. Marehis, I know my earlier candor was not one of welcome when Eleanor proposed you pray us. But I would be honored, truly, if you wished to join us.”

“It would be my pleasure.”

Chapter End Notes

Dalish Used:
Da’len=Child
Lethallan=my friend
Elgar’nan= The All-Father, the male leader of the pantheon who plays the masculine role opposite Mythal’s feminine role in Dalish religion.
Fendehis= unofficially translated Dalish swear word, I personally believe to mean "(Dread) Wolf’s Shit!"
Notes:
*Wintersend= basically Christmas, falls in the month of Guardian, the Thedas equivalent of February
*Name-Day= so Dwarves either don't have birthdays, or they consider their naming more important than birth, or some culmination of the two ideas. They might be named the day of their births, but they could be named in some form of post-birth ceremony. Dunno for sure but I remember Birthdays being mentioned in every other context of the other races and their birth, but in Dragon Age: Origins Dwarf Name-Days are mentioned. So I went with it.

Thanks for reading! Chapter Four, in Val Royeaux, EDA: 7/28/18
They left for Val Royeaux shortly thereafter. Marehis was a marvelous addition to their team, Cassandra thought. She fought well—remarkably so, Leliana hadn’t been exaggerating when she said Marehis would be best suited in her role as Eleanor’s bodyguard. The Elf woman stayed close to the Herald, and it was something of a relief to have someone who always had eyes on Eleanor—they’d done well in the Hinterlands, between Cassandra, Varric, and Solas there was almost always someone with Eleanor, but there were times, especially when setting up camp or in battle when Cassandra lost sight of the Herald. Marehis was continually at Eleanor’s side, nothing took her from it, and it was reassuring. Cassandra worried less of what might be befalling Eleanor as she focused on defending herself in battle or work that consumed her focus.

Marehis equipped appropriate scout armor she used for field work, and she rode with Eleanor as they traveled, seated behind the Herald in the saddle. The Elf woman was religious in her treatment and care of the girl, every morning she subtly passed along small vial of yellow potion to her and was often unprompted when she would hand her what Cassandra recognized as an antacid, something to calm Eleanor’s stomach when she became anxious.

There was one day in particular that had been…jarring, to say the least. They’d been cleaning up from their midday meal, Elenaor had been rather quiet throughout, had needed potion to stomach her food. The girl dropped the ceramic plate she’d been handing to Blackwall for drying and looked like she might sick up, her hand flew to her chest though and she gasped out a panicky whisper to the Warden that she couldn’t breathe.

Blackwall hollered for Cassandra, but Marehis was already at the girl’s side. At first there was the concern that something had triggered an asthma attack, that the girl genuinely was losing the ability to breathe, but it was more that she couldn’t catch her breath. Marehis took a hold of Eleanor’s face, told her to focus on her and try to match her breathing to Marehis’s own.

A panic attack, it turned out to be. Eleanor nearly threw up, was on the verge of passing
out, when Marehis calmly unstopped a miniature vial of blue potion and administered it to the girl.

It was rather drastic, the change. It was clear why Eleanor was not to use such a draught unless going immediately to bed or experiencing dire panic. They had to keep moving so, Marehis got into the saddle first, before Blackwall helped a swaying, unsteady Eleanor into her place in front of her body guard, and the Elf woman took the reins, keeping her arms secure around the girl—Eleanor’s head lolled back onto Marehis’s shoulder and she dozed in and out of consciousness as Russel trotted along, moving carefully, as if he understood he needed to take care with the girl in his saddle.

Varric had been rather alarmed—one moment Eleanor had been loud and inconsolable, and the next she was eerily still and silent, and if they fell under attack, she would not be capable of defending herself. He rode close by and it was only because his own horse was so skilled that he stayed on their path—the Dwarven man was hardly paying attention to where they were going, he kept looking about as if worried danger could swoop down at any minute and he’d need to protect the Herald.

Eleanor was quiet the rest of the day. Even as the potion’s effects wore off, Eleanor remained withdrawn, awake but unfocused. When they made camp for the evening she slid from the saddle and didn’t respond when questioned on how she was feeling, if she was tired or hungry. Solas and Blackwall set up their tents, and Eleanor slowly, as if her legs were like lead, lumbered into a tent. Cassandra followed and saw her unroll her bedroll and slip inside pulling the covers up under her chin, bottom lip caught in her teeth, she turned so her back was to the Seeker. Cassandra wanted desperately for Eleanor to say anything, but her own words dried up in her mouth.

She left the girl be. Marehis didn’t disturb her either. Their party sat silent in the midst of their campsite, no fire built, no supper underway. They sat and waited, the only sound in their little desolate camp, was that of Eleanor crying, now that she was in the privacy of her tent, curled up under her covers—the sound was muffled but they could still hear, and it was…awful.

She didn’t come out of the tent even when they did take their evening meal, didn’t speak when Marehis and Cassandra settled in for the night alongside her, her back was still to them. Cassandra did not think she was asleep. Marehis crouched at Eleanor’s side, and set two bottles beside her—sleeping and calming draughts—and then smoothed some of the girl’s hair from her face before pressing a kiss to her temple, whispering, “Theneras antishan, da’len.”

Cassandra and Marehis had been alarmed when they woke the next morning and Eleanor was not in her bedroll, potion untouched, but they found the girl sitting in front of a fire none of them had built, in silent prayer as they usually started her day. The older women looked to each other for a moment before taking their usual seats, on either side of Eleanor, and joined her. Cassandra closed her eyes and prayed—prayed for their days journey, for their safety, for Eleanor.

Eleanor remained quiet, eyes closed, until the men began shuffling out of their tent, tentatively taking seats of their own around the fire.

“I’m sorry,” were the first words out of her mouth since ‘I can’t breathe’. Cassandra was gratified to hear the girl’s voice again, though she did not necessarily appreciate that they were in apology, but she wasn’t about to snap at the girl. “I shouldn’t have shut down like that, last night. I know you guys were helping me, and just trying to make sure I was alright. My little freak out was kind of scary, huh?”

No one seemed certain what to say to that, but Marehis took a hold of Eleanor’s unmarked hand, and Cassandra found her voice, “We were merely concerned. You’re feeling better?”
“I don’t really… feel much of anything right now. I’m still kind of…I dunno. I was just tired afterward, done up. But I’m not freaking out or anything, so I guess that’s better,” she licked her lips nervously. She’d been staring into the fire as she spoke, but now she raised her eyes to catch the gaze of the men who sat across from her.

Eleanor was transparent with them then, opening up to them about her discussion with Healer Adan, and that Marehis had been brought on their journey to monitor her treatment. Cassandra was glad she’d somewhat prepared them for such a revelation—Varric, still half-asleep, bags under his eyes as if he’d had trouble falling asleep at all, visibly held his tongue, stopped himself from saying the first thing off the top of his head in response to Eleanor’s disclosure. Blackwall and Solas were quiet too, though she supposed they were taking her advice and merely listening to the girl.

They did seem mildly surprised that Eleanor had decided to tell them. But Cassandra, after her initial ponderance thought perhaps that was why she’d been so very sad. She’d been caught, so to speak. Eleanor was embarrassed of what she thought of as a weakness. She was ashamed of her having had such a drastic symptom flare so openly—she’d known it would be awkward at the very least, if not futile to try and act like nothing had happened at all.

Eleanor said that thinking back, she’d had some close calls with panic attacks, but yesterday it just crept up on her—she hadn’t been expecting it any more than they had.

“I didn’t realize how loopy calming potion would make me, I’ve only ever taken it before bed.”

“In the future, perhaps we could try half doses,” Marehis suggested. “Adan is a skilled healer, but he cannot account for every sensitivity you might have to certain ingredients.”

Eleanor nodded.

“Look Tumbles,” Varric nervously trotted out, “I don’t know a whole lot about this stuff, but uh, you ever need to talk, I’m all ears.”

“Likewise,” Solas was quick to volunteer.

“If you need anything, don’t hesitate to ask,” Blackwall insisted.

“Actually,” Eleanor said, as if giving the matter considerable thought, “there is something that’d be really helpful right now.”

There was something almost like amusement in her tones, that was the only thing that kept Cassandra in her seat. The three men, however, were already on their feet. Varric was looking around as if he should be able to see what Eleanor was referring to, looking like he might actually race the other men to get whatever it was he was shifting restlessly on his feet.

“What? Name it, Ellie, anything,” the Dwarf said.

She looked up at them, and with grave seriousness said,

“Breakfast.”
It took an entire week more to traverse their path to Val Royeaux. Their horses were well in hand at the stables just outside the city gate, though Eleanor worried leaving their steeds in the care of strangers.

Though that seemed rather forgotten as she stared up at their surroundings in wide-eyed awe—or perhaps it was terror. The expression on her face reminded Cassandra of how she’d looked upon the Breach. a mix of shock, horror, and resigned determination. Val Royeaux was full of glittering beauty that juxtaposed the dark fury of the Breach, but to some degree, they were equally terrifying and malicious entities. The Breach was full of demons, but Val Royeaux was full of *Orlesians*. Wealthy, high-born Orlesians with a penchant for frivolous rivalries and too much power for anyone’s good.

Their access to the city was secured by their few Chantry allies, but unfortunately, it did precious little to secure them from open fear on behalf of Val Royeaux’s citizens. They were not carrying torches and pitchforks, as Eleanor feared they would, but Cassandra expected no less. Orlesian’s were more likely to run from their fear than attempt to do it harm.

Eleanor looked up at Cassandra, wide-eyed when in fact, a woman took sight of them upon entering the city and ran screaming.

“What was that about? Just what kind of rumors has Roderick been spreading about me?” Eleanor asked.

“You are hardly a foreboding sight, Eleanor, I’m sure she was reacting to the Inquisition’s infiltration of Val Royeaux. If anything, my presence will set fear in our audience today.”

“You aren’t scary,” Eleanor was quick to…it sounded like assurance, though Cassandra was half-inclined to take it as an insult. “I mean golly you’re good at scary, but you’re really pretty!”

Cassandra gave a dismissive huff. ‘Pretty’ did not put fear into the hearts of men. Scary, however, did.

“Lady Seeker.” One of Leliana’s scouts approached them then, “Revered Mother Hevara is in the Bazar expecting your arrival. There are Templars in wait, led by Lord Seeker Lucius.”

Eleanor blanched at the idea that there were Templars near and waiting for her.

“They cannot take custody of you Eleanor, you will be safe,” Cassandra promised. Though the fact that there were Templars here at all was troubling, but Lord Seeker Lucius…surely, he would be reasonable. But it was not Cassandra’s worry that needed abated, “The Marchand’s apartment is in the second tier of the bazar, we could go settle ourselves and take a moment before addressing the clerics.”

If memory served, as hers often did, there were shops on either side of the bazar they could slip through unnoticed to get to the towers leading to the upper levels of Val Royeaux. They could make themselves at home and maybe set in for the day, let Eleanor eat something she didn’t have a hand in cooking, bathe in an actual bathtub, and sleep in a proper bed before facing the Chantry’s masses.

There was something familiar, that gave Cassandra a deep sense of relief that Eleanor was on her way to recovery, in the Herald’s response to the Seeker’s suggestion.

The Eleanor they brought back from the Hinterlands would have clutched Cassandra’s offer
like a lifeline—there was no immediate, pressing thing that could not be put off until tomorrow. The Eleanor Cassandra bore witness to at the Breach…she would face the grand clerics head on— their time in the Marquise home a luxurious reward for a job well done, as opposed to a guilt- ridden respite before facing a harrowing task.

“The grand Clerics have had more than enough opportunity to speak ill of the Inquisition already,” Eleanor said, a sort of determination in her voice, “let’s go see what they have to say to our faces, yeah?”

And despite the fact there were Templars in attendance, Eleanor took the lead, her party members flanking her, and Marehis at her back, into the summer bazar.

Rather a large crowd was gathered before the Cleric’s platform—Orlesian nobility and members of the Chantry, all who parted way to let the Herald of Andraste stand before Revered Mother Hevara herself.

“Good people of Val Royeaux, hear me! Together we mourn our Divine,” The Mother said at the Inquisition’s approach. “Her naive and beautiful heart silenced by treachery! You wonder what will become of her murderer, well wonder no more.” She pointed her finger at Eleanor, “Behold the so-called Herald of Andraste! Claiming to rise where our beloved fell. We say this is a false prophet! No servant of anything beyond her selfish greed!”

Several thoughts struck Cassandra at once. She should have insisted they regroup before coming here, scoped the landscape more before having Eleanor come before the clerics. She shouldn’t be subjecting her to the Chantry’s rhetoric at all—it seemed sound to address them but perhaps they should have simply dug-in, stood on their own to serve Thedas until they caught the attention of the Mages or the Templars on their own merit. She shouldn’t want to strike an old woman—a Chantry Mother of all things.

But Eleanor stepped forward, her voice calm as she said, “We only came to speak with you peacefully, your show here is a bit dramatic don’t you think? Perhaps you could get off your little stage and speak with me like an adult about how we can work together to seal the Breach?”

Cassandra nodded. “Agreed. Really Mother Hevara, is this all necessary? You asked for Eleanor to address the grand clerics, should you not give her fair opportunity to do so?” Cassandra made certain her voice was loud enough to be heard by all gathered there, “She is no longer a suspect of the Divine’s murder and you know that. There were several Chantry members in attendance, myself included, when the Breach revealed its creator and the events of the Divine’s death.”

“It is already too late for any such vindication,” Mother Hevara said gesturing to a group of oncoming Templars. At their head, was Lord Seeker Lucious. “The Templars have returned to the chantry! They will face this ‘Inquisition’ and the people will be safe once more!”

Perhaps not all the people. A Templar at Lord Lucious’s side punched Mother Hevara squarely in the face, knocking her onto her back as Lucious took her stage.

“Still yourself, she is beneath us,” Lord Seeker said to a dark-skinned Templar who was visibly startled by the assault and made to go to the Mother’s side, stopped only by Lord Lucious’s hand on his arm.

Cassandra was very glad she hadn’t herself given in to the temptation to strike against the Revered Mother, Eleanor was glaring—a look more murderous than Cassandra thought the girl could manage, and for a moment the fear of magic surging forth uncontrollable in a fit of rage
piqued itself in the back of Cassandra’s mind. What would she do if Eleanor suddenly lost control in such a way?

But she didn’t, she did however clench her fists and Cassandra flinched when Eleanor rushed forward, hopping up onto the platform to put herself between Mother Hevara and the Templars, hand reaching behind her to settle on the old woman’s shoulder while her marked hand pointed a finger at Lucious as she railed against him,

“Hey! Back it right up mister, what is your deal? Maker’s breath is the entire Chantry filled with toddlers? I came here to talk to have a civilized discussion on how to fix the gaping hole in the sky that threatens the entire world, not to reprimand grown men for not knowing you shouldn’t hit people.”

Lord Seeker Lucious looked down upon Eleanor with distain. “I came to see what frightens old women so, and to laugh.”

“Lord Seeker, what if she really was sent by the Maker—” the dark-skinned Templar that had been just as appalled as Eleanor spoke then, coming to her defense. Eleanor leveled the sensible Templar a grateful smile.

“You are called to a higher purpose, do not question,” snapped the Templar that had struck Hevara.

Eleanor looked as if there were several things she would like to say, and it occurred to Cassandra that she had yet to see the girl swear before—she’d volleyed her share of insults at enemies true, but never with the colorful language Varric, and sometimes even Cassandra or Solas, used. She looked like she might break that streak just now, but instead looked imploringly to Cassandra. Ahh. Maybe the Lady Seeker could get the Lord Seeker to see reason. Maybe.

“Lord Seeker Lucious—” Cassandra began. Maybe turned into ‘definitely not’.

“You will not address me,” the Lord Seeker said frigidly. “Creating a heretical movement, raising up a puppet as Andraste’s prophet. You should be ashamed. You should all be ashamed! The Templars failed no one when they left the Chantry to purge the Mages. You are the ones who have failed! You who would leash our righteous swords with doubt and fear! If you came to appeal to the Chantry, you are too late! The only destiny here that demands respect is mine!”

What sort of nonsense? Had Lord Lucious gone mad? His bizarre behavior struck Casandra silent, just what had become of the Templar Order without proper Seeker supervision?

“I will make the Templar order a power that stands alone against the void,” Lucious enthused, “We deserve recognition. Independence! You have shown me nothing, and the inquisition…less than nothing. Templars, Val Royeaux is unworthy of our protection! We march!”

And they did, leaving the chaos they’d created, the Templar’s followed Lord Lucious away from the platform and across the bazar to the gates of Val Royeaux. Though the young Templar that had tried to get Lucious to see reason looked back at Eleanor as they left. Cassandra hoped something could be done about the Lord Seeker, that he could be made to see sense. Not all of the Templars were a lost cause.

Eleanor was helping Mother Hevara to her feet then, standing on tip toes to whisper something in the woman’s ear before pulling away, the two nodding at each other, though the woman looked rather disgusted with the whole affair. Eleanor turned to face her companions.
Marehis was at her side in an instant, a hand on Eleanor’s elbow as she led her off the platform, her lips at the girl’s ear and Cassandra caught the whispered, worried snap as Marehis insisted Eleanor *never* rush off out of reach like that again, not in such an unpredictable situation.

Eleanor looked abashed and kissed her minder on the cheek before saying, albeit apologetically. “I didn’t mean to worry you, I just didn’t want them to think they could hit her again. She didn’t uh…”

“She didn’t what, Ellie?” Solas asked quietly.

Oh goodness. Eleanor was going to insist the woman hadn’t really meant the horrible things she’d said or some such nonsense. She was too forgiving by half.

“She didn’t move to protect herself or get out of striking distance so,” Eleanor shrugged. “Usually when people uh, hit like that they don’t stop, not in my experience anyway. That Seeker Lucius seemed like the kind who might literally kick when someone’s down.”

Oh. That certainly hadn’t been the response Cassandra expected, and for a moment the Seeker had to try in order to parcel through what exactly Eleanor meant, and she found herself paling at the thought of an even younger Eleanor with some great lout towering over her, striking her down and kicking her for good measure—that Eleanor had worried the same thing was about to befall the woman who had just insulted her, and sought to keep her from harm.

She opened her mouth to…well she wasn’t sure what. She felt like yelling, not at Eleanor, but she wanted *names*. Just who thought they had the right to—

The absolute outrage she felt was quelled and forgotten, replaced by startled panic when their entire party jumped back, Cassandra and Marehis’s arms shooting out to shield Eleanor when the distinct *thump* of an arrow striking stone smacked at the Herald’s feet.

Blackwall had his hand on the hilt of his sword as he surveyed the area above them trying to scope out the sniper, Varric had pulled Bianca to aid in striking whoever had shot at Eleanor, and Cassandra felt the wash of Solas’s magic as Barrier swept over the girl.

“An arrow with a message,” Cassandra ground out with some measure of relief after studying the object that had been flung at Eleanor, the men calmed at that and Varric very reluctantly settled Bianca back into her holster.

Eleanor made to reach for the parchment attached to the arrow, but Marehis beat her to it, unraveling it herself to hold it out for Eleanor’s inspection.

“What does it say, Lady Seeker?” Blackwall asked as the two women and Eleanor examined the parchment.

“Favors for Favors of Friends,” Cassandra read aloud. “People say you’re special. I want to help, and I can bring everyone.” Eleanor’s cheeks pinked at being called ‘special’ by their unknown messenger.

“There’s a baddie in Val Royeaux,” Marehis picked up then, “I hear he wants to hurt you. Have a search for the red things in the market, the docks, and ‘round the café, and maybe you’ll meet him first. Bring Swords. Signed, the Friends of Red Jenny.”

Marehis looked to Cassandra then, and were silent for a moment as they seemed to decide between which of them would go to investigate the threat to Eleanor, and who would stay.
With a nod from Cassandra—that she would watch over Eleanor—Marehis gave her a grateful smile and said, “I’ll have a look around. In the meantime, da’len stay with the others and try to stay out of trouble, yes?”

“Take someone with you please, would you mind? I…I wouldn’t want anyone to mistreat you, wandering around Val Royeaux on your own.”

Ahh. Marehis was an Elf. Perhaps Cassandra should be the one to go in search of the information this ‘Red Jenny’ sought to provide.

But Marehis shook her head and pulled her hood up over her hair, the outline of her ears barely visible—one could easily mistake it as some form of hair decoration sticking up under the hood the impressions were so very unperceivable, the woman had much shorter ears than her male counterpart in Solas. At a passing glance one would think the woman just a tall, lean Human.

“I’ll be just fine, Ellie,” she said reassuringly before turning on her heel and heading for the docks.

The moment the Elf woman was out of view, another seemed to take her place, approaching Eleanor cautiously. Her robes spoke to her status as a mage, though she had no staff with her, so Cassandra supposed the woman was not much of a threat if she meant to harm the Herald. Ahh, wait, Cassandra recognized her.

“Herald of Andraste?” the raven-haired newcomer asked Eleanor. “If I might have a moment?”

“Grand Enchanter Fiona?” Cassandra asked, shocked to find her in Val Royeaux of all places.

Solas immediately recognized the name, “Leader of the Mage Rebellion? Is it not dangerous for you to be here?”

The woman looked to Eleanor as she said, “I heard of this gathering and wished to see the Herald with my own eyes,” she looked thoughtful before offering, “if it is help with the Breach you seek, perhaps you should look among your fellow mages.”

“You would help us?” Eleanor asked.

The Grand Enchanter did not necessarily say yes, but neither did she reject the notion. “Consider this an invitation to meet with us in Redcliffe. Perhaps alliance could benefit us both. Au revoir, Herald.”

She was walking away, out the gates of Val Royeaux before Eleanor could reply. Cassandra was not certain it would be wise to approach the Mages, but the invitation was a sign of progress for the Inquisition.

“We will discuss this once we are back in Haven, Eleanor. For now, we should seek out our housing,” Cassandra said.

“Yeah, lets go check out the digs Ruffles got us,” Varric said. “I call dibs on the biggest bed.”

“What would you do with the biggest bed?” Blackwall asked.

“Fill it.”
“You’re shorter than I am,” Eleanor said with genuine confusion.

The Dwarf smirked. Oh Maker. “Give me an hour at the tavern and trust me, Tumbles, I can fill the biggest bed in Val Royeaux.”

Eleanor clapped a hand over her mouth, delight evident in her eyes at Varric’s joke.

Blackwall clapped the Dwarf on the back of the head for his crudeness. “Watch your rotten mouth, Dwarf, she’s just a girl.”

And then Eleanor shrugged as if unbothered and began leading them towards one of the towers that would lead them up to the level their housing was on, she said in the most nonchalant tone of tones, “I could probably fill my bed in half the time Varric could anyway.”

Maker preserve them, the Dwarf was a terrible influence Cassandra thought as she shook her head. Blackwall looked dumbstruck while Varric guffawed.

Solas was the only one who had his senses intact, following close behind Eleanor.

But Marehis would likely kill the man if he let Eleanor’s knack for occasionally saying something astounding and unexpected, keep him from being at her side at all times.

Though he seemed more amused than shocked, Cassandra realized then, his shoulders were shaking with unspilled laughter.

Maker preserve them all.

The Marchand’s home in Val Royeaux was…well it was just amazing. Ellie felt the way she did when she was a foreigner in an entirely new place, somewhere with another language and customs she could never hope to understand. Everything was crafted from marble and gold-something-or-other it seemed, everything. From the doors to the windows, to the decorative candle sticks, everything was made from things that cost more money than Ellie could ever dream to see in her lifetime.

What was it she’d had in her pocket when she and Trevelyan finally trekked up the stairs to the Temple of Sacred Ashes? Lint and maybe a copper. And that copper might have been on loan from Trevelyan, she couldn’t really remember now. Was it the amnesia or had just so much time passed that she couldn’t remember the little details?

Not much time had passed, and yet her time in the Inquisition, with all the people she’d met and traveling she’d done, it felt like years instead of just…uh…

“How long has it been since the Breach opened, Cassandra?”

Her sudden question had Cassandra looking at her strangely, but the Nevarran woman slowly replied, “It has nearly been two months, why?”

Ellie shrugged. “Hmm, just wondering. I’ve never been good at keeping track of time.”

“Oh, don’t sweat it kid,” Varric said, “time’s just a social construct.”
“Perhaps how we mark its passage, yes, but time itself is scientific fact,” Solas debated.

Ellie shook her head at them, those two could really get into it over just about anything sometimes. But it seemed like they usually did so in good fun, so, that was alright.

“Come Eleanor, I suggest we pick out our rooms while Varric is distracted,” Cassandra whispered conspiratorially in her ear.

Ellie smiled and nodded. Cassandra had been like that more and more lately—friendly. Not that she’d been wholly unfriendly towards Ellie, not since she first woke up after the Conclave anyway, but lately…well it was a bit more like having an actual friend than just someone you could play nice with at work.

They wandered through the house together. Well, Ellie wandered, Cassandra seemed like she knew where she was going—the Seeker, Blackwall, and Marehis had poured over maps of Val Royeaux and the Marquis home, discussing the best ways for navigating both, and every possible option of emergency exit should the need arise.

Ellie didn’t like that. Oh! Not that they were prepared, no, that was great—she just didn’t like that they tried to leave her out of things like that. A lot of her security stuff was kept between her companions and advisors and Marehis in an effort not to ‘scare’ her. But didn’t that just make their jobs harder? She only knew about their contingency plans for Val Royeaux because she’d woken earlier than usual one day on their trip and seen them gathered together talking quietly, and then the moment Marehis saw Ellie awake and standing in the open flap of their tent, they’d gone quiet and said they were just waiting for Ellie to wake up for their morning prayers.

They could have been sleeping! That’s what worried Ellie, that her friends were neglecting themselves to unnecessarily shield her from something that would honestly probably benefit them if she was in the loop.

She wasn’t sure how to ask to be included, she didn’t want to make them think she was ungrateful, but she knew there were people after her. Yeah sometimes it was stressful, the idea that she didn’t know who outside the Inquisition…and sometimes even in the Inquisition…she could trust, that anyone could be out to kill or capture her. It used to gnaw away at her in the beginning, but she’d had time to think about it, think about it clearly—even more so recently, since Adan’s prescription—and really…it wasn’t that much different from her previous life.

Templars had always been after her, and people who just in-general feared or hated mages. She’d never lived anywhere she felt particularly safe, even when she was able to stay close to Ava. And that wasn’t even considering the fact that she’d been alone, taking care of herself, never having a consistent roof over her head, never quite sure where her next meal was coming from, or if it was coming. Some nights she’d gone to sleep expecting to wake up dead.

If anything, her life in the Inquisition was the safest she’d ever been. It hadn’t seemed that way at first, she’d been so caught up in the new danger it made her forget the old danger she’d just come from.

“You’re awfully quiet.”

Ellie looked up at Cassandra then, giving her a reassuring smile, “Just thinking,” she said.

“Anything you’d care to share? Is there something troubling you, Eleanor?”

Well, she did ask.
“Why do you guys plan so much when I’m not around? I understand if it’s because you’re afraid I’d get in the way, but if it’s just to make it seem like there’s nothing to be planned for, because you don’t want me worried, I’d much rather be informed and included than in the dark and ‘blissfully ignorant’.”

“Ahh.” Cassandra seemed to think on it a moment and then, “I should like some time to consider the matter and discuss it with the others before outright offering to include you in future, however I understand your point. It would likely be safer for you to be more readily aware of the different security precautions we’ve taken it upon ourselves to see to without your knowing.”

“I mean, I could help, you know? If there’s something I’m doing, or something I should be doing that would make your jobs easier, you guys should tell me.”

“You’re not exactly running around making a spectacle of yourself, delivering yourself into the hands of your enemies—save your display with Seeker Lucious,” Cassandra gently reprimanded. But then, “though I must say, it was rather well done of you. My point is, Eleanor, you do not make our job difficult, in fact you’ve rather improved its burden since becoming more forthright with the things you struggle with, your opinions on things, telling us when there is something that bothers you.”

“Well, it bothers me you that you spend time you could be resting to do things you could do when I’m awake. I know I’m the youngest but I’m pretty sure everyone needs to eat their vegetables and get enough sleep.”

“I’ll discuss the matter with the others, but you needn’t be so concerned for us, we’re hardly hurting from lack of sleep. Though your sentiment about vegetables, Varric could do with a few.”

“The healthiest thing I’ve seen him eat is fruit…in alcoholic form. Technically that’s just drinking.”

“Eleanor, you may not realize this, but you do hold a great deal of influence over the Dwarf. I’m certain if you asked him to eat all the brussels sprouts in Thedas, he’d take up the challenge.”

Ellie scrunched up her nose at that, “Oh sprouts taste like sweaty socks! Peas are okay though, and carrots. Oh! You know what’s the absolute best? Butternut squash! Flissa made this stew with them and Maker it was heavenly.”

“Better than snails?” Cassandra asked as placed an arm around Ellie’s shoulder’s then, the two walking closely as they investigated the Marchand’s home.

“Cassandra! Snails are the worst!”

They ended up getting their pick of bedrooms, though Ellie had a feeling Cassandra had already decided before arriving in Val Royeaux, which rooms would suit them best. She did mention there were several escape roues out the various windows, balcony door, and even a secret passage way the Marquis and his wife made them aware of in case of emergency, in the room which she delegated to Ellie.
The room was *beautiful* and so big! It was good it was so open, or Ellie feared she might just get lost in it. It was constructed of copper-veined marble, deep blue curtains and tapestries, even the bedding, and gold trimming on *everything*. She was somewhat afraid of getting things dirty.

But there was also a bath. An actual bath! A tub, sunk into the floor she could step down into and bathe. Had she thanked the Marquis? She was pretty sure she had but she was for sure thanking the Orlesian couple big time next time she saw them.

She opted, however, to wash up in the basin first. Marehis would be back soon and something in Ellie’s magic said she’d be out and about again—no point in bathing and changing if she was just going to get all dirtied up again.

She did get lost when she left her room. She couldn’t exactly remember which room Cassandra had claimed, but she knew it was close by. But the older woman might be bathing herself, and she didn’t need Ellie hanging around all the time—she was probably enjoying the solitude. So, Ellie began wandering the estate in the general direction she was pretty sure would lead her back to the main hall.

There weren’t any servants, she was grateful to note. It was weird enough having someone like Marehis, who she could ask just about anything of and expect it forthwith, she didn’t think she’d like having servants acting like she was the boss of them. That was another security measure, one she’d been made aware of, that the usual serving staff would prepare the house for occupation and then leave their Inquisition guests to their own devices—less chance of an awkward interaction where Marehis would have to kill a servant-turned-assassin or anything.

Though, she could stand having someone around who could give her directions. She was pretty sure she was lost now—she’d found a section of the house dedicated to being a library. The door to it thrummed with magic that zipped through her hands when she pushed it open, not painful just, like she’d opened something warded, but allowed her access.

Maybe Solas would be around? He liked to read. Or maybe once she found him she could show him the library if he hadn’t discovered it yet. She didn’t know much about magical texts or if this library would hold anything of interest to the Elf, but there were a billion books it looked like, spanning the walls and the maze of shelves throughout the large room. Surely something would pique his interest. She thought of Varric as well, but he seemed more interested in writing books than reading them.

A bit of panic spiked in her chest though, as the shelved path grew too narrow for comfort—the room was truly set up like a maze, no clear path through, and she wasn’t sure if she was going in circles or not.

And her magic did something it hadn’t done in quite some time. It sent familiar notes of comfort coursing through the veins of magic traveling through her body.

She thought at first that her magic had been backing off because she’d found companionship elsewhere, but maybe her depressive state had been keeping her magic from interacting with her the way it was used to? Now, it sought to soothe and do what it could to guide—as she navigated, her magic told her if she’d already been one way before, or if she’d accidentally rounded back.

*Thank you*, she thought as she made it to a large door on the opposite end of the library from which she came, and her magic warmed in reply.
She swung open the door to find Solas on the other side looking just as surprised as she was to be, quite literally, running into him.

“Oh!” she gasped as she staggered backward, his hands went to her elbows to steady her.

“Ellie!” he regarded her for a moment before asking, “Are you well, lethallan?”

Ellie nodded slowly. “Yeah, I’m alright. Are you?” she looked around the hall they were in, “Did you get lost as well?”

Solas shook his head. “Not at all, I was merely settling in when…Eleanor, were you lost just now? Were you frightened?”

Ellie blinked at that, confused. She felt a bit childish for having to admit she’d been afraid, but she wasn’t about to lie to Solas…especially with Cassandra’s voice in her mind reminding her how much easier it was to protect her when she was forthright with her companions. “I was actually—there’s a whole world of books back there, and I got turned around in the maze,” and then, “It really is a great set-up if you’re interested in checking it out, I think I can navigate it better now—there might be something you’d like to read.”

“Yes, I gathered as much, before,” he spoke absently.

“Before?” Ellie asked.

Solas’s cheeks paled though the tips of his ears turned red, and he seemed embarrassed about something. Or worried?

But then he shook his head like he was clearing a thought from it and peered into the library. “Ahh. There are some books of magic—common ones, on the outer shelves. Perhaps we should avoid the library then. I’ve never had the means to do so myself, but usually Mages obscure the set up of their libraries to keep others from finding things they’d rather keep hidden. Like rare, possibly only remaining editions, of tomes and scrolls containing spells they’d rather keep in the family or be the only Mage in existence that holds such knowledge.”

Oh. But, “The Marquis isn’t a mage, though,” Ellie said, confused. She hadn’t thought his wife was one either.

“It is of no great importance, they may just be avid collectors of books regardless of genre, the wealthy can often afford even hobbies that do not necessarily coincide with their way of life,” Solas shrugged. And then, “Come, are you hungry, da’len? We didn’t partake of a noon meal earlier, Marehis would be rather displeased if she discovered I left you to starve.”

Ellie giggled at that. “I forgot all about lunch! Though its more like dinner time now isn’t it? Do you know where the kitchens are?”

“I do indeed, come along now, da’len,” Solas said, and he actually offered her his hand which she took in her unmarked one, and he led her though the Marquis home.

When they’d first entered the Marquis Val Royeaux apartment she’d thought it would be just that—a small, fancy apartment. But now she realized the Marquis owned the entirety of this fourth of the circle around the Summer Bazaar—the second tier and the third tier, which was…well it was an awful lot for just two people, wasn’t it? Though they probably had friends and family that visited them, they hadn’t any children it seemed. Ellie thought she’d get rather lonely if she lived in a place this big all on her own.
Solas was quiet as they made their way to the kitchen, but she could smell something delicious already being prepared, had the Marquis left a chef for them?

“Oi, Dwarf, you cut those carrots like that they’ll be mush—fine lengths, not mashed paste!”

“Keep your fine lengths in your pants, Hero, I’m chopping just fine.”

Solas loudly cleared his throat as he and Ellie entered the kitchen.

Ellie started laughing then—it was just too rich, these two in aprons, standing side by side at the counter—Varric on a stool of course—chopping vegetables and squabbling like a married couple.

Oh Maker, Blackwall and Varric would make the hairiest babies!

Ellie slapped her marked hand over her mouth as peals of laughter escaped her lips at the thought. Even Solas was chuckling a bit at her side.

“Oh, shit, sorry Tumbles. And Chuckles, there you are, I was wondering where you’d wandered off to, you uh, okay? You kind of just walked away mid-sentence.”

“I was merely wondering after Ellie, she needs to eat too, does she not?”

“Well yeah, I figured we’d call her when it was done, I wasn’t gonna let her go hungry.”

“Can I help?” Ellie asked, looking at their work on the counter.

“See? You went and got her too early Chuckles, now she wants to be put to work.”

“Actually, he got me just in time, I was sort of lost—this place is huge. So, can I help?” Ellie asked again.

“There’s peas that need shelling if you’d like,” Blackwall said as he resumed chopping…oh onions, yuck—they didn’t taste bad or anything, but chopping them always made her teary, which meant she’d wipe her eyes and get onion juice in them and it was all one big vicious cycle. Shelling peas though, that was easy enough!

Ellie went and washed her hands in the kitchen basin and then stood next to Varric on his stool, as she pulled the pile of green toward herself and began shelling the little peas from their pods into a bowl. Solas came alongside her and helped with the peas—they were done in no time! Piling everything into a pot that’d been simmering on the stove full of broth and meat, they went to sit at the kitchen table, though Blackwall moved a chair to sit next to the stove so he could occasionally stir.

Footsteps could be heard in the hall just before Cassandra entered the kitchen. “Ahh, Eleanor, there you are.”

“Enjoy a nice soak there, Seeker?” Varric asked drily, noting how Cassandra’s hair clung curly and wet against her head.

“I did in fact, though you obviously haven’t. I do hope the bath isn’t too deep for you.”

Ellie thought Varric looked like he might say something rude but thought better of it because he didn’t wish to say it in front of Ellie. He gave Cassandra a mockish looking smile and
“I held off on bathing too,” Ellie said, “for now anyway, Marehis will probably be back soon.”

“Ahh, I apologize Eleanor,” Cassandra said, “I did not think—would you care for a bath? I forgot Marehis usually helps you. I could be of assistance.”

Ellie blushed at that, “Oh golly, I can bathe myself just fine. I was only waiting till she got back in case we have to go out again, you know?”

“Ahh, you expect the letter will bear something relevant?”

“Just a feeling, but yeah,” Ellie shrugged.

Blackwall began ladling soup into bowls sitting on a tray he carried back over to the table and set down before dragging his chair back over, so he could sit with everyone.

They sat in relative silence as they ate, though Solas seemed contemplative, stopping the steady stream of spoonfuls and then seemingly remembering what he’d been doing and setting about eating once more.

“Does something trouble you, Solas?” Blackwall asked quietly.

“Trouble, no. Though I suppose there has been a notable development of sorts. I’ll demonstrate if Ellie would be willing to assist.”

Ellie finished drinking the last of the broth from her soup, and looked at Solas as she lowered her bowl. “Of course, Solas, what’s up?”

“If you’re finished Ellie I would appreciate if you’d…well do not take this the wrong way, but I’d ask that you not tell us where you’re going, and just wander around the house for a moment.”

“…just, wander around?”

“I’d also ask that you trust me,” Solas said.

Looking to each of her companions for a moment, all whom seemed just as confused as she was, Ellie shrugged and said slowly, “Alright,” before rising from her seat and leaving the kitchen.

That was…pretty weird, but she supposed maybe he needed to talk to the others about something? There wasn’t any harm in looking around the home some more anyway. She hadn’t been around on this side yet except the stretch between the library and kitchen.

It was once she’d found a very lavish sitting room she realized she’d lost track of just how many turns she’d taken. Was it two lefts and a right? Oh, would she need to reverse that—two rights and then a left…no, that didn’t make sense. She’d turned down a sort of semi-circular hall at one point and gone up a flight of stairs but…

Several minutes passed as she sat down in one of the cushy, over-stuffed chairs to think of how she might get someplace familiar—either the entrance, or her room, or the kitchens again.

Just when she was thinking she was lost, the door before her swung open, and in walked Solas, followed by Varric, Cassandra, and Blackwall. Oh! And Marehis!
“You’re back!” Ellie said, delighted as she jumped to her feet and went to hug her friend.

Marehis smiled as she hugged Ellie back, “Yes, just in time for the search party it seems. You got lost, da’len?”

“She was not lost, not really,” Solas interrupted. “I knew where she was.”

That had everyone looking at him…well, rather much like he’d just grown a second head.

“…um, you mean you guessed where I’d be?” Ellie asked uncertainly.

“No,” he looked around the room they were in and gestured towards the couches and chairs sitting around a low table, “Shall we sit?”

“Okay Chuckles, what’s the deal? You’ve been acting weirder than usual since we got here,” Varric said as everyone took their seats—Varric in the chair Ellie had been occupying, and Blackwall in a chair next to him. Ellie took a seat on the couch, which Cassandra and Marehis took to sitting at her sides. Solas looked as though he were going to pace for a bit, but he stilled and instead sat with his legs crossed the way he did when they meditated, on the low table before them.

“I have not had many companions in my life, friends so to speak, outside of the Fade,” Solas started out. “Even as I joined the inquisition I did not think to meet any I would truly consider my friends, but I have found that with each of you. And in an even deeper sense it seems, I’ve found a dear friend in Ellie. No offense to any of you, but I do…find I cherish her friendship more than most, it is very precious to me. Similar only to how I cherish the friendships I’ve formed with beings in the Fade.”

Ellie found she’d gone bright, bright red. “Oh, gosh Solas. That’s really sweet of you to say—I cherish our friendship too. All of you, you’re some of the most important people I’ve ever had in my life.” Maker, it felt silly to say as much though.

Oh, that was nice, everyone seemed to be blushing on some level or another now, she wasn’t alone in her mild embarrassment.

Solas nodded. “Thank you, Ellie. My point is this, however—my friends in the Fade, I can sense them. I can focus on them and know if they are well, they can call to me if they are in trouble, or in need of my companionship. I can also fathom out where they are in the Fade or the world, should I need to find them,” he paused, carefully considering his words before saying, “earlier, Ellie, you got lost in the library and you were very frightened. You actually hoped you might run into me there—your fear and desire to be found, my magic sensed those things while I was in the kitchen with the others. I hadn’t even realized what I was doing until I was half way to the library, and even then, I didn’t know what had happened until I saw you.”

Ellie’s mind drew a blank and then, “Oh! You mean you found me, using your magic? Like you do with your spirit friends?”

Solas nodded.

“Uhh…is that unusual?”

“I would not know. I’ve never developed such an ability with anyone born outside of the Fade.”

“It is certainly unorthodox, but possibly beneficial,” Cassandra spoke then.
“We would be better off being able to find Ellie if we ever got separated,” Blackwall said.

“And you can discern her wellbeing as well?” Marehis asked, “You could tell if she were sick or injured or in danger?”

Solas closed his eyes. “A spirit of Faith I have known for several years is currently working in Kirkwall, guiding the foreman of a construction crew, in charge of rebuilding the city. He—the spirit—is safe, and happy, pleased with the work he’s done, grateful that the foreman is so responsive to his presence. A spirit of Patience is in Tevinter, not summoned for blood magic, but there to watch over a group of slaves—Elves—one of which the spirit has grown attached to. That slave is hungry, being starved as punishment. It makes my friend sad, but she hopes she can shield her friend from further punishment by tempering his master’s impatience with the work they require, while also lending the slaves the patience to bide their time so they can choose wisely the best opportunity to break free.”

He opened his eyes then. “Ellie is safe, warm, and still full from our meal together. She is intrigued by my friend in Kirkwall, pleased and grateful that a spirit is helping to heal that broken place. She is sad that there is slavery, that there is a hungry slave, and a sorrowful spirit striving, and thus far failing to help him as she’d like. Angry, that someone could be so cruel to another living being. Hopeful, that the Inquisition may do things that will one day help people like that slave.”

Ellie stared wide-eyed at the Elf. That was…accurate and kind of uh, well—

“That was just stupid spooky, Chuckles,” Varric spoke up, “That might be useful in a fight, or if we lose Ellie somewhere, but shit, don’t play creeper on her brain all the time okay?”

“I apologize for the intrusion, I meant only to make a point. I will only intentionally seek your mind if you are lost or in danger. Does that suit you, Ellie?”

Ellie nodded. “Y-yeah, that sounds alright,” beyond strange, but alright, “Thank you, Solas.”

And then he was shooed away from his seat on the table by Marehis as she rose to her feet and Solas took her former seat beside Ellie on the couch as the Elf woman laid out her findings from the little scavenger hunt their anonymous friend had set up for them across the table.

Three red scarves, each with a note pinned to them, and a key.

“This is a key, a report from a stable’s records that discloses a location, and a time. There is a meeting this evening of some sort of anti-Inquisition group. Our Friend asks that we attend and break up their little party.”

“Eleanor, you said you thought this ‘Friend’ had merit, do you still believe it is so?” Cassandra asked.

Ellie bit her lip and listened to her magic for a moment. It thrummed in a way that said…there was something here. Someone important was on the other end of these messages, and they would be found if Ellie pursued their offered quest.

“Should we bring the punch?” Ellie asked, “For their party I mean.”

Varric snorted. “Tumbles, that was a horrible pun. Chuckles, never lose her.”
Their late-night rendezvous in Val Royeaux was more than a little unorthodox. Cassandra was not certain what she should expect—some form of information broker, or a spymaster like Leliana.

What they got was a prankster with some connection to a system of ‘Friends’ peasants that sought opportunity to trick and cause menial strife for nobility and gentry.

They were able to take the first set of guards by surprise, and once deeper into the compound there was indeed a Marquis with a vendetta against the Inquisition, and the Herald of Andraste. After lobbing several fire balls that narrowly missed Eleanor’s head, he rambled some nonsense about how much it must have cost them ‘immeasurably’ to discover him and his plot.

And then he was cut off by an arrow in the throat. Marehis was quick to throw a hand over Eleanor’s eyes when she caught on to what the strange new comer meant to do, pulling back on her bow as she demanded the Marquis just say ‘What’.

What indeed. What nonsense.

“Hehehehe squishy one, but you heard me right? Just say what? Rich tits always try for more than they deserve,” the Elf girl with an atrocious bowl-cut said as she sauntered to the now-dead Marquis and wrested the arrow from his throat.

Marehis uncovered Eleanor’s eyes to receive a bit of a reproachful glare from Eleanor for babying her, the Herald looked to their ‘Friend’.

“Good to see you’re…” the Elf girl said, looking Eleanor up and down a moment before blanching a bit, “well shite, you’re just a little one, aren’t you? Regular at least, but you’re a right tot.”

“I’m fifteen,” Eleanor informed her belligerently.

The newcomer slapped her hands on her thighs and guffawed, “Maker, you’re just a baby! I mean,” she calmed herself, “It’s all good innit? The important thing is you glow, right? You’re the Herald-thingy.”

Eleanor held up her Marked hand, the glimmer of her Mark just barely perceivable through the seams of her glove. “Yup, Herald-thingy at your service. Would you mind explaining all this?” she asked.

“I don’t know this idiot from manners. One of my Friends just said you might should check him out. Oh,” the girl seemed to remember something. “I’m Sera, and this is cover,” she said gesturing to a stack of crates nearby, “get ‘round it. Reinforcements should be coming soon—but no worries, my Friends tipped me off to their equipment shed.”

“You’ve stolen their weapons?” Eleanor asked.

This Sera snickered and said, “No, even better—no breeches!”

The thunder of footfalls echoed through the corridors leading to their place in the courtyard, the sound of battle cries and unsheathing of swords.

Eleanor gave Marehis a rather pitiful look. “If you wanted to cover my eyes again, that’d be
cool.”

But nevertheless Eleanor was jumping up, teetering on the edge of a box before throwing herself forward to continue climbing so she could take the high ground atop the cover ‘Sera’ had so helpfully pointed out. Cassandra felt the familiar soothing cool of magic coast across her skin as the Herald casted Barrier on her companions.

Men in chest plates and loincloths bravely rushed from the safety of their compound to face their enemies in the courtyard sans breeches. Maker’s breath, all this cloak and dagger, all this set up and they met a child with a drinking license and a penchant for sabotaging their enemies in ludicrous ways.

But, this Sera was a skilled marksman, it seemed. Cassandra watched closely as the younger woman fought, jumping up onto the crates to be just below Eleanor, and even without the Herald’s barrier surrounding her she fought with confidence and…

Well she fought well in defense of herself and the Herald it seemed. Enemies Eleanor herself did not notice or catch in time, were taken out by this Sera in swift fashion. Perhaps she could take some things seriously.

Though the horrendous cackling could be turned down a notch—this Sera took a great deal of pride in her handiwork.

“I think we’re all clear my lady,” Blackwall announced gruffly as he looked about the courtyard with uncertainty. The man looked for all the world like he wished he had something to cover the dead men’s underdressed state, but he opted instead for looking up to Eleanor and offering her a hand down off the crates.

Cassandra, personally, was grateful it was so very dark.

Eleanor hopped down off the crates and the Warden caught her deftly, making sure she was secure on her feet before releasing the hand she’d given him.

“Everyone alright?” Eleanor asked as she looked around at her companions.

“All good here,” Varric said, Solas was at his side and nodded in agreement.

“We’re well Eleanor,” Cassandra said.

Eleanor smiled and then turned to address Sera, “You’re okay, right? I didn’t get a chance to ask if you’d mind me casting Barrier on you before the fight broke out, but I feel badly having left you out. Are you hurt?”

Sera shuddered, “Ugh! Oh Andraste’s tits you’re one of them. I mean I heard something about that but shite. You seem okay though for a Mage, just…yeah don’t go casting your Mage thingy on me, or I’ll pop you, got it?”

Eleanor holstered her staff on her back and put her hands down in front of her waist as if to show surrender. “No casting my mage thingy, got it. Now, would you care to explain all this? You said your Friends told you we should check this out, but I’m still not clear on who your Friends are? Are they just a group of friends into espionage or is it an organization you work for?”

Sera scoffed. “It’s no fancy shmancy organization but…yeah like that. I don’t know a lot of ‘em, there’s a fence in Montefort and a woman in Kirkwall, there were three in Starkhaven, brothers or somethin’. Anyway, the Friends of Red Jenny lets little people stick it to nobles they
hate. I used them to help you…plus arrows.”

“I’m glad you wanted to help but uh…why?” Eleanor asked.

“I want to join, help your Inquisition. There’s a hole in the friggin’ sky and all anyone seems to be doing is pretending it isn’t there, point fingers at each other over shite that doesn’t matter right now. You lot seem to be the only ones doing anything about it, and I want things back to normal. I got things to do. So here, in your face, I’m Sera. I can use my friends to help punch back at noble shite getting in the Inquisition’s way, and my arrows to…well, shoot anything big bad getting in your way.”

Cassandra was fully prepared to advise Eleanor not to associate with this…hooligan. What absolute nonsense. This was, perhaps not a total waste of time—they’d taken out an enemy of the Inquisition they may not have discovered until he was a greater threat. But still, not wholly worthy of their time—the girl may have her talents but if she wanted to be part of the Inquisition she could join on at the recruitment level like everyone else with conviction to assist their cause and an ability to fight, be a soldier if she wanted to help so very much. She couldn’t just throw together some shady connections and expect a position working directly with the Herald of Andraste herself.

But Eleanor didn’t even look to her for advice before she held out her hand and said,

“Alright Sera. You’re in.”

In? Just like that? Surely Eleanor didn’t think…ugh. She was a child, and sometimes Cassandra forgot that with that came severe immaturity, the idea that fifteen was all grown up and she didn’t need anyone’s advice. But Eleanor had never exhibited such behavior before—was it a symptom of her medication? Or a result—Eleanor regaining the full scope of her personality? Cassandra had believed Eleanor’s reliance on her advisors a sign of maturity, but perhaps it was a lack of blind faith in her own foolish ideas. She could go around baselessly offering alliances to outsiders! She should have stopped to think before she acted, consulted someone who may just know better.

Cassandra would be having words with her once they returned to the Marquis’ home. She would not rebuke the Herald in front of a stranger, out in the open, private as this compound seemed. But the girl needed to know she was by no means to take such charge.

“Really? Great!” Sera enthused as she shook Eleanor’s hand briskly. “Get in good before you’re too big to like—that’ll keep your breeches where they should be. Speaking of,” the girl released Eleanor’s hand and went behind a pillar, hefting up a large sack, and carrying it over to lay at Eleanor’s feet. “These are their breeches. You’ve got merchants and stuff that buy this pish yeah? Got to be worth something.”

“Uhh…”

“Haven, right? I’ll head there now—”

“Wait, all by yourself? We have a place we’re staying—”

“Ugh! Some Marquis something or other’s hoity-toity blah blah place? No thanks. I’ve got favors to handle along the way anyway, best rack some up. I’ll just meet you lot back in Haven.”

“We’ll send word then, ask for Leliana when you arrive alright? Be careful,” Eleanor cautioned.
Sera giggled. “You’re a sweet little one, aren’t you? I’ll see you there.”

“I’m not little!” Eleanor thought to call after her.

Oh she was, and she would be reminded. Eleanor would learn that if she wanted to be treated as an adult in the Inquisition, she had to behave like one.

Everyone was seemed tired when they got back to the Marquis’ home, and Ellie followed close behind Marehis as they made their way to her bedroom, and the moment she laid eyes on the sunken tub in the floor she started stripping, leaving a path of her armor in her wake as she went to examine just how to work the thing.

Marehis snorted at her very lady like behavior, closing the door behind them to make sure her lady had some measure of privacy—Elgar’nan, the girl forgot all semblance of modesty when her sights were set on bathing.

“Put away your armor and I’ll run you a bath, Ellie,” Marehis said.

Ellie had the grace to blush at that. “Whoops! Sorry, I didn’t mean to leave my things everywhere,” she said rising from where she’d been crouched, looking at the different knobs that operated the bathtub. She set about tidying up the mess she’d made while Marehis filled the tub with warm, soapy water.

“Oh! There’s bubbles,” Ellie commented when Marehis was done.

“You have heard of bubble-baths yes? I thought you might enjoy one.”

“Neat. Thanks, Marehis!” Eleanor gave her a brilliant smile before stepping carefully into the tub and sinking beneath the bubbles.

They chatted idly for a while as Ellie soaked and Marehis reclined at the edge of the bath, she thought perhaps she should keep an eye out for some sort of tub that Ellie could use in Haven. Maybe not on a daily basis, but every now and again, the girl might enjoy the opportunity to relax, she could certainly use it.

“Do you think Cassandra is upset with me?” Ellie asked suddenly.

Marehis thought for a moment, carefully running the evenings events through her mind—whatever had Ellie done that would warrant the Seeker’s displeasure? Had Cassandra been acting coldly toward her?

But no, there wasn’t anything in particular that could set the Seeker against Ellie.

Ahh. Wait. “You mean is she displeased you signed on that Sera girl? I was surprised you didn’t seek her advice on the matter.”

Ellie looked uncomfortable then. “She was going to say no—I figured not asking would be better than asking and outright defying her in front of everyone.”

Truly? “You would have gone against her judgement?”
Ellie nodded.

That was…surprising. Ellie held nothing but respect for Seeker Pentaghast and her opinion, why in the world would she differ so strongly over some random girl? It was true Sera had proven somewhat useful, but she wasn’t invaluable, not on her face anyway.

Oh but maybe her face had something to do with it, the rest of her as well. Marehis hadn’t found the Elf girl to be particularly striking in appearance—if anything she’d looked gangly and odd, with the most awful haircut. But did Ellie find her appealing in some way? Had she gone against Cassandra because she…had some sort of crush on the Rogue Elf? Granted there was some romance to the entire affair, a mysterious stranger leaving a scavenger hunt that leads you to meet them in the midst of battle, fighting side by side before they formally introduce themselves as something like a spy—a pedestrian sort of spy, but it may still hold some appeal to a person as young as Ellie all the same.

It wasn’t something she would expect from Ellie. She hadn’t expressed interest in anyone they’d encountered before—aside from her exuberant proposals of marriage to Master Harrit as thanks for his blacksmithing abilities—but this Sera seemed younger than many they’d met in the Inquisition. And Marehis had taken note, that first day with Ellie in her care, when the girl had admitted to gender not being a factor in who she found interest in, sexually—she thought to keep tabs on her ward’s interests in case they posed a threat. Too, she didn’t want her lady to be wholly without romantic attachment if she were ready for such a thing, Marehis was keeping an eye out for any who might be suitable.

She certainly did not think this Sera suitable. And she wasn’t expecting such an impasse to occur—didn’t think Ellie would find attraction into someone so unsuitable and create…well a problem. If anyone naysaid the liaison, if Ellie was so immature as to be seduced by anything this Sera had to dish out, she may well be further enticed by her friends’ and advisors’ disapproval.

Suddenly there was a horrific aspect, being the caretaker of a fifteen year old. Rebellion. Her very own Mage Rebellion, in Ellie’s case. Ha.

“Well,” Marehis spoke carefully, “I suppose you’ll have to talk it out with Cassandra. She won’t hold it against you for long, da’len, it’s one recruit,” she said, attempting to sound non-committal to an opinion on the girl for now.

Ellie sighed and smiled up at Marehis, “I think I’m ready to get out now.”

“Prune-y enough, Ellie?” Marehis asked teasingly as she reached for a towel, letting it unfold so Ellie could step up out of the tub and be wrapped in it.

“Oh gosh, I’m all wrinkly!” Ellie exclaimed in surprise as she examined her hands. Silly girl.

Sweet girl. Too sweet, she wasn’t allowed to date until she was forty! Oh that was irrational she knew, but still! No sketchy rogues! Nothing against rogues, Marehis was one herself, just no sketchy ones!

Marehis drained the tub and stepped into her own room—adjacent to Ellie’s—and sought out the washbasin to clean herself off, rid herself of the dust from the road and wet her hair, it was so short it wasn’t difficult to keep clean. By the time Marehis was satisfied with her own state of cleanliness and stripped of her armor and changed into a fresh tunic and breeches. She wasn’t sure how to broach the subject of Ellie’s interests, and she thought she’d magically (ha!) come up with
some sort of solution as she made herself ready for bed, but…no such luck.

She heard a knock at Ellie’s door and walked back into her lady’s quarters to find Ellie with her hair in a towel and tying her robe closed. “Come in!” she called over her shoulder.

“Seeker, the kid’s trying to get some sleep, see?” Varric said as he and Cassandra appeared in the now-open doorway.

“Eleanor asked to be a part of our late-night discussions, she’s more than welcome to join us if she thinks she’s so capable,” Cassandra said, her voice hard.

Ahh, perhaps the Lady Seeker was upset with Eleanor.

“Come on in, is everyone with you?” Ellie asked.

Cassandra stepped into the room, followed by Varric, Solas, and Blackwall.

Ellie climbed into her bed, sitting with her back against the pillows as she for everyone to come around and take a seat, Marehis went and got into bed next to the girl, pulling the towel from her hair so it could finish drying in the open air. Varric hopped into bed on Ellie’s other side, and Solas sat in front of Marehis. Blackwall came near but didn’t sit, he just stood beside Varric, and Cassandra stood at the end of the bed with her arms crossed over her chest.

“We’re sorry to disturb you so late, but the Lady Seeker insisted,” Blackwall started off uneasily.

Ellie nodded. “You’re mad about Sera. Would you feel better if I explained?”

Cassandra sighed as if trying to temper herself with some level of patience before outright yelling at the girl. “I do not wish to quarrel Eleanor, but I do not appreciate you flippantly agreeing to let that girl join without so much as taking a moment to consider the matter.”

“I didn’t need to,” Ellie said, and then held up her hand in defense before the woman, whose mouth had flown open to seemingly yell at the girl, could get started. “Explanation time, before you blow a gasket huh?”

“I do not blow—ugh, explain yourself then.”

“First off, I didn’t have time to consider Sera’s offer. What do you think she’d do if I said no, or asked to think it over? She’d be off in the wind, her offer rescinded. She’s likely always on the move, and you either take her or leave her, you can tell that much just from meeting the girl. And…that’s sort of how I was living before the Inquisition. I didn’t have time for people to think over whether they wanted me for a job, or if I could stay somewhere for the night—it’s not like I had a home to go sit around and wait on their answer, I had to move on to the next thing, or it was over for me.”

“You felt sorry for her—” Cassandra accused.

“No. I understand the position she’s in and how that relates to my response time. I had to give her a yes or a no, then and there, and for this instance, it had to be a yes,” Ellie sighed.

“It had to be?”

The Seeker looked chagrined when Ellie flinched at her scathing tones.
“Eleanor,” Cassandra said, terse but obviously trying. “I…suppose you should explain then. I cannot let you simply accept requests to join the inner circle of the Inquisition on a whim. This woman wants to assist you personally dealing with Rifts—that cannot be allowed without appropriate understanding of who she is and if she poses a threat to you. What, exactly is your reasoning for tonight?”

Ellie was silent for a moment, and Marehis thought perhaps the girl was considering her answer, but when she peered around to look at her ward, the half of her face visible to her was…well her jaw looked set, and she wasn’t making eye contact with the Seeker.

“Da’len?” Marehis asked, gently.

“I want to explain I just…it’s just not safe.”

The Seeker looked concerned then, they all did. Ellie looked truly frightened, so much so Marehis was contemplating rising to dash into her bedroom and get the girl a bit of calming draught, the girl clenched her fists tightly to keep her hands from shaking, but that did not stop the trembling in her frame.

Cassandra sat on the bed, scooting so she sat on her knees before Ellie, and cautiously, as if she expected the girl to shrink away from her, reached out with a gloved hand to take hold of Ellie’s Marked one, squeezing it gently. “Eleanor? I do sincerely apologize for getting so angry with you. People get angry at each other, and that isn’t necessarily a bad thing, it’s just means there is something needing addressed in order to work through it. I…I can never apologize enough for the way I treated you when we first met. But you needn’t fear that I would…hurt you. I know once that trust is broken it is hard to regain, but I promise Eleanor, I vow, no matter the transgression, I will never strike you out of anger ever again.”

Ellie looked up at her then. “You’ve never hit me or anything it’s not that—”

“I informed you that hundreds, including someone you held dear, had been murdered in an attack that I blamed you for, and in my outrage, I laid hands on you in anger and I broke your wrist.”

Marehis’s mind went blank for a moment. What…when was she talking about? She wasn’t sure if she should throw Ellie over her shoulder and get her as far away from the Seeker as possible, or if she should fight the Nevarran woman outright—she’d hurt Ellie? When? Marehis had trusted this woman to protect her ward! Why hadn’t Ellie—

“Cassandra!” Ellie cried out sounding exasperated with the older woman, “You didn’t break my wrist, I fell off a friggin fence like a thousand feet for goodness sake! And even if you had, Maker, do you think I’d hold something like that against you? You talk like you had all the facts at the time—I have Conclave-specific amnesia and you knew just a little bit more than I did. For all you knew I was some demon possessed psychopath masquerading in a teeny-bopper meatsuit hell-bent on destroying the world. And when I was finally awake to give you answers, I didn’t have any for you! You’re a Seeker, I’m sure you’ve heard loads of crap excuses like ‘I don’t remember’ or ‘I don’t know’ from tons of people who did do horrible things were just trying to get away with it. I’m lucky you didn’t beat me to death!”

Ahh, Marehis relaxed marginally, at Ellie’s explanation. She remembered then, her wrist had been injured when she was brought into Marehis’s care after the Breach. Marehis had known Ellie had been a suspect for the Conclave, had seen her dragged into Haven’s Chantry by Inquisition soldiers who’d found her, claiming she’d fallen from a Rift. She herself had not been sure what to believe—she’d seen a young girl, but the Mark had seemed menacing then, like proof
positive she was responsible for the Breach in the sky. She couldn’t imagine the choices she would have made, had she been in Cassandra’s shoes.

“Eleanor if you believed, as I do that I hurt you in such a way—”

“Hey!” Ellie shouted, prompting everyone to stare because...well Ellie did not shout, save for the few times Marehis had heard her do so during fights. The girl took both of Cassandra’s hands in her own and squeezed them tight. “Gosh, Cassandra, yeah for like all of five minutes, these hands intended to hurt me, did hurt me. But they also freed me from captivity, guarded me, and laid on me in prayer for my soul before I faced certain death—that was just day one. And since then? They’ve done nothing but teach me to defend myself and protected me in battle. Cassandra I’m nothing but grateful to you for all you’ve done to help me.”

“I...Eleanor you say that, but you fear explaining your thought process behind doing something I believe to be reckless.”

“Not because of you! It’s not safe to tell anyone. Gosh, you getting mad or hurting me or whatever didn’t even cross my mind. I mean don’t get me wrong I don’t necessarily enjoy arguing with you but I’m not scared to or anything. You wanna yell? We can yell! I’m game. I might cry after so much of it, but that’s just reflex, pretty sure its just cuz I’m so short.”

“I suppose I misunderstood then. We needn’t yell, Eleanor.”

Ellie looked over her shoulder to Marehis, and then turned to look into the face of everyone else in the room in turn before her gaze settled on Cassandra again. “I can explain, and I will, but I would ask that what I’m about to tell you doesn’t leave this room.”

“Whatever it is, da’len, we will keep your counsel,” Marehis promised, her hands going to Ellie’s shoulders and giving them a reassuring squeeze.

Ellie nodded. “Um...so. You know how sometimes I find things, like those little treasures in the Hinterlands, and the things Blackwall’s been looking for from the Grey Wardens?”

Marehis wasn’t certain where she was going with this, though it did call to mind the instance in Adan’s old teacher’s cabin. Ellie had insisted they look inside, and she discovered an improved recipe for lyrium the man had invented before his passing. That had been...rather fortuitous and strangely coincidental.

“Yes?” Cassandra prompted.

“My magic uh...well it communicates with me, and part of what it does is tell me when something is important—whether it’s important I go a certain direction to find something, or that I talk to someone because somehow my magic knows they need my help, or that they have information I need,” she took a deep breath. “When we got the letter from Leliana that there was a lone warden in the Hinterlands my magic sort of pinged, told me that we were about to meet someone important,” she looked to Blackwall then, “the moment we met my magic was certain, you’re supposed to be a part of our team, you’re important to our success as the Inquisition.”

Blackwall visibly paled and actually finally did sit down on the edge of Ellie’s bed then, the motion more like he’d needed to sit than simply accepting the seat she’d offered.

“My lady, that is...surely you exaggerate.”

Ellie shook her head and leaned forward to put her hands over the hand of Blackwalls closest to her, and gave it a gentle squeeze, “I don’t. Why would you question it? You offered your
help yourself, my magic knew you would even before you did. You’ve done nothing but help us,
and you’ve been amazing! Don’t sell yourself short.”

“Your ‘pinging’ of magic, you felt it upon meeting this Sera?” Cassandra asked.

Ellie shook her head ‘no’. “I actually felt it when her messenger arrow hit the ground in
front of us. I knew the message would lead us to someone important. I don’t know how or why, but
Sera’s going to help us, really truly help us. So far, my magic hasn’t steered me wrong.”

Oh. Oh thank everything. She hadn’t acted out of rash, hormonal, love-struck teen angst.
That was…well Marehis wasn’t certain about magic all the time, but Ellie’s had never posed a
problem, and the girl had used it as a tool for survival all her life. That it would develop in such a
way, to keep her appraised of things that could help and harm her she may not be able to perceive
of herself, wasn’t unfathomable.

“Why would disclosing this be dangerous, da’len?” Solas asked.

Ellie looked at the man as if he’d just asked her if she thought setting oneself on fire was a
good idea.

“The system we live in paints all mages with the same brush,” she said, “If I went around
telling people—even those I trusted—my magic helps me find valuable things, that could get out to
the wrong sort of people. I mean how quickly do you think I’d be snatched up for treasure
hunting? Or worse, because people think all mages are alike, I have the ability, so all mages must.
Slavers would capture mages just for the purpose of using an ability they might not even have!”

Solas looked taken aback by the prospect. Marehis knew he had not come from a back
ground of being acquainted with many others, especially other mages. He hadn’t considered it
might be dangerous for others to know about the personal natures of magic, that it could create
danger for his fellow mages.

Cassandra was quiet for a moment. Then she squeezed Ellie’s hand, looking into her face as
she said, “Thank you, Eleanor. For trusting us. None shall hear of it unless you bid it.”

“Even the Advisors?” Ellie asked tentatively. “It’s not that I don’t trust them, it’s just…the
more people that know, the more risk there is and…I know Cullun wouldn’t—”

“No, that isn’t necessary. Unless you just feel convicted to do otherwise, you are free to
keep it to yourself. Should they question a decision you make based on your magic, I will simply
back you up.”

Ellie smiled then, “Even if that means defending my decision to let Sera join?” she asked,
almost teasingly.

The Seeker sighed as if put-upon. “Ugh. Yes. I will defend that wretched Elf. Though be
warned, if she does not absolutely prove great value to our cause, I will be very cross.”

Ellie moved forward to hug Cassandra’s shoulders. “If she doesn’t work out, I promise, you
can kick her out yourself!”

“Ahh Eleanor, I appreciate that you trust me, but do not tempt me so, I may just send her
packing upon our return to Haven.”

Ellie sat back and shook her head, “No you won’t,” she said simply.
“I won’t?”

“Nope! Because you trust me too.”

Cassandra sighed. “And so I do.” And then, “I understand your magic gave you insight but I still would have appreciated you seeking my opinion on the matter.”

“Oh a scale from one to ‘dragon in high dudgeon’ how outraged would you have been if I asked you about it and you said no, and then, in front of an outsider, and our friends, I flat out ignored your advice and hired her on anyway?”

“I cannot imagine that would have gone over well,” Cassandra allowed.

It certainly would have not.

“I preferred to deal with it in-house later…or, well now…instead of in front of a total stranger. The goal wasn’t to embarrass you or make it seem like I think I know everything, I just —”

“Saw what needed to be done, and you did it,” Cassandra said softly, like she had a certain fondness for the idea.

And then she started laughing.

Loud, one hand clutching her abdomen as laughter spilled forward unbidden.

“Did she drive you literally mad there, Seeker?” Varric asked, as if honestly worried that was exactly what had happened.

“Oh, forgive me Eleanor, I—” Cassandra stopped to take a deep breath and steady herself, she sat on the bed then, “I was absolutely furious when you behaved so brashly but I should have realized it was because it was so very much like something I would have done. Have done. You would not be here, Herald of Andraste if not for my own inclination for the practice of seeing what I think is best and acting upon it.”

“So…you’re not angry with me anymore?”

“No, Eleanor, I suppose I’m not. I don’t particularly care for our new team mate, but perhaps she’ll surprise me.”

“Eh, I think with Sera what you see is what you get, but an extra Rogue can’t be a bad thing.”

Marehis shook her head and sat back against the pillows, throwing an arm over the Ellie’s shoulders and the girl snuggled back into the embrace.

“You know, I’m surprised, magic or no magic, you offered her a place to stay after she called you a baby, she’d probably think cuddling with your nanny before bedtime real grown up,” Varric teased.

“Marehis is my best friend, and Sera can fight me if she thinks I’m a such a baby. I’m fifteen! Almost sixteen, thank you very much.”

“Is your birthday approaching, Ellie?” Solas asked. Elgar’nan, bless him, the way he asked, he was obviously curious to know how much time he would have to get her a present.
But Ellie’s impending birthday was news to Marehis. Had the girl ever mentioned the date before? She supposed she should have asked.

“Mmm, it’s still the first week of Harvestmere now, right?” she asked. Cassandra nodded, and Ellie continued, “Then yeah, First Day—Wintermarch 1st.”

Cassandra sat up at that, “You were born on the first of the year?” she asked, surprised. It would be a rather fortuitous birthdate—to be born at the beginning of the year often marked a child as gifted in some way, at least that was what was boasted in noble circles. In Marehis’s experience, no one she’d met before who’d had such a birthday was all that spectacular, but perhaps Ellie was a true example of the Maker using the start of the year to bring forth someone of importance, who would carry them into a better future.

But Ellie was shaking her head. “I dunno about that, it’s just when I up my age.”

“…up your age?” Cassandra asked as if she wasn’t sure she’d heard her right.

“Yeah. I don’t know when I was born, but I do know when the year changes—it didn’t matter if I lost track of what month is was, if it was First Day, it was hard to miss the new year celebrations going on everywhere. So, I just started counting with that. I know I was five when I was sent off on my own, and it was 9:31 then, in 9:32 I started saying I was six, and it just went on like that.”

Their conversation shifted then to what they’d accomplished during the day, and what they could improve upon. It was a ritual they usually performed without Ellie, but she’d evidently sought to be included. She mostly listened, but occasionally she held some measure of input that helpful—a lot of their nightly talks centered around her security, having her actually there to say ‘yes, doing this was helpful’ or ‘that isn’t necessary’ to different strategies and ideas was beneficial.

Solas reclined on the side of the bed, and even Blackwall was laying on his side, Varric had long-since put his feet up, laying next to Ellie, and Cassandra was lying on her stomach, her chin resting in the palm of her hands. Their talk began driving off into chatting, that was beginning to die down.

Ellie seemed practically asleep, her head resting against Marehis’s shoulder, when she suddenly mumbled out, “I didn’t even need to go to the tavern.”

“For what, da’len?” Solas asked.

A mischievous smile pulled at Ellie’s lips and she said,

“To fill my bed.”

The following day at breakfast, the halls of the Marquis’s home echoed with a low gong. Ellie watched for Marehis as the Elf woman left the table to answer the door, Solas volunteering to go with her in case there was any trouble.

Maker, they were so cute together!
They returned shortly, Marehis holding a fancy looking letter.

Oh. Her magic perked up at that.

“What’s up?” Varric asked.

“It’s an invitation from the Imperial Enchanter herself,” Marehis said, rather breathlessly as if she could scarcely believe it, “Vivian de Fer, First Enchanter of Montsimmard is holding a salon at the Chateau of Duke Bastien de Ghislan. She wants Ellie to attend. Or, well, ‘Herald of Andraste Eleanor’.”

“Truly?” Cassandra asked, rising from her seat to read over the letter herself. “It’s embossed with her official seal.”

“The messenger mage who delivered the letter seemed legitimate as well,” Solas said.

Ellie’s mind drew an absolute blank. “So…wait…the Imperial Enchanter wants me. To come to her fancy party? Why?”

“Evidently she’s heard of you and wants to meet you as a representative of the Inquisition.”

“Josie’s going to have kittens! I can’t just…go to something like this! I just learned how to chew with my mouth closed! Like! Yesterday, I’m pretty sure! 24 hours of neat eating under my belt doesn’t make me ‘salon ready’!”

Marehis giggled! Was everyone in her life prone to traitorous tendencies? First Cassandra and her being so very okay with Ellie traipsing off to Val Royeaux in the first place, and now Marehis and her weird ideas that Ellie should set even one foot in the direction of Duke Bastien’s existence, let alone a party thrown in his home hosted by the First Enchanter.

Maker. Whatever could a woman like that want with a girl like Ellie? Oh, her magic could take a flying leap, there was no friggin way! It pinged! Traitors, all of them!

“Eleanor you’ve been doing well enough at meals, your lunch with the Marquis got us the use of his ‘mid-spring abode’ we’re in now,” Cassandra said, “This is hardly a sit-down dinner, it’s a party.”

“There will be finger foods—snacks basically. We’ll eat before we go, you snack, sip some champagne…or well, we’d best stick with water,” Marehis said.

“Water! Definitely water!” Ellie agreed.

“I’m sure the Grand Enchanter will have some pretty extravagant wine, rare vintage the whole thing,” Varric said as if the thought were enticing.

“You’ll have to drink enough for the both of us then,” Ellie said. She’d tried a glass of wine at lunch just her and Lady Josephine, she’d forgotten, and she hadn’t wanted to be rude. So, she drank less than half a glass of wine the day before they left Haven and it’d interacted awful with her potion—the one for depression, Adan was sure. Marehis said she didn’t act strangely—a little quiet sometimes, maybe a bit gigglier than usual—but Ellie had absolutely zero memory of the rest of that day until about mid-morning when they’d been just about to head out. Literally, to her mind, one moment she was chatting with Josephine and the next she was falling because she’d apparently been climbing into Russel’s saddle when she snapped out of it and panicked.

She’d blacked out, Adan said when Marehis whisked her away momentarily to make sure
Ellie was alright to travel. Given she already had some level of amnesia surrounding the Conclave, she was to absolutely not even think of drinking, which was fine by her.

“Vhenan,” Solas said absent mindedly, “I don’t believe you read the letter in its entirety.”

Marehis turned bright red and seemed to choke for a moment, and Solas’s eyes went wide as he reeled back, taking a few steps away from the Elf woman, half looking like he might turn heel and run away.

“You just call Shadow a bad name?” Varric asked, as if ready to come to Marehis’s defense if he had. That was sweet.

“No worse than your nicknaming her ‘shadow’, I quite assure you,” Solas said, his voice was pitchy though, nervous.

“Vhenan?” Ellie asked. “…huh,” she thought over what Dalish she knew.

“It means ‘My heart’. I assume Solas meant it in the way a Human might say ‘bless my soul’, or ‘oh goodness’. A statement of surprise, yes?” Marehis asked.

“It certainly seems to be,” Blackwall said as if he were all too pleased about something.


“It would seem the Grand Enchanter is only interested in meeting with Ellie. She requested her presence alone at the party,” Solas said.

Marehis looked further down the letter and said, “Ahh. This is a party for the elite of Orlais, I should have figured something of the sort would be required.”

“What do you mean?” Ellie asked.

“Well, da’len…um, I know you’re conscious of the prejudice many hold against Elves,” Marehis seemed to struggle with her explanation for a moment before she came and sat down in the chair next to Ellie and took Ellie’s hands in her own. “Sometimes you’re going to be called to events like this, we’ve been hoping for such a thing—that you would attract the notice of important potential allies, and they would seek audience with you. This is a case where you’ll have to go to them, and…well, the Grand Enchanter is so closely tied to the Empress, da’len. Everyone in attendance will be high ranking nobility. They will not mingle with undesirables.”

Undesirables?

Oh Maker. Oh, the absolute nerve! Pinged or not, this Madam de Fer, she could…she could —

“Madam de Fer can stuff her invite then! Undesirable?! You can’t be serious—” Ellie railed once she caught on.

“It is not a pleasant thing, Eleanor, but racism is alive and well, especially in the upper class of Orlais. I worried we would run into something like this,” Cassandra said, her hand on Ellie’s shoulder, meant to sooth, and Ellie fought the urge to find it patronizing and shake it off. She wouldn’t be so unkind to the Seeker, even if she meant it in a bad way, Cassandra had difficulty expressing herself affectionately, Ellie wouldn’t throw her efforts back into her face.
“I take it none of us are invited then?” Cassandra was asking then.

None of them?

“Wait, she’s not just excluding Elves?” Ellie asked. That…that wasn’t much better. In fact, it wasn’t better at all.

“No, da’len. Think on it. While we would be excluded regardless,” Marehis said, gesturing to herself and Solas, “she’s not going to invite a Dwarf into her fancy party, no matter his renown.”

“But I’m so fun at parties,” Varric insisted in tones that implied there was no love lost.

Marehis rolled her eyes and continued, “Or a Grey Warden. Cassandra, perhaps…”

“I am Nevarran nobility, a pariah. Seventy-eighth or so in line for the throne, perhaps if a great portion of the Kings family were to suddenly drop dead I would be credible enough to attend as a guest, or at least an oddity.”

“As a guest,” Ellie said then. “What about as a servant?” she blushed as soon as she made the suggestion. “I mean it might not be a good idea—”

“It’s a sound idea, Eleanor,” Cassandra was quick to stop her. “We cannot send you alone, but neither should we turn down such an opportunity.”

“How do you propose we do such a thing?” Solas asked.

Ellie smiled. “Well, if you can get a letter out, I think we have a Friend who can help us.”

The letter to Sera made it in time for the girl to send back a crudely written, phallus embossed letter of reply with names, times, and instructions before the salon.

Perhaps she would be useful after all, Cassandra thought.

Sera evidently did have a Friend connection to some people on staff for the caterers Vivienne de Fer used for her parties. Marehis, Solas, and Blackwall infiltrated the catering staff using Sera’s intel, and Cassandra went without armor, wearing a nicer tunic and breeches similar to what Marehis would wear—she couldn’t be an outright guest, but if she did not make a spectacle of herself, the woman could pass as Eleanor’s handmaiden, a more socially acceptable one. If Marehis arrived at her side, the Elf woman would likely be made to wait outside while Eleanor went in alone. If she were allowed in, there was no telling what Eleanor might say to defend the woman she considered her dearest friend if someone mistreated her—she could very well get herself ejected from the party without ever meeting this Madam de Fer. With her real handmaid acting as an invisible servant, and a Human woman acting as her ‘handmaid’, all was right with the world as far as Orlesian nobility was concerned, and there was a smaller chance Eleanor would feel the conviction to start a fight over her friend’s honor.

She’d already been lectured by just about every single one of her companions to hold her tongue in regard to the invitation being so very prejudice. Well, she’d termed Cassandra and Marehis and Sola’s talk with her on the matter a ‘lecture’. Blackwall had given her a pat on the back and insisted she not worry herself on his account, and Varric said he was grateful to have
dodged a fireball on this one—fancy parties were not his forte. He preferred fun parties, not stuffy polite affairs.

“If people don’t leave drunk, hungover, or pregnant, what’s the point?”

Blackwall saved Cassandra the trouble and slapped the Dwarf on the back of the head for that one.

As it was, Varric got the luxury of cooling his heels by the carriage they’d taken to the chateau, on guard for any sort of trouble—it wasn’t lost on Eleanor or her companions that her being invited to attend this event alone could well be a trap dressed up in Orlesian elitism. Hence the need to have a great deal of them on the inside with her—if this Madam de Fer had devious plans for Eleanor, she would have aid.

Maker, Orlesians were tiring.

Cassandra felt more than awkward. She felt *naked*, walking around without her armor, without her weapons. True, she had a few knives tucked into her boots and daggers carefully concealed beneath her clothing, but that was hardly a sword or a shield, or a thick plate of steel between her chest and an oncoming blade. Eleanor had opted to wear her armor, at Marehis’s suggestion, replacing the leather overcoat with shimmery ankle-length duster made of swirling patterns of silver and olive green. She looked appropriately attired for the event while maintaining the security of her armor, no one might even realize she wasn’t just wearing a fine tunic and leather breeches—the style of wearing tight leather bottoms had become popular in the youth of Orlais, for ‘clubbing’ Marehis had informed Cassandra. It made the Seeker wonder if the Elf woman was of a mind to sneak Eleanor out to such a place, a club, full of young people around her age for a bit of fun. Reckless, and truly pointless, but not everything needed to be doom and demons.

Clubbing aside, for now they were safely inside Madam de Fer’s salon, going in full-swing by the time they arrived, fashionably late. The idea had boggled Eleanor’s mind to no end, she couldn’t believe it was a *faux-pas* (especially before Marehis explained what faux-pas meant) to arrive to an event at the exact time specified, that it wasn’t outright rude to show up even an hour or more, late.

Eleanor had known it was appropriate to bring a gift for the host, she seemed delighted with that idea, and Cassandra handed over a portion of their funds for this trip to Marehis, who slipped down to the marketplace in search of something suitable.

Eleanor, however, had something else in mind entirely. So, they came to Chateau de Bastion armed with a crystal-encrusted bottle of wine, a specialty of a popular Orlesian Vineyard, encasing their rarer vintages in bottles meant to be kept as a decorative status symbol. The silvery, glittering bottle looked like it would fit in well with Orlesian décor, and then there was Eleanor’s offering. A circlet of flowers.

The girl had apparently done some slipping out of her own—which she was quick to apologize for once she was reminded how very unsafe it was for her to leave her companions, especially in such a new place. She’d not gone far, just to the top of the circle of buildings that encased Val Royeaux, technically the roof of the estate. There were small beds of flowers there and an Elf man, a servant had been replanting them for a Nobleman and his Lady wife—they were to be dining there later in the open air and the Lady sought to surprise her husband with flowers similar to those she’d had in her wedding bouquet.

Some of which, the Elf man had given to Eleanor. The girl seemed to find the whole thing rather innocent, a sweet gesture from the man since she’d complimented how lovely the flowers
were and he’d seen fit to leave her with some, but Cassandra, and Varric as well (ugh, to be of the same mind with the Dwarf was...increasingly less disparaging. And that was a depressing thought in and of itself) thought that the man had been flirting with Eleanor. The girl didn’t think so.

She’d carefully woven the flowers into a circlet and it hung around the wine bottle, pink petals admittedly complimentary to the silver vessel.

It was one of those moments where Cassandra was struck by what level of innocence the girl had managed to maintain in her life. Hearing Solas term his kinship with Eleanor the other day, as something ‘precious’, something he cherished, it made Cassandra wish she had some way with words. Eleanor was light and trust, and as she grew more like herself she became even more open with her regard to her companions, Cassandra included. But the older woman wondered if the girl knew just how very important she was to the Seeker, outside of her role as the Herald.

Cassandra did not often think of the future. Now, now was what mattered. But still she worried. The choices the Inquisition would make, it would influence Eleanor’s future not just in her role within the organization itself, but her life later. If they came down on the side of mages, Cassandra knew well the dangers of magic held unaccountable, it had cost her her brother.

If they came down on the side of Templars, it may well cost her Eleanor. Would she be Circled? Would Cassandra stand idle-by and let it happen because duty bid it so?

She didn’t think so. And that thought terrified her. Even in her seemingly rebellious, anarchical actions, maintaining the Inquisition Justinia had ordered...it was just that, orders. Cassandra was not banging her chest and waving her flag as the Lord Seeker, and many others seemed to think. She was performing her duty to the Chantry. While a majority in the Chantry did not necessarily agree with her actions, it was their own code that dictated them.

It was baffling how easy it seemed to be calm and certain about the idea that someday, orders may go out to lock Eleanor away in a Circle for the rest of her life, and Cassandra would simply defy them, no hesitation, no struggle with her moral sensibilities or her sense of duty.

Eleanor had been chatting politely with a nobleman and his wife, faring rather well, in Cassandra’s opinion. She’d side-stepped their interest in rumors they’d heard, making all the right notes without committing anything as certain truth. And she hadn’t faltered even for an instant when Marehis, dressed in catering uniform, slipped past them holding a tray with champagne flutes, one of which Eleanor was quick to snatch up—water, though it almost looked like champagne, just clear with bubbles similar to that of its more yellowish counterparts.

But as Eleanor began sipping at her beverage, a haughty voice spoke out from above—descending the flight of stairs down into the foyer, a Marquis they hadn’t the pleasure of meeting yet, began lobbing insults at the Inquisition.

“The Inquisition? What a load of pig shit! Washed up sisters and crazed Seekers? No one can take them seriously. Everyone knows it’s just an excuse for a bunch of political outcasts to grab power.”

“The Inquisition was reinstated to restore peace to Thedas,” Eleanor said calmly, and Cassandra was glad of it. His ‘crazed Seeker’ comment had set a stiffness in the girl’s shoulders, and while her ‘crazed Seeker’ companion was albeit flattered to see the girl so ready to jump to her defense, this was hardly the place or time to pick fights with pricks over petty jabs.

And it was almost amusing, how flippantly this man insulted Cassandra when he had not a clue she was in his presence. The thought of breaking her cover was almost so, so rich in her
mouth. How very satisfying would the look on his face be, if he realized Seeker Pentaghast was among them and he’d actually insulted her to her face?

But the notion was also angering—he thought Eleanor *alone*. An easy target, a little girl he could bully. This man was a coward. Perhaps she would break cover just to punch him square in the face.

And then the man challenged Eleanor, to a duel of all things and Cassandra realized all too late she could well have come openly armed. The man had daggers strapped to his back and reached behind to pull one on the Herald.

And then he froze. Solid, his body coated in a thin layer of filmy frost, his hand just barely touching the hilt of his dagger.

“My dear Marquis, how unkind of you to use such language in my house, to *my* guests.”

A feminine voice, one that held power and seduction spoke from on high, and it took no guess to realize just who the woman descending the stairway to join them, steps certain and measured, was.

Madam Vivienne de Fer, First Enchanter of Montsimmard.

“You know such rudeness is intolerable,” she crooned as she circled, predatory around the frozen Marquis.

“M-Madam Vivienne, I humbly beg your pardon,” the man chattered.

“You should,” Vivienne said as she came to look the man in the face. “Whatever am I going to do with you, my dear?”

And then she turned to Eleanor. “My lady, you are the wounded party in this unfortunate affair. What would you have me do with this foolish, foolish man?”

“I’m sorry?” Eleanor asked, clearly uncertain what Madam de Fer was insinuating.

“My Lady, if I may,” the words felt unnatural coming from Cassandra’s lips, and she wondered just how Marehis dealt with acting so very cowed when she was much more confident and capable. Never the less, “I believe she is leaving his fate up to you. The Marquis challenged you to a duel. Shall Madam de Fer release him and have him evicted from the party, or would you prefer she kill the man where he stands for his crime?”

Eleanor looked taken aback at the prospect. “Oh! Gosh! I would ask that you spare him, Madam de Fer. I’m sure he’s sorry now. His insults aren’t worth his life. Though…” she was thoughtful a moment and she looked at the offending Marquis. “I would like you to apologize to my erm, handmaid here, for your rudeness.”

Cassandra nearly snorted. This girl. He hadn’t labeled any of his insults for her ‘handmaid’ but Eleanor wanted penance paid for his insults against Cassandra personally, even if he hadn’t a clue who he was apologizing to, or what he was apologizing for.

“I-I-I am t-t-truly sorry if I have caused offense to you or your Lady,” the Marquis rambled out.

Vivienne looked intrigued for a moment and then she turned her magic back on the Marquis. “Very well, by the grace of Andraste, you have your life, my dear. Do be more careful
With a snap of her fingers, the man was free, redfaced with shame, and scurrying out of sight.

The First Enchanter then drew close to Eleanor, hands clasped lightly before her as she so charmingly greeted the Herald. “I’m delighted you could attend this little gathering. I’ve so wanted to meet you. Come,” she gestured for Eleanor to follow her. She and Cassandra trailed after the First Enchanter, up the stairs where she led them to a window overlooking the courtyard.

“Allow me to introduce myself, I am Vivienne, First Enchanter of Montsimmard and Enchantress to the Imperial Court.”

Eleanor gave a small bow as she said, “It’s a pleasure to meet you, Lady Vivienne.”

“Well aren’t you a polite little thing. Tell me, are you truly who they say? The Herald of Andraste?”

“If I may,” Eleanor held up her marked hand, gloved in the thick leather that encased her Mark entirely, she gestured to make sure Vivienne was comfortable with her removing her glove.

Ahh. Such a move could be at first perceived as the start of a challenge. Eleanor had learned more in her lessons with Josephine than just how to chew with her mouth closed.

Vivienne assented with a regal nod, and Eleanor carefully removed her glove to reveal the Mark of Fadelight resting in the palm of her hand.

“How lovely, the color brings out your eyes,” Vivienne commented as if Eleanor had just shown her a darling pair of earrings and not a strange Mark of unknown origin giving her the power to manipulate tears to the Fade itself.

“Thank you,” Eleanor said as she replaced the glove on her hand. “Oh! We have a present for you,” she said, turning to Cassandra then, and holding out her hands. The Seeker deposited the flower-ornamented wine bottle into Eleanor’s care.

Madam de Fer looked like she’d been taken off her stride, as if Eleanor had interrupted the way the older woman had been guiding the conversation, but she examined the girl’s offerings and there was a softness in her eyes then. Marehis would be pleased to know her gift went over so well.

Or maybe it was not the wine so much, but the flowers adorning them.

“Peonies*,” Lady Vivienne spoke softly, carefully reaching out to touch a soft petal with her finger tip. “They are lovely. Whatever made you think of them, my dear?”

Eleanor shrugged, and then blushed—the gesture was not wholly rude, but such plebeian forms of nonverbal communication weren’t done. “When I received your invitation, I wanted to bring you something. My handmaid thought of the wine, but I dunno, I don’t really come from a background of buying presents. Anything I’ve ever given anyone has been something I made or found. I found these…peonies did you say? Oh, that’s a pretty name. Anyway, I found them and made them into a little circlet, I think they’ll still smell pretty for a while.”

Lady Vivienne waved her hand before the flowers, gold light slipping over the petals before disappearing. “They shall remain just as they are for all time,” she said.

A house servant, a young human girl came and took the gift of wine and flowers from
Eleanor’s hands, and Lady Vivienne instructed they be placed in Lord Bastien’s room.

“Will Lord Bastien be joining us?” Eleanor asked.

“I’m afraid not, my dear. He is detained, but I will make sure he sees your thoughtful present.”

“Well please tell him thank you for allowing me into his home. And give him my apologies for that mess with the Marquis. I didn’t mean to cause trouble. Oh! I apologize to you for that as well, thank you for helping me.”

“It was my pleasure. Put that insufferable man from your mind, he is not worthy of concern, he has always acted without thinking of the consequences. I expect once his Aunt gets word that he disrespected the Herald of Andraste herself, he’ll be disowned. The woman is powerful, and extremely devout.”

Eleanor looked horrified at the thought. “He won’t really be disowned, will he?” she looked to Cassandra then, “Could you help me later? I’d like to get a letter to his aunt and make sure she knows I’m not offended.”

“Oh my dear girl. The man is grown, and still doesn’t know any better. Being disowned will not be to his detriment. If anything, it will create the opportunity for him to grow. If he redeems himself, he’ll be back in his aunt’s good graces forthwith, though I shall pass her name along to your handmaid if that is your wish.”

“Hmm, well if she’s as devout as you say, I would still like it if we could reach out to her on behalf of the Inquisition.”

“I’ll see you have her information before you leave,” Vivienne promised. “If it pleases you my dear, I did not bring you here to exchange pleasantries.”

“Oh, right! Please, what did you want to talk with me about?”

“With Divine Justinia dead, the Chantry is in shambles. Only the Inquisition might restore sanity and order to our frightened people. As the leader of the last loyal mages in Thedas, I feel it is only right that I lend my assistance to your cause.”

“Loyal Mages?” Eleanor asked, apprehensive.

“Loyal to the people of Thedas. We have not forgotten the Commandment, that Magic exists to serve man.”

“And never to rule over him, Transfigurations 1:2,” Eleanor finished, to express she knew what Madam de Fer was referring to.

“Exactly so, my Lady,” Vivienne said, with some measure of obvious delight.

“What would you do for the Inquisition, Lady Vivienne? Are you lending us political aid, or do you mean to join our ranks yourself?”

“I would serve in both respects. I know every member of Council personally, here in Orlais. I would work within the court to assist the Inquisition’s political affairs, and I hold the remaining resources of our fallen Circles, those would be of use to your cause as well. And I am a mage of no small talent.”
“You would join my party then?” Eleanor asked.

“I would.”

Eleanor looked around as if to take in their very fine, comfortable surroundings. “Are you certain, my lady? I mean no disrespect of course, you were amazing earlier, you’re obviously powerful. But Haven is far, and very different from here. I would hate for you to travel all that way just to realize you would rather serve here. Your political assistance and the uh…Circle resources you mentioned, that is more than enough you’re bringing to the table for the Inquisition. And it can be very dangerous.”

“I should like to meet my enemy. I will not sit quiet and watch the world destroyed,” Lady Vivienne insisted.

Eleanor made a point then, of looking up at Cassandra, making certain the woman held no objection before she offered her marked hand. “Then I would gladly welcome you into the Inquisition.”

Madam de Fer looked at the hand for a moment, a handshake was not usually a trademark of ballroom etiquette, but she clasped Eleanor’s offered hand and said, “Great things are beginning my dear, I can promise you that.”

“Vaaaaaaric!” Ellie’s voice, all sing-songy.

Varric jerked awake, in his seat on top of their carriage. Shit, he was supposed to be keeping watch. At least Bianca was out and at the ready, he used his free hand to rub at his eyes, geesh. What time was it? Wait, did someone say something about wine?

Ellie and Seeker were standing by the carriage now, man Seeker looked weird out of armor. She and Tumbles looked worn out, he holstered Bianca as he yawned, and then pulled out his pocket watch. Damn, it was going on II in the morning now. Had it been that fun?

“Hey Tumbles, how was the party?” he asked.

“It was nice. We brought you wine, as thanks for keeping watch!” Ellie was happy to report, holding a canteen up to him.

He dropped down from the driver’s seat and took the canteen off her hands, twisting off the cap. Huh. Sweet.

“Ahh, Seeker, I didn’t know you cared,” he drawled before taking a swig.

“I didn’t realize one could keep watch with their eyes closed. Eleanor brought you wine,” Cassandra corrected drily, looking to Tumbles as she announced. “I still do not know how you hid that.”

“I’m a woman of mystery. The Herald of Andraste. Men fear my canteen concealing abilities,” Ellie proclaimed. And then under Cassandra’s wry stare she giggled and admitted, “I asked Marehis if she thought she could get this in and fill it up. She just passed it off to me before we left.”
Kind of stolen wine tasted all the better, Varric thought. “So, what now? You ready to head back?”

Ellie shook her head. “The others will be out in a while. Do you guys mind waiting?”

“Not at all,” Cassandra said.

“Nah, I’m set,” Varric agreed with a shrug, opening the carriage door and hopping in, reclining with his back against the carriage wall and his feet on the seat as he enjoyed his wine. Cassandra gave Ellie her hand to help her into the carriage before the Seeker stepped up and slid into the seat next to Tumbles.

It took all of thirty seconds for Ellie to start swinging her legs restlessly.

“Oh!” she said, looking to Varric. “You wouldn’t happen to have writing things?”

He couldn’t always write while they traveled, but inspiration could strike at any time, he couldn’t risk not having a way to jot down notes when he needed to. “Course, what do you need?”

Ellie turned to Cassandra. “Do you think you could write a letter? To Lady Josie, asking her to write to that Marquis Aunt for me? Since we’re waiting. It’s okay if you’re too tired or something tho-“

“I would be glad to,” Seeker said.

“Mind if we use some parchment, Varric?” Ellie asked.

“Knock yourself out, Tumbles,” he said. He always had a journal for note taking on his hip, quill secured between the cover and parchment, and a small box hooked to his belt that held a stoppered inkwell. He handed notebook and inkbox to Ellie who removed one of the loose parchment papers in the back of the journal and the quill, closed the journal and handed it to Cassandra, parchment flat against the hard cover of the journal so she’d have a stable surface to write on.

Cassandra settled in with Ellie leaning against her shoulder, in her unmarked hand she held the inkwell for Seeker while she held her Marked hand overhead, ungloved so the Fadelight gave the Seeker light to write by. Varric had told them. Nightlight capabilities.

“Dear Lady Josephine Montilyet,” Cassandra read aloud as she wrote, and then looked to Ellie. “What would you like to say?”

“Explain what happened at the party and that when Madam de Fer said his aunt is so devout, I thought we should reach out and see if she would like to help the Inquisition and ask her not to be so cross with her nephew for challenging me—”

Woah woah, hold up! Varric swung his legs over the edge of the seat so he could sit straight up facing Tumbles. “Challenging you?”

She shrugged. Shrugged! Damnit, Tumbles! “There was a Marquis at the party who wasn’t exactly pleased to have someone from the Inquisition present. He just said some stuff and tried to challenge me to a duel or something.”

“He insulted you to your face and attempted to draw his weapons on you.” Cassandra corrected drily.
Maker’s entire nutsack. He was going to have to kill someone. Marquis whoeverthefuck. Wait. Was that that dipshit that got kicked out? He could feel his brain splitting off in two directions—half of it assuming Seeker stepped in and saved the day and that asshole had been ripped a new one, and the other going into full panic mode that Tumbles had to fight the bastard herself—shit! She hadn’t even gone in armed! Had he hurt her?

She didn’t seem it. And no way Seeker would let anyone actually hurt Ellie and walk away from that.

But shit. He should have paid better attention—if he’d known that asshole Marquis he saw skulking away from the mansion had tried to start something with Ellie, threatened her, he’d have popped him real good.

Oh. But maybe it was a good thing he hadn’t. because of course Tumbles forgives the sap and wants to play nice with his aunt or whatever. Sometimes he felt like his Street Smart lessons didn’t sink all the way in with her.

But that was…okay, he supposed. It was worrying as shit because people take advantage of that forgiveness shit, but it was also part of what makes Ellie, Ellie. On some level, he was pretty sure it was part of what made the Maker think she’d be cut out for a job like ‘Herald of Andraste’.

“Madam de Fer stepped in and helped, kind of…scarily.”

“Scarily?” Varric asked.

“She froze him solid and then offered to kill him for me.”

Huh. Really? “I like her already.”

“Varric! It was awful!” Ellie insisted, “She might have killed him!”

Cassandra glared at him then and holy mother of chest hair, under the glow of Fadelight, her imposing presence was amplified by about a thousand. Scary.

“Sorry Tumbles. Ignore me and work on your letter.”

Varric downed his wine while Ellie and Seeker worked on the letter for Ruffles, Ellie dictating while Seeker scribbled away.

“Does it look good to you, Eleanor? You’re satisfied?”

“Uh-huh! Yup, your handwritings cute! I like Lady Josie’s cuz its all loopy and fancy, but I like how yours is kind of zig zaggy and little it’s pretty.” Maker.

Seeker looked almost overwhelmingly bemused, like she wasn’t sure if she should laugh or groan. “Eleanor. Honestly. I meant the wording.”

“Is probably just as great as your handwriting, Go for it!”

“Very well, I shall indeed go for it. I’ll see it sent as soon as we return to the Marchand’s home.”

Ellie nodded and put her gloves back on, sitting on her bottom on the seat and swinging her legs again, bopping her head side to side. It was something the kid did when she’d forgotten something and was trying to think. Varric picked up on this because he was an astute observer, a
true master of his craft. And he’d only caught her doing it every spare moment of every day her first week in Haven, trying desperately to recall the events at the Conclave, but it was no dice.

“Something on your mind, Tumbles?” Varric asked.

“I was just trying to remember what Lady Josie told me about the Marquis and Marquess Marchand. Oh gosh, that’s a lot of M’s,” she observed with a smile. Maker, watch over this kid, damn. “Anyway, when I got lost in their house yesterday I came across their library and Solas said it was set up like a Mage’s library. But I’m pretty sure Lady Josephine didn’t say anything about their being Mages, and they certainly didn’t say anything of the sort.”

“No, the Marquis and Marquess are not Mages,” Cassandra said quietly, carefully, but her voice did that sort of upward-pitching thing it did when she...

Oh shit she was lying. Not…not outright but, there was definitely something there she didn’t want Ellie to know. A lie of omission, about something that Seeker obviously did not want to hurt the kid with.

Tumble’s leg swinging stilled and she placed a hand on Cassandra’s knee. “Cassandra? What is it?” Ellie asked,

Oh shit. Shit shit shit, nope, Street Smarts was not smart, he should not have taught Ellie anything about lies, or tells, specifically Cassandra’s, or anything he was an idiot and he should have stuck to snowball fights.

“It is nothing, Eleanor—”

“It’s not nothing if you won’t even look at me. Come on, out with it.”

Cassandra took the hand Ellie had placed on her knee, into her own and turned a bit in her seat to more properly face her.

“The Marchand’s daughter was a Mage.”

Oh. That wasn’t so bad, Varric thought.

“Was?”

Oh. Okay that might be bad. Past tense usually was.

“She attended the Conclave, as a representative of White Spire*.”

Fuck.

Ellie’s mouth opened like she might say something, then closed, licking her lips as, oh shit her chin crinkled the way it did she was about to cry.

“Oh,” she said faintly, like she’d used the tail end of a breath held in her lungs, and it didn’t look like she breathed again until she blinked a few times took in a staggering breath through her nose. “I…no one said anything. I should have t-told them I was s-sorry for their loss!”

“Eleanor you were not to know. The Marchands insisted you not be informed.”

“W-what?”

“They did not wish to burden you with the knowledge, Eleanor.”
“They must be so sad! And I was so mean—”

“Nonsense. Eleanor, you were not unkind to them, Josiephene had nothing but good to say of your meeting.”

“But I was mean about them, later, I complained, and joked about Orlesians being weird—”

“Tumbles!” Varric half-shouted, swinging his legs over the edge of the seat to sit up properly, across from the girl. He wasn’t sure what he did with the canteen of wine but he was pretty sure he’d thrown it or something, he heard it thump on the carriage floor. “Kid listen to me, you can’t beat yourself up about that. Orlesians are weird, and that was a crazy lunch, you didn’t know—not because you’re insensitive, but because they didn’t want you to. And because of that you gave them something they probably needed. A normal afternoon by their standards.”

“What good does that do them?” she asked pitifully, she clenched her eyes shut as tears escaped them.

Maker damn it, he slid from his seat and got on his knees, took both of Ellie’s hands in his and squeezed as he looked up into her face. “Ellie, when you lose someone like that, everyone you know, everyone that they knew, reminds you about it—and that’s what happens, what’s supposed to happen, we’re supposed to be comforted by friends and family. But constantly hearing that people are sorry, sometimes it just reminds you what you’ve lost. They came to Haven to get closure, see that there was still some hope after the Conclave. Kid, they got to meet you—their daughter might be gone, but you, a little Mage girl with the key to saving us all, working with the people trying to find the one responsible for Breach? Helping to make decisions that might make the world a better place for people like their daughter? That had to give them hope. And that’s all they needed. Not more sorry’s or for you to feel badly for them, or guilty.”

“Eleanor—” Cassandra started.

“Um,” Ellie gulped out, “T—that was nice of you to…I. I just…can we just not talk for a bit? I’m not mad at either of you I just…” Ellie’s hands clenched under his own and her head was bowed, eyes closed shut as she shook. Varric let go of her hands stood, nodding that he understood but then that felt stupid cause she definitely couldn’t see it.

Seeker carefully put an arm around Ellie’s shoulders and the girl tucked her legs up against her chest and turning to bury her face against Cassandra’s shoulder, and just sat there, biting her lip, eyes closed.

Varric patted Ellie’s shin, gave Seeker a nod she lightly returned before leaning her head to the side to rest it atop Ellie’s. Varric hopped down out of the carriage, wait on the others and maybe actually keep watch.

Ellie was wandering around the halls of the Marchand estate, padding barefoot, in her pajamas. The hall was dark save for light spilling out from underneath a closed doorway.

Where was everyone? Were they hiding?

Wait, when did they get back?
She got to the door, and it thrummed with magic that zipped through her hands when she pushed it open, not painful just, like she’d opened something warded.

Oh. The library again. Why was she here?

“I wanted to meet you, of course.”

Ellie was sure she’d entered the library—the maze of shelves and everything, had been there when she opened the door, but now it was vanishing, like they’d been cast aside, and in the center of the library there was now just an overstuffed couch, like the ones in the sitting rooms, and end tables on either side.

Seated on the couch, was a young woman with long dark hair, pallid skin, dressed in a soft blue nightgown that fell to her ankles. Glasses rested on the tip of her nose and she was scanning the pages of a book she held in her hands, though it vanished when she looked up at Ellie. She’d wanted to meet?

“Herald of Andraste? That’s what mother and father called you. But your friends call you Ellie, yes? That’s what they’ve calling you while you’ve been here.”

Ellie stared at her blankly.

“Oh, how rude of me. I’m Charlotte Marchand. Come, sit,” the girl said patting the empty space beside her on the couch.

Ellie hadn’t even stepped forward. One second she was standing in the doorway and the next she was seated on the couch.

Oh. Oh she supposed they had returned to the estate after all. Or maybe she was still in the carriage with Cassandra, or they were all on their way back or something. Either way—

“I’m dreaming. And you’re dead.”

“Both true. You sleep in mother and father’s bed—gave me quite the startle your first night here. Time moves a bit different when you’re dead I think. I experience a lot of timelessness, I thought I might have missed seeing you altogether and then poof! I like sleeping in their bed or… well, just being in it when the world looks like sleep time, sometimes they’re there—they were when they came to make the house nice for you, thanks for that I was worried they weren’t coming back. Anyway, a few nights ago I go for a lie-down and there you were, I’m surprised I didn’t wake you.”

“I um, I sleep pretty deeply. I take potion—”

“Yes. Lots of fluoride, clogs up your penial gland*, makes you sleep without dreaming, keeps you disconnected from the Fade when you sleep. My parents arranged for me to have similar after White Spire fell.”

That sounded like being made Tranquil to her, but Ellie, well she didn’t know what to think about that. Maybe she’d ask Adan or…or something.

“I’m sorry,” Ellie said, then. “T-that your Circle falling gave you nightmares and…and I’m sorry your parents don’t come a lot, and I’m sorry about the Conclave. T-that you’re dead.”

“Why are you sorry? Apology implies responsibility. It’s not your fault I’m dead, or the Conclave happened, or my Circle Fell. Those things just happened. The world happens.”
“I might not be r-responsible, but I still feel badly.”

“Might not? There is no might about it, Ellie. You are not responsible, it was not your fault. Say it.”

For one startling moment, Ellie worried she’d messed up big time—it was stupid to talk to something in the Fade, it was one thing when she didn’t realize she was in the Fade (it was still dangerous, but it was hard to tell she was there when it pulled from your own personal memories!) but here she’d realized pretty quick she was asleep, Fade dreaming. Charlotte might not even be Charlotte—she could be a demon, and the command ‘say it’ Ellie bit her lip to keep her mouth shut but…

Oh. Nothing happened. Ellie didn’t feel any sort of compulsion to give in to the command, and Charlotte just sort of stared at her, waiting. So, no spooky manipulation from a demon trying to possess her, just a kind-of spooky ghost hopefully not interested in possessing her at all. Hopefully.

“It isn’t my fault,” Ellie said quietly.

Charlotte smiled. “Very good,” and then she looked down at Ellie’s hands sitting in her lap and asked. “Can I see?”

Oh. Her Mark. Ellie held up her left hand for the older girl to examine. Oh it was weird—she could feel the other girls hand touching hers but it felt…like it wasn’t really there. It was almost like her hand was asleep or something, just the barest ghost of pressure of something around her hand, no warmth or softness.

“I’m glad I waited around to meet you,” Charlotte said softly, one hand holding Ellie’s while the other she used a finger to trace across the Mark itself.

“Waited?”

Charlotte nodded. “I was just…I wanted to see my parents again. They can’t connect to the Fade, not as you do but when they were here I laid with them as they slept, and I think they knew I was there. That I’m okay. But they talked a lot about the Inquisition and you especially and…well I wanted to see you for myself. To thank you.”

“T-thank me?”

“Your meeting, with my parents. They really liked meeting you and getting to know that…well that even though so much was lost at the Conclave there was still good that came from it. You came from it and you gave them a lot of peace of mind about backing the Inquisition and hope that the Breach can be stopped. And it got them back here. They don’t live in Val Royeaux, just have the apartment here so we could all stay together—White Spire would let me out in the Spring, for my birthday.”

Were birthdays important? Ellie hadn’t thought so—she knew people kept track of how old they were, it was important for health stuff and legal stuff or whatever, so she’d done her best to figure out her age. But Sola’s and the others interest in her birthday’d seemed like they wanted to know about the specific day as opposed to just how old she was. Huh.

Oh! But that wasn’t the important thing.

“You only got to see your family once a year?” Ellie asked.

Charlotte nodded. “I was one of the luckier ones. My parents could afford a place in the
City—White Spire wasn’t going to let me too far out of bounds, after all. Most people never got out, hadn’t seen their families or anything outside the Circle since Templars took them away. You have to have certain influence.”

“You had to be nobility,” Ellie said. That’d been true with Trevelyan, he’d only ever been allowed out of Ostwick because his family was so notable, though he’d been allowed way out of bounds—but maybe because he’d been going to Val Royeaux. White Spire could have taken him if he’d caused trouble. Oh Maker, just how different could everything have been if that had happened? Their paths may never have crossed.

“Yeah, or just wealthy, really. My parents would offer up a generous donation to the Circle, and in return I got to come stay with them here for a week or so. One year, they let me out for a whole month it was the best.”

Maker. She seemed a little older than Ellie, but not by much. And magic could be exposed in someone at a young age. Had she been like Ellie? Turned five but gotten whisked off to a Circle, never to see her family more than the cumulated time of maybe a year, if you squished the weeks and one month of visitation together? That…

That was sickening.

“I’m sorry you didn’t get a lot of time with your parents.”

Charlotte shrugged. “Again, nothing you could do about it. I got enough time with them, or at least as much as someone like me could hope for. I’m not sad about it or anything. Though…if you could do me a favor?”

“Anything.”

“Careful who you say that to, in the Fade,” Charlotte cautioned. But then she smiled. “In my library there was this book. Its from when I was little, just this compilation of children’s stories. My father used to read them to me. I got so nervous when I was preparing to go to the Conclave—I was here for a while before I left. I thought I would study up on magical theory or rhetoric that would support our cause but…I found that old story book and for some reason I just gravitated toward it. I pored over that dumb book for hours, I even took notes of all things, habit I think from my time in the Circle. I just had all these thoughts I kept marking up the margins with. Like, memories about daddy reading my favorite stories, and how much some of them meant to me when I couldn’t be with my family because I’d just cling to those memories, sometimes relive them like new in the Fade while I slept.”

“That’s really sweet,” Ellie said.

Charlotte nodded. “Um. I would like it if you could get them that book for me? And maybe just…just tell them I’m okay—I think they know that, but it would just really make me secure in that knowledge if you promised to tell them that I’m okay, and I’m not sad or scared, and I’ll be here, well not here here, but in the afterlife with the Maker when their times come. Would you do that for me?”

Ellie took the older girl’s hands, tried giving them a reassuring squeeze as she promised. “I will. I mean you’ll have to tell me where to look cuz your library’s kind of mazey but—”

“Oh! It’s here with me in the Fade, I had it on me at the Conclave. I’ve been reading while I’ve been waiting so it’s sort of existing in-between, in the here-and-there.”
“Um. So. How am I supposed to get it?” Ellie asked.

“I have a friend, sort of. From White Spire. I haven’t seen him much since everything went to hell there, but he came to me when I died. He’s really different now though. He died but then he didn’t. Anyway, he can pop in and out as he pleases, take the book from me here and bring it to you there. Just uh, try not to freak out if you can see him.”

“If I can see him?”

Charlotte shrugged. “Dead and not dead, it can get weird.”

“I’ll try not to kick him the danglers then.”

Charlotte actually cackled at that. “Well, as long as you try,” she said, still laughing a bit. “Oh, it was good to meet you, Ellie. Thank you for all you’ve done, and all you will do.”

Ellie gasped when she woke. She didn’t remember coming back from Madam de Fer’s party, but she was in her assigned bed in the Marchand’s home.

Though that line of thinking was lost to the fright of a strange boy crouching on the headboard, staring down at her.

Ellie shot up, reeling around to crawl backward toward the end of the bed, scream building in her throat—

But then there was a soft sort of blip in her magic, oh. Was he…was he important? Like Blackwall, and Sera, and Madam de Fer?

The boy was suddenly right in front of her, knees on the bed, somehow making no dip in the mattress like he was weightless, but his hand felt real enough when it laid across her mouth to hush her regardless of the fact she was no longer trying to escape and was just observing him now. He wore a huge, wide-brimmed hat, and rogue armor, shaggy blond hair dipping over wide cast blue eyes, and Maker he was pale as a ghost.

Oh. Ghost?

“You healed a hurt, and had your own hurts healed,” he said, removing his hand from her mouth. “You were very sad when the hairy man carried you in. And then the one that watches, she put you in soft things certain to see you safely sleeping. But you were still sad.”

Um. That was a lot and sss sounds. Ellie realized then she was no longer wearing what she’d worn to the party. ‘the one that watches’…that must mean Marehis? She must have changed her into her pajamas. That was sweet.

She did feel better now, actually. Having met Charlotte—it was sad she was gone, and that her parents would miss her but being able to help the girl give her family further closure was…nice. The best one could hope for out of a bad situation.

“How did you know I was sad?” Ellie asked.

“I hear the hurts and try to heal them. Charlotte beat me to it this time, but I brought her
book, so we helped each other I suppose.”

Oh Maker he was a ghost. Or…or not a ghost? Dead and then not dead, Charlotte had said. “You’re Charlotte’s friend.”

“Cole was. And now I’m him. When Charlotte passed she sought him and got me. She wants to heal her parents’ hurts. They will always hurt, but healing helps.”

A book appeared in his hands then and he offered it to Ellie.

She carefully took hold of the book dark blue book, gingerly running a finger across the silvery lettering engraved on its cover.

“I’ll make sure her parents get this and her message,” Ellie promised.

Though she may as well not have said anything at all. When she looked up the boy was gone.

Cole, had he said his name was?

Blackwall was dead tired when they at last made it back to their appointments in Val Royeaux. They couldn’t just drop their trays and leave with Ellie anytime they pleased. They stayed until the servants were dismissed—which came after the party, and after they’d cleaned up. Ellie couldn’t stick around though; she and Cassandra made a polite exit at the end of the party and the girl was found having fallen asleep in the carriage while waiting on the others.

She’d been crying it looked like, curled up against a subdued Cassandra who, at Marehis’s concerned (bordering on outraged) look explained that she’d informed Eleanor that the Marchands had a Mage daughter who had perished at the Conclave.

This resulted in an almost amusing, mostly terrifying, whisper-fight the entire carriage ride. Marehis was livid—apparently it had been a matter of agreement between she, the advisors, and the Marchands that Ellie not be told of the girl’s passing for fear it would only exacerbate the survivors guilt the Herald felt. Cassandra assured Marehis she knew very well why such a thing would hurt her, but apparently Ellie could tell something was being kept from her and she would only press until someone informed her, and Cassandra felt it was best to do so in as open and gentle a manner as possible rather than being prodded until the answer was delivered in the form of an accident or a harsh snap.

Marehis had been open about her doubt in Cassandra’s gentle manner.

Surprisingly enough, once they arrived at the estate and Varric hopped down from the driver’s seat and once he realized they’d been arguing, he settled it coming to Cassandra’s defense—Blackwall was almost certain he himself had fallen asleep on the carriage ride back to the Marchands, for surely he must be dreaming. But no, Varric insisted Cassandra had done her best, and it was his fault, he said, that Ellie was even capable of spotting a lie from Cassandra, specifically. Hurting Ellie was the very last thing any of them wanted, and fighting over something that they couldn’t change was pointless—she knew now, and she felt terrible the Marchands had lost a daughter in the assault on the Concalve. What mattered was being there for her, and quote ‘Seeing her moms have a world-ending bitch off over who’s the better parent’ wasn’t going to
Both women had slapped the dwarf—Marehis on the back of his head and Cassandra backhanding his cheek, the two of them rising to each other’s defense saying, “Do not call her a bitch.”

And then Varric chuckled and, making a very quick exit to get to his rooms and lock the doors before the women could assault him further, he left them on the note that he was glad to have brought them back around to being on each other’s side and he wouldn’t mind watching them ‘kiss and make up’.

That damn Dwarf had a death wish. But he was right—he’d momentarily given the women a common enemy and that led to, when Blackwall took up a sleeping Ellie in his arms, Cassandra and Marehis being much more civil to each other as they followed after him, discussing how the party had gone and how they would handle tomorrow’s schedule. Or today’s schedule, as it were, Maker it was late. It was a good thing they weren’t fighting anymore—he’d certainly never term it as such but ‘bitch-off’ hadn’t been too far off the mark. If they hadn’t feared waking Ellie, he thought the women might have actually drawn weapons on each other.

“Blackwall?”

The Warden looked up from where he’d been…huh he’d just been staring into the fire in the kitchen’s hearth, the mug of coffee in his hands mostly untouched. He hadn’t slept a wink, hadn’t tried to really. It was nearly four in the morning when they returned from Chateau de Bastion. He wasn’t sure what time it was now, Ellie usually rose early with the Seeker and Marehis, but they’d had such a long night he was sure everyone was sleeping in before they got a start on their journey back to Haven.

“Ahh, good morning Ellie. Did you sleep well?” he asked gently. He’d been worried, when they put her to bed Cassandra and Marehis did not think it best to wake her to take potion for sleep—she wasn’t restless or distressed so they figured it was best just to leave her as such, if they woke her she may only get upset again and she’d feel better after a good night’s sleep, was the hope.

The girl nodded sleepily, rubbing at her eyes as she stretched a bit. “I feel like I slept for forever. Oh! Thanks, you guys worked so hard last night, you must’ve been beat, I appreciate it, you carrying me in.”

Blackwall felt his face warm at that, clearing his throat, “Ah, did we wake you?” he asked. He thought she’d been sleeping rather soundly, but Maker she’d felt so little when he carried her—it actually made him consider discussing her eating habits with Marehis, Ellie was able to eat well enough at meal times now that Adan’s potion had been brought to bear, but the girl was young and probably still had growing to do, and she was extremely active what with all the fighting and the training, and Rift Sealing looked like a workout in and of itself. He was surprised the girl wasn’t constantly snacking. Anyway, he was big and while he wasn’t worthy of a title like ‘Tumbles’ he certainly could be rather clumsy himself at the of worst times, he’d probably jostled her something fierce and hadn’t realized it.

But Ellie was shaking her head. “Nope, a friend told me.”

“Friend?”

“I’ve had kind of a weird morning,” she said, “Fade dreamed.”

Suddenly the blood that had rushed to his cheeks was gone and he could feel his stomach...
turn, he abandoned his coffee cup on the table as he studied the girl’s face for any sign she was distressed. “Are you alright?” he felt almost awkward as he offered, he wasn’t…great, with emotions or talking for that matter but he was the only one up and around and he had a feeling shouting for…hell, even Varric would be better suited for the task…would only startle or offend the girl so he said, “Do you want to talk about it?”

She plopped down into the seat next to his, head bopping side to side as she thought it over. “Hmm. It wasn’t bad or scary or anything. It was actually kind of nice.”

Fade sounded scary, the crap that poured out of it was just bloody awful. He couldn’t imagine finding anything pleasant about dreaming in the place, but he wasn’t a Mage. Still, it was little wonder Ellie needed help sleeping but he worried her potion forced her into slumber—like if she were having an awful experience in the Fade, she couldn’t wake up until the potion was out of her system, though Cassandra assured him no such thing was happening. But the Seeker wasn’t a Mage either, so he wasn’t certain she had any authority on the matter.

“Marehis hasn’t been in here, has she?” Ellie asked then.

Huh. With Ellie awake he’d actually expected Marehis would be on her heels “You haven’t seen her this morning?” Blackwall asked.

Ellie shook her head. “Nope. I checked in her room, but she wasn’t there.”

Ahh, but she hadn’t checked Solas’s room had she? It was well enough, the Elves wanted their courtship to be private, though that ‘My Heart’ rubbish was quite the blunder. He was surprised Marehis’s cover had worked. Ellie was a smart girl, but ultimately Blackwall supposed she was too trusting. Marehis’s word that she had no intention of coupling with Solas was enough for her to believe they hadn’t despite any evidence to the contrary, not until Marehis or Solas confirmed it themselves forthrightly.

“I think she had an errand to run this morning, we’re to leave for Haven soon, yes?” Blackwall offered up as cover.

And there it was, Ellie smiled at him, taking him at his word. “Oh, well hopefully she gets back in time for breakfast! Did she need help?”

Blackwall shook his head. “Did you have need of her?” he asked carefully. He wasn’t sure he himself was equiped to comfort the girl, especially if she was seeking comfort from her minder.

“No, I’m fine,” she assured him with a smile and a shrug.

He half expected it to be a lie—or as much of one as Ellie could tell. Cassandra had rather a passionate lecture to them one evening that they were none of them, under any circumstances whatsoever, to ever accept Eleanor’s definition of ‘fine’ as a passable one. He had to admit he agreed, he’d only heard her use the term a few times but so far she’d practically dropped dead the first time. He looked her over carefully for any sign of distress or some hidden mortal wound she thought wasn’t worth the bother, when he realized she was dressed for the day, but her hair was unruly and wild, curling madly from her head uncombed. In her hands she had a wide-toothed comb and a small bottle of…huh, he figured with her hair, it was probably oil of some sort.

“Do you need help with your hair, Ellie?” he asked.

“Oh! Uh, sort of,” she said, blushing a bit and looking at the implements she’d been intending to bring to Marehis, “I never really do it right. I like how long it’s gotten its just difficult
to do it as well as Marehis does—swear she uses some form of secret, hidden Rogue magic. I used to have to just chop it every couple weeks.”

He was quiet for a moment before offering, “I could help, if you’d like.”

She looked up at him then, “Really?” she asked, surprised. As if he’d just told her he was a world class tap dancer in his spare time.

Blackwall motioned for Ellie turn her back to him, “Put your things on the table, I’ll fetch some water.”

Ellie did as she was told, just a bit hesitant, and she waited. Blackwall went to the kitchen pump and filled a pitcher with water before digging around in the cupboards for a few clean dish towels.

“For your shoulders,” he said as he handed her one of the towels, Ellie placed them over her shoulders, across the back of her neck.

They were quiet as Blackwall wet her hair before selecting a section to detangle. Once he’d massaged—it smelled like coconut—oil into the tangled mane, he took up the comb and carefully worked through her hair. Starting at the ends of course, he used to get smacked in the head for starting at the roots, and he’d deserved it.

“My sister, Liddy*, her hair was like yours, when she was young,” he found himself saying to his own surprise. Her name hadn’t crossed his lips in decades—ages before his years at tourney.

Ellie almost turned around in her seat to look at him but stopped when she remembered he was still working on her hair. “Liddy’s a cute name.”

Blackwall nodded, his voice a bit thick as he said, “Her hair was always a bother to her. She struggled with it,” she’d been so very sick in the end, “so I learned how to do it for her.”

“That’s really sweet of you, it seems like you do a pretty good job of it,” Ellie complimented.

“Ahh, it’s been ages since I’ve done this. You’ll have to let me know if I snag you, or comb too roughly.”

Ellie nodded, gently so she didn’t pull her hair, and asked, “What’s your sister do? Have you been able to keep in touch with her since coming to Haven? Cassandra says we can send and receive letters there.”

“That life is long gone from me now. Liddy passed when she was nine.”

“Oh,” Ellie said quietly, “I’m sorry.”

“That life is long gone from me now. Liddy passed when she was nine.”

“Nothing to be done for it now,” Blackwall said, the words sounding lighter than they felt.

“I know…that talking about life before the Wardens is difficult, for most Grey Wardens,” Ellie said, speaking as carefully as he handled her hair, “but if you ever want to talk—about it, or anything else, I’m always here to listen. I mean, I know I get busy,” she said with a laugh, “but if you ever need it, I know talking about things can help. And…I mean, if you don’t mind my saying…”

“Yes, Ellie? Feel free to speak your mind, I won’t take offense.” How could he? Ellie was
more likely to burn Orlais to the ground than hurt someone intentionally. He couldn’t think of anything he’d hold against the girl.

He pulled his hands away from her hair as she turned around in her seat to face him.

“You disparage yourself too easily!” She…was she reprimanding him? For what?

“I’m not sure I know what you mean,” he said baldly.

“You’re always making self-deprecating remarks and putting yourself down! And honestly it worries me, because you talk…well, you talk like you don’t like yourself very much,” her voice went thin, fragile, like the thought made her want to cry.

He found himself almost speechless, just barely finding the hallow words, “I like myself just fine, Ellie, you needn’t worry.”

Oh. She was giving him a look now, like he was in for a bit of a lecture. “Look, as someone whose working on liking herself on a consistent basis, I can honestly say I think you should talk to someone. If not me, then someone else—even not Varric but I don’t think he hates you really. Maybe Cassandra, or Solas or Marehis—she’s always with me but I dunno if you don’t want me to hear I can go hang out with one of the others or something and she’s a wicked good listener. Harritt and Dennet, they seem like they’ve been through life, and if you needed someone with similar experience, that might be where to look. Or even Adan, if you’d prefer. He doesn’t just prescribe you stuff and send you on your way, that’s what I do because it’s what we think will work best for me, and I talk things out with Marehis and Cassandra.”

How could he even possibly begin to explain just how dark his sins had stained? That they were many, and irredeemable? How could he tell her she was putting her life in the hands of a wretched man repenting from his own life of cruelty in the only way he can? He wasn’t worth liking, and he was entirely unworthy of her concern.

But she was concerned. Something could be done about that. He was meant to be helping. Maker, he was useless at this. He’d been meaning to comfort Ellie since she woke this morning—in the back of his mind he was pretty sure that was what had kept him awake, he’d been waiting to see if she was alright, wanting to be there for her if she needed. And here she’d breezed by any of the awkward efforts on his part to talk about her problems, and instead flipped the script on him.

“I’ll talk to someone, Ellie, if that would make you feel better.”

“Promise?” she asked, raising her Marked hand to him, pinky finger extended. Wouldn’t he have to cut off a pinky if he broke his promise?

Maker take his whole damn hand if he ever breaks his word to this girl.

“I promise,” he said, bending his own large, battle-calloused pinky around her slender Fade-lit one.

She smiled before turning back around in her seat, so he could continue on her hair. He was glad to have her eyes off him, he did not like the way her gaze sometimes seemed like it could drive him to bear his soul. There were times he thought his crimes might just come spilling past his lips as he tried to make it clear to her just how wretched a man he was. And. Maker, there was some part of him that felt, feared…

That he would do so and horrify the girl. Have her look upon him for what he truly was, that light she had that made her see the good in everyone utterly destroyed, extinguished by his
hand. He could not allow that to happen, not to her, not because of **him**.

Then there was a new fear created by Ellie herself. Seeker Pentaghast admitted to things he thought he’d kill a man for. Granted she’d had her reasons but…Maker, Cassandra had made it sound like she’d horribly abused Ellie when they first met. He’d heard **some** of the confusion the Inquisition had had—something that came off like a rumor the further away from Haven one got, that the Herald of Andraste had been momentarily considered as a suspect before she’d revealed the blessing the Maker himself had bestowed upon her, her true divine purpose. He hadn’t realized she’d been captured and had a Seeker of all things set upon her for **interrogation**. The very idea made his skin crawl. Cassandra had intentionally inflicted the girl with fear and pain and it was little wonder Ellie had guilt and shame over the Conclave—regardless of the fact her name had been cleared, Cassandra had laid the blame upon her and it had obviously taken root.

And then Ellie had offered redemption. No sooner had Cassandra confessed her sins, then Ellie was wiping her slate of guilt and shame, he could practically see the burden of it being lifted from the Seeker’s shoulders. The girl gave her justification and forgiveness, left her clean and blameless, and untainted in the eyes of the others in her company. Blackwall had experienced actual whiplash, gone from fear the Seeker could not be trusted with the girl, to realizing **Cassandra** had more than proven herself worthy of their trust, that she’d made things right, those hands that hurt Ellie had long since found redemption in her care and protection.

That scared him. Because he feared someday his past would come for him, and it would either destroy some innocence in Ellie or…or see her forgive him. That through some divine grace this girl seemed capable of wielding, his slate would be wiped clean. That he would look into her face and know redemption, forgiveness, penance paid for the lives he’d taken.

It scared him, because it made him think perhaps forgiveness was obtainable and that was a dangerous thought. There was something in that vein that said ‘do enough good for Ellie, follow her, protect her, please this little holy girl and she will save you’. That he couldn’t counteract the balance of his karma, but **she** could with the snap of her Marked hand if he could prove himself to her.

And that was a horrid thought because no matter what—it tainted whatever good he would do. He’d be doing it for the wrong reason—he would be doing good things to save his own skin, and not because they were the right thing to do. That was a life he had lived too long, and not one he sought to ever live again.

“What’s this? Hair braiding chain?”

“Varric! Ho—**Ouch**!” Ellie yelped when Blackwall suddenly jerked.

Maker’s breath, he’d been working with her hair, lost in thought—her voice, greeting Varric who lumbered in, his greeting spoken as if he’d been half-asleep, though now fully awake and glaring at him, had startled him, caused him to jerk and oh. Ouch indeed. He’d not left a bald spot or anything but there was quite a bit of hair caught in the comb now he was decently sure hadn’t been a moment before.

“Oh Maker, forgive me,” he rasped out as he dropped the comb and gingerly separated her hair to examine her scalp for injury, worried he’d pulled up skin or caused her to bleed.

“I’m not the Maker you goof, and I forgive you just fine. It didn’t hurt much you just sort of startled me really,” she assured him as if he were overreacting. Maybe he was but, well damn it, she was certainly underreacting. It’d happened so quickly but he’d seen her head snap back and heard her chair scrape against the floor, felt the back of it press into his knee caps because the force
had pulled her chair and all. She wasn’t bleeding, thankfully though her scalp was a little red where he examined.

“What’s he doing playing with your hair anyway? Last I checked hair braiding wasn’t in the Warden handbook,” Varric sniped.

“He was helping me comb my hair,” Ellie said, “since Marehis is running an errand.”

“Shadow’s no—”

Blackwall motioned Varric to kill that sentence.

“—uh, not back yet?” Varric amended. “Forgot she was going on a uh, errand.”

“Perhaps we should wait for her to return,” Blackwall said to Ellie when she picked up the comb and made to hand it to him once more.

“Oh, if you’re tired of doing it or something yeah I can wait, but really, I’m okay, you do it nice.”

Well he certainly wasn’t going to snag her again, Blackwall took up the comb with even greater care, paying closer attention he resumed the section of hair he’d been working on. He was nearly done anyway.

“Just be careful with her, Hero. I’m gonna get this breakfast thing rolling since you two are busy and Seeker’s sleeping in.”

“Everyone deserves a lie-in after last night,” Ellie said, “I mean it was pretty boring just standing around talking and those people made it go on for hours. Did they really enjoy that?”

“Unfortunately, yes,” Blackwall said.

“People leave parties hours early all the time kid, you show up, show off, go home,” Varric spoke over his shoulder, he’d set about actually making breakfast—standing on his stool before the stove, cracking eggs into a pan. “You didn’t have to wait on the others, I’d’ve taken you home and gone back for them. Well. Maybe just for Shadow and Chuckles.”

Blackwall made sure Ellie’s back was still turned to him when he flicked oil to hit the back of the Dwarf’s head to get his attention, so he’d turn to see the lovely bird Blackwall had for him in his hand. Varric snorted, returning the favor.

“I didn’t want to go on ahead without everyone, I’d’ve felt badly,” Ellie was saying, “Plus, I didn’t want to be rude to Madam de Fer.”

Madam de Fer. She was a prissy one. A terrifyingly powerful priss. Blackwall had to admit he had been glad that she stepped in when she did with that Marquis talking threats to Ellie. He’d been about to spill his tray and use it to knock that lout into next week, challenging a little girl over political nonsense. It had been the most uncouth game-play he’d ever witnessed.

And he hadn’t liked Ellie being involved in the Game. That party, those people, they were all playing it and she hadn’t even realized just how much danger she’d been in. That Madam de Fer hadn’t taken advantage of the opportunity, well…it didn’t quite speak to her character yet. She could merely be biding her time.

For what, Blackwall wasn’t certain. But he did not trust this Madam de Fer. She had
motives in her offer to Ellie other than just lending a helping hand.

And she was to be a party member, Ellie had been excited to inform them.

Voices echoed in the hall outside the kitchens, male and feminine, lively and was that...giggling?

And then a gasp of surprise, from Marehis, as she and Solas entered the kitchen, obviously not expecting to find anyone there.

“Da’len!” the Elves greeted in unison, both sets of pointed ears tipped in burning red.

“Heya!” Ellie said, not seeming to find anything questionable about their behavior. “I’m glad you’re back! What’d you do? Did Solas help?”

Blackwall could actually kill Varric, the Dwarf snorted. “Oh yeah, I’m sure Chuckles was a real gentleman, helping Marehis with her errand. Work hard, did you?”

At least it helped the girl’s minder to realize they’d had to cover for her. “Just reconnaissance for our departure today. I ran into Solas on my way to get you some breakfast, I wasn’t expecting you would be awake so soon. Did you have need of me?”

“Not badly or anything, Blackwall was here and helped with my hair, see?” she asked, holding up a lock of curls for Marehis’s examination.

He was finished now, he thought, the whole of it hanging wet and neat. “It just needs to dry now,” Blackwall said.

“Great, thanks!” Ellie said as she hopped up from her seat, she turned and dropped a kiss to his cheek before joining the Elves and hugging Marehis tightly in good morning.

“How are you this morning, Da’len?” Marehis asked, pulling back and carefully running a finger along the side of Ellie’s face, tucking it up under her chin to raise the girl’s gaze so she could properly gauge her ward as she relayed her morning to her minder.

Blackwall quietly excused himself then, he found he wasn’t feeling all too hungry and retreated to his quarters. His room was the one at the end of the hall of bedrooms next to Varric’s—he wasn’t sure if the Dwarf wanted to pal around with him or if he was still putting himself as a buffer between the Warden and the Herald. Either way it didn’t matter, if Varric still distrusted him...well then, he was the only one here with any sense, wasn’t he?

Alone in his room, the door sealed shut behind him, Thom Rainier kneeled at the foot of his bed, in prayer like he did when he was a boy. But it wasn’t Andraste or the Maker he spoke to.

Talked to. As promised.

“Liddy. I know it’s been a while. I haven’t been ‘round to your grave in ages now.” Ever. Just nine flowers in her death bed, and more offered up, to people, to the wind, to the sea, every year—each flower representing the age his Liddy would have been...should have been. But sometimes, he feared she didn’t get them. “I’m sorry. But Liddy-girl...I’ve done some things. Horrible, awful things...”
It had been…Maker, decades since the last time she’d risen after sunrise. Though she hadn’t missed it—the sun coming up. She’d still been tossing and turning when the first rays of sunlight streaked through a gap in the curtains in her appointments in the Marchands home. Her argument with Marehis had been thankfully short-lived, resolved before the women went their separate ways for the evening. It worried her, to be in opposition to the Elf woman who held Eleanor’s heart so dear, that if they remained at odds Eleanor…well, she would lose Eleanor’s regard. But she’d felt badly, even with Marehis’s forgiveness—acceptance that Cassandra had acted with Eleanor’s best interests at heart—she still felt she’d failed the girl somehow. Worried that she’d only sent her spiraling. So sleep, it evaded her even as the sun rose.

She felt like she hadn’t slept at all, the only indication she had was the fact that one moment pale light had breached the darkness of her rooms, and the next the golden light of midday was flooding the bedroom, and then something warm made a dip in the mattress and curled up against her side, soft fluffy hair snuggling into the crook of her neck, it was almost alarming but she felt so at peace with the intruding presence she didn’t need the sight of wild red curls when she cracked open her eyes to tell her who had taken it into their head to cuddle with the Seeker.

“Eleanor.”

“Sorry. We have to get going soon, I figured you’d want the chance to wake up a bit before hopping on a horse.”

“Blinding me and then cuddling seem like counter intuitive actions,” Cassandra mumbled.

“Blind you to wake you up. Cuddling so you don’t kill me for blinding you,” Eleanor explained. “I did try calling you awake, but you just sort of snored in response so. Sunlight, the Maker’s wake up call.”

“I do not snore.”

“You do so!”

“Insufferable girl,” Cassandra accused, and her arm, trapped under Eleanor and the mattress, came up around the girl’s shoulders, running her fingers along one of the fluffy, wild curls of Eleanor’s hair. “Did you sleep well?”

“I met Charlotte.”

That…that was not a usual response to, ‘Did you sleep well’. “Who?” Cassandra asked.

“The Marchand’s daughter.”

“I’ll admit could do with a bit more explanation,” Cassandra prompted, looking down at the girl’s head, resting on her shoulder, she couldn’t properly see her face but at least she did not sound disturbed by…well whatever interaction she’d had with this ‘Charlotte’.

“I Fade Dreamed. Which was actually nice, Charlotte knew we’d be coming and was waiting around to talk to me. I feel a lot better, it’s still sad she’s gone but she um, she’s at peace and she sort of asked a favor of me.”

The word ‘favor’ made Cassandra nervous, fearful the girl had been tricked by some awful demon but then Eleanor said, “There’s this book—I have it now—and she wants me to get it to her parents and tell them she’s alright. She doesn’t think they’ll return here—they only kept this
apartment because she could visit them here on break from White Spire. Now that she’s gone…
well they may not find it if I just left it laying around with a note or something.”

“I’ll touch base with Josephine. If you cannot meet with the Marchand’s in person, we’ll
arrange for the book and their daughter’s message to be safely delivered to them,” Cassandra
promised. “Your talk helped?”

Eleanor nodded. “Sorry, for last night. Getting upset.”

“You needn’t apologize Eleanor, it is perfectly natural to find such things upsetting,” she
thought over her next words carefully, she did not want to reprimand or make the girl feel she was
being lectured but this…manner she held herself to, only finding it acceptable to express herself
either happy or even tempered, it was unhealthy and concerning. “You do not have to be sorry
for having and expressing emotion. You did no harm to anyone, it is…not a selfish or shameful thing
to be anything less than cheerful. You would not disappoint us or lose our regard for being a
normal person with responses to normal feelings.”

Eleanor ducked her head at that, shyly, the nod she gave in response tentative, but it was
something Cassandra supposed.

Cassandra was startled when the bed dipped further still, jostled by the added weight of—

“Sweet girl, Cassandra is right, you’re allowed to be human,” Marehis said as she snuggled
against Ellie, sandwiching the girl between herself and the Seeker, the Elf woman’s arm draping
over her ward, hand resting on Cassandra’s arm and giving it a squeeze.

“In that vein, Ellie, it would be understandable for you to be upset with us for leaving you
in the dark, so to speak. The Marchand’s did ask for our discretion.”

Oh but that had Eleanor shaking her head ‘no’. “I wasn’t—I mean I was upset, just cuz, you
know. It’s sad. And I do wish I’d known, but I understand…Varric explained the idea rather well,
why they’d prefer I not know. And I know you were just respecting their wishes—and their wishes
are what’s important I mean Maker, I can’t imagine how they must be feeling. And you were all
trying to protect me from feeling guilty or sad, so I can’t really be mad at that. It isn’t like you were
acting out of meanness or anything.”

“No, no it was not out of meanness,” Marehis murmured, pressing a kiss to Eleanor’s hair.

Maker preserve her, she never thought she would say such a thing, but Cassandra found the
next sentence falling almost effortlessly from her lips;

“It is because we love you.”

And there went that shy head ducking again, “Gosh.”

“It’s true, you silly girl, we do. We do, we do, we love you,” Marehis insisted laughingly,
shifting to tickle the girl’s sides. Cassandra could not help it, Eleanor began giggling and
Cassandra found herself peppering kisses to the head half-resting, half-wriggling against her
shoulder.

“Marehis! Cassandra! Oh, you lot, I swear! I love you too!”

The sound of the bedroom door creaking opened was followed by the heavy thud of boots
against marble thunking into the room and then, “Geeze Tumbles. First a hair braiding chain with
Hero. Now you’re having a cuddle party without me?”
“It is not a party, and if it were you would not be invited,” Cassandra assured him.

But Eleanor was already sitting up, oof, she was half seated on Cassandra’s stomach for half a second, but she popped up and away from her place sandwiched between her guard and the Seeker, bouncing across the bed until she was launched onto her feet and rushing the Dwarf.

“Brace yourself, Tethras, you’re getting a hug!”

Chapter End Notes

Dalish Used:
Theneras antishan, da’len: peaceful dreams, my child.
Vehnan= my heart, a term of endearment used among Elves to their significant others. Solas uses it eventually as you romance him in game.

Notes
*Harvestmere=October
*Wintermarch 1st=New Years Day (First Day)
*When I was doing background research for Vivienne, I read about how Bastien, when he decided to sweep her off her feet and pursue her openly like 2 seconds after knowing she existed bombarded her with a boatload of Peonies (commonly used to express courtship in Thedas)—I’d kicked around the idea that yeah, like IRL you can’t really go far enough back and find a time when it was acceptable to just show up at someone’s home, no matter the circumstance and not come bearing a gift. So. I wanted to throw in something that would be meaningful, and when I read about the Peonies, I was like, you can’t give this woman something she couldn’t get herself, she’s someone who snaps her fingers and has whatever she wants. So the gift she’s going to love has to be simple enough that it catches her off guard, something she wouldn’t think to get for herself, that would genuinely touch her, which would be something that inadvertently pays homage to the single most important relationship she has in her life. Just an all around banging gift that she’s going to actually find memorable.
*White Spire=the biggest baddest Circle I’ve heard of, in Val Royeaux proper. Super strict, and it goes to absolute hell when the Circles fall. It’s where our good friend Cole was held captive and died, then haunted, then went to Therinfal Redoubt seeking punishment.
*Penial (ha!) Gland= it’s not dirty, I swear! It’s a gland in the brain that controls our sleeping/waking functions. It produces all the chemicals that allow us to sleep. There’s a belief that it is what allows us to dream full stop, and that if it gets calcified (calcium builds up around the gland), you don’t dream. A major way it’s believed calcification occurs, is through the ingestion of fluoride.
*Liddy is in canon Thom Rainier’s sister. She passed away from, what sounds like illness due to his conversations with Cole, when she’s around eight or nine (there is a reference to number of flowers he leaves on her bed and window sill after her passing, and the number of flowers he gives as offering is the number of years old she would be. this is a tradition that, in canon, Blackwall continues, even as he’s in the Inquisition —Cole references the flowers he’s cast into the sea on the Storm Coast, and then the ones he casts off the battleships in Skyhold).

Next Chapter: Storm Coast! Iron Bull! Krem de la Krem! MAYHEM! EDA: 8/4/18
Chapter Summary

Returning to Haven to discuss their future moves to seal the Breach--should they reach out to the Mages who've already extended an open invitation, or should they hold out hope for the Templars to help them?

Ellie and friends journey to the Storm Coast to check out the Bull's Chargers, in general mayhem ensues.

Chapter Notes

This chapter introduces the point of view of a canon Trans Character--I'm not a trans man, but just like everything else with this fic I wanted to be super careful with research, and in this case super respectful because we're dealing with a real life topic, so 'Thank you!' to the lovely T's in LGBT that read over Krem's POV's providing their insight and accountability, before I posted. <3

This chapter will also address one of the major reasons I thought of this fic in the first place--in the tags you'll notice I tagged both 'Inquisitor Sides with the Mages' and 'Sided with the Templars'. I'm super excited to finally get to touch on that in this chapter!

I hope you enjoy this chapter, it kind of got away from me, and grew so long that covering the entirety of the Storm Coast in one chapter became a no-go, so I ended up having to split it in two! Thanks for the Kudos and comments and feedback! I truly do appreciate it.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

They’d been back from Val Royeax for three days and Ellie was starting to miss her friends —Blackwall, Solas, Varric, oh Marehís, she only saw her first thing each morning, and in the evening when she was heading for bed. She hadn’t been able to see Sera or Vivienne much at all since their arrival in Haven and she felt badly for that, but it couldn’t be helped.

Advisor meetings. They had consumed her every waking moment. Every evening when she finally got to leave the Chantry she half-expected to find the Inquisition in ruins, abandoned and possibly on fire because who was running everything if Cullen, Josephine, and Leliana spent the whole of their days holed up in the War Room with Ellie and Cassandra arguing?

Cullen and Cassandra thought the Templars should be investigated as their option for sealing the Breach. Cullen knew there were more Templars like him, yearning to help the people of Thedas by sealing away the threat to their world, they could suppress the Breach while Ellie’s Mark went to work. Cassandra was certain she could get Lord Seeker Lucious to listen to reason if she could just sit down and have a civilized conversation with him for even a moment.

Leliana was amimate about going to the Mages of the Rebelllion. Their power combined
with Ellie’s Mark would surely close the Breach for good, and it would bring the Mages back into
the fold. Josephine was of a mind to agree with her, Grand Enchanter Fiona had reached out to
Ellie very intentionally, inviting her to meet with the Mages in Redcliff—whereas the Templars
and their leader had openly shunned the Inquisition and denounced them in front the Chantry.

Ellie just wanted someone to pick already. At this point she’d kiss the bare, hairy bottom of
the most Templary Templar that ever Templared or the bloodiest Blood Mage just to put an end to
the cycle of breakfast, War Room, arguing, lunch in the War Room while still arguing, arguing
after lunch, dinner time! Oh! But wait! They’re still in the War Room arguing over dinner! Instead
of dessert, they get more arguing! And then maybe someone (usually Cassandra) remembers that
Ellie actually likes sleeping now that she can actually get some, and she gets to limp back to her
 cabin for some peace and quiet. Limping, because her legs are numb from staying in the same spot
around the War Table all day. At this rate, she was tempted to keep a spoon from breakfast, use it
to dig an escape tunnel. Somehow, she didn’t think Flissa’s spoons would break through Chantry
 concrete, but a girl could dream.

It was the third day of such deliberations when Ellie finally realized there was only one
other voice in the War Room, and they hadn’t picked a side. This was followed up by the thought
that…well, did there even really need to be a side?

We are asking you to represent the Inquisition, as the Herald of Andraste. We would use
that status, and your efforts with the Inquisition to help bring peace to Thedas end this war
between Mages and Templars.

Cassandra had said that, back when all this started. She said that Justinia reinstated the
Inquisition to bring the Mages and the Templars back together.

“We already have Fiona on our side—” Leliana was half-shouting.

“And an invitation to the city her followers took ransom is hardly being on our side!” Cullen
was full shouting, that awful vein up the center of his forehead seemed fitting to burst. “For all we
know this could be a tra—”

“Why choose,” Ellie said suddenly.

“Eleanor?” Cassandra questioned.

“What do you mean, my lady?” Josephine asked.

Ellie realized she’d been staring into space, and she blinked, looking up to scan the faces of
all her Advisors. Oh Maker, she hadn’t actually meant to say anything out loud just yet, she’d only
just had the thought, and it…was probably crazy.

But something in her magic said to just go for it.

“Divine Justinia reinstated the Inquisition to mend the rift between Mages and Templars,”
she looked to Cullun, “Templars can suppress the Breach—but I’m still…I mean I’m young, my
Magic isn’t fully mature, and the Mark uses my power to fuel it, even with a hundred Templars my
power might not be enough to close the Breach by myself.” And then to Leliana, “Likewise, even
with all the Mages in Ferelden, the Breach might be too strong.”

It was Cassandra who Ellie turned to, imploring her, “This, the Breach it could bring us all
back together don’t you think? We shouldn’t choose, when we could approach both. Make the
Mages and the Templars work together under the flag of the Inquisition, to suppress the Breach,
and fuel my Mark, and seal that thing for good.”

“I mean, wouldn’t picking a side cause further division?” she continued when she was met with, what she hoped was thought-filled, silence. “Justinia wanted them brought back together, and with a threat such as this… I think it would be a rather fitting revenge against the person who created the Breach, if what they thought would destroy us actually brought us together and made us stronger.”

“You have the invitation readily available to go to Redcliffe at any time, my lady,” Josephine said, not entirely rebutting, just reminding her there was still work to be done, even more so if she wanted to do something like this, “approaching the Templars will require more renown, more noble allies gathered together to beseech the Lord Seeker to let us have talks of getting their aid.”

“Then we get more renown,” Ellie said. “I mean our work is hardly done here. There are still Rifts everywhere. We’ll keep working and reach out to both parties once we’re ready.”

Cullen looked thoughtful for a moment and then said, “…that does sound almost feasible. Am I alone in thinking this?”

“Wait,” Ellie said, her magic doing a happy little jolt in her blood, “oh Maker is that one yes?” she asked him.

“Yes,” Cullen affirmed, then prompted, “Cassandra? Leliana, Josephine?”

“I believe with more acclaim, we could indeed approach both parties,” Lady Josephine agreed. “It would take great care to traverse the order in which we do so, and who we take to represent the Inquisition, but…yes, I think we could do this.”

“As do I,” said Leliana.

Then Cassandra, “And I.”

Woah woah woah woah wait.

“For yeses? I’m not hallucinating, did we just make a decision on this?” Ellie asked excitedly, bouncing in place a little.

Her advisors looked to one another and there was one unanimous, “Yes!”

“Ha ha! Whoo!” Ellie pumped her fist in excitement, and then flushed when she realized that was just a bit too excited possibly, it might seem rude. “Sorry, it’s just…well I was worried I’d die an old woman in this War Room, still listening to your ghosts screaming at each other.”

“My Lady, we did not scream,” Josephine was quick to say.

“Oh come now Josie, you nearly bit my head off yesterday and we were arguing for the same side,” Leliana corrected.

“A lady does not scream. She declares.”

“Can we declare this War Room meeting adjourned?” Ellie asked. “Did I use that right? Adjourned?” she’d heard Solas use it once, in a similar context—and the Elf Apostate was also the one who explained what the word ‘context’ meant, so she was pretty sure she said it right.
The adults seemed to consider it a moment and then,

“Yes you did, and yes we can,” Cullen said.

“Yes, thank you, thank you, thank you!” Ellie enthused, going around the War Table then, popping up on her toes before each advisor and kissing them on the cheek, “Thank you,” Lady Josie, “Thank you,” Leliana, “Thank you!” Commander Cullen, “and thank you!” Cassandra, who shook her head at her antics.

“Can I go now?” she asked then, way too amped up—they said yes! They had a plan! Sort of! Ahh! “I haven’t felt the sun on my skin in days, I’ve forgotten Varric’s face. Will my friends even recognize me?”

Lady Josephine seemed amused as she said, “We can handle things from here. You know the locations we’ve been receiving reports from of Rifts?” she asked, to which Ellie nodded—Cassandra had kept her updated. “Good, think on where you’d like to go next to garner more attention from noble allies,” she gestured for the door, “You may go see the sun.”

The next time Bull wanted someone to play messenger bird, he could send Stitches—at least he was Ferelden, he’d be used to this weather, wouldn’t he? All Krem’d done was agree that the Ben-whatever-eth’s orders for Chief’s next job would be good fights for a good cause, “if you think it’ll be such a good time, you won’t mind delivering the contract”. Maker’s ass, it was freezing. Ugh, he could practically hear Chief cracking a joke, calling him ‘Kremsicle’. He’d show him Kremsicle. Put his cold frozen foot right up his Qunari ass! He had to run this missive to the dead end of nowhere, ‘Haven’, and then trek all the way to the Storm Coast; where it would be, surprise surprise, storming. At least that meant it would be warm enough to rain instead of this cold, frozen, hellscape of never ending snow.

It was strange to think when he’d been a little—when he’d been young, he wished for snow. They didn’t get it a lot, in Tevinter. Not where he’d lived anyway. It snowed once, when he was maybe ten, because some nut-case Laetan thought they could up their status—prove they were actually an Altus—by performing a magical feat so great, there could be no mistaking their connection to the Old Gods. Whatever they’d been trying to do, some world-ending storm spell, just made it snow a little around a small section of the city. He could remember his mother bursting into his room that afternoon—he’d thought she’d come for round two of the row they’d had that day—but she’d been excited to show him the fluffy white coating the ground, the soft flakes still falling from the sky. She’d laid with him in the middle of their street and taught him how to make a ‘snow angel’.

That had been a good day. One of the best he’d had with his mother.

But that snow had melted rather quickly once the spell wore off, the cool of it refreshing in the summer heat. This snow was just frigid and wet, and filling his boots. Worst of all, the cold had given him a cold.

He couldn’t bind when he had a cold. Too dangerous, Stitches insisted. And it was, Krem had that learned the hard way a while back. Binding too much or at all when he was sick, even with just a stupid little cold, only made it worse, and could even turn into pneumonia if he got stupid about it.
It shouldn’t have been that bad—his armor was solid, provided smoothness to the appearance of his chest no matter that he was sans-binder, in fact sometimes he didn’t bother. But by the time he reached Haven he was sick, and tired, and hadn’t actually used his voice in a long while, not since stopping to ask for directions at the last sign of civilization several miles back. So, when he’d finally spoken, to the guardsmen at Haven’s Chantry doors his voice came out…well, not the way he was used to. Too soft, and too high. It got under his skin a bit, just a bit.

“’scuse me, I’ve a message for the Inquisition. My boss said to get it into the hands of your Ambassador?”

“Ambassador Montilyet’s office is down the hall, last door on the left,” a guardsman said, helpfully.

_Cool._

But when he actually made to enter the chantry, helpful guards were no longer helpful. They halted him. “No one’s permitted to enter.”

…was he speaking Qunlat or something? Had they not just had a conversation about this? Clearing his throat, he tried again, “…I have a message for your Ambassador—last door on the left, you said?”

“You’ll have to wait,” a guardsman said, “No one’s permitted to enter the Chantry while the Herald is in with her Advisors.”

And he hated this Herald already. Maker’s breath could he not catch a break? He just wanted to be _done_ with this, message delivered, off to bash some baddies’ heads in with Bull, the stupid lout. Bastard owed him for this trip big time.

“Look I-”

The doors swung open then, and the guardsmen stood at attention.

An Elf woman was walking out of the Chantry, arm in arm with…well. Maker.

A young Human woman, younger than Krem but…not by much if the way was filling out that tunic was any indication. She had to be Lady of something or other, she was dressed well enough, deep blue tunic and leggings that brought out the green in her eyes. Olive skin, little freckles dusting her cheeks, curly ginger hair trapped in a braid that ran along the side of her face, laying over her shoulder, falling just past the curve of her chest. She looked like…Maker she looked like she _made_ joy, happiness just sort of rolled off of her. She was _excited_ about something, the biggest smile on her face, it reached her eyes. She seemed to be sort of vibrating with exuberance as she squeezed the arm of the woman next to her in a hug.

“…_believe_ they they said yes! Oh!” she was saying as she emerged from the Chantry, and then she looked up like she was looking for someone, and her eyes went to him for a moment before she directed that blinding smile at him as she said, “Hello there, can I help you with something?” she asked pleasantly.

“Excuse me,” he said, immediately clearing his throat again—not low enough still. His eyes only left her for a moment when the guardsmen put their hands on the hilt of their swords—not drawing on him yet, just making sure he didn’t mean harm. He stood relaxed though, and his voice was back to normal when he continued, “I’ve a message for the Inquisition, but I’m having a hard time getting anyone to let me deliver it.”
The girl didn’t reply to him at first, her earlier exuberance calmed as she gave a questioning look to the guards.

“Security protocol, my Lady,” a guardsman said.

She looked to Krem then and smiled apologetically. “Sorry about that, I hope you haven’t been waiting long. Who’s your message for?”

“The Ambassador…Montiliyet I think her name is.” Was it her name?

Apparently not, but that was even better, because she said, “Oh! Josie’s busy right now, but if you’re willing to wait she shouldn’t be too terribly much longer,” she leaned forward then, whispering conspiratorially, “the Advisor’s shouting match is done for the day.”

Waiting, somehow that didn’t sound as bad as he found it moments ago.

“I can wait,” he said. Damned mucus had him sniffling quietly.

“Oh well you certainly shouldn’t wait out here, it’s freezing. Are you hungry?”


The girl leveled him a brilliant smile, big, and he found the cold didn’t bother him so much anymore. “Great! Marehis and I were just about to grab a bite to eat if you’d care to join us. It’s… oh, what time is it?” she asked.

Marehis must be the Elf woman, who looked at a watch on her wrist and said, “Half past three, my lady.”

“Lunch rush is over then, the others probably won’t be hanging around still,” the girl said, sounding a little disappointed. But then she shrugged it off, “Oh well, come on um…oh, I haven’t asked your name,” she said as if she felt badly for it.

“Cremisius Aclassi,” he said, with what he hoped was reassuring grin,

“Cremisius is a handsome name,” she complimented sweetly. Handsome, oh that was nice, even if it was just in regard to his name, it was a good sign he hadn’t er…well, that his initial vocal flub hadn’t left her with the wrong impression.

“May I ask your name?”

She extended a gloved hand to him and said, “I’m Ellie, it’s a pleasure to meet you.” Ellie.

“The pleasure’s mine,” he said, as he took her hand, the girl squeezing his in a shake. Her cheeks went a little pink, but that was probably because he had her chatting in the snow. If he was cold, she had to be too—she’d even said it was freezing just a moment ago—she had long sleeves but that didn’t make up for the lack of a proper coat. She was dressed well enough, so he couldn’t imagine she didn’t own one, but perhaps she’d forgotten it? He didn’t have one, didn’t usually need it though the weather in these parts had him seriously reconsidering that, but he’d have offered it if he did. He hadn’t seen any signs for a tavern, so he wasn’t sure how long they’d have to walk in the cold.

“Come along then, Cremisius Aclassi, Flissa should still have some lunch left over, or dinner underway,” she said as she pulled her hand away. But then she offered him her arm and she led him away from the Chantry. “If not, worse case scenario,” she was already walking right
“Beside him, but she leaned in closer to say, as if it were some secret she was about to trust him with, “Marehis puts snacks in my pockets before long meetings,” she told him with a girlish giggle. Then straightened up and said, “We ended things a bit earlier today than I thought we would, so if you’re a fan of shortbread, I’ve got plenty to share.”

Yeah, he was pretty sure she could offer him straight up poison and he’d suddenly be a fan.

“That’s very generous of you,” he said.

They’d reached what he supposed was the tavern then—it hadn’t been far, that was good—and he stepped ahead of her to push open the door, unlinking their arms so he could gesture for she and her…handmaid? to enter first.

“Quite the gentleman,” the Elf, Marehis said, sounding pleased as she and her Lady entered the tavern, Krem right behind them.

It was a nice little set up. Nothing fancy, just a small single room with a little bar, a few tables and chairs but it was clean, well lit, and warm. There were only two other occupants—a Human woman with short red hair wiping down the bar (Bull’d piss himself!) and a blonde Elf woman with a bowl-cut snoozing away in a chair seated in the opposite corner.

“Oh! Is she alright?” Ellie asked sounding alarmed when she saw the dozing Elf, and she looked to Marehis for explanation.

“Ahh, I forgot to inform you, Sera’s taken to sleeping in the tavern. She’s claimed it as her quarters.”

Ellie looked distraught at that. “Surely we haven’t run out of room? My cabin’s big enough for more than—”

“You needn’t fret so, da’len, we have plenty of room still. Sera sleeps here because it’s where she’s most comfortable, she says.”

“Really?” she asked doubtfully, examining the sleeping Elf. “Well, she seems zonked out. Maybe we could arrange for a bedroll or a cot, and move the side table by the door someplace else so it isn’t in the way when she’s using it…does Varric have a desk? He could probably use one, that table isn’t used for eating or anything it just sort of sits there anyway.”

Varric?

“I’m sure Master Tethras would appreciate one, certainly. I’ll bring it up with Flissa, why don’t you two find a seat,” Marehis suggested as she left them to go speak with the woman at the bar.

Oh, Tethras…the Dwarf? Yeah, that was the bloke that wrote that book on the Champion of Kirkwall. Krem had read it, it wasn’t half-bad. Strange to find him working for the Inquisition, though.

Ellie looked to him again, “Sorry, I didn’t mean to ignore you or anything. Sera’s new, and I haven’t been able to check-in much on how she’s settling, or Vivienne very much either…” she looked as if she were about to call something to Marehis, but the woman was already answering over her shoulder.

“Madam de Fer sends her regards, and is ‘settling in splendidly, thank that dear girl for inquiring, she’s an absolute treasure’, she said to tell you.”
“Oh gosh,” Ellie’s cheeks went pink again, and then to Krem, “Alright, I’m focused now. Table!” oh she was focused now, had this determined look on her face like it was a mission of the utmost importance, it was cute. “We usually sit by the fire if that’s alright with you.”

Sweet Maker, fire sounded amazing right now, the tavern was nice and warm, but he felt a sort of relief in his bones as he took a seat across the table from Ellie just before the hearth.

“So, what brings you to Haven?” Ellie asked conversationally once they were settled. There was that blush again, and she bit her lip before saying, “Oh gosh, you said already, a letter. But um, well can you say what for? It’s alright if its private.”

He wasn’t about to go talking about the Chief’s private business, but this wasn’t that. In fact, if Ellie was some noble ally for the Inquisition, having her interested in their work may lend to them getting the job. Plus, they could always use the advertisement. “I work for a mercenary company, The Bull’s Chargers. Our leader, Iron Bull, wants to help out with the Breach, and sent me to bring a proposal to your Ambassador. Hire us on, to help as only we can—there are loads of things we can get done as a mercenary crew with no official Chantry or government ties, that the Inquisition may not be able to do on its own without compromising alliances or political interests.”

“You’re a mercenary then? Do you like your job?”

Maker, that was a sweet question, asked in earnest like it mattered to her that his job made him happy of all things. “The Chargers’s the best crew of people I’ve ever worked with, its an honor to serve with them. Fights are always good, so’s the money, so I can’t complain.” He could. He did. But he was blessed enough to know he shouldn’t, might not if he were the type who took things too seriously. Everyone in the company had their complaints, it was the way of things, it wasn’t like any of them actually hated their jobs. They loved it, and at the end of the day, loved each other like a bizarre mis-matched family—most of them, anyway. Closest thing to family Krem had had in a while. When bits of it were unpleasant, like this little jaunt out to Haven, yeah, he wasn’t going to be real chipper about it, but that was just…Human. And Elven, and Dwarven, and even Qunari-en if he considered his crewmate’s griping. Chief’s bellyaching gave all of their whinging a run for its money.

Though, he’d lost all reason to complain now. Warm fire, nice company, and he could smell the food—if the Inquisition hired them on, they were in for a decent set up. He just hoped Bull didn’t terrify the locals. Hmm, especially Ellie. She seemed a little younger than him and she was on the smaller side, and a Human. A great honking, loud-mouth Qunari hanging around might scare her, especially if she heard about his thing for red-heads. Bull wasn’t a total slag or anything, Krem’d give him a heads up about her age and he’d know his place.

“Wow, that’s really cool! Do you usually work in Ferelden? Your accent sounds Tevinter,” she was saying then.

Ahh. “I’m from Tevinter, originally, yes,” he responded, quickly. He didn’t talk much about it. “The Chargers come from all over.”

“Oh neat! I’ve never been to Tevinter, but closeish—a little ways into Nevarra once or twice—and I’ve been to Hasmal*. I’m from the Free Marches.”

Hasmal. Huh, that’s where he’d been heading when he ran into Bull. Never made it there of course, but it did make him wonder if he’d just narrowly missed the opportunity to meet her then. It also made him wonder what a noblewoman would be doing in a place like that, though after seeing her care of others in Haven, he thought perhaps it’d been some sort of missionary work or something.
She was a Marcher, that seemed to fit the accent. “We just came from there—we’ve been working our way around the Free Marches coast into Orlais and back ‘round the Ferelden side. Company’s heading for a job on the Storm Coast now.”

Ellie looked concerned about that. “Really? Please, be careful there, we’ve had awful reports of Rifts in that area—the Storm Coast.”

Reports. He wasn’t entirely sure what Ellie was in the Inquisition—she’d welcomed him straight away and seemed concerned about how the new girl Sera and someone named Vivienne were settling in, thinking of things like maybe Varric could use a writing desk. Was she some sort of manager, or welcoming committee, or something? That would be surprising, a noblewoman not only joining up with a thing like the Inquisition, but then to act in service of its members regardless of their status—that Sera was definitely a commoner, and Krem wasn’t a king or anything—well, that said a lot about her, he thought. But now she was talking like she was involved in the information part of the Inquisition—having access to reports the Inquisition got on places with active Rifts. Chief had gotten similar reports too. Krem couldn’t imagine Ellie worked in a similar capacity as Bull. She seemed a bit too honest for that. She said she’d been in the Advisor’s meeting for the Herald. She certainly wasn’t the Templar man Bull’d been told about, a Seeker, Spymaster, or Ambassador Montilyet. Had she just been a guest or something? Did she work for one of the Advisors?

“We’ve heard rumors about them, everyone’s on the look out and’ll stay clear,” he promised her. Calling them rumors wasn’t a lie necessarily—if he considered Bull’s sharing his Ben-Hessrath reports as gossip, which from Bull it basically was. Besides he couldn’t outright say anything about the Ben-Hessrath to her, but he could tell her this way, and she seemed to feel better. The fact they would be careful made her smile with relief.

“Good,” she said, “I’m glad.”

She’d asked about him so, “Where were you from, in the Free Marches?” he asked.

“Oh well…” she seemed to give it some thought, “I traveled around a lot growing up. Never really kept to the same place. Haven’s been the first place I’ve ever stayed in long-term.”

That was surprising. “Really? Does your family deal in trade or something?” That might explain her work—some nobles did roll up their sleeves and dig in to the family business, it wasn’t common, but it also wasn’t entirely unheard of.

But she shook her head. “Oh, no. It’s always just been me, no family, and definitely no trade, oh gosh, that’d be lux wouldn’t it?” she breezed.

Oh wow. Always just her? Some problems, having money could fix—he knew that for certain, especially since he didn’t come from wealth himself. But he also knew what it was like to lose family. He couldn’t imagine any amount of money that would make up for the loss of loved ones. “You seem to have done well enough for yourself, my Lady,” he commended gently.

She shrugged. “I’m…oh. Oh are you thinking…,” she stopped and then restarted her sentence to clarify, “I’m not nobility or anything, the ‘lady’ thing is just…I dunno, politeness, or something. Everyone’s just been calling me that since I got here,” she looked over his shoulder then, and said, “Why does everyone call me ‘my lady’? I don’t think I’ve asked.”

“It’s appropriate for your station,” Marehis said as she came up from behind him to stand at the end of the table and place two plates of food down before them, potatoes and meat loaf, which actually looked pretty good, especially considering he’d had to gnaw through the charred block of
weird meat Skinner wordlessly burned up to Bull’s claim that it was ‘meatloaf’ every once in a while. The woman they called Flissa followed after with a third plate she sat in front of the empty chair next to Ellie, which Marehis took a seat in then as she said, “Think of it as a shorter way of saying ‘my Lady Herald’.”

…“Lady Herald?” Krem asked, uncertainly.


It was strange how quickly his thoughts flipped, righted themselves, and flipped again. He thought Ellie a noblewoman, then been corrected—thought she was just a well-off commoner—and then…Maker, Herald?

Oh, he certainly didn’t hate this Herald at all, then.

Maker, he’d been chatting her up. Had he made an ass of himself? Was he still making an ass of himself? He was pretty sure his soul was damned now, he’d all but laid eyes on Andraste’s Herald and he’d…Maker he’d checked her out.

How many verses of the Chant would he need to recite? Did he need to find a Chantry Father*? Oh, but it was Mother in the South, right? Men were either Clerics or Brothers or something.

“Are you alright?” Ellie was asking then, left hand reaching out to lay on his forearm resting on the table. That was supposed to be the Marked one, right? Thick leather gloves were no help deciphering that though, no matter how hard he stared.

“I-I apologize, Lady Herald, I didn’t realize uh, well,” and he was making an ass of himself. Bull would never let him live this down if he heard.

But Ellie smiled again, gently. “It’s okay, I know I’m not what a lot of people expect when they hear the name. Josie and Cassandra—Seeker Pentaghast—they’re always introducing me as ‘Eleanor’, because that sounds more Herald-y than plain ‘Ellie’.”

Huh. Did it? “I think Ellie’s a beautiful name. Pretty, and cute. It suits you.”

Her face actually went red at that and she looked shy at the compliment as she murmured a bashful, “Thanks.”—he’d’ve been embarrassed for saying something so forward, except she seemed flattered.

“Anyway, a lot of people don’t quite believe it till they see it, so,” she removed her hand from his arm and used her other to remove the glove from it before laying her hand palm-up on the table.

The Mark was…weird, definitely weird but beautiful. Almost like the Rifts they’d seen in their travels, but those had seemed like death and doom. This one was small, and the Fadelight was oddly comforting. Perhaps because it was a Mark meant to close those damned things. Or maybe because it was wielded by someone like Ellie.

Oh Maker. This girl, shorter than Krem by almost a foot, was small like her Mark. He didn’t think his hands were the largest, but bigger than hers—she was slender and fine-boned, like it would take seven of her to make one Iron Bull. And here she was, the Herald Bull had heard about, been going on about since word of her reached his bosses back in Par Vollen. The Herald of Andraste that faced the Breach, went around the Hinterlands sealing Rifts—getting right up on them, slaying the demons and sealing them away with her Mark—and saving refugees, cutting off
all the Templar and rogue Mage bullshit happening down there. The woman who’d stood up to some high-up Templar dick when she addressed the Clerics in Val Royeaux, had spread division among her critics in the Chantry. Chief had actually cackled when he read that report, was of half a mind to deliver the contract to Haven himself just to see her first hand.

And seeing her first hand, there was what the Ben-Whatnot reports lacked, what Krem himself had witnessed in his time in Haven. She came back to Inquisition headquarters, dealt with War Room meetings and who knows what else, and worried after others in her camp—if they had places to sleep, or to write. She’d just ended her work for the day, found Krem and immediately set about making him welcome and ensuring he didn’t have to wait in the snow for that Lady Josephine.

“Maker,” he swore.

He half expected her to put her glove back on, but instead she took off her other one. Oh, it was probably easier to eat. He almost did the same, but he liked his gloves on, usually didn’t take them off except to clean them, or his hands.

“ Weird, huh?” Ellie asked, as if sympathetic—like she expected him to be uncomfortable with her Mark and was okay with that.

“It’s just different,” he said. “Different isn’t bad.” In her case it was world-saving good.

That got him another smile.

They turned on their food then, and Maker above, it was good and warm. Ellie filled Marehis in on the fact that Krem was here to deliver a contract from his mercenary company, and that resulted in the Elf woman making polite conversation with him—just as inquisitive as Ellie, only her questions weren’t so much about whether he enjoyed his job or not, and more so about the work itself. He was happy to answer her questions and hell, if he thought Ellie’d had influence in the Inquisition before, he knew she would likely have final say in whether or not they got the job. When they finished their food, Ellie made to take their plates but Marehis beat her to it, insisting she sit and chat, and when the Elf woman returned, she did so bearing three mugs of coffee. He wasn’t sure if he was more surprised at how good it was—coffee among the Chargers was hit and miss, a hit when Grimm or Bull played barista, and a major miss if Dalish or Rocky took on the role—or by the fact Ellie accepted the pitch-black liquid with a blinding grin and immediately set about drinking it, no sugar, no cream. Even Chief usually put…ugh…what he called ‘krem’ in his coffee most days. But Krem figured it was mostly his need to be tirelessly punny, rather than the Qunari oaf really needing the bitter drink sweetened to stomach it.

Krem personally found pun-less coffee easier to stomach, himself.

Flissa’s coffee was excellent, warmed him head to toe, though that got a bit embarrassing as it made his nose run. Marehis politely pointed it out to him and he made to cover his nose, but Ellie handed him a handkerchief, dark green with a silvery E embroidered in it.

“Apologies, my lady,” he said, he didn’t want snot all over his face in front of her, but neither did he like soiling something that belonged to her with it.

But she was shaking her head, looking mildly concerned about something. “Don’t worry about it. Go ahead and keep it in case you need it later. Do you have a cold, Cremisius? You’ve a bit of a cough,” she said, and then she leaned across the table—Marehis shaking her head a bit as Ellie narrowly missed knocking into her coffee cup because her Elf friend moved her mug out of the way—and placed her warm, unmarked hand on Krem’s forehead. “I don’t think you have a
fever or anything, so that’s good.”

“Just a little cold, it’s nothing to worry about,” he assured her as she pulled her hand away.

Her eyes went a little wide at that, “But it is!” she implored him with some level of urgency. “Healer Adan is just up the way, he’d gladly treat you. Well, gladly in his own way—he’s a bit of a grump but good all the same.”

His face actually felt a bit clammy now. No Healer. Not someone new, anyway.

“Oh, uh, that isn’t necessary, really,” he insisted, something on the verge of panicky he resented in his voice.

Ellie looked at him for a moment, deciding something and then she turned to the Elf. “Would you mind, Marehis?”

“What shall I ask for?” Marehis questioned.

“Embrium, liquid-form,” Ellie requested, “clove tincture too, if he has it.”

“Of course. I’ll return shortly,” the Elf said as she rose to her feet, though she looked at Krem for a moment and said, “You are to ensure my lady is safe.”

Oh. Something sort of clicked then, Chief’d give him a hard time for not figuring it out sooner, its not like the signs weren’t all right there. He’d thought Marehis was just Ellie’s friend or something, she obviously was, but she was also her guard. He could see just the faintest of outlines at her hips, concealed daggers. The way she moved, the way she had her eye on just about everything—she was a trained, professional bodyguard. You wouldn’t know it unless you knew what to look for, and when to look for it. Ellie was the Herald, there had to be loads of people after her.

Oh, and that thought made him sort of sick. While there were more and more people all the time singing the Herald’s praises, there were people everywhere that hated and had a vendetta against the Herald of Andraste. Hated Ellie. Wished her tortured and killed.

This Adan must certainly be close by, and Marehis seemingly decided Krem himself wasn’t a threat, at least he hoped so—otherwise she wasn’t as good a guardswoman as she seemed, leaving her ward even at Ellie’s own say-so?

But Krem would beat the hell out of anyone that made a move to hurt her. “I will,” he promised. Marehis looked him in the eye for a moment more and then nodded. She was off, out the door they’d come through, he could see her racing up the steps as the door swung closed behind her.

There were two doors to the Tavern, on walls adjacent to each other, so Krem turned in his seat so his back was to the fire and he could keep watch over the entrances see out the few windows in the tavern. Flissa was in his peripheral, though he supposed the woman was to be trusted, she handled the Herald’s food after all. When Ellie addressed him, he kept the entrances in his view as he looked her way. She was leaning in closer, speaking softly—her eyes went over to the bar as if to ensure Flissa was still behind it, washing dishes and humming to herself before she asked, very softly,

“Does your chest hurt, or feel tight at all?”

She seemed to want her questions private, so he shook his head no, in response. It didn’t.
Ellie nodded. “And you’ve been stretching, right? Every few hours?”

Stretching? He spared her a confused look for a moment and then she explained. Or more rather, she demonstrated.

Ellie leaned back in her seat to sit up straight and stretched her arms up over her head, crossing her wrists and twisting a bit side to side to stretch out her chest and upper back in demonstration, coughing lightly before lowering her arms to repeat the stretch downward. Oh. The movement was kind of distracting when she did it, kind of...

He almost didn’t realize it was the way he was supposed to after every few hours of binding.

“Ahh,” he cleared his throat a bit, it felt a little tight. Just when had she realized? She was obviously not shaming him or reacting badly or anything.

Oh. Maker. She wasn’t reacting badly at all.

Her insistence he get his cold dealt with, and the compromise, that he didn’t have to go to this Adan she mentioned. Keeping her questions related to his binding vague and quietly spoken between them—she even waited to ask such questions for when her Marehis wasn’t around, respecting his privacy. She knew, and what was more, she understood, was worried that he didn’t realize how serious sickness could get when binding—she assumed he was under his armor—but knew he mightn’t be comfortable with the potential threat of outing himself to some healer he’d never met before or anyone else for that matter.

His stomach got sort of queasy—not like he was going to be sick or anything, just, like he was overwhelmed or uncertain, like he was just one misstep from going headlong into a trap. He wasn’t sure if he was upset that she had been able to tell or if he was relieved at the prospect that he didn’t have to agonize over a future reaction. She knew from the get-go and it hadn’t phased her. That was…nice.

“Yeah, I keep track,” he said then.

“Good,” she said, smiling as she relaxed. “I have a friend who used to get horrible chest congestion and coughing spells because he’d forget to stretch. He’s an Apostate so finally he got this little silver pendent on a chain he wore under his shirt and he spelled it to vibrate at the top of every couple hours during the day to remind him.”

Oh, that made him feel a lot better actually. It wasn’t him, it was her—like when he realized he should have pegged Marehis as her guard. He’d known what to look for in that regard, and so had she, in this. The outright acceptance…he’d only found it before in Bull, and then the Chargers. Much different from his life in Tevinter.

Krem sat up straighter in his seat, alert, though he saw it was only Marehis again, her hands full of glass bottles and a jar, which she placed on the table.

Maybe new healers weren’t so bad after all, he thought. Not with Ellie playing the role, anyway. She took up the glass bottles and came around to sit in the chair right beside Krem’s, scooting close so her knees were between his. He might not have had a fever earlier but now his face and neck felt a little warm. More so when, after she asked politely if he minded (he didn’t), her fingers searched the lymph nodes (Adan’s words, she said—Stitches too, he did this when Chargers were feverish) under his jawline, very top of his throat, gently pressing to see if there was any inflammation there that could indicate he was worse off than he thought. She gave him a relieved
smile when there was no tightness or swelling to be found. He almost didn’t pay attention as she started handing him a vial of potion to drink—cold medicine, that smelled and tasted like what Stitches gave them, so that was okay. Ellie had to stand then, to drip a few drops of that clove stuff—explaining that it would fend off anything making him sick and numb his sore throat. He tilted his head back and she carefully administered three drops to the back of his throat, which was excellent—almost immediately he lost the feeling there was a tiny Qunari raking his stupid horns along the inside of his throat.

Ellie pulled the jar over then and removed the lid.

“Oh,” she said, sniffing the translucent salve lightly, “Adan won’t mind if this is for keeps, right?” she asked Marehis who nodded, “Good, I’ll make him more, promise,” she said as she closed up the jar and handed it to Krem. “You should take this with you when you leave, alright? It’ll help you breathe easier and should keep you from getting any sort of chest congestion. It’s just Embrium salve, you should put a little here,” she pointed to her own chest, the center plane of bone just beneath the visible dip of collar bone at the base of her throat, “before you go to sleep.”

Eyes up, you berk! “Thank you,” he said, meeting her eyes and nodding. He shifted so he could put the small, squat jar into the leather bag at his hip, holding his supply of potion. He wondered if Stitches knew how to make this stuff, it sounded dead useful.

Someone new came bursting through the door then, Krem saw armor and fast movement out of the corner of his eye and rose to his feet, hand on the hilt of his sword, partially drawn as he stood between Ellie the the newcomer.

But it was just a scout who went right up to Marehis’s side, “Ambassador Montilyet is available now.”

Marehis was looking at Krem, an amused smile at her lips over his reaction. Oh. He’d sort of forgotten Marehis was back watching over Ellie, and her being an Elf, she probably heard the scout coming before they even made it to the Tavern, knew who it was before they approached her lady.

“Very good,” Marehis said, though she was looking to Krem as she said it, like she was telling him so, and simultaneously offering a response to the Scout, who nodded and took their leave.

Krem relaxed and turned to find Ellie was standing now, putting her gloves on and offering him her Marked hand, “Come on, I’ll introduce you,” she said.

When all was said and done, the letters and contract from Bull were delivered—not yet signed, but there, waiting. Lady Josephine Montilyet seemed nice enough, Chief’d definitely like her. He’d like Ellie too.

Damn, Ellie had been something else. Beautiful and kind. His cold was better, and she made sure he was sent off with job well done, good news for Bull, a meal packed away for the road from Flissa’s—the short bread she offered to share with him before carefully wrapped and tucked into the warm ceramic container as well—and his tankard full of fresh water. She and Marehis walked him to Haven’s gate and had seen him safely off, Marehis seeing fit to offer him
directions on a short cut he could traverse since he was on his own, to the Storm Coast. She was of a good sort.

And the conversation with the Ambassador had gone smoothly, Ellie introduced Krem, as she’d said she would, ‘This is Cremisus Aclassi, he works for a Mercenary company that would like the Inquisition to consider hiring them on’. Lady Josephine launched right in to a few questions about Bull’s company and when and where to come watch them in action.

_Ellie_ was going to watch them in action. She said something about having decided on where she and her party were going next to Lady Josephine—apparently, they’d been considering going to the Storm Coast soon to seal the Rifts there and look for signs of Warden activity.

Krem left Haven looking _forward_ to getting to the Storm Coast. He wanted a piece of the action, and he definitely wanted to help make the impression that got them hired on to the Inquisition.

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Eleanor was rather exuberant about going to a place as abysmal as the Storm Coast. Cassandra was not necessarily looking forward to the venture, but she was going all the same. Varric griped but that did not stop him from being at Haven’s gates ready to go when it was time to leave, right along with Solas, and Sera who actually offered to go as well—she’d heard the name ‘Iron Bull’ and wanted to see. Blackwall volunteered as well, as he knew the area, apparently, and wanted to help in their search for signs of Wardens.

Madam de Fer politely declined, which was not at all surprising. It was just as well, six of them going to the Storm Coast was more than enough. Though what was surprising was the fact that Madam de Fer decided to go with Marehis, on her mission.

Marehis was going to Orlais again—Leliana and Josephine had found something as to the source of those strange blue glowing stones Eleanor had discovered using those horrible skulls in the Hinterlands. Eleanor wanted to investigate and what they’d uncovered so far was strange and unsettling—miners being lured out in to the farthest deserts of Orlais to some so-called Oasis, only to abandon their post and then…well it seemed a lot of them may well have vanished or gone into hiding. It was concerning enough that when the advisors brought it up to Marehis, the woman volunteered to go along with Scout Harding for an initial sweep of the place before they even considered allowing Eleanor to set foot in the direction of the alleged temple that laid there. The temple and the somehow connected shards were what attracted Madam de Fer, when she examined the shards the Eleanor had collected for the Inquisition, she was intrigued and insisted her magical expertise be brought to bear. Harding would be at base to give the Herald and her party a run-down of the Storm Coast before heading to meet Marehis and Vivienne in the Oasis.

The Elf woman had pulled Cassandra aside before they were to leave Haven and took her to Healer Adan. The man gave her a fresh supply of Eleanor’s potions, instructions on how and when they were to be used, and the three of them discussed how the girl was faring. She was improving all the time, she would still struggle, but Cassandra would say she was beginning to truly flourish in her position as Herald now that she was receiving proper care. When Eleanor had returned to Adan after their stint in Val Royeaux she reported feeling like she had things more in-hand, and given him feedback about the potion he’d made for calming panic attacks—she could take full-doses now, as Adan had tailored the brew to be less potent, they could not have it rendering her so lax she could not defend herself, or that it put her in such deep sleep she could not rise in an
Marehis had also seen fit (once they were finished at Adan’s) to inform Cassandra that Eleanor had apparently developed a sort of first-impression crush—which she said Eleanor denied when Marehis teased her about it. But Marehis insisted she knew what she saw, that this Cremisius Aclassi and Eleanor had gotten on well, and he was a very handsome young man. Eleanor was, to coin a phrase the Herald herself had used to while conducting her own matchmaking schemes, ‘totally crushing on him’, and he (in Marehis’s words) had been ‘positively smitten’ with her. Marehis and Cassandra had gone together to consult Solas on the matter, asking him to use his connection to Eleanor to see if she truly was infatuated with the boy, but the Apostate man insisted that he would not break his word to the girl—no prying when she wasn’t in danger—and too the effort would be in vain. He could only perceive of what she was currently feeling in the moment, he would have to catch her at the exact time her focus was of this Cremisius. But it was no matter, Marehis was certain and Cassandra would see for herself.

He was a mercenary, this young man, and they would be investigating how credible his company was. They already had some information about it, their leader The Iron Bull had provided letters of recommendation embossed with official seals from noble houses they’d performed jobs for, which Josephine and Leliana—Cassandra herself, when it came to the few Nevarran ones—had been able to verify the authenticity of. So, if they were a reputable company, honorable in their code, there was nothing inappropriate about his job that might worry them in regard to his character. Marehis said he’d been very vigilant when she test-tasked him with watching over Eleanor for a time, taken the role seriously—some would have allowed the fact they were attracted to Eleanor distract them, put their focus on her as opposed to the potential dangers around her—when she returned to the Tavern, they’d obviously still been chatting amicably, but he was positioned to take in all their surroundings, keeping watch, and prepared to defend her. He’d done nothing to expose himself as a threat overall, though Marehis admitted she would like Cassandra’s eyes on the situation, asked that she see for herself if the boy was suitable for Eleanor.

Cassandra had done her own investigating, carefully, one evening when she and Eleanor laid alone in their tent on the road to the Storm Coast—Sera was off…well she wasn’t quite sure what the Elf girl did, she was in and out at odd hours of the night. But Cassandra hardly wanted the girl yammering away and interfering with her questioning. She didn’t seem to do subtle, this Sera, she was loud, and crude and Cassandra shuddered to think what horrible jokes she may seek to make at Eleanor’s expense. Varric was bad enough with his uncouth jokes, Sera seemed to take things to another, usually phallus-centric level.

Cassandra asked after the person this Iron Bull had sent to the Inquisition. It certainly verified Marehis’s belief in Eleanor’s infatuation. She hadn’t gushed over the boy or anything, but her cheeks pinked in the low lamp light of their tent, and she ducked her head in shyness, a little smile on her lips as she recounted her interaction with Cremisius. Cassandra commented that she hadn’t seen the young man when he’d been in Haven and asked what he looked like. Eleanor bit her lip and lightly commented that he was ‘a cute boy’, she’d a fondness for his eyes apparently, ‘sort of dashing’ and did Cassandra know he worked for a Mercenary company? Yes, she did.

Oh. It tickled Cassandra, the thought of how Varric would be very upset if it turned out he’d missed the initial meeting between Eleanor and her ‘great romantic interest’ for his precious book.

Cassandra herself was greatly displeased when she realized just what it was Sera was out doing to occupy bizarre hours of her evening. The following morning, she found honey had been poured into the boots she’d left outside to air out. They had been filled. To the brim. And Sera could be heard cackling from their tent when the audible squelch slapped the air from Cassandra
blindingly shoving a foot into the sucking stick of thick, now insect infested honey.

The Seeker sought to wring that little menace’s scrawny neck. She certainly would have if it weren’t for Eleanor. The girl had taken in the sight of Cassandra, red faced, seething, one foot sucked into a honey filled boot, hand clutching the other boot so tightly honey spilled over the edges and left a trail down her chest plate and leggings.

And she’d laughed. Hard, and fierce, and genuine.

She’d struggled of course, trying to contain her laughter, a hand slapped over her mouth as if that would hide it but…well Cassandra would douse herself, head to toe in the disgustingly sticky substance if it meant Eleanor might laugh like that again. She seemed to be handling her station better but there was always some measure of tightness in her shoulders, an underlying seriousness in her expression when she worked. And the girl did not often have moments where she considered herself not working—during meals sometimes, and during their morning prayer, and even that she considered preparation. Ugh. That awful cycle of sleeping and War Room meetings had been unrelenting, they’d fallen out of the habit, but regained it now that they were back on the road.

Varric had lamented more than once that Eleanor did not know how to relax and have fun—that she did not know it was okay to do such a thing. Cassandra was…oh Maker preserve her, she agreed with the Dwarf.

So, seeing Eleanor so giddy she was practically falling over from the effort, well Cassandra could not hold her laughter against her, and annoyed as she was…she felt some measure of gratitude to that horrible, horrible little Elf.

It had been nice, as well—something like vindication—when Eleanor calmed herself and rounded on Sera, reprimanding the girl for tampering with Cassandra’s equipment. Pranks had their place, Eleanor said, but what if there had been an emergency? Weapons and armor, at least those that belonged to their party members and members of the Inquisition, were off limits for her jokes, she insisted. Sera had begrudgingly agreed and when Eleanor set about helping Cassandra clean up the mess made of her armor, Sera had sat down with them and lent her hand as well which was…a bit useless, the girl wasn’t so underbathed for no reason, her efforts were futile, but she meant well Cassandra supposed. It seemed Sera could be reigned in by Eleanor, to some degree, at least.

All of Eleanor’s companions thus far had become her mentor in some way or another, Cassandra taught her self-defense, Solas Magic, Blackwall horsemanship, Varric…every life skill he took into his head to pass along to the girl, one day it was picking locks, the next it was how to make the ‘ultimate smore’…of course that had been when he’d finally gotten a hold of some chocolate. Even Madam de Fer pulled Lady Josephine aside to discuss a more rigid magical lesson plan, “Surely she cannot learn everything she needs to know from an Apostate Elf” and perhaps Eleanor should be given appropriate lessons in how to survive within the Game, should she ever need to play on behalf of the Inquisition.

Sera, however, she taught Eleanor how to have fun.

Eleanor had begun bonding with the Elf girl, who was by far the closest to her in age out of the whole of their companions coupled with the mentality of an absolute child. But she had Eleanor laughing and making light, silly conversation more in these past few days than she had since Cassandra had met her. It had built to where nearly everything the girl did revolved around her role in the Inquisition, even in her supposed down time. Now as they road along, it was not just that she looked so very young that they knew she was still just a child, it was in her voice and her candor. She wasn’t thinking about the Breach or demons, or danger when Sera drew her into a ridiculous
debate over which cloud overhead looked more like some buttocks, or the occasional round of Sera making some sort of bizarre noise for Eleanor to copy, and vice versa, seeing who could make the other laugh first.

Cassandra could have done without the random dancing, Sera just coming up from behind Eleanor when they made camp and pulling her dangerously near to the fire in some frantic musicless nonsense that looked ridiculous—neither of them were suitable for the dance floor as it were, though it did bring to mind that Cassandra should remind Josephine the Herald may have to dance at some point, lessons would be beneficial. A necessity, really. Sera often did this when Eleanor was mid conversation with one of her other companions, though the younger girl usually only danced around a little and then told Sera she was free to continue, but Eleanor really did need to address something important.

However, the Seeker realized perhaps, tactless as the Elf was, as much as she wasn’t one for subtle…Sera did choose carefully, these moments in which she engaged Eleanor in random fun. Always when something pressed so much it might strain the young Herald, burden her more than what was necessary—when the tension in her shoulders tightened beneath the weight of what they were doing, Sera struck, and Eleanor always returned to her work a little lighter for it.

All in all, the annoyance Cassandra felt at Sera’s general presence was…tempered. She did not necessarily like the Elf or her company, was still not wholly certain why Eleanor’s magic had ‘pinged’ upon her initial arrow delivered interaction, but she did feel grateful to her for instilling a bit of childishness into Eleanor’s all too adult routine.

Sera was given some explanation about Eleanor’s Magic—not the full extent of the personal inner workings of it, Eleanor and Cassandra agreed Sera may find the treasure hunting aspect all too interesting. What she was told, was about how Eleanor’s Magic told her when someone was important to the Inquisitions efforts—all but implying that it was a symptom of her Mark interacting with her Magic.

The Elf had gotten flustered when told how Eleanor’s magic had said she would be vital to the Inquisition, and told Eleanor to, “Ping yourself, you!”

That had Eleanor giggling, and then saying, “It pinged about The Iron Bull too, I wonder what he’ll be like? Cremisius says he’s got the finest crew he’s ever served with.”

“The Iron Bull sounds cool. The name anyway. Crem-is-us-is is a stupid name, too much sssss.”

“Ssssssera’s got too much sssssssss if you say it right,” Ellie retorted laughingly.

“Eww, gross, don’t say my name like that! Ugh! Yours dunnit even have S in it. ‘cept maybe it rhymes with Smelly.”

“Oi! I bathe regularly!”

“Cuz you’re so smelly! Stinky Inky!” Sera teased, loudly, and sent Eleanor giggling at the play on that horrendous nickname the Elf had given her—Cassandra hadn’t a clue what ‘Inky’ meant, though the sound of it sent a worry through her that it was short for *Inquisitor*.

They hadn’t one, for the Inquisition, no true leader that represented them, and Cassandra was rather worried that the Advisors might one day place Eleanor in the role. Being Herald was one thing, an already daunting task in and of itself, it made Cassandra almost sick to even consider further burdening the girl.
In her annoyance, the Seeker had growled, “I will murder you both in your sleep, if you do not let me rest,” from where she lay between the girls in their tent. Serious or no, her threats were met with a pair of giggles, and a soft ‘Whoops! Sorry,’ from Eleanor before she leaned over in her bedroll to kiss Cassandra on the forehead. Ugh. Sweet girl.

“Pleasant dreams,” Eleanor wished her.

Sera snorted. “Someone’s hoping she dreams of Crem-sus-sus-sis!”

“I hope you dream of him then,” Eleanor rebutted, but then she settled down deeper into her covers, and did finally fall asleep—sans sleeping potion, Cassandra was pleased to note. It was reassuring to find the girl did not so heavily rely on potion for peaceful sleep, and she thought then, as annoying as Sera’s banter could be, perhaps it was of some help to Eleanor, that after she cleared her mind with meditation, the Elf girl turned her thoughts to lighter, sillier things before sending her off to sleep. Ugh. Cassandra was not going to have a quiet night this entire trip, was she? Ahh well.

Blackwall was a great deal of help with their journey to the Storm Coast. He had warned them ahead of time that the rain was unrelenting, and Cassandra was gratified that the Warden had seen fit to bring up the issue with Harritt when Eleanor announced their impending journey there—the trip was time sensitive, so their party was informed of the decision immediately and they had left the following morning after that day Eleanor settled their rather harrowing War Room debate. Blackwall and Harritt worked late into the night to fashion and waterproof a matching hood to attach to Eleanor’s armored tunic.

The Warden had also taken it upon himself to manage Eleanor’s hair, in Marehis’s absence. Twice during their journey to the Storm Coast her unruly locks had required washing, and when she was finished bathing, she sat by the fire, hair still damp, and the Warden would pull up a stool and sit behind her, taking a great deal of care in conditioning and combing her hair. He even made some valiant attempt at braiding—he’d apparently sought Marehis’s advice on how to do so, and while his efforts were not quite as elaborate as what the Elf woman could do, Eleanor had been absolutely delighted, thanking him.

It took them little under a week to reach the Storm Coast—though for the last stint into the area, they’d stopped at the last sign of civilization, a little town, and secured safe haven for their horses. Blackwall warned that the Coast held terrible conditions for steeds—the constant rain meant extremely slick, muddy terrain, and the place was full of steep hills that, it would be nice to have a horse to traverse, but ultimately may result in injury for the beasts.

The rain for which the Coast was famous started a mile out from their destination. Ugh. The moment they came in view of their infiltration camp, Eleanor laid eyes on Scout Harding and let out a happy squeal of sorts, rushing down the muddy hillside to meet her. She skidded and slipped, and Cassandra saw the purplish glow of Barrier bouncing at her knees and around her shoulders, Solas using spurts of the spell to counter balance her so she kept upright and unharmed in her descent.

“Oh! Oh my gosh it’s so great to see you again, I’m so glad you’re alright!” the girl was saying as she clasped hands with the Dwarf woman. “I told Master Dennet you asked about him back in the Hinterlands, and he’s even in the Inquisition now, did you hear?”

“I did, I read all the reports about what you’ve done so far in the Hinterlands. Thank you, Herald,” Scout Harding said sincerely.

“Oh gosh, you can call me Ellie, please,” Eleanor insisted.
“Ellie, then. Thank you, home’s really starting to shape up again, and I’m proud to serve those responsible for that,” Scout Harding said, squeezing Eleanor’s hands in her own before looking to the others as they approached. “Nice to see some new faces, thank you for joining on.”

“Yeah! Scout Harding, this is Warden Blackwall,” Eleanor introduced, the old Warden offering a nod of acknowledgment.

“Nice to meet you, Ellie has said great things,” Blackwall said.

“It’s an honor to serve,” Scout Harding replied, bashful.

“And this,” Eleanor said, her voice ringing with some measure of excitement as she reached behind her to grab ahold of Sera’s wrist and bring the Elf girl to her side, “Is Sera, our Friend of Red Jenny. She’s just brilliant with the bow. Sera, this is Scout Harding, I told you about her.”

Cassandra did recall Eleanor speaking of Lace Harding rather a lot on their journey to the Storm Coast. So much so Cassandra wondered if Eleanor had developed a crush on the Dwarf woman, she was even chattier about her than that Cremisius boy, talking her up so much with Sera—that Scout Harding was a proficient archer, and perhaps the two of them should practice together sometime, and…oh Maker.

Sera gave a strange sounding, nervous laugh and then said, “Oh you’re a cute one ain’t you. Hmmmm, freckles,” and then, “Oh shite. Said that bit out loud yeah?” as if there were any part of what she’d said that could not be considered embarrassing to have spoken aloud.

Scout Harding seemed flattered as she blushed. “Thank you, I think?”

Eleanor was practically beaming then. Practice together indeed. Cassandra had worried success with her matchmaking efforts would only instill in the girl further desire to play matchmaker. And success would not be difficult with Sera, Cassandra thought, the Elf girl didn’t seem like she had standards coming out her ears. But Scout Harding was a solid, honorable woman, any liaison between the two would be impractical in the longterm. Eleanor should hardly expect an invitation to their wedding, in any case.

“Scouts have combed the surrounding area. There are two Rifts we’ve seen so far, on the coast and one in the north, there’s also been a few darkspawn sightings, I’ll mark on your map where the problem areas are. There’s a group living here called the Blades of Hessarian, I’m not entirely sure what their deal is. We sent soldiers to investigate but so far haven’t heard anything back from them. I’ll mark the area they were heading to—if you could look into that and just see if they’re alright, I’d really appreciate it.”

“Of course,” Eleanor promised.

“Not a whole lot else. We’ve heard some… screeching. We haven’t made it much farther out than our entrance points here, but we’re pretty sure it’s a dragon. A few Scouts got roughed up by dragonlings when they tried investigating the northmost part of the land—past the tombolo.”

Oh Maker, a Dragon. No, no no. No. It was much too soon for Eleanor to be facing such a creature—should she ever do so. Cassandra was wholly opposed to the idea, there was no telling the endless things that could go wrong, and it was a reckless venture. She would have to be vigilant in keeping track of where the beast could be and steer the girl away from it.

“Venatori presence has been noted—some kind of Tevinter mage gang, we don’t have much intel on them, but those people Lady Josephine has you looking at to hire, they’ve been
hunting them down and dealing with them—last I saw they were down on the shore just down the hill.”

Eleanor nodded. “Good, I mean we should probably go then, get a good idea of how helpful they’ll be to the Inquisition,” and then catching herself she said, “Thanks Scout Harding, I really appreciate all the work you’ve done here.”

“Thank you,” Scout Harding said, her cheeks a bit red from Eleanor’s praise.

“You’re going to meet up with Marehis now?” Eleanor questioned.

Scout Harding nodded, grinning. “I am, I look forward to working with her again.”

“Look out for her, yeah? And tell her I’m thinking of her?”

“Of course,” Scout Harding promised. “Stay safe out there.”

Sera watched as Scout Harding left the Inquisition camp. “I en’t gonna have to fight your child-minder for her, am I? She’s pretty…wow.”

Eleanor ignored the jibe at her age and giggled saying, “I told you!”

“Shall we seek out the Bull’s Chargers, Eleanor?” Cassandra asked.

Eleanor smiled. “Oh! Yeah! Let’s go!”

Ellie had known the Storm Coast would be rainy, but like…not this rainy. Where did it come from? Did it ever stop? Maker bless Blackwall and Harritt for her hood. The rain was kind of nice? She liked sleeping with rain pattering overhead…but that was only ideal when you had shelter. She felt another pang of gratitude for all the Inquisition had given her. It had put her in a situation where rain wasn’t life threatening—she had no fear of being caught out in it with no hope of warmth or cover. Just a few months ago rain clouds overhead would terrify her.

Now, since her time in the Inquisition, rain usually made her sleepy. Something about the lack of sunlight and how very quiet the world got when everyone and everything seemed to try and lay low until the weather passed. And they’d been up since sunrise, traveling for hours, she’d expected that mixed with the weather, she’d be dying to curl up in a tent and nap.

But right now, she was awake and excited, slip-stepping down the muddy slope that led to the stoney beach. She couldn’t wait to see the Chargers in action—Maker, what kind of person would Iron Bull be? He must be super important for the Inquisition—her magic had pinged twice!

When she first left the Chantry with Marehis and saw Cremisius waiting, her magic brought her attention to him. She thought he might be important to the Inquisition, and he was going to be she supposed, but then he’d presented his mission from Iron Bull, that he was there to offer their services to the Inquisition, and the moment he brought it up, ping again!

So this Iron Bull must really be something!

Fighting could be heard ahead, and Ellie drew her staff and fell back, allowing Cassandra and Blackwall to rush ahead of she, Sera, Solas, and Varric, the warriors running through the
Barrier spell she cast as they ran ahead, though she was careful to avoid Sera who still wasn’t comfortable with magic. Sera gave off one of her clattery giggles and scrambled up the hill to shoot down onto the coast from a boulder jutting off the drop of the hillside. Though that was probably more of a tactical thing than a ‘keep that creepy mage-thingy away from me!’ thing. Probably.

“Venatori, to arms!”

Oh yikes! Ellie had never fought against a Tevinter mage before, but they meant serious business!

Oh, and so did these Chargers. They fought well together, and when Cassandra and Blackwall declared themselves—calling out that they were Inquisition—the Mercenaries seemed to take consideration for their additional numbers, made certain of where they were striking, and the Inquisition forces blended seamlessly into the crew already on the ground.

Ellie didn’t think she could climb like Sera…not even on a good day but especially not in this rain, she’d end up slipping and cracking her head open or something! So, she stood with Solas and Varric flanking her as she cast against the Tevinter Mages.

Darkspawn added to their numbers—in the form of enemies of course, though they attacked the Venatori as well, they also drove a wedge between Ellie and her companions.

“Shit!” Varric shouted.

“Ellie needs help!” Solas called out.

“Eleanor?!” Cassandra yelled for confirmation, she couldn’t exactly scope out the battlefield at the moment, her sword locked with a Darkspawn’s, the creature snapping its jaws at her face.

“I got her!” a gruff, deep voice bellowed.

Ellie shrieked in surprise when…oh Maker just the greatest biggest largest person she’d ever seen in her entire life ever, came swooping in. A Qunari! He stood towering over Ellie, getting right up behind her and shielding her with his form as he swung his battle-axe around like a whirlwind to cut down the Darkspawn surrounding them.

“Oh!” Ellie gasped, and the Qunari man almost lurched away from her when she shot her staff out under his arm, which was raised holding his axe, and smacked a Darkspawn he’d just narrowly missed square in the face before its teeth could seek purchase in the exposed flesh of the Qunari’s arm. She followed up with a blast of fire right to the face, that raced down the Darkspawn’s body, sending it reeling backwards to fall dead on the shore.

“Nice move, kid,” the Qunari rumbled out. It was then she noticed his eye. The Darkspawn he’d missed had crept right up under the whipping of his war hammer and into his blind spot.


“Horns give it away?”

“Just a little.” She grinned when he chuckled at her understatement.

And then he was turning his back to her to swipe at a Venatori Rogue slipping a path up the shoreline to strike, and Ellie was joined by Cassandra, who stayed as close as possible to Ellie for the remainder of the fight.
“Eleanor are you hurt?” Cassandra rounded on her the moment she could sheath her sword.

“Ellie-girl?” Blackwall was with them in a heartbeat, skidding on his knees to be eye level with Ellie, his hands bracing her shoulders as he looked her over carefully. These two, Maker’s breath! Cassandra had taken Ellie’s hands and was lifting her arms and having her turn about while the two warriors looked her over for even a scratch that could have come in contact with Darkspwan blood. Blackwall looked like he was satisfied she wasn’t going to turn anytime soon and let out a breath he’d been holding. “Maker, there must be a horde somewhere nearby. You’re uninjured?”

“I’m just fine, I didn’t even get hurt. We’ll deal with that horde in a bit, kay?” Ellie asked, looking at Cassandra, amused as the woman still had a hold of her hands and didn’t realize it. The Seeker released her grip and Ellie looked to Solas as he and Varric approached.

He didn’t use his weird magic connection thing to check in on her unless he thought she was in trouble, but they’d found she could communicate silently to him using it, not exact words or anything, but feelings and instincts on things. She sent him a little vibe to check over everyone and make sure they all took potion if they needed it while she approached Iron Bull.

Oh Maker, she hoped he checked on Sera—she caught sight of the Elf girl sliding down the bank to join their party and worried if she hadn’t been hurt in the fight, she may well break something the way she just threw her whole-body weight into slipping down the muddy hillside. She sent him something she hoped conveyed itself as a Be nice! because he really did not like their new Elf party member.

Ellie was a bit nervous as she made her way to join the Qunari, talking to one of his men about their fight, though she couldn’t see who exactly, not around their boss. Maker, he was massive! No wonder her magic pinged twice! One for each great honking horn atop his head!

But he was their friend it seemed, Magic had pinged. Though now it was rather a lot nervous, so was she as she was approaching him. She kind of wished Cremisius had given her some sort of heads-up, she’d never met a Qunari before and she knew zero…huh, was it called Qunlat? She was worried she’d accidentally insult the large man. But he’d spoken to her in Trade language*…and she didn’t see any other Qunari in his crew, so he must be pretty proficient in it.

So, Ellie walked right up to the Qunari, his subordinate rushed off with orders to ‘break out the casks’ as she approached, her eyes glued to Iron Bull’s great big back as she thought carefully how to address him.

She realized she still had her staff in-hand and while she didn’t know any Qunlat, she did understand that Qunari were generally reticent with magic. She’d heard things…awful things, about mouths being sewn shut that made her squeamish if she thought about it too much. She thought of holstering her staff but instead kicked aside some of the pebbles and rocks underfoot and sunk her staff deep into the sand to stand on its own. The sound caught Iron Bull’s attention, and she was already leaving her staff behind to join him.

“Thanks for helping me earlier,” she said.

“Not a problem. Glad you could make it—have a seat, drinks are comin’,” Iron Bull said as he sat on a boulder, resting a bit.

“I assume you remember my Lieutenant,” he said, gesturing as his subordinate returned, “Cremisius Aclassi.”
Oh gosh! “Cremisuis!” Ellie greeted him, her magic did a happy little skip in her blood and she smiled when the older boy joined them. She realized why she hadn’t spotted Cremisius almost immediately—he wasn’t using the sword he’d been armed with in Haven…was it a Warhammer? It was awfully big. It looked like he’d found a stout sturdy tree branch, sanded it down and jammed it against giant green rock and bound them with a spike riddled, thick leather strap. Whatever it was it looked heavy and he’d seemed to have excellent control over it. “It’s good to see you again! Are you feeling better?”

Cremisius had two large ceramic tankards in his hands and he held them out to Ellie and Iron Bull as he slanted her an amused smile and he reported that he was in fact, “Right as rain, my lady.” Iron Bull snorted before taking a drink of whatever Cremisius brought them, and Ellie giggled at his pun,

“I’m glad,” she was. Colds were no fun, but it could have gotten so much worse. Maker bless Adan and his excellent potions-work! She almost sipped at the drink he’d given her, but as she raised the mug to her lips she could smell the mix of spice and alcohol. Oh warm, spiced mead would be glorious in this weather, but she definitely shouldn’t, not with her potions regimen. So she just kept her lips tight to the edge of the mug and tipped it a bit to make it look like she’d taken a sip—she didn’t want to make Cremisius think she didn’t trust him or something, or come off as rude.

“The uh,” Cremisius balled up his fist, running a gauntleted thumb across his throat, “are all done, Chief.”

“Already? Check ‘em again, I don’t want any of those Tevinter bastards getting away, no offense, Krem.”

Krem? Oh! For short! It was cute!

“None taken,” Cremisius said with a shrug, “at least a bastard knows who his mother is,” he said as he turned to ‘check again’ on whatever he hadn’t wanted to say in front of Ellie, “puts ‘em one up on you Qunari, right?”

Ellie smiled at their exchange—time with Varric and Blackwall had shown her that talking meanly to each other was sometimes a bonding thing—that was nice that they got on so well. And Cremisius was Iron Bull’s Lieutenant? That sounded like an important job, to Ellie at least.

“Eleanor!” Cassandra called as she came to join them, looking conflicted, like she was going back and forth on something in her mind. Oh she was worried that Ellie was drinking—the Seeker didn’t want to throw all of Ellie’s personal business out there in front of strangers, but she had a responsibility to make sure Ellie wasn’t blacking out while handling important Inquisition affairs, huh?

“Cassandra,” Ellie greeted her cheerily, popping up on her tip-toes to kiss her on the cheek, to be close enough that the Seeker could smell that Ellie hadn’t actually drank anything, Maker she was glad she’d brushed her teeth after breakfast! Then she offered the woman her mug, “Here, are you thirsty? It’s really good—warm.” She thought it must be, anyway.

“Thank you, Eleanor,” Cassandra said, taking the mug and a few quick drinks of the stuff, coming away looking pleased with it.

“Oh! This is—” she stopped when she remembered something, “Lady Josie read your name as ‘The Iron Bull’ in that contract you sent us, do you have a preference?”
“I like ‘The Iron Bull’,” the Qunari said, “Putting an article in the front makes me sound like a machine or a weapon and I…well I dig that.”

She wasn’t sure what ‘article’ meant but she did understand that he ‘dig’ed that so. Ellie nodded. “This is The Iron Bull. And this is Seeker Cassandra Pentaghast.”

Any pleasantries between the two warriors were stopped short when a dark-haired Elf woman appeared on the boulder The Iron Bull was seated on. She was crouched, sitting on the balls of her feet with her hands planted between them, examining Ellie intensely.

“Skinner,” Iron Bull greeted her, though his tones sounded like a warning. “Are we behaving? We have guests.”

Ellie smiled to her, gently. “Hi, I’m Ellie,” she said, holding out her hand for a shake.

She didn’t even acknowledge that Bull or Ellie had spoken, just kept staring at her. And then, “You took care of Krem. You made sure he was fed and made well before returning to us.” the Elf known as ‘Skinner’ said.

Ellie nodded, since the woman didn’t seem like she would shake her hand, she just dropped it and said, “I just treated him the way I would want anyone treated,” since it sort of sounded like…well like she wanted an explanation.

Skinner stared at her for a moment more before, eyes never leaving her as she deftly snatching the mug from Iron Bull’s hands and twisting on the balls of her feet. She turned her head away and fled with her stolen mead.

“Skinner!” Iron Bull protested, just a little though, he didn’t make to go after her or anything. “Well that was pretty uhh…tame, actually. Sorry about that.”

Ellie shook her head with a smile, “Oh that’s fine—it just seemed like she was curious about me. It was kind of sweet really.”

“It uh…yeah, from Skinner that’s about as close to sweet as she gets,” Iron Bull said as if he would not at all term the woman as such.

“So,” Ellie said, since he’d said they should sit and talk, she plopped down onto the ground, seating herself like she would when she and Solas meditated. Cassandra grunted in mild disapproval, but she too one leg crossed before her while the other’s knee was raised to rest the arm she held her mug in upon. “Shall we discuss terms?” Ellie asked. “Josie—erm, Lady Josephine briefed me on the finer points of the contract you sent to Haven. Her only concern was um, well the matter of your payment.”

“No need to worry about that, if you hire us on, I’ll work out a payment plan with your Ambassador. Gold will take care of itself. We’re worth every coin, and it’s not just my crew,” The Iron Bull said, “You’ll be getting me—you need a front-line bodyguard, I’m your man. Whatever it is, demons? Dragons? The bigger the better.” he sighed as he leaned forward a bit, eyeing Cassandra warily, “and one more thing. Might be useful. Might piss you off.”

“Unless you’re about threaten me or something, Cassandra’s cool,” Ellie promised with a shrug.

“Nothing like that,” he promised. “You ever heard of the Ben-Hessrath?” the Qunari man asked. Cassandra immediately stiffened at the words, so Ellie looked to her.
“Qunari intelligence,” Cassandra ground out. She sounded angry about it which was…well weird.

Ellie looked to Bull then. “Well, of course you’re super smart, I mean you’re multilingual, and you know how to fight like super well that whirlwindy thing you did was just wicked cool! And you run your own mercenary company, and Lady Josie was impressed with the contract you sent to Haven so you must write well. Why would you think you’d have to tell me you’re smart? Or think that the idea would offend me? I…I’d never just assume something mean spirited about…what’s so funny?”

Iron Bull was full blown laughing, hearty and rich in his chest as he slapped his thigh.

Cassandra sighed. “Ellie, Maker preserve us.”

Ellie blushed, pretty sure she’d stepped in it somehow.

“Imekari,” he said once he calmed, voice ringing with affection so Ellie didn’t think it was an insult or anything, it sort of sounded like the way Solas or Marehis called her ‘Da’len’. He cleared his throat and politely explained, “It’s a Qunari order. They handle information. Loyalty, security, all of it. Spies, basically. Or, well, we’re spies.”

Oh. Oh! Ellie giggled then wrenching a hand at the back of her neck, nervously. “Intelligence as in the government kind, then. I wasn’t super wrong though—you’ve got to be smart to be a spy I think.” Leliana was certainly one of the smartest people she’d ever met.

Iron Bull grunted his agreement. “Ben-Hessrath are concerned about the Breach. Magic out of control like that can cause trouble everywhere. I’ve been ordered to join the Inquisition, get close to the people in charge, and send reports on what’s happening. But I also get reports from Ben-Hessrath agents all over Orlais. You sign me on, I’ll share them with your people.”

Ellie thought about it for a moment. “Thank you, for being upfront with me—I understand about your job, and it sounds important. I wouldn’t want you getting in trouble with your bosses, but the Inquisition’s safety is important too—what sort of things would you report to them about?”

Iron Bull gave a dismissive wave of his hand as if to cast worry aside, “I’d send enough to keep my superiors happy, nothing that’ll compromise your operations. They’re considering sending an army to stop the world from falling apart—you let me report on the progress you’re making, it’ll help put some minds at ease.”

Oh, yeah, Qunari army sounded bad. It made her grateful they’d sent a spy first, before adding a whole other level of warfare to the chaos in Ferelden and the Empire.

Ellie looked to Cassandra—she’d already told the woman her magic said The Iron Bull would be important, so she trusted the woman’s judgement. The Seeker nodded, so Ellie stood from her place on the ground, Cassandra and Iron Bull rising as well, though the Qunari looked a little surprised when Ellie hopped up onto the boulder he’d been sitting on, to be eye level with him. Or. Just-barely chest level but looking more directly into his eyes.

“Young company’s strong and your mission is important. You’d be a welcome addition to the Inquisition, but only if you promise to run your reports by our Spymaster Leliana before sending them out, and that you’ll send nothing she doesn’t approve of. If you compromise the Inquisition after all the hard work everyone’s put into it, I’ll let Cassandra eat you alive.”

And then she held out her hand for him to shake.
“Wouldn’t have it any other way,” Iron Bull said, his hand devouring hers. Maker he was big!

“Great! So, would you care to follow us to our camp? We should probably get everything in writing. Maybe with Cassandra though, I’m super pumped you’re joining us, but I could use a nap.”

Chargers made camp in the cover of some caves they’d cleared the spiders from. Nasty things. Krem was absently pleased they’d cleared them before Ellie went trekking through the Storm Coast—one of those Rift things were gleaming just down the way and she may well have to cut through the caves to get to it. Krem didn’t particularly like fighting the damned eight-legged bastards, but he didn’t have a problem squaring up against them.

“Your little girlfriend’s cute,” Dalish teased from her place around the fire. Where were the Templars when you needed one?

“If I were about twenty years younger, you’d have some serious competition my friend,” Stitches was saying as he bandaged Grim’s leg. The smaller blond man grunted his agreement. Or maybe Stitches got his bandage too tight, but he had something like mischief in his eyes.

Maker this lot couldn’t cut Krem a break. Ever since he got back from Haven with his report—he’d just told them about Ellie, given Bull a heads up about her being so young, and talked about what he saw while on the inside of the Inquisition’s headquarters—they’d been teasing him about his ‘little crush’ on the Herald.

Krem was quiet, sitting close to the fire, working his latest knitting project. It was one of the things he did without his gauntlets—the fibers tended to get snagged if he tried—grey wool soft under his fingers as he worked, nearly done.

He ignored their teasing. As if. Not that he wasn’t interested just…some things weren’t in the cards for him. He’d had his share of carefully ventured lays in the past but Ellie…that wasn’t the first thing that came to mind, when he thought of her. She made him think more of long walks spent talking about anything and everything or finding different ways to make her smile at him, the way she had when he was in Haven. Things that seemed like the sort of things you did to build something long term, and nothing in Krem’s life was permanent, they just never worked out, not before the Chargers anyway, and even that was…well if you grew old in the mercenary business, you got out. Out…it didn’t hold anything for him he thought. Couldn’t, he felt like sometimes.

Besides, she wasn’t interested, she was just…

“She is kind.”

The chatter around the Charger’s Storm Coast campsite died down when Skinner spoke. It usually did—the woman didn’t often speak and when she did it either meant she was about to do something horrendously violent they either needed to stop or join in on, or she was delivering the very rare, genuine usually violence-oriented opinion on something.

“She is,” Krem agreed feeling sort of creeped out by…well Skinner rarely spoke to anyone, and certainly never to him. Nothing personally, but he was just another ‘Shem’. Sometimes she spoke to Bull, more often than not, though Dalish was her second, rarely used, choice. Grim too,
surprisingly, but that was more of a grunting contest between the two teammates. Skinner still had it pretty hard against Humans—the ones that spoke in more than monosyllables, at least. Krem didn’t blame her, but that didn’t mean her actually talking to him for once didn’t make the hair on the back of his neck stand on end. Like he was half expecting the woman to attack or something.

“Shemlen so rarely are,” Skinner said before turning her attention away from Krem like he didn’t exist to her anymore.

“Kid thinks your real sweet too, Skinner,” Bull said as he came to sit around their fire, his voice teasing though Krem was pretty sure Bull would somehow say something like that about Skinner even if the Elf woman had done something bizarre—all he knew was Skinner came away from the interaction with Chief’s mug. “She’s smart too—a little gullible or at least slow on the uptake sometimes, but she means well, got a good head on her shoulders when it counts. Red head. Damn Krem.”

Okay he wasn’t going to ignore that, but neither did he look up from his knitting as he threatened, “Watch yourself Bull, or I’ll kick your fat Qunari ass all the way back to Par Vollen.”

Bull snorted. “You’d have to get in line behind just about every member of that party of hers. I know my place, Krem, I just meant maybe I’ve rubbed off on you a bit, eh?”

“Rub off on yourself you oaf,” Krem groused half-heartedly. Bull chuckled at that, and Krem felt a hand on his shoulder then so he looked up to see the amused smile tugging at Chief’s lips as he jerked his head to the side, a signal for Krem to come with him. Krem nodded and laid his project aside, rising from his seat by the fire to follow after.

He did dislike stepping out side the cave to chat with Bull in the pouring rain, but the big ass did stop him at the entrance, letting Krem stand under the last bit of overhead coverage.

“Herald agreed to sign us on. I stopped by their camp since she wanted to make sure I had a contract that covered my personal alliance to the Inquisition. Get my promises about my transparency with the sort of things I’ll be reporting to HQ, in writing and sent off to her Advisors so I can keep up with my reporting schedule, get the next one out on time…” he looked like he was mildly impressed when he thought about it some more, “I think she was trying to secure my job too, make sure I get paid my due, since the contract I had written up just covered the Chargers in a general sense.”

Huh. Yeah, their contract was for the Chargers to work for the Inquisition offering their mercenary services, but there wasn’t anything explicitly detailing Bull’s role…but uh, wasn’t his role just leading them? “What’s up?”

Bull grumbled for a second and then, “The original plan was just…subtle infiltration, get in, earn trust, get information out. But shit Krem you didn’t tell me she was that…” ha, flustered was not a good look for Bull. “I mean you’re sure she’s as old as you’re thinking? Humans make such little imekari. And they have her just rushing out into fights—girl can’t have fought in an actual battle a day in her life before this crap, she’s obviously had training but…its recent. She isn’t used to it.” He sighed. “So, plans changed. I offered to go out with her, be a part of her ‘party’ she calls it. Hence, separate contract for my personal services,” he said with a wink.

And then Bull just sort of gaped at him when Krem started cackling with laughter.

“Well of course you did, you oaf! I tried to warn you, but I figured you’d have to see for yourself before the idea drilled its way into that thick head of yours. You sure you got room for brains in there what with those horns?”
Bull grunted at that, “Might want to watch the ‘stupid’ comments around your girl Krem, she thinks I must be ‘super smart’ to do my job.”

He ignored his calling Ellie his ‘girl’. It was just baiting, trying to see if Krem was out of his mind or something, under the delusion he should attempt something dragon-crap crazy like romancing the Herald of Andraste.

“You actually told her about that Ben-Hessrath stuff?” Krem asked.

“And she thanked me for my honesty. And then I think she hit on me. Or threatened me? Either way, it was kind of hot.”

Krem whacked the oaf on the forehead with the palm of his hand.

“Okay, okay,” Bull relented. And then he looked almost gravely serious.

“Chief?”

“You know she’s Saarebas.”

He could hear the accusation—that Krem had either missed pertinent information right in front of his nose, or he’d opted not to tell Bull, though he was certain as hell those Ben-Hessrath reports had told Cheif she was a mage and he hadn’t felt the need to tell Krem. But that meant it had likely been a test.

“She wasn’t carrying a staff when I was in Haven, got a bodyguard that stays with her there —I told you about her, Marehis? I sort of figured she didn’t fight full-stop,” he said. That sort of concerned him. She was a Mage and she just walked around unarmed in Haven? “What’s it matter anyway, you’ve got no problem with Dalish,” Krem snapped, defensively. Qunari got real weird about mages. Yeah, it had surprised him when Ellie popped down onto the shoreline armed with a staff of all things. Even then—staff fighting wasn’t a common technique outside of magic, but it wasn’t unheard of—it wasn’t until he saw her actually casting visible magic that he accepted she was a mage.

A mage who saw her potential ally in a Qunari…and just disarmed herself like that, went defenseless to speak with him so that he would feel safe. Iron Bull. Someone that could break her in half with the effort most used to pop open a bottle of wine. Ugh, awful imagery.

Oh. Was that why Ellie hadn’t had her staff on her in Haven? She’d just been in with her Advisors, one of which was a former Templar, he couldn’t imagine such a person would be comfortable speaking their mind in a high-stress situation with an armed mage. But Maker, wasn’t she worried the man may attack her should things grow heated? He really couldn’t imagine a Templar former or otherwise would dare disarm for a Mage’s comfort.

Growing up Soporati* in Tevinter, seeing the absolute worst of what magic and mages had to offer the world, magic was still on some level a synonym for ‘evil’ in his book. Dalish was an exception, he thought, she’d done okay—never hurt any of the Chargers with her magic, never resorted to Blood Magic, that Krem knew of anyway. But…well Maker, Ellie, she couldn’t be evil. In the little time he’d known her, he’d come to feel secure in the conclusion she couldn’t have a mean bone in her body. It…well it sort of made him feel that maybe ‘exception’ to the rule didn’t cut it. Maybe the rule itself was wrong. Magic…magic couldn’t be inherently evil, not if it could also be a part of someone like her.

“I didn’t mean anything by it, just an observation,” Bull shrugged.
Krem snorted at that. Bull’s entire job was observation. He didn’t go talking about them unless he had a point other than the ones on his head.

But he changed the subject then. Seemed done with it, whatever he’d been trying to say. “You’ll take the boys on ahead to Haven, sign the Charger’s contract on my behalf.” Bull said.

“You got it, Chief,” Krem replied, before returning to his place by the fire and briefing everyone on the situation—Chief staying behind while they went on ahead to Haven.

Some nodded, some started grumbling, but they all set about gathering their things and packing up camp. Krem…well he’d had a good idea which way the wind was going to blow. He had his stuff all ready to go.

Besides, while the others got their shit together, he was hoping to finish his knitting.

Ellie finally did get that nap, once The Iron Bull had been properly introduced to everyone and his contract was seen to—Cassandra had written up the deal Ellie and Bull set. After he read it over, The Iron Bull was satisfied with the terms of his employment and sent it off with his first set of reports to be approved by Leliana—though they only covered his sending an offer to the Inquisition and about his initial findings on the Storm Coast and his dealings with the Venatori there, he said, but a deal was a deal.

When they asked him if he’d care for lunch, Bull said he had to check in with the Chargers, tell them they got the job and give them their orders. Cassandra seemed pleased when, as they ate, Ellie told her that Cremisius was actually Bull’s Lieutenant. She didn’t exactly know what a lieutenant was exactly—a military rank?—but it sounded important, like he was Bull’s ‘right-hand-man’. Or maybe ‘right-eye-guy’—Varric had said that, once Bull was down the bank heading to… well wherever they’d set up camp. She hoped it was dry.

She sort of worried The Iron Bull would get sick, running around the Storm Coast without a shirt on, but the Qunari was large and warm like a walking furnace, so he was either already running one wicked fever, or his natural body temperature was such that the cold and rain might just not phase him. But then, maybe shirts were difficult to manage when one had such spectacular horns to consider. She’d have to ask him about it sometime. Politely. Maybe there was some cultural reason Qunari didn’t wear shirts.

When she did finally wake from her nap, it’d been nearly two hours! She was surprised she actually slept so long. Not that she hadn’t been tired, just Sera didn’t seem the sort to not take the opportunity of Ellie napping to prank her or something.

Huh. Sera never pranked her. She teased her and played and invited Ellie to join in on her plans to prank the others, but she didn’t play tricks on Ellie herself. She wondered at it, but she wasn’t about to complain—if anything it made her feel like they were partners in crime or something, and that was sort of fun! Ellie was glad that Sera had gotten into the habit of running her pranks by her since the whole ‘boots full of honey’ incident, it gave her the opportunity to redirect Sera’s special brand of chaos into something manageable and easier to deal with in the aftermath.

And it was pretty funny while on their way to the Storm Coast, when they crept into the
mens’ tent while they were sleeping and filled their hands with...it was pie filling, and Ellie wasn’t
certain where it came from, but Sera just had it on her for some reason. Goopy, pudding-like stuff
that tasted like something in the sleeping potion Adan made for her. Vanilla, Sera said. What was
left over from the setup of their prank, the two ate as a midnight snack—with Cassandra when the
woman woke and discovered them, apparently vanilla pudding was a good enough bribe to secure a
Seeker’s silence. That might have been the most fun part—the three of them gathered together
around their cold firepit, eating pudding in the middle of the night with a shared secret that was
sure to bring amusement in the morning.

When the men woke for the day, three cries of surprise could be heard from their tent, and
they emerged with pie splotches on their faces—Solas on his head, Varric’s around his eyes, and
Blackwall’s right around his mouth all caught up in his beard. They were all sporting glares for
Sera who’d jumped up, pointed at Ellie, and cackled, “She did it!” and ran away. She climbed up a
tree!

Ellie realized then one of the reasons Sera was so very mailable to Ellie’s suggestion when
they pulled these pranks together—Sera was going to toss the blame off on Ellie, so Ellie may well
get a say in what she’s going to be blamed for.

Or not blamed for, really. The moment the men finally believed it had been Ellie’s doing,
Solas was forgiving, Varric impressed, and Blackwall laughed it off saying it was a refreshing,
tasty way to wake up, good on her for getting them good.

Ellie yawned as she pulled her riding cloak on, and hood over her head. She crawled from
her tent, once she was out she stayed on her knees and stretched as she opened her eyes to look
around their campsite.

Sera might not be into pranking Ellie, but she certainly gave her a fright. The Elf girl was
waiting, crouched eyelevel with Ellie, right up in the Human girl’s face. Sera actually leaned
forward so their noses sort of smushed together.

“’s bout time you woke up! Andraste’s tits I’ve been bored. Lady Priss Pants won’t play
with me unless there’s puddings involved. And Beardy won’t let me braid his hair! Dwarfy says
he’s busy with his stupid book.”

Oh gosh she’d startled her! Ellie took in a few short quick gasps and her lungs did some
sort of quivery thing, ouch! But she caught her breath just fine then, and gave Sera an apologetic
smile as she leaned back to sit on her bottom, thankfully resting on the edge of her bedroll and not
the ground, so she wasn’t so smushy-faced. “Sorry, rain makes me kind of sleepy, you know?”

Sera plopped back then too, a little splashy since she’d just sat in the mud. “Pffft. Rain just
makes me have to piss. All that falling water, drip drip drip it’s a nightmare.”

“Ugh,” Cassandra complained. “Sera, really?”

“I know right? Lady Priss Pants feels me! Or should I say Lady Piss P—”

“I will murder you I swear to Andraste. I will cast you off a cliff, into the ocean, if you
finish that sentence.”

Sera cackled—she liked when Cassandra threatened her, Ellie thought. She kind of figured
it was some weird form of the Elf woman trying to flirt with the Seeker. Hopefully Sera’d be able
to hit it off with Scout Harding and give Cassandra a break. The pretty, Dwarf woman seemed
much more Sera’s speed.
Ellie shook her head as she stood to join Cassandra and the others around the fire in their camp. Thankfully the trees around gave them some sort of out-of-doors coverage from the rain, though the occasional droplet dripped from the branches, it wasn’t too bad. Maker, it was cold though—was it this cold in Haven? Colder there but she was either inside or working so hard out of doors she kept up a nice body temperature. Here she just felt cold, and Ellie pulled her riding cloak more tightly around her as she sat beside Cassandra, leaning into the Nevarran woman a little, though her armor was sort of cold so that didn’t help much despite the woman’s body heat. Oh well, Cassandra looked up from a requisition she was reading, and wrapped an arm around Ellie’s shoulders, rubbing Ellie’s arm to warm her a bit with the friction.

“You’re cold, Eleanor?”

Ellie shrugged. “Just a bit.”

“Shall I put the kettle on, lethallan?” Solas inquired.

Ellie smiled, grateful for the suggestion, “If you wouldn’t mind.”

“I wouldn’t have asked,” Solas assured her, warmly. “Coffee? Or would you care for some tea?”

Oh, her throat felt a bit scratchy, tea’d be lovely. “Hmm, tea so long as you’re okay with it.” She wouldn’t want Solas to make something that he himself wouldn’t partake of, he didn’t really like tea, she remembered.

Solas nodded and went about fetching the kettle and water.

“How’s the book coming along, Varric?” Ellie asked, the Dwarf sat across the fire from her, scribbling away in his journal.

“Not off to a bad start, just cleaning up the first chapter. Editing’s hell kid, you wanna lend a hand?” Varric asked, holding up his journal as he looked to Ellie.

Ellie snorted, shaking her head. “I’d be down to listen if you ever want to give us a preview, but you definitely don’t want me as your editor,” she assured him with a little laugh.

“Oh, come on Tumbles, breaking my heart here, you mean I gotta do my work myself?”

“At least we’re in the Storm Coast, the rain will mask your tears, though we may well drown in them,” Solas quipped as he got the kettle hanging over the fire now.

Varric dramatically put his quill to his chest like he was being stabbed in the heart, “You people live to see me bleed, don’t you?”

“Oh can-it Dwarfy! There’s Bull!” Sera said as she dropped to the ground from…had she gone up into a tree again? Where had she gone when Ellie turned her back on her? The Elf girl was always wandering off and it worried Ellie sometimes, really. What if she got caught up in a fight away from her allies, or had an accident and got hurt?

Nothing for it, now, Sera was fine and excitedly greeting The Iron Bull as he approached their camp. Ellie wasn’t sure if maybe she had some kind of crush on him? But probably not though, she’d said he ‘made her wonder about things’ and then went into a little tangent wondering about if Qunari women were built like their men. Ellie said she hadn’t a clue, she’d never met a Qunari. Never really ever seen one, before The Iron Bull.
“Heya! Glad you’re back safe, how is everyone? All squared away?” Ellie asked, patting the empty space at her right side, if he wanted a seat. He’d probably be more comfortable sitting and talking with her in his peripheral—there wasn’t really a place across the fire for him, not with Varric, Solas, Blackwall and…well Sera wasn’t really sitting but she was standing on the empty portion of the log beside Blackwall, bouncing up and down on her tippy toes.

“Chargers are all set, heading off to Haven as we speak, they set out about an hour ago. I double checked the shoreline on the way back to make sure there weren’t any stragglers from the fight.”

“Oh! Thanks, that’s good work,” Ellie commended, feeling a bit weird having to lean back to look up at him, she considered standing since he hadn’t sat down yet, but it seemed he was just taking a quick look-around before seating himself beside Ellie and Maker, bless him. Wait, who was the Qunari god? Did they have one? The Qun was a religion, right? Huh. Anyway, bless The Iron Bull and his body heat because it was like the actual sun had taken a seat next to her. Okay maybe not the actual sun, that’d be like world-endy and whatnot she thought, but still.

“Not a problem. Uh, this is for you,” he said sounding…well not awkward but kind of like he was amused about something and trying to hide it or trying not to laugh about it at least. He handed her something soft wrapped in cloth bound with a bow made of twine. There was a torn piece of parchment with a hole poked through it so the twine could be threaded through, like a tag, with…uh…

“For me?” Ellie asked The Iron Bull.

“Got your name on it kid,” Bull said with a shrug.

Oh! Really? Ellie smiled as she traced the letters with a bare index finger. 'E-L-L-I-E'.

Careful not to damage the parchment she tucked it with a bit of the twine still tied to it gently away into her cloak’s inside pocket for keeps, and pulled away the cloth to reveal, oh!

“A hat!” she said with a smile, holding the grey, woolen garment in her hands, oh it was so soft! “It’s beautiful, did you make this?” Ellie asked. That’d be cool if Bull knew how to knit—Solas knew how to make handkerchiefs! Maybe they could bond over that? She had a feeling Solas was uneasy having a Qunari with them—worried, that the man may try to convert them to the Qun or whatever.

Bull let out a boisterous laugh, and patted her on the back—gently, though it did still push her forward in her seat a bit, making Blackwall eye the Qunari as if trying to judge whether or not he was hurting her, but she smiled at him and he seemed to relax.

“Nah, shit, can you imagine? My hands trying to knit? Krem made that for you. He had it all wrapped up when he was ready to lead the Chargers on out and asked me to pass it along.”

Oh! Cremisius knew how to knit! That was…Ellie felt her cheeks warm and she bit her lip, gently running a finger across the soft hat in her hands…that was really sweet of him. “I’ll have to thank him when we return to Haven.”

“Who’s Krem?” Varric asked, his questions coming rapid-fire as he stared at the present in Ellie’s hands. “What’s he do? How tall is he? What’s he look like and what are his weaknesses?”

He almost sounded like he might be wanting to fight Cremisius? Huh.

Ellie shrugged. “We talked about him earlier, Cremisius Aclassi, the Chargers’ Lieutenant.
He’s the one that came to Haven and invited us out here. He’s about…” Ellie thought it over. She’d seen Krem and Bull standing side by side on the beach, “he’s shoulder height with The Iron Bull —”

“Thanks for remembering the, ‘The’,” Bull cut in.

“No problem!” Ellie said, “Weaknesses…well he was the fellow knocking Venatori around with that huge war hammer thing, so I dunno, he seems super strong. And he’s got like, tan, brownish skin. Brown hair, that sort of long-up-top, shaved on the sides look. And his eyes…well they’re just warm and light, sort of like sunlight caught in the bottom of a whisky glass.”

Oh, she felt a bit awkward then when everyone just sort of stared at her.

Oddly enough, Sera giggling and falling onto the ground to sit on the forest floor by the fire and cackle like a madwoman made Ellie feel a little less embarrassed. Probably because one of those group ‘oh sweet ‘deity of choice name here’, what is this girl on?’’ looks that sort have happened on a regular basis as they traveled to the Storm Coast.

Sera was sweet. Bit wild, but sweet, Ellie thought.

“Varric asked,” Ellie said then, shrugging a bit.

“Uh. Kinda asking his boss but, shit tumbles, you sure you don’t want to play editor? I’m not gonna lie that was rough but I’m planning on cleaning up and using that sunlight whisky reference. Maker.”

Ellie blushed. “It’s your book, you goof, write whatever you want.”

“Uh-huh. You feeling poetic about Seeker, or Chuckles? I think my description of Hero’s pretty down pat.”

“Down pat, eh?” Blackwall asked, curious.

“Foul-smelling crotchety old man with more beard than brains.”

“I’m sitting right here Dwarf, I could burn your stupid book.”

“I’d like to see you try—”

“Sorry about those two, they’re always sort of fighty. It’s how they get along I think,” Ellie said quietly leaning towards Iron Bull. “Thanks for bringing me this, I really appreciate it,” Ellie said as she lowered the hood on her armor and pulled the hat on over her head, it slipped over her hair and actually fit comfortably, like the Tevinter man had taken her hair into consideration when crafting the hat. Maker, it was warm! Pulling her hood over her head, she was water proofed and snuggly, and if she wasn’t careful she’d end up falling asleep again!

“Your tea, da’len,” Solas said, handing her a mug. More warmth! Would it be socially acceptable just to take another nap in the middle of their campsite? Sera wouldn’t care, and she was comfortable enough with the others, but Iron Bull might take offense, think she found him boring or something, especially if she fell asleep on him. So. No more napping!

“Thanks, Solas! Oh!” she looked up at Iron Bull, “Are you thirsty? Solas just made tea! And we have water. You have a canteen or something right? Do you have all your things? Are you cold? Do you need a coat? I can keep on the lookout for one.”
“My reports said your Inquisition didn’t have an Inquisitor but you two seem to be vying for the position,” Bull said gesturing between Ellie and Varric with one hand, his laughter dry as he patted Ellie on the head with the other. “Don’t worry about me kid, I have everything I need. Qunari run warm, so yeah, the rain’s kind of nice. Refreshing. Won’t pass up a cup of tea though.”

Solas was already pouring more tea into a few more mugs to pass around, though he looked a bit worried about how well the Qunari would be able to hold the cup, but Bull was obviously used to handling things not quite made to fit Qunari hands. He kept the handle pinched between thumb, and index and middle finger, resting it on the palm of his other hand even when he tilted it to drink.

“Not bad,” he said, “Solas right?”

“Indeed. Good of you to remember,” Solas complimented with a polite bow of his head. Well at least he was just being polite—with Sera his politeness was more like cold disdain dressed up in pleasantries, when he wasn’t outright fighting with her. Maybe that meant he and Bull would get along! That’d be nice.

She didn’t need everyone to be best friends or anything, but the larger their group got, the more personalities that mixed and repelled, the more Ellie worried about taking everyone out with her. They needed to be able to count on each other in a fight, not worry that some campsite unpleasantness will lead to hard feelings and letting each other get hurt in the field.

Ellie took a sip from her mug and sent Solas a little wave of gratitude for the tea that had the Elf man smiling to her before he resumed…oh, he’d been writing something when Ellie came from the tent. He did that a lot, Ellie had noticed—not when they went to Val Royeaux, but when they went to the Hinterlands, and now as they traveled to the Storm Coast, he wrote letters, sometimes everyday! She didn’t want to pry into his private business, but she did wonder just who this ‘M-a-r-e-h-i-s’ was. Were they in the Inquisition? Or was he writing to a friend from somewhere else?

Oh gosh! What if he had a girlfriend? Well. Whoever they were Ellie was sure they couldn’t hold a candle to Marehis. But if they made him happy, that was good! And he always seemed…content, not busting out of his skin happy but, he definitely cared about whoever these letters were for.

“Are you hungry or anything? We’ll probably head out soon,” Ellie said turning her attention to Iron Bull.

Bull shook his head. “I’m good to go whenever you’re ready.”

Ellie nodded, and took a bit more time with her tea, eyeing Solas occasionally to register when he might be done with his letter writing. Sera started chatting up Bull then, asking him her questions about Qunari women—though when her questions got a bit…uh…graphic, Cassandra snapped at her to mind her tongue.

Sera giggled wildly and said, “Sorry! Forgot Ickle Inky was listening.”

“Inky?” Bull asked.

Sera groaned, exasperated as if it should be obvious. “Ellie. Cuz her hands all marked up like a glowy ink stain. And Inky rhymes with Ellie. Cause e’s and y’s and shit.”

“Inky is a reference to her Mark?” Cassandra asked.
“Duh.”

Ellie hadn’t been sure why she called her that either, but she supposed if you thought with Sera-vision in mind, yeah, that made sense.

“Best leave the nick-name thinking to me, Buttercup,” Varric teased. “Tumbles makes way more sense.”

“Tumbles is a stupid one, doesn’t even rhyme.”

“Doesn’t have to rhyme—”

“I promise I love both nicknames equally. They’re sweet, thank you,” Ellie assured them as Solas rose, folding up his parchment and placing it in the box for outgoing messages on their requisitions table, Ellie drained the rest of her tea and stood, stretching a bit and yawning.

“Are you still tired, Eleanor?” Cassandra asked, standing then and looking down at Ellie with reserved concern.

“Nah, just still waking up a bit. We should get moving, yeah? Scout Harding said something about soldiers not reporting back, and we haven’t seen or received anything from their unit while we’ve been here, have we?”

“We haven’t,” Cassandra confirmed.

“We should go check up on them—they might need our help or be lost or something.”

“I know a good rout,” Blackwall offered.

“Lead the way!” Ellie said.

Soldiers hadn’t reported in in a while huh. That was never good. kid had proposed the possibility that they could need help but…shit. She didn’t seem like the sort to jump to the very probable conclusion they were dead—though they could be captured, but a hostage situation could get ugly. Not everyone had a code like the Chargers—when they could, they took care of anyone they captured, and handled negotiations as quick as possible, no more bloodshed, everyone back where they belong and make a little gold on top. Vints this time, it hadn’t been one mercenary group against the other, there wasn’t any sitting down and talking things out, these guys were hell bent on…well, Ben-Hessrath weren’t sure. They had some sort of cryptic god bullshit going on, and a vendetta against the Inquisition. He wondered if the kid was just super optimistic or…too optimistic. So hopeful that the idea her people might be dead already hadn’t occurred to her. Shit.

Ben-Hessrath reports out of Orlais had given Bull, what he thought, was a decent rundown on the Herald of Andraste but Vashedan. Who the hell were they letting into the Qun? Into the Ben-Hessrath? No shit they needed a guy on the inside. Krem’d given him the most accurate report to date on the Herald, and he hadn’t been able to figure out that she was Sarabaas. He thought he’d trained Krem better than that, but yeah if she was going around unarmed in Haven, and after her display on the beach that checked out, he could understand not seeing it. Kid didn’t carry herself like any mage he’d ever met. If she hadn’t come trotting—like a kid, she had this little hop in her walk, in her run like she was amped up about where she was going—down onto the beach and
Well shit. He wasn’t sure what he’d thought. But that wasn’t surprising. Humans weren’t like Qunari, there wasn’t a filing system for them, they weren’t numbered and labeled and put in their neat little niche in society before puberty. They fended for themselves mostly, spent a shit-ton of time fathoming out their ‘purpose’ their ‘dreams’, even their elderly—sometimes especially their elderly. She was just imekari, full of potential, an empty vessel. If she’d been born without magic she’d just be starting some form of training for something else—just now figuring out what she’d want to do with her life, and even then, she could take up something and drop it, move on if she didn’t care for it.

She’d used her staff like a sword a few times during that fight and there was toning in her arms, in her upper back—he’d seen the muscles shift and flex beneath the leather of her armor—her footing in battle, these were all indications she’d been trained like a warrior. But she was on the small side, she was young so maybe she’d grow, but she seemed too little for out-and-out warrior shit. Maybe she’d make a good rogue—fast movement, attacking from afar with a bow or something, nothing up-close and personal. She had little hands perfect for picking locks or pockets.

Overall, she was just…pure. Talan. He’d spoken her language when he’d been upfront about the Ben-Hessrath, kid understood reason, and believed in honesty, and that there was good in people. If he’d hidden it from her and she found out later that wouldn’t have ended well. She wouldn’t have figured it out on her own—she was too trusting for that—but that Spymaster Leliana, she probably knew what he was even before the Inquisition had boots on the ground on the Storm Coast and he didn’t know her from Koslun* so he wasn’t sure how she ran things. Putting it out there right from the start with Ellie—shit the name just sounded like the word ‘imekari’ only softer, which was worse. Anyway, being honest with her earned her trust, told her he could be as honest as she was—which was misleading in and of itself, but it did the job.

Krem’d warned him to be on his best behavior—she was small and Human and he was decently sure she’d never seen a Qunari before, and Bull’d obviously startled her when he came to her aid in the fight but she’d defended him, and when she saw that her magic had startled him—it shouldn’t have, he’d known the Herald was a Mage for months now, that shit was Krem was just a test he’d…eh, half-way passed—she disarmed herself to come speak with him. At first, he’d taken the sound of her staff hitting the ground as a sign of attack, but she’d been digging it into the ground and walked away from it, put it out of reach so he would know she couldn’t just draw and cast on him. That…had taken some serious guts, girl deserved a stiff drink after that. She obviously trusted her party to protect her, but she’d approached him alone, unarmed, and he could have snapped her neck before anyone of her companions could blink let alone come to her rescue. She did it anyway, so he would be comfortable talking to her.

He’d seen her pretend to sip from the mead Krem gave her—which told him three things. She didn’t drink on the job, she was thoughtful of her companions, and she trusted Krem. She wouldn’t have passed her drink off to the Seeker if she thought there was something funny about it, she handed it off because she thought her companion would like the warm drink, and it was a smooth move that made sure she didn’t give Krem…or Iron Bull himself…the idea she thought them untrustworthy, that they’d invited her out just to poison her or something. She showed that much thought about one interaction. And hell, Skinner hadn’t sent her packing either, she hadn’t even looked phased by her weird Elf shit—maybe because she had a weird Elf on her own, but Sera was more like a wild cat than a crazed…well, Skinner reminded him of a madness driven Mabari on a good day.

Damn, Krem hadn’t been kidding when he said she took responsibility over everyone in her camp. He’d meant everyone. She checked to make sure Sera hadn’t been hurt in the fight, made
sure that Blackwall guy knew she was sincere about helping him clear out any active Darkspawn sites. The Elf, Solas had taken a blow to the face, his nose bleeding and bruised though by the time the kid got to him he’d had potion and his injury was already clearing up—she asked him if he was alright, and when he assured her he was well, she stood on the tips of her toes to kiss him on bridge of his nose before chatting away trying to discern who in her party had how much potion. As soon as they got to camp, she made sure everyone was restocked and Bull was given a supply of his own, asked if there was anything their company healer had need of that they could spare from their stores, and was Cremisius really feeling better? Really? Great! Had anyone else gotten sick? No? Oh good! Kid had been genuinely relieved—like she’d been worried about Krem, and worried about the Chargers being caught out in all this rain. Elves seemed fine with it, Dalish’d never been sick a day in her life since Bull had known her, same with Skinner…though he had the feeling her foot could be falling off and she’d not deign to inform anyone about it…but Humans didn’t seem to mix well with being wet and cold.

She made sure that Iron Bull had a personal contract with the Inquisition—that entitled him to his fair share of things they came across while traveling, money, loot, things that weren’t covered in the contract he’d sent to Haven. Kid was tired as shit—didn’t act like it but something in the slump of her shoulders, in her smile tipped him off that she’d been sincere when she joked about needing a nap. But she sat down with that Seeker, and Iron Bull, and made sure Cassandra was comfortable as a representative of the Inquisition with Bull’s agreement to have their spymaster vet his reports, and that he was comfortable with the terms of his employment.

Then when that…Warden—kid’d introduced him as a Warden anyway, something was off there though, maybe not in his occupation but dude had secrets—had started making lunch and she helped him, asked Bull if he wanted to eat with them but it was the way she asked, no pressure either way, if he was hungry she’d feed him—probably cook up a storm if he said he needed it—if he’d rather take a break from their Inquisition intro, go check on his guys and handle his business, cool. He’d shaken her hand on the beach and suddenly he and his crew were her responsibility and she would work with him in whatever way suited him best, no questions asked.

Well. That was almost a lie. As Blackwall led them through the Storm Coast to check on their soldiers—she asked a lot of questions. More responsibility—she wanted to know every last thing she could think of she would need to know in order to make sure Bull had everything he needed. Instead of being frightened of his being a Qunari she was more worried she didn’t know how to take care of one. It was the first time he answered truthfully when asked if he was allergic to anything, had any food-sensitivities. He didn’t have any—usually he’d give a false weakness, see if someone would use it against him. Kid wouldn’t do that, and neither, it seemed, would those around her. They seemed more likely to convert to the Qun than do something to hurt her.

The Qun—it obviously made that Solas guy uncomfortable just how many questions she had about the Qunari religion. She was careful—like she didn’t want to be disrespectful in case he wasn’t supposed to talk about it with outsiders. She asked if there was anything he needed to avoid, religiously. Like if there was something he wasn’t allowed to partake of under the Qun, or if he had any religious practices he’d like to take time to observe—said something about how she and the Seeker and sometimes someone named Marehis (again, not someone mentioned in his Ben-Hessrath reports seriously? Krem’d told him about her Elf body guard, he was just going to start sending the Tevinter man around everywhere scooping out intel for him at this rate, damn), they woke up early and prayed together in the mornings, and if he wanted to join them he was more than welcome to. She wanted to know if it would be alright for her to pray to whoever Qunari prayed to, to watch over him—and that Solas’s ears went red when she said she prayed to the Maker and Elgar’nan for he and Marehis and Sera now too but that just made the weird Elf stick her tongue out at her and tell her not to ask some Elfy god to get all up in her business.
“I’m good kid, Qun isn’t really about prayer or reliance on a greater power. Our religion teaches us to seek strength within ourselves, that we can face our own problems head on without divine intervention. Lots of self-reliance, reflection, meditation.”

“Oh! Solas and I meditate every night, if that’s more your style. Just offering you don’t have to, I get it if that’s something you do alone, but you’re more than welcome! Its fun!”

Huh. He took time to meditate just…not as often as had been enforced during his time under the Tamassrans. It could get boring as shit. He only ever went full-blown lotus position if he really needed it. Ellie talked like she liked the practice. Eh. Maybe he’d join them. Somehow, he got the feeling if the kid could term it as ‘fun’, she was doing it wrong. But maybe she knew something he didn’t.

“Oh! Gosh! I’m sorry, I should have asked earlier, um. This might be a dumb question…I know Qunari don’t really love magic, but would you be comfortable being included in Solas and I’s barrier spells? It’s okay if you’re not! Sera isn’t and we’ve sorted just fine.”

“I like Inky just fine, but magic’s creepy!” Sera said as she skipped alongside the kid.

Ellie just smiled at that and said, “So, if you’re creeped out by magic too, I totally get it!”

Dalish usually cast barrier…with her uh…bow. So. “As long as it’s just barrier kid, we’ll get along, you can handle casting uh, that much?”

“Yup! You’re the actual tallest person I’ll have ever cast on, but I think it’ll be okay!” she sounded like she was excited about that, and shit if the kid could do it, more power to her. Uh. Literally, he supposed.

Once they made it up the muddy hillside to a clearing housing two run-down cabins, there were Blades of Hessarian all around. The second they were spotted by the enemy he felt what definitely had to be the kid’s magic bubble across his skin—from the tips of his horns to the bottom of his boots, and shit, either Dalish needed a better bow, or this kid would be giving her a run for her money sometime soon.

Ten warriors, three archers, two rogues, three mabari. They were holding position, all of them already banged up like they’d been through one hell of a fight. Their leader sent them out here to ward off or take care of Inquisition forces, and hadn’t sent backup or reinforcements? Just, sent them to go fight and hold position until what? Inquisition retaliation?

These chumps up against three warriors coated in barriers set in place by two mages who were backing them alongside two archers? They never stood a chance.

Seeker was the first one through the door to the first cabin and the moment she set foot inside she was rounding back, pushing Blackwall out of her way and shoving against Iron Bull so she could be in clear sight of Solas, Sera, and Varric as she gestured at them.

“Keep the Herald back!” she called out, “Eleanor, remain where you are there is…it is dangerous, let us handle it!” she implored.

Bull felt Barrier slip over them again, Ellie. Seeker said danger and the kid had taken that to mean more of a fight.

But there wasn’t anything to fight. Just bodies. Inquisition soldiers lay in bloody heaps on the cabin floor, like they’d been fought outside and dragged into the cabin for some reason. To hide them? What kind of operation was this, whoever the fuck ran the Blades of Hessarian,
running? Shit was all kinds of messed up. These kills were sloppy, their marks had suffered not for cruelties’ sake but because they were brought down by under-trained hands—they’d just been caught off guard, outnumbered, probably on the return trip to their camp, exhausted. Bodies were cold, the blood on them, around them, dry and stale—they’d been dead for nearly a day now and the Blades they’d just taken out? They had to be the ones that did this. They came out here, killed Inquisition soldiers and were waiting for further command that never came.

Bull was pretty sure it wasn’t death that prevented communication coming down the chain of command. Just shitty leadership. These weren’t bandits or thugs, they were mercenaries—swords for hire, they shouldn’t want to pick a fight with the Inquisition of their own provocation. But everything—from reports he’d received on the Blades, and the reports from Inquisition Scouts that Cassandra’d let him read through while she was looking over his own reports to send for Leliana’s approval, get him briefed on their situation in the Storm Coast—said that these Blades hadn’t been hired on by anyone in a while. Months by Ben-Hessrath reports, and certainly not since Inquisition influence on the Coast according to Scout Harding’s account.

Shitty leadership. Poor saps. Their boss set them up for failure to bang his own chest, feed his own ego, and left them to reap the punishment for his decisions.

Bull’d of felt sorry for them, the Blades, if it wasn’t for what happened next.

“What is it?” Ellie asked.

Seeker slammed the door to the cabin shut, standing in front of it as if doing so would keep the doorway hidden from the girl who…well Solas and Varric each had their hands her shoulders, but they didn’t apply any actual force against her to keep her back she just walked away from them when she realized there wasn’t some sort of fight breaking out she was meant to keep away from.

“Cassandra?” Ellie questioned again, standing just before the Seeker.

“Eleanor. I would ask you return to camp, with the others. Blackwall and myself, The Iron Bull, we can handle what is left to be done here.”

That just got her a confused look. “We haven’t found our soldiers yet, they could still be out there, just cause they’re not right where Scout Harding was hoping they’d be…” a sort of realization—half-realization—dawned on the girl’s face then. “You…you found them.”

“Eleanor. Please.”

Seeker may have some sort of rank in the Inquisition, but it sure as hell wasn’t Inquisitor, and ‘Herald of Andraste’ seemed to out rank her.

Kid got right up in Seeker’s personal space, looking for all the world she was hugging the older woman, and she did sort of—her arms went around her waist except while one hugged, the other reached for the handle to push open the door, Seeker relented, rolling with it, just turned so she could face the room with the Herald, putting her arm around the younger girl’s shoulders.

Full realization, then.

“Seeker?” Solas’s voice.

“Inky?” Sera. Tentative sounded strange from the rambunctious Elf.

Bull heard her, Ellie, take in a deep, shuddering breath and then, “All of them?”
“Yes,” Cassandra said. She’d counted. All their missing soldiers were no longer missing.

“The Blades?”

“I believe so.”

“Response to normal human emotion sound okay?” Ellie asked.

Bull wasn’t sure what she meant by that, but the Seeker squeezed the kid’s shoulders before releasing her hold on her, and Ellie walked past the dead soldiers, out the back of the cabin to the cliff side as the rest of her companions came to stand with the warriors gathered at the cabin’s front door.

“Seeker?” Varric questioned, his tones in warning like he wasn’t sure what she thought she was doing, letting the kid just walk off like that.

“Give her a moment Varric,” Cassandra said.

A scream, like rage and pain, just about as close to a roar as Bull could imagine coming from a Human that size, echoed out across the coast, loud, and long. It would have been impressive if it had come from anyone else.

Coming from Ellie, somehow it just made him…shit it made him…not sad. He wasn’t sad over this. Soldiers died. And she was just some kid.

She was just a kid.

A kid that, after ten solid seconds of screaming her frustration, walked back into the cabin, features tight with strain, fists clenched at her sides.

“Scout Harding had a list of soldiers. We should get their personal things back to their families when they’re notified. Will you help me later, getting everything to Cullun?” kid asked. He wasn’t sure who, exactly, she was just staring at the ground.

But Seeker answered, “Of course, Eleanor.”

“We should…” Ellie licked her lips, her voice hoarse as she looked up, spreading a look across her party, “I mean we can’t just leave them.”

Too slick to get the bodies down from here, they’d probably kill themselves trying, and the constant rain, it’d make digging graves hell.

“Can’t move or bury them boss,” Bull said. sounded weird calling someone the size of one of his legs ‘boss’ but Koslun’s entire ass, if he didn’t distance her somehow, he was pretty sure he was going to end up coddling her. Maybe because she was so much smaller than him—something about that made him think of her as actual imikari, Qunari grew very big, very fast, he’d seen toddlers bigger than her. Maybe that was a bit of an exaggeration but if it was…it was only a bit—a Qunari her age would be two, three, four times her size. She was too young to be dealing with shit like looking for missing soldiers and parceling out what to do with their bodies.

“Personal items, money, weapons. Let’s get it off them,” Ellie said, decisively. Orders, he could roll with that. “And then I don’t care who you lot pray to, or if you pray at all, we’re praying. If prayer isn’t your thing just have a moment of silence or whatever, bow your heads and close your eyes. We’re not just leaving them.”
They’d have to leave them in the end, but yeah there were some things that could be done. Everyone stepped up and helped as Ellie started them off, sweeping her hand across one of their fallen soldier’s faces to close his eyes before she removed a brass locket from around his neck, wedding ring, pins on his armor that denoted his rank and status in the Inquisition. No weapons it turned out. None of them had weapons, they’d probably been looted for them by the Blades. She pulled a handkerchief out of her pocket—a lot like one he’d seen Krem with when he returned from Haven—used it to wrap up the dead man’s belongings, keep it separate from the rest.

They all caught on, did their best to keep each soldier’s things separate so they could more easily be identified and divided up among their loved ones. When they were done, there were seven bundles for seven bodies, and with a glare that was obviously in warning of the Elf girl—that if she meant to steal even a copper from the collection Cassandra would see her regret it—the Seeker accepted the rucksack Sera handed her to put the bundles in to tote them back to camp, Ellie placed each carefully inside before pulling the drawstring shut and Sera slung the bag over her shoulders.

Ellie stood over the bodies, bowed her head, eyes closed, hands reaching out to either side of her. Cassandra took her marked hand, and Solas, the other, all of the Herald’s party joined hands and formed a circle around the fallen soldiers, Bull ended up between Blackwall and Sera.

“Many are those who wander in sin, despairing that they are lost forever,” an Andrasten prayer fell from the kid’s lips, out of the corner of his good eye he saw the Seeker squeeze her hand, then he snapped his eye shut in case the kid might see. “But the one who repents, who has faith unshaken by the darkness of the world, and boasts not, nor gloats over the misfortunes of the weak, but takes delight in the Maker's law and creations, they shall know the peace of the Maker's benediction. The Light shall lead them safely through the paths of this world, and into the next. For those who trust in the Maker, fire is their water. As the moth sees light and goes toward flame, they should see fire and go towards Light. The Veil holds no uncertainty for them, and they will know no fear of death, for the Maker shall be their beacon and their shield, their foundation and their sword.”

“Blessed be,” Cassandra said.

He thought that would be the end of her prayer, but the kid continued, in Dalish. Respectful, he supposed, since at least two…maybe three, it was hard to tell with some of the damage…of their fallen were Elves.

“Falons na melana sahlin, emma ir abelas, souver’inan isala hamin, vhenan him dor’felas, in uthenera na revas, vir sulahn’nehn, vir dirthera, vir samahl la numin, vir lath sa’vunin.”


Ellie sniffled where she stood, and it was a moment more spent in silence before she cleared her throat, and everyone looked up to see her no longer bowing her head, eyes open as she looked to each of her companions, assessing if they too, were done with their prayers.

“We can’t carry them down?” Ellie asked Bull then, for confirmation.

Oh shit she was looking at him like she thought he could lift anything. Hell, yeah he could hoist all of them onto his shoulders but that wouldn’t matter much if they sent him headlong down the bank. Maybe his horns would keep him from cracking his skull open.

But he’d be no good to her…er…dead. So.

Iron Bull shook his head and Blackwall seconded the sentiment, saying, “All the paths
down from here are steep and slick, my lady. And any grave we could dig for them would…well it’d scarcely be passable, probably end up washed away.”

Ellie nodded. “We’ll not leave them to rot,” she insisted. “Everyone out. Solas, with me.”

It was a few minutes more before Bull could smell burning, and Ellie and Solas emerged from the cabin, not bothering to close the door behind them. The bodies would burn, possibly the cabin, though the rain was enough, the wood of the cabin probably wouldn’t catch, rain like this would spare them a forest fire. It was a wonder the bodies caught flame.

The Herald of Andraste cared for everyone in her camp. Even her dead.

Everyone, even that Sera—a first since they’d met—was subdued as they made the journey back to their camp. Warden stayed close, walking before Ellie, braced to catch her should she slip and fall forward, he kept looking over his shoulder to make sure she was alright.

It was somehow raining even harder as they traversed the muddy slope. Bull was keeping close behind. There was a sign on this path, warned of rockfalls—sometimes the boulders overhead got too much give in the earth underfoot and came barreling down the hillside to strike unsuspecting passersby. He was in the best position to move the kid out of the way or, worst case scenario, shield her. Kid had enough on her plate just now, adding on a concussion wasn’t going to help anything.

As it was, it sounded like she was getting a cold or chest congestion or something. She was still sniffling but she hadn’t cried at all—screamed her head off and dealt with her shit, but she hadn’t shed a tear. Had the sniffles though, and she’d coughed a few (seven) times, made Seeker break their silence to quietly ask if Eleanor needed water.

Their pace was much slower than that they’d taken in search of their soldiers, it was almost awkward for Bull, he had to take such short steps to keep behind Ellie and the Seeker who was walking just about as close to beside the kid as she could with the narrow path. Cassandra had a hand raised in case Ellie needed it for balance or…well the kid seemed very affectionate, she may take the hand for comfort, and it was almost amusing that the Seeker would be open with that. But maybe it shouldn’t be. Watching the two, Cassandra reminded him of the Tamassrans.

Something caught his attention then—raspy, almost liquid-clogged breathing straining through someone’s chest.

“Kid?” Bull asked. She’d had a cold he thought but this…this sounded like the makings of that pneumonia shit that’d almost taken Krem out a few months after they met. She didn’t reply but her sluggish steps were beginning to slow further like she did intend on stopping to address him.

“She might not be feeling real chatty, Bull,” Varric ground out quietly from behind him.

Bull ignored that and brushed past Cassandra who gave a startled, half-outraged cry that had Blackwall stopping in his tracks hand on the hilt of his sword as he turned to see what had happened.

Bull had come to stand, well kneel, now on one knee before Ellie, oh fuck.
“Kid doesn’t sound right, been wheezing for the past twelve seconds,” Bull said, “Ellie?”

“A panic attack?” Varric whispered quietly, to Solas.

Panic attack? Oh, veshedan. Asala-taar. Soul sickness—where the mind thought it was still in battle while the body was safe from harm. Qunari got it left right and center in Seheron. Did… did the kid deal with things like that?

He’d followed her around on her job for all of two hours and she’d dealt with Venatori, Darkspawn, delicate negotiations with a foreign entity, kept her team of misfits balanced and focused, and not murdering each other (at least she seemed to play referee a lot between Sera and Solas, Varric and Blackwall), and then she’d seen the bodies of men she felt responsible for, realized they were lost, and she’d had to deal with that loss. It would be a shock to anyone.

But no, no he finally got her to look up at him—this wasn’t Asala-taar it was just… fuck he wasn’t sure. Sickness, physical, definitely physical. Her cheeks were flushed and features tight with strain, and though it was definitely cold out, sweat was beading along her forehead, and her eyes were sort of glazed over.

“I, um-” Ellie mumbled incoherently, the few words constricted like she didn’t have a lot of air to say them with, and Cassandra came around to stand at Ellie’s side in a flash—a precarious position since there wasn’t a whole lot of room on the path before there was a drop off. The narrow path kept the others—Varric, Sera, Solas—standing in a line behind the Herald, not sure if they should come closer or give everyone some room.

“Ellie-girl?” Blackwall asked.

“Seeker, her asthma!” Solas called out in panic, “She’s burning with fever, and her airways are constricting, she’ll lose the ability to draw in breath at all if we do not hurry.”

Asthma…some of the Viddathari he’d met before—usually Human, though the occasional Elf recruit, had complaints of the ailment, made their lungs weaker, saw them seriously sick.

Ellie laid a shaky hand on Iron Bull’s shoulder struggling to keep herself upright, her knees buckled.

“Eleanor!”

Cassandra looked like she meant to sweep the girl up and carry her the rest of the way but Bull beat her to it, having caught and kept her from falling, he scooped Ellie into one of his arms, her head resting on his shoulder, side pressed against his chest while her legs hung over his forearm. “I got her,” he said.

“We must get her to camp immediately,” Cassandra stressed.

They were moving at an even more urgent pace than before, then, Bull moved fast, his legs longer than the others as he rushed forward with Ellie held securely against him, Cassandra on his heels for the last stretch back to Camp where Seeker started shouting orders, telling Bull to get Ellie down and for one of the medically trained scouts to assist them. The Iron Bull sat, on the ground, his chest supporting Ellie’s back, an arm wrapped around her waist to keep her upright. Cassandra knelt at her side, had potion in hand and uncorked in an instant before handing it off to the medic who immediately had its contents in the kettle over the fire to boil. Solas made fire in the palms of his hands and cradled the bottom of the hanging pot in an effort to heat it more quickly before snatching it up and removing the lid, handing it to the scout that held the pot before the
Herald, using the lid to fan the steam directly toward’s Ellie’s nose and mouth.

“Breathe, Eleanor,” Cassandra commanded quietly.

What she did sounded more like choking than breathing, what little air she could take in rattled around in her lungs in a way that sounded painful to Bull. Cassandra took hold of Ellie’s unmarked hand, and Solas sat on Ellie and Bull’s other side—he removed the glove that covered her marked hand and held it firmly in his own, eyes closed and it clicked then—the Elf had some sort of magical connection to the girl, could monitor her somehow. Saarebas ways were often strange but if this preserved the Herald of Andraste’s life, Bull wasn’t about to turn his nose up at it.

Sera was pacing madly, and Varric had sunk down to sit by the fire, giving the others room to help Ellie but watching, like he thought if he looked hard enough he could have the same ability Solas did to know Ellie’s wellbeing.

Blackwall stood looking like he felt utterly useless. Like he wanted to do something but there was nothing to be done.

Or maybe something. Sera had her hand on his wrist then, that hand trembling a bit as she asked, “S’wrong with Inky?” she didn’t look at him as she asked that, her eyes were trained on those assisting the Herald.

“Asthma,” Blackwall replied dumbly.

“Yeah I heard Elfy. I got ears. What the friggin hell does that mean?”

“Not a hundred percent sure myself,” Blackwall admitted. “her lungs aren’t as strong as what would be normal, and her airways—”

“Constrict, that means like they choke themselves summthin messed up like that, right?”

“That’s a way of putting it I suppose,” Blackwall said. “Potion can be used to help clear them up—get rid of anything gunking up her lungs, and help her to breathe normally again.”

“Is...is it helping? Can you tell?”

It didn’t sound like any great miracle had occurred and the kid was gonna be up and at’em anytime soon but Blackwall said, “Solas would tell us if she were in peril—the potion seems to be helping.”

Sera growled at that. “Stupid, pointy-nosed, ugh,” she huffed and then, louder, “E- er—Solas, is potion doing shite for her?”

“It is helping her, if that is what you mean,” Solas said wryly, opening his eyes. “She’s breathing easier now, no longer on the brink of an attack,” he said to Sera, it was just about the most pleasant interaction the two had had since her introduction into their ranks. And then he turned his attention to Cassandra, “She has a cold, I believe the worsening of that, in culmination of stress triggered her asthma. We should get her into her tent, keep her warm and dry, and allow her to rest.”

Cassandra took Ellie, unconscious, from Bull’s lap, carrying her in her arms to the tent.

Sera descended on Solas then, plopping down directly in front of the male Elf.
“What can we do? Does she need anything? Herbs and all that pish make potion—do we need more? Oi! She’s cold right? Can you make some sort of stupid mage fire shite that’ll keep the tent warm? Or would extra blankets work? Do we have extra blankets? She can use my bed stuff…”

Shite shite shite shite shite shite shite.

No way, no way, no friggin’ way!

So them Blades of Hessarrian, real dick-heads right? They go and kill Inquisition soldiers, and there’s all this rain, and some kind of ass-ma or whatever. Inky’s sick and Beardy’s gonna fight some big ugly bloke that runs the Blades!

Oh. There’s a lot missing from that huh? Okay, ‘s like this see—Seeker got Inky settled in her tent, and Elfy’s got some sort of magical shite that tells him if she needs anything, like if she wakes up, or gets sicker or something weird and creepy but if it helped Inky…oh Maker, it just better help her! Or Elf boy was getting arrows in his dangle bags!

Anyway, they gathered around the fire and Elfy pulls some paper out of his pocket. Says it was something he saw in the cabin with their dead soldiers—these Blades, they wanted out. Or not out—they still wanted to be Blades, but they were hoping the Inquisition would come. Apparently, their boss was bad news, Bull said their whole operation seemed like a cock-up. So, those Blades they’d killed—the ones that killed the soldiers—they hadn’t wanted to fight the Inquisition, if anything they wanted to help, take get rid of the Breach, or at least stay out of the Inquisitions way while they handled it. but their boss didn’t like Inquisition coming ‘round, thought of it as them encroaching on his territory or some shite. So, they followed their orders, but they left a map to their Headquarters and some kind of note with rules or something, their company follows. If someone from the Inquisition came to the Blades base, wearing some sort of challenge medallion or something, they could square up against the Blades boss—kill him, and become the new leader of the Blades.

Ugh. After they went and murdered Inquisition soldiers, people with lives and families, that Inky cared about—after those arseholes went and made her sad! Made her sick!—Sera’d rather they just go down to that dumb fortress of theirs and set the lot on fire. See how well they liked having their people burn.

But that’d just make Inky sad—she’d get all forgive-y once she realized the Blades were ugh, some sort of victim in all this even if it was only a little bit. In Sera’s opinion, if those arseholes hadn’t wanted to fight the Inquisition, they should have taken care of their stupid boss themselves. Not blindly follow orders and ask the Inquisition to save their sorry hides.

But they talked about it—the group, but they decided it would be best to go fight the boss and claim the Blades as part of the Inquisition. Lives would be spared, and Beardy made a point that while yes, the Blades had done something terrible, the blame was with their boss, the man that lead them, gave them orders. So, he would go challenge the man and hopefully by the time Inky was feeling better they’d have good news for her. Revenge for their fallen soldiers, new grateful recruits for the Inquisition, and they took the moral high ground. She’d like all that pish.

But she wouldn’t be liking much of anything if she died. Which Sera was pretty freakin’
terrified she would! Because shite shite shite shite shite—Blackwall would need backup, so Seeker and Dwarfy were going…

And they were taking Solas with them! Solas!

Ugh! She never thought she’d actually want that egg-headed git hanging around but what the hell did they think they were doing taking him along and leaving her!

They were thinking he’s their only mage with Ellie down for the count but still—they were taking him and all the rest of the responsible-ish adults and leaving Sera!

Sera!

In charge of watching over a sicky Inky!

Shite!

She wasn’t even able to take care of herself! She should be taken from her own custody! Who thought it would be okay to add Inky to the equation?! She was just little! And she was so sick!

Solas said she was ‘stable’ whatever that meant. She was still pale, and she wouldn’t wake up—but she needed to rest anyway everyone was saying—and her breathing was all wheezy.

She wasn’t supposed to be wheezy! She was supposed to be Inky! Sera just wanted her better already, she didn’t know how to take care of someone! Didn’t like Ellie being sick, full-stop!

Oh, but they were leaving Bull behind too. But what the hell does a Qunari know about taking care of a sick Human girl?! He was staying for protection and cause he’s so warm. They couldn’t do much for the temperature in the tent—Seeker got her into some sleep clothes and got her wrapped up real good in all the blankets they could find—but it was still so cold. So they got Bull dried off and he was laying in the tent with Inky tucked up against him. She stopped shivering so.

She sat in the tent with Bull and Inky, curled up watching over the sick Human. Sera wanted to do something but there wasn’t anything to do, it was the worst. And she’d rather pace around outside—she really just wanted to tear ass through the forest, burn off the nervous energy bubbling around inside her guts—but if she did that she couldn’t see Inky. And she couldn’t not see her—letting the girl out of her sight right now just sort of set something panicky in Sera, like if she couldn’t see with her own eyes that the girl was still weakly, but steadily, breathing, still among the living, she’d…she’d stop being among the living.

Oh and that was dumb! What the hell could Sera do for her, huh? Seeker’d gone over all the potions shite but—oh.

The kettle they’d been using for potion—left sitting by Ellie as she slept while steam rose from it—it had stopped steaming a while after the others went to handle the Blades. And Lady Priss Pants, she’d told Sera all about the emergency potion, but she’d also shown her something Ellie’d done for some lady in the Hinterlands—when she’d been sick like this—so…Sera was pants at cooking but maybe she could do this.

She looked to Bull as she took up the kettle.

“Um. I’m…,” she cleared her throat quietly, she wasn’t used to this whispering crap but she didn’t want to wake Ellie, stupid as it was she wanted her to wake up already cuz it’d seem like she
was feeling better, but…ugh she needed to sleep to actually get better right? Really getting better was better than just seeming better. So, whispering, “I’m gonna get her more steam stuff. Just…just watch her and s-shout or something if something happens.”

“Got a war horn on my belt,” the Qunari rumbled out quietly. Drily. Oh har har.

Oh, she really wanted to yell! “I’m serious you great…” whispering! Shh! Inky needs to sleep, “ugh! I-if she…I want to help. If she needs something or something’s wrong—”

“I’ll call you. She’ll be fine.”

She friggin better be!

Oh shite. Wait. Ugh.

Sera stopped just outside the tent breath catching in her chest and for a second she wondered if that ass stuff was contagious. But no, no people could get breathless from being afraid and she’d just had a thought that scared the shite out of her. She’d be leaving Ellie alone with some great big Qunari guy they’d known all of two minutes.

She wasn’t the highest functioning adult, but she’d been good at protecting herself, her friends. Capital and lowercase F alike. In her book, Ellie qualified as both and…Sera’d seen enough of the world to know it wasn’t always the safest place for anyone—especially someone young, and pretty, and…well while she wasn’t interested in mixing bits with her, she’d certainly taken notice what Inky had going on under her fancy duds. And she was little and unconscious and…well Bull didn’t seem like a groady slag but lots of blokes seemed alright and turned out not to be.

So she waited a second, and listened close. There was some benefit to being elf-y. She found she could hear better than Humans. The simultaneously agonizing and reassuring rasping of Ellie’s breathing, and if she really paid close enough attention she could hear the thrum of her heartbeat—Bull’s business too but she didn’t care as much about that aside from the fact she could hear he hadn’t moved a muscle since she left. Anyway, she figured if he got up to anything funny in the few minutes she’d be blah, cooking or whatever, she’d hear and then she didn’t care how big and Qunari-y he was, she would ugh, she’d…well she’d kick his ass! Shoot him right in his good eye! And the danglers! And the nips! Teach him to wear a shirt!

She crouched by the fire and dumped out the very little sorta medicine, mostly water mix left in the bottom, out onto the ground before filling the pot with uh oh! Elf root potion! Kay, cool she could do this! Embrium blossoms was in the little potions station, so boom! All put together in the pot, it was hanging over the fire heating right up! Oh! Water! She’d nearly forgotten, cripes! She quickly dumped some in, her canteen was full anyway…

Inky’d filled it. Ugh! That made her eyes all itchy and that was just dumb! It was just stupid water! But Ellie was always doing stuff like that, it was like having a miniature mother or something. Making sure Sera’d had enough to eat or that she got sleep—in sleep clothes, Sera’d always just slept in her stuff! It was her stuff! But Ellie thought that wasn’t any good, and so, sleep clothes. She…oh shite. She hadn’t questioned where they came from—Ellie just said ‘sleep clothes’ and poof, a few days later, there was tunic and trousers for her. They didn’t feel like hand-me-downs, or seem like something borrowed from her Marehis, Sera was a head taller than most Elves*, and her sleep clothes fit well enough, too-big in a way that made them cozy.

Then she woke up one morning, and her day clothes weren’t uh, quite so hole-y anymore. She really didn’t think Solas or Cassandra were responsible so.
Ugh. Stupid. Sometimes it scared her, how nice Ellie was to her. People weren’t nice! Especially little bitchy teen age girls! Sera knew! Cuz she was one! Or had been one, very recently! They were only nice if they wanted something or wanted to screw you over. Usually both.

The closest thing to bitchy she’d seen from Ellie was when she told Solas off for using Barrier on Sera when she’d already said she didn’t want their creepy magic shite touching her! and that’d been a bitchin’ sort of bitchy so.

“Barrier is perfectly harmless,” baldy-boy’d insisted all snooty from his place across the fire from Ellie. Bleh! Bleh him, not Inky, cause she was sayin’,

“So?! She said no magic! No means no!”

“I understand that, Ellie—”

“If you understood, you wouldn’t have cast!” Ohh, she sounded pissed.

“Her reticence on the matter is silly.”

“Uh-huh. Solas, you trust me right?” Ellie asked him.

That seemed to throw him off his stride. “Of course, Ellie. Implicitly.”

“Cool, so let’s say, next time we’re under attack, I borrow Cassadnra’s sword—Cassandra, I can borrow your sword yeah?”

Seeker’d been writing her whatever-reports for Leliana. “You’ve need of it, Eleanor?” she asked absently, like she’d not quite been paying attention to their chatter.

“Hypo-something-clly,” Inky said.

“Hypothetically?” Varric offered. Wordy one, him.

“Mwah!” Ellie plopped a little kiss to Dwarfy’s cheek. “Yes! Hypothetically!”

“Then certainly,” Cassandra said, returning to her writing.

“So,” Ellie said, looking to Solas across the fire. “You trust me. I’m borrowing Cassandra’s sword. You know, there is so much vital stuff in our throats? Like an artery, windpipe—I mean gosh, our necks connect our heads to our bodies, so its an important thing to keep protected!”

“It is,” Solas agreed though he sounded a bit confused. Sera was totally lost but Ellie talked like she was getting somewhere with this. Plus, it was throwing Solas for a loop too so, ha!

“So you wouldn’t mind—seeing as you trust me and all—if I held it up—edges not pointed at you or anything, just the blunt length of it shielding your throat!”

“Eleanor you could easily—”

“I could easily hurt you. Just like I can easily hurt Sera. Not with Barrier but here’s the thing. Your worries about a sword at your throat is this—you might trust me, but things happen. You can’t know implicitly that I won’t accidentally cut you, and when I draw the sword on you, you can’t be a hundred percent sure I’m bringing the sword to your throat to shield it, or to hurt you. is it your reflex to see a sword coming at your throat and just let it come?”

“Certainly not,” Solas said quietly.
“It’s the same with Sera. And she’s new. She’s got little reason to trust us, and even if she did—she’s not a mage, hasn’t been around a lot of magic, especially the friendly kind! She has no way of knowing what we’re casting when we cast, she can’t trust that the magic we’re lobbing her way is barrier or a fireball until it’s too late to do anything about it. She just can’t be certain, so, no magic! Barrier or otherwise!” and then, “And you can be certain. If you ever cast on Sera against her will again, I’ll be casting fireballs—to burn all your clothes!—and you’ll be hoofin’ it back to Haven starkers. To work as a team, we’ve got to have respect for each other. If you can’t work as a team, you can’t be part of the team!”

That shut Elfy right up, and Sera hadn’t felt the creepy crawl of that barrier crap since!

Oh! Oh oh! There was steam shooting up from the spout now! Hell yeah! She was in business!

“Innnkyyy! Oh!” she caught herself calling, and whispered, “shite!” Sleeping! She whisked the kettle up and returned to the tent, sitting by the entrance and reaching to set the pot by Bull, popping the lid off so the steam could uh steam or whatever. “All done. Inky’s okay?”

“She’s hangin’ in there,” Bull said.

A scout popped their head in—oh the lady that helped when they came back with Inky so sick—and said, “Excuse me, the Lady Herald should take these,” she held up two glass bottles. Huh. There was one that didn’t look like any of the ones Inky took—it was red. Ellie took lots of potion…it’d sort of worried Sera when they first started heading for the Storm Coast, but she didn’t know shite about medicine, she figured it was like nutrition stuff or something. There was a yellow one she took every morning, and then the blue stuff, the white stuff, oh! The scout was holding the big purply one that helped Inky sleep. “Cold medicine,” the scout said shaking the red bottle, “and Lady Cassandra entrusted me with Lady Eleanor’s potions. I’ve brought her sleeping draught.”

Bull shifted so he could sit up a bit, Maker he was big, and he kept Ellie undisturbed, still tucked against his chest, propped up so she could take her potion.

Or so he could take her potion sort of. The scout placed the glasses in the Qunari’s hand, and he unstopped the red one first, sniffed it and touched the part of the cork that was wet with potion to his tongue before he shifted Inky so her head was tilted back in the crook of his elbow, and made a soft rumbling sound in his chest, it almost sounded like cooing but Qunari-y Sera supposed, like it was meant to soothe and stir her a bit before he put the potion to her lips and carefully tipped it back to steadily slip down the sleeping girl’s throat.

He did the same with the sleeping potion—sniff, taste test, he mumbled something about vanilla being weird.

“Inky’s sleepy potion, she told me it tastes like vanilla,” Sera said. She remembered, from when they’d had pudding. She wondered if Inky could have pudding while she was sick. Oh. But that might hurt her tummy. Too much sugar or something, didn’t sick people need…dunno. Huh. Soup! Could Sera make her soup? Ellie couldn’t eat it while she was asleep though. But she’d done alright making that steamy stuff, so. As soon as Inky was awake Sera’d make her soup! Erm, maybe. Might just make her sick.

Bull seemed to accept the vanilla thing checked out and started giving the potion to Ellie. Why was he so—oh! They didn’t know this scout from a salad fork—they were Inquisition but that didn’t mean they weren’t capable of being some sort of evil super secret agent or just an in general bad person or something, out to hurt the ‘Herald’. Duh. He was checking to make sure the potion
was alright that it wasn’t poisoned. Oh! Bull could taste test Sera’s attempts at soup! Make sure the effort didn’t make Inky sick all over again.

The Scout was getting ready to leave. Oh!

“Thanks for uh, bringing potion and stuff,” Sera whispered. Blah, she wasn’t usually a thanky person. But Inky couldn’t do it, and she would if she were awake. She’d have thanked them all to the Breach and back for helping her.

Oh. “Hey Bull. Thanks. For uh,” when Ellie did this she was always good at making sure you knew what she was grateful for. Maker she was just sweet. “you know. Realizing Inky needed help and getting her to camp so fast and checking her potions and and…” what would she thank him for? Ah! “And for keeping her warm!” oh he was gonna get a cheek kiss for that!

“Just doin’ my job. If you’re cold you can get in on this—plenty of body heat to go around. You can watch the kid like a hawk sitting right beside her too.”

Huh. She wasn’t sure if that was some kind of pick up line or something, but he hadn’t said it weird or nothing. And Andraste’s tits yeah, it was still kind of cold. And sitting next to Inky didn’t sound bad.

So Sera scooted to sit right by Bull. Oh. Frick! Qunari were warm! She needed to get her one. Maybe Bull had a sister?

Bull shifted a bit, to pull a journal out of the bag of his pish he’d lugged up from wherever his Chargers camp was. He’d slung it into a corner when he came to play heater for Inky.

Speaking of ink, he rested the journal on the thigh Ellie’s legs weren’t hanging over. Oh no ink, he had a—oh shite, not laughing hurt but she was so not about to wake Ellie over…he had a big pencil!

Ugh. Too rich. She was totally telling Inky all about it. It was just such a good one!

Bull started scribbling away then and that, and the rain and ugh it was so warm! And…and Inky was breathing, two short rasps in, one out, and nothing needed arrows put in it at the moment so…

So Sera fell asleep, head leaning against Bull’s shoulder.

Chapter End Notes

Dalish Used:
New Dalish in this chapter resides in the Eulogy, which is a canon, common Dalish Eulogy:

falon na melana sahlin, emma ir abelas, souver'inan isala hamin, vhenan him dor'felas n uthenera na revas, vir sulahn'nehn, vir dirthera, vir samahl la numin, vir lath sa'vunin

friends your time is come now I am filled with sorrow weary eyes need resting heart has become grey and slow
in waking sleep is freedom we sing, rejoice, we tell the tale, we laugh and cry, we love one more day
Qunlat Used in this Chapter:
Imekari=child, the Qunari equivalent of da'len
Serabaas= mage
Vashedan= crap or shit, a common profanity
Tamassrans=priestesses who raise all children under the Qun, and educated new conversions to follow the Qun
Talan=Truth
Asala-taar= "soul sickness", Qunari's word for PTSD. It is an epidemic in Seheron, where statistically two soldiers contract it for every one casualty. Sufferers are usually removed from combat and reassigned among the priesthood and workers.
Viddathari= converts to the Qun, non-Qunari.
* Notes:
*So, when you speak to Iron Bull for the first time, he says he got his mission to infiltrate the Inquisition from Ben-Hessrath, however when passing through the Fade with Iron Bull in your party in game during Here Lies the Abyss, Bull grumbles about how it was Krem's idea they fight for the Inquisition--or at least it sounds that way?
All he says are quotes of Krem saying the Inquisition would give them a good fight for a good cause, so I'm interpreting that as, Bull got his orders from Ben-Hessrath was like "eh okay" and Krem was like "yeah, that'll be good fights for a good cause" and Bull in all his 'I must constantly troll my son' wisdom, sends Krem to Haven with the contract, since he thinks its such a good idea.
*Tevinter Weather=so, in game as you travel around, especially with Dorian, he complains a lot about the weather, because it's so much colder in the south he says. Throughout DA, there are multiple indications that Tevinter doesn't really do snow--it just doesn't get cold enough there.
*Laetan=it's like the first step up from being a free, non-mage in Tevinter society. You have zero connection to the Old Gods, but you've got magic, so you're 'ight. But being an Altus is better.
*Altus=Dorian is an Altus. This is someone who is a mage with powerful bloodline connections to the Old Gods--it's the bees knees, the ultimate ultimate of what you can be in Tevinter Society.
*Hasmal=a town on the Tevinter-Free Marches border. In canon, it is a refugee city full of mostly escaped slaves from Tevinter. Considering that Krem was fleeing Tevinter Authorities, this is likely where he was heading when he came across a crazy Qunari willing to sacrifice his eye for a total stranger in need of some help kicking Vint ass.
*Chantry Father=One of the major points of division between Tevinter and the rest of Andrasten-centric countries, is that in Tevinter, men are just as powerful in the Chantry as women. It is the only place known in canon that allows men to be anything higher than a cleric or brother, and hold the position of Divine or of a Father (equal to a Mother role outside Tevinter). Outside Tevinter, the Divine is always female, and there are no Revered Father's, only Revered Mother's.
*Trade Language=okay so, I'm decently sure I've called the language everyone speaks in-game 'the Common Language'. In actuality, in game it's called Trade Language, and guess what? It was invented by Dwarfs! In order to create trade with the rest of the world.
*Soporati=non mage, free citizens of Tevinter. Lowest social class one can be, and not be a slave.
*Koslun= the Prophet Koslun wrote the code the Qun is based on. He's been dead for Sever hence the phrase "I don't know you/them from Koslun".
*In Sera's game specs, the designers built her specifically to be a head taller than all other Elves in game. Why? Dunno. But it was a little detail I saw in her background...
and decided to plop in here.

Thanks so much for reading! Next Chapter EDA: 8/15/18 the second half of their adventures in the Storm Coast
Chapter Summary

The remainder of their time on the Storm Coast, getting Sicky Inky back into fighting shape, facing off with dragonlings, bears, and demons (literal and figurative). Victories are had, lies are revealed, and Ellie learns how to play tag.

Chapter Notes

Thanks for reading, and a to everyone who has left kudos and comments, I appreciate it!

Also. Another of my bigger motives for this fic is an exploration of different ways Blackwall's redemption arch can play out. Um. Have fun!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Icy rage settled a heavy weight in Blackwall’s stomach. The medallion—Mercy’s Crest, the instructions left for them by the now fallen Blades—was hanging around his neck. Cassandra and Sera had cobbled it together, Sera slipped down the bank to collect Serpent Stone—more like assaulting the stuff, blowing off steam she’d screamed and shouted, smashing it with the pick-axe kept in camp for such purposes, and then with her fists it sounded and looked like when she returned, bloodied hands clutching large chunks of precious stone.

Cassandra quietly commended the girl for her efforts before, in a moment of uncharacteristic…well outright compassion for the Elf girl that often rubbed her the wrong way, the Seeker doused a handkerchief in Elf Root tonic, and took a hold of Sera’s hands, gently brushing it over the broken flesh of her knuckles as she asked if Sera had any ideas on how best to fashion the medallion. The instructions were rather strange, Serpent Stone hanging from a chain of deepstalker hide. Sera volunteered to collect hide, but there was already some in their stores. Too bad, she’d said. But she’d made ‘crap like this’ before, her words, and in the end, the bizarre looking necklace with an unfitting name was crafted.

Blackwall came to a stop, surveying the area below for the best way to go about getting down to the damn fortress for the Blades of Hessarian. Maker, the Coast was unrelenting—like it was set up with the intent of killing those who dared traverse its paths, with the rock slides and slick slopes, high rises that lead to steep, plummeting drops.

Solas, Varric, and Cassandra joined him near the cliff that overlooked the Blades Fortress.

The Elf Apostate went very pale then, taking a sharp intake of startled breath as he jerked forward, nearly pitching himself over the edge of the cliff—he would have fallen if not for Blackwall and Varric’s hands shooting out to assist him, Blackwall’s hand on Solas’s shoulder pulling him back away from the cliff’s edge while Varric’s hands went under the Elf’s opposite elbow to support him, keep him standing upright.
“Shit, Chuckles, you hit or somethin’?” Varric asked, alarmed. Solas was practically translucent, he’d gone so very white.

“E-Ellie,” Solas breathed, eyes wide with shock, his expression crumbled and thickly accented, ancient-sounding Dalish tumbled past his lips, deep and haggard and broken as he staggered back.

Blackwall’s heart actually stopped for a full second, still and unbeating in his chest before making three harsh, fast pumps to make up for it. Oh, oh Maker no. Please no.

Dread filled him out matching the absolute horror he’d felt when Bull called their attention to the girl’s distress, the blood chilling fear when Solas announced she was losing the ability to breathe, he’d been terrified by the idea that they couldn’t possibly move quick enough to save her. She’d been pale and feverish, and she’d shivered fiercely, practically seizing from the chill when she was out of Bull’s hold. She’d been so cold, helpless like Liddy.

No. Not like Liddy, please…

“Solas, you will explain this instant!” Cassandra demanded in panic-ridden, wet-sounding tones her expression fierce even as tears welled up thickly in her eyes. Her hands went to his shoulders and she shook the Elf, fiercely, sort of snapping the man out of his rambling, he and fell onto his bottom and then—

Solas half sobbed and something like relief poured over his features as he held up a hand like he meant to stop someone from attacking him as he closed his eyes. At this point yes, Cassandra, even Blackwall was inclined to start throwing punches if the man didn’t calm himself and put words they could understand to his panic, his sudden lamenting turned to relief.

“My apologies, Seeker, everyone,” he heaved a deep breath, “Ellie is fine. Resting, alive.”

“Oh, praise Andraste most high,” Cassandra whimpered out as she went to her knees, hand pressed over her heart as tears slipped unbidden from her eyes, the Seeker bowing her head to hide the fact, or perhaps the whiplash of fear to overwhelming relief had driven her to take a moment for prayer.

“Maker,” Blackwall breathed rubbing his forehead trying to banish the pound of a headache building in the front of his brain. He wasn’t sure if he would be eternally grateful for the Elf man’s abilities to monitor Ellie or if he would throttle him for worrying them so. It wasn’t his fault, the very fact he could do such a thing at all was miraculous, but Maker—damn it! he was too old for such a scare.

“What the hell was that, Chuckles?” Varric ground out, fists clenched and shaking.

“It would appear my connection to the Herald has its limits. I must have stepped out of range—I felt all connection to Ellie cut off abruptly, it is not something I’ve had any experience with, it is was rather startling, again I apologize. One moment I could feel her peace and warmth as she slept, the ache of her illness, the ragged pull of breath in her lungs and then suddenly nothing. Not the way it feels when I pull away from the connection. What I felt was a vast emptiness in my connection to her, as she was no longer in range to fill the void. My magic immediately interpreted this to mean she had been lost.”

“Bullshit,” Varric snapped. “You told us all about your Spirit friends hundreds, thousands of miles away, we can’t be three miles out from our camp!”
“I do not understand it myself, except the deduction that perhaps it is because my other friends being Spirits with no physical manifestation in our world, allows me to sense them where ever they are through the Fade. Ellie is not of the Fade, it was foolhardy for me to assume my connection to her would work exactly the same.”

“You had no reason to assume otherwise, you have not been separated by such distance since…well, you’ve never been so far from one another since meeting upon her waking to face the Breach,” Cassandra offered as she hastily wiped the wet from her cheeks.

None of them had. When they weren’t in the field together they were always with the girl in Haven. It felt almost strange, to Blackwall, the realization they had all become such a constant in each other’s lives since the Hinterlands.

It had been a sort of misery, those few days in Haven when War Room meetings kept them from their routine, they’d seen little of each other, and almost nothing of Ellie. There had been one evening, when Varric rather surprisingly came down from his tent, to the stables to invite Blackwall along to the Tavern for drinks. It had been strange and almost awkward, they sat drinking in silence until eventually they called it a night, on their way back to their respective homes in Haven, they’d seen Ellie wearily walking alongside Marehis, making her way to her cabin. It was the most they’d seen of her since they set foot back in Haven after Val Royeaux, poor girl looked exhausted but when she caught sight of them and broke out into a brilliant smile, so cheery it’d sent a warmth to his chest greater than that which Flissa’s ale had left behind.

It’d been a troublesome thing not to see her for those few days. To not see her ever again? Varric must have been feeling the same way because he was voicing the question just about to break on Blackwall’s lips.

“Is she okay?” Varric ground out, though he was shifting a bit on his feet and Blackwall half-expected the Dwarf to turn tail and bolt for their camp to see Ellie was alive and well with his own two eyes.

Solas actually closed his eyes a moment to more fully focus on his reinstated connection to Ellie and then, “Actually, she’s feeling markedly better, I believe potion has been brought to bear and is finally kicking in. She’s sleeping even more peacefully now. If I focus hard enough I believe…” his lips tugged upward almost involuntarily, and he opened his eyes, blinking a few times, and cleared his throat. “My panic spiked across our connection when it was reestablished, I’ve assured her we are alright, but it startled her, and I do believe The Iron Bull may well be humming to comfort her.”

Varric snorted. “Shit, I’d give my right eye to hear that.”

Cassandra made a disgusted grunt at his jest, and rose to her feet, offering her hand to Solas, helping the man up.

“Are you recovered now Solas? That was quite the shock,” Cassandra said.

“It’s certainly not an experience I would care to recreate. Though it was truly beneficial to learn such a thing,” Solas said, “If this had occurred while I were in Haven and she on the road elsewhere, I may not have been able to reinstate the connection with proximity and believed her truly lost.”

Maker, news of a fallen Herald would have spread like wildfire.
Ellie’s triumphant return would likely only redouble her renown. Of course, it had been bad enough the Inquisition had labeled her ‘terrorist’ and then ‘savior’, proclaiming her dead and then not dead would have called the Inquisition’s competence into question.

“Let’s go beat the hell out of that Blades bastard for putting us through all this shit!” Varric declared.

“Yes, let’s. Blackwall,” Cassandra said, gesturing forward. “By your leave.”

He envied The Iron Bull. Right now, he wouldn’t say no to a nap in the security of their camp, the ability to be certain Ellie was alright a constant. The trepidation that they would be leaving the range of Solas’s ability to monitor her was palpable throughout the adults as they made their way down the slope to the fortress, Solas looked back over his shoulder the moment he stepped out of range looking albeit tempted to find some valid way to wait within range of his connection while the others went on ahead.

“Someone’s come to challenge,” one of the Blades guarding the gate said, in tones that sounded like rekindled hope.

“The others have failed,” the other said dully, like…Maker like the very life had been drained from them.

Oh, there was no love lost between these people and their leader. Truly, they longed for someone to come and take him out.

And then it became very plain why none of these Blades dared to step up and done the job themselves. The man waiting for them was as tall as Bull, and in a moment of uncertainty he almost wished he’d switched places with the Qunari man.

But no. No, this was almost fate. This was somehow meant to be.

Blackwall stood and stared into the face of a man…the man he had been, would still be if he’d chosen differently. He saw a reflection of himself. Thom Rainier alive and well, having held no remorse for his grievances, making a living off the suffering of others. Leading men astray to lead dishonorable lives, cutting short the lives of those far more deserving than he, and relishing in the raw, unregistered power he held over those far weaker than him.

“You come to challenge me?” the Blade’s leader asked in haughty tones.

“You killed Inquisition soldiers, we cannot let this stand. I’ve come to represent the Inquisition,” Blackwall announced, “and Eleanor, the Herald of Andraste.”

The man merely laughed, pulling his weapon from his back. “You want justice?” he mocked. “Claim it.”

He would. It didn’t matter how big this man thought he was. He was going down. He’d made his choices and now he would die for them.

Hessarian mabari hounds descended on them at their master’s command, and Blackwall felt the wash of Solas’s magic—swift, sure, secure—glide over him in the split second he had to draw his sword up to block the downward strike of the Blade’s leader.

A battle cry tore from Blackwall’s throat as he pushed back against the beast of a man, his blade ringing and vibrating with the force of untrapping his blade from beneath his opponent’s axe, a split second gave him the chance to slash up against the exposed armor of the man’s torso, cutting
through the thick quilted material his blade coming away, blessedly bloody.

It wasn’t enough to stop the man’s advances, to cut him down, but getting in the initial blow did work in Blackwall’s favor, the man was slumping, trying to shield his injury as he rallied against the Warden. Solas’s barrier broke down and that big bastard got a hit in on Blackwall’s blade arm before…

Barrier flashed across his body again, but it wasn’t practiced and certain like Solas’s or the bubbly blanket of security Ellie could provide. It felt like desperation and the sudden impulse to protect.

Whoever cast upon him, Maker bless them, he redoubled his efforts under the security Barrier provided him and—

Oh. Maker. He was certainly glad Ellie was not present to see this. He’d struck against the Hessarian’s leader…former leader…intending to slice his throat and had managed to lob the man’s head off entirely.

Varric gave a low whistle as he holstered Bianca.

“Well done,” Cassandra commended him looking for all the world she wanted to spit at the dead man’s face for good measure but thought better of it.

Ellie certainly wouldn’t approve of such a spiteful action, deserved though it may be. Maker that girl had them all wrapped around her Fadelit fingers.

“Ser. The Blades of Hessarrian are at your service,” a voice had Blackwall turning to see a younger man in Blade armor addressing him with a bow.

Blackwall sheathed his sword. “By the mercy of Andraste’s Herald, you’re delivered from your former leader, and you will serve the Inquisition.”

“We will be your eyes on the coast,” the Blade vowed.

“We shall get a proper contract written up, you’ll make your reports to Inquisition Commander Cullen Rutherford,” Cassandra said. The young man nodded and led the Seeker to the cover of a cabin to see to just that, Varric trailed after them, either to assist with negotiations or… well it almost seemed like the Dwarf was prepared to back Cassandra up if these Blades did not hold true to their code.

Blackwall took in the sight of the Blades gathering in the midst of their fortress, trying to discern just who had come to his aid—cast Barrier on him and given him the edge he’d needed to win. But not a one of them had a staff on their person, not from what he could see.

A staff did catch his eye then, on the back of a young Elf man in Inquisition uniform. The four of them had come alone hadn’t they? All their soldiers and scouts were to stay at camp and guard the Herald, at most they could patrol the surrounding are for enemies—

There hadn’t been any mages among their numbers in the camp, save Solas and Ellie, not many Mages had joined their cause. But…he’d taken the Lyrium supply off the body of one of their fallen soldiers slain by the Blades, himself.

Oh. Maker.

The Inquisition Mage raised a hand to his temple to salute him and then he vanished.
Cassandra had experienced a brief period of her life where she had been prone to panic attacks, for a time after Antony’s death, when she’d found herself alone without the brother who had always guided her, her only true source of friendship, of family. For a stance of nearly a year after his passing, if she were near flames that grew too hot, or found herself engulfed in total darkness, her mind threw her back to that night where the forest burned, and Blood Mages slayed her brother before her very eyes.

Her Seeker training had done a great deal to deliver her from that life, grounded her so she could instill herself with the cool calm required of her. but still, she felt the strain in her chest as lingering panic tried to hold her breath hostage, she had to focus on her breathing the entire way back to their infiltration camp. It was not until she pulled back the opening to the tent, and laid eyes on Eleanor, chest rising and falling, the sound of the effort it took for the girl to breathe that indicated she was still among the living reaching Cassandra’s ears, that the Seeker found herself able to once again fully ground herself in her well-trained sense of peace. With a sigh of relief, she knelt in the tent entryway, just outside so she did not track mud or rain into the tent proper.

The Iron Bull was sitting up, a closed journal with pieces of parchment laying on top sitting atop one thigh, Eleanor’s legs hanging over the other while she slept propped up against his chest. Sera was sitting awake and alert, holding Eleanor’s Marked hand in her own, rubbing circles on the back of it with her thumb. It was surprising—Sera abhorred all things magical, and while she had a certain appreciation for the fact that the Mark was supposed to be able to close the Rifts and seal the Breach, it did frighten her. Eleanor was always careful that if she did offer a hand to Sera for any reason, it was always her unmarked hand. But Cassandra supposed the Elf girl had merely taken hold of the closest most hand to her…still it was an act of kindness Cassandra found herself grateful for, that Sera did not let her fear and prejudice keep her from doing something she thought might comfort Eleanor.

“Job done?” The Iron Bull asked quietly.

Cassandra nodded. “How is she?”

“She stirred about an hour ago, but potions helped her sleep. Lungs are clear of fluid now, her heartbeats steadier, stronger,” the Qunari said.

“Whatcha do about those Blade aresholes?” Sera whispered.

Cassandra granted her a half smile at that. “The Blades will work for us now, I’m just about to send their contract out to Cullen.”

Sera nodded, though she grimaced as if she’d have preferred they’d gone against their plan of action and killed the Blades. It was clear that was her opinion on the matter when they’d discussed it as a group, it was a sentiment Cassandra felt as well but…the way things had played out was for the best. Most especially since it was what would most hearten Eleanor when she woke.

“Mind sending this for me?” Bull asked, picking up the parchment in his lap and holding it out to Cassandra. “It isn’t a report, but you’re free to read it to verify. Just touching base with my guys.”
Cassandra nodded. She considered folding it up and merely reading it once she was out of sight of the Qunari, but he’d already proven just how good his hearing was. There was no point in feigning trust in this regard, so she scanned the letter first before nodding again and leaving them to get it into the claws of a messenger bird. It was indeed a letter—to Cremisius, specifically, detailing that they may be delayed in the Storm Coast for longer than expected, since the entire purpose for Inquisition presence on the Coast was to seal the Rifts, but their designated Rift Sealer was down for the count. He informed the man that Eleanor was ill, terming her as Cremisius’s ‘little girlfriend’. Cassandra supposed the letter was fine to send through, she did not necessarily want word to spread widely of Eleanor’s illness, but she was curious to see just what sort of response it might illicit in the Tevinter man.

Days passed, and their party kept busy—they all switched off in taking watch and care over Eleanor. With the tent only able to fit Cassandra laying along the entrance, Sera along the side and Eleanor curled up atop Iron Bull, though her temperature did regulate, and she could be kept warm without the Qunari’s constant assistance, that still left Blackwall, Varric and Solas incapable of having eyes on the Herald. It was unsuitable to have the tent opening every few minutes letting in the cold, so they could check on Eleanor.

They’d been taking a meal together, huddled around the campfire when Varric ground out that if they couldn’t all fit in ‘Tumble’s’ tent they needed a bigger one ‘damnit!’.

It had taken all of two seconds for Cassandra to agree, they should do just that.

It took a great measure of patience and Cassandra and Blackwall’s passable ability to sew, they were able to conjoin tents, Sera whisper-chanting “Mega-tent! Mega-tent! Mega-tent!” to cheerlead them on as they worked to make lodging large enough for their party to sleep in all at once, the entire scene, and the fact they felt compelled to do so, was very amusing to the Iron Bull. They were lunatics, the lot of them, but it was worth it.

Now Eleanor was under constant watch always slumbering tucked up against one or more members of her party, stirring only slightly to be given potion or broth. Sera tried her hand at preparing the broth, actually, and she surprisingly looked to Solas for guidance on the matter because,

“You make potions and whatnot,” she said. He also made a good portion of their meals on the road but apparently Sera did not take that into consideration. But perhaps it was the way the girl thought—Eleanor was sick, potion would make her better, and so would sustenance provided by broth, so she classed them in the same category of ‘medicine’. Oh. Ugh. It hurt Cassandra’s brain, being so readily able to fathom out the innerworkings of the Elf girl’s thought process. “And you got that magic shite right? You’ll be able to tell if Inky don’t like it. And maybe Bull should play taste tester again yeah?”

That had certainly been heartening information, that the Iron Bull had been so very diligent in his care of Eleanor. He brushed it off—he could down the whole of a draught tainted to harm Eleanor, anything meant to take out someone her size would pass through like mild indigestion, and worst case scenario he was apparently diligent in mithridatism* and was immune to most common poisons.

Daylight hours led Blackwall, Solas, Iron Bull, and Varric, along with a few volunteers from their Inquisition soldiers to set about finding and sealing off tunnels Darkspawn had been using to escape from the underground. When they returned, they made certain they were all clean and free of Blight contamination, they gathered around Eleanor who dozed in a state of half-consciousness and Blackwall recounted their days adventures in a manner that utterly delighted

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* Mithridatism: The practice of using a poison to make a person immune to future poisonings.
Varric—the Warden sounded like he was telling a bedtime story, assuring Eleanor that all the Darkspawn were sealed away, but he did little more than touch on that subject. He opted instead to describe the caves and beaches and cliffs of the Storm Coast, tell her about the families of Nugs and Fennecs that lived about these parts. Though later he did recount to Cassandra that they’d seen a Dragon and a giant of all things, battling it out on the shore. But the Dragon had lost interest and hadn’t been sighted again, and the giant had been taken out by the men backed by Inquisition soldiers. She was grateful he hadn’t mentioned such to Eleanor, if she remembered any of his tales, it would certainly be that one, and Cassandra was still resolute in her conviction Eleanor was by no means to ever face off with a dragon. It took everything in her to allow the girl to remain on the Storm Coast—something inside screamed, longing to take the girl back to Haven and lock her away from Dragons and Darkspawn and sickness for time immemorial.

Solas’s letters to and from Marehis in those days multiplied like Nugs. Cassandra had even received correspondence from the Elf woman, asking for her take on Eleanor’s care and wellbeing, saying she knew and trusted Solas’s insight but she wanted Cassandra’s point of view. It was the closest thing to a personal letter Cassandra had received in years, while it still pertained to work it was not obligatory like reports. Cassandra took care to respond quickly, hoping she could reassure the Elf woman. She shuddered to think how she would feel, herself, were roles reversed—if she were hundreds of miles away incapable of returning to Eleanor’s side and receiving word that she was so very sick. As it was, with Bull no longer constantly acting as a personal heater, Cassandra found she was most at peace when she had Eleanor resting tucked up against her, being able to feel the thrum of her heartbeat, her breathing, be able to monitor her fever herself.

It had been petrifying when in the dead of night, Bull, Sera, and Solas shot up from their bedrolls, the fast movement waking Cassandra just a millisecond before Eleanor began choking, her body thrashing uncontrollably. Everyone was up and awake then, Sera letting out a horrified, aggravated scream as she fled the tent to be out of the way and wait for the others to assist Eleanor. Solas attempted to use the same respiratory magic he’d used to get Eleanor breathing again after their attempt on the Breach for all of a second, but her magic was endeavoring to do something on its own that conflicted with that. Bull throwing the girl over his shoulder to hang over it upside down and reaching back with a great hand to pound on her back.

The Qunari hadn’t flinched or hesitated for even a moment when Eleanor emptied her stomach and her magic expelled liquid from her lungs, bile and phlegm, and the mucus-ridden fluid that had choked her airways—thick, awful, concerningly blood-flecked stuff. She retched and coughed until there was a horrible, foul smelling trail of gunk down the Iron Bull’s back, and a puddle in the middle of their tent. He kept her like that, gently patting her back until they were certain she was done, and then he carefully pulled her forward, cradling her against his chest, wiping the corners of her mouth off and Varric got to bear witness as humming rumbled through the Qunari’s chest, the girl fell lax, utterly exhausted despite the fact she’d been sleeping for all of two entire days at that point. It had been daunting, cleaning everything up, and the Iron Bull actually went and threw himself into the sea to rid himself of the grime and stench, but they had everything back to rights shortly.

When he returned, Cassandra thanked him for his quick thinking, but he shrugged it off—he’d known what to do, it wasn’t something he hadn’t done before, apparently one of his Chargers had dealt with a similar ailment and needed such assistance, sans magic. She was grateful all the same as she laid with Eleanor sleeping against her again.

When Sera returned from her run she demanded Solas use his ‘magic shite’ to dry her off before she dove to lay on Eleanor’s other side, holding the girl tight as they slept.

The following morning, there was a response to Bull from Cremisius Aclassi. If Eleanor did
not decide to eventually kiss the Tevinter man, Cassandra may well do so herself. Sweet man. He not only sent a detailed report on how the Bull’s Chargers were faring on their journey to Haven, most importantly he’d sent along a small squat jar from his potions stores. Something ‘Ellie’ had given him when he’d been unwell he said, it was a salve that would prevent such chest congestion from occurring again. He’d even included instructions and made a point that Bull was by no means to apply the salve himself unless Eleanor was somehow comfortable with it. It would require unbuttoning her sleep top a bit to rub the concoction into her chest. Cassandra took up the task herself and told Bull to send along her thanks—Maker, they hadn’t such a salve on hand but Cassandra would write Adan, ask that he see to it that they would from now on, it improved Eleanor’s condition greatly and the Seeker found she was able to rest easier that evening knowing Eleanor was able to breathe.

It had been nearly four days when they sat around the campfire, quietly taking on dinner, when Eleanor emerged from the tent riding cloak and a blanket wrapped around her, hat and hood over her head as she half crawled to join them, snuggling up between Cassandra and Bull.

“Thanks everyone,” she croaked out as her head nuzzled into the Seeker’s shoulder. That was nice.

“How are you feeling, Eleanor?” Cassandra asked.

“Better, sleepy,” she said, giving her a small smile.

She was, she was snoring softly shortly thereafter, but she roused when Sera landed in front of her with a thump, crouching before the girl.

“Hey,” Eleanor murmured, reaching out with a finger to poke the Elf girl on the nose.

“Hey you! Are you hungry, Inky?”

Eleanor nodded and Sera let out an excited little yelp before whirling away to…oh Maker she’d been very serious when she said she wanted to cook for the girl. It didn’t take her very long, though the Elf nearly caught herself on fire—as it was the hem of the back of her shirt ended up singed but nothing too detrimental.

Bull was rather startled when the Elf girl descended upon him, armed with a spoonful of soup and shoving it at his mouth with no warning, but he did accept it and shrugged. “Not gonna kill the kid,” he said, which didn’t say much for the taste.

But when Sera handed a bowl to Eleanor the girl smiled pecked a kiss to Sera’s cheek that left the Elf girl red-faced, she obviously hadn’t been expecting to receive such appreciation for her efforts. Eleanor ate her fill and then she asked to be filled in, what they’d been up to while she’d been asleep.

Blackwall was the next recipient of Eleanor’s gratitude, the man looked wholly bewildered when the girl exclaimed that she was just so very proud of him for saving the Blades from their old leader! And she was so glad they’d dealt with the Darkspawn, though she apologized she hadn’t been able to be of any help.

In point of fact, Cassandra did not like that the girl had been sick, but she was grateful that her illness kept her out of the mix with more Darkspawn. The risk of the Blight…she did not even want to consider the possibility of Eleanor ever falling prey to such a fate.

“Hero had plenty of help,” Varric insisted, “you just focus on getting better.”
Eleanor nodded and yawned then, stretching as she rose to her feet. “I think I’ll head back to bed if that’s alright. Oh!” she gasped, turning around so quickly she nearly lost her balance, steadying herself with a hand to the Iron Bull’s shoulder. She gave him a smile and said, “Thanks for keeping me warm!”

“Not a problem kid,” Bull said.

Eleanor nodded before pressing a kiss to the cheek under his good eye. When she returned to the tent and crawled into her bedroll once more, the grey of his cheeks looked a bit purple now.

Sera began cackling. “Knew it!”

Bull was glad to see the kid rallied a bit, taking a meal. Though Koslun’s ass food was food and shouldn’t be wasted but damn, Bull was pretty sure he’d tasted better from Skinners attempts at...uh...possibly trying to poison them all. He wasn’t sure yet. Anyway, as far as Sera went, everything she made was cooked, Ellie wasn’t going to get food poisoning or anything, but he was pretty sure her cold kept her from actually tasting what she shoveled in her mouth.

Krem was going to crap himself when Bull teased that Ellie kissed him—he’d clarify it was just on the cheek but maybe he’d let it ride on its own for a paragraph or two in his next report, wait and leave it as a post-script.

Krem was definitely going to crap himself whenever they did finally make it to Haven—if the kid’d been passing out kisses for keeping her warm, dude was in for a kiss on the cheek for that hat she loved. He’d told Krem she loved it. He also told him that’d been a smooth move, getting in good with Ellie’s Tamassran, Cassandra, by sending along that salve stuff.

Ahh, he was a good guy—A-classi guy, shit! He needed to use that!—Bull was just giving him a little grief. Maybe a lot of grief. The latest report from Cremisius Aclassi held a second sheet of paper that had...he’d seen Human kids splay their hands against parchment and trace the outline of it. It looked like Krem’d done the same except he’d just pressed the back of his hand to the parchment and extended a solitary finger. It was pretty sweet and Bull sort of kicked himself over the fact he hadn’t thought of it first.

Morning after kid ate with them had caused a bit of panic. Just for a second though—Bull heard Seeker wake up and gasp, she wasn’t the sort that startled easily so he figured it wasn’t that bugs or a mouse had crawled into their tent in the night scaring her. He sat up and immediately realized kid was not in her designated place in her Seeker-Sera sandwich.

But he heard her—heart beat strong and steady, breathing clear, rain was pattering against the hood and cloak she wore when she wasn’t in the tent.

“Outside,” Bull said quietly, getting the Seeker’s attention, and the woman scrambled to go check on the kid.

He expected her to start spouting off questions, but he heard her sit and then nothing. Oh. That prayer thing Ellie said they did maybe the girl was trying to get back into the swing of things. Bull almost went back to sleep but after a while Seeker started talking,

“How are you feeling, Eleanor?”
“A lot better now, thanks!” her voice still sounded a little hoarse, but better than last night, “I’m sorry I worried everyone.”

“You do not have to be sorry, you fool girl,” somehow ‘fool girl’ sounded affectionate, “Everyone gets poorly sometimes just…” the Seeker took a deep breath and then, “Eleanor, why did you not tell anyone you were feeling unwell? I understand your asthma can set in quickly, may give you little to no warning but Solas informs me part of its onset was triggered by a cold.”

“I was a little symptom-y when I woke up from my nap…well, the nap was probably a symptom too. I dunno, I’d been feeling it off and on for a few days, but it always turned into nothing—which is normal for me I’ll sort of get a cold, where most people it would be gone in a day, my body likes to play ‘will-we-or-wont-we’ for a bit and then eventually moves on. It wasn’t until we were almost where our soldiers went missing that I started feeling badly—but we had to focus on finding them. If they’d been alive and needed us and we turned back because my head was a little stuffy. Everything just sort of built up after that. I didn’t realize I was in trouble until I couldn’t actually vocalize the fact.”

“In future you must tell someone when you are, symptom-y, immediately Eleanor. Please.”

“I will, promise,” Ellie said.

“Good. Now, are you…how are you feeling ah,” Seeker seemed to be struggling with the right words. “Emotionally. Our discovery was not an easy one to make, and I apologize but you were incapable of consuming…” more struggle and then, “if I’d given you your depression medication, it would have been too hard on your stomach, what with the little sustenance you could take in while you were ill.”

Oh. Damn. Kid…

Bull had fought a little bit of everything in his life—Darkspawn, Ogres, Tal-Vashoth, bandits, weird tree-spirit shits. He’d never surrendered, not to anything or anyone, no matter how big, or strong, he was the Iron Bull and he could take on anything. The one thing that had ever taken him to his knees, had him waking up, not knowing who he was, why he was alive, losing every sense of his self and his purpose, that brought him so low it was either surrender himself to the re-educators or the sword of some low-life Tal-Vashoth scum, was what Humans termed depression*. 

Shit. Rough. But it sounded like she was getting help, that was good. That was the hardest part, in his experience.

“Kind of weird. Praying helped. I’m not as sad and angry—thanks for handling all the Blade stuff, I’m glad they were able to be spared. Were you able to send our soldiers things on to Cullen?” come on kid, this is serious, don’t side-step.

“I was. Word has been sent to their loved ones, and he and Lady Josephine are working to see to it that their families will receive their income for the next six months.”

“Working to? Are we um…I know running the Inquisition is expensive and everything, if —I mean I haven’t used any of my payment, and I don’t really see that happening anytime super soon so—”

“Nonsense, Eleanor, we are hardly in dire financial straits. Work means they are in deliberations on how to best obtain payment. The Blades of Hessarian have a great deal of weapons stockpiled, obtained not in the most legitimate of ways. If they are to be a part of the
Inquisition, they must get rid of their ill-gotten-gains, we are attempting to find the most honorable way to convert the goods into money that will be used for such a purpose, reparations for the lives they stole.” And then, “Now. You are not as upset as you were before, you are still distressed?”

Good. Keep her on track.

He heard her shrug. “I’m just sort of, dunno. Little sad. Anxious. Not empty or disconnected or anything so, that’s good I think—sort of felt that way when I first woke up last night but seeing and talking to everyone helped.”

“I am glad,” Cassandra said. Bull had to keep himself from chuckling, giving the game away that he’d been listening (not that he could help it, if Sera or Solas were awake, they’d bear witness too)—he heard what he was almost positive was the Seeker kissing the kid on the forehead. She’d done that a few times while holding the kid as she slept, when she didn’t think anyone was paying attention, dropping kisses to her hair or temple.

“I know it is awkward to put words to feelings, thank you for being forthright. Would you care for breakfast? If you are up for it, we should get you back to a regular schedule, it is a dangerous thing to be inconsistent with your potions.”

“Breakfast sounds good. Can I help?”

“Certainly. You’ll be a great deal of help sitting as you are and keeping me company while I cook.”

“Cassandra!”

“I’ll hear nothing of it, Eleanor, you will rest today or so help me I’ll…ah,” the Seeker huffed, frustrated that she could not think of any unpleasantness she could honestly threaten the kid with other than a pitiful attempt of, “Well I will certainly be very cross with you!”

The kid sighed and relented, “Alright.”

Well damn, it worked. Bull got up then, the movement stirring most of the others since he wasn’t being careful about it—if the kid was up they probably needed to regroup anyway, so he didn’t see the point in slipping out unnoticed.

“Oh! Good morning, The Iron Bull! Are you hungry?” Ellie asked as he emerged from the tent. She was sitting, facing the tent from across the cold firepit in her sleep clothes and riding cloak, Krem’s hat still on her head, covered by her hood. She still seemed a little pale to him, but she looked to be in pretty good shape.

“Good to see you up. Breakfast’d be good. I can get the fire going,” he offered the Seeker who was digging around in the chests they stored food in.

“Yes, thank you,” she replied, recalculating how much food she’d have to prepare since now everyone was filing out of the tent. Bull crouched before the firepit and set about getting it hot again.

Ellie was imekari, so he was going to refrain from joking that he was, in fact, very good at making things hot.

“Inky!” Sera crash landed into Ellie, wrapping her gangly arms around the younger girl’s shoulders. “You’re awake! And its daytime!”
“I’m feeling better,” Ellie promised, using her unmarked hand to squeeze the arm around her neck in assurance.

“Thank Andraste’s right tit! This lots just boring without you!”

Okay, Sera started it, and Bull couldn’t stop it, “Why just her right tit, Sera?” he asked, “Why not have appreciation for the whole set?”

“Left one’s bigger in all the statues, and I’m savin’ it for when Inky’s all better duh! Then both tits get thanked. It’s called patience, Bull!”

Seeker gave a disgusted grunt. Bull had to laugh, the Elf was weird, but funny.

Varric took the empty spot next to Ellie and started an Inquisition of his own—how was she feeling? What could they do? Had they done enough when she’d been down? She didn’t have an answer for that, she didn’t remember much after finding their soldiers.

Blackwall and Solas helped the Seeker get breakfast underway and the Nevarran woman returned to the tent for a moment before she came back and made sure ‘Eleanor’ had a large plate of food and silently slipped her two bottles, yellow, and white. That got her a grateful smile and the girl downed the white one quickly, setting about chatting with Solas about if he’d seen any of the Rifts, and how bad he thought they would be to deal with. Kid let her potion settle before she started popping bites of scrambled egg in her mouth, listening intently as the Elf man briefed her on his own understanding of the Rifts in the area.

“You will absolutely not be sealing any Rifts today, Eleanor, it is much too taxing.”

Kid didn’t do much that day, Seeker either had her sitting by the fire or in the tent. That Blackwall guy offered to handle her hair if she wanted to clean up.

“Oh golly, I must reek! I haven’t bathed in…gosh how long was I out?”

“’sandra and me—” Sera started but Cassandra leveled her a menacing glare at the shortening of her name. She squeaked, “Shite!” and then, “Cassandra and me, we made sure you wasn’t stinking to high heaven. Cause you like being clean and stuff. And I was thanky to people for you. And I sent wordy thoughts to those great pricks up in the sky. Cause I figured you couldn’t all sleepy and such.”

“Um. Wordy thoughts?” Ellie asked.

“Prayers and shite! Which I don’t do by the way but you get all worried about this lot and your child-minder and think praying for them helps keep them safe. I figured if I did it for you, you wouldn’t have to worry about it. Though Bull said he don’t pray cause Qunari are too big and bad for gods and pish so I figured praying to him for himself would work just fine.”

Ellie smiled at that—though he wasn’t sure if it was because of the Elf’s weird acts of thoughtfulness or because Bull started laughing at the ideas that crazy Sera could take into her head. But it was uh, kind of sweet. Crazy Elf had her heart in the right place.

Blackwall did end up washing and doing some kind of intensive conditioning crap to the kid’s hair—it had been wild and frizzy and brittle before he started working with it. It almost reminded him of applying globs and globs of oil to his horns—Koslun’s balls, he would kill for some damn horn oil. That shit was scarce outside of Par Vollen.

Everything was pretty low-key, Bull did end up sitting with the kid and Solas when they
meditated. He didn’t get super deep into it but somehow yeah, it wasn’t stupid boring, and it did
seem to ground the kid so, eh. Giving it a whirl couldn’t hurt. He could practically hear the
Tamassrans lecturing him that he shouldn’t have fallen out of practice with it to begin with, that he
should be ashamed it took some Basra brat to get him back into doing it.

Huh. But she wasn’t just Basra. She was straight up Basalit-an. He’d been ready to consider
her such when Krem came back from Haven telling him how she’d treated him so well—that she’d
shown the Tevinter man respect, especially in the regard of his being Aqun-Athlok. Shit. Humans
varied in their response—Stitches hadn’t kicked up a fuss, but those Tevinter assholes really did a
number on Krem. Dude didn’t talk a whole lot about that, but Bull’d seen the sort of insecurity past
reactions to his gender identity had left in him. That Ellie had just accepted him right off the bat—
no preamble, no questions asked, saw he represented himself as a man and rolled with it—she’d
already been okay in Bull’s book. Everything he’d seen of her in person only added to that.
Especially, once she got back to work.

She apologized to him that everything’d been pretty boring especially with his being a
Mercenary and all and promised they usually would have gotten ‘a whole bunch more’ done by
now. Kid was sweet. He assured her he wasn’t underwhelmed with the Inquisition and was looking
forward to seeing her in action. She’d smiled at that—Qunari weren’t real big on smiles, the show
of teeth was usually a threat but uh, it wasn’t so bad from the kid.

The boss—shit, he had to remind himself. It’d been hard to see her as such, especially when
she’d been sick. If the Chargers had seen him going full-blown Tamassran on the Herald, he’d
never live it down. It was beyond weird this complex—he’d never encountered it in the Qun. You
were what you were, if you were imekari that’s what you were, you weren’t also Karasaad or
Ashkaari or Arigena, just as none of those titles intermingled. But Ellie—she was ‘kid’ and she was
‘boss’, and the mixture was disorienting as fuck. Should be one or the other. And it bugged the shit
out of him that the ‘one’ should just be kid.

In the following days, once Seeker, Solas, and Varric of all people, were satisfied that Ellie
was well enough (two tits better, Sera declared her), they did finally start spreading Inquisition
influence across the Storm Coast—taking on a few more campsites, and more importantly, Rifts.
The first they faced was on that little tombolo branching off the coast where all the dragonlings
were. Kid hadn’t liked that they had to kill the ‘baby dragons’, neither did Bull really, but it was
necessary. Little shits would just try to fry and eat them, and anyone else that occupied the area so.
They had to go.

Ugh. If there was one thing Bull hated fighting, it was some fuckin demons. Liked sending
them back to the Fade though, so. It was a love/hate thing when they reached the Rift.

The kid showed no hesitation in fighting the things, she cast barrier over her team sans-Sera
and went to down on the monsters pouring from the Rift. He could have done with some warning
that she could manipulate the Rifts—cast against them with the Mark and weaken them—when she
first zapped the Rift it startled him, he wasn’t sure what he’d expected it to look like, but then it
seemed to him like something was wrong, maybe she was still too weak to deal with these things,
because it didn’t close. But no one else responded like they were in trouble, just took out the
weakened demons and waited for the next wave. When she manipulated the Rift a second time he
got the picture. Good thing too, he’d been inclined to throw the kid over his shoulder and make a
run for it if there was something wrong with her Mark magic.

But after the second wave of demons she cast against the fluctuating thing and when she
snapped her hand back, it crackled closed.
That just about did it, in Bull’s book that was pretty badass.

When the Rift closed several things happened at once.

First and foremost, kid was grinning, absolutely ecstatic to have closed that damn thing, shaking out her hand.

But under that—her heart had stopped, just straight up called it quits, only to start beating again with several, erratic, painful sounding thumps, which made Sera stare at her absolutely terrified, but he expected Solas would be used to hearing that.

But he wasn’t just hearing it this time, simultaneously, the same thing happened to the Apostate Elf, only the man let out a yelp, and crumbled in on himself, going to his knees, arms crossing over his midsection as his body jerked in head-to-toe pain and he went about six shades whiter than normal.

“Solas!” Ellie was on her knees then, to be level with the Elf man as she started pulling vials of potion from her stores, offering health draught to him, but he raised a hand to halt her.

“I-I am well, Ellie,” his voice came out rough and he had to clear his throat, everyone was gathered around him, even Sera looked a bit worried for the guy. But he was staring into space with some measure of…well he looked horrified.

“What ails you, Solas?” Cassandra asked.

“I…we have not encountered any Rifts since our time in the Hinterlands. This was the first I was capable of monitoring Eleanor as she sealed it,” his vision focused and he was looking at Ellie then, “You, lethallan, my word. Is that what you feel when you seal Rifts?”

Kid looked like she’d just been gut punched—worse for wear than when whatever the fuck just happened, happened. “Oh, gosh! Solas! You don’t have to monitor me all the time—I’m not sick anymore and it was just a normal fight I…gosh, yeah, that was pretty normal for Rift sealing, sorry! I’d have given you some warning not to if I’d known! Are you alright?” she asked.

The Qun taught purpose, and the necessity in fulfilling the roles they had to for the good of the Qunari—fellow man. Bull had a pretty grounded sense of it, in fact everything told him that the Mark on that girl’s hand meant this was her purpose, to seal Rifts, seal the Breach.

But shit. It wasn’t just a little sting in her hand she’d been shaking out, fuck. Solas was an Elf but lots of Viddethari, some of their best Viddethari like Gatt, were Dalish, and they were tough sons of bitches. He didn’t seem the sort to exaggerate an injury or have a low pain tolerance.

That she kept fulfilling her role, and what was more, that she didn’t complain, shit. Kid had the makings of Viddethari. It was something that spoke to her being more than suitable for the role she played in all this.

But it also made Bull want her to have absolutely nothing to do with this mess. She was expected to do this a second time—today, she’d said. She wanted to deal with all the Rifts so the Coast would be safe from demon influence.

“No no no no no no,” Sera was saying then in tones of rising panic, shaking her head emphatically. “No more Rifts, nope! Inky! We’re going back to Haven and staying there, and the world can go prick itself. Shite!”

“I know they can be really scary. You can return to camp if you don’t want to face anymore
Rifts with us, we’ll walk you back. But they need dealt with,” Ellie said, as she rose to her feet. “Solas wasn’t expecting what it feels like to use the Mark to seal Rifts is all—I’m used to it now, so. It really isn’t that bad.”

“Lady Priss Pants!” Sera appealed to the Seeker, “Tell Inky she can’t go sealing any more Rifts!”

“I… I must say, Eleanor,” Cassandra said, “I did not realize how truly arduous it was, I did not assume it was any different from other form of magical casting. Why have you never told us it was so very painful?”

Kid just shrugged. “Dunno. At first, you know, it’s not like it really mattered if it hurt or not, I had to get those Rifts sealed to get to the Breach and I was pretty sure I was toast anyway. And then later when it still hurt I just…there isn’t anything we can do about it, I’ve tried uh using health potion, cause it’s a good painkiller just not for this. It’s more of a pain in my magic than a physical hurt—they’re so closely tied it prompts a physical reaction to magical pain,” she was quick to clarify when it looked like Solas was about to refute that it had been, very much, physical pain. He nodded then, agreeing she was correct, and she continued, “So, there wasn’t really any point to bringing it up, it is what it is, all you guys knowing about it would be pointless, just make you feel badly.”

“There is most certainly something to be done!” Cassandra insisted. “Eleanor, there are other ways to obtain acclaim for the Inquisition, we do not need to—”

“Yes, we do Cassandra!” Ellie implored. “We can’t just leave people to deal with these things floating around! They’re dangerous, and my Mark is the only way to get rid of them and,” she stopped, seeming to need to catch her breath, she’d been half-shouting and she looked stricken, conflicted. Her fists clenched at her sides and she said, “We do not know if sealing the Breach will take the other Rifts with it and I…I can’t leave them open.”

“But ridding the world of the Breach truly might seal the others, Ellie,” Solas said, rising carefully to stand.

“He’s right, Tumbles,” Varric agreed, “just let us bash in some bad guys heads or whatever, fix some pedestrian bullshit to impress the nobles, and we’ll get the help we need to seal the Breach. We can see if that closes off the Rifts—if it doesn’t then you can go around finishing them off.”

“I might not be able to,” Ellie said, shaking her head.

“Come now, Ellie, you’re stronger than that,” Blackwall said, coming to stand at the girl’s side he placed a hand on her shoulder, squeezing gently. “If you can seal that damn blight in the sky, you’ll be able to handle anything left over from it.”

She didn’t look up at him. Wouldn’t. Her head was bowed. “The Breach is…it’s big. Worse than any Rift we’ve dealt with,” she said, “I wasn’t exaggerating when I said it nearly killed me.”

Cassandra paled at that. “Eleanor we…we’ve agreed to your solution, reaching out for Templars to suppress the Breach while the Mages power your Mark to seal it.”

“I know. And I believe it will work to seal it,” Ellie said. “Doesn’t mean I expect to get to walk away from that thing a second time.”

No one knew what to say to that. Bull certainly didn’t. Ellie didn’t look up at them, but she
did start moving then, Blackwall’s hand slipping from her shoulder. She began heading back up the hill toward the mainland. Bull followed after her, and it took a few seconds but eventually so did the others. There was the smell of salt—different from that of the sea, and Bull realized someone was crying. Wasn’t Ellie though.

When she started sniffling, Bull figured out it was Sera.

They were quiet as they made their way to the second Rift their scouts had reported. Sera’s cheeks were still a little wet, but it was still raining, and she didn’t wear anything to cover her head, if Bull weren’t Qunari, he wouldn’t have had a clue she’d been upset.

Or an Elf. When her sniffling began to slow, Bull saw Solas silently extend a handkerchief to her. She accepted it, begrudgingly, using it to wipe at her face, and then jammed it into a pocket before they came up on the next Rift.

Second Rift sealed, and kid didn’t even flinch. Solas either but Bull got a feeling dude was either braced for it this time or…well, no ‘or’ about it, he couldn’t imagine the guy left her to feel it alone. The Elf Apostate was guilt ridden, features pinched, sweaty, a slight—very slight—tremor in his hands. He felt guilty. Was guilty, of something, Bull was sure.

Ben-Hessrath didn’t have many reports directly from the Conclave—all their spies had either been in attendance, or observing from nearby, and died in the explosion. The first news they got was from spies other places hearing about what happened at the Conclave, and then the acclaim the Herald was receiving from her time in the Hinterlands. But since joining up he’d been filled in by Seeker and Solas, and a little by Varric about how the kid fell from a Rift with that Mark on her hand, taken into custody as a suspect, and had only been able to be kept alive long enough to face the Breach because of Solas’s magical understanding.

Magical understanding Bull’s ass. Dude knew more than he was saying. He went to see the Conclave but wasn’t close enough to the event proper to be harmed in its destruction? There’s a hole in the sky, and this Elf Apostate comes traipsing down to turn himself over to a Templar-run Chantry order instead of turning tail and running? Worked like crazy to keep some girl he doesn’t even know alive—a girl who was considered a perpetrator of the Conclave attack, who everyone who knew about what had happened blamed for the event, everyone but him and he’d been able to keep the Mark from killing her.

There was a powerful council in Par Vollen that studied and understood all manner of magic in an effort to reign in and control what little the Saarbas were allowed to use. So they kept tabs on what big magic users like Tevinter and Orlais were developing—their Viddethari, Elves, the Dalish sort with Vallaslins, they kept them informed on all sort of Dalish magic. Bull’d never met her, but there was a Keeper that abandoned her clan and converted to the Qun, and she’d delivered to them a great deal of understanding of Elf magic. Nowhere, was there anything about something that could cause the Breach, and there wasn’t anything like that Mark on her hand. So how the hell did some Apostate with zero formal magical education just so happen to know so much about it?

Didn’t matter how you sliced it, Solas…shit why hadn’t the Seeker labeled him a co-conspirator? Why wasn’t he being questioned about the Breach? So much screamed that he’d had something to do with it. Was it because he obviously regretted whatever part he played in the act? Or was she afraid to label him as such because he would be revealed a traitor and then they’d have to deal with him? He was the only one that knew anything about all this mess, guilty or no they couldn’t afford to lose him. Maybe he’d confessed his part in the event and was acting as an agent of the Inquisition as punishment? Paying for his sins through service. His every action in regard to
Ellie rang with recompense, like he was endeavoring to make up for…what? The Breach? The Mark?

Cassandra looked all sorts of awkward, like she wanted to talk to Ellie and didn’t know how, didn’t know what to say. They found a decent place to set up another Inquisition camp. Ellie went about gathering everything they needed for a signal fire, and Blackwall got it burning so their reinforcements would know to come set up a camp.

“Bullshit,” Sera said out of nowhere. She was the first of them to say squat in the past hour and a half. It’d been the quietest battle he’d ever fought, the one against the second Rift, no smack talk, no shouting, just the occasional grunt or groan from their efforts and then the crackle of the Rift being sealed.

“Sera?” Ellie asked, looking up at the Elf girl.

“Ugh!” Sera screamed and then pushed Ellie by her shoulders, knocking the smaller girl back a few steps.

“Sera!” Cassandra and Blackwall’s voices overlapped with Varric’s,

“Watch it!”

“It’s bullshit!” Sera shouted, stomping up to Ellie and getting right up in the girl’s face, “You’re just going to give up! Just like that! Ohh I’m Inky, I’ve got some magic shite on my hand and have to close the hole in the sky and die?! It’s bullshit, and I don’t buy it. You’re not allowed to just- just- let that happen!”

Bull released a breath he hadn’t realized he’d been holding—he’d sort of expected wild magic. Serabaas often lashed out, even unintentionally, when they were threatened but nothing happened, Ellie just stared at the older girl with wide eyed confusion, didn’t push back or move to defend herself, not in any way other than with words.

“I…I’m not giving up I’m just being practical,” Ellie explained gently. “I really did almost die the last time I faced the Breach. It pulls on my magic and tries to take me with it, like it was going to burn me up to fuel the Mark but I dunno. I guess I passed out before it could do that, stopped it somehow. If we try again we have to succeed, no matter what, and if sealing the Breach won’t rid the world of Rifts, I have to do my best to make sure they’re gone just…just in case.”

“On the contrary, Eleanor, consider this,” Solas spoke up. “It is true your first encounter with the Breach was deadly—in point of fact you required resuscitation—but-

“What?” Sera snapped, clearly not liking the sound of that.

“Tumbles bit it for a minute, but Chuckles got her back,” Varric deadpanned.

Veshedan.

Sera groaned at that and covered up her ears like she could stop herself from hearing what she’d already heard, “No no no no no no no no no!”

Ellie had her hands on the Elf girl’s shoulder’s then, only she didn’t push, she just squeezed and said, “Sera! It’s alright! I…I’m sorry you’re so upset but you really don’t have to be its…it’s not that big of a deal.”

“What have we discussed about your being so cavalier about your life?!” Cassandra
snapped.

Ellie’s hands went to her side as she turned to look at the Nevarran woman and timidly shrugged as she thought it over. “Uh. N-not to be? That’s the same as cavalierly, right? Was I doing it again?”

“Yes!”

“Sorry,” Ellie apologized, rubbing the back of her neck nervously she added. “Uh. It might help if I knew what cavalier meant?”

Cassandra took in a deep breath. “Eleanor, it means to be careless, or show lack of proper concern for something, in this instance, your life! You cannot regard your life so little that you could speak so casually of throwing your life away to the Breach! We are not asking you to lay down your life, we are working to preserve it!”

The girl blinked a few times as she processed it and then, simply, “Oh.”

“If I may,” Solas interrupted, “I did have a point I was endeavoring to make before all these asides.”

“Then by all means, make it,” Cassandra snapped.

“I understand facing the Breach the first time was certainly a death sentence but Ellie, you must remember, you were already at several disadvantages, and you survived,” Solas stressed, “You were starving, exhausted, grieving, injured. You had to fight your way to the Breach, sealing not just one, but four Rifts before attempting to seal the Breach proper. You had no training to do so, you had no assistance in casting against it, but now you will.” He continued, “Think on it, da’len. We shall not see you face the Breach as you did before. You will be well rested, fed, you’re certainly stronger now than you were then—physically and magically. It will be a simple matter of marching to the Breach, the path well maintained and clear. You will have the whole of your allies at your side. You will have Mages—myself and Madam de Fer included—that will assist to power your Mark, and Templars to weaken the Breach.”

“Cullen and myself will assist the Templars as well,” Cassandra vowed. “it will not be like last time when it was you alone casting against the Breach.”

“Lethallan, could we compromise?” Solas asked.

“Maybe,” Ellie said. “Depends.”

“Our discussion just now it has reminded me that we do intend for your fellow mages to assist powering your Mark. We have only thought of doing so in regard to the Breach, but could we not consider having me attempt to assist you when sealing Rifts? It would make for practice for sealing the Breach and may make the act of dealing with Rifts easier. It could also serve to give you some peace of mind for what facing the Breach will be like a second time.”

Kid seemed to consider it for a moment and then, “Do you think it would hurt you too, if you tried helping me seal the Rifts?”

“I do not know, Eleanor, we cannot be certain until we try,” Solas said. “The compromise comes with this—if this exercise makes you feel better about your chances surviving the Breach, we will only seal Rifts in areas of Inquisition influence. It will allow us to see if sealing the Breach will take the remaining Rifts with it—it would be a horrible thing if we could spare you the effort and didn’t.”
“One condition,” kid said, holding up an index finger, “no linking to me anymore when I seal Rifts, and we’ll try having you help power my Mark to test it out but if it hurts you too, I don’t want you doing it,” Ellie said. Then, “Oh. That sounds like two conditions then, but I’m not always the best at counting.”

“I always monitor you during fights—”

“So just promise you’ll pull away before I seal Rifts! You can do that, we’ve got switching it on and off pretty well down pat. I don’t—” oh shit the kid’s chin was quivering a bit, “I don’t want it hurting you too, okay? The Mark isn’t your problem, you shouldn’t have to deal with its side effects. Please?”

Yeah if this asshole ended up being part of the big bad behind all this, Bull was gonna kill him. Not for the Breach, but for putting this kid through hell and making her feel badly for him to boot, this sketchy-ass Basra bastard.

“You’ll truly consider not seeking out every single Rift before seeing if the Breach will seal them away? They are numerous and in places the Inquisition cannot yet influence, it could take years to garner the means to seal all of the Rifts. We cannot leave the Breach at large for so long.”

Ellie nodded. “I get that, and yeah I want the Breach sealed as soon as possible so…if, if we can be certain I’d still be uh, around to seal them then yeah, we’ll test your theory out.” Instead of extending her hand to him like she had when striking a deal with Bull, she extended her pinkie to the Elf man. “You’ll close our connection when I’m sealing Rifts, and you won’t help me if it hurts you.”

Oh Imekari. A pinkie promise. Yup. Dude was screwed. If he fucked her over, he was going to pay big time.

Huh. Were the Chargers in Haven yet? Should be. Last he heard they were in the final stretch. Hadn’t gotten todays report yet. He’d have Krem do some recon on the Elf before they got back from the Storm Coast. Maybe he’d reach out to his Ben-Hessrath contacts, see if they could find anything on where this guy came from, what he was doing before the Breach.

And of course, he’d do his own research. He’d be Elf boy’s best damn friend, see what he could get the Apostate to tell him himself.

Solas wrapped his pinkie around hers and nodded. “Agreed.”

“Whatever the hell you two just worked out better friggin work!” Sera snapped. And then, remorseful, “I’m sorry I pushed you, Inky. Shite, I didn’t hurt you, did I?”

Ellie smiled up at her and when she put her hands on her shoulders she did push the older girl, gently—just enough to jostle her before pulling her into a hug. “I’m okay! I’m sorry I got all defeat-y,” she said, pulling away.

But the Sera pulled her into her arms, squatting a bit so their faces were squished together as she hugged the girl as tightly as possible.

“We’re gonna kick the Breach right in the danglers, Inky!”
Inky was sort of dumb. Not stupid—*dumb*, like how babies is dumb—cause she didn’t know lots of things. Like about pies, or pranks, or loads of important stuff Sera knew all about growing up. But maybe that’s cause she had a little more help. Sort of. Shite help that it’d been, bitchy old Lady Emmald* blah! Anyway, it was dumb to just jump to crazy conclusions about dying and shite. Cause that was just…nope. Not allowed. Inky was gonna…well she had to just live for forever, alright! Or at least a good while after Sera bit it. Elves lived longer than humans but…nope. Not allowed! So, back to forever it is! Inky’s immortal, anyone who has a problem with it can friggin fight Sera!

Ugh. Enough about that crap. Inky also didn’t know about loads of kid stuff! Like hide and seek and tag and hopscotch! Though she made a joke about playing tons of Hide and Seek with Templars. So Sera wasn’t sure if that would be fun for her. Though maybe it meant she’d be real good at it. Didn’t want to lose Inky though, cause she wasn’t like Elfy with his ‘finding her’ junk. So.

“Tag! You’re it!” Sera shouted as she tore ass away from Inky.

They was waiting on Inquisition tits to get to their new campsite and set up, and that was just straight boring, and Inky was feeling better, and tag was fun! Ellie didn’t get much fun. If Sera had her job well…she wouldn’t. The world would be screwed. Or maybe not, Sera would want to go play but you couldn’t play much with a hole in the sky. But she also didn’t like nothing about those Rift shits. She’d almost taken Inky’s offer to go back to their camp and sit out on fighting more of those Rift things—they spat out demons for Andraste’s sake! But Ellie had to fight them and they was scary. So if they were scary to Sera, they had to be even scarier to Inky! Cause she was littler! And a Mage! All them demons wanted all up in her brain! It was bad enough she had Solas mucking about in it sometimes or whatever.

Anyway. Tag! Fun! *Fuck* the Breach!

Inky chased after Sera, oh gosh, she was fast! Gosh, huh. Maybe Inky was rubbing off on her? Nah she just thought ‘*fuck*’ so, probably not. Inky never swore not even littler ones. Oh! Maybe she didn’t know any swears? Sera could teach her those too!

Ohh, Lady Priss Pants wouldn’t like that at all. *Yes*!

“Gotcha!” Ellie giggled breathlessly as she reached out quickly switching hands—oh. She’d almost tagged her with her Marked hand.

Ugh. That made Sera feel like a real dick-head. Magic was creepy, but Ellie was alright and…and the Mark was a part of her and people already had so much shite they put on girls about their bodies and pish, making them feel low so lucky bitches or rich tits got to feel big. Sera didn’t buy into any of that garbage—who cared what she looked like? What mattered was if her body friggin worked. Foot hurt? Don’t matter if it’s beautiful or not, you fix it and move on. Hair got in her face? Chop it went!* Didn’t matter if it was pretty, it matters that she can see to shoot shite!

Anyway. Ellie didn’t deserve to feel like something on her was gross. And that’s what Sera was doing, she thought. Made her feel like…well Sera hadn’t minded her ears till Lady Emmald told her that baker was a right prick who hated Sera, cause she was an Elf. She let Sera hate him when he was just a regular bloke, and Lady Emmald was just a lying priss that would rather make Sera feel hate, feel *hated* because of something she couldn’t control! All so she could maintain her own stupid sense of pride by destroying Sera’s. She didn’t ask to be elfy. And she wasn’t, as far as she was concerned. She was just Sera. But, ugh, the point was—she wasn’t lying when she said magic was scary, but it was scarier the idea that she made Ellie feel badly about herself, that she could have that in common with that dead bitch.
So, Sera doubled back, stopped in place and twisted ‘round—Inky had just about caught her good—and let her tag her, pressing her shoulder into Ellie’s Marked hand. For a second she worried she might burn up or something but nothin’.

“Oh gosh, sorry!” Ellie gasped out, snatching her hand away and putting it behind her back. Shite! She was bad at this.

“S’fine Inky. I mean, it’s all good innit? The important thing is you glow,” Sera teased. “Don’t bother me none. Don’t hurt me none either so, you don’t got to be so careful, okay? Point of tag is having fun, not worrying about stupid stuff.”

Oh, that got her a smile. That was nice. “You’re it!” Ellie squealed, tapping Sera’s shoulder with her Mark hand and dashing away.

They ended up on the hill that overlooked their campsite. They finally got the fire going good, they could see the smoke, hopefully Inquisition would be ‘round soon.

Oh yuk. There was bones and some swords and stuff. Would that be scary or sad for her?

“Uh Inky maybe we should turn—” oh shite. “Inky?”

She was leaning against a bolder as she worked to catch her breath. Oh. Fun was fun but maybe she shouldn’t’ve picked something so runny. Took lots of lungs and Ellie’s had just been sick. “I’m okay,” Ellie said, a bit breathless but she was smiling and waving dismissively. “That was fun, skulls are sort of a creepy way to end things, but I liked playing tag.” She coughed a few times but it didn’t sound bad, just like it helped clear her throat a bit and then she said, “I wonder what happened up here. Huh. Look…”

Inky crouch down and brushed dirt away before picking something sort of brown but silvery and shiny up off the ground, wiping it against her cloak. “This has markings like Warden things. Maybe Blackwall will want it.”

Sera looked at it, was upside-down from her point of view ‘cause she was facing Ellie but she could read it just fine. Inky was weird just going off the picture. “Well yeah he will! It’s his! See? Warden Constable Gordon Blackwall,” Sera read off, pointing to the words. “Ha! That sucks. Warden-Gordon Blackwall? Warden-Gordon, Warden-Gordon, Warden-Gordon!”

“Oh don’t be mean, Gordon’s—” Inky tried to reprimand her but then she giggled a bit, “Yeah it’s kind of funny that it rhymes.”

“Who could take him seriously? No wonder he just goes by Blackwall. That don’t rhyme with shite. Cept maybe ball, or tall, or uh…wall…er. But those ent jobs now are they?”

Ellie nodded and then, “Come on, last one there’s a rotten egg!”

Ahh! Yeah! Inky knew ‘bout last one there!

So maybe she knew some important shite after all!

“Warden-Gordon, Warden-Gordon, Warden-Gordon!” Sera’s voice was sing-song as she
and Ellie came skipping down the bank. Blackwall wondered just where they had run off to. Bull’d risen when they left, stood and just sort of turned, watching after them while they apparently went to play Tag. Cassandra had almost run after them, probably would have if it wouldn’t have looked like she were joining in their game.

Though if Ellie asked her to, Blackwall was pretty sure the Seeker would sit down and have an out-in-out pretend tea party with the girl, with zero shame. But Ellie seemed too old for that sort of thing, Liddy’d been growing out of them when she was six, one of the few things she got the chance to grow out of.

Ellie was certainly doing a lot better, her complexion was healthy, and she was rosy-cheeked and a happy sort of breathless as she came to a stop within the bounds of their camp, Sera giggling up a storm at her side as the younger girl caught her breath.

“You called?” Blackwall asked drily for Sera, but smiling for Ellie, he certainly didn’t want her thinking he was being short with her.

Sera just cackled and fell onto her bottom to finish catching her own breath.

“You’ll never guess what we found!” Ellie enthused, smile on her face, bouncing on her tip-toes with excitement, her hands behind her back.

Maker’s breath this sweet girl. Had she found something she thought he might like? Had he done something to warrant a present? She had been rather grateful for his handling the Blades business, thanked him multiple times for it, but he hardly needed it. Ellie might not think so though. Huh. There didn’t seem to be much in the way of seashells on the shore of the Storm Coast, but maybe she’d found an interesting rock or a flower or something.

She could hand him Nug dung in earnest and he was prepared to grin and thank her and tuck the droppings away for safe keeping.

“What’ve you got, Ellie-girl?” he asked.

More giggling, Maker she was excited. “Guess!” she insisted giddily.

He was bullocks at guessing, it’d be no fun for her. “I thought you said I’d never be able to,” he teased.

Ellie playfully made a show of rolling her eyes at him, but his words earned him an even brighter smile, present enough in and of itself, and then—

Nug dung would have been preferable. In fact, he was certain it wouldn’t make him sick to his stomach, have his throat drying up, heartbeat pounding blindingly in his ears and if he hadn’t already been sitting down well…well he’d probably just fallen on his arse.

In Ellie’s hands lay a Warden Constable’s badge. Warden Constable Gordon Blackwall emblazon in its seal.

“You must of dropped it when you were fighting the Darkspawn or uh,” she sounded a bit uncertain as she continued, concerned, “when you were here last…um, are you alright?”

He was standing on the sharp precipice of his lie. He hadn’t used it against Ellie so far, not really. It was she, who called him Warden Blackwall. She’d been the one unknowingly spreading the lie for him. Every point he could recall, she was the one who spoke that name, to her friends, her allies.
Somehow that felt worse than if he’d straight up lied right to her face. Ellie was honesty and he’d taken advantage of that.

His hands trembled ever so slightly, as he took Warden Blackwall’s badge from her.

“El-” he cleared his throat and then patted the empty space next to him. He stood when she sat though, he wasn’t sure…Maker he wasn’t sure how to even begin.

But he hadn’t lied to her. Let her go along with one. But never had he actually lied to her. And…he wasn’t about to.

He got on his knees before her, running his finger along the truth etched in a badge he’d never worn. Everyone was still and silent, watching—confused he was sure. Ellie certainly looked such.

“My name is Thom Rainier*. I was born in the Free Marches, Markham,” he said. “My sister’s name was Liddy, she passed when she was eight. I went on to win the Grand Tourney in my youth, and it was with that in my resume that I was recruited into the Orlesian military. I garnered the notice of Grand Duke Gaspard, and his ally Ser Robert Chapuis,” no one interrupted him. No one was certain what he was saying, but they would be. Absently, he wondered who would move to kill him first. Varric? Cassandra? Would Ellie find it within herself to do so? It would be just if she did.

“I did well in the Orlesian army, and when I retired I formed a mercenary crew of my own. We practiced for two years before I got a contract from Gaspard and Chapuis. This was when Gaspard was making one of his original moves for the Empire’s throne. He wanted an ally of Empress Celene taken out of the picture. Lord Vincent Callier. These men, they were my friends, we’d fought together, defended each other’s lives. I was honor bound to help them as I could—at the time. If I were a better man, I’d not entertained the notion for a moment. He wasn’t military, or a warrior, he was just some political pawn Celene over played, pi—angered Gaspard, dinged Chapuis’s pride. Looking back, it was petty political nonsense. Not worth a moment’s thought, let alone bloodshed.” Hindsight was…well. He wish he’d known then what he knew now. “I delivered my men their orders, and we went to intercept the Lord when he was in travel. He was meant to be alone but…he’d allies of his own. Been tipped off and thought…” Blackwall swallowed against the bile building in his throat. “My men descended upon his carriage with orders to kill anyone inside. It wasn’t until it was too late that I realized Lord Callier had taken his family with him in an effort to dissuade any such attack—thought having his wife and his children surrounding him would save him from the onslaught.”

He didn’t need Qunari hearing to realize Ellie had stopped breathing or was at the very least holding her breath. Her covered head was bowed, staring down into her hands resting on her lap, drops of wet dripping into her palms.

“This was a highly political movement and Gaspard wanted nothing linking back to his involvement. There was no paperwork, nothing. I told my men they were to attack a carriage, kill everyone inside…” Maker preserve their souls, “and they did. It was a massacre. My men were arrested or ran. Gaspard denounced the act entirely—nothing tied him to it so he was able to sit back and earn sympathy for how very heartbroken he was over the tragic loss of Lord Callier, his family. Chapuis killed himself. And I ran.” Somehow that almost felt like the worst of it. He’d just…run. “I was drinking myself into oblivion in this little bar in Churneau, when the village militia started harassing the barmaid. I came to her defense. Man sitting at the end of the bar stood up, shook my hand, and introduced himself. His name was Warden Blackwall, and he saw potential in me. Would I perhaps be interested in joining the Wardens?”
Ellie looked up at him then, eyes wide, tears streaming down her face as she trembled. Her voice rasped out, “You didn’t…” and her expression crumbled.

Oh, Maker, no, “I didn’t,” he vowed. It was the truth, every word. “Not what you’re thinking. I agreed. We were on our way to Val Chevin, for me to take my vows. We were ambushed by Darkspawn here on the Coast. There was a blow meant for me, that Warden Blackwall took upon himself, and it killed him. That medal was on his body when he perished. That was five years ago.” Had it truly been that long? Some days it seemed on yesterday he’d come across the Warden man, and others it felt he’d been Warden Blackwall for centuries. “I could have continued on to Val Chevin, taken the oath but…Warden Blackwall, he was a pillar of the Warden community. He had no criminal background, he joined the Wardens simply out of honor, not circumstance. He gave his life to the order, made an example of what a true Warden should be. He was responsible for recruiting new members in his old age and I…I did not see a reason for that to stop. What could Thom Rainier bring to the Wardens? Nothing worthy. I let Thom Rainier die that day, and I moved on as Warden Blackwall, traversing Ferelden and working in the name of the Order, continuing the good work of a better man.”

He heard Bianca being removed from her holster and then, “You fucking low life son of a —”

“Varric!” Ellie half shouted, half…it sounded broken, her voice. She held up her hand and something like Barrier wavered over him—not bubbly and protective but more like bland obligation, and he wasn’t sure if her hand motion had cast the spell or if it was meant to still the Dwarf whose finger was trembling over the trigger.

“I…don’t know what to do with this. I…m-magic…you might have lied but it doesn’t. S-so.” She sniffled, the sound staggering, and she bit down harshly on her bottom lip for a moment before, “We will have to uh…figure out h-how to m-move on from here,” she looked at Blackwall then. “L-Liddy wasn’t a lie?”

“No. No, swe—.” ‘sweetheart’ was hardly going to fix things. He’d give anything to fix things. “I swear,” he tried, “I’ve never lied to you, not directly. I just…your information told you I was Warden Blackwall and I never refuted it. Liddy wasn’t a lie.” None of it was, not his vows to serve the Inquisition, to serve her. None of it.

“She was just little, so you might not be familiar with this,” Ellie said. “Kids throw tantrums. Teen girls, at least in my case,” she leveled him a hallow look, “we’re more of a silent treatment sort. You don’t have to leave. But I’m not talking to you until…well right now I feel like never. But I’m not s—” she stumbled on the word as if she wasn’t certain she was speaking the truth if she said it, and it killed him that he’d made her feel this way, made her think it might be a lie for her to say, “I’m not stupid. Lie or no, magic wouldn’t have said you were important for sealing the Breach unless you were. Sera didn’t even give me her name when it knew. So. Just.” She stood then, “Do whatever. But don’t talk to me.”

He nodded, tentatively, worried even that would end whatever measure of patience she was teetering on. He said nothing, and she turned heel and stormed away from their camp, walking up the hill that would let her see if their Soldiers were on their way to set up their site, Sera popped up, made to follow her, turned to look back at Blackwall and she made a face at him—used one middle finger to draw down the lower lid of an eye, while she stuck up her tongue and held up the other middle finger, jerking it about before she stomped after Ellie.

“Talk to her again and I’ll fucking end you,” Varric swore, and then he, a Dwarf who had expressed more than once, his weariness of the sea, stomped down to the shoreline, to stand in the
splash of the waves. Anything to be away from him. To not break faith with Ellie, Black—...he supposed. Solas looked...disinterested. Like he didn’t care to condemn or commend him, just...indifferent. He went and joined the Dwarf on the shore.

“I am going to Eleanor,” Cassandra said quietly to Bull who nodded. And then to him she said, “Your fate has yet to be decided though were it up to me you would be dead where you stand. I suggest you make yourself scarce. Eleanor would not cast you out, but I will. Do not be here when we return.”

He waited for Cassandra to walk away, up the hill to join Ellie, and Sera, before he dared to rise to his feet. The Warden Constable medal slipped from his hands and clattered against the stones underfoot. He didn’t bother to pick it up.

“She’s not done with you. The kid,” Bull said from where he sat by the fire. “Don’t do anything stupid. Wait it out.”

He nodded again, and then he did as the Seeker said. Heading for the river, and the woods that lay beyond, he made himself scarce.

Boss girl might have said she was giving Blackwa...er...whoever the fuck, the silent treatment, but she was pretty quiet around everyone in the days that followed. She didn’t say much when she came back to camp, though she did see the Grey Warden badge laying on the ground and tucked it away in a cloak pocket.

She woke up, prayed in silence with Seeker. Sera joined them—not to make ‘wordy thoughts’ really except maybe a few to the Maker, she said. She just liked being up when ‘Inky’ was, liked sitting with her. They took on breakfast, and afterward Ellie led them around to find the Astarium things because they always lead to cool treasure apparently—and they did, it was bitchin. And she quietly led them to those weird-ass glowing skulls and used them to find the even weirder ass glowing shards. Seeker explained they wanted to find out what they were and if they could be useful to the Inquisition. Apparently, her bodyguard, Marehis, was off in Orlais investigating a lead on that—that was one of the few times Ellie spoke up, asking if Cassandra had heard from Marehis at all. She had, and Marehis was faring well, missed Ellie. That’d gotten the quiet admission that the kid was missing her too, the words came with a look like the kid was holding back tears. It sounded like homesickness in her voice—like she really wanted her minder here to give her advice on how to handle all this shit being thrown at her on the Coast. Cassandra carefully put an arm around the girl’s shoulders, and they walked like that the rest of the way until Ellie made to get another shard from some great precarious reach.

Bull was able to help with that, actually, he’d lift her up to reach high places, step up and grab stuff for her that she’d have had to climb to reach herself. Something about it made him even more appreciative of his size—and he already had a strong appreciation for it.

It was day two, they finally got a smile out of her. Shit, it felt good—admittedly even more so because Bull could take credit for it. Not to blow his own war horn, but he’d taught the kid how to make pancakes. She was great at mixing them up, but she had a hell of a time trying to flip them. Her hands were small, the spatula was big, and so was the round, cooking blob of batter. He’d had to help her, his hand over hers as they worked together to flip it teaching her how—that’d gotten a little spark in her eyes. The next pancake they made, she flipped it all on her own and damn, he
almost gave a victory cry when she smiled in excitement, pleased and proud she’d been able to do something so simple, and she’d given that smile to him. Shit. It was like a damn medal. Except he’d sound like a total loser bragging about it.

Didn’t stop him from bragging about it in his report to Krem. *Your little girlfriend’s been feeling down—sad, not sick—and guess who made her smile? That’s right. Your god, The Iron Fucking Bull. I. am. King.*

Day three he expected another piece of parchment with Krem’s middle finger drawn all nice on it but uh, no. There was a spare piece of parchment that came with Krem’s report—a report that detailed his search of Solas’s quarters, he’d found nothing super sketchy, just tomes about Fade magic, and, what was most interesting, letters. Love letters. From that Marehis chick that protects Ellie. No one said anything about it, kid obviously didn’t know, and Bull’d noticed Solas sending letters to Ellie’s bodyguard, but he hadn’t seen their contents, just figured he was reporting to her about Ellie since he had that weird magic stuff. So, either he was in a blooming relationship with the Elf woman, or she was spamming him with sexual harassment mail. Krem said they read like non-threatening, non-creepy, regular old love letters so.

Speaking of love letters. The extra piece of parchment in his report.

It wasn’t a letter exactly, it was ‘origami’, Krem called it in his post script of his report to Bull. The extra parchment was folded up into an intricate looking flower blossom, that he was instructed to pass along to Ellie and son of a bitch, it made her smile for the second time—big and genuine, and damn Krem, that was smooth. Not Bull’s style, but smooth.

“What’s this?” Ellie’d asked, intrigued when Bull deposited the paper blossom in her hands.

“From Cremisius. I might have let it slip you were having a bad day—nothing detailed,” he promised. He hadn’t even mentioned the fake Warden in his Ben-Hessrath reports, just sent off a detailing of their progress on the Coast, sealing the Rifts. “He told me to pass it along.”

Que big smile and then, “That’s so sweet,” she murmured, running a finger carefully along the edge of a paper petal.

“What’s it supposed to be?” Sera asked.

“A peony,” Ellie said quietly, cheeks going the shade of pink an actual blossom of this sort would be.

For her part, Seeker was sitting quiet and still except for the hand she slapped over her mouth to keep her from saying something. Or maybe squealing. There was a sort of vibe rolling off her that screamed ‘this is so cute, I might just die’.

Solas, with some measure of amusement, taught the kid a little charm to keep her present dry. And Varric grumbled a bit as he jotted down notes in his journal. Bull had been informed by Cassandra that the Dwarf man had wanted some great romantic interest for Ellie as an element for his book but being faced with the reality that someone might actually be pursuing the girl he found so precious romantically was not the delightful side quest he’d thought it would be.

Bull kind of felt that. Big part of him was rooting them on, if Krem liked her enough to be able to handle all the Herald stuff that would come with it, he should go for it, shit, the girl was sweet. Accepting, warm, compassionate, tough. If she came in Bull’s size, he’d be pursuing a woman like that in a heartbeat. But she didn’t, she was a kid and that sort of made him feel like he didn’t want her traversing the trials and tribulations of dating at all. Not until she was. Dunno. Old
enough she could tear the heart from a lover that scorned her and stomp it into the ground, walk away like nothing happened. But something told him it wouldn’t matter how old she was, Ellie would still be too sweet for that.

What made him most comfortable was that it was Krem. The guy would turn himself over to those assholes in Tevinter before he hurt someone like Ellie. He wasn’t a horn dog, and he was respectful, he couldn’t think of anyone he’d trust her with more. But uh, did make him a little conflicted. He was always on Krem’s side. Always had been and had never thought of a situation where he would ever not be.

But if he somehow did manage to hurt her, Bull was pretty sure he’d be the first in the line of their party members to break his face. He’d help him fight off the rest of the vengeance-seekers but uh, yeah. He was fixing to be on Ellie’s side just a little bit. Then Krem’s. Bros right after uh, nope. Not calling the kid that, he’d have to fight himself.

“Cassandra, would you help me with a letter?” Ellie asked looking up from the paper blossom in her hands.

“Of…of course Eleanor,” the Nevarran woman said, “Though if you wish to pen a response to Cremisius, you may prefer to do so yourself.”

“Oh. No I was just going to thank Cremisius when we get back to Haven,” Ellie said, shaking her head. “No, I want to get word to the advisors.”

“Whatever for?” Cassandra asked as she made to retrieve ink, quill, and parchment.

Varric looked like he was holding his breath, actually scratch that, he definitely was. Poor guy, he was terrified she was about to disclose a courtship to them or something, wasn’t he? He was so screwed.

Ellie set her paper blossom aside and withdrew the Warden Constable medal from her cloak.

“I’d like to inform the Inquisition, and the Grey Wardens, that Warden Constable Gordon Blackwall has died, while assisting Inquisition efforts on the Storm Coast.”

The sound of rain pattering against her hood was nice, comforting despite the chill of it. It helped that The Iron Bull was sweet enough to walk alongside her as they made their way across the river and further into the woods, the others trailing behind them. Maker he was warm, and she was pretty sure she would love him forever for it.

At least he’d had some great honking secret, something he’d have been justified to keep secret, and he’d still told her. Been honest from the start!

Oh. She wasn’t still unfathomably mad about it anymore, it was a complicated situation all around. She could understand a little—Cassandra had brought to question if they could pursue
cases she had piled up from the Seekers, taking out criminals of the Chantry that the Templars weren’t dealing with. She’d been fine helping Cassandra track down Ser Torn in the Hinterlands and kill him. Not that she could do something so unthinkable as send her party to kill off children without raising question about it, but…she understood loyalty and wanting to help your friends. Thom Rainier made bad friends and had gotten played. Gaspard shouldn’t have called the hit, and if that Callier man knew what he was in for, he should have surrounded himself with armed guards, not his wife and children as human meat shields.

And Thom’s men shouldn’t have killed them. full stop. Orders or no orders, there are just some lines you do not cross. Maybe kill that political putz, its not like he deserved a great deal of mercy for his part in that horror fest, but Maker. Children?

Thom hadn’t killed them. Gave the orders—to kill the Lord!—it was his men, and whatever messed up ideals they had that let them kill without question. But he blamed himself entirely, and yeah, Ellie felt that too. Responsibility. Maker, when they found their soldiers slain at the hands of the Blades, she’d felt like she’d sent them to their deaths herself.

Well, it was little wonder now, why the man regarded himself so very low. Ellie…wasn’t a hundred percent she could ever look at him the same way again. He’d lied, and she hated that. She’d felt used and stupid. She was stupid, and she was really gullible sometimes but…oh, blah! Sera’d tried teaching her swears. She knew swears, just didn’t use them. She really wanted to take up the practice now though.

Ugh. She wouldn’t but “Gosh!” didn’t feel like it did this situation justice! Gosh!

“Okay there boss? That’s the third time you’ve uh, huffed all angry-like,” Bull said quietly.

“If we did this when I stopped being angry about it, we’d have to make a trip all the way back here from Haven. Doing this now. It’s been like four days. So,” she shrugged.

It’d been four days since the man formerly known as Blackwall left their camp. And d-um. Er. Darn was okay! Darn it! She hated that she was kind of worried about him. He’d been all alone before, so he was probably alright but still. Ellie was worried. He hadn’t exactly packed a bag, or anything just walked away with what he had on him.

She was worried because she cared, she’d loved him. just like she loved all of the people the Inquisition had brought into her life. That’s what made all of this so…hurtful. She loved him and now she couldn’t be sure who he was. He’d said he’d not lied to her face, and not lied about his past—what he’d told her of it before all this—but…he’d been living a lie for five years! And he just let her spread that lie for him! Made her a liar!

She’d lied to Marehis! And Scout Harding! And just about everyone! She’d wanted to disappear when she sat with Cassandra while the woman wrote that letter to the advisors yesterday with the news of ‘Blackwalls’ demise, with a separate missive detailing the truth and what was to become of Thom Rainier. She hated admitting to them that she’d been lied to, and had lied to them, and they’d all been tricked!

She got lying—she’d had to lie loads of times to protect herself and people she cared about, and she sort of thought maybe this was the same thing. But in her case she was lying because some political nonsense Ages ago said that her just being alive was a crime she deserved to be locked away for! So, she either kept her magic to herself or straight up lied to keep herself safe. Rainier had done the same thing but…his crime was legitimate. It was something he’d done—she hadn’t chosen to be born, hadn’t chosen to be a Mage, whereas he’d chosen to take the life of a civilian, and in the mix of things his men murdered innocents! He was running and hiding to protect himself
from incarceration or even a death sentence, taken on someone else’s life to escape it. Taken on a lie.

Lying to trick for selfish reasons was dumb, hateful and awful. Unless it was to protect someone from harm, you should be forthright about your public business! Everyone was entitled to their privacy—things were private like super personal stuff—but privacy didn’t cover every single aspect of your entire life! You didn’t get privacy when you were living someone else’s life! That’s called acting! And that’s a super public thing! They sell tickets and everything!

Another angry huff. Bull chuckled and patted her on the back. That was nice.

What wasn’t nice was the burning in her hand, Marked one, worse than usual but they’d deal with that next.

Magic was thrumming along, timidly reassuring. It helped her find her way through the woods, following the trail—though there wasn’t really a visible one except for the occasional boot print that hadn’t been completely washed away—to Thom Rainier.

To his tent, it would seem. Not a super nice one, like the Inquisition had, it looked like he’d just set up camp in an abandoned tent, it was old and moldy and soaked from rain.

His boots stuck out from the opening of it, sleeping with most of his body under the cover of the crummy tent. Part of her wanted to say “good! I’m glad your tent is crummy!” but…she mostly just felt bad she hadn’t come out to get him sooner.

Of course, Varric was still hot to shoot the man, Sera too for that matter, so. It was likely for the best that she’d let their tempers cool off a bit more.

Cassandra had been murderous, but she was the one Ellie had talked to the most about it. When everyone else was asleep, they’d gone to sit by the now dormant occularm on the hill near their camp, under the cover of the trees there and she’d done an embarrassing amount of crying over it, but mostly they just talked, and debated, and considered their options.

In the end, there was only one thing that could be done.

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A gentle kick to the bottom of his boot.

And then, “Wake up, Rainier. I’m tired, and mad at you, but I still love you. We’ve got stuff to do, so get up.”

Ellie’s voice. Oh Maker. Was she truly here? Was she talking to him?

It’d been how long? He’d sort of wandered aimlessly and then stumbled upon this abandoned camp and just laid down. At some point he’d gotten hungry. Laid there a while, but eventually he’d gone and got something together. There was all kind of edible fauna. Throw that in with some nug meat he’d called it a day and then…well, when the Seeker banished him he wasn’t exactly sure when or if they’d come for him again. He’d laid back down and hadn’t really felt convicted enough to get back up.

Now though, he sat up straight in the tent he’d found, it wasn’t the best campsite, but he
didn’t exactly deserve the best of life right now did he? His face ended up covered in the moldy sheet overhead and he scrambled as he ended up a bit caught in the tenting and Maker’s balls he didn’t have time with this—what?! She was tired, she said? Was she sick? She was mad at him yeah that was a given but Maker—she had loved him? That was...he didn’t deserve that. Still loved him? What?

Damn him, was she crying now? Something, muffled, it sounded like sobbing—

Oh. When he finally whipped the mangled sheet up over his head, freeing himself, he realized she was laughing. Hard, loud laughter, the girl was doubled over with it.

All of them were for the most part—the entire party was with Ellie, though they were standing a way off, as if to let her deal with the man herself. But, no crying, just laughing at his expense for his clumsiness—an expense he was more than willing to pay.

“I’m still mad at you!” the girl insisted, made sure that he knew, as she calmed from her laughter and wiped her eyes. Maker, she could be mad for as long as she liked he was just glad...he was just glad to see her again. This had been worse than those days in Haven.

“Of course, yes. Good,” he was quick to say, “I would be too. Am, really. Mad at myself, that is. You...you still want my help?” he asked uncertainly.

The girl looked down at him and nodded, crossing her arms over her chest. “You’ve lied to us this whole time, but you’ve also helped us this whole time, too. And magic wouldn’t have said you were important unless you were,” she said. “But no more lies. I’ve already made arrangements. As of yesterday, Warden Constable Gordon Blackwall died in service to the Inquisition. We’ll send word to the Wardens though I doubt we’ll hear anything given they’re all missing still. Leliana and the other advisors have been filled in. When we return to Haven you’ll be reintroduced to everyone as Thom Rainier, and we’ll just move on from there. No more lying. None, Thom.”

It couldn’t be as simple as all that. “Thom Rainier is wanted by Orlais—”

“I’m not totally stupid,” the girl snapped. “We’ve been in contact with Leliana. It’s being dealt with. She and Lady Josie are in talks with Orlesian authorities and they’re positive we can work it out with them—your volunteer work, we’re terming it, with the Wardens, and your continuing service with the Inquisition will pay penance for your part in the Callier attack.”

That was all...what? Really?

He...

What?

“Well? Are you just going to sit there, or can we get a move on?” Ellie asked, impatience was an unfamiliar tone to her voice, but he deserved worse than that. But then she Maker, preserve him, she blanched a bit and crouched down to be level with him, ungloving her unmarked hand and resting it against his forehead. “When did you last eat? Did you have that fire going at all this entire time?”

“I...” he wasn’t sure what to say. In fact he was almost afraid to guess, if he was wrong that...well he’d be right back in the lying business wouldn’t he? No more, about anything, she’d said. “How long has it been?” he asked instead.

“G-Gosh!” she stumbled over the word with shock and then, “Thom! It’s been four days!”
“I merely lost track, haven’t been paying much attention. I did have a fire going for a while, not surprised its cold now though, I didn’t keep it tended. I ate um, the second day,” he was most certain of it, anyway.

She didn’t look any less horrified at the notion. She set about digging around in her pockets—cloak, her armor’s overcoat. She came away with crumbling shortbread and an apple.

Shortbread came first, she handed it to him saying, “Stay sitting, eat this. You have your canteen?” she asked.

He nodded, doing as he was told. She held out her hand and he gave her his canteen which she shook and then uncapped. “You haven’t refilled this have you?” she asked, in tones that sounded parts concerned and accusatory.

“No,” he hadn’t really drank from it much, there was no need to refill when it was still mostly full.

She pulled Elf Root potion from her belt and poured its contents into his canteen before capping and shaking it up and then handing it to him. “Drink it all. We’ll refill when we’re on our way.”

He’d drain the sea if it pleased her. Maker, was she really taking him with her? Oh. She was. He was…huh, she’d probably use a word like ‘loopy’, he realized. Dazed and a bit confused. Who wouldn’t be?

He wasn’t prepared for this. He thought…maybe he’d get to see her one last time, but it would be to deliver his death sentence in some form or another. Death, he’d already died before. He’d been more than ready to do so, permanently this time.

And here she was, an offer of redemption. The sentence of living and earning forgiveness. Making the idea obtainable. It…he’d feared this very thing would happen someday, had resisted it but…maybe it was because he wasn’t of his right mind, delirious from exposure and hunger and sudden offers of redemption he still couldn’t wrap his head around. Once his truth was exposed, and he’d seen all the sort of damage his lie had done he wanted nothing more, nothing in all his life, more than her forgiveness.

Because forgiveness would mean his harm was reversed—not with Callier, never with that—but with her. He’d hurt her, betrayed her trust, shaken that fragile sense of security in who she could put faith in—she could trust so few with the life she lead now and he’d compromised that for her.

And worse. Something he had picked up on, faster than her offered path of forgiveness, I’m not totally stupid, she’d said.

He made her doubt herself. Made her feel she was a fool for having trusted, for being herself and that was…he couldn’t let that stand. He had to prove to her she hadn’t. He would regain her trust, tenfold, and show her that her magic hadn’t been wrong. That it had been him who should have doubted himself, that he’d been the foolish one, playing pretend he was someone he wasn’t. He wasn’t going to play a better man, he was going to be a better man.

If it was the last thing he did, he would right his every wrong to this girl that could be so hurt, betrayed by him, and still fret over him. Who worried that punishment she hadn’t even put upon him—Cassandra had, and it was justified, he deserved much worse—had harmed him.
He downed the potion-mixed-water and when she stood, he stood. His legs sort of wondered what he was doing, the blood rushed to them proper for the first time in a while. But he had to get a move on. She obviously had something pressing she wanted to get to and Maker mark his words he was going to help her.

She took his canteen from him and handed him the apple. “Eat,” she said, and then she turned on her heel and rejoined the rest of her party, heading back toward the river. He made himself busy eating as they walked. He was a bit outside the formation of party members that sort of walled him off from Ellie, Varric walked with his fists balled up and jammed down into his coat pockets, resolutely endeavoring not to pummel or shoot the man Ellie was providing repentance.

Made him a bit breathless for a moment, because it made him realize Varric and the others…he’d thought they may well cut him down in the midst of their next skirmish, just to be rid of him. But they wouldn’t do anything to hurt Ellie and…doing something like that would hurt her he realized. Maker, his loss would hurt her. He didn’t deserve that sort of care, he’d always known that but…he was going to earn it. He’d always just skimped by accepting he wasn’t worthy, but he’d never attempted to do anything about it, he realized then. Instead of wallowing he should have picked himself up and done something worthwhile—on his own, not raising himself up on someone else’s acclaim.

“Eleanor, camp is northward,” Cassandra gently offered. Her posture was stiff as she very pointedly ignored the W—uh. Thom…Rainier. That was going to take more getting used to. Everyone was walking along as if he weren’t trailing after Ellie but that was just as well. Roles reversed, he’d never look at himself again.

“Sorry, I was thinking too much earlier! I forgot to say anything,” she offered the woman apologetically, “We’re not heading back to camp, if that’s alright with everyone,” her left fist clenched, the movement fast and she cleared her throat a bit. “There’s another Rift.”

“You’re certain? Our scouts are very thorough,” Cassandra said.

“I’m positive, felt it once we got to the river earlier,” Ellie assured her. “big one. So if…” she turned her head a bit, to speak more so in his direction. “If anyone doesn’t feel up for it, you’d better head on back to camp.”

No way. He was going to fight whatever she did until he was dead. End of story.

When they got to the river, Ellie knelt and refilled his canteen before handing it back to him and doing the same with her own, everyone set about topping off their water supply. Thom wondered what he should do with the apple core he was left with but there was a little Nug drinking from the river edge and he tossed it to the creature which stopped what it was doing to give a happy little chirp before taking what was left of the apple and scurrying off with it.

Oh, and it made Ellie smile just a bit and that was nice.

The smile slipped along with the canteen cap from her Marked fingers and she gasped, hand clenching again, involuntarily it looked like. Sera was quick to snatch up the cap before it could float to the bottom of the river, popping it back on for the younger girl.

“Ellie?” Solas spoke with some measure of concern.

“No point,” she said quickly, trying to gloss over something. “We’ll seal it, and it’ll be all good. We can test out your helping power my Mark, yeah?” she offered a bit hopefully.
No point?

Oh Maker, she’d said something similar days ago, when they’d realized just how awful sealing those Rifts were. She’d always just shaken out her hand and kept moving, but he’d considered it had to be somewhat painful. It’d never occurred to him it might be as bad as it truly was.

She’d been able to tell where Rifts were, even without consulting their maps if they were near enough, and how powerful they were going to be. She had to have something to measure that by.

“Inky? Your Mark hurt?” Sera asked tentatively.

“Hmm,” she seemed to consider the question as she stood and stretched, Sera rose with her and the younger girl popped up on tip toes to kiss her on the cheek. “Only when I breathe,” she said with a shrug and a smile like she intended it to come off as teasing.

Sera didn’t look like she was reassured by the younger girl’s blitheness. The Elf girl groaned a bit and picked up the pace to walk next to Ellie and took the girl’s Marked hand, holding it fast like doing so could will the Mark to stop hurting.

Though she did have to drop that hand eventually as they walked along, because there was a loud growl, and then a roar. Bears, plural, descended from the river bank.

Huh. Well, that would explain there being a Rift out this way that went unseen. Bears were hellions, more demon than most demons, Thom thought. He’d heard them about when he was on his own, it’d sounded like there were many in these parts it was little wonder their Scouts hadn’t been able to survey this area much.

Bubbly security trickled over his skin, Ellie’s Barrier as it should be, he was glad she would still do so for him. She moved to put herself between Sera and the Bears, pushing the older girl back a bit to prompt her to seek higher ground because Maker, these horrible creatures were fast approaching, and while it’d been heartening to see Sera’s reticence over the Mark was quelled, she still wasn’t of a mind to allow for Barrier.

Thom had his sword in hand and charged one of the oncoming bears. Ellie squealed in surprise when Bull got right up behind her, one hand holding his axe while the other arm wrapped around her waist to hoist her up and around, moving her out of the way before he backed Thom up going head to head against the bears. Or head to horn, the Qunari man was squaring up with the bear he’d taken on, they were roughly the same size after all.

Cassandra joined them, and surprisingly…well, it should be so surprising, she was a woman of strong character, had a code for battle she stuck to with conviction…she assisted Thom, without hesitation.

When the bears were dealt with, Thom was almost tempted to jest at Varric. A few of his bolts had been the deciding factor between victory or death in the bear Thom had fought. He wanted to see if the Dwarf would swear at him or if he’d rather say something like he’d missed his mark, than admit he’d assisted his former ‘frenemy’.

The term was Ellie’s, not his, but it was rather fitting he supposed.

“Eleanor, are you injured?” Cassandra called out, immediately rounding to seek the girl out.

“Nope!” Ellie said, “All good! Everyone else okay? How are we looking on potions?”
Sera, Solas, and Varric were just fine, unscathed as Ellie was, since they’d been able to attack from afar.

Cassandra, himself, and Bull had all had to knock back draughts mid fight. Ellie worried at that a little, she stepped up on a rock to be taller, getting on tiptoes and nearly slipping off the thing but Bull was quick steady her, and crouched a bit when he realized she was trying to get a better look at the half-bleeding half-bruising on his forehead over his good eye. She made a concerned sound that almost sounded like cooing as she examined it.

She ended up taking out that jar of stuff that boy, what was his name? Cremisius. The salve he’d sent her. That was for chest congestion wasn’t it?

But he remembered Ellie’d offered him such a remedy when he’d been injured in the Hinterlands, something about it being disinfecting and healing. There were little flecks of green in it, a sort of topical Elf-root that wouldn’t drain their potion stores further.

He made this girl feel stupid. It made him sort of wish Varric would punch him.

She opened the jar and Bull held it for her while she got a thin dab on her index finger before using her other hand to shield his eye in case rain or sweat carried the salve out of place before she could get it rubbed in, she tapped the stuff gently to the injury.

“Sorry it hurts, I’m almost done,” she promised the Qunari.

“Don’t sweat it boss,” Bull said, sounding amused that she thought she might be doing something that he could qualify as hurting him.

When she was done she tucked away the jar and popped a little kiss just above the Qunari’s eyebrow like that would finish off the remedy she’d applied. He gave her a hand as she hopped down off the rock, and she looked giddy for a moment, like she’d been delighted by the splash she’d made in the river, before she rounded on Cassandra, having the woman roll up her sleeve. No bleeding but it would bruise later from great bear paw bashing against it, she made a sympathetic sound at that and Cassandra went a bit red in her cheeks with embarrassment when the girl kissed the reddening skin on her forearm before rolling the leather sleeve back down into place and giving it a little pat.

She looked to Rainier then, but then she looked at her feet when she offered, “Are you alright, Thom?”

He was weary, and the bears had certainly knocked him around a bit, but potion had done much to heal him, especially riding on the back of the Elf Root she’d had him drink not too long ago. “I’m well, thank you.”

She nodded then and looked to everyone else. “Shouldn’t be too much farther now,” she promised them. “Maybe later we should send people to uh, collect stuff from the bears? Fur and the like, it’d be a shame to let it go to waste.”

“Certainly, Eleanor,” Cassandra said.

She kept them moving then, and when they found the Rift’s hiding place, well.

Ellie paled considerably and actually stepped back away from the cave entrance, eyes wide as she knocked into Cassandra walking behind her, the Nevarran woman quick to brace the girl, hands on her arms.
“Eleanor?” she asked quietly, mildly alarmed. Was she hurt?

“All good,” Ellie said, voice pitching a bit high, “we’re all good just uh, there’s a lot of…” she looked to her Elf friend, “Sera. I can’t do it justice, would you mind?”

“There’s a shit ton of friggin spiders! Shite!” Sera screeched on her behalf.

“Sums it up nice, thanks!”

Varric looked almost amused then, “You’re afraid of spiders too, huh?”

“I-just a bit,” Ellie admitted, embarrassed.

Maker bless her, the girl went headlong into battle with men and demons two, three, four—hell in the case of Pride demons twenty—times her size brazen and ready to fight, but Spiders elicited such trepidation in her.

“I got ‘em!” Bull announced, drawing his axe and giving off a war cry as he rushed headlong into the cave. “You wanna piece of this you six-eyed freaks? I’m the Iron Fucking Bull!”

The Qunari’s antics left Ellie looking surprised for a moment and then she started giggling, casting to protect them as they joined their ally in facing the horrible things. Rainier didn’t care for them much himself, but he couldn’t blame the girl for being frightened of them, it did make him all the more glad to fight them for her.

They saw the Rift then, shimmering and crackling in the back of the cave.

“Everyone ready?” Ellie asked.

She hadn’t been exaggerating when she said it was a big one—demons of Despair poured from the blasted thing with spirits and a Rage demon to top it all off, and this was just the first wave. And the second wasn’t any more forgiving—it was a difficult thing to count those Spirits when they were so quick and many you weren’t sure how many more you had to deal with until they were all finished off, Maker, they were wretched things!

When Ellie raised her hand to seal the Rift, Solas and Cassandra joined her raising their own hands and Rainier saw the Rift shrink in size as the Seeker used her Templar training to suppress the thing while Solas worked with Ellie, powering her Mark as she cast to seal it shut.

Ellie was wide eyed when she rounded on her friends and grabbed hold of an arm from each of them, “Are you two alright?”

“It was a bit tiresome but nothing detrimental, Eleanor. I feel no discomfort from suppressing the Rift,” Cassandra reported.

“Neither did I,” Solas agreed.

“Really?”! Ellie asked, excitedly. “That’s so great! Gosh, that was so much easier than usual, you guys were a really big help!”

“Didn’t hurt so bad this time, did it Inky?” Sera asked.

“Nope!”

Oh, Thom breathed a sigh of relief. Thank the Maker.
“It was a lot better than doing it on my own!” Ellie said as she looked to Solas, “The Breach is going to be tough, but I think I’m more likely to die from tripping and falling into the crater on my way to close it than from actually casting against it with Mages and Templars on our side.”

Sera gave an excited yelp and then, “The Breach can eat it!”

It was awkward, the walk back from the cave. Once the Rift was dealt with, and they’d collected all of the Shards—there’d been one of those horrid skull devices in the very back of the cave—there was nothing more to do, really, no task at hand other than getting back to camp, settling in for the evening.

Cassandra still could not bring herself to look at that man. Rainier. He’d been a friend and an ally, an excellent help to Eleanor and then…he’d completely betrayed that girl’s trust. All, of their trust. He should have paid for his crimes a long time ago, but he had been a coward, ran and hid instead of owning up to what he had done.

Though there was something…ugh. This man better truly prove himself of use to the Inquisition. If so, then perhaps it was meant to be. Perhaps it was divine providence—his choices, shameful as they’d been—preserved his life, lead him to be in the right place at the right time to assist the Inquisition, and Eleanor. If he had been convicted of his crimes, he would surly be in prison still, or perhaps dead.

Eleanor was weary when they returned to camp, and Cassandra stared after her in mild concern when the girl yawned and stretched and said she was going to take a nap, if that was alright with them.

“Solas?” Cassandra asked quietly once the girl was in their tent. There was no ‘mega-tent’ this time, three tents for their party were set up. Varric had been livid when Eleanor chose to spare Rainier, and return him to their group, it was the first time the Dwarf man had raised his voice in anger at the girl. She’d handled it well, and placated him, enough so that he begrudgingly accepted it but there was ‘no way in hell’ he was sharing a tent with the ‘bastard’. They secured another tent and set it up so the men could sleep separately, which suited well enough, they did share rather cramped quarters with Bull in their midst.

And it wouldn’t do to tempt Varric with such easy access to go through with the thought of slitting the Human man’s throat as he slept.

Solas took a moment to focus on his connection to Eleanor and then, “She is merely exhausted, Cassandra. Not sick, or in as much pain any longer. I did not realize, though I should have…when the Mark detects Rifts, it burns more intensely, reacts to them. The more it burns the bigger the Rift, and the more…reactive—the thing sort of flares against her magic—it gets, the closer it is.”

“More intensely?” Sera asked, Maker the vapid girl did pick up on tiny details every now and again and it always surprised Cassandra, “You mean that friggin thing like actually burns all the time? I know its all shiny but I thought that was just a light show. It don’t feel like much when you touch it, just sort of hummy.”

Cassandra thought so as well, it was strange, though now it was familiar, the thrum of
Eleanor’s Mark when her hand was bared, but she thought Eleanor experienced the same effect.

“You are not affected—you aren’t from the Fade,” Solas said, “and the Mark isn’t latched on to your physical form, as it is with Ellie. It is in constant contact with her magic, and while not debilitating all of the time there is always some measure of discomfort, even out of reach of the Rifts. Perhaps when the Breach is gone, and the Rifts as well, there will be nothing left to agitate it. Perhaps the Mark will leave her entirely.”

“Piss,” Sera swore. “Double piss! For Inky, cause she can’t make swears.”

“Kid is a weirdly uptight about that,” Bull said with a laugh.

“Eleanor is clean spoken, and it is very professional behavior, we should all take example,” Cassandra said.

Sera snorted. “No, she don’t make swears ’cause of professional whatever shite, she doesn’t ’cause her Ava lady or whatever.”

“Ava?” Bull asked.

“Avery was orphaned in infancy, cast out of her orphanage when her magic was discovered. She was left to her own devices save for the occasional assistance from an Apostate woman named Ava, she has since passed” Cassandra summarized for him for fear he would ask Eleanor herself. The girl didn’t speak much of the woman, and Cassandra didn’t pry worrying it may be a painful subject for her. “Eleanor said this Ava did not abide swearing?”

Sera shrugged. “Dunno. I tried teaching Inky swears and she said she knew ‘em, just couldn’t use ‘em cause she promised Ava she’d ‘be good’, you know, when she uh, died. So, no swears.”

Oh. That made Cassandra’s throat feel a bit tight.

The Seeker cleared her throat and said, “I believe I could do with a nap, myself.”

Sera snorted. “Ha! You just wanna snuggle Inky!” she hopped up then. And shrugged. “Me too, lets go.”

“Getting’ real soft there Seeker,” Varric teased.

Insufferable Dwarf. “I am not the grown man afraid of spiders,” Cassandra tossed back.

“Neither am I,” he replied smugly.

Oh goodness. That had Cassandra stopping to look back at him. He didn’t mean…

“Varric. Is the Champion of Kirkwall afraid of spiders?”

The Dwarf man held up his hands as if to halt her. “I’ve already said too much.”

Ha. “Obviously,” Cassandra drawled. And then, she realized she was about to leave the man with Bla—Rainier, mostly unattended. “Behave yourself, yes? If you wake Eleanor by endeavoring to extract revenge she has forbidden you from, I will throw you into the ocean and consider letting you drown.”

“Yeah yeah,” Varric groused with a dismissive wave. “I’ll play nice.”
“I’ll keep an eye on him,” Bull promised.

Cassandra was almost reassured by that, except that when she made to enter the tent, the Qunari quietly added, to Varric, “Didn’t say it’d be my good eye, though.”

Maker preserve them.

Their last few days in the Storm Coast were spent looking for signs of the missing Wardens. Ellie tracked down and found a few things, left behind by Wardens who had been on the Coast searching for their fellow Warden, a man by the name of Stroud.

Thom had felt badly, when he couldn’t say he knew the man. He didn’t know many of the Wardens, the only one he’d actually met was Blackwall, and it wasn’t like he went to Val Chevin claiming to be the man—that wouldn’t have worked. Any conscripts were either released from service after he’d imparted valuable skills to help keep themselves alive, or they’d been sent on to the Warden fortress to take their vows, being able to say that Warden Blackwall sent them there.

That was why Ellie had decided to say Blackwall had been part of the Inquisition and died recently, she’d explained to Thom—if the Wardens discovered several of their recruits had not actually been vetted and selected by Warden Blackwall himself, well. They could be found guilty of crimes against the Order, even if they’d had no way of knowing they’d been fooled. At the very least, they would no longer be considered Wardens, be cast back into whatever life they’d been fleeing in the first place.

“Thank you, my lady, that’s an excellent idea,” he’d said.

She’d just shrugged, avoiding his eye as she said, quietly, “I do have them sometimes.”

She did keep up in collecting Warden artifacts. No more would they serve to assist Thom in his lie—he’d hated having to admit he’d only wanted them to give him information beneficial to sounding more like a Warden—now they would be sent on to the Wardens proper, offerings of the Inquisition as a show of good will, and repayment for the efforts ‘Warden Blackwall’ had made to assist them before he ‘laid down his life in service’.

Things were…messy with everyone. No one much cared to acknowledge him, but they still fought well together, and that was right decent of them, he thought. No one spoke to him much—Varric had not said a single word to him, though he supposed that was because, if the Dwarf did dare do so, he wouldn’t be able to stop himself from flying into a rage and going against his own word to Ellie that he wouldn’t kill him.

Ellie struggled the most, with talking to him, caught between wanting so badly to forgive him, and feeling the brunt of his betrayal. She only endeavored to do so when it was absolutely necessary—well, by Ellie’s standards—and it was always measured and almost painful for her it seemed, to say anything to him, and she very rarely looked at him when she did so. She talked out how they were going to handle the aftermath of his lie with the Inquisition itself, that had been their longest conversation. She would wish him a stilted good morning, ask if he was hungry, always checked to make sure he had enough potion between fights, made sure he wasn’t hurt badly. No more joking, or small talk, or asking his advice.

Or for his assistance outside the realm of fighting. Her hair was worse for wear, and she’d
set up everything to do it herself but it was clearly difficult, her hair being so long, her arms were short and working with so much of it was a real chore.

The Iron Bull had rumbled out a soft, “Here, Imekari, let me,” and then he set about the careful task of conditioning and combing her hair. If it hadn’t been so very…well, he knew he wouldn’t deserve such trust so quickly but he did miss the way things had been, it was a kind of heartbreak seeing the Qunari do what had once been something he could be glad to do for the girl. If it hadn’t been so very sad, it would have been amusing—this Qunari with large hands carefully pinching locks of hair between index finger and thumb, taking a comb that was comically small in his other hand, and gently untangling her curls. He’d done well, said the conditioning aspect was similar to horn maintenance, and he’d seen enough of combing over the years to get the gist of it.

“I figure, if I do anything the opposite of how Skinner does it, I’m doing alright,” he joked with Ellie.

“Oh gosh! She doesn’t brush her hair roots down does she?” Bull nodded and the girl made a face, “Ouch! That’s so painful!”

“Skinner doesn’t really do gentle. Speed is more her thing. Burns every meal because she thinks cooking it hotter will make it cook faster.”

That made the girl giggle. “I like her.”

“In her weird way I think she likes you too. Or at least, she doesn’t dislike you. And that’s saying something. Took me forever to get to ‘doesn’t dislike’ with her, and I’m the one passing out the gold,” he said. “I’ll introduce you to the guys sometime.” That got him a rather exuberant smile.

Rainier made his way to his tent then, it was…he didn’t deserve to be in her good graces, but it was still hard to watch.

They said their farewell to the Coast, once their leads dried up. There was nothing more to do. So they made their way to the little town they’d left their horses in, Ellie practically bursting out of her skin with excitement when she got to see her Russell for the first time in two weeks.

“Russy! I missed you, I missed you, I missed you!” she exclaimed, peppering her steed’s face with kisses. “Did you have fun? Did you miss me?” she asked, and the horse brayed a bit, nipping lightly at one of the loose curls hanging over her face, and it got him a giggle.

Ellie was all serious business then, suddenly, as she left her horse to stand before Rainier’s, standing between he and his steed, halting him. Meeting his gaze for the first time in days as she said,

“You wait just a minute. You’re going to apologize to this sweet horse for lying to him, and then you’re going to reintroduce yourself to him. Got it?”

Varric laughed at him, Sera too. Cassandra even stifled a guffaw she managed to shift into a cough.

“Of course,” he said and went to his horse then, standing before him and addressing the beast—he wasn’t in the habit of doing so, as Ellie did with Russell, so his horse just sort of stared at him like he was confused. “I owe you a debt of apology, my good sir. I lied and deceived you, I am not Warden Blackwall. My name is Thom Rainier, and I am sincerely sorry for having mislead you. Do you think you can forgive me?”
The horse just huffed and nuzzled its snout against Rainier’s cheek. He patted the horse’s face in return before looking to Ellie who met his gaze.

“Trust takes time but,” she shrugged, “I think maybe he forgives you. At least a little.”

Oh, Maker. The thinly veiled admission of even partial forgiveness on Ellie’s part, oh, it was like water to a dying man. Even more so than when the girl had actually given him water and he’d sort of been dying from lack of it.

“Trust takes time,” Thom agreed. “If I can make amends, it will be more than worth the wait.”

Ellie nodded, giving just the barest bit of a smile.

Sera snorted. “He’s just a horse,” she said. “You lot are so weird!”

Chapter End Notes

Qunlat used:

Imekari: child
Tamassran: Qunari priestesses who raise all Qunari children and teach new initiates to the Qun.
Basra: derogatory term for a non-Qunari.
Basalit-an: a non-Qunari worthy of respect.
Aqun-Athlok: the Qunari word for someone being assigned one gender at birth, and living as another.
Karasaad: an in-general word for Qunari warriors
Ashkaari: “one who seeks/thinks” a Qunari Philosopher, Koslun was an Ashkaari.
Arigena: Qunari government official, female, who presides over workers, and deals with things like public health.
Viddethari: non-Qunari who converts to the Qun.
Serabaas: Qunari word for Mage

*Notes:

Mithridatism=the real-world practice of consuming non-lethal quantities of poison to build up an immunity to them. It’s named after Mithridates VI, the King of Pontus, who so feared being poisoned that he regularly ingested small doses, aiming to develop immunity.
Iron Bull’s Depression=in game if you talk to him about Qunari roles, he’ll talk about the Re-Educators, a branch of the Ben Hessrath that essentially deal with mental health. He talks about how his time in Seheron left him questioning why he woke up every morning, and that he’d considered just letting someone kill him in battle, but did end up turning himself in to the Re-Educators for help instead.

Lady Emmauld=the woman who took Sera in when she was caught stealing at a young age. She tells Inquisitor a little bit about her in game, and how she told Sera that the local baker hated her because she was an Elf,. She discovered later the woman only did so to keep Sera from going into his bakery stop her from finding out that cookies Lady Emmauld claimed to have made, were actually made by the baker.
Sera’s Hair= in her info, the creators of DA: I have it that her hair is the way it is because she cut it with a knife because it got in her eyes, and she needs those for shooting things.

Thom Rainier= the whole of Rainier’s confession is canon, some of that information is offered in-game in dialogue but some of it is from codex entries and information offered by the writers online.

Real Life projects are bearing down on me, so there will be a bit of a bigger break this time around, I apologize! Next chapter will be their return to Haven to clean house a bit, a certain Tevinter man getting a kiss on the cheek, and Ellie's pursuit of the Rebel Mages. Coming at you, as soon as possible, but at the very latest EDA: 9/1/18
Return to Haven

Chapter Summary

Cleaning up after the Rainier reveal. The Chargers find their place in Haven, Bull's got glasses, Varric blows a gasket, and there is a gratuitous amount of Krem POV. Because if you've stuck around to read this long-ass story, this is what we're here for.

There is one scene, in Solas's POV that contains a few Trespasser DLC spoilers and is marked as such, so if you haven't played/seen and don't want to know, you can skip on down to Krem's POV.

Chapter Notes

I'm back! And slightly concussed! So pardon the quality, I'm not 100% satisfied with my writing at the moment, if you see anything super plot holey or confusing please call me out! But I have two chapters this week somehow! Because I made promises about this next installment that I wasn't going to be able to fulfill in just one chapter--original chapter plan got totally derailed because I remembered Leliana's character arch in game and uh. well. Plot bunnies were born. Second chapter is being edited and will be up very shortly! Enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The return trip to Haven was…a bit long and sort of awkward, but better than what Ellie had feared it would be.

First there’d been the matter of, well, The Iron Bull was a big man and they hadn’t a horse for him yet. They’d see to it he had one assigned to him once they were in Haven—Sera hadn’t wanted a horse of her own, Ellie thought perhaps the Elf girl was afraid to ride by herself, she rode on the back of Russell with her arms wrapped tight around Ellie’s waist—so he couldn’t ride with her…she was a little worried he’d weigh too much with her in the saddle too anyway. The biggest, strongest of their steeds was Varric’s, at the very least it was tall enough that The Iron Bull’s legs wouldn’t drag on the ground riding him. So, the Dwarf man let their Qunari friend use his horse, and he road with Solas officially proclaiming their ‘Dwarf-Elf-Coalition’ reunited.

Then, as they traveled, she’d been concerned Varric would start a brawl with Rainier, possibly attempt to kill the man, but she’d sat her Dwarf friend down made him promise her, to her face, with double pinkies, that he’d not harm the man. He could be rude, or angry, or whatever else he felt, but he’d have to figure out some way to work with him still because…well they just had to! Anyway, Varric kept his word, and mostly just pretended that Rainier didn’t exist, ignored him entirely, no attempt to belittle or smack talk the man, no exchange of pranks like there had been before when Varric hadn’t been sure they should trust the lone Warden they met in the Hinterlands.
He hadn’t told Ellie ‘told you so’, and he really could have. Varric was sweet really, at least in Ellie’s experience. He hadn’t once made her feel stupid for being tricked.

And they were still dealing with all that. They’d made camp for the evening along the edge of a river. Varric was reclined by the fire, reading, the Iron Bull seated next to him, reading…huh she thought it might be a letter from Cremisius, the Qunari kept close tabs on his Chargers, worried after them she thought, it was sweet. Solas sat closest to the fire, with ingredients for dinner scattered around him Sera was actually helping. Apparently, he’d taught her a lot about cooking when Ellie’d been sick and now whenever the Elf Apostle took up the task of preparing their meals, Sera was always a volunteer. They still didn’t like each other very much, but they didn’t exactly make conversation while they cooked aside from ‘pass me that spoon’ or ‘chop that more finely’. It was really great to see them doing something nicely together because they wanted to, not because they had to like fighting alongside each other and stuff.

Thom had taken to sitting apart from the group more often than not, he sat behind everyone, backed up sitting against the trunk of a tree while he whittled…something, Ellie wasn’t sure yet, it was just a block of wood that was less blocky.

Cassandra sat with Ellie, by the water, away from the rest of the group so they could focus on their work. The Seeker was going over the latest word from Leliana with Ellie. It sounded like things were sort of rocky in their negotiations over Rainier’s service, some rot about ‘the Game’ and how, while Callier and his family’s death had only been a part of the game, and Empress Celene had no true grievance with the loss of her ally outside of the fact she’d been her pawn on the ‘board’, she was obligated to kick up a fuss about Rainier being found and not serving a sentence in Orlesian captivity. Anyway, it was all complicated and made Ellie’s head hurt, made her heart hurt—emotionally, not physically though as she started to worry about all the things that could go wrong—what if they couldn’t work this out? Would Rainier be taken by Orlais? Imprisoned or executed, unable to help them with the Breach? Would the Inquisition be required to deal with him, execute him themselves to keep the Empress from declaring them an enemy and thwarting any progress they were making to get the Mages and Templars on their side?

All of those worries made her stomach burn and her heart started racing—like she was running like mad instead of sitting with Cassandra. Solas looked up at her and the Iron Bull raised a hand to quiet Varric who’d been saying something. Sera’d jumped up from her place around the fire coming forward but keeping a distance in case she’d be in the way of helping and she screamed at Cassandra,

“Stop yammering at Inky, something’s wrong with her!”

There wasn’t anything wrong, exactly. Okay sort of. Her heart wouldn’t slow down and then she couldn’t really catch her breath. Cassandra hadn’t been yammering, Ellie just hadn’t really heard that the woman was speaking, her hand was on Ellie’s shoulder though and she realized Cassandra had been asking if she’d needed potion, though the Nevarran woman had made up her mind for herself and risen to go get some. The Iron Bull came and sat straight down on his bottom, his legs on either side of Ellie so he could sit at her eye-level and he put a hand on her shoulder and in the other he held her unmarked hand.

“Hey boss, you’re okay. Try breathing with me,” he said taking in and releasing breath methodical increments she worked to match, she wasn’t sure she’d be able to, but she did. “Okay, good, that’s good. Can you tell me five things you can see?”

The question was kind of weird, but he said it like it was important. “Um, y-you?”

“Good job boss, you’re doing great, four more,” he said.
“The grass, trees, our tents, Cassandra.” The Nevarran woman had rejoined them, just come up to stand at The Iron Bull’s side, clutching a bottle of blue potion.

He continued, “Four things you feel—physically, outside not inside.”

“Your hands, my hair, the ground, the wind.”

He asked her for three things she could hear—his voice, the river, birdsong. Two things she smelled—him, he wasn’t stinky though she promised, and spindle weed, it was growing somewhere along the river. And then lastly—kind of silly sounding, he said—he asked if she could taste anything.

“Mint. I brushed my teeth after lunch.” Varric had made some sort of stew that had beef and onions and garlic in it. Tasted good but it made her breath reek, and she should keep her teeth clean anyway.

“Yeah I’m pretty glad you did that boss, smells better than garlic breath,” he teased her, patting her on the shoulder. “Feel better?”

Oh! Her heart wasn’t so poundy in her chest anymore. “Oh, gosh, yeah! Wow, how’d you do that?”

“Ben-Hessrath trick. Called grounding, your mind panics about a danger that isn’t physically present, grounding brings you back into the reality of the moment.”

Huh. Neat!

“Are you alright now, Eleanor?” Cassandra asked gently. Ellie nodded. “Have you need of um,” she cleared her throat, not wanting to disclose that she’d been about to give Ellie something for anxiety in front of the members of her party that hadn’t really been let in on her private business, she supposed.

“I think I’m okay now, The Iron Bull’s grounding thing worked really well,” she said, looking to the man still seated in front of her, and if she turned her head to the side a bit, Sera was standing, sort of pacing in place nervously, watching everything. “Sorry. That happens sometimes, I’m alright now, promise.”

Sera stared at her. “Inky that was…shite what was that?!” she glared at Cassandra, “And don’t you dare say it was nothing, you priss! I know what I heard this time, something’s wrong!”

Oh.

Ellie felt her cheeks go warm with embarrassment, and she looked down at her lap. Bull’s hand on her shoulder gave her a squeeze, and he rumbled out quietly, “It’s okay kid, you don’t have to say anything if you don’t want to.”

They’d heard! Solas had been of some help, with his connection, been able to send waves of calm if he didn’t get too freaked out from the panic coming from her end. She hadn’t thought Bull or Sera noticed her occasional brush with panic attacks over the last week, but they heard! And Sera’d asked Cassandra about it and…well it sounded like Cassandra lied to keep Ellie’s confidence and that felt wrong, hypocritical for Ellie to let her do that seeing as, well, she hadn’t liked it at all when she realized she’d been lying for Rainier.

She didn’t want to say anything, not really. It was embarrassing! But, “No, it’s okay. I um…That was a panic attack, I have those sometimes. And uh, well you’ve seen the potion I take
every morning?"

Sera nodded, stopped pacing. "Yeah, you mean your vitamin pish?"

Ellie shook her head. "It’s not vitamins, I mean there might be some in there, I don’t know a whole lot about it. It’s for depression."

Sera plopped straight down onto her bottom, crossing her legs in front of her and leaning on them a bit. "That doesn’t sound like an Inky thing. That should definitely not be an Inky thing—you’re always smiles! And lovey! And sweet and shite! That’s just dumb!"

Cassandra leveled a menacing glare at the Elf girl. "Do not think to belittle—"

"She’s not being mean, Cassandra, honest. I mean it would sound weird to me too," Ellie defended, looking to Sera again. The Elf girl was quiet, scrunching her eyes closed as she…well it looked like she was thinking it over really hard.

"Thanks boss, for telling us, you didn’t have to do that,” The Iron Bull said, patting Ellie on the shoulder.

Ellie shrugged. "I sort of just freaked out on you and it’d be weird to just let it go without explanation. You guys are my friends, and we work together, sometimes in some pretty dangerous situations. You need to know that I’m not going to break down on you mid-fight or something. So, it’s only fair to be forthright with my problems and promise that I’m dealing with them. Thanks for helping me."

The Iron Bull sat back, arms out behind him so he could recline on the palms of his hands. "No problem. Everyone has their crap. I’ve dealt with depression before, Qunari have re-educators for that. Branch of the Ben-Hessrath that handles all things mental health."

Oh. Gosh… "I’m sorry," she said. "You’re okay now?"

Bull nodded his head, smiling. "Yes, Imekari. That was years ago. But I spent a good deal of time with the re-educators and there’s some of their line of training in psychology incorporated into the spy branch of Ben-Hessrath training. If you’d like I could teach you a few things like grounding that might help you."

"Hey Chuckles, how long did I wager it’d take Tiny to offer to teach Ellie something?" Varric asked.

"You believed he would be requesting time on her roster before the end of the month,” Solas sighed.

Those two betted on the weirdest things, or maybe it was just that they bet on everything.

"Roster?" The Iron Bull asked.

"I get pretty busy when we’re in Haven,” Ellie explained, “there’s a lot of different things I learn that help with the work we do in the field, and sometimes I have to meet with people considering allying with the Inquisition, or meet with the Advisors about things—so Lady Josie makes me a schedule so I can do everything I need to get done."

"Perhaps some education in psychology would be beneficial to your work, and at the very least it could prove useful in assisting you personally,” Cassandra said. "If you would truly be agreeable, Bull, I could send word to Lady Josephine."
Oh, it’d be fun to learn from The Iron Bull! But wouldn’t he be busy in Haven? “Oh gosh! But I mean you’ve been away from the Chargers for so long and you’ve got your Ben-Hessrath stuff, I wouldn’t want to make more work for you.”

“Spending a little time teaching you some things isn’t going to take away from my work—in fact it helps with my ‘Ben-Hessrath stuff’. My job is technically to spend time with Inquisition higher-ups, and that’s you, boss. I’m down if you are,” he said.

Oh, that sounded all good then! “Deal!” Ellie agreed, “Thanks!” she said and the Qunari man patted her gently on the head before rising to his feet to rejoin the other men around the fire.

Sera was still sitting in the middle of their camp thinking when she suddenly snapped her fingers. “Oh! Got it! Like your asthma stuff!”

Um…“What do you mean?” Ellie asked.

“You know!” Sera said. “You’re breathing just fine right now but you still have Asthma—you’ve always got it, even when you’re not all wheezy and shite. So, this depression business, you’ve got stuff that helps keep you from getting all mentally wheezy or whatever. So, you can be smiles and sicky.”

Oh. Yeah. That was actually…huh.

Ellie always felt sort of…well she was embarrassed, ashamed for having to get help with something going on in her mind. She felt like she should just be able to move on on her own, like normal. Something makes you sad, you don’t cry about it for forever, you cheer yourself up and feel better. Mad about something? She’d been livid with Thom at first, but she’d had time to work through that anger, now she was just sort of…sad because she wanted things to be back to normal and waiting to see if she could trust him again. She hadn’t needed potion or brain tricks to snap out of it. But the way Sera put it…depression was something she couldn’t get over like normal, because her brain was sick, just like her lungs. Ellie wasn’t ashamed of having Asthma—it was just a thing she dealt with, it wasn’t her fault she had it and all she could do was try her best to keep it from interfering in the things she needed to get done. It was the same thing.

“Sera, has anyone told you you’re kind of a genius?” she asked. Sera preened at that sitting up straight and smiling proudly.

Cassandra was shaking her head as she sat back down with Ellie by the river’s edge.

“You’re alright now, Eleanor?” she asked, her hand resting on Ellie’s knee. She nodded, and Cassandra looked relieved. “Are you feeling up to continuing our discussion of Leliana and Josephine’s efforts for Rainier?” she asked carefully, gently enough Ellie knew she could say no and the Seeker would drop the subject until Ellie herself brought it up again.

Sera jumped up to sort of launch herself at Ellie then, colliding into her side and wrapping her arms around her shoulders. “No more bothering Inky with friggin Beardy’s bullshit, Cassandra! It’s *his* mess!” she exclaimed, half-shouting in Ellie’s ear, turning her head a bit to look at Thom and stick her tongue out at him.

Ellie looked to him then and saw he’d stopped his whittling, his project laying on the ground at his side, abandoned. He looked…well he’d gone very pale. Thom hadn’t been able to hear what Ellie and Cassandra were discussing, he’d Human hearing and sometimes it wasn’t the best, but he’d certainly heard Sera’s shouting that Ellie’s panic had gotten out of hand while discussing their work to clean up after his lie.
Oh, gosh, if worrying about how it was all going to work out had freaked Ellie out, he certainly had to be worried now too—it was his life at stake. “It’s okay,” she was quick to assure him. “Leliana and Lady Josie hit a bit of a snag, but we’ll get it sorted, alright? I promise.” She wasn’t entirely sure how they would fix it, but she’d always been good about keeping promises so, she figured doing so would sort of lend to tipping fate in their favor.

Varric made a sort of frustrated growling sound and slammed his book shut before shooting to his feet and stomping away from the campsite, very intentionally walking the direction opposite of where Rainier sat. Well, it was better than the Dwarf brawling with the man she supposed. A lot better, really. He was going to keep his promise to Ellie and that was nice, he was a good friend. They all were…for the most part. Solas, Cassandra, Sera, the Iron Bull…

Huh. It made her think she was so very lucky to have so many great friends and somehow that sort of made her think of something—Vivienne was her friend, sort of. Her ally at least, and she’d promised to work within the realm of Orlesian politics on behalf of the Inquisition, in ways that sometimes might be able to surpass Lady Josie’s work. So, she’d asked Cassandra to see if maybe, since Madam de Fer was already in Orlais with Marehis, she wouldn’t mind going to the Empress to settle this matter for them.

“That’s a sound idea, Eleanor,” Cassandra agreed.

So that was a focus in the following days as they made the return trip to Haven. They’d run the idea by Lady Josie first, because Ellie didn’t want her feeling badly, thinking that Ellie was disappointed in the work she’d done, or feeling like she was having Vivienne undermine her or something. But the Inquisition Ambassador admitted to having considered the same thing and thought it an excellent notion. So, Cassandra sent off a letter to Vivienne, requesting her assistance.

Ellie got the weird feeling, like the return messenger bird had been given performance-enhancing drugs or charmed or catapulted at great speed—it returned to them in record time, and practically crash-landed into Ellie bearing Vivienne’s response, which she passed off to Cassandra who said Madam de Fer ‘would be absolutely delighted’ to assist in such a way, and she was already on her way to Halamshiral as they speak, oh it was such a shame to have reason to leave the Oasis.

That made Ellie worry a bit about Marehis, but Cassandra said she’d been receiving copies of Marehis’s reports to Leliana and things had been going well in the Oasis, but it was very hot, and isolated, and far from all signs of civilization, and the actual Oasis proper was full of Nugs and Tuskets. Oh! That sounded so cute! But apparently Madam de Fer hadn’t thought so, the soothing water had to be full of filth she was certain, so she’d not been delighted by it at all. And there were Rifts all around, but they’d managed to work around them. They’d found old mining equipment abandoned by the company that had been working out there and discovered a weird Temple that Marehis hadn’t liked at all, but it seemed have something to do with the Shards—Madam de Fer theorized that the Shards could work like keys, but they hadn’t brought the Shards along for a scouting mission. Marehis said she’d see to it that all the Shards Ellie had collected would be sent along to their infiltration camp in the Oasis and when Ellie and her party decided to finally check the place out themselves, they would be there, waiting.

Marehis was wrapping up her final look-around the area with Scout Harding, and then she would return to Haven. But, she wouldn’t be able to be there when Ellie and the others got back from the Storm Coast. That was sort of sad. She missed Marehis! It was embarrassing that she’d gotten a little teary over it, Maker, she was such a baby sometimes! But it had just been she and Cassandra, and Sera too, talking in their tent, and Sera hadn’t made fun of her, just told her it would
be okay—they’d have loads of fun when they got back to Haven!—and Cassandra told her it was alright to be sad about missing Marehis, assured her she was positive Marehis missed her too, that she was a strong and capable woman and she’d be back before Ellie knew it.

Huh. Speaking of Elves she worried over—Solas. He’d been really quiet the last couple of days of their journey back to Haven, like he was worried about something, but when Ellie asked he said he was ‘well’. He hadn’t been very upset over Rainier, he wasn’t best friends with Thom, but he remained cordial, polite. She thought maybe it had something to do with the person he’d been writing to so very much—he’d sent letters out to whoever ‘M-a-r-e-h-i-s’ was during their return trip to Haven, and he’d been receiving letters back until a few days ago. Had they had a falling out or broken up or something? He never talked about who he wrote to, so she was afraid to ask him outright. Secrets did have their place—whoever he was romantically involved with was his private business. Well, his private business and hers whoever she was. Oh! Or he! Maybe that was why he hadn’t found an interest in Marehis, maybe Ellie’d misread things? She didn’t know many of the male Elves in the Inquisition, but she’d keep any eye out, for whenever Solas was ready to put himself back out there! Yeah!

Coming back to Haven was a relief, Ellie missed the routine, and the snow, and the people, and her bed!

Oh, that was sort of a new experience, another thing the Inquisition had given her—home. A set point, not just the next form of shelter she could find. Homesickness and the absolute high that came with returning home after a long time away. Ellie’d always moved on, looking for the next place, the only other place she’d ever made a point of coming ‘round was Ava’s but even that had been…not something she could term home, not in the way she did her place in the Inquisition. It had always been dangerous, so Ava kept her at arm’s length. The elder Apostate struggled between the urgent need to keep her head down, keep everything in her life unquestionable for fear she’d attract too much attention, be cast from her home, and what she felt was her obligation to be of some help to the scrawny young Apostate she’d whisked away into her cellar one day when Templars had gotten too close and she had all of a second to decide if she was going to leave Ellie to her own devices or save her from certain capture.

But, Ava had come up in a Circle, escaped that life at great cost for good reason. She wasn’t going to stand by and just let Templars drag another little girl off to be locked away forever. So, she took Ellie in for a time and always welcomed her back, taught her what she’d known of medicine and magic before meeting Trevelyan and then Solas and even Adan, in the healing department.

Crossing the last bridge into Haven estate and seeing the smoke of Harritt’s forge growing ever nearer, the outer walls of Inquisition Headquarters coming into view. It was pure relief and excitement and just wow, she was so glad to be back! She could kiss the snowy ground!

Horse Master Dennet was waiting for them just outside the forge with some of his crew, ready to take their horses into their care. Oh, gosh, she wondered if maybe he would be upset over everything. Lady Josie had said she and the advisors debriefed the Horse Master and Blacksmith about the situation, at least that Rainier had lied about his identity and since confessed he wasn’t a Warden. The men had taken some time to consider a response, and Lady Josephine said they were still alright with the man sharing a roof with them if the Lady Herald was so willing to attempt forgiveness. As long as this ‘Thom’ did right by her, they’d endeavor to keep things cordial.

“Master Dennet!” Ellie greeted him, going for cheerful. Sera slipped out of the saddle behind her dashing away to race up to Haven’s gate saying “Gotta piss, gotta piss, gotta piss!” so. Ellie supposed she had to use the bathroom—they could have stopped! Sera was just a riot.
sometimes. Ellie couldn’t help laughing a bit.

“It’s good to see you, my lady,” Horse Master Dennet said as he approached and offered Ellie a hand down, “You had safe journeys I hope?”

Ellie waited until her feet were on the ground and then said, “All safe! Oh! We have a new party member,” she turned to look at the Qunari man lumbering down off Varric’s horse. “Horse Master Dennet, this is The Iron Bull. He’s going to be working with me in the field, do you think you could help him find a horse of his own?”

The Human man stared at the large Qunari, sort of paling a bit, but he cleared his throat and regained his composure. “O-of course, my lady.”

“Nice to meet you, boss speaks highly of you,” The Iron Bull said. “You’ve met my Lieutenant, Cremisius Aclassi?”

“Tevinter chap, came ‘round and introduced himself when he and the Ambassador worked out where your crew would set up camp. Bull’s Chargers, yeah? Decent neighbors, they don’t cause a bunch of ruckus and spook the horses or anything.”

“Krem runs a tight ship when I’m away. Back now though so I can’t promise the ‘ruckus’ will stay down,” the Iron Bull joked as he and Dennet shook hands. The Horse Master laughed a bit and seemed to be put at ease with his new Qunari neighbor.

Oh. Ellie noticed then there were a few tents set up between the Forge and Haven’s gate. She almost worried because surely there was room in Haven but then she remembered that Varric liked his tent near the Chantry, and Sera slept in the Tavern. Too, if Cremisius had worked with Lady Josie, obviously this was the accommodations the Chargers were most comfortable with, so that was nice.

Oh! Cremisius was just emerging from Haven’s gate, and he called out over his shoulder, “Chief’s here!” as he came down the steps. Just after him came a group of people, a dark-skinned Human man, and a short blonde man, and the Elf woman, Skinner. They all went to gather around the tent, though Cremisius continued toward Ellie and her party, still having their horses being dealt with. The Iron Bull waved to his Lieutenant in acknowledgement before he followed Horse Master Dennet to seek out a proper steed for him.

The Tevinter man saw Ellie then and he smiled as he approached.

“It’s good to see you, my lady,” he said warmly, “How are you feeling?”

“Oh, much better now, thanks!” Ellie said, smiling. “Cassandra said you sent the Embrium salve, that was really helpful. Oh! And I love the hat you made me! And the flower! It was all super thoughtful of you!” Ellie thanked him, lowering her hood so he could see she was wearing the soft wool hat before popping up on tip toes to kiss him on the cheek.

Cremisius’s face went red and he scratched at the back of his neck nervously. “It was nothing, my lady. I’m just glad you’re feeling better, and that you’re back safe.”

“Ahh, Lieutenant Aclassi, it’s good to see you again,” Cassandra said as she came up from behind Ellie.

“You as well, Seeker Pentaghast,” he greeted in kind.

“I apologize for the interruption, Eleanor,” Cassandra said, “but the families of Lord
Berand and the late Lady Vellina have been visiting Haven, Lady Josephine was hoping you would get in, in time to see them before they leave this afternoon.”

Berand worked for Commander Cullen, Vellina…oh! The noblewoman they’d found deceased in the Hinterlands, she’d been engaged to Lord Berand, he joined the Inquisition after Ellie informed him of his fiancée’s passing. Wow, it’d seemed so long ago, the war room meeting where Lady Josie said their families wished to see Ellie and throw in their hats with the Inquisition.

(Of course!” she looked to Cremisius, “I’ll be back around later, to make sure everyone’s settling in alright. The Iron Bull should be done soon, Master Dennet’s just assigning him a horse. Oh! Do the Chargers need horses?” she thought to ask.

“No worries, I’ve spoken with the Horse Master, decent bloke. He got us all squared away. I already picked a horse for Chief, actually, strong old mare,” and then leaning in a bit he shared conspiratorially, “Her name’s Bitsy, though.”

Oh gosh! The name created the mental image of The Iron Bull riding into battle on the back of an itsy-bitsy horse. Ellie slapped a hand over her mouth to keep from laughing too loudly. “Really?” she giggled out, and Cremisius smiled.

He nodded, then said, “I shouldn’t keep you, I hope your meeting goes well.” He gave Ellie and Cassandra a wave before going to…probably check and see how well The Iron Bull was warming up to his new horse.

Cassandra linked arms with Ellie. “You were able to thank the Lieutenant?” she asked as they walked, heading for Haven’s gate.

Ellie nodded. “Uh-huh!”

“I am glad. Would you care to freshen up before we head to the Chantry?”

Cassandra was admittedly nervous, returning to Haven without Marehis awaiting them. She’d confirmed with Leliana that the Spymaster was aware Eleanor’s caretaker wouldn’t be there when Eleanor returned, and she was gratified to see someone had been around to keep house after a fashion, her quarters didn’t seem dusty and nothing looked out of place, and most importantly, there was a fire going in the cabin, Eleanor’s room was warm and she was vaguely certain the bedding had been changed.

Eleanor went to her wash cabinet, poured fresh water from the pitcher into the basin, wetting a cloth left laying out for her, to wash her face. She opened the cabinet and withdrew a few more towels, one of which she offered to Cassandra. “Your face doesn’t look dirty or anything,” she assured her, “but I know its nice to clean up a bit after being on the road.”

Sweet girl. Cassandra accepted the offer, washing her own face. Though she did feel out of her element. Marehis seemed almost effortless in her care for Eleanor and Cassandra…well all she’d done was walk the girl to her quarters, and then Eleanor had seen to it the Seeker washed her own face. She felt uncharacteristically clumsy like she was doing this wrong—she should take charge, should she not?

Somehow this felt different from their time on the road, Eleanor kept after herself with
bathing and brushing her teeth, they worked together to make meals. Cassandra watched over her safety and the only role she felt she played as caretaker was when she ensured Eleanor had her potions. But in Haven, Marehis saw to every element of the girl’s care. She was always at her side—Cassandra had seen how the woman was there even before Eleanor was awake, making sure her cabin was warm and breakfast ready, the Elf woman did everything from picking out Eleanor’s clothing to seeing her safely through her scheduled day.

She was uncertain who would take on that role now that Marehis was delayed, still making the journey from the Oasis back to Haven. Eleanor could sort for herself as far as personal hygiene, bathing…clothing herself Cassandra was decently sure she would be fine in—she knew how to dress herself obviously but she may need to rely on Lady Josephine for fashion advice. Certainly, the Seeker could assist in Eleanor’s morning routine—she was already a large part of it, she would merely be taking on the task of seeing the girl got breakfast, and the days Lady Josephine scheduled her lessons with Cassandra and Cullen, those were always the first lessons of the day now. But she didn’t think she would be able to follow the girl throughout her day, as much as she would certainly be glad to, she had her own responsibilities to the Inquisition to see to. Who would see to her safety?

This made a survey of questions pop into her mind. What should she be doing? Did she need to get Eleanor to the Chantry right away? As soon as possible, she was sure. What did the girl need? Would she need advice on how to speak to their noble guests? She got nervous sometimes, when handling Inquisition alliances, should Cassandra offer her calming potion? No, Eleanor never seemed under the influence when she attended meetings, but maybe…

“Should I change, do you think?”

Eleanor’s question sort of snapped Cassandra out of her own internal inquisition. Ahh. A part of Cassandra didn’t see why—she always went about in her armor, herself. But Eleanor had a bit of a different role to play than she, and she’d meetings with nobility today.

“Certainly,” she cleared her throat as she looked around the cabin and went to the wardrobe, opening it to look through Eleanor’s clothing.

She hadn’t cared a bit about what was fashionable to wear when she’d been fifteen. And she certainly had not a clue what would be fashionable for such a girl to wear now.

But Eleanor was at her side then, humming a bit as she filed through her clothing, head bopping side to side as she considered her options.

“Lady Josie said they’re from Highever, right?”

“Yes, Ferelden nobility,” Cassandra confirmed.

“Their heraldry is greeny-blue,” the girl’s nose scrunched up a bit as she tried to remember. “The drop of water with two arrows crossed over it yeah?” she asked. Lady Josephine had seen to it Eleanor would be able to recognize notable flags of their noble allies, Cassandra was pleased the girl had taken the lessons seriously.

“Yes,” she was certain Eleanor was correct. Ahh, she was pulling a…Lady Josephine would likely term the green-blue color ‘teal’, tunic and leggings from her closet, swirls of soft blue in their design. Cassandra was not wholly fashion minded but she thought it would look nice, the colors did compliment the green of Eleanor’s eyes, and the cool hues sort of contrasted the warm tones of her skin in a way that was striking.
Eleanor changed quickly, putting her armor and staff away, and she checked her face in the mirror over the washbasin to make certain she was clean. She tousled the curls atop her head trying to arrange her hair neatly.

Oh. She realized something she was certain Marehis would do for the girl, and…well, she hoped she could at least make a passable attempt at the task.

“Would you like your hair braided, Eleanor?”

“Oh!” she looked to Cassandra with surprise, “Really? Could you?”

She wasn’t sure, but Maker watch over them all, she was certainly going to try. She nodded and was a bit surprised when the girl took that as a signal to seat herself on the floor before the fireplace, but she supposed that was merely where she sat when Marehis did it. So Cassandra sat down on the floor behind the girl and gathered her hair so it was all over her shoulders, down her back.

It was a different experience than she had with her own hair—the braid she kept around her head was easily maintained of course, otherwise she would simply keep it cropped short. But her hair was very fine and while it was a bit wild when she rose in the mornings, it was easily tamed. Eleanor’s hair reminded her of literal fire, unruly and it easily got out of control if one wasn’t careful. Thick and heavy and the curls seemed to multiply as she worked, like they were conspiring against the uncertain Seeker. But like with all things, Cassandra was persistent and while it certainly wasn’t Marehis’s handiwork, she had Eleanor’s hair trapped in a neat, thick braid of curls that tapered to the small of her back, bound at its end by two tightly knotted hair ties because she meant business, her labors would not be foiled by a gust of wind or the hair coming alive and trying to unbind itself, which she felt most certain it could not, at least not now. Not with two hair ties. Certainly not!

“Oh wow, Cassandra, you did great!” Eleanor enthused once she was on her feet and twisting about a bit to see her hair in the mirror. “Thank you!”

Cassandra had fought and won actual battles whose victory paled in comparison to that which she felt at Eleanor’s approval of her attempts with her hair. She caught herself smiling in the mirror as she offered her arm to Eleanor. “I am glad it pleases you. Shall we head to the Chantry?”

The girl nodded but she looked nervous, to Cassandra’s eye.

“Eleanor?”

“Oh, gosh, sorry I just…” she looked up at Cassandra. “I’m kind of worried, seeing the advisors again after…” her chin quivered a bit and the Seeker was mildly horrified that she might cry, but she didn’t, just cleared her throat. “Do you think they’ll be upset with me? About everything with Thom?”

Maker, she could throttle that man. She settled instead for putting an arm around Eleanor’s shoulders and pulling the girl into a hug. It was almost strange how such a thing was so easy for her now, but Eleanor was so openly affectionate with those she cared for, and after days of almost non-stop contact with the girl when she’d been ill, Cassandra found she could come to miss it, took any opportunity that arose where it would be appropriate to be so open with her regard. Speaking somewhat into her hair as she said, “Eleanor, you did nothing wrong. You did not knowingly misinform anyone—we were all fooled. Lady Josephine, Leliana, Cullen, they do not blame you— it was Leliana’s information that said he was a Warden in the first place, do you fault her for his betrayal?”
Eleanor shook her head, pulling back to look into Cassandra’s face as if concerned the Seeker did blame their Spymaster. “Of course not! Leliana had no way of knowing! Thom was the only one who knew Blackwall had died, and he went around telling everyone that’s who he was, she…” the girl calmed then, “it wasn’t her fault like it isn’t mine, I see what you mean,” she said with a smile, she leaned in again, borrowing her head against Cassandra’s neck and the tension in her frame relaxed. “You’re the best.”

Maker, ‘the best’ indeed, she was embarrassed how very pleased she was to be called such, it was a ridiculous thing. Cassandra dropped a kiss to the girl’s hair and rubbed her back for a moment before releasing her. “Do you have need of anything?”

“I feel better, like thinking and feeling wise about my meeting but um, my stomachs sort of in knots, burning.”

She was in need of potion, then, Adan’s instruction was clear about that. Cassandra worried—the girl had been using it only occasionally, before a meal every once in a while, but since Rainier’s reveal on the Coast she began taking it a daily, many days taking the maximum amount she was allowed. Cassandra was not worried of abuse of course, Eleanor was hardly getting a high off the stuff and it wasn’t habit forming, but that her worries made her so very ill so often lately was concerning. This would be her third dose today alone.

“Of course, Eleanor,” Cassandra said, gently, handing a draught over and Eleanor had it downed in the blink of an eye. “Would you care to let it settle before we join the advisors?”

She shook her head, and linked arms with the Seeker. “I think I’m ready now, thanks. For the potion and for listening to my pre-war-room freak out,” she said, jesting to make light.

_Did_she usually have such worries before her meetings? Cassandra supposed…oh, Maker. If she were as young, and non-confrontational as Eleanor was, yes War Room meetings would be nerve-wracking. The girl could argue over things she felt some conviction over, but that only came if she felt she was a reliable source on the subject. Cassandra knew well now, the girl was not so brazen to assume she knew everything about everything, and openly admitted to having no clue how to even begin fathoming many of the issues they dealt with in their meetings. That she’d been able to voice her idea to approach both Mages and Templars had been surprising, and the girl had privately admitted to Cassandra that she’d only done so because her magic had encouraged her.

It made her think of herself in Eleanor’s place, when she’d been her age. She could easily imagine a fifteen-year-old Cassandra storming into the War Room, angry at everyone and everything, arguing with the advisors at every turn, having strong opinions on their every issue that she would stubbornly stand by, whether she was right or wrong not mattering to her in the slightest.

“What are you thinking of?” Eleanor asked as they walked the path to the Chantry, a bit of laughter in her own voice as she smiled up at Cassandra.

Ahh, had she laughed aloud? She could feel the smile on her own face at the very least. “Nothing of note, just how very different I was from you, in my youth.”

“Do you think we’d’ve gotten along?” Eleanor asked.

Oh goodness. “Unfortunately, I do not think we would have, through no fault of yours. I was very brisk, and angry. Though…” she thought it over. Eleanor had a great deal of patience, something many lacked with Cassandra in her youth. Somehow, she was almost certain if anyone could have weathered that, it would be Eleanor. “If you were persistent, I’m sure your influence would have broken through eventually. Over time, we may have even been friends,” she said. “I’m
certainly glad to consider you such now.”

Eleanor beamed at that, hugging Cassandra’s arm more tightly as she said, “Me too!”

The Chantry doors swung open to reveal Commander Cullen speaking to Lord Berand just inside the Chantry hall, though they’d obviously just finished, the Lord was turning to leave and he bowed to Eleanor when he saw her, wishing her a pleasant morning before he took his leave of the Chantry. The Commander looked to Cassandra and Eleanor and he smiled.

“Cassandra, it’s good to see you,” he greeted warmly, his eyes sort of lingered on her and she realized she was still smiling, it was not a wholly common sight, not something she did aside from…well Eleanor had a way of making her do so. It was mildly embarrassing just now as she worked to school her features. She was glad when the Commander turned his attention to Eleanor. “You as well, Lady Herald. Cassandra informed us you were poorly while on the Storm Coast, I trust you’re feeling better?”

“I am, thanks!”

No sooner had she spoken then,

“Is that Eleanor?!” Josephine’s voice echoed through the hall from her office, and the Antivan woman was suddenly rushing, well walking rather briskly in a way she may term improper, down the hall, Leliana looking bemused as she trailed after her friend. “My lady,” Josephine said, coming near but stopping just short of touching the girl. “Would you be ill at ease if I were to give you a hug?”

Eleanor looked surprised that the woman would ask, “Oh! Of course not! Hug away!” she insisted, releasing her hold on Cassandra’s arm and putting her arms out. It was rather a ludicrous question, but Cassandra supposed the advisors did not see quite so much of Eleanor to know just how very affectionate she was. Lady Josephine held the girl tightly for a moment before pulling back and saying,

“My lady, we were truly very worried when we heard you were ill, you are fully recovered?”

“I am,” she said, “everyone took really good care of me.”

Eleanor had been particularly grateful to her companions for having aided her when she was sick. It struck Cassandra about the fifth time Eleanor saw fit to thank her for some arbitrary thing she’d done to comfort her, that the girl hadn’t expected to be taken care of. That she had never been taken care of, not usually anyway, when she found herself ill before the Conclave. When her sickness filled her lungs with fluid, nearly suffocated the girl to death, it was her magic that stepped in as it obviously must have in the past, with some assistance from Bull, expelled the foul stuff from her lungs—she’d been thrashing in her sleep, her magic trying to get her to turn over so she could rid herself of the fluid without re-breathing or swallowing the bile. It horrified Cassandra to think that there had been a time when Eleanor may have found herself wholly alone, stricken with fever, weak, and unable to breathe, with only her magic to just keep her alive until…what? Had she just managed to heal on her own over time? Had no one helped her? Her Ava had been of some assistance it seemed but what of the times when she couldn’t be due to distance, or her death?

“I am so glad to hear that,” Josephine said.

“Yes, it’s good to see you looking so well, my lady,” Leliana agreed.
“You were in our prayers—as you always are, but we took time to pray for your recovery in earnest when word came.”

“Oh, gosh,” Eleanor was blushing now. “That’s so sweet of you, thanks.”

“I thought I was going to have to lock Josie in her office—she immediately set about plans for an all-out vigil throughout Haven,” Leliana said sounding wholly amused.

“I was rightly concerned!” Josephine defended. “Though I understand it would not have been wise to do so, and risk word getting to someone who may seek to use the information to your disadvantage my lady.”

“I appreciate it,” Eleanor promised. “The almost-vigil and being so thoughtful for my safety.”

“Of course. Come! We’ve updates on the Rainier situation we should discuss in the War Room,” Josephine said as she began leading them down the hall. “And then Lady Vellina and Lord Berand’s families are just dying to meet you my lady, oh, they heard of your time in Val Royeaux—Lord Berand’s father thought it was rather well done of you, standing up to Lord Seeker Lucious. And Lady Vellina’s family actually has Orlesian ties—the Marquis that challenged you at Madam de Fers’s salon? Lady Vellina was his second cousin, they share the aunt you had us write and she insisted she had to meet you, so she will be among those you see today.”

Leliana opened the War Room door and they took their usual spots around the table.

Eleanor took in a deep breath and asked, “So. Updates on the um, Rainier situation?”

“I will challenge the man to a duel on your behalf if you wish it, Eleanor,” Commander Cullen said, in tones that neared seething.

“Cullen has put in a formal request with you to duel the man on your behalf,” Lady Josephine reported drilly. “And Madam de Fer has reported that she has in fact secured the Inquisition full custody over Rainier. There has also been…well, an interesting development. You recall the letter we received from the University of Orlais, their Chancellor Jurgen Haulis*?” Josephine asked.

“I’ll pass on the duel, but that’s um, sweet I think? Thanks,” Eleanor said before she thought for a moment. “Haulis, he wrote to the Inquisition asking for help with…Mother Hevara? Right? The Cleric we saw when we were in Val Royeaux.”

Awful woman. She’d said such horrible things about Eleanor, for all to hear in Val Royeaux’s Summer Bazaar. Though Cassandra was grateful that it seemed most spoke more of Eleanor coming to the woman’s assistance after the woman cast such slander upon her, than of the slander itself.

What had been most horrific to the Seeker was that the Mother Hevara had called Eleanor selfish. She feared the girl would take such an accusation to heart—come to truly believe herself to be selfish. The last time someone from the Chantry had maligned Eleanor in such a way, it had been Chancellor Roderick. ‘And yet you live’ the man had said, blaming her for surviving—the Conclave and her attempt against the Breach—and the words had been a part of the girl’s nightmares she described to Cassandra, played a role in the intrusive thoughts she was subject to that told her she was not worthy to have been the sole survivor of the Concalve, that she should have died.
There was a lingering fear ever-present at the edge of Cassandra’s mind, that with her struggles, the near constant turmoil she’d been subjected to since the Conclave—Maker, the girl had never killed a person before the Crossroads. She hadn’t been prepared for death delivered by her own hands upon another person. She’d been tortured, reviled, betrayed. All that she’d faced, all that came for her, with all the guilt the girl felt for her survival on top of it all…she worried Eleanor may seek to stop surviving. Either in giving up completely or…

“Cassandra?” Eleanor’s voice, there was a hand on her arm.

“Seeker Pentaghast?” Cullen asked.

She realized then she’d been rather lost in thought. Oh, her fists were clenched at her sides and her face felt a bit tight with stress. She blinked and looked to Eleanor’s Marked hand resting on her arm, raised her left hand and placed it over Eleanor’s. “I was merely thinking.”

Of things she should not have been, her mind was required presently and such thoughts…they were as unthinkable as they were unpleasant, and she should not worry about those possibilities in such a way. Eleanor had an excellent system of support that stretched across many people with any perspective she could possibly need, and she was openly receiving help.

Cassandra gave her hand a gentle squeeze and the girl smiled before dropping her hand.

“I guess it is a lot to consider,” Eleanor said as if in agreement, a crease in her brow as she pondered.

What she was pondering, Cassandra was unsure.

Ahh. She was most tempted to simply let it stand and not admit she’d not been paying attention to save face but…if Eleanor was in need of her input on the matter she would not be ill-equipped to give it. “I did not hear the uh…developments, Lady Josephine was informing us of. I apologize, I allowed myself to become distracted.”

She’d expected to receive looks of reproach or perhaps a complaint for having to rehash the information, but what she got was,

“Oh!” Eleanor gasped, as if startled. “I’m sorry! You checked with me to make sure I didn’t need anything before coming to the Chantry, but I didn’t ask about you!”

“I am well, Eleanor,” Cassandra was assuring her, but the girl was already digging around in the lower pockets of her tunic, just above her hips, withdrawing a few thin wafers of sweet shortbread, and holding them out in offering. The girl was looking at her in earnest, like she was concerned, and she thought that the only way Cassandra could grow distracted during an important meeting was if she were unwell somehow, perhaps suffering from low blood sugar. When had she put food in her pockets?

Maybe she was suffering low blood sugar, she barely realized she asked the question aloud.

The girl gave a smile like she’d been caught with her hand in the cookie jar, as opposed to a hand in the snack pocket, “Um. I sort of remembered Highever’s colors because I saw there was something in the tunic pockets of this outfit. Marehis always makes sure I have snacks and keeps tabs on my schedule so…I figure whoever had the fireplace going in my cabin had instructions on which outfit to supply.” Maker bless Marehis, the woman was a force of nature. Cassandra couldn’t imagine herself thinking to do such a thing. “Huh, oh! These are really good,” Eleanor was saying, “did you know Seggrit makes th—” she gave an excited gasp as if she’d just realized
something, “Seggrit! Was he the one who did all that? Made sure my cabin was warm when I got back?”

Seggrit? The curt, Ferelden man who ran Haven’s store?

Leliana nodded. “We were considering who to deliver the task to and the man volunteered himself.”

“Ha! That jerk! He loves me and he knows it!” and then, at everyone’s mildly surprised stares, because Eleanor was not in habit of calling people names she giggled, “We talk mean to each other but not for real meanness—Seg calls me a brat and insists he finds me insufferable, then does nice things for me. He’s the one that got Varric chocolate. And he makes a lot of the things Marehis has around for snacks—he says he orders them from somewhere, but he’s handed them to her piping hot while had flour on his face!”

She was still holding the wafers out Cassandra.

Well. It had been a while since breakfast.

Cassandra took a wafer and nodded to the girl to say that was enough for her. It got her a smile for some reason and then Eleanor was looking to the other Advisors. “Anyone else?”

Cullen shrugged and took one, Leliana too, so Lady Josephine allowed herself to partake as well, leaving a left-over wafer in Eleanor’s hand which she took a bite out of once she was certain no one was going to ask for seconds. It was almost comical, the War Room going from talk of important issues to, Eleanor’s enthusiasm, to the quiet crunching of the five of them taking an impromptu snack break. It was admittedly good, crisp and sweet but there were granules of salt as well, and the bites melted on her tongue. She could practically see the gears turning in Lady Josephine’s mind as she pondered just how to cajole the Fereldan man into making her things to serve to guests of the Inquisition.

“So, Lady Josie was reminding us that after Val Royeaux, Mother Hevara started trying to deflect the backlash against the Chantry by calling out the University of Orlais, use them as a ‘scapegoat’, Chancellor Haulis said,” Eleanor recounted for Cassandra.

Ahh. Things were always tense between the University and the Chantry. They often sought to create some greater discord between the people, and the University whenever there was unease against the Chantry. The University’s Chancellor Juregen Haulis had written the Inquisition and asked that they help get the Chantry off their back in exchange for the University’s resources on magical knowledge, perhaps they would find something of use to their issues with the Breach. Discussed among the advisors, they decided to have Leliana arm the University with what they like best: information. She gave them ammunition against the Chantry that silenced their efforts, and Chancellor Haulis wrote back in thanks, Mother Hevara had come to his office and apologized to him, dissuading further conflict. Or at least, that had been the impression Cassandra had been left with, had something happened?

“I thought that was resolved?” Cassandra asked.

Lady Josephine nodded. “Which brings us to the interesting development. Madam de Fer knew of our dealings with the University, so when she was granted audience with Empress Celene, she made certain the Empress became aware of the assistance the Inquisition lent Chancellor Haulis against the Chantry. You know Empress Celene’s love of the University*, when she learnt their recent victory against the Chantry was our doing she reconsidered her stance on Rainier’s sentence and has given the Inquisition jurisdiction over his fate.”
Ahh. Good—at least it would put Eleanor’s mind at ease and secure her the ally she still managed to find in Rainier. But Lady Josephine was not finished.

“The Empress also has an offer to extend. To Eleanor.”

Oh. Maker above. It would be a move in the Game, accepting or refusing Celene’s offer. Cassandra had hoped, futilely, to keep the girl from such things. She’d barely been comfortable with Eleanor’s attendance of Madam de Fer’s salon. Directly dealing with Orlais Empress would be a polarizing thing.

“Empress Celene is willing to expunge Thom Rainier’s record,” Leliana said, “make it so it would be as if charges were never brought against he and through proxy, his men.”

“If Eleanor accepts, it would not only secure Rainier’s position within the Inquisition,” Josephine clarified, “but his life afterward, as well as the lives of his men. They would not be held accountable for their crimes against Orlais, and all official record of their misdeeds would be destroyed. However…”

“It would mean she would owe the Empress a debt of favor,” Cassandra concluded with a weary sigh.

“Something she may use as the Inquisition builds acclaim and further moves are made by Duke Gaspard to take the throne,” Josephine confirmed. “However, the offer is a generous one, and should Eleanor refuse, it could be seen as a slight against Celene. The Empress has remained neutral in regard to the Inquisition, whatever we choose to do here will influence her future candor with us.”

“Accepting would also create the possibility for a feud between the Inquisition and Gaspard,” Cullen pointed out, clearly displeased with the notion of garnering the Duke’s attention in such a way.

“We should be more concerned that refusing the Empress could be seen as our position in the conflict between Celene and Gaspard—that the Inquisition wishes to align itself with the Duke,” Leliana argued. “Regardless of people’s feelings on the matter, Celene is Empress right now. Refusing her may cause the Duke to approach us with an alliance, offers of his own to beat his cousin at indebted Eleanor.”

This was…beyond messy. Perhaps it had been understatement, Eleanor’s claiming there was much to consider. It felt more than ‘much’. She did not want Eleanor owing anyone favors, especially not the Empress. Who knows what the woman could call upon her to do. But neither could the Inquisition withstand the woman’s ire.

“Whatsoever the decision it is Eleanor’s to make,” Cassandra snapped. “She is the one who will be most at stake, the consequences will be hers. We must set aside our personal feelings over Celene’s claim to the throne, this will be a move within the Game for Maker’s sake! She can ill afford getting caught in the middle of Orlais power struggle.”

“O-of course,” Cullen said, the man visibly paled as if he hadn’t considered just how truly arduous this could turn out to be for the Herald. Celene made the offer to her specifically, not the Inquisition Josephine had said. The Inquisition would be affected but…this whole mess derived from Duke Gaspard calling a hit on a Lord that allied with Celene—small petty moves within the game delivered a man and his family to their deaths. Accepting the offer would make Eleanor a walking target to people like Gaspard. Declining would make her enemies within Celene’s camp and quite possibly the Empress herself—she would not take kindly to some commoner, Herald of
Andraste or no, refusing her generous offer.

“Can I…” Eleanor bit her lip, going silent as she thought and then she cleared her throat and restarted her sentence, “I know I have to meet with people today and this decision is um, is it time sensitive?”

“Extremely,” Leliana said. “If we could have appropriately settled this via messenger bird, we would have.”

Eleanor nodded. “I would like to talk to Thom, quickly, if that’s alright. What time is it?”

“Nearly noon now, Eleanor,” Cassandra said. She wanted to speak with Rainier?

“Okay. Give me ten minutes with him, we can have a decision out to the Empress before the noon hour is up, and uh, would say, one-ish be okay to meet the Lords and Ladies from Highever? Oh. And Orlais too I guess, if that Marquis’s aunt is here you said?”

“Yes, my lady,” Josephine said and then, “Very well. If you’re certain, I’ll send for Rainier at once.”

“Could we speak privately, do you think?” Eleanor asked, “I wouldn’t want to be rude and put you guys out, he and I could speak uh…” she seemed to be trying to think of something that would be quick and convenient.

“You could use my office,” Lady Josephine offered. “You will not be disturbed,” she promised as she quickly left the War Room to send for Rainier and clear her office of staff.

Cassandra was not certain she liked the idea of Eleanor wholly alone with the man. “Eleanor, would you like for me to sit in on your discussion?” Cassandra asked. She did not like the idea of leaving her alone with the man.

But the girl shook her head. “Nope. But thanks for offering. You know…just because he wasn’t really Blackwall doesn’t mean he isn’t still ‘Blackwall’. He’s not going to hurt me or anything. He’s still…still our friend. Whose made bad life choices and I’m seriously considering letting Cullen loose on him.”

“The offer does stand, and it is most sincere,” the former Templar assured her.

“But yeah, I’ll be fine.”

For Rainer’s sake, she certainly better be. Eleanor gave them all a small wave before leaving the War Room to wait in Josephine’s office, Lady Montilyet returned and shut the door closed behind her.

“She’s settled in your office?” Leliana asked.

Josephine nodded, the motion seeming grave. “Rainier will be along soon, we should do this now while Eleanor is occupied.”

That certainly did not sound good.

“Has something happened?” Cassandra asked as Lady Montilyet resumed her place around the War table.

“There has been a breach in security,” Leliana said. “One of my agents, Farrier, is dead,
murdered by agent Butler.”

The codename was vaguely familiar. Butler was an agent who dealt in service to other agents—keeping appraised to their whereabouts and wellbeing, reporting back to Leliana if they were compromised or needed extraction from their current mission. Farrier was one of the agents who handled travel arrangements for Leliana’s spies ‘ferrying’ them to and from location when they had to—

When they had to travel great distances for their missions. Like Marehis’s work in Orlais.

Cassandra could actually feel the blood draining from her face.

“Marehis?” Cassandra asked tightly. Oh Maker, please.

“She is alive but compromised,” Leliana gravely confirmed. “We have not detained Butler yet, but my agents are close. Farrier was on his way to meet Marehis and Harding in the Oasis when Butler killed him, I have since sent orders for she and all my agents in the field to abandon their positions and confuse their trails. Butler had knowledge of everyone’s assignments and locations, if he’s turned on us and planning on going after the others, that should serve to keep him from killing more of our agents before my men find him.”

“I received reports from Marehis—one as recent as yesterday, just when did this happen?” Cassandra asked.

“Farrier was found days ago. The last genuine report we received from Marehis was her arrangements for Eleanor’s return to Haven. The reports you’ve been receiving the past few days were written by me, using Marehis’s older reports to copy her handwriting, make the letters look and sound genuine and as if she were merely delayed at the Oasis for now,” Leliana explained. “I am aware you keep Eleanor appraised to Marehis’s wellbeing, I thought if reports stopped showing up, she would know something was wrong. We cannot have her getting involved, she may seek to go to Marehis’s aid, or unintentionally compromise the woman further still. The best thing for Marehis’s and Eleanor’s safety, as well as her peace of mind, is if we handle this as quietly as possible. She needn’t be aware her caretaker was in danger at all, just delayed performing other duties for the Inquisition.”

Cassandra most certainly did not like the idea of lying to Eleanor, especially after the horrible betrayal inflicted upon her when Rainier’s lies were revealed. But this was life and death—Eleanor knowing would only worry her, needlessly if Marehis came out of it alright, and her knowledge could potentially put Marehis in greater danger. Eleanor would…if she discovered she’d been lied to, she would prefer Marehis be safe than being kept in the loop and putting the Elf woman at further risk.

“You will not be asking Eleanor’s input on your dealings with Butler then?” Cassandra surmised.

Leliana shook her head, something like darkness hardening her gaze. “Butler has betrayed us. He cannot be allowed to live.”

It was conflicting. Cassandra was agreeable to such a solution but…Maker. That Sera of all people could set such an example for her vexed Cassandra to no end. The Elf girl had done much to consider Eleanor’s feelings on things when the girl had been sick, been thankful to those Eleanor was not conscious to thank herself, even joined Cassandra for her morning prayer on Eleanor’s behalf this…this was much the same, at least it felt to her, a place Eleanor could not be made to give her own opinion on the matter but, if she could she certainly would hold a more merciful
stance than what was being dealt.

“I understand your position Leliana and I would not wish to speak out of turn,” Cassandra spoke carefully, “but if Eleanor cannot be included in this decision then I would speak on her behalf.”

Leliana gave the Seeker a wry look. “You think Eleanor would hold some objection to my decision?”

“I know for certain she would not wish for you to take his life forthwith without so much as questioning him. I ask that you spare his life for now and bring him in for questioning—we do not know what transpired between he and Farrier, there could be more to the story than a rogue agent. If it would please you, I could assist with his interrogation. You can kill him yourself if you are dissatisfied with what he has to say for himself.”

“Eleanor may be showing mercy to Rainier, but Butler has compromised the host of my agents,” Leliana insisted. “You cannot believe she would be so merciful to someone who has endangered Marehis.”

That was too rich by half. “So now you are an expert on the innermost workings of Eleanor’s personality?” Cassandra snapped. “You’ve not spoken a single word in her direction outside your work together, made no effort whatsoever to get to know her. Do not think I have not noticed how much you hold yourself apart from her?!”

“I’ve been nothing but cordial, if not outright friendly to the girl in our meetings!” Leliana retorted. But she sighed wearily then, “State your case. Why is it so very important to you we bring him in?”

“There is every possibility Eleanor will find out about Butler’s betrayal, even if it is after the fact. I understand we cannot divulge this to her now, but when she finds out she will not like that we have lied, but it will be forgivable especially given that it is meant to keep Marehis safe. Should we kill Butler without so much as trying to give him the chance to explain himself…she is very tenderhearted Leliana. You read our reports from the Storm Coast—the Blades of Hessarian murdered our soldiers and it devastated Eleanor, outraged her even. But she was gratified that we found a solution that allowed us to spare the Blades—because we took the time to decipher just what had truly happened. We thought them mindless thugs when in truth they were victims of a cruel master Rainier freed them from.”

Leliana seemed to consider that a moment. “I know…,” she cleared her throat as if it were tight. “I know Eleanor is not at fault for the Breach, or Justinia’s death but…that the conclave was survivable, that someone made it out alive and it was not Most Holy it…”

“I understand,” truly, she did, “You are still hurting.”

“I do not wish to take it out on the girl, so I ‘hold myself apart from her’, as you say,” Leliana said. “However, I do see your point, I would not hurt the girl needlessly. I can see the value of bringing Butler in—this could go beyond him, he could be working for an enemy force, there could be co-conspirators within our ranks still that he could expose for us. I will have him brought in for questioning,” she conceded. “But you will by no means question me if I decide the man should be executed afterward.”

“Of course. Thank you Leliana,” Cassandra said. “Truly and…if you do not mind my saying so—”
“I undoubtedly will,” the woman groused leveling her a glare.

Cassandra felt embarrassed for what she was about to confess, especially given they were not entirely alone, but Leliana was her friend, they worked together to serve Justinia and the Lady Nightingale hadn’t attempted to reach out for help in her mourning the woman, this was the first time she’d voiced her grief to Cassandra. It was not good to just push through the day to day, and not endeavor to work through her heartbreak, Cassandra knew that very well.

“I had similar issues, reconciling the losses we endured at the Conclave. If you would take the time, even outright tell the girl your feelings regarding the loss of Justinia…well, knowing Eleanor has healed things in me I did not even realize were still broken,” she admitted, albeit abashed. “Perhaps she could do the same for you. She would be glad of it should you try to connect with her, Leliana. The girl idolizes you, says you’re the smartest person she’s ever met.”

Leliana huffed an uncertain sounding laugh at that. “I am the one who gave her bad intel on ‘Warden Blackwall’. She cannot still have unshakable faith in my abilities as Spymaster.”

“In point of fact, she does not blame you for Rainier at all. She has said as much to me. If you were to reach out to her I believe you would benefit from it, and she would certainly be delighted,” a smile came to Cassandra’s lips as she recalled, “Marehis actually told me there was a moment where Eleanor grew incredibly concerned that you do not eat, because she’d never run into you in the Tavern proper. Perhaps you would consider taking a meal with her.”

“I could put it on her schedule!” Lady Josephine interjected, sounding ecstatic with the idea.

Leliana crossed her arms over her chest, looking a bit out of her depth like she did not really wish to take Cassandra’s suggestion to heart, but relented regardless because Lady Josephine was already excited for her to agree. “I suppose. I will have lunch with the Herald some day this week. A short lunch. I do not have all day to play child minder.”

“Splendid! Oh!” Lady Josephine seemed excited then, “Perhaps we should all dedicate to having a meal together! Something casual, no work talk, as the Herald does with her party members. I’ve always enjoyed joining her when I can.”

“I’ve certainly no objections,” Cullen agreed.

“That is all well and good, schedule whatever pleases you Josie but we are still at work,” Leliana pointed brought them back to the task at hand. “And while we may have settled how I will handle Butler there is still the matter that Eleanor will not have Marehis while she is in Haven, not until we have questioned and dealt with the man appropriately.”

“Oh course,” Cassandra said.

“You must continue assuring Eleanor that Marehis is well and will be back in Haven as soon as possible—that is the truth of the matter, should things change you will know the moment I do,” Leliana promised. “Until then that leaves Eleanor with no guard. Until Butler is apprehended we must assume the worst, and that has severely compromised the safety of all of my field agents. The few that were here in Haven were sent out to detain him. I have conferred with the Commander and Josephine on the matter and they can think of none in their ranks we could securely bring in on the issue without further exposing our problem with Butler.”

Certainly, they could not have the Inquisition at large being made aware there had been a traitor in the most sensitive of their ranks. Butler’s betrayal, if not handled carefully could at the
very least cast seeds of panic that would lead to people—recruits and noble allies alike—abandoning their cause.

That wouldn’t do, Eleanor needed someone—Cassandra herself could not be with her at all times, no matter that she would love nothing more than to do so, neither could any of the advisors. That left her party perhaps. Solas maybe but the man had a great deal of research he saw to in Haven, vital to their efforts against the Breach. Varric would take the job seriously insofar as her safety went but…no he was not suited to the task, he would likely influence Eleanor poorly, have the girl skipping classes or meetings he did not think worthy of her time. Sera, as much as Cassandra had come to respect her as an ally for Eleanor, she would insist Eleanor do nothing but play. Rainier, was most decidedly out of the question. The Iron Bull had his own duties to the Ben-Hessrath and his Chargers to deal with—ahh. Oh goodness. There was someone that came to mind.

“Would you perhaps be willing to allow the Iron Bull to know of our issue with Butler?” Cassandra asked. “He would be more than capable of understanding the situation, its severity and the need to keep it quiet. He has done well to respect the Inquisition’s safety and not compromise our operations when reporting to the Ben-Hessrath. He has disclosed nothing of some very personal things he has come to learn about Eleanor in their time together,” he’d not reported on her illness in the Storm Coast to the Ben-Hessrath, or her personal struggles with depression or panic attacks out of respect and care for the girl. “Nor did he expose the Rainier betrayal in his reports to them, and he could have very well done so.”

Leliana considered the matter. “The Iron Bull has been true to his word, he’s only reported on Eleanor’s sealing Rifts, our plans to seal the Breach, and that the Inquisition had things well in hand without further interference from Par Vollen.”

“You want The Iron Bull act as a subtle bodyguard for the Herald?” Cullen questioned, looking at Cassandra as if he were concerned she’d all but lost her mind.

“No, but he could lend us the aid of someone who could do so, someone I know Marehis would trust,” Cassandra said. “And quite possibly, the arrangement would be such that Eleanor will be too distracted to question or despair of her minder’s delay.”

Things were…a bit awkward with Harritt and Dennet. They did not know of the Callier massacre, and as far as Ellie was concerned Rainier did not need to confess his past sins to others. It would only make things worse for relations within the Inquisition. They were given the explanation, by the Inquisition advisors that he had been with Warden Blackwall when he passed and been driven to take on the man’s name in an endeavor to keep his work alive. Still they were uneasy that the man had mislead them, but willing to overlook it, ‘every man has his secrets, keep your nose clean and uh, your bunk too, we’ll get on fine.’ Harritt had said when he was settling in from the Storm Coast.

He was nervous though, walking through Haven for the first time, in the wake of a runner saying Lady Josephine requested his presence in the Chantry. For some reason he expected someone to…well…do something. Say something, call him out. But no one…well it seemed like normal. It wasn’t like with Ellie and the others, where he’d caused so much hurt or was being
pointedly ignored. He hadn’t exactly gone around introducing himself to everyone in Haven, people barely knew there was a Warden in the Inquisition, supposed or otherwise. He was just another face in the hustle and bustle of everything, a few people who didn’t even know his name, just recognized him from seeing him around, waved as he passed. Flissa was scurrying away from Quartermaster Threnns station, returning to her Tavern when she caught sight of him and she smiled, giving him a little wave and calling out “Good day W- er. Mister Rainier! Nice to see you back safely!”.

So maybe things would not be quite so uncomfortable with the others in the Inquisition, his consequences squarely residing within those in the Herald’s company. He was glad but…honestly, he’d rather every person in Haven hate his guts, Flissa spit in his face and food, if it meant he hadn’t hurt Ellie.

The runner led him to Josephine’s office, but it was not Lady Montilyet who awaited him.

Oh. Ellie stood, leaning back with her bottom resting on the edge of the Ambassador’s desk, arms crossed over her chest, the girl was staring into space looking very grave. She didn’t even notice when the door opened, like she hadn’t heard it.

“Thom Rainier, my Lady,” the runner said, bowing to her.

The girl startled, jerking slightly and blinking in surprise before she offered a small, polite smile to them. “Thank you for bringing him, I appreciate it.”

“And then the runner was gone, the door closed shut behind them, and Rainier was alone with the Herald of Andraste.

Had something gone wrong? They’d hit a snag, she said a few days ago, in their efforts to clear his work with the Inquisition. Ellie...Maker, the girl had a panic attack over it, or at least the beginnings of one. And then she sought to ensure he did not worry, not as she did, over the issues that had come up. It was distressing, he wished...he was glad, selfishly so, that Ellie was worried because that meant that she cared, proof positive the girl did still have some love for him but he wished with everything in him she had no cause for such fear, that he could spare her the trouble she was going through to clear the mess he’d made. He’d considered going himself to speak to the Orlesian authorities be open and contrite on his own behalf, but that would only bungle the Inquisition’s efforts and he wouldn’t risk that, not after all that had been done for him.

“My lady?” he asked, gently. Worried he shouldn’t, since she hadn’t spoken to him yet, but he’d been brought here to speak to her, hadn’t he?

“Sorry, spaced for a second, thinking. Would you care to sit?” she asked. There wasn’t really a chair available except for right behind Lady Montilyet’s desk, but she was gesturing to the side table against the righthand wall of the office. There wasn’t anything on the side of the table nearest to where Ellie was, so he nodded and leaned against it, half-sitting as she was.

“You’re settling back in okay?” she asked, “Harritt and Dennet um, they aren’t too terribly upset, are they?”

“I’m all unpacked. The Horse Master and Blacksmith took time to welcome me back and clear the air a bit. They’ve been right good about everything, far kinder than I deserve.”

“I’m glad,” she said softly, though that seemed to give her pause. She was quiet, hands resting at her sides against the desk, they gripped-tight the edge. Then, “You...everyone deserves kindness, Thom.” She was rather tense, like in their previous discussions but she’d been able to
look at him at least when she spoke and that was...that was some improvement. “You did an awful thing, and punishment is a good response, its what teaches us the consequences of our actions, but once you’ve learned your lesson, are certain you’ve learned not to repeat your mistakes...you shouldn’t punish yourself forever. I...I still stand by what I said in Val Royeaux. Perhaps it means more now. Learn from your mistakes and do better, if you do, you shouldn’t disparage yourself so much.”

Said in Val Royeaux? Oh Maker. She still worried he was too hard upon himself. At the time, he’d thought if she knew the truth of everything she would take it all back, understand he was loathsome—she had come to understand it, had the fullness of his sins revealed to her, been disappointed, found him wanting, and still. She worked her way back around to mercy.

“I promise to work on that, in future. Truly.”

She didn’t smile but she did give him a little nod, satisfied with his promise. “I...” she took a deep breath and her arms crossed under her chest, over her stomach hands gripping the opposing elbow as she continued. “I have some questions. About your men.”

Thom nodded. She hadn’t asked him many questions about what happened, only focused on how to move past it but...well he’d gladly answer anything if it would put her mind at ease, help her with whatever she needed to reconcile still letting him help her. “O-of course. Please,” he said, “you may ask me anything.” He’d talk of anything if it meant she would speak with him.

She seemed to think for a moment more before saying, “When you’ve spoken of their actions with me, you’ve mostly taken the blame upon yourself. Do you think them blameless? They did something horrific, orders or no they should not have killed innocents.”

“They shouldn’t have,” Thom agreed. “But they did. They were instructed to kill everyone. Gaspard did not wish for any witnesses to the attack, the order was meant to take care of that. My men trusted me, believed me worthy to lead them, and they believed I would not ask such a thing of them unless I had some viable reason. I understand that does not excuse them—make them blameless—but ...the fault was mine. I should not have taken the hit, it was my decisions, and their trust in me, that led to what happened.”

“You know how we were just talking about um, punishment, teaching us the wrongness of our actions so we can move forward and do better?” she asked, and he nodded. Then, “Do you believe that, with the time that has passed, that they have um, learned? From their punishment?”

“My lady, you have never sinned in such an egregious way, I pray you never do,” he struggled to find the words to explain. “You would find that no matter how much better you do, you always inflict a bit of punishment upon yourself, for forever it feels. My men were horrified, mad with guilt and shame, they suffer for what they have done from the fact that they must live with themselves. They cannot fix what they have done, none of us can. They were remorseful and I’m certain they would never do...do anything like that again.” He stopped to gather his thoughts and then, “My lady, while people did realize Callier and his family never arrived to their destination, it wasn’t until my men turned themselves in and confessed to the crime that our part in their deaths was realized. If they had not done so, I’m...I’m not sure any legal action would have been brought up against us. There was no paper trail, no written contract or traceable money exchange, nothing tangible that could draw authorities to the conclusion of what truly happened.”

“Really?” she asked. “It must have been upsetting, being found out when you could have gotten away with it all.”

Thom shook his head, he’d been mortified when word of their deeds spread, and he found
out his men had turned themselves in but really he just… “No, no my only regret is that I did not do the same. I was ashamed of myself, and I wish to the Maker I’d been the sort of man who could face the consequences of his actions.”

She was silent for a moment as she seemed to think it over. And then, “You might not have been that sort of person then but…you’re doing well enough with it now,” she quietly commended him. “The Inquisition is hardly prison but…I know it can’t be easy everyone being so upset with you. You’ve continued serving the Inquisition well, fighting, and you haven’t p-pushed anyone to just be okay with everything,” his stomach turned with remorse when it seemed like she might cry, her eyes looked a bit wet and she closed them. “I’m…I am trying, I promise. I wish I um, I wish I could just get over it already.”

“E-” he stopped, he still wasn’t sure he should return to being so informal with her yet, it might be too familiar. She always called him by his first name but…well he didn’t have a more formal title anymore, did he? “My lady, I understand, needing to take time to rebuild the trust I’ve broken with you. If such a day comes that…those things could be as they were…”

She opened her eyes and, it obviously took some effort, but she gave him a small smile. “I’d really like that,” she said.

He could never thank the Maker enough that Ellie would want something of the sort, to be able to be friends again, truly. It didn’t matter if they never regained their former candor, that she was willing to give him anything remotely like friendship…it felt like he’d been blessed with borrowed time with her. He’d come so very close to losing her—hell for a time he had, those four days of his banishment had been deserved but still a sort of torture, the real fear the last time he’d see Ellie was in her heartbreak at his deeds.

“Then do not trouble yourself over it, please,” he implored her, “If such a day comes it should be because I deserve it not because you’ve found it within yourself to fix the hurt I caused you on your own. You’re doing more than enough of that, already, dealing with the Orlesian authorities on my behalf.”

She nodded. And then his words seemed to remind her of something. She cleared her throat and asked, “What do you think they would do? Your men, if they were no longer convicted of their crime?”

His mind drew a blank at that. “I’m not sure I understand the question,” he said.

She worried her lip a bit before, speaking very carefully, she said, “If tomorrow, everything was wiped clean from their records, and they were free to live their lives, do you…do you think they deserve that? What do you think they would do with their freedom?”

He would…Maker the very thought, of even a hypothetical situation where his men could be set free, allowed to properly atone, move on with their lives from the horror he’d put them through, it was almost cruel to voice something so unobtainable, he was certain she meant it in kindness, an attempt to understand the situation better somehow. “They were not…they were not inherently bad people, as hard as that may be to believe given the circumstances, they were honest men trying to make an honest living. If they could be free I am sure…I’m sure they would endeavor to do better, help people, do as I did in trying to live a life where I no longer caused more suffering but aided in the relief of it. I am certain they would do the same.”

“Minus the lies?” Ellie asked in tones approaching wryness, lips tugged slightly upward as she attempted to jest.
“Minus the lies,” he said, in all seriousness. “I thought living as Blackwall would cease my contributions to suffering in the world, but the lie ended up creating more. It is bad enough I have done so, it…it kills me that the suffering I created inflicted itself upon you. I’ve learned now, that only in living in truth, with that same measure of seeking to help where I can as I am, that is the path I should have led all along. If my men could do the same…I would give anything for that.”

She took a deep breath, and nodded, looking every bit as grave as she had when he’d entered. She held herself tighter, her cheeks lost some color and she flinched a bit as if something hurt.

“My lady?” he asked, and he rose to take a step closer, but he had to stop himself from reaching out to her. Was she unwell? His mind raced back over the course of the last few days, trying to recall the skirmishes they’d fought on the journey back, was she injured?

The door swung open behind him and he looked over his shoulder to see as Seeker Pentaghast entered looking every bit of menacing that she possibly could, the woman, beautiful as she was, could really look like the stuff of nightmares when she wished to.

“Your ten minutes has more than passed,” she said, in low dangerous tones, glaring at him, and he wasn’t sure what her words meant—their talk was being timed? Then Cassandra drew nearer, having looked the girl over, and all animosity left her and she was crossing the room, a hand on Ellie’s shoulder. “Eleanor?”

“Sorry, I’m pants at tracking time,” she offered weakly, “I um. I’ve made a decision. We should get back.”

A decision? He thought…he thought she had decided to allow him to serve the Inquisition as penance for his crimes? Had she been reconsidering her choice for his fate?

“He has upset you,” Cassandra said, her free hand clenching at her side as if she intended to round on Rainier and punch him with it. He certainly wasn’t going to stop her. Had he done something, said something that upset Ellie even more?

But Ellie shook her head. “No. I’m just uh, nervous and…I mean this isn’t the sort of decision I’m used to making. I…I know I have to make it just, I don’t feel either option is a super ‘right’ decision. It doesn’t seem like something I should have a say in, period.” She stopped and swallowed harshly as if to keep herself from being sick, and she flinched again, beads of sweat forming on her forehead.

“Seeker,” Thom said, “something is wrong—”

“I know very well something is wrong,” she ground out menacingly. And then much more gently, quietly she asked the girl, “Burning, again?”

Burning? Was it her Mark?

She nodded to the Seeker’s question, “I know I already took—” her voice cut off and she ruefully admitted, “bit uh, stabby, now.”

…stabby? Did she mean stabbing pain or had she been outright stabbed at some point?!

Cassandra seemed to understand perfectly what she meant, the Seeker’s hand unclenched to reach into the smallish compartment on her potions belt that held the smallest draughts of Ellie’s potions, and she handed the girl a small white vial she knocked back quickly, pressing the back of her unmarked hand as if it would help to keep it down. Maker, was it her stomach? People died
from being run through! It was slow and painful, but there was some level of salvation that could be brought to bear through Healer’s and magic, was she treating such an injury?

“Should I send for Adan?” Cassandra asked quietly. Rainier was just about to bolt for the Healer’s, but Ellie shook her head ‘no’, and the Seeker took a deep breath before firmly stating. “Very well. But you will see him later, are we clear?”

Ellie nodded.

Gentle knocking came from the doorway and they looked to see Lady Josephine standing there with Leliana and Cullen at her back, the man had a hand on the hilt of his sword as if he expected trouble.

“Apologies, we merely wished to see what was keeping you, my lady,” Josephine offered.

Ellie pulled her hand away from her mouth then, swallowing once more before she could speak, “It’s okay. We’re sort of pressed for time, I know. Thanks for letting me talk it over a bit.”

It? Her questions about his men?

“You’ve come to a decision, I trust?”

Ellie nodded, though she didn't seem happy about it.

It was great to have Chief back. Krem was proud to be second in command—it’d been a bit unexpected to be named such in so short a time, he’d barely been with the company maybe a week when he’d made ‘Lieutenant’, but no one begrudged him the position, no one’d been vying for it and their time without their leader reminded him why. It was a special brand of chaos to keep everyone stable and functioning within the realm of acceptable behavior.

Skinner was the least of his problems in that regard, what with Rocky constantly on the edge of blowing shit up with random experiments trying to recreate Qunari black powder. And Dalish’s nervous, sketchy behavior—she’d be just fine if she stopped making unnecessary attempts to cover her Apostate status. Grim’s silent thing was always met with mixed reviews—some people thought he was weird and creepy, and some thought he was simple.

Stitches was his favorite. Favorite one, spoke when spoken to, didn’t say anything weird, didn’t blow anything up, didn’t randomly threaten the local ‘Shems’ with gratuitous acts of violence. Maker bless Stitches, that beautiful, Ferelden bastard.

Chief touched base with everyone, thumped him on the back of the head for ‘Bitsy’, but he said the steed was a damn good pick. Krem gave him a rundown on the place, showed him around, and he thought he was going to have to call for Dalish to slap Bull with some ice magic, cool him off when he caught sight the redheaded barmaid that ran the tavern. She was kind of flighty, a giggly sort Bull’d treat right and have a nice time with, not a future ‘Mrs. The Iron Bull’ or anything but Krem didn’t think he had ‘long-term’ type. He’d pay real gold to see the sort of person that could pin the Qunari down, get him locked into anything resembling a committed relationship.

Maker, relationships. Once Bull got over his initial ‘there’s a redhead that serves booze’
glee he’d made fun of Krem some more, asking if Ellie’d kissed him yet for his presents. Bastard.

They weren’t presents really, he wasn’t courting the girl! Not exactly. He wasn’t sure what he was doing.

The hat had been a present he guessed, but Ellie’d been kind to him, when he was in Haven, and he’d just wanted to thank her. He knew how awful the Storm Coast was, how cold, and the weather in Haven was hardly any better—it was even colder! He figured, maybe she could use something to keep her warm. And the salve was hardly a present—she was sick! And Maker, that’d sounded awful, and she’d helped him when he was sick, so it was only right he do the same. The flower…he…he just hadn’t liked the thought that she was so sad she hadn’t smiled in days. Bull hadn’t said what upset her so badly, but it must have been bad. So. Paper flower. Girls liked getting flowers, but there wasn’t really anything growing in Haven other than Elf Root. He’d had to fold about a thousand of those damn paper peonies for a cousin’s wedding what felt like ages ago, he was pretty sure he could craft them in his sleep. It was lame but apparently, it’d worked to help her feel better.

And…well it’d been reward enough on its own that it’d made her happy, Bull telling him so before they made it back to Haven. But her actual thanking him was even better and he kind of hated that. She’d smiled and laughed with him and kissed him on the cheek and…Maker, his face still felt a little warm if he thought about it.

Bull took up post out front of their tents to watch how the Inquisition soldiers trained, so Krem too his place, standing in his blind spot to keep watch from just below the ledge that bordered the stairs to Haven’s gate.

He heard the gate doors swing open and then,

“…where they practice for hours every day! Everyone works so hard to train and prepare. Do mind your step. Is everyone still comfortable? Your coats are all lovely by the way!”

Ellie’s voice, cheery and chatting away politely to, oh. Wow. There was like ten…eleven, twelve…shit. Sixteen people paraded after Ellie, all nobility unless they were also orphans ascended to Herald-hood, and somehow, he doubted that. On her arm she led the most elderly woman of the group, her hand on the woman’s arm that was linked with hers, walking to keep an easy pace for all of them as she spoke. She was giving a tour of the place it seemed.

He was glad to see she was dressed warmly, she’d changed out of her armor, wearing something similar to what she’d worn when he first met her, only with the addition of her cloak and he could see the very bottom of the hat he’d made atop her head underneath her hood that sort of made him feel warm—that she liked the hat so very well she wore it with her nicer things.

Oh, she looked a bit worn out, a little pale, and her smile didn’t quite reach her eyes. That was worrying. She’d had a war room meeting when she got back, he wasn’t sure what went down in those but ‘war room’ sounded intimidating. Had it gone badly?

Though it was…Maker it was almost enough to make him forget his concern, when she turned to face the path to the forge and she laid eyes on him and her polite smile turned into something warmer that met her eyes, glittering green as she said,

“Here are our most recent recruits, a Mercenary Company, the Bull’s Chargers,” she drew her crowd nearer to the tents, “this, is Cremisius Aclassi, he’s the Charger’s Lieutenant, second in command.” Nice, gave Chief a heads up she was bringing people up on his blind side.
“An honor to meet you all,” he said politely, with a little bow. Ellie’s smile spoke of gratitude for rolling with her suddenly introducing these random nobles and she moved on to Bull.

“And this, is their leader, The Iron Bull.”

“Oh my!” the elderly woman on her arm exclaimed, looking up at Bull with wide struck eyes. “He’s a Qu- quite a large fellow, isn’t he?”

“He is!” Ellie enthused, “The biggest, baddest Mercenary commander this side of the Waking Sea—and that’s only because he can’t also be on the other side of the Waking Sea mind. He’s been the most incredible ally since he joined the Inquisition, and he has nothing but glowing commendations from nobility hailing from all across the Free Marches, Antiva, even Nevarran nobility proclaim the Charger’s greatness.”

That was certainly complimentary…oh. Wow. She was advertising for them, making sure their name got ‘round to people who mightn’t’ve heard of them—they had a name for themselves in the Free Marchs but yeah, this side of the Frostbacks was entirely fresh territory for them, they’d done work in Orlais before, though the jobs there had gotten scant as they worked their way to the Storm Coast. The Inquisition was a priority for them but working other jobs certainly wouldn’t hurt, if anything they could do things that helped to represent the Inquisition. There were sixteen potential customers and even if they never hired the Chargers, they would likely pass along their name to others who would. She’d even offered them Krem first, introducing him as a face of the Chargers they would be comfortable coming to, in the event that the actual face of the Chargers was a bit too intimidating—their first impression would be ‘polite human bloke’ and not ‘great big one-eyed Qunari we fear will eat our children for snacks’.

“Shucks my lady, you’re gonna make me blush,” Bull said, before dipping his head a bit at the Herald and her crowd. “Nice to meet you all. How’re you enjoying Haven?”

“I do believe we’re having a splendid time,” the elderly woman said, meeting Bull’s eye. “I say, have your men worked in Orlais before my good man?”

“We wrapped up a few jobs there recently, ma’am. For the Lords, Acord and Callihand.”

The woman seemed to brighten at that. “My word! Callihand is a dear friend of the family—you’re the ones who cleared up that awful rash of gang violence plaguing his land?”

“Yes ma’am, that’s right,” Bull confirmed.

It hadn’t been gang violence exactly, but close enough. Lord Acord had hired the Chargers when Darkspawn tunneled out of a nearby mine and Wardens weren’t responding to the call for help, so the Chargers came, cleared them out, sealed the tunnel back up, and Acord passed their name on to Lord Callihand. Callihand was an ally of Duke Gaspard, so one of Celene’s devotees hired mercenaries to harass Callihand’s townspeople. Good job, good gold, and it was always a good feeling, being able to put a stop to shite like that. Two wealthy blowhards duking it out over political nonsense and wreaking havoc on innocent people’s lives.

“Fool man, Callihand,” the elderly woman said, “he had nothing but high praise for your men but when I asked your company name, he couldn’t for the life of himself remember! My son-in-law had complaints I thought your company might be suitable for, have you a calling card by chance?”

“Never leave home without ‘em,” he jested lightly, giving the woman a little wink as he reached into one of the small pouches of his belt, and the crowd of nobility behind Ellie sort of
stared in shock when the elderly woman didn’t hesitate to accept the small piece of parchment from the Qunari’s hand.

One of the Lords looked fit to faint when she allowed Bull to kiss her hand before they parted ways, with promise that she would send their information to her son-in-law. Ellie was all smiles over the exchange as she led her little tour onward to the stables, and forge.

“Lieutenant Aclassi,” a Nevarran accent spoke and that Seeker…Pentaghast was her name yeah, she approached. Ellie’s ‘Tamassran’ Bull’d called her.

“Seeker, Pentaghast, good to see you again,” Krem offered politely.

“I am watching over the Herald for the time being, but I need to speak to the Iron Bull on a pressing matter. Would you keep an eye on Eleanor for me just a moment?”

“Of course,” Krem promised.

“Excellent. She’ll be seeing our noble guests off soon, so she shouldn’t be straying out of sight, catch her when she returns to the gate if I have not returned with Bull, I will try to be back quickly,” the Seeker assured him before going to talk to Chief. Krem shifted so he could see Ellie better, still chatting away with the Horse Master who appeared to be answering the questions of the nobility flocking around her.


“Nothing that is of any concern to you,” the woman replied darkly. But then, “However, there is a problem I would like to bring to your attention.”

“Something wrong with the boss?”

Boss? Oh yeah, Ellie. It was sort of hilarious, the large Qunari man calling a girl about the size of one of his legs ‘boss’. He sounded worried—oaf that he was, he was sharp probably saw what Krem’d seen, Ellie seeming tired, but pragmatism kept her focused on her task of entertaining their noble allies.

But the Seeker was saying, “Nothing detrimental, though more than that I cannot say here, you must be debriefed. We’ll have to go to the Chantry, Leliana will be joining us.”

Don’t do it, just don’t. Please Maker above keep that damn Qunari’s mouth shut—

“Spymaster. Redhead, right? So, which one of you will be uh, debriefing me?” Bull asked as he followed after the Nevarran woman heading for Haven’s gate.

He grunted when the Seeker elbowed him in the gut. Good. Served him right, debriefing, honestly.

Ellie was showing her guests around the forge, introducing them to Harritt, and…huh there was a man that had ridden in with her, part of her party but Krem didn’t know his name. He didn’t join the group or address Ellie, but he was watching her awfully close, so Krem watched him awful close because the guy looked nervous. He was almost considered moving closer in case there was something weird going on. But Ellie led her tour on away from the forge to where a carriage sat just a bit down the road from Harritt’s cabin, and she gave the man a nod as she passed him, and he didn’t do anything bizarre in response just nodded and then he decided to head inside the cabin so. Krem supposed he wasn’t up to anything strange—maybe he was just worried too.
Nobles loaded up into their carriage…carriages, Krem could just see the back of another, and then another if he leaned to his left a bit. Ellie held the arm of the elderly woman, helping her into her seat. She took a moment to talk to a couple of the Ferelden nobles, man and wife that she motioned to hang back with her a moment, and she…well she seemed sad about whatever they were talking about, and then she hugged them in farewell, smiling to them as they got into their carriage with their family.

She waved, high up over her head as she watched the carriages roll away heading for the bridge out of Haven estate and she remained waving until Krem supposed she couldn’t see the carriages anymore, then she turned on her heel, heading for Haven’s gate, smiling and waving to Harritt and Dennet as she passed and he could just barely hear her called out, “Thanks!” for taking the time to talk to their guests.

She looked around a bit as she got closer, probably wondering where Cassandra was.

“My lady,” he called in greeting and she smiled at him again, coming to join him out front of the Charger’s tents.

“Cremisius! Thanks for being polite with our guests, sorry I just sort of sprang them on you and the Iron Bull.”

“Are you kidding? We’d never turn down the chance for advertisement, Chief’ll be stoked if that Orlesian lady actually comes through with a job offer for us. It was no trouble saying ‘hello’.”

Ellie nodded. “I’m glad!” she said.

Huh. She still didn’t look like she felt very well, little pale, tightness around her eyes. “Are you alright, my lady? You were excellent with your guests and everything,” he assured her, and he didn’t want her to think he thought she looked bad or something, “just, you seem a bit tired.”

Because women love hearing they look ‘tired’, smooth. Though Ellie didn’t seem offended, she’d taken his words at face-value which was…well he was glad she hadn’t seen rudeness where he’d just been offering concern.

“Oh,” she looked sheepish as she admitted, “I’m okay, just a headache.”

That wasn’t any good was it? He got more than enough headaches from Bull to know they were unpleasant and he didn’t like it, the idea she wasn’t feeling well. “Stitches is around, he probably has something for that,” Krem offered lightly, though he was half tempted to outright call for the man to come and check up on her. But Ellie didn’t know Stitches, she mightn’t be comfortable going to a stranger, “Or I could walk you to Adan’s.” Seeker had made it sound like he should keep Ellie ‘round the Gate but she’d hardly begrudge him taking her to the Healer’s if she needed it.

She shook her head, smiling for good measure as she said, “That’s sweet but it isn’t bad or anything.” She shrugged. “Travel and war room meetings and trying to keep so many new names and faces straight, I think my brain is just telling me its done for the day.”

Well yeah, he’d be beat too he supposed.

She looked around a bit more. “Where did the Iron Bull get off to? I was going to see how he was settling in.”

Her brain was done for the day but she clearly wasn’t. “I gave him a tour of Haven, he
knows where the Tavern is so he’s all set,” he assured her, she giggled at that. “Seeker Cassandra came ‘round and said she needed to talk to Chief real quick.”

“Oh! I was wondering where she went!”

Yeah. He probably should have said as much, sooner. “She said she’d be back soon though. You’re welcome to stick around.” He didn’t want to outright say ‘I’m supposed to watch you’. One, that phrasing could come off as creepy, and two, the idea might make her feel like she was being babied and embarrass her, or make her worried she was bothering him or something.

“Thanks! Huh, I wonder what she wanted to talk to him about…”

“She said something about him being debriefed and he got gut-punched for making a less than couth joke about it.”

She smiled at that. “Oh gosh!” she said, shaking her head. “He’s so bad about that, loves his puns.”

“You’ve no idea. You’re lucky ‘Ellie’ can’t really be made into a pun,” not any he could think of anyway, “he uses every variation he can imagine for Krem.”

She gasped, eyes a bit wide as her hands went to her mouth, and then she said in tones of amusement-mixed-sympathy, “I literally just thought of about ten different ways to use Krem as a pun and I am so sorry you have to live with that, is it constant?”

“It’s constant.”

But almost worth it, since she was laughing with him over it. It was nice.

“Oh!” she said then as if she’d just realized something, “I’m sorry! Do you prefer Krem over Cremisius?”

Eh. “Krem’s faster,” he said with a shrug but… “But I don’t mind, that you call me Cremisius.”

She nodded. “I wouldn’t mind, if you called me Ellie,” she returned, “You haven’t really, I don’t think, since um, finding out the Herald thing.”

“I didn’t mean anything bad by it,” he swore, though she didn’t seem upset, just offering an observation. Still, “I just wouldn’t want to overstep.”

Her nose scrunched up a bit, “I’m not a super formal person. I mean it still feels pretty weird everyone calling me ‘my lady’ or ‘the Lady Herald’. The Iron Bull can corner the market on liking ‘the’ in his name.”

“Ellie it is then,” he promised. “And don’t let Chief mess with you, he’s not super formal either. He wouldn’t begrudge you calling him ‘Bull’ for short.”

“Speak for yourself, Krem, its nice someone pays respect to the whole thing, I’ve got an image I’m trying to put out there, boss-girl knows how it is,” Bull said as he and Seeker Cassandra approached. Ellie whirled about to face him and the Qunari held up his hand to Ellie for a high-five and Maker it was cute, she really did her best to give his hand a loud solid slap. “Thanks for repping the Charger’s boss, I appreciate it.”

“No problem!” she looked to Cassandra then. “Everything alright? Cremisius said you had
to um, debrief the Iron Bull on something.”

“Security protocols,” Cassandra said by way of explanation.

“Oh! Sorry, there are a lot of those, I hope you weren’t bored,” Ellie said.

“Seeker and Red kept me on my toes,” Bull assured her, “no worries.”

“Red?” Ellie asked.

“Sister Leliana,” Cassandra supplied drily, obviously unimpressed with the nickname.

Please Maker don’t let him have actually called the Inquisition’s Spymaster ‘Red’ to her face.

Bull’s a jackass and there was a hundred percent possibility he’d done just that.

“You know cuz of her uh,” Bull looked at Ellie then, a lose forelock hanging along the side of her face. “Yeah ‘Red’ might not be a specific enough nickname. You’re ‘Boss’ to me though, so there shouldn’t really be any confusion.”

“There’s like a thousand redheads in the Inquisition!” Ellie exclaimed laughingly. “Leliana, Charter, Scout Harding, Flissa…anyway there’s a whole bunch!”

“A thousand redheads huh?” Bull asked sounding pleased…too pleased. Oh Maker. “Guess I have my work cut out—”

“Watch your rotten mouth, Chief!” Krem snapped.

“Indeed,” Seeker Cassandra agreed.

“Sorry boss,” Bull said, not super sorry.

Ellie just smiled and looked like she was going to say something but lost her train of thought.

And then, “Woah, kid?”

“Eleanor?” the Seeker questioned in alarm when the girl pitched on her feet, swaying a bit and nearly falling over, except Bull dropped to his knees, hands on her shoulders to steady her.

“Ellie?” Krem asked.

She shook her head as if to clear it. “Sorry, I’m okay. Little dizzy.”

Dizzy? “Is your headache worse, Ellie?” Krem asked. And then it sort of struck him—she’d been whisked away to a war room meeting the minute she set foot in Haven, then entertained their noble guests, she hadn’t mentioned a meal in there anywhere. “When was the last time you ate something?”

The Seeker looked chagrined. “Not since breakfast—do not,” she stopped Ellie from saying something, “A cookie does not constitute a proper meal. Maker, it has gone five.”

“Oh! It got so crazy earlier I forgot all about lunch, honestly,” Ellie admitted. She laid a hand over one of Bull’s on her shoulder, patting it as if in thanks as she stood okay on her own, so he let go. That wasn’t good, her not eating all day. She wouldn’t stand for it if it were someone
Seeker Pentaghast linked arms with Ellie and put a hand over the arm she held captive in case she needed the support. “Come. You will eat and we’ll see to what we discussed earlier. Then I recommend you call it an early evening, busy day is rather the understatement.”

Ellie nodded. “Um, it’s after five you said?” when Seeker nodded Ellie looked to Krem and Bull. “Are you two hungry? The Chargers?” she asked.

“Gotta touch base with my guys, we’ll grab dinner later,” Bull answered for them as he rose to his feet.

“Okay! Um…” she looked toward Harritt’s and said, “if you would, maybe check in on Thom? I mean, if you’re okay with that.”

The Seeker was shooting a glare over Ellie’s head that read that Bull was most certainly not to be okay with that. Thom? Was that the party member he hadn’t been certain of earlier?

Bull pointedly (ha! Horns) ignored the Seekers glare, only looking to Ellie as he promised her, “I’ll make sure the guy isn’t starving or anything boss, no worries.”

Ellie nodded her thanks and went with the Seeker. Good thing too, it’d looked like the woman was milliseconds away from yelling at someone and throwing Ellie over her shoulder to get her to the Tavern already.

“Round up the guys,” Bull ordered. “Just core people* on this one.”

“Got it, Chief.”

Thankfully everyone was around for the most part—Stitches had been sleeping in the tent, Dalish was nearby in her bedroll reading. Rocky, Skinner, and Grim were in Harritt’s forge poring over weapons schematics.

They gathered in the clearing between the forge and the bridge out of Haven—they couldn’t all fit in one tent and Chief wanted privacy.

“Good. Listen up,” Bull said once everyone was accounted for. “The Herald has a bodyguard that sticks by her side when she’s in Haven—unfortunately she’s delayed on Inquisition business. That leaves boss-girl in need of replacement security. I want everyone to watch over her while we’re in Haven, just in case. Nothing too invasive just keep an eye out for her while you’re going about your days.”

“The small one?” Skinner asked for clarification.

That got Krem a blank stare from Bull. “Ellie,” he explained.

“Yeah Skinner, the small one,” Bull confirmed.

Krem was a bit concerned the Elf woman looked pleased, like she thought she was being given carte blanch to kill any ‘Shems’ that looked at the Herald sideways. But uh. They’d burn that bridge when they got to it he supposed.

“We’ll keep an eye out Chief,” Krem said.

And that got him one hell of a shit-eating grin from the Iron Bull. The Qunari clapped
Krem hard on the shoulder, hard enough he wasn’t sure if it was the oaf’s hand or his words that winded him.

“Oh, you’ll be doing more than just keeping an eye out, Krem.”

Varric and Sera were sitting together at the bar of Flissa’s Tavern. Good woman, kept topping off Varric’s mug without question. Sera hadn’t done much more than chug two beers, her third sat slowly losing its froth, all but forgotten to their debate.

Of the most intellectual and stimulating sort, of course.

“Yer a Dwarf, Dwarfy!” Sera exclaimed. “You should know Diamondback* is way better’n’ Wicked Grace!”

“You don’t know shit about Diamondback if you think I would enjoy it just because I’m a Dwarf,” Varric drawled. “It’s the damn Orzamar nobility that’s all about that crap. Wicked Grace is where its at. Diamondback is a child’s game.”

“Dwarves is short like kids,” the Elf girl snickered.

Okay, ignoring that. “Chanson d’Argent verses Dead Man’s Tricks.” Varric posed.

“Duh! Dead Man’s Tricks!”

“Can’t pronounce Chanson d’Argent can you, Buttercup?”

“Shite yeah I can’t pronounce ‘chanty deodorant’ you wank, plus I’ve only ever played Tricks. Other thing sounds like a lady-bits disease.”

Eh. “It’s Orlesian so, basically yeah, it’s like a lady-bits disease,” he conceded. Dead Man’s Tricks was more fun. Huh. He wondered if Tumbles knew any card games.

He heard the door swing open, and Sera whipped her head around real fast, “Inky!” she greeted loudly.

Oh, hell yeah, Tumbles was here? Great timing, Wicked Grace was totally going on the syllabus for Street Smarts. Varric turned from his mug and saw Seeker and Ellie.

“You will moderate your tone this instant,” Cassandra snapped at the Elf girl, harshly but quietly like she was trying to keep her own voice down. Sera’s mouth went shut.

“Be nice to Sera,” Tumbles gently reprimanded. Almost half-hearted but not like she hadn’t meant it, more like she was just beat. Seeker saw Ellie seated in front of the fire place, kneeling a bit to whisper something to her, hand stroking the back of her hooded head before rising and coming to the bar. Ellie had her arms folded on the table and laid her head down in them.

“S’wrong with Inky?”
“She has had a trying day, Sera, she is tired and has a headache. If you insist upon speaking
do so quietly, please,” Cassandra implored using the strained politeness asked of her. “Flissa, the
Herald needs dinner.”

“Of course!” Flissa gasped, setting about getting her meal ready at once.

“What’s up?” Varric asked Seeker quietly. Oh. Shit.

Seeker looked like absolute hell. Taunt with stress, eyes wide and unblinking as she stared
into space, hands gripping the edge of the bar, and she was just ashen.

“Fliss, you good to keep an eye on things?” Varric asked the barmaid who nodded. “Go sit
with Tumbles, kay Buttercup?”

Sera nodded. “I’ll be quiet,” she promised the Seeker before slipping off her stool to go sit
next to Ellie, whispering ‘Just me’, and putting a hand on the younger girl’s back to rub circles.

“Seeker?” Varric asked, awkwardly putting a hand on the Nevarran woman’s shoulder. She
jerked and stared at him in question. “Come on. Flissa’ll get Tumbles her food, Sera’s watching
her.” he nodded his head to gesture for the Seeker to follow him.

“I cannot leave Eleanor unattended.”

“Was I not speaking Trade? Flissa’s got her, so does Buttercup, and Chuckles is literally
two feet away in his cabin.” He’d seemed distracted lately, Solas, but he’d know if Ellie were in
danger and come running.

Cassandra nodded stiffly and followed as he hopped down from his seat and led her, not
far, just to his tent, gesturing for her to take a seat on his cot. He sat on the little table that used to
be in Flissa’s, Tumbles got it for him as a writing desk. Bless that girl.

Seeker sat and just. She looked like she was about to snap, really.

“What’s going on?”

Okay wait, maybe he shouldn’t’ve asked, shit.

He thought she might yell or get violent or something but her face just completely
criumpled, and something like a sob huffed out of her and her eyes had definite, confirmable tears
when she pressed a hand against them. Shit!

He couldn’t’ve felt more awkward if the woman had sat down and stripped herself naked,
and at least if she’d done that eh. He knew what to do with naked. Definitely couldn’t say the same
for crying but he was going to try his best.

“I forgot to feed her,” she said first. “She has been in my care in Haven for all of seven
hours and I just…Marehis isn’t here, and she won’t be for-” she stopped and gasped for air,
“Marehis will be delayed indefinitely! She has to trust
[319x142]that we can do what is best for Eleanor and I
have failed more than once today!”

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have failed more than once today!”

“Okay uh, let’s talk this out. What do you mean ‘forgot’ to feed her? She’s not a puppy.”

“Our War Room meeting became more involved than I thought it would be, and then she
had to meet with noble allies for the Inquisition, that was abhorrent, they,” oh man they’d done
something, Cassandra was pissed, swinging from near sobs to seething rage, “they proposed to
Okay. That. No no no, nope! Nu-uh. Back it _way_ on up.

“Please tell me you mean a lucrative business proposal.”

Cassandra leveled him a wry glare—though her anger was clearly not at him. “Lord Berand’s family proposed a _marriage_ between Eleanor and their son! A man most recently affianced and over a decade her senior! The Lord himself gave Cullen some warning but Maker forbid anyone tell me! Apparently Lord Berand wanted no part in his parents’ manipulations but they offered his hand to Eleanor saying Lady Vellina’s loss was tragic but just how fortuitous that her fate delivered their son to the Herald of Andraste—we were in talks for _three hours_ dissuading them from such a notion without losing their allegiance! Eleanor was incredibly embarrassed by the entire affair!”

Yeah screw them for scarring the kid but also proposing in general. Cause see Tumbles isn’t allowed to get married. Nope. Not uh, not anytime soon. The meaning of ‘at arrow-point wedding’ would mean Bianca has shot the groom dead to cancel the proceedings.

How the hell did these people even thought to do something like that? Shit, hadn’t these jerks come here with the family of their son’s dead fiancée?

“Wait wait wait, so you introduce them to Tumbles and they just…? Propose?”

“What an esteemed honor it is to finally meet you Lady Herald, while it was such unfortunate circumstances that brought you together, we hope you would hear our proposal of _marriage_ on behalf of our beloved son,” the Seeker quoted in scathing tones. “The absolute _gall_! And when Lady Montilyet finally worked them down to an understanding that such a union would not be practical at this time before doling out a respectful refusal, they cajoled Eleanor into giving them a tour of Haven before they left! Like they thought if they could get her alone they could bully her into acceptance! Thankfully Eleanor brought up the point that it would be incredibly rude for her to ignore her other guests, they’d all come so far to see her, and she would be so very delighted to give the host of our noble guests a tour. She only just saw them off.”

“Well shit, Cassandra it doesn’t sound like Tumbles had time to breathe let alone take a lunch break in the middle of war room meetings, thwarted marriage proposals, and playing tour guide.”

“Time or no I should have made some!” Cassandra insisted with vehement compunction, “Made escape for her during those _horrible_ marriage negotiations! They were daunting and did nothing but mortify her. Lady Josiphine could have made her case without the Herald’s presence. But I didn’t even consider she hadn’t eaten since breakfast until Eleanor was suffering from the oversight! Marehis would _never_ have made such a mistake!”

“Let’s stop comparing with Marehis. You’re always watching over Ellie in the field, Marehis usually watches over her in Haven and those are two totally different playing grounds.” Plus, Marehis was the embodiment of maternal instinct, the woman had mad powers of perception and foresight for _days_. Varric was definitely never playing card games against her, she’d rob him blind.

Cassandra had actively _work_ at taking care of the kid outside of kicking demon ass to defend her, everything else was new and she was _trying_, shit, it was more than Varric had ever expected of the woman. She’d gone from keeping the girl at battle-field’s length, an asset to the Inquisition and nothing more to open, revealing affection with the kid! Varric had gotten an eyeful
of the woman’s cuddle session, and he didn’t need Qunari hearing, just his regular shitty Dwarf hearing to overhear the Seeker singing, that’s right! A horrible, off-key, ‘the tune bucket had a Breach sized hole in it’ lullaby, to Tumbles when she was sick on the Coast. Elves and Qunari were gone, and she obviously thought Varric wouldn’t be able to hear her through the tent and the raining, but nope, he’d been cooking dinner and boom! Horrible singing…but a damn sweet gesture. Point was, Seeker tried.

And still, she beat herself up when shit just…happened. “This should not be so difficult,” she said.

“It’s just different!” Varric insisted. “Out in the field we’re all together, we take all our meals at the same time, sleep at the same time everything—everything that needs done we do together, and our time is way more flexible, anything we can’t get done one day can be seen to the next. Here we all go our separate ways. Marehis’s day is dedicated to taking care of Ellie, you’ve got your own shit to juggle, separate schedules with you and Tumbles trying to stoke a crap ton of fires. Today sounds like it got away from you. It’s not like she was going to starve to death, a headache isn’t that big of a deal—”

“She nearly fainted!”

Alright granted. “Slightly bigger deal but still, Seeker. Slightly. Definitely not life-threatening—you’re doing the best you can. You had to pick up the slack for Marehis on a crazy-ass day. Don’t beat yourself up over it.”

“It isn’t just today I am…I am so,” worried? Distressed? Either worked. Seeker shook herself and restarted her sentence. “Something is…something is wrong, Varric she,” her voice was wrought with panic, Cassandra bowed her head, hands bracing her temples like a vice. “She is sick, nearly all the time now, from stress. It is constant. She…”

“What?” he asked. Seeker didn’t say anything so Varric rose from his seat and went to kneel in front of her. “Hey. Look at me. I know Marehis isn’t here but the rest of us are, talk to me. What’s going on?”

“She is ill, day in, day out, sick to her stomach, must be continually dosed with potion and it is getting to such a state she cannot take more and yet her illness persists—burning sometimes stabbing pain in her stomach, burning in her chest. She could barely eat this morning she was in such pain. And her panic attacks…” she struggled for her words then so Varric tried to help. Shit. Kid was stressed but he hadn’t realized it was that bad. He’d seen her picking at her food this morning he just thought she was sick of his scrambled eggs. It was his go-to for breakfast okay? And the bearded bastard used to handle breakfast a lot of the time so Varric had been beating that asshole to the punch. Cause fuck him, that’s why.

Seeker was still tripped up so he offered, “Yeah, that’s always hard, but it was just one panic attack,” the fact was meant to soothe but,

“Seven,” she corrected.

… “What?”

“She has had seven panic attacks in the last four days. One of which n-nearly…” she shuddered. “Solas was able to be of assistance before it wholly transitioned into an asthma attack.”

“Shit, Seeker…” about a thousand questions wanted to fling themselves at her all at once. Why hadn’t she said anything?! Who else knew about this, why was he the last to know? Fuck!
What was…shit was it all over Rainier’s crap? Of course it was, that bastard. Bah! He had to stop himself from launching into all sorts of questions Seeker was…she was freaking out right now.

Cassandra handled her shit pretty well, but she was basically in the middle of a full blown breakdown and he uh…definitely didn’t want that. She worked herself way too hard. He’d seen new parents with less anxiety. Aveline* hadn’t slept for almost three months after she (with a little help from Donnic) popped a little guy of their own into existence, she worried if she didn’t have eyes on the tyke he’d stop breathing in his sleep or something. Cassandra was nearing new-mom-Aveline levels of stressed-out and that was dangerous for everyone involved, and certainly not healthy for the Seeker herself.

“What can we do?” Varric asked. Shit, he knew he did fuck-all to help out with the kid outside lunch dates and the occasional street smarts session. He could do more. Probably. “Is it Rainier’s bullshit stressing her out so much? I know you got some resistance from the Empress, but I thought kid asked Vivienne to handle that. Can’t imagine Iron Lady walking away without success.”

“Oh no. No, Madam de Fer did indeed secure the Empress’s mercy in Rainier’s case. Perhaps too well,” Cassandra took a deep shuddering breath, and she was shaking. “This cannot leave this room, not until everything has been finalized.”

“I can keep a secret.” For someone who chronicled his every adventure, he really could keep a secret.

“It will be common knowledge all too soon,” she said. “The Empress offered Eleanor a favor.”

He didn’t know the symptoms of having a stroke. But he was pretty sure he was having a stroke. His brain felt like someone had doused it in kerosene and lit it on fire. He sat straight down on his ass then. Son of a bitch. Whatever the hell it was, if Ellie refused she was screwed. If she accepted she was screwed. Just. Damn it!

“Uhh was it at least wor—” nope. Nope. Didn’t matter what it was. That old Orlesian bitch could have offered Ellie anything in all the world and it wouldn’t matter a damn because she just got right up in the asscrack of the Game. Hell yeah, this was going to be common knowledge soon—every last fucking noble dick was going to hear about this, take satisfaction or offense at whatever choice the kid made.

Ellie’s whole ‘screaming my frustrations out into the sea’ thing felt like uh, yeah, he’d be down for some sea screaming. How far was the Coast? Maybe the Haven’s lake would work, all that ice and shit it’d be echoy and loud and yeah he could go for it right now. No wonder Seeker was beating herself up—it wasn’t her fault but yeah, Varric hadn’t even been there and he felt like…shit! He should’ve been able to do something! He had all sorts of connections, mostly in Ferelden but he couldn’t believe an offer from the Empress to Tumbles had slipped under his radar. This was dangerous and there was no way of protecting her from it!

He’d never really cared much about whose ass warmed Orlais’ throne but yeah, Empress Celene was definitely on his list now. Ellie was a kid! And she just threw her head first into the deep end of the Game!

For some reason that gave him the vague thought that the kid might not know how to swim? Not just politically—shit, she had no way of even beginning to know how to do that. But like for real? They should probably make sure of that—ha, not him, he was sunk but someone should, when they were around a non-frozen body of water. Bah! Current problem though—
“What has her royal majesty so graciously offered?” he wanted to know. Damn!

“The Empress will clear Rainier and his men of their crimes, he will be free to work in service to the Inquisition and his former comrades will be released from prison,” Cassandra said. “After discussing what Rainier feels his men would do with their new-found freedom, Eleanor decided to accept.”

Just. Wait. “He- that bastard- He could have told her anything! Just! Lied again, gave her false assurances, maybe…maybe this was what he was planning all along!”

“Yes Varric,” Seeker drawled. “Years before the Breach, before the rebellion even, Thom Rainier decided he would have his men commit a horrific crime he fully intended them to get away with because he planned to pose as a Warden and wait for the Herald of Andraste to find him, trust him, and manipulate her through his betrayal to free he and his men with the aide of the Empress of Orlais. Truly. He is the greatest mind in a generation. We will proclaim his intellectual prowess in the ages to come.”

Okay. Little much. But at least she was being all bone-dry humor and not all worried out of her mind and openly crying anymore.

“I’m not saying he planned all that, I’m just saying he’s a goddamn opportunist!” Money to be made over the war for Orlais throne? Sure! Whoops, now some kids are dead. Better run while I can! Oh, Warden says I ‘show promise’ hell yeah, sign me up! Oh he’s dead now too, and it should have been me? Sounds like a likely story, I’m the only one alive to talk about it anyway, I’m just going to steal his identity! Sweet, clueless, naive little girl running around trying to fix the hole in the sky? If she can fix that she may as well fix my cocked-up life for me!

“It was a difficult decision, but Eleanor had to make the call, loath she was to make it. She is petrified at the possibility that these men will squander their freedom, cause harm that could have been prevented if she had turned the Empress down,” Cassandra sighed. “As it is, Lady Josephine is working on offers to present Rainier’s men with, to see if perhaps they would serve the Inquisition, they would be more easily dealt with if they were under our direct supervision. If they are truly repentant, we will see.”

“I could kill him, I really could.” Really, really, really could. Bianca was practically begging to put an arrow in that man’s head, and he so very rarely let his favorite girl down.

But, he might have made a promise—double pinkies—to uh, shit, she was his new favorite girl, how was that possible? Was he losing his edge? He’d accused Seeker of going soft but damn.

“Believe you me, if his loss would not absolutely devastate Eleanor, that man would not have survived the journey back from the Storm Coast,” Cassandra assured him darkly.

Varric sighed and shook his head. “I still can’t believe she gives a damn about him.”

“She loves him,” Seeker lamented wearily.


“You…you do know Eleanor loves you, as well, yes?”

Uh-huh well that had his face feeling like it was on fire now. He cleared his throat. “She’s a good kid. That asshole hurts her ever again I’ll kill him myself.”
“You most certainly will not,” Seeker assured him. He would have argued but then she said, “I have already made arrangements with Leliana. Should he ever betray Eleanor again, his loss will be made to look like an accident.”

He didn’t quite have Bull’s appreciation for red heads, but he could kiss their Spymaster senseless if he thought she wouldn’t put a hit out on him for it.

“Huh. I can dig it,” he agreed. Still. Might not be able to kill the bastard, but he was absolutely by no means to go anywhere near Ellie. Never. He’d broken her heart, and Varric blamed him, absolutely for Tumbles being so nerve-wrackingly sick, and…shit now, now he’d put her life at stake. Asshole may think he can just pick up where he left off with the kid but nope, he had another thing coming, no way in hell Varric was letting him get anywhere near being someone Ellie considered truly her friend ever again.

“You uh. You feel better now, Seeker?” he asked after they’d fallen silent for a while.

She went a bit red at that, as if she’d only just realized they sort of completely broken their whole ‘I’m going to despise you till your dead’ thing they had going on between them in the beginning of what was now a…weird sort-of friendship. “I do apologize for becoming so out of sorts. I would ahh,” she cleared her throat, “appreciate your discretion.”

Oh, come on, he couldn’t let the opportunity pass him up. “I assure you, I’m always discreet about the women who’ve been in my bed.” She was sitting on his cot after all.

“I could also arrange for your death to look like an accident.”

“Yeah yeah,” he chuckled. But more seriously, because awkward as it felt to say, they’d already come this far, “Look uh. I know, taking care of the kid can be a lot, Marehis being out of the picture leaves a lot on you but I was serious when I said everyone else is here. Solas. Bull. Sera…you know, sorta. And uh. Me. Don’t feel like you gotta do everything all on your own.”

She didn’t say ‘thanks’ but she did say,

“You will cease being so kind to me this instant. I assure you it is nauseating.”

He was pretty sure that was the same thing.

***Trespasser DLC Spoilers abound***

He lost track of time, a gentle feeling of question filtering through their connection snapped Solas out of his daze and reminded him of the hour. Goodness, it was nearing sunset when he finally emerged from his cabin. He hadn’t set foot from his quarters since their return to Haven that morning. He’d been occupied with study. Of a sort.

Admittedly, of his letters from Marehis. He…he kept them all, every single one. A strange bit of sentimentality he supposed. One that was a bit torturous at the moment. He did not think of
himself as a clingy man but...well he’d not heard a single word from Marehis in quite a few days. Three. Which wasn’t much granted but...well she’d written him, sometimes multiple times a day, every day since their, ah, since their relationship formed, and he went to the Hinterlands with Ellie. They made a point of touching base, some of their letters were barely worth the parchment they were set to—entire scrolls dedicated to the single line “I am safe” from Marehis, and in Solas’s case the addition of the assurance that “Ellie is well” when he hadn’t a great deal of time to detail their travels. At first he was worried, perhaps some misfortune had befallen her—that she physically could not get word out from her quarter. But apparently Marehis was still sending her reports along to Cassandra, well, and still in Orlais.

He wasn’t sure what he’d done. He almost wished he were the sort of person to copy his own correspondence, a record of letters he’d sent her. He tried to remember everything he’d said in his last letter to her...had he offended her somehow? Said something he shouldn’t? Was she...had she decided to terminate their relationship? Surely even if she despaired of him she would not suddenly cut off all contact—she would write to let him know or at the very least make it clear she did not wish to continue correspondence with him until such a time they could speak face to face, to end things.

So, upon returning to Haven he’d gone straight away to his cabin and pored over every letter the woman had ever written them, studying them for style, tone. Reading them in order he could see the...the way her feelings for him had grown, the change between light flirtation to...genuine love. He had not loved in such a way as this, not in recountable time. He hadn’t expected to find someone who captured his attentions but somehow, she had. She was beautiful, at times it was such he came to understand what it was to look upon a woman and the breath from your very lungs is stolen away at the sight. When her body was bathed in moonlight he would find himself struck by the thought that perhaps she had been like him—not in exact form, of course, but...he had not found any of the others in his travels, though he knew for certain Mythal* had fallen, given herself over, allowed herself to be reincarnated in a sense by attaching to a willing mortal form. He wondered if perhaps Marehis was her vessel, conduit of the All-Mother. But no, there was nothing in her history that would suggest such a thing, and perhaps that was for the best. While he longed for things of old, Marehis brought to light every quality that could be found in something new.

Just as she was lovely, she was bright, so very smart. He found he could speak with her on any subject he could possibly care to discuss and he did not grow bored, he could listen to her for hours, and she listened to him, never mocked or ridiculed ideas of his she did not agree with or couldn’t fully understand—when such misunderstanding did occur, when they brushed against subjects he was not fully prepared to discuss with her in full, like his... plans for the future, for their people...she was patient and tried to comprehend, and sometimes it seemed like she did garner understanding even when he could not clue her in on all of the information, not yet.

He’d spoken with Marehis of the way things had been—not in great detail. He’d posed truths disguised as hypotheticals—had she heard legends of the old gods, what did she think of the tales of their ascension? Did she believe, as many Dalish did, that their gods—at least Elgar’nan and Mythal—had always existed as gods, or did she think there was some credence to be paid to the theory that their gods had once been Elves themselves, ascended to godhood. He daren’t pose the suggestion that the gods were not gods at all, merely the last generation of Dalish that lived the way Elves were meant to live before they fell from their higher station, revered by their cheated descendants as mystical beings. Marehis believed in the gods.

She would scarcely believe, that when Sola’s attentions as they laid together caused the Dread Wolf’s name to cross her lips, she placed them on the Wolf himself.

When he first woke, sought the keys to his success to bring his people back from the brink
of destruction they lived on now, his goals had been for the betterment of them all, to set things right, make things as they were, return eternity to his people. Now...now when he thought of the return of Elvish immortality, of forever, he thought of Marehis. Oh. Perhaps she had come to have some idea of that. Maybe he had been too reckless with his intentions, given her too much information. Maybe she pieced enough of the puzzle together, had discovered his plans for Elven immortality.

Perhaps that was it? Why she’d so abruptly seemed to have cut things off with him. Had he been reckless, given the woman too much information too soon, accidentally revealed the truth of the matter—that Elves were always meant to live eternal? She loved him, would certainly be content to share their lives together, he was certain of that now. But...but forever? That may be desirable to her as well except...he only lay claim to part of her heart. There was Ellie. A Human girl, small and, despite the Mark’s ability to anchor to her, and more impressive her ability to hold magical connection with him, she was mortal. If his goals were met, he and Marehis, all Elves would live on. Ellie...she would age, and if she were lucky, live a long life. But she would eventually grow old and weak and die. Perhaps Marehis had realized what Solas longed to do for his people and wanted no part in it because she could not abide a fate where she lived eternally with the loss of her ward.

“...here soon. He said he was coming. Or...well, he sent the feeling? It’s pretty weird to explain,” Ellie’s voice, muffled, filtering through the walls of her cabin as Solas approached.


“Nah, I’m okay. Really Cassandra, thanks for everything today. Oh! Come in!” she called when Solas sent a subtle announcement of his arrival.

Her cabin was warm, Cassandra sat on the floor, her back resting against Ellie’s bed, the Herald curled up against her before the fireplace, one of the Seeker’s hands absently playing with one of the curls at the back of Ellie's hair. Even though by his watch it was not even seven o’clock, Ellie was already in her sleep clothes.

He had not focused much on their bond today, and he should have. The past week Eleanor had continually exhibited signs of stress causing her to be physically unwell. When he focused now...there was the burn of the Mark, the dull pain ever-present in her stomach as of late, and she was weary, more than ready to go to sleep, she did still wish to meditate with him before she went to sleep though...not for her benefit? Oh.

She was worried about him. She wanted to make sure he was alright before she went to sleep, and thought...ah, she had noticed he was unlike himself these past few days and thought he was sad, perhaps lonely, and sought to make sure he got the opportunity to both clear his mind and attempt to work through his angst while being in the company of one he could call friend—to dispel his sorrow, and loneliness.

He could scarcely forgive himself, that his actions had led to the fate burned into her hand, but he was glad to know Ellie. He did not like the prospect any more than Marehis would, a future where he would have to live on past her death, but that made the time they had together all the more precious. He would hold onto it for as long as he could and cherish it once it was gone.

“Come, da’len. Sit with me,” Solas said as he sat down before the hearth. Ellie nodded and scooted away from the Seeker to sit beside him. He cast his worries aside and focused on his breathing, on her breathing, they synched rather seamlessly now, and he paid close attention to his heartbeat—like the ticking of a clock, to help him discern how much time they passed. He would
not keep her long. In fact, it was such he needn’t keep track of the time, Eleanor quickly began to
doze in her seat after a few minutes, outright falling asleep, he cracked an eye open to see her
slump forward, his hand and Cassandra’s went to her shoulders, his far more calmly and he nodded
to the Seeker as if to reassure her Ellie was well.

“I think that is enough for this evening, da’len,” he said, and the girl stirred a bit, shaking
herself and blinking at him sleepily.

“Mmkay. Thanks, Solas,” she mumbled.

She was only barely awake, and he worried that she might fall if she tried to rise, she was
utterly exhausted. So, he carefully slid his arms, one behind her back, the other to brace the back of
her knees, and carried her the few steps to her bed. Cassandra pulled her bedding aside, so she
could be laid down and her blankets pulled over her, the Seeker actually tucking the girl in, and
Solas offered her a bit of privacy, turning away when the woman brushed the hair from Ellie’s face
and pressed a kiss to her temple.

“We must talk,” Cassandra said quietly, after a moment of making certain Ellie was sound
asleep. She gestured for him to follow her, nodded her thanks to the guards stationed outside her
door for the evening, and headed for Solas’s cabin.

“May I speak plainly? Marehis has told you I am aware of your relationship, yes?” she
asked when he closed the door behind them.

“Oh. Oh goodness. Had…had Marehis sent the Seeker with some form of rejection for him?
She was much younger than he surely, but he had not ever found her to be immature, it would be
incredibly childish to- to- break things off through a friend. Like a girl in the school yard breaking
a liaison with some boy she’d claimed to have loved for all of a day!”

“You may wish to sit,” the Seeker was reluctant to say.

“Of course, Seeker.” They’d been almost concerned with just how many knew of their
relationship, but the important thing was Ellie wasn’t aware—the girl wouldn’t be upset over it,
just the opposite. She would seek to encourage their relationship, and that ran the risk of Ellie
putting herself at danger to allow the Elves more time alone together. Ellie would not understand
that there was a part of their relationship that benefited from her presence, Marehis in her role at
peace to have her ward so close and safe, Solas in his role offering guidance and sharing what he
could of his knowledge with the girl. Marehis’s job protecting Eleanor came first, that was
something he was more than cognizant of going into this, he could hardly begrudge the time Ellie
consumed with Marehis, not when, once all was said and done, Marehis’s time with Eleanor would
be a mere paragraph in the story of the Elf woman’s life.

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Oh. Oh goodness. Had…had Marehis sent the Seeker with some form of rejection for him?
She was much younger than he surely, but he had not ever found her to be immature, it would be
incredibly childish to- to- break things off through a friend. Like a girl in the school yard breaking
a liaison with some boy she’d claimed to have loved for all of a day!

“No. I do not believe I do. Say what you’ve come to say.”

“Very well,” Cassandra said looking incredibly awkward, shifting on her feet uncertainly.
“You cannot share what I am about to disclose to you, not with anyone. Leliana barely agreed to
cue you in, but given your relationship with Marehis, I believe it wise to keep you informed.”

This…this did not sound much like a breakup anymore. It…no. He would wait to hear the
Seeker out first, if he allowed the very thought to cross his mind that Marehis might…no. Panic
spiked in his magic and he could feel it crackling beneath his skin and for a horrified moment he
thought perhaps after centuries of cool control he’d mastered in his youth, he was going to cast
involuntarily, wild magic lashing out like a wounded animal—
Perhaps he should sit down then, clenching his eyes shut just a second as he took a few deep breaths, before he crossed his quarters—small as they were they felt vast somehow, empty. He had never minded his solitude, did not mind it even still but his world was lighter, more content when Marehis was there, even when it was just her attendance during Ellie’s lessons. He fell into one of the chairs before his fireplace. It lay cold, and he realized he hadn’t tended it all day, his cabin was chilled now and that suited him, it was something of a distraction. When Cassandra sat in the second chair he was reminded that he was not alone in his quarters, he cast at the dormant logs, gave them light again.

“Marehis is alive, but there has been a complication. Leliana’s ranks have been compromised, and while she seeks to fix the problem, her agents in the field have been instructed to scatter and lay low. Marehis made it out of Orlais safely but we cannot know where she has gone until order is restored among the Nightingales.”

Oh, he was, he was eternally grateful. He wasn’t sure to who but…Marehis was alive. She…she had to flee Orlais? She could not let anyone know where she was, that explained the sudden cut off in communication but…

“…she…she’s been sending reports still, I thought?”

“Fabrications. Leliana’s doing, to ensure Eleanor was not made aware of the problem.”

Ahh. “Ellie does not know?”

“Certainly not.”

“When can she…how can…does Leliana have any idea of when she will be able to resume contact? Return to Haven?”

Cassandra shook her head. “The Iron Bull has been made aware of the issue, and is reaching out, quietly to his Ben Hessrath contacts, to keep an eye out for Marehis. If they see her they will report back to Bull on her wellbeing—he has not revealed the Inquisition’s troubles just asked that they look out for ‘a friend of his’ in the field. That is the most we can hope for until the threat has been dealt with. I cannot go into detail but Leliana assures me that we will have the culprit apprehended and in Haven for questioning before the week is out.”

“What will we be saying to Ellie? She will question if Marehis does not return shortly after Madam de Fer. Or with Scout Harding.”

“We will be saying nothing, allow Leliana to handle this. Harding is under orders to hide, just as Marehis is. I will ensure Eleanor believes Marehis is merely delayed with other matters the Inquisition requires her attention on in Orlais. She cannot know about this, Solas, truly.”

Her voice held such an intonation that was just about as close to begging as Solas had ever heard from the woman.

“What is it, Seeker?” Solas asked.

She sounded surprised that he would ask as such. “You did not hear us earlier? When we visited Adan?”

He looked up at the Seeker then, absolutely horrified, “She was in need of the Healer? Was she attacked?” Surly he had not been so distracted that he missed a call for help from Ellie!

“No, Solas. The ailments she has been having, her stomach upsets, more frequent bouts of
Today she took the maximum amount of her stomach potion before noon. I insisted she see Adan and he believes she has begun to develop an ulcer. If she were to know that Marehis has been put at risk, that she could be in danger it—the stress is unnecessary for her to bear, and it could prove detrimental!”

His mouth worked, opening shutting, opening again but he wasn’t sure he was capable of speech at the moment. What did manage to translate from his brain to his lips was, “An ulcer?”

“A hole burned through the lining of the stomach and if left untreated, through the organ proper.”

“I know what an ulcer is!” he found himself snapping and then, “I apologize I just…Adan is certain?”

“As he can be. It has not become wholly degenerative but must be monitored. We must be vigilant in lessening the demands placed on Eleanor. He has sent word to the Advisors, and I will be speaking to the others later. We must do what we can to bring her ease. I would ask that you monitor her as you can in the days to come, I understand you do not wish to invade her privacy, but this is a matter of her safety.”

Solas nodded, he whole-heartedly agreed. The future was uncertain but what he could be certain of, was Marehis never forgiving him should he allow something to happen to Eleanor, something he could have prevented, anyway.

He thanked Cassandra, and she left him to his thoughts.

To his sleep—he needed to, now, not just because it was ever pressing, his exhaustion from the day. He had to dream, cast his mind deep into the Fade. Ellie was resting and he would monitor her when they woke tomorrow.

The Iron Bull had his Ben Hessrath contacts but he…he would much prefer the reliance of his own allies. He would call out to his friends in the Fade and ask that they cast a net of their own to search for Marehis, see that she was well. He could feel the subtle life-signs of Marehis’s magic perhaps he could make contact with her himself. She was not a Mage, but all Elves, even now, had some measure of magic even if it laid dormant within them. Sera, loath that she was to accept her heritage, she had a certain affiliation with magic. She may not realize it but her instincts, to hold Eleanor’s Marked hand when it burned the girl’s magic, it was in fact a form of relief—the Mark could sense another’s magic touching it even through a layer of skin, it stopped tormenting Ellie’s magic so much, became distracted trying to see if it could latch on to a more compatible host. To no avail of course, Solas had tried, for days after the Conclave, to get the Mark to transfer to him, but it would not be removed. Sera could not put it into thoughts or words, she did not even realize what she was doing, she just did it. Perhaps Marehis would be able work on such instinct as well, join him in the Fade even if by accident.

Solas closed his eyes and threw himself into sleep.

Krem’d always been something of a morning person. It started in his youth—his father always rose early each morning, to prepare for the day in his workshop, a little place just around
the corner from their home. The first thing his father did was shave, he always woke with scruff on his face, and he liked to be neat, clean-shaven—it was professional, and dignified he said. Once mother could be heard getting breakfast together, Krem would tip toe from his bedroom to his parents’ room and in the low lamplight, just a hint of morning sun peeking through the slats of their windows, and the bit of reflection from his father’s shaving mirror always angled downward so Krem could see into it, his father would let him pretend to shave. The man kept a squared off butter knife in his shaving kit—something that looked similar to the razor he used without an actual sharp edge a young child might accidentally hurt themselves with. And even when things were tight, every dollop considered scarce, his father always let him lather his face with shaving cream—when he was very little his father did it himself, he’d take Krem’s face in his hands and rub the cool cream on his cheeks, for some reason it always made Krem laugh, and his father would grin ‘meus bello mimo!’ my handsome child, he’d say. Together they sat, father and son, shaving.

It was one of the few times in his day he felt truly completely at peace with himself when he was young. His father’s shaving kit was one of the few possessions he still had from his life in Tevinter, a small wooden box he kept tucked away except when he shaved. He didn’t have anything like the thick dark scruff his father had, nothing that reminded him of the comforting scratchiness of his father’s cheek against his face when they hugged, but he got fuzzy under his chin, along his jaw, above his lips. Made him feel like, wherever his father may be, for a few minutes, they were together. A silly notion, nothing but sentiment, but comforting, Krem thought. So.

This morning he rose just a bit earlier, excitement, nervousness rousing him before sunrise. A runner came for him just shortly after he’d woken, he was already armored up and ready for the day ahead when he received Ellie’s schedule.

8am combat training, meet Seeker Pentaghast and Commander Cullen at Haven’s Gate

10am—up to the lady Herald’s discretion. She may take free time, though Mister Thom Rainier will be available for horseback riding lessons, should she wish. He can be met at the forge, but she truly needn’t trouble herself.

11am psychology, meet The Iron Bull at the Charger’s camp

Noon Break for lunch

2pm See Solas in his cabin for Magical Training

3pm onwards, free time, dinner, etc.

10pm nightly meditation—The Herald may call upon Solas at any hour she wishes to retire, but we advise 10pm at the latest.

His orders were to keep the schedule to himself—the Herald’s movements were to be controlled around Haven, but the Advisors didn’t want just anyone knowing her outright schedule. Even her party members were not appraised to the thing, they only knew where to be and when for their specific part in her day. Apparently Marehis committed the new schedules to memory each morning and destroyed it but Seeker Pentaghast made it clear he was to simply endeavor to keep the parchment on his person, it would not do for him to forget where Ellie needed to be and when. He studied the thing over breakfast, he’d commit it to memory but tucked it away for safe keeping
for today. Just in case. And then yeah, if that went well, maybe tomorrow or the next day he’d read it and burn it for safety’s sake.

It would seem Marehis had tested him when he’d been in Haven—he’d have figured that out soon enough without Seeker Pentaghast outright spelling it out for him. He was given full leave to command anyone for the sake of the Herald’s safety. When Marehis had gone to Healer Adan’s at Ellie’s request, she could have simply passed the task along to someone else and stayed with her ward, but she wanted to see how he’d fare with the responsibility. The Seeker said Marehis had been pleased with his work, the little he’d done, and her recalling the events to Seeker Pentaghast was what made her think of him in the first place. Marehis would be ‘comfortable’ with the idea of him watching over Ellie’s safety and Seeker Pentaghast had seen him fight on the Storm Coast, thought him suitable. So. No pressure.

Little bit of pressure but he didn’t mind it. Wanted to do well. It felt good, that they believed him capable. And he liked the idea, being someone who could keep Ellie safe.

He reported to Ellie’s cabin first thing after breakfast. There was a moment of uncertainty, once he dismissed the guards keeping watch outside her door, and he stood ready to knock. Her day would start soon, the scheduled part but he wasn’t sure if she would be ready yet or not, didn’t want to make her feel rushed or uncomfortable or…

No, he was just nervous. This was an important job, and…well he and Ellie got along well in the little doses of time they’d spent together but what if she tired of him, having to spend an entire day in his company? And he wasn’t certain just how many days after that, until Marehis was back from Orlais, or Ellie was sent somewhere else for the Inquisition’s work. And Marehis was who she would want to be looking after her, she had to miss the Elf woman horribly. What if she resented him because he was taking Marehis’s place?

It took all of a second after he knocked on the door for him to realize his worries were unfounded really. Ellie was just, well,

The door swung open and Ellie popped her head out, smiled when she saw it was him, bright, cheery, and Maker it cleared any trace of the chill Haven’s winter placed in his chest.

“Good morning, Cremisius! Do we need to leave now, or would you like to come in?”

He’d been careful to follow instructions, he was supposed to join Ellie early enough that they could handle any last-minute hiccups in her schedule before they absolutely had to be to her first appointment so. Yeah, they had some time.

She seemed glad to hear that, stepped aside and motioned for him to come on in.

She looked like she felt better today, well rested, her color returned. Her hair was trapped in a braid that ran down her back, and she was wearing the plainest clothing he’d seen her in—still pretty, she was uh, well she was beautiful it didn’t much matter what she wore—but they were obviously clothes meant for wear and tear. Combat training, her schedule said, and he wondered what sort of training that would be for a Mage. Fighting with her staff? It sat propped up against the wall in the corner by the door.

“Sorry for getting all fainty on you yesterday,” she thought to apologize. “I appreciate you helping me.”

He hadn’t helped much, and that’d certainly been no problem. “Don’t worry about it. You should see us when Chief gets a drop in blood sugar, he goes down like a stack of bricks. Squashed
the littler Human fellow on our team, Grim, once, I swear! It took five of us to get the lug off of him!"

“Oh, that’s horrible!” she said, though the little story earned him her laughter. Had he really been concerned of boring the girl? He had no end of ways to make fun of Bull, and a great deal of stories that he thought she might like of previous jobs they’d worked. She wasn’t incredibly hard to please.

Her cabin was nice, clean, and he was glad it was warm. Ellie offered him a cup of tea from a pot sitting on a tray from Flissa’s. “It’s green tea. I didn’t think I’d like it, smells sort of…eh,” making a face like she’d expected the stuff to be foul, “But it actually isn’t bad,” she promised.

Oh, he accepted a cup in the hopes she would drink more of the stuff herself, she did which was good—they stood in front of the fireplace sipping their drinks. He was supposed to encourage her, in the efforts being made to make her better. Seeker Pentaghast had informed him last night that Ellie was at risk of ending up with an ulcer—which scared him senseless when he made Stitches give him a Healer’s rundown on it. Maker, he certainly didn’t want such a thing happening to Ellie. He’d stayed up talking with Stitches until Bull saw fit to remind him he couldn’t protect his ‘little girlfriend’ from much of anything if he was falling asleep on the job. Ass. Anyway, Stitches gave him a good feel for what to do in an emergency and the sort of things they’d need to avoid. No coffee was the kicker, Ellie’d not like not being able to have that but it was good she was going along with the green tea thing instead. Tea was on the ‘yes’ list. He’d been briefed about her potions regimen, Seeker handled her potion in the mornings with breakfast, and Ellie was supposed to let him know if she needed the others throughout the day. And he was supposed to watch out for signs of distress, let the Seeker know if he saw anything they could do to cut back on unnecessary stressors pressing the Herald.

Huh. Bull said that Ellie was shy about outright bringing attention to her anxieties, she would usually talk things over with Cassandra, and probably Marehis. She might not be comfortable being so forthright about things that bothered her with someone she wasn’t that close to.

“Ellie, can you do something for me?” he asked as they set their empty mugs back on the tray.

She nodded, as she looked to him. “Of course, whatever you need.” she sounded mission-ready when she said it, like if he were about to asked her to help him slay a dragon she’d ditch her day’s schedule and stop only to see if Bull wanted to tag along.

Oh. Maker. That reminded him how Bull ached to fight one of those things. Krem would kill that bastard if he took it into his head to drag Ellie along to hunt down a dragon! After all, “My job is to protect you, right?” When she nodded he continued, “It’ll be easy enough to see if someone’s coming at you with a knife or something, but part of my job is helping protect you from stuff that might not be super obvious to me—things that stress you out or scare you. I know it’s hard to be uh, open with people you’re not super familiar with, but we’ll have to work together.”

She worried her lip nervously. “Yeah, it is kind of awkward to just say ‘Hey! This bothers me!’ I mean sometimes it’s the stupidest stuff,” she admitted.

“It’s not stupid if it bothers you,” he told her. “I was thinking maybe, if you wouldn’t be comfortable saying something, you might be alright doing something.”
That got him a bit of a confused look. Yeah, explanation would probably be good.

“Growing up, my father and I had this sort of system. If something was really getting to me—even if it was something that wouldn’t quite make sense to him—I could just reach out and either lay my hand on his shoulder or arm, or hand and squeeze three times, that told him if someone or something made me feel uncomfortable or unsafe, and he’d do whatever he could to help me deal with it.”

“Your father sounds like a good man,” Ellie said sincerely.

He nodded, wholeheartedly agreeing. “I was thinking, maybe you’d be more comfortable doing something like that? You wouldn’t have to say anything—no explanation needed unless you feel like giving one later—just one two three and I’ll know to either look out for something in the future, to end or intervene in a conversation, or get you out of a situation you don’t want to be in.”

She lit up at that. “Oh! Gosh! Yeah, that’s such a great idea!” she enthused and oh. Wow. She hugged him, rising just slightly on her toes to wrap her arms around his neck, her head just beneath his chin, hair soft against his throat and oh.

He didn’t catch himself before he leaned into the hug, his head bowing over hers because her hair…what was that? Coconut oil. Her hair smelled like the coconut oil that scented nearly every stitch of the clothing his father tailored after investing in a proper sewing machine for himself. It was this big metal clunky thing that required lots of light to use and pedaling, and his father would let him help disassemble the thing on a regular basis because every piece and part required cleaning and oiling. There was outright sewing machine oil but uh, coconut oil was much less expensive and there was something about it, the fact that the scent lingered on the thread fed through the machine, stuck with his clothing that made it…he wasn’t sure. For his father he supposed it felt a bit like part of branding his designs. For Krem it just made everything his father ever made for him, smell something of him and home.

He hadn’t realized he’d hugged her back more tightly then until she returned the favor like she thought he’d suddenly found himself in need of the contact. He suppose he had.

Maker! Nope! Backing it up, get your head in the game Acassii! Friend! Bodyguard! Protecting the Herald!

He let go of her and she pulled away, smiling up at him, so he supposed he hadn’t done anything that struck her as odd. He checked his watch then, they were still good on time but should probably start heading that way. “Do you have everything you need? You’ve combat training with Seeker Pentaghast and Commander Cullen first.”

She nodded, excited. “Yup! All set!” she said as she grabbed a canteen that hung from her bedpost.

“I could carry that for you, if you’d like.” It was only polite, and he figured he’d have to hold onto it for her while she trained anyway.

“Oh, gosh, it isn’t heavy or anything,” she objected.

“Then it shouldn’t be an inconvenience for me at all then,” he returned with a reassuring grin.

“Okay, well, thanks,” she said sweetly, handing it off to him. He put the canteen over his shoulder, settled beside the bag on his hip of her potions.
She didn’t grab her staff or cloak when they made to leave, and she informed him she wouldn’t need her staff just yet, only if she had training with Solas, so they’d swing back around later and pick it up then. She wasn’t in the habit of wearing her cloak to her lessons—she certainly couldn’t during her time with Cullen and Cassandra she said. He grabbed it just in case, draping it over an arm—he could drop it in a heartbeat if he needed to, to defend the Herald, and he didn’t want to risk being out and her needing it. He offered up his other arm for her to take, if she wanted.

She blushed and thanked him, hugging his arm a bit when they stepped out into the morning chill. The sun was out well enough now, bright against the snow on the ground, though it wasn’t snowing at the moment which was nice. They made their way to Haven’s gate, and saw the Commander and Seeker waiting in the gateway.

The two stood close, conversing over something that seemed important, Cassandra had her hand on the Commander’s shoulder, saying something in earnest and Ellie tugged Krem. He let her pull him off to the side to duck along the front of the last cabin that lined Haven’s walls.

“Did they see us do you think?” she asked him quietly.

He shook his head, no.

“Good! I mean, not good, it kind of looked serious, I hope everything’s okay, but…well people talk about serious things with people they trust right?”

“True,” he agreed with her.

She smiled at that, looking excited about something. “This might sound super silly but,” she leaned in closer, speaking softly, “I think they’d be so cute together! You haven’t seen much of them I suppose but Cullen is super into Cassandra, and I think they’d be good for each other! They’ve got similar experiences and jobs, and I mean they don’t seem like they’re the sort to be super pressed to start a family or anything, but could you imagine—Cassandra’s cheekbones, Cullen’s eyes? They’d make the most beautiful, violent babies!”

He hadn’t paid a lot of attention to the Commander’s eyes but if Ellie thought they were nice, he was sure they were. Maker, she seemed ecstatic that the two were caught confiding in one another. “Lady Herald, have you been playing matchmaker with those in your camp?” he couldn’t help but tease.

“Maaaaybe. Just a little,” she admitted playfully. “I just, I dunno, I know things like that are important for people to have. The sort of work they do is tough to handle all on your own and so its important to have friends you can rely on, and if there’s someone you can be completely yourself with, rely on implicitly even in intimate ways, it’s something everyone should have if they need it.” and then, “I mean, Cassandra could stand to get laid. Cullen too. So. Two birds, one bed.”

Oh sweet Maker, god in heaven, did he really just hear that?

“Shhh! Shush! Cremisius!”

He couldn’t help it—he was laughing, loud, uncontrollable, and Ellie was no better after a second of trying to quiet him she was leaning against him for support as she giggled and laughed, her cheeks were red and her eyes a little wet after a moment.

Krem looked up when he heard movement and saw Seeker Pentagast had followed the sound, rounding the corner to see them laughing their asses off at…well. He had to stop himself from laughing harder when Commander Cullen joined the Seeker just a second later, and asked,
“Something funny, Eleanor?”

Ellie squeaked a bit, trying to reply but she was more focused on trying to stop laughing.

“Apologies, Seeker, Commander,” Krem cleared his throat, though his belly still jolted with unspilled laughter as he tried to reign it in. Sort of, “The Lady Herald was just telling me a funny story about some birds.”

“Cremisius!” that got him a little swat on the arm and she looked…not mad but like she was trying to look mad at him but was too amused to actually be upset. It was…

It almost made him want to kiss her really, and that was not happening so. He smiled in apology and she giggled.

“Sorry,” she said then, to her teachers, “I’m ready if you guys are!”

He thought the Seeker would be annoyed with their carrying on, but she looked pleased if anything, and the Commander just seemed amused.

“Very well, come along Eleanor, Lieutenant,” the Seeker said.

Bull was up and about, and Ellie released his arm to run up to the Qunari man with a big smile and a “Good morning, The Iron Bull! Thanks for helping me yesterday.”

“Not a problem boss. Morning to you too. Feeling better?”

Ellie nodded. “Uh-huh! Did you sleep well? You and the Chargers are all comfortable out here?”

Bull grinned to the Human girl. “Yeah boss, Chargers are all snug as a Nug in the mud,” he assured her.

Oh that was just lame, but it made Ellie laugh a bit. “Good,” she said, “I’ve got lessons now, but I’ll see you later!”

Krem went ahead and stood in Chief’s blind spot like he usually would, he could watch over Ellie from there—they trained right out in front of the Charger’s tents, in the clearing with a few practice dummies set up, beside the soldiers’ tents. Didn’t use the dummies though.

Oh. She really didn’t need her staff at all for this, it wasn’t the kind of combat training he’d been expecting.

Sparring. Hand to hand combat with the Commander and Seeker—they alternated sometimes coming at Ellie one at a time, and sometimes they both struck at the girl and she’d have to try to dodge or block or hit one of them back while dodging the other. She popped the Seeker in the chin, and ducked down, rolling to avoid the Commander coming at her from behind.

“Oh shit,” Bull said, obviously pleased with the move. “Go boss!”

There was fast movement on his left and Krem’s attention snapped to oh. Skinner. She’d come running from a tent, hair disheveled as if she’d just woken up, eyes wide, arms shaking a bit like she was itching to jump into action, fight something even as she stopped, standing between Krem and Bull, and stared unblinking at the ongoing training session, trying to decipher what was happening.
“Is the small one under attack?” she asked, bitingly, alarmed.

“Nah, Skinner, they’re just training,” Bull assured her. She didn’t look super assured. But then again, Skinner didn’t usually look much of anything except detachedly neutral, or wrath-fueled violent.

“I’d be over there kicking ass if it were anything else,” Krem promised. Wasn’t super sure he could take on a Seeker of all things especially backed by a Templar but uh, he was pretty sure he’d fist fight a bear if he had to, to defend Ellie. Plus, Bull’d have his back. Kind of want to see Bull fist fight a bear now.

Skinner stared at the three sparring Humans hard for a moment more and then she turned on her heel and disappeared back into the tent.

“Shouldn’t’ve told her she should watch out for the Herald, someone’s going to end up dead,” Krem warned him.

“Yeah but it keeps you on your toes. Though I suppose boss-girl’s doing a good enough job of it on her own,” Bull said. “Two birds one bed? Shit, that was good.”

Krem snorted.

Seeker handed Ellie a sword. It was a practice one for now—it looked real enough to make him a bit nervous at first, but the edges were blunted, you were more likely to walk away with bruises than bleeding. So, she’d get the feel for an actual sword without the consequence of accidentally injuring anyone or herself, and her teachers kept their actual swords sheathed, using practice swords to demonstrate moves for her and exercises that would help her gain better control over the weapon.

“Huh. She did something like that against a bear on the way back from the Coast,” Bull commented when they had her practicing a swinging strike with her blade.

Wait. “Seriously?”

“Two bears show up and we’re handling it but there was this third—like a damn bear club those woods. Huh. Bear club, bear cub. There’s something pun-worthy there to work with, it’ll come to me,” he was certain. “Anyway, third one shows up, gets right up on Sera—Rogue Elf, tall, bad bowl cut,” Krem nodded, he knew her, Bull said, “Ellie didn’t want to cast on the bear because it just about had Sera pinned down and she’s batcrap afraid of magic. Boss-girl just runs at the damn thing screaming like mad, bashed it in the face with her staff. WHACK, busted its snout.”

“Shit,” Krem breathed. That was just…badass. He’d been a bit more focused on the discover that she was a Mage when he saw her fight on the Coast than on her actual fighting, but Maker, watching her here, she had excellent form. As in fighting form. The form, with which she was using to fight? Bull and his damn puns had him seeing double meanings in stupid places! Blah! Yeah, he thought she was pretty to say the least, but he meant there was definitely some muscle going on and she knew how to use it, both obvious effects of all the training.

They stopped practice fights about half an hour before their time was up, catching their breath, the trio sat down on the ground and started talking. It seemed like the Commander and Seeker were going over their lesson, Ellie nodding occasionally, or asking questions. And then it seemed like they were just chatting, Ellie sat relaxed and smiling, reclining a bit, supporting her weight on the palms of her hands. Their time wasn’t up yet but they seemed to be done for the day, Commander Cullen rose to his feet, offering his hands to the Seeker and Ellie, helping them both to
their feet though…oh shit. Yeah. He saw it—Cullen let Ellie’s hand go once she was on her feet but the Seekers, yeah it wasn’t like awkward or anything, but he definitely held on to her hand a little longer, gave it a squeeze before releasing it. Huh. He wasn’t exactly spouting love poetry at the Nevarran woman but uh, yeah he was into her.

Ellie waved goodbye to her teachers then, her cheeks were still rosy from her workout and she was smiling as she jogged up to meet him.

“Good work out there,” he complimented, offering up her canteen.

“Thanks!” she replied. She tilted her head back, gulping at the water. Sweat shone down the curve of her throat and that was sort of just…whelp he was going to kill Chief. The bastard was snickering.

“What?” Ellie asked after wiping at her mouth with the back of her hand, looking to Bull.

“Nothing much, boss, just thinking,” he brushed her off. Ass. At least he hadn’t called Krem out. He hadn’t been gawking at her or anything just. Oh the big oaf could bite him! He took the canteen back when she was done with it, slinging it over his shoulder.

“Do you want your cloak now, Ellie?” Krem offered, not to distract her, not really anyway. It was freezing and sweat could make you real cold, real fast in weather like this.

“Oh! Yes, please!” she said, and he draped it around her shoulders before Ellie secured the clasp at her throat. She dug around in one of the cloak pockets and pulled out her hat. She gasped a bit when something else fell out of the pocket—a slip of paper and twine, that fell to the ground, so he was quick to snatch it up before it could get wet or anything.

Oh. It was the tag—what he’d written her name on, so she’d know the hat was for her. Kind of dumb, considering Bull was the delivery service, not a messenger bird but still. She kept it? Maybe she’d just forgotten to throw it away?

She put the hat on and took the tag as he offered it back to her, “Thanks for saving it,” she said to him, tucking it away into her pocket again, “I forgot to put it away when we got back!”

Put it away? “You plan to keep it?” he found himself asking.

“Of course!” she said, blushing a bit as she bit her lip and then, “No one’s ever just given me a present like that before, so,” she shrugged, “I thought it’d be nice to keep the tag too.”

Oh. Wow, really? That was sort of…well it was a little sad, to think no one had ever given her a present just because, or for…Maker not even her birthday? Or Wintersend? But he was glad he’d uh, well he’d given her something she really did like and it was a first of sorts to boot. That was nice.

“I’m glad you like it,” he said, and Maker he was glad Bull hadn’t taken the opportunity to somehow make fun—of him, Bull wouldn’t make fun of Ellie.

She nodded. “So, um. What’s next?” she asked.

“You got lessons with me later, right?” Bull asked.

Ellie brightened at that, looking to Krem. “Really?”

“Yeah, over an hour from now though, Lady Montilyet said this next hour was up to you—
uh,” he thought, and almost pulled the schedule from his pocket but he remembered. “You’re free
to do as you like, but Mister Thom Rainier is available for horseback riding lessons if you’re up for
it. Your choice.”

“Oh!” Ellie seemed to take the matter under consideration.

“Uh…you don’t have to, if you don’t want to boss,” Bull said, looking uncomfortable.
“Sera’s probably up if you’d rather go play or something? I’m down for moving our lessons up, or
we can just shoot the breeze if you want. Hell, you could take a mid-morning nap. Those are
banging.”

Oh. Thom…was that the guy from yesterday? Sort of nervous fellow, watching Ellie
worriedly while she gave her tour for the nobles. He’d forgotten to ask Bull about him, but he
obviously didn’t want Ellie to feel pressured to take lessons from the man.

Krem offered her his arm, to escort her wherever she chose, and for her to squeeze if she
needed.

She smiled her thanks and took his arm, she hugged it tight but no pattern just, holding. “I
would like to go ahead with lessons with Thom. If um…if that’s okay with you? I’ll still have time
with you later, right?” she asked Bull.

Chief shrugged, keeping it light. “No problem boss, yeah I’ll see you in a bit. Have uh,
fun.” And then, he looked the most like a little-shit Krem’d ever seen, mischievous and just like he
was living to cause some sort of trouble. He said, “You can introduce Krem to your boyfriend.”

“He means Russell!” Ellie said, exasperated.

Okay. Not jealous. But Chief was obviously trying to make him be. Who was this Russell?
Was he someone to Ellie? She was blushing an awful lot, her face, even her ears and neck were a
little red like Bull’s terming the man her ‘boyfriend’ embarrassed her.

“We’re to meet Rainier, at the forge then, if you’d like,” he offered.

Ellie nodded. “Come on, you’ll like Russell!”

Probably not, but he’d certainly try. Maker, it was stupid! It shouldn’t bother him, Ellie
being with some boy, especially if he made her happy, and she was pretty excited to go see him, so.
Grow up!

They walked arm in arm to the forge. Harritt was hammering out a flat edge to a red-hot
blade, and he was the only one in the work area. Oh. There were some boxes stacked by the cabin
door, and a single box sat next to the stack—yeah, the guy from yesterday, he was sitting on top of
a crate, whittling something. Not sure what, it had ears whatever it was—he thought they were ears
anyway, pointed, sort of like a mabari maybe?

The man half-way looked up when they approached, and then he did a sort of double take
and jerked as if surprised to see them. “Lady Herald!” he gasped out, wincing a bit when he
accidentally sliced his thumb on his whittling knife, dropping the blade and project on the ground
as he jumped to his feet—though dropping everything seemed like it was because he was surprised
more than the cut on his hand.

“Thom!” Ellie let go of Krem’s arm and reached out, taking the man’s bleeding hand and
examining it, she pulled a handkerchief out of her trouser pocket and pressed it tight against the
slightly gushing injury. “You should be more careful!” she said, holding his thumb tight to help it
stop bleeding. Putting pressure on it for a minute or two got it to stop and she took the non-bloody edge of the handkerchief in her teeth to help rip a sliver of the cloth away and wrapped it around the man’s thumb. “It’s not too tight, is it? I don’t want to cut off circulation or anything.” She said as she released his hand.

The man hadn’t spoken a word since he’d addressed Ellie, he still looked…huh was he going into shock or something? Krem supposed not, because the man cleared his throat and spoke coherently enough then. “It’s fine. I apologize I wasn’t expecting you.”

Ellie stepped back away from him then, bumping into Krem and staying there. “O-oh. I thought the schedule, um,” she clammed up, sort of seemed to struggle for her words and her hand was on his arm then, one two three. Was she afraid of Thom? She seemed more worried that she’d been scheduled by mistake—that the man had lost interest in teaching her and she’d been foisted on him regardless.

“Lady Montliyet said you would be available for lessons right now, for an hour at least, if Ellie was up for it,” Krem explained to the man, he’d sort it out alright if there was some confusion. Another squeeze, like a quiet ‘thank you’ before she released hold of his arm.

“Oh! Yes, of course!” Thom said, he looked to Ellie, “I just, I meant- I wasn’t expecting you to uh, to be up for it, given the circumstances. And uh…well you didn’t seem to be feeling very well yesterday,” he said, Maker the man was a nervous wreck. As nervous to speak to Ellie as it seemed she’d grown to speak to him. He seemed almost afraid to ask, “You are…you are feeling better I hope?”

Ellie nodded. “I am. And I’m up for lessons still, i-if you are.”

“Certainly! Let me just,” he gestured vaguely before bending down and picking up the knife and wood he’d dropped, and he retreated into the cabin for a moment. When he returned, he looked like he had himself more in hand, or at least not quite so anxious, though there was some relief in his expression when he saw they were still there waiting on him, like he’d thought they’d change their minds and leave in his absence.

“I don’t believe I got your name?” he said to Krem.

“Cremisius Aclassi, Bull’s Chargers. Though today I’m shadowing the Herald,” he explained, offering a hand to him.

“Ahh, its nice to meet you,” he said, shaking his hand. “I’m Thom Rainier. Shall we?”

Ellie nodded, seeming more relaxed now and they followed the man to the stables.

Bull made it sound like this is where that Russell would be. He looked around a bit—for tactical, protecting-the-Herald reasons—but he didn’t see anyone except the old Horse Master, he certainly wasn’t Russell.

Oh. Oh he certainly wasn’t.

“Russell!” Ellie cried out happily, skipping ahead to pet a rust-colored chestnut stallion on the snout, kissing the horse’s cheek. “Good morning fella! Are you happy to be back in Haven?” she giggled when the horse sort of nodded to her.

A…a horse.

Russell was a horse. Russell was a horse and Bull was an ass.
He was going to actually murder that Qunari. Murder him dead. Big. Stupid. Lout!

“Russell, this is Cremisius! He’s going to look out for me while Marehis is away! She’s in Orlais, we’ve been there, remember? Anyway,” she looked to Krem then, “This is Russell, he’s the actual best horse in the world.”

Yeah he was, cause he was a horse! “It’s an honor to meet you, Ser Russell,” Krem said, more than pleased with himself when Ellie giggled at him giving the creature a little bow.

Thom saw to Russell’s saddle for Ellie and then he sort of seemed like he might help her up into it but he stopped himself and backed away, looking to Krem. The man made himself busy saddling another horse, for himself Krem supposed.

“My lady,” Krem said, smiling to Ellie as he offered his hand, she giggled a bit at the formality and he helped her up into the saddle.

She patted the space behind her. “You can ride with me if you’d like.”

Oh yeah, it was either that or go get the steed the Horse Master had assigned him when he’d gotten the Charger’s steeds. But uh, it was probably safer that he stick close in case something happened.

He swung into place behind her, and he worried for about half a second about what exactly to do with his hands but when she laughed and said, “You should hold on, you goof, you’ll fall!” He offered a laugh himself and put his arms around her waist.

They were off then, Ellie heading out with Rainier following after them, riding past the soldiers practicing, and past a cabin that was sort of tucked away in the woods around Haven, and then around to the other side of the frozen lake. There was a clearing with little obstacles for her lessons he supposed. Rainier joined them and got off his horse, so Krem figured he should probably wait with the man, Ellie probably didn’t need to worry about a second passenger in the saddle while practicing.

“Try taking a lap around and practicing the lower jumps first,” Rainier called out.

Ellie nodded, signaling Russell and he raced around the clearing and Krem was just a bit nervous about her being airborne for a second over the shortest obstacle fence, she lifted out of the saddle when Russell was in the air, which that was exactly what she was supposed to do but still he sort of worried she was being launched off the horse. But no, Russell landed gracefully and Ellie was seated in her saddle safely.

“You’re the Iron Bull’s Lieutenant?” Thom asked conversationally, the pair of them keeping their gaze trained on Ellie as they spoke.

“Yes sir.”

“Good,” he said, “Thank you, for taking the time out to watch over the Herald.”

“Of course.”

That was the extent of Rainier’s attempts at conversation. He’d have to ask someone about the guy—Bull, if Ellie didn’t say anything. Something had gone down, the man was obviously… dunno, seemed like he was afraid if he made one wrong move he’d be tossed out on his ear and Ellie clearly was keeping him at some sort of distance, but wanted to close that distance just, wasn’t sure how to. Everything just sort of felt awkward with them.
“Maybe try calling her Ellie.” Krem suggested. He didn’t seem like a bad guy, Ellie obviously cared about him so, maybe it would help. “The other…well, she doesn’t seem to care for titles between friends.”

“We’re not quite on a first name basis right now I don’t think.”

“She calls you Thom.”

“That’s just about all I am,” he said, as if that was unfortunate.

“Well on her schedule you were put down as ‘Mister Thom Rainier’.” Huh, maybe he’d pissed off the Ambassador and that’s why he was on such thin ice? Bull joked about not messing around too often with Antivans on account of their ‘hot Antivan blood’, tempers were wild if they wanted more than a ugh, ‘ride’ with the Bull. Anyway, “I’m pretty sure if Ellie wanted to she’d just call you something like that, but she chooses to call you Thom.”

Ellie’d done a few good runs but then she shifted course, coming back to them, slumping in her saddle a bit. That set off a red flag for Krem who stepped up to meet her, and the second Russell came to a stop she was out of the saddle, on her feet, but only for the barest moment before falling to her knees. Shit. Krem knelt with her, was she hurt? He’d been watching closely nothing came shooting down at her, there wasn’t a sniper in the mountain range. But maybe a spell? He could hear Thom’s boots crunching the snow, coming closer to see what was happening but keeping back to stay out of the way. Her Marked hand on Krem’s arm while the other was holding her stomach, she worked to catch her breath and there was a tightness to her features. Oh, Maker.

He offered up one of her white potions, she nodded but took a moment, eyes closed taking a few deep breaths, like she wasn’t sure or not if she might sick up. Krem moved to be of better help, bit awkward walking on his knees, but he shifted to sit to her side where he could hold her potion until she was ready to take it, and place a hand on her back, rubbing circles the way his parents would whenever he’d been sick. After a minute, she seemed certain she wouldn’t be emptying her stomach in the snow, so she took the potion. Krem took a hold of the hand on his arm.

“Ellie? Is it…” he gave her hand three quick squeezes, light and gentle but she got it. She gave him a small smile and shook her head.

“No, um,” she cleared her throat, “A lot of the stuff I do with Cassandra and Cullen uses muscles around my stomach, and so does holding myself correctly in the saddle, and all the jostling and whatnot, I think I just over did it. Agitated it or something.” She winced, before righting herself, rising to her feet, he almost wanted to protest but settled for keeping a hand under her arm just in case, Maker.

“Do you need Adan?” Could she ride back or would she have to walk? Or be carried really because he definitely wasn’t having her walk all the way back around the lake when she was hurting. If he shouted he was pretty sure Bull’d hear him, send Stitches their way.

“Ellie?” Thom asked, concerned, coming closer to stand just behind Krem.

She looked up at the older man, surprised that he’d said her name and then she smiled, warmly. “I’m okay,” she said. “Do you think we could sit for a minute though?”

“Of course!” Thom said, and for a moment Krem thought the man might break his own neck he was whipping his head around so very quickly, looking for someplace suitable. There were some large stones that sort of lined the path they’d used, and he brushed the snow away, off of one that was a good height for Ellie to sit on. Krem kept an arm around her back, she didn’t seem to
need the help but he sort of felt better, he guessed, being right there if she needed him.

Oh. He gave her arm a reassuring squeeze before letting go because it struck him then. He’d sort of...he thought the girl would need coddling or something, that every little sniffle or ache might be her undoing. When he first met her, he hadn’t really been able to reconcile the image of what the Herald of Andraste was rumored to be—slayer of demons, defender of the weak—and Ellie, someone who ran around sharing the cookies in her pockets, young and trusting and looking for all the world like someone who had no place fighting anything. He kept underestimating her—she wasn’t one or the other, she was Ellie, the Herald of Andraste, she’d bash a bear in the face with her staff and eat the cookies in her pocket to refuel for the next fight. She was tough. She didn’t need Krem to coddle her, she just needed him to have her back.

When she sat down he knelt at her side. Thom sat down on the ground before her. It would take more than just ‘a minute’ for her potion to settle and really help her, and the silence was a little tense. Thom looked like he so badly wanted to strike up conversation with Ellie, and her knee was sort of bouncing nervously like she was trying to come up with something as well. Though maybe the motion was meant to distract herself until her potion was really in her system. Either way, he thought of something that might distract her better and maybe get them talking.

“The trees around these parts are just normal trees, right?” he asked. Ellie stopped her nervous fidgeting and she and Rainier looked to him.

“What other kind of trees are there?” Ellie asked, curiously.

“Well,” Krem said, “there was once this noble of the Dales—they hate if you call them Dalish nobles,” he rolled his eyes, “he hired the Chargers* to take care of the trees on his land. Apparently, they were causing all sort of trouble, attacking anyone who went near them—they were magic, possessed by something called Sylvans, Elf spirits that controlled the trees and made them haunt the forest.”

“Oh gosh! Really?” wide-eyed she asked, “Were you scared?”

Shitless, but more hilarious was the fact that, “Oh Chief just about crapped his pants when we started in on chopping down the trees and they chopped back—you should have heard him! ‘Ahh, shit! Shit! Kill ‘em with fire! Fire, Dalish!’” he mimicked. Bull’d kill him, but Ellie looked absolutely delighted with the tale so, worth it. “Anyway, all in all the spirits weren’t that bad—worst part was the squirrels,” Krem shuddered a bit. “Squirrels. One of the little buggers just about ripped my face off,” he said pointing to a scar on his cheek where a little squirrel claw had slashed deep enough that Stitches literally stitched it up.

Her bottom lip stuck out a bit in an amused but sympathetic pout. “Awe! Well, it sounds like you were very heroic against the evil-tree squirrels, now you’ve got a sort of dashing battle scar to prove it.”

“Squirrels will forever fear the name Cremisius Aclassi I’m sure,” Krem jested, trying to ignore how ‘dashing’ just about went right to his head, made his face feel a little warm.

“Have you ever fought anything like haunted trees?” Ellie asked Thom then, a solid effort to get him talking with her.

“Oh, uh, well no but,” he seemed to think a moment, obviously wanting to offer something she’d enjoy, “Hordes of squirrels does call to mind: When I was young, just sort of starting out for myself, there was this Lord who hired me to track down his missing wife. They’d had a good relationship, he said, and he’d not received threats or ransom notes like she’d been taken, she just
one day she up and left without a word. So I follow a few leads and end up in this part of Starkhaven—a sort of slums area really no one had any business being in but apparently she’d rented out an apartment there and paid a year’s rent up front in gold. I explain the situation, landlord lets me in no problem—doesn’t care he’s already been paid. Door shuts behind me and there’s no windows, so it’s black as pitch in this place, and I can hear movement all around, little scratchy claws skittering across the floorboards.”

“What was it?” Ellie asked.

“I stumble around, and I keep knocking my feet into these things, warm, moving, squeaking. And Maker, the smell, it stank to high heaven in that place. I finally bump into a dresser, feel around and find a lamp—Maker only knows how I got the damn thing to light but I do and when I finally get a look around…Nugs. I’m talking not one or two, it had to be at least a hundred of the things packed into the apartment, wall to wall lining the floor, climbing over the furniture—and completely covering the bed.” Holy shit.

“Oh my goodness!” Ellie gasped out in a way that came off like her version of ‘holy shit’, “What about the missing Lady?”

“The missing lady? She was laid out on the bed, completely covered in Nugs just crawling all over her. At first I’m confused and disheartened, thinking something horrible happened, she got caught up in some sort of underground Carta Nug-trading business and killed in the process. But I go over to the bed, just about break my neck trying not to step on the Nugs and I reach to check her pulse and chomp!”

Ellie’s eyes were wide, “A Nug bit you?”

“No, the Lady!” Rainier exclaimed, Ellie’s mouth fell open in shock as he said, “She just sat straight up, naked as the day she was born, bit me right on my hand! Then asked me what I thought I was doing like I was the crazy one!”

“No way! What in the world?!” Ellie was just about as amazed and confused as Krem was, the tale just wild. “What did you do?”

“I said her husband sent me and she said she didn’t know why he would. Apparently, the day she left, her husband said he worried she wasn’t finding fulfillment in her life, living as a housewife, and told her he wanted to fulfill her dreams whatever they were. So. uh.” He shrugged. “She took that as a by-your-leave to do just that.”

That…what?

Ellie looked just absolutely dumbfounded as he felt. Ellie asked, “Her…her dream was Nugs?”

“Her dream was Nugs,” Rainier said, Ellie sort of worked that thought around in her head and then shrugged.

“Maker,” Krem swore, “please tell me you at least got paid for your trouble?” It was always either the absolute worst jobs, or the absolute most worthy jobs you didn’t get paid for, and at least with the latter you can hope for some reward in your afterlife for your deeds.

“Oh not a coin,” Rainier assured, shaking his head, “I went back to her husband and tried to explain but he didn’t believe a word of it—I got him to follow me back to the apartment in Starkhaven, but when we got there, the place was empty—top to bottom, no furniture, no Nugs,
and certainly no crazed Nug Lady. I swear to the Maker, I would think I’d hallucinated the whole thing if it weren’t for the bite mark on my hand,” he showed them, just the faintest impression of, yeah it did look like a scar from teeth marks, faded and distorted from aging but still there. Damn, crazy Nug lady nearly bit a chunk of his hand off!

“That’s awful!” Ellie said, “After all that trouble you didn’t even get paid?”

“Hmm. No, looking back it was a worthwhile experience,” Thom said. Krem supposed it must be, seeing as the story sort of broke down a bit of the distance between him and Ellie, the man seemed like he’d take on a thousand such fruitless endeavors if they resulted in tales that made the girl laugh with him, talk to him with ease.

Their time was just about up, as it was they’d be late meeting up with Bull. Ellie said she was fine to ride, and Krem was certain she was being forthright, her coloring was normal, no hint of discomfort in her expression or the way she carried herself.

Thom mounted his horse and when Ellie led Krem back over to Russell popped up on her toes to kiss Krem on the cheek with a whispered, “Thanks.” For helping to break the ice he supposed, wasn’t really sure, his brain sort of crapped out on him for a second and he felt himself nodding in acknowledgment to her thanks but uh, Maker that was twice now—was it a Mage thing, her lips spelled to leave him feeling warm from head to toe?

Seriously? Focus! Get it together Aclassi! Bodyguard! Friend! Helping the Herald! Go!

Krem helped her up into the saddle, and climbed up after her, he spoke quietly against her ear, offering to take the reins, she could just relax against him keep away the risk of re-agitating anything. She went a bit pink, he thought maybe she was a little embarrassed at the offer of help, but she nodded and handed over the reins, relaxing against his chest, his arms bracing her on either side would keep her from falling out of the saddle. Maker, Russell was a smart horse, didn’t fuss about a stranger directing him and he walked the path back to Haven, as if he knew trotting would knock Ellie about too much. No instruction just did it. Krem’d have to check with Dennett, see if it’d be alright to reward the beast with a treat like sugar or a salt lick or something.

Rainier went on ahead to the stables but Russell came to a stop so Ellie could talk to Bull when they returned. They were just a few minutes behind schedule, but Bull’d heard them coming back.

Seeker Pentaghast had no such ability and she descended upon them the moment they returned, apparently, she’d been watching for them while she worked with the Inquisition soldiers.

“Eleanor, Lieutenant. Was there trouble?” she asked.

“We’re okay!” Ellie said, then, “Sorry I’m late, The Iron Bull!”

“No problem, boss,” Chief said with a dismissive wave.

Krem got down, offering up a hand for Ellie since Horse Master Dennet was approaching to take over with Russell. Ellie grasped his hands and swung her leg over but her other foot slipped out of the stirrup. She gave a surprised yelp, but Krem was quick enough, released her hand to wrap his arms around her back to catch her against his chest plate.

“All good?” he asked. Maker, he was glad he’d caught her—it wasn’t a terribly long fall but still she could have been hurt!

She hadn’t been, though she looked sort of dazed for half a second and then, “Whoops!
Yeah, sorry, thanks for not letting me fall on my face!” she said, blushing.

Oh, he was still sort of holding her, he set her on her feet and released her. “All part of the job. Canteen boy, comedic relief, catch the Herald every once in a while, its paying the bills,” he teased.

Ellie smiled and rolled her eyes at him before she went to join Bull for…psychology huh? Maker he was glad to sit in on that, watching the oaf play professor.

Smart oaf, despite the flack Krem gave him, so, he might actually learn a thing or two.

Seeker was still watching though, like she was concerned at their lateness. And Ellie’d taken the Seeker’s question literally—they hadn’t been attacked or anything, and she was feeling better so there wasn’t any ‘trouble’ to speak of.

“Apologies for the delay, Lady Seeker,” Krem said quietly, he was probably going to get dinged a few points for not keeping right on schedule. “Ellie wanted to attend her lessons with Thom Rainier—she’s still interested in learning from him so, perhaps days she learns from you and Commander Cullen, and riding days should be made separate? She said both lessons use a lot of core strength, it hurt her stomach and she had to take potion for the pain—we were delayed waiting for it to set in. I checked if she needs to see Adan, but potion set her to rights.” Seeker didn’t look entirely put at ease by that so he thought it best to tack on, “Unless you believe it necessary, then I can take her by.”

The Seeker looked to where Chief and Ellie sat—there was a bench near the Chargers tents and they sat facing each other, Bull straddling the bench while Ellie had her legs crossed up under her. She looked a bit bashful as she said something to him but then the Qunari pulled an apple from his pocket and Krem heard the happy yelp Ellie gave as she withdrew an apple from her own cloak pocket and she high fived before Bull whipped out a cloth napkin and had her set her apple down and he started using a knife to peel and slice the apples, making a nice pile on the napkin, Chief talking all the while as Ellie munched on an apple slice, listening intently. Seeker Cassandra seemed satisfied, “She looks well. No healer unless that changes. I have a meeting with Lady Montilyet, I will see to it she adjusts Eleanor’s schedule accordingly,” she cleared her throat and asked, “She was not distressed by her time with Rainier?”

Bit of a rocky start but they’d gotten past it so, Krem shook his head. “No ma’am.”

Seeker Cassandra nodded, she looked to him then. “You are doing well thus far, in your care of Eleanor. It is appreciated.”

He almost felt like he should say ‘thank you’, the woman didn’t seem the sort to just hand out praise, but that uh, yeah that probably wouldn’t make much sense. “It’s an honor to serve,” he said.

The Seeker left then, went on ahead through Haven’s gate, heading for the Chantry he supposed, for her meeting. Krem went to join Bull’s lesson, Ellie smiled and waved as he approached.

“No distracting the boss, Krem,” Bull said, “I’ll drop-kick your Vint ass back across the lake.”

He hadn’t planned on being a distraction. But of course, now he was, just a little. Ass.

“Course Chief, I’d never,” he vowed, snatching up an apple slice and popping it into his
mouth before winking to Ellie and crossing his eyes, she slapped a hand over her mouth to quiet her giggling.

“Fuck off Krem, I’m teaching here!” and Bull’s eye went a little wide and he said, “shit sorry boss,” even before Krem swatted him on the back of his stupid Qunari head—Maker, his mouth!

But Ellie just laughed outright the exchange. “Here Cremisius, you can sit with me,” she said patting the empty space behind her on the bench.

Probably the safest place in case Chief sought to seek vengeance for Krem’s bit of fun, he sat facing the practice grounds and kept an eye out, listening as Bull lectured. Ellie’s hand would occasionally appear low, in his peripheral, passing back an apple slice to him.

He just about snorted when he saw Bull pull his spectacles out of his pocket—tiny, tiny stemless reading glasses he squeezed onto the bridge of his nose—so he could read from a large book he had resting in the palm of his hand, Krem wasn’t certain but he was pretty sure the cover had Qunalt on it. Oh, oh wow. He did recognize the book—it was Ben-Hessrath, Bull read from it sometimes, but he certainly never shared the contents, not like he did sometimes with reports he got. But here he sat translating a few paragraphs into a lecture in Trade for Ellie.

He was teaching her different breathing and grounding techniques…a few of those things Krem knew actually. Huh, big lug had shared some of his Ben Hessrath stuff with them. Things Bull had imparted on the Chargers for uh, situations. If they found themselves captured by enemy forces, to survive imprisonment and torture. Oh. Maker. Bull didn’t tell Ellie that’s the ultimate reason Ben Hessrath teach their spys such methods but…it made him sick to think there were people out there seeking that very thing befall the ‘Herald of Andraste’, that someday Ellie might find herself in such a situation where she was captive, tortu—nope. Not thinking about it. Made Krem’s stomach turn, so much so that when Ellie passed back another slice of apple he just held the thing in his hand. He hoped with everything, that Ellie would never have to use her lessons with Bull for something like that.

“I think that’s our time for today,” Bull said right around noon by Krem’s watch, snapping the book closed and taking his glasses off. “You should try grounding yourself throughout the day, it’s not just for handling panic attacks. Habitual grounding can help you keep your focus and help keep anxiety in check. Try it out when you wake up in the mornings—nothing big, just think of a few things that are true in the moment. Your name, location, whether or not you’re safe, are good starts. Just quick observations that bring you into the present moment before focusing on the day ahead.”

Ellie nodded. “I can do that! Thanks for taking the time to teach me, The Iron Bull!”

Bull rested a hand atop her head, Maker! Oh, but he was being careful, gentle. Krem’d had to build up a tolerance for Bull’s manhandling—used to wind him every time the Qunari patted him on the back, or the shoulder. Seemed to know better with Ellie though, the action was meant to comfort, not concuss.

“You are welcome, Imekari,” he said a sort of rumble in his voice around the Qunlat word.

Krem almost choked on his breath in surprise. Bull never broke out the Qunlat except for swearing or something sacred or important. And he called Ellie Boss, kid sometimes, but he straight up calls her Imekari? Not just in passing description but like to her face? Krem had worried about Bull being under orders to get close to Ellie—she’d be heartbroken if the second his mission was done she realized he didn’t really have any care for her, she’d just really been a part of his job
and nothing else, she obviously cared about him. He wasn’t so worried after what he’d seen today though. Dude was totally wrapped!

Bull was rising then, tucking the empty handkerchief they’d used for their apples into his pocket. “You two heading for lunch now?”

Ellie leaned backward a bit, resting her head on Krem’s shoulder. “Are we?” she asked.

“That’s next on the list. You don’t have lessons again until this afternoon, 2pm with Solas,” he popped the last slice of apple she’d handed him into his mouth and stood when she leaned forward again, turning about in her seat, accepting Krem’s hand when he offered it.

“Cool! Would you like to join us for lunch, The Iron Bull?”

“Just gotta put this stuff up and yeah, I’ll tag along boss.”

“Great! Um…” she seemed a bit nervous to say, “I was thinking about inviting Thom too. Would that be okay, do you think?” Oh shit. Did dude have beef with Bull?

“It’s your business boss, as long as he doesn’t get between me and my food, we won’t have a problem. Maybe tell him not to block the view.”

Oh. Oh crap! Yeah things had been tense at first between Rainier and Ellie but he hadn’t realized she was the one he’d wronged! She hadn’t seemed angry with him just awkward—Krem’d read it as being uncomfortable because the man was at odds with a mutual friend in their camp, Ellie feeling caught in the middle.

Oh. Because that’s exactly what it was. She’d forgiven Rainier for the most part it seemed. And the man had done something that pissed everyone in her camp off. So. She was caught in the middle.

But she didn’t seem too focused on that, at least not just now,

“Oi!” Ellie reprimanded the Qunari, “Flissa’s a woman! Not ‘the view’! And you better respect her cause she’s a person and she feeds me, and I’d rather that not stop anytime soon! No casual romps with people who give me food! No Flissa! Or Cassandra! Or Solas or Varric or Marehis—You haven’t met her yet but she’s like, the prettiest, and sweet, and I will personally destroy the man who breaks her heart!” Solas better watch out then, Maker, Bull said Antivan women had tempers. “Thom doesn’t seem your type but…” she gave it some thought, “Oh, and definitely no Seggrit!”

“Seggrit?” Bull asked.

“Human man, blonde, runs the shop just inside Haven. He makes me cookies and then says he doesn’t—but he does! And I like them!” Ellie informed him, and then, “Unless of course you can seduce him into giving me even more cookies, then by all means do your thing.”

She’d said it so seriously it took a second for it to sink in that she was joking. Bull of course, ate it up, going right along. He looked to Krem. “Is Boss-girl pimping me out for cookies?”

Krem nodded, “I think she is, and I think I’ve had them before so I’m okay with it,” he admitted, remembering the shortbread she’d sent him along with from Haven, it’d been damn good, “so long as she’s still willing to share.”

“Oh certainly,” Ellie assured breezily.
Krem shrugged. “Well then there you go.”

Bull chuckled and then, “You realize you left Sera as free game?”

Ellie shrugged. “If you think your Sera’s type, you’re more than free to risk the arrows in your coinpurse for hitting on her.” Maker!

Bull was belly laughing at the statement, and then he asked, “Dalish wants us to eat together on Tuesday nights, right?”

Huh? Oh yeah. Chargers all sort of had their own things they did while in Haven, different schedules and whatnot. After day one of that, Dalish had insisted they set aside a night a week for ‘family dinner’ to keep everyone ‘connected’. “Yeah Chief.”

“Clear your schedule tomorrow night, Boss, you’re officially invited to meet the crew. Dinner at our place, ‘round sundown.”

Oh. Oh that…would she even want to have dinner with the Chargers? Should she, was the real question, things could get pretty out of hand, wild when they were all eating and settled someplace they could cut loose and have a few drinks. But he supposed everyone would be on their best behavior. Or at least, he supposed he’d just have to make certain everyone would be on their best behavior.

If any of those assholes made a single ‘little girlfriend’ joke in front of Ellie, Stitches would have his work cut out for him.

Ellie was ecstatic at the prospect, bouncing on her toes a bit with excitement. “Oh, gosh! Really? That sounds like fun!” she enthused, “Thanks, The Iron Bull!”

“Don’t sweat it, Boss,” Bull said, “See you in a few.”

Rainier wasn’t outside the cabin off the forge, but he answered the door to Ellie’s knock. You’d have thought Ellie’d offered him a life’s worth of gold from the way he just lit up when she invited him to have lunch with her. He followed close behind as she and Krem made their way back through Haven’s gate.

“Oh! Solas’s lessons next yeah? I should grab my staff real quick.”

Krem led them back to Ellie’s cabin, beating her to the door and taking a quick look-around to make sure everything was as it should be, before moving out of her way so she could grab her staff—she walked right past it though, so Krem followed a bit in case she needed help or something. She went to her desk and reached up to the shelves hanging over it, retrieving a wooden box. It looked like it was meant for jewelry but when she opened it it was just the paper flower he’d made her, resting on a bed of the cloth he’d sent her hat wrapped in, and she dug the tag out of her pocket to add it to the collection. That was nice. Sweet, made Krem feel almost—Bull’d make fun of the word but—giddy, that the things meant so much to her.

She grabbed her staff, carrying it herself, the holster’s strap slung across from shoulder to hip so her staff hung on her back—he wasn’t sure if it would be rude or not to see if he could carry it for her, Mages were very particular about their staffs in Tevinter, and he’d never seen anyone but Dalish handle her…uh…bow. Besides, she should have it on her if she needed to cast to defend herself.

Thom waited outside her cabin and followed them up to the tavern. When they entered it was right in the middle of the lunch rush, Inquisition soldiers, servant staff grabbing a bite to eat.
The Dwarf, Varric was there, seated at the bar beside a blonde-headed Elf girl. Sera, Krem assumed.

The moment Varric turned to see who’d entered and laid eyes on Thom, then Ellie and back again, the glare-you-dead look he leveled the man had Ellie stopping in her tracks, a hand on Krem’s arm.

“What the hell are you doing here?!” Varric snapped at Thom.

But it was Ellie who answered him, “I invited him to have lunch with me,” she said, trying to offer up lightly, “you’re free to join us too, if you like?”

“Yeah, you and me, anyone else you want Tumbles, but that bastard can come back later! Or never for all I fucking care.”

Well he could just back it the hell up.

“Check your tone with the Herald, Master Tethras,” Krem returned coolly, staring the Dwarf down.

“Yeah! Don’t say big swears at Inky!” the Elf, Sera whirled about in her seat next to Varric at the bar and looked around before her gaze settled on Krem. “Oooh! Is that Cris-is-a-mif?”

He was pretty sure she meant him, but there wasn’t even an ‘f’ sound in his name? Girl didn’t seem quite right though, bit of a wild card Bull’d said so, eh. Not the issue at hand.

Thom obviously had no intention of creating more trouble for the Herald. “I appreciate that you invited me, Ellie,” he said, “but you go on with Varric, I’ll leave.”

Ellie shook her head, “I invited you out,” she insisted, “we can just take trays—”

That hardly placated the Dwarf. “Shit, Ellie, come on!” he shouted.

And she returned him the favor, not quite so scathing but firmly, “What’s going on with you, Varric? You were peaceable enough yesterday, and all the days before that! If you’re so tetchy about everything now, I’m sorry, really. But I invited Thom, so I’m eating with him. If you’re going to be rude, we’ll leave, though he’s got just as much right to use the Tavern as anyone else!”

“Course he does, seeing as he’s a free man now,” Varric sneered, turning attention back to Rainier, “You rotten bastard. What’d you tell her, huh? What’d you say to talk the sweet little Herald into doing more of your dirty work, letting your me—”

“Varric!” oh that was a shout. Ellie snapped at the Dwarf, “That’s private business, you’ve got absolutely no right sharing, especially here. Stop it! I don’t know what you think you know, or how you know it, but you need to quit talking about it, right now. Please.”

“Goddamn it Ellie, would you stop and think for a minute?! Why the hell are you still defending him? He’s done nothing but lie and wreak havoc and- and- shit, Ellie you don’t even understand just how dangerous your decision was yesterday, do you?”

“I do understand, Varrie.”

“Sure you do, that’s why you’re still making the same mistake, again! Wake up kid! You can’t trust that bastard any farther than you can throw him. Guy puts you through hell—”


Krem was on the verge of stepping in himself and shutting it down but Ellie hadn’t signaled for him and he knew his place. If Chief had a problem with one of the Charger’s it wasn’t an outsider’s business to step in and help the big lug, undermine him in front of his subordinates. Same principal applied to Ellie and her team but…well Krem had leave to defend her.

Rainier tried to intervene though, get the Dwarf to stop yelling at Ellie, focus on him.

“Varric, I know—”

Oh. He got him to focus on something alright.

“No, you don’t know shit, you selfish manipulative bastard!” Varric railed at him, red faced, raging mad. There was a vein in his forehead that looked ready to pop and you could see the strain in his neck as he shouted, “You didn’t stick around to see Ellie sob her heart out on the Coast! You didn’t hear how she cried herself to sleep every night—every goddamn night those four fucking days! Oh and that’s not all! Glad at least I’m not the very last one to get a fucking clue—she’s been having back to back panic attacks, brought her right up to the edge of another asthma flair you jackass, because she needs not being able to breathe in her life, that’s super helpful! And now she’s got an ulcer! You know who gets ulcers? Not fifteen-year-old kids!”

He just…did he really just air all of Ellie’s private, personal business in front of everyone? It would be bad enough if he’d shouted it in the privacy of a party-member meeting, but this was the bloody tavern! There was an Inquisition soldier the man probably didn’t know from Andraste sitting at the bar next to him! More soldiers and staff seated around the tavern and everyone was deadly quiet and staring.

He was pretty sure he was about to kill a dwarf. But he wasn’t Krem’s primary concern at the moment,

“V-Varric that’s enough,” Ellie’s voice was faint and faltering, and she’d gone pale, Maker she was losing all pigment at a rate that had Krem’s outrage whiplashing over into gut wrenching panic.

Varric clearly didn’t think he was through, “You should be staying the hell away from him, you’re smarter than this!”

Ellie flinched as if the man had slapped her.

“She said that’s enough!” Krem raised his voice in her defense. “Shut your mouth right now dwarf, or I’ll shut it for you.”

Varric scoffed. “Look, I’ve got no problem with you kid,” he said to Krem, “but that asshole—” Maker, he might actually have to fight this guy, that’d be a good mark to have on his first day on the job. Fisticuffs with one of the Herald’s party members. Way to keep it professional.

“I definitely have a problem with you. Now shut up!” Bull’d taught him how to roar his words, and that had Varric’s mouth snapping closed. Much, much more gently Krem spoke to Ellie. “Adan’s?” he asked quietly, hands on her arms just below her shoulders to steady her. Maker, she was shaking. Shit!

She swallowed thickly, eyes clenching shut for a second.

And then quietly, “Um, j-just potion I think.”

“Oh, piss! Cris-is is right, you’re upsetting Inky! Frick!” Sera was out of her seat and at Ellie’s side while Krem searched the potions bag on his hip. “Inky, does your stomach thing hurt
really bad?” She growled at the Dwarf when Ellie nodded.

Varric looked absolutely horrified. Serves him right. Bastard.

“T-Tumbles?”

And then a shadow fell over Krem, someone standing over them, the silhouette of horns appearing on the Tavern floor.

“You’d best remember where you are, and who you’re talking to, Tethras.” Chief. His voice was low, and very calm. Made the hairs on the back of Krem’s neck stand on end, because it was the kind of calm he used when he was riding the edge of going ballistic on someone, just one wrong word away from all hell breaking loose. Raising his voice at Ellie, yelling at her like she was a child, questioning her, and flaunting her business out for everyone to hear? Chief took a lot of flack, let a lot of shit slide, but he did not abide outright disrespect, especially not in front of strangers or worse, subordinates. The random mix of Inquisition soldiers bearing witness fit both categories to the letter. “Apologize. And leave. Now.”

The Dwarf was quiet, stared wide-eyed at Bull for a moment like a nug caught in a trap, then Ellie, like for once in his life words failed him. But then, “I…I’m sorry, Ellie. Really.” Sincerely spoken but shit was some seriously weak sauce. Didn’t seem to matter though, Ellie didn’t say anything, almost seemed like she hadn’t heard him and Varric walked across the Tavern, leaving through the other door.

Krem knelt before Ellie, trying to get a better look at her face as he handed off her potion. “Ellie?” he asked carefully, once she’d downed the draught. Shit, her vision wasn’t focusing was… was she going into shock? Damn it he should have…he should have punched that Dwarf out the moment he so much as raised his voice in Ellie’s direction. That was the new security protocol, he’d update the Spymaster. Start shit, get hit.

Bull caught on just a moment before it happened. “Alright. Nothing to see here, eat or move along,” Bull’s order got the other Tavern’s occupants’ stares off of them, off Ellie, some of the tavern occupants abandoning untouched food at their tables for fear they’d be on the receiving end of Bull’s temper. Because Varric hadn’t just embarrassed her.

Sorry everyone, he was going to have to kill one Varric Tethras. At least that would put an end to his shitty romance serials.

Bastard made Ellie cry.

Her entire expression crumpled in on itself a millisecond before Ellie’s arms were around Krem’s neck and she sort of leaned into him as she hugged him, burying her face against his throat, and he felt warm tears against his skin as her arms squeezed, one two three.

The whole thing had to be embarrassing enough, Varric’s yelling at her in front of everyone, enough to make her cry, Maker, she was straining not to sob, trembling. This was definitely a ‘get her out of here’ situation.

“Have a tray sent to the Herald’s cabin,” Krem said quietly to Bull, as he rose, taking Ellie up with him, one arm wrapped around her back while the other scooped her knees up, braced against his hip, Bull and Thom moved out of the way letting them pass.

She was holding on to him pretty tightly, so he used the hand at her back, for just a quick second before he secured her again, to pull her hood up over her head, gave her a bit more privacy
from the eyes of those they passed in Haven. He let go of his hold under her legs and used that
hand to push open the door to her cabin, kicked it shut behind them.

They were quiet except for the sounds of her sadness, and he didn’t set her down, just had
both arms wrapped around her back. Wouldn’t let her go until she let him know that he should, just
let her cry.

“Wh-why…wh-what d-did…” her voice came out in gasping sobs, “Did I do so-something
wrong?” she whimpered out.

“No, no Ellie shh. Maker, you did your best, that wasn’t…that was none of it your fault.”

She let go of him, and he set her on her feet, hands bracing her elbows in case she was
unsteady. “I…I don’t kn-know what to d-do,” she pressed her unmarked hand to her eyes. Yeah,
she was definitely done in, sick and tired and sad.

Krem rested his hands on her shoulders, going for soothing as he said, “Hey, we’ve got time
okay, all the time you need,” he promised. She could take the rest of the day as far as he was
cconcerned—Solas dude could fight him if he had a problem with it. “Bull’s sending a tray.”

She seemed apologetic about that. “I’m not very hungry anymore.”

“No worries. I’ll get things settled, you get comfortable, you should probably lay down for
a bit.” She didn’t look at him but she did nod that that sounded okay. “I know you said you only
needed potion, but I’d appreciate it if you’d let me get Adan,” he was getting Adan, he would just
prefer she not be made further upset about him springing a check-up on her, “just to make sure. For
my peace of mind, okay?” he brushed a curl back from her face when she looked up at him her
gaze was just hallow. “Pretty sure Seeker Pentaghast will kick my ass if I let you get sick,” he
tesed, wiping his thumbs against her tear-stained cheeks.

That got him just the barest twitch of a smile, and she nodded in agreement, “Thanks.”

Oh he could do better than that. “Crim-mis-mif Aclas-id,” he mangled his own name
cheerfully as he saluted her, “always ready to serve.”

Actual smile, and she groaned a bit, as if embarrassed over her friend, “I’m sorry, I don’t
think she means anything mean by it, and she’s not stupid it’s just like if a word gets long enough
Sera gives up, throws some sounds out there and calls it a day. Please, just tell her to call you
Krem.”

“Oh yeah, she can definitely just call me Krem,” he said, glad to see her looking not quite
so grave. “Go ahead and change, lie down. I’ll be back.”

He’d been about to call on guards to watch Ellie’s door while he was gone but Bull was
approaching the cabin armed with a tray from Flissa’s when Krem closed the door behind him so
he asked the Qunari to wait out front while Ellie changed, keep watch until he returned.

He went to Solas’s cabin first, cutting through the tavern as a second thought, asked Flissa
if she’d mind making a pot of tea for Ellie. She’d eaten a little earlier but if he couldn’t get her to
eat lunch, it would be best to get something with some benefit on her stomach. He went on ahead
to Solas’s while Flissa prepared the order.

Windows looked dark like there wasn’t any light on inside Solas’s cabin, and he had to
knock a few times calling for the Elf, almost thought maybe he wasn’t in, before the man
answered. He looked uh, not too hot himself. Bags under his eyes, features drawn and movements
sluggish, seeming like he’d just woken up when Krem came to his door. He was blinking against
the light as if it hurt his eyes, raising a hand to rub at his temple, and his voice came out in a rough
croak,

“What is the time?”

“Noon hour sir,” Krem wasn’t sure if it was the time that startled him more or the fact that
the man had apparently been speaking to himself—had been answering the door but it seemed he
hadn’t really noticed Krem, he jumped out of his skin a moment and cleared his throat.

“Oh. Lieutenant Aclassi, yes? Still getting your bearings of Haven I see, if you’ve need of
the healer, Adan’s cabin is next door.” Well, he certainly slept pretty deep. Didn’t seem to know
Krem was replacing Marehis for a bit, and he’d obviously not known Ellie was supposed to meet
him soon.

So Krem gave him the condensed version, “Actually, I’m here because I’m shadowing the
Herald today and you’re scheduled for lessons with her this afternoon. She taking the afternoon off,
resting.”

“I was sched- oh. Wait resting? Is she alri-” he stopped and shook himself. Closed his eyes
a moment. Oh, weird mage power, he could check on Ellie from here, he guessed, Seeker
Pentaghast had explained it as best she could, didn’t make much sense to Krem. Didn’t mind magic
so much anymore but Mage things were pretty bizarre. Whatever he felt in his ‘connection’ startled
him. “Oh, my. What has happened?”

Didn’t have super amounts of time to get into it. “Rough day. I’m heading to get Adan
now,” he said, pointing a thumb in the direction of the Healer’s cabin to assure the man he did
indeed know his way around Haven.

“Very good,” Solas said, “th-thank you, Lieutenant.”

“Yes sir. Have a good one.”

Solas nodded absently and closed the door. Once Ellie was looked over maybe he’d send
Adan Solas’s way, he’d seemed unwell to say the least. Though the man was grown, lived next to
the Healer, would surly seek him out if he saw fit. He’d tell Bull though, Chief’d be interested to
know something was up with the Elf he was so suspicious about, and it’d give him an opportunity
to show himself as a friend to the Apostate, checking in on him, help him out, earn his trust.

When he got to Adan’s, Stitches was there too. The place was…sort of a wreck. There were
books and scrolls laid out all around, on tables, on the floor, there was the barest bit of space for a
path from the door to the potions table where the two Healers were hovering over a cauldron
boiling with thick syrupy green goo bubbling in a way that eerily reminded Krem of witch’s tales.
They’d been working together on potion for Ellie, something that should help heal her forming
ulcer. Adan had been researching it for a while now, since he first had concerns such a thing might
happen to the Herald, but it wasn’t something he’d ever made before and the process was very
intricate—experimental so much so he’d needed a second set of eyes on his proposed formula to
really understand if it was viable, and then a second set of hands as well, in helping follow the
recipe he and Stitches worked to sort of cobble together from different sources.

Maker, the stuff looked ghastly and he was definitely making Bull try it first before they
unleashed it on Ellie.

Adan was quick to follow him, trusted Stitches to mind their potion while he was gone. The
Healer hurried after Krem. Flissa was watching for his return and was at the Tavern door with a tray with teapot and mugs, giving him her regards for the Herald.

Bull was still waiting out front, said he’d heard Ellie lay down, so Krem let them all in, pointing to Ellie’s desk for Bull to set aside the tray. Ellie was under her covers, hair unbound, she lay curled up with her back to them, but she turned when Krem placed his tray on the foot of the bed, and then came to sit beside her.

“You’re good for the day, no more schedule,” he spoke quietly, resting a hand on her arm, “Bull brought food if you’ve changed your mind?”

She shook her head. “You should eat,” she said.

“I will in a bit,” he promised. She didn’t look like she’d be much satisfied with the answer unless it came with him chowing down on a turkey leg while he said it, so he saw fit to say, “Come now, I can’t in good conscience ignore a direct order from Andraste’s Herald, can I?”

She huffed a little laugh at that, smiling a bit. “Why do you keep trying to make me laugh?”

“Because it also makes you smile,” he answered, probably a shade too honestly. Too late to call the words back now though. Probably wouldn’t if he could, even if it meant Bull’d heard them. Maker, he was screwed. “Adan’ll check you over, then you just rest. Let me know if you need anything.”

Chapter End Notes

End Notes

No real new Qunlat or Dalish broken out in this chapter however
Meus bello mimo!=my handsome child, in a culmination of Latin (Meus) bello (Spanish/Italian) and mimo (Italian). We don't get a lot of the Tevinter language, and a massive portion of what is provided is untranslated and I couldn't cobble together a "look at this word in that context and use the translation to cross reference and figure it out" because there's not enough translated Tevinter to do that. So. I know Tevinter is sort of Roman Empire-based, and the words they provide look like a marriage between Latin and Italian with just like a few things that strike as specifically Spanish--though Spanish Italian are markedly similar languages, I personally think there's a touch of straight up Spanish influence in the Tevinter language so. I used all three to come up with the term of endearment from Krem's father to lil bby Krem.

*This is a War Table mission, “The University of Orlais”, Chancellor Jeurgen Haullis writes the Inquisition for help with Mother Hevara badmouthing the university. Here, I’ve chosen Leliana’s method of handling the situation for the Inquisition, it matches the in-game option of picking her card at the War Table.

*Empress Celene canon, LOVES the Orlesian university. The university has thrived in wealth and resources since Celene has taken the throne, attempting to open the University up to more and more students from all walks of life as long as they have educational merit—meaning non-Humans, and even non nobility, she personally sponsors an Elven commoner because she believed them to be a brilliant mathematician. This is obviously met with mixed feelings because Nobles be snooty,
but that’s beside the point, Celene owns an “I <3 the University of Orlais” sweatshirt in every color.

*Core people=Bull talks about the Chargers in game like he has more troops, like a smallish army of support troops, and then his core people we meet when he has drinks with the Inquisitor—Rocky, Dalish, Skinner, Stitches, Krem, and Grim.

*Card games=Diamondback is a card game that is popular with Orzamar Nobility, that makes it sort of popular among Dwarves because they want to be fancy/act like nobility blah blah blah. Sera assumes Varric would like Diamondback better than Wicked Grace because WG is more so a Human game—too, Diamondback has a much more simplistic format, fewer rules, it really could be easily played by kids, and Sera enjoys it a bit more than WG because it has way more rules, and different combination of hands that can be played—its like Poker on steroids. Dead Man’s Tricks is a simple little card game that can be played quickly for just mindless fun, and then Chanson d’Argent is an Orlisian card game like Dead Man’s Tricks but more complex in a way Wicked Grace is, from my understanding.

*Aveline=Aveline! Companion from Dragon Age 2, for anyone who is all about DA:I but hasn’t played DA2 or just hasn’t played in 5ever. she meets Hawke while their families flee the Blight, Aveline looses her husband to Blight sickness. She later becomes Guard Captain of Kirkwall and marries a Guardsman named Donnic and they are precious.

*Mythal=Solas is aware Mythal started a system of latching on to mortal forms to keep her presence among her people to some extent. As we play DA:I and encounter Morrighan and Flemeth, Solas discovers where Mythal ended up which…doesn’t work out so great for her.

*Squirrel Story= the story Krem tells is from an in game conversation you can have with him, where Inquisitor asks about memorable missions the Charger’s have had. Rainier’s story is from the depths of my concussed brain.
In Haven Part 1

Chapter Summary

Growing pains, mending friendships, Charger Family Dinner, assassins, knitting, tag, lots of Krem

Chapter Notes

I'm so so sorry this is so late! Protect your noggin kiddos!

I had just gotten a concussion when I last posted, didn't think anything of it but it was just a liiiittle bit more serious than I thought it was. Memory isn't great, and I lost a good deal of my vocabulary. I thought I had this chapter all written, but clearer thinking me realized I only had two scenes and a crap ton of notes--which was helpful because otherwise I'd still be scrambling to replot this! With the help of a thesaurus I was able to grind this out with some level of quality (hopefully) and I'm relearning my lost words slowly but surely!

Coming at you in two chapters since they can only be so many characters long--here's 100+ pages of "I'm so sorry this took so long, thank you for your patience, I promise to finish this fic! <3" Enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Krem sat at Ellie’s desk, watching while Adan asked question after question before checking her temperature and declaring her feverish, the Healer was glad to announce that her vitals were passable—but heart rate was erratic he said—as he listened to her breathe for a moment and checked her pulse.

And then he checked her stomach, having her push away her blankets and lay back while the Healer pressed a hand into her abdomen. One spot made her flinch a little but the second had her sitting bolt upright, breathless from pain and Krem was at her side in an instant, pulling her hair back away from her face, holding it when she started to retch, dry heaving for a moment. Adan dashed across the room to grab the empty wash basin, at first Krem wasn't sure why since she wasn't throwing anything up, but she'd shut her mouth biting her lip to keep it closed even as it sounded like she was choking on something, the moment Adan had the basin in front of her she let out a strangled heave and blood poured up from her stomach.

“I-I’m alright,” she panted out, Krem stared at her incredulously when the words left her mouth, about to protest until she said, “but if y-you’re worried you can get Commander Cullen.”

Commander Cullen? Last time Krem checked, which was never, Templars weren’t known for their heal—

Templars.

Oh. Oh. She meant she was ‘alright’ as in she wasn’t in danger of possession. He hadn’t even considered the fact she was a Mage when he saw blood Maker he’d just been scared shitless
because—well blood was usually bad anywhere outside its designated places in the body! Stitches
had made it perfectly clear it was a severe symptom and he was to get a Healer immediately if she
started doing that, it was so ingrained in him for a moment his brain told him to run and get
Adan…who was already here, so. He was just a little freaked.

“Seeker Pentaghast has made it known you’re more than capable to resisting demon
influence,” Adan said, “Ellie, are you sensing something strong nearby?”

She shook her head, her voice raw, Maker it just sounded painful, as she insisted, “No b-but
I know it can be scary, the threat of mage possession. I trust Cullen’s judgement, if you’d feel more
comfortable having a Templar on hand.”

Krem leveled Adan a menacing look that said he was absolutely not to fetch the former
Templar. And then he moved to sit facing Ellie, making sure she was looking him in the eye when
he said, lightly, “Ellie? Hush.” He smiled to make sure she knew he didn’t mean it meanly. Just.
She was going to be fine, if Seeker Pentaghast was confident in her ability to stave off possession
Krem trusted her. And he trusted Ellie, really.

She nodded. “Kay,” she agreed.

Adan instructed Ellie to stay in bed and said he’d be back around later with the completed
stronger form of Elf Root tonic he and Stitches were so, so close to finishing. It was meant for
intensive healing that would require sleep for her body to process. They’d have to wait until she
was able to eat, and the Healer said he was going to talk to the Advisors, make it clear they were to
clear her schedule for a bit, at least a day so she could just recuperate if her potion hit her hard.

Krem held Ellie’s hand until she dropped off to sleep. Then he set about cleaning up the
washbasin, setting aside the tray of tea for later, though he did eat some of the lunch Bull’d
brought by since Ellie was out like a light, he’d order dinner when she woke up. He kept her cabin
warm and sat in the chair by her desk. Chief’d been decent enough to drop back by with something
to keep Krem occupied while Ellie was out, though he complained he wasn’t a bar wench when
Krem handed him the trays to return to Flissa’s.

“Wouldn’t know it, the way you constantly display those big pillowy man-bosoms of
yours,” Krem, very quietly, sniped, and Bull just slumped, shoulders dropping in devastation
because he couldn’t properly shout or laugh at or slap the crap out of his Lieutenant—had to be
quiet so Ellie could rest, and it killed the Qunari, Krem could practically feel the life force draining
from the lug, extending the Tevinter’s own life by…eh, about a decade it felt, solid ten years bonus
for his trouble. Bull still flipped him off before taking up the trays of half-eaten lunch and
abandoned tea.

Now, Krem sat knitting, waiting. Seeker Pentaghast came ‘round not very long after Healer
Adan left, the Healer had appraised her on how poorly ‘Eleanor’ was feeling. She knelt by the bed,
taking hold of Ellie’s Marked hand, smoothing her hair away from her face before resting her
forehead against the girl’s.

“Though I am flesh, Your Light is ever present,” Krem closed his eyes and bowed his head
respectfully as the Seeker prayed, quietly, her voice a bare whisper as she recited the Chant, “And
those I have called, they remember, and they shall endure. I shall sing with them the Chant, and all
will know, we are Yours, and none shall stand before us.” She pressed a kiss to the girl’s forehead,
and then stood, seemed to calm herself before she turned to Krem. She looked like she wanted to
say something, but she just nodded to him and then she was gone—so swiftly he worried for a
moment she might let the door slam behind her, but she made certain it closed softly, didn’t wake
Ellie.
Stitches ended up being the one to bring the finished potion along since he would be headed back to the Charger’s camp anyway, handed it off to Krem with promises that it’d been tested for toxicity, nothing in it would be harmful to the Herald and yes, Stitches had Chief lick the spoon when they were done making it so. Bull’d apparently declared it was safe, but that it tasted quote: “like the inside of a Qunari’s ass, but that isn’t necessarily a bad thing”. Maker, maybe instead of Qunari Mages, the Qun should have sewn Chief’s mouth shut! He was certainly glad Ellie’d been sleeping when Stitches relayed that…graphic piece of information.

When trays of dinner arrived from the tavern, delivered by Flissa herself, Ellie was just beginning to stir, giving the woman a small sleepy smile of thanks, saying she knew Flissa was busy. The barkeep let out a happy little gasp, curtsied and stumbled over her words as she wished the Herald well, that it’d been no trouble to bring her dinner, and she’d been just so very sorry she hadn’t smacked that Dwarf with a spoon or something—he was cut off! No more day drinking if he was going to be such a lout! Probably good for him though since uh, day drinking wasn’t the healthiest habit to have, in Krem’s experience. Not that he particularly cared about the man’s health, but he wasn’t feeling quite as murderous as he had been earlier at least.

He downed his food quickly, and Ellie did manage to eat as well—Flissa had made some sort of thick broth, like for a stew except there weren’t any large chunks to chew, it was meant to be sipped. Took a while, Ellie gingerly sipping, seeming half concerned each new gulp might have her stomach emptying out, keeping the cleaned-out wash basin close at hand but she finished her meal without issue. Krem sat on her bed, his back against the wall and when she finished eating she scooted to sit next to him. She laid her head on his shoulder, and he thought she might fall asleep, but she insisted she wanted to talk. He just talked nonsense with her at first—who would win in a fight, The Iron Bull, or a bear? Easily figured out, Bull wins hands down every time Ellie was certain, and who was he to disagree? Krem, feeling just a mite vindictive over the Ferelden man’s teasing him these past few weeks, proposed the idea that Stitches and Adan may have something going on, romantically, which perked Ellie right up—she gasped with her delight at the idea and immediately wanted to know ‘everything’ he’d seen to make him think such a thing. They hadn’t just been working together on potion for Ellie—aside from their meals together as a crew, Stitches had taken to eating with Adan, either in the Tavern or the man’s cabin, Krem’d teased him about it one morning when the man rose at an ungodly hour to have breakfast with the Inquisition’s Healer, and he’d been just a bit flustered, insisting ‘someone has to make sure the man eats’. He may have just been embarrassed getting caught caring so much about someone new, but he’d seemed pretty impressed with Healer Adan. Either they were developing the biggest bromance, endeavoring to outshine Krem and Chief, or they were dropping the ‘b’ and cooking up something serious besides potions. Ellie was ecstatic either way.

Their light, borderline gossiping, chatter seemed to help her relax enough to say what she wanted to talk about. She explained about Thom, once she secured Krem’s solemn vow not to breathe a word to anyone else—Bull knew, she said, so did everyone else in her party, but everyone was supposed to keep it quiet (though Varric had certainly been running his mouth about it, Krem thought, didn’t say as much though in case it upset her)...she technicallly probably shouldn’t tell him but, Marehis had been informed and he was sort of in her job now, and he was The Iron Bull’s Lieutenant. And she trusts him, she said which uh...well he certainly wasn’t complaining about that. So, she explained how they met Rainier, posing as a Warden in the Hinterlands, that he’d volunteered himself to the Inquisition’s cause, and Ellie explained that her magic had a way of expressing when people would be important, for the Inquisition’s goals of sealing the Breach. Her magic had done so with everyone in her party—Bull twice, she said and then she stopped, working the thought around in her mind a moment.

“Though, it might have meant you, huh,” she said as she pondered.
Seriously? “Me? You think your magic says I’ll be of help against the Breach?” the huge ass, gaping hole in the sky? Him?

Ellie shrugged. “You’ve been pretty helpful so far,” she said, playfully knocking into his side a bit. “And everyone in the Inquisition plays a role that helps save the world from the Breach—I mean Flissa’s never seen a Rift or fought a demon, but if she didn’t run the tavern the whole operation shuts down, Breach stays put, demons probably take over the world.”

Huh. Very true. Maker bless Flissa, last beacon of hope against the void.

She went on to explain about finding the real Warden Blackwall’s badge on the Storm Coast, that when Thom had been faced with outright lying to Ellie’s face and say the badge was his, he confessed his former misdeeds when he’d been a mercenary, Maker. Krem found himself compelled to assure her, Bull had never, would never make any such horrible…mistake was the only word he could think of to use but kids getting murdered over anything let alone political bullshit wasn’t an ‘accident’ or a ‘mistake’, it’s something Rainier’s men did. But there was no undoing what had already been done, killing Rainier for his crimes would only make him dead, and he served higher purpose alive, so she’d cleared his name with Orlesian officials—she told him about the ‘offer’ from the Empress. It was no wonder she was worried sick to the point anxiety was burning a hole in her stomach! And it sort of made Varric’s freak out just a bit more understandable. He wasn’t doling out fresh anger over Rainier’s lie, he was pissed Ellie’d been cornered into playing politics with the Empress directly.

He was still an asshole. And he was definitely still on Krem’s list.

It was also good to know, in general. Krem didn’t say as much to Ellie but…damn it, Gaspard was a right bastard, all those Orlesian assholes were. He’d have to be on guard for retaliation against the Herald for accepting Celene’s offer, incase Gaspard or one of his allies sent some form of threat, probably something mild but sometimes ‘mild’ came in the form of assassination attempts. Fucking Orlais.

Despite everything…well Ellie had loved Blackwall—he was always so helpful, and kind, and funny, and he always tried his best to help her no matter what! She loved everyone on her team really. She didn’t know Madam de Fer very well yet, but she certainly liked her a whole lot. She said she wanted everyone to be able to at least work together, and…she loved Varric very much, he was always saying the funniest things and teaching her cool stuff, and always watching her back. She didn’t want to have to choose between hating Rainier forever to keep Varric as her friend and forgiving Thom at the cost of Varric’s regard for her. She’d only gotten so very upset because she thought she was losing the Dwarven man’s friendship, that he would hate her, leave. Oh, Maker. Did she really think like that? That people would just cast her aside the moment she didn’t meet their every expectation?

Krem took a hold of her hand, and it was then he realized he hadn’t replaced his gauntlets—he’d taken them off to knit and he was sort of glad he’d forgotten to put them back on. Her hand was warm in his, soft for the most part save the callous on the heel of her hand from wielding her staff, and the underside of her right index finger had a bit of puckered skin, scarring from a burn. Reminded him of something as he said, “He’s not going to leave. And he definitely doesn’t hate you, Ellie.” he had to laugh at himself a bit—he’d sort of hated the Herald when he thought her War Room meeting would keep him stranded in the bitter cold for hours his first time in Haven. But then, he actually met her, so. “No one that knows you could hate you. He might hate the situation or Rainier, or both.” He sighed. “I know he was a real ass about everything but, well, he’s probably just scared of you getting hurt, taking up for Thom, getting involved in the Game.”
That got him a confused, doubt-ridden, “He...hurt my feelings, because he’s scared I’ll get my feelings hurt?”

More than just her feelings, Game put her life at stake, but yeah basically. “I know it sounds weird, and he went about it all wrong, but,” Krem tried to explain, “I remember this one time, I was...I must have been four? I’d been playing too close to the fireplace while my father was cooking, apparently I’d gotten amused by the fact that every time I got close to the fire he would come swoop me up, carry me back across the kitchen.”

That made Ellie smile. “Awe, that’s so cute!”

“Oh, it was adorable,” he assured her. “Till I ended up burning myself. My father was livid. Once he knew I was okay he yelled at me mean loud, like wall rattling volume—has a real boom to his voice, like Bull. We needed the fireplace for, you know, cooking, so it’s not like he could just never light a fire ever again to keep me safe, he certainly couldn’t yell at the flames to keep to themselves, so he had to make sure I knew to stay away from it, so I wouldn’t get hurt. Sort of what parents do.”

“Varric isn’t my dad. I think I’d have chest hair down to my knees if he were.”

Krem snorted. “My point is, you love him a lot? Well he probably loves you just as much, wants to protect you from things he has no control over. He saw you walk into the tavern buddy-buddy with fire. Once he’s more confident you won’t get burned, he’ll come around. Give him time.”

She whined a bit at that. “Time sucks. Moves either way too fast or way too slow.”

“Well, if you’re worried he’ll be in a reasonable mood too soon for you, I can always start a fight with him,” he teased. Sort of. Might punch the guy next time he laid eyes on him. Jury was still out on that.

That got him a frustrated little huff, but she grinned when she sat up and playfully pushed against his shoulder, “Cremisius! Don’t be a mister smarty-pants!”

“Allright, alright,” he relented.

She seemed to be feeling better about her fight, and she’d eaten well so Krem offered her potion. She looked shy for a moment, admitting she was starting to feel ‘swamp-persony’ after all the sweating and sicking up and everything from the day. He got wanting to clean up after all that and very carefully helped her to sit on the floor by the fire, saw to getting her set up with everything she’d need before stepping outside.

After a short moment he heard what sounded like her voice and he almost dashed back inside, thinking she needed something, or something was wrong, but his hand stilled on the door handle when he realized she was singing. Soft and a little off-key, he vaguely recognized it as a Chantry hymn. He couldn’t remember the words, it’d been forever since he last heard the tune, but it was something simple everyone learned when they were kids about the Maker’s love for all his children. He believed in the Maker of course, but uh. It was a tenuous relationship to say the least. Had faith but also if he did ever actually meet the guy he’d have some serious fucking questions about a lot of things. But it was sort of...soothing to hear, after a hard day Ellie absently worshiping the Maker in such a sweet way, sounding so content while doing it.

When she was done the crazy girl had gotten up and let him back in, and he saw her safely to her bed, half tempted to carry her but that might be a bit much, as it was she did lean on him for
support. She was practically falling asleep by the time she raised the potion to her lips. He asked if she could think of anything she needed,

That got him a tired little smile and, “Hmm, for you to get some sleep too. Thanks for everything today;” she mumbled, eyes closed, snuggling deeper into her blankets.

So, a sleepy evening turned into a sleep-filled day, for the Herald. Krem kept busy. Once Ellie was fast asleep, there was a report to get out to Spymaster Leliana of the day’s events, and then he was just knitting, tending the fire, admitting the occasional visitor. Solas came later in the evening, and he looked better, thanked Krem for having Bull check up on him. He’d gotten caught up in a tangent of his research, neglected to eat for nearly two days, he asked that Krem keep his momentary unwellness to himself, he was fine and there was no need to worry Ellie. Krem was quick to agree, and the Elf Apostate went and sat on the floor by the bed, Ellie’d rolled over on her side, Marked hand hanging down over the edge of the mattress and Solas sat facing her, taking her Marked hand in his, pressing the back of it to his forehead and he meditated or something for a while, before taking his leave.

Bull came by late in the evening er, more like three in the morning, tried talking Krem into catching some sleep in the Charger’s tents and…well he could have but, no, he wanted to be around when Ellie woke up. In case she needed him, or needed help, or was scared or something—he didn’t know! Just. He didn’t want to leave her. So, he didn’t, he did however let guards take post outside the cabin doors, and after he did a perimeter check ’round the cabin, and a once-around Haven, before he returned to the desk chair in Ellie’s room and napped a bit, ‘getting some sleep too’ as ordered.

He jerked awake when the cabin door opened, hand on hilt, but it was just Seeker Pentaghast. It was early morning, sun wasn’t even up, and she’d brought breakfast for Ellie—Krem too which was greatly appreciated. They didn’t wake Ellie at first since she hadn’t stirred of her own accord. Seeker wanted to chat for a bit, she’d read the report he’d sent to Leliana. He’d done well, she said, she was glad he’d taken the initiative to clear her schedule, that he’d gotten Adan. She said she had taken note, he’d bowed his head while she prayed for Eleanor when she last stopped by. He worried momentarily he’d made a mistake, that she was going to reprimand him for not remaining visibly on guard in the moment, but no, instead it prompted her to ask if he was Andrasten. He was, he said, and she seemed very pleased with that—she was a Seeker after all, he supposed one didn’t pursue such a calling if you weren’t a devout follower of the Maker.

She left him to eat his meal then, going and rousing Ellie to see if she felt much like eating. Potion had her absolutely zonked, Krem didn’t think she comprehended a word that came out of the Seeker’s mouth, she just looked so incredibly exhausted and confused. But the woman spoke to her kindly, a seemingly uncharacteristic warmth in her voice that had Ellie at ease through her disoriented daze and she did manage to drink the thick broth of a breakfast stew, and then the Seeker had her drink her morning potion, asked if Ellie needed anything. At first it looked like she’d been understood, that Ellie needed a hug since she sort of faceplanted into the Seeker’s chest plate, the Nevarran woman quick to hug her back, running a hand through Ellie’s hair a moment before she realized the girl hadn’t been so much hugging her as much as she’d just flat out fallen asleep again. She looked bemused at that and then she seemed a bit conflicted. Krem understood decorum, the woman looked torn between taking a moment to hold on for her own sense of security more than Ellie’s—and the need to save face in front of someone she wasn’t super familiar with, so he averted his gaze and quietly said he was going to do another perimeter check, drop their dishes off at Flissa’s. That, apparently, was enough to earn him a quiet ‘Thank you’ from the Seeker.

When he exited the cabin Varric was there. Not skulking just outside the door or anything
but standing at the bottom of the stairs that led down from the path splitting between the Tavern and the Chantry, staring at Ellie’s cabin, and then Krem, when he emerged. He thought he might punch the man when next he saw him but uh…well the Dwarf was still wearing the clothing he’d had on the day before, and while he’d made himself scarce after that, it didn’t look like he’d gotten around to sleeping much, his eyes already looked bruised for lack of rest. He didn’t say anything, just met Krem’s eye for a moment, stared, and then left, back up the steps. Krem thought he’d been heading for the Tavern too but as he made his way up, he saw the Dwarf disappear into a tent at the top of the stairs.

Sera was in the Tavern though, sound asleep in her cot there—Krem wasn’t sure how the Elf girl slept so well there but she was snoring away all through the ruckus of the breakfast rush.

He walked passed Solas and Adan’s cabins, following the loop around the Chantry, nothing seemed out of sorts, he’d gotten familiar with the regular faces around Haven and no one seemed out of place as he jogged down the stairs and headed for Haven’s gate.

Commander Cullen was in high dudgeon it seemed. The former Templar looked the very definition of irate, barking out orders that sounded like punishment being cast upon the huh, it was a much smaller group of men on the practice field than usual, just six men lined up in two rows doing what looked like a never-ending number of pushups, sweat pouring off of them as the Commander bellowed. Skinner was at his side for some reason, the side of her face Krem could see was sporting a cut across her cheek, bruising on her jaw. Her knuckles looked bloodied and bruised, but she seemed the absolute most elated Krem had ever seen her. She was smiling, a very sadistic looking smile, but still. She was pleased.

He touched base with Chief real quick, and uh. Well, he got the rundown on just why exactly Cullen was currently teamed up with Skinner of all people.

Apparently Varric’s meltdown got around, the Advisors were handling damage control, had rounded up everyone present in the Tavern during Varric and Ellie’s fight, but word still managed to spread. Bout an hour or so ago Skinner and Bull overheard a group of soldiers—six, to be exact—laughing, calling Ellie mentally unstable and saying they weren’t super confident in the Maker sending them to be saved by some ‘crybaby bitch’ and she didn’t look just fifteen, and the things that had been said in their argument, without the proper context did sound like some strange lovers’ quarrel. Varric being so upset at seeing Ellie and Rainier together, insisting Ellie go with him instead, yelling about how Rainier had broken Ellie’s heart and left her devastated on the Coast. They bet she was screwing Rainier, they’d had a spat and she moved on to Tethras, starting drama in her own camp by juggling the men or something.

Skinner cut loose on them and Bull looked the other way for a couple minutes. Landed the assholes in the infirmary. Of course, feeling so very badly for his recruit’s behavior, Bull manhandled them the whole way to Adan’s, explained the altercation and left them to the Healer’s tender mercies. Adan didn’t seem to be in a particular mood for gentle bedside manner for some reason. Meanwhile Cullen was made aware of the situation—by Bull—but when Cullen confronted his men they tried to turn the situation around on Skinner, said she just attacked them for no reason.

Needless to say, Cullen had already been livid and ashamed, and that just about doubled it. He said that the entire thing gave him a massive migraine and he was basically making them do pushups until he felt better, or they were dead, whichever happened first. Skinner got to watch.

Krem couldn’t really hear too well after the recap of the soldier’s slander, his heartbeat sort of pounded in his ears and he was trying to think of just how much time he could leave Seeker
Pentaghast with Ellie before he’d be missed. “That’s nice Chief, where’s my maul?” thing got lost sometimes, Rocky borrowed it for harvesting materials—breaking off chunks of raw metals and stones out of hillsides for his experiments. Or Chief’d use it for training, fighting whatever. Krem’s turn now though. Just real quick.

But Bull shook his head. “Let it go. Boss-girl’ll be upset if she wakes up and finds out you’ve been picking fights on her behalf.”

He was hardly picking a fight, those assholes started it! But Chief had a point. And just the prospect that he might be the one to upset Ellie…nope. Did not like that at all. So.

Thom inturrupted them. He’d been in the forge talking to Harritt but when he saw Krem he excused himself and hesitantly approached. Just sort of checked to see how Ellie was doing. He assured him she was recovering, he should be getting back to her anyway. Took just about every ounce of restraint he had in his body to keep from rounding on the men Cullen was still shouting at.

By the time he got back, Seeker Pentaghast was standing over the desk examining his latest knitting project, or at least she had been. The second the door was open she was backing away as if trying not to get caught, and nodding to him, asked if he needed anything before she left—she would be in a meeting all day, possibly longer, it would require her full attention and she did not know when she would next be available. In fact, he was to see to it that Ellie got breakfast tomorrow.

She didn’t outright say ‘I’m going into the bowels of the Chantry to mercilessly interrogate someone in a way only a Seeker can, and I’m not coming out until it’s done’ but uh, she definitely delivered the words with such a quiddity. If anything to ‘Eleanor’s’ detriment were to happen he was to get word to the Chantry guards as soon as he possibly could, they would get Cassandra.

“I will,” he promised. Interrogation wasn’t a big part of what the Chargers did, but Bull’d had to do it from time to time with his more official line of work. It was always intense, you had to be at your best to make sure everything…everything that needed done got done without having to take things too far. “I’ve got everything under control here. Focus on your meeting, I hope it goes smoothly.” The Seeker put a hand on his shoulder and thanked him, truly. Twice in one day, damn.

Sera stopped by during the afternoon, she’d heard ‘day off’ and wondered if ‘Inky’ wanted to play but Ellie was still out like a light from her potion. The Elf girl just sort of watched her for a time as if verifying her Human friend was still breathing—sleeping and not dead—she was sleeping pretty deep. Then Sera came over to Krem, sat at on the floor and, very quietly, asked him all sorts of questions. Was Inky supposed to be sleeping like that? How was she feeling? Was she better? When would she be better? Was she in a lot of pain? Could Sera do anything to help? How exactly does he pronounce his Vint-ass name? He told her she could just call him Krem and she liked that a whole lot better, said she didn’t know why Inky called him the other, and he said she could mind her own business. That got a weird sort of cackling sound out of her and then ‘fair enough’ she said. Then she rose to leave but she came in real close, right up in Krem’s face, looking hard and Krem asked,

“Can I help you?”

“Pfft, no, just lookin’ at your eyes. Inky got all wordy about them so I wanted to see what all the fuss was about,” Sera said, speaking directly into his face before pulling back, standing up straight.

Wordy? “Wordy?”
“Ugh. You know!” He really didn’t. “Fancy word stuff. Poetry-like. She said they’re like sunlight or whatever, but I just think they’re just regular brown,” she said with a shrug. And then she whirled about on her heel and left the cabin.

Well. He was pretty sure his face was as red as his eyes were brown. Maker! That uh, well that was certainly something. Probably not something Ellie’d’ve wanted Sera just sharing with him but…huh.

He shook the thought from his mind, focused on his knitting for a while, but that just sort of made his eyes hurt after a while, they ached after not sleeping very much. Guards were still in their places, so he found himself dozing in the middle of the afternoon.

Only to wake when a hand made contact with his shoulder. Gentle, but reflex had him lurching forward to tackle an assailant to the ground, but sudden realization had him stopping before he actually got them down, instead he rolled mid-attack to fall onto his own back on the cabin floor, his assailant wide-eyed with surprise as she landed on top of him with a startled gasp, but otherwise unharmed.

“Cremisius?”

“Ellie! _Maker’s breath_ I’m so sorry!” the words shot from his mouth rapid fire, “I swear, I didn’t know it was you! Are you alright?” Shit! He hadn’t hit her or put her in a choke hold or anything, and he’d realized it was her fast enough to stop himself from grabbing her too roughly but still.

“I’m fine, you goof,” she said laughingly, pushing herself up a bit with her hands and he realized then he still had his arms around her, the hand on her back felt the muscle shift as she moved, and he realized his other hand was lower, had a handful of something soft—Maker! He quickly let go he’d- hand- bottom! Ellie rolled off of him, rising and offering him a hand up. She looked around the room a bit sort of getting her bearings and then she looked at him hard and asked, “Have you been here this whole time?”

“Of course.”

“Cremisius!”

Oh. She hadn’t been upset at his mistaking her for an assassin here to kill…well…her. But she laid into him pretty good then, because people need to sleep! And eat! And! Not sleep in chairs! That couldn’t be very good for him at all! Was he alright?! Did his back hurt? His chest? When had he last eaten? _Breakfast?!_ He must be starving! She appreciated that he’d wanted to help but Maker, he was by no means to neglect himself!

He’d hardly done that. Yeah yesterday was pretty intense but it was about a four on the scale of absolutely demanding, ’so much pain and exhaustion from our work I might lay down and die’ days he’d had in the military or with the Chargers.

Huh. The Chargers. Sun was down so…

“How are you feeling, Ellie?” he asked.

She looked up at him indignantly, stomping her foot with a huff, “Don’t you _dare_ try to change the subject, Cremisius Aclassi!”

“I’m not trying to change the subject,” he said, holding up his hands in surrender, “work with me here.”
She didn’t look like she very much believed him but, “Tired but not like I need to sleep anymore, and my stomach feels a lot better—” she grinned a bit and said, “all better, really, wow! It doesn’t hurt at all anymore!” Maker, that was a relief, enough so he almost gave into the sudden urge to hug her he was so very glad to hear that, but he thought he probably should leave the hugging initiation to Ellie, he wouldn’t want to overstep. “Though uh,” she sheepishly admitted, “I’m actually pretty hungry.”

Couldn’t have that, now could they? “Me too. I could send for dinner from Flissa’s,” he said, definitely wasn’t super ready to take her to the Tavern proper, he wasn’t sure just how well the advisor’s ‘damage control’ had gone over yet, “or if you’re still up for it, Chief did invite you to dinner with the Chargers,” he reminded her. No one’d dare bother her with Bull at her side and the practice fields should be clear this time of day. She’d need to see either Stitches or Adan now that she was awake—if she wanted to order in he’d swing by and pick up Adan on the way back, and if she was up for Charger family dinner, Stitches would check her out. Either way, healer, food, and avoiding assholes.

She gasped in surprise and excitement, “Oh gosh! I forgot all about that! That’d be great!”

Guys probably already had dinner underway, so he said, “We can head out whenever you’re ready.”

“Oh!” she commanded, pointing to the cabin door, and for half a second he thought she’d misheard him or taken offense at something, but she was smiling and then, “No peep-shows Mister Aclassi. I have to get changed.”

Oh. Yeah, that wouldn’t be super appropriate to stick around for would it? Wasn’t like with the Chargers where everyone had seen everyone else’s everything. He assured her he’d be right outside whenever she was ready. Guards hadn’t changed since morning, so he went ahead and dismissed them for the evening, he’d arrange security when he returned Ellie to her cabin later.

“All ready!”

Ellie wasn’t in her practice cloths, but it wasn’t as elaborate as the clothing he’d seen her wearing for noble guests and other ‘Herald’ business. Matching brown linen tunic and leggings, tucked into her boots, he was glad she remembered her cloak, and gloves. Chargers ate around a large fire but still, it was chilly. She was pulling her hat on as the cabin door closed behind her, her hair wild as it spilled unbound around her shoulders.

“You look beautiful,” the words just sort of left his mouth on their own, but girls liked knowing they looked nice, and Ellie had probably put thought and effort into picking out what to wear, her face was sort of glowing, moonlight casting a cool shine to her warm skin…uh. Like she’d just washed up was his point. So. It was only polite. And you should be polite to your friends.

Course, Bull was his best friend and if he ever called him beautiful, the Qunari would go full blown Ben-Hessrath re-educator training on him. ‘Damn right I’m beautiful, I’m a goddamn legend!’. Ass. But maybe he’d wait and see, save it for when Chief had a bad day or something, being given an excuse to be insufferable would cheer him right up.

Ellie went a bit pink. “Gosh. Thanks!” and then she seemed to have a thought, “Oh! Wait! Should I…I mean is it going to be rude just showing up empty handed?”

Kind of hard to go ‘empty handed’ anywhere with the Mark meant to close the Breach. Krem huffed a laugh. “You’re bringing yourself, that’s good enough as it is. Everyone’s pretty
stoked to meet you. This is just supposed to be a fun, chill thing. No pressure, alright?"

Ellie nodded with a sheepish smile, “Yeah, sorry, I guess I’m being a worry wart huh?”

For a horrified moment Krem worried he might accidentally say something just stupid lame about her being the cutest wart he’d ever seen—damn! And he was worried about Bull’s big mouth! Well that stood to reason, at least he’d kept his comment to himself. Lame, lame line even if he’d cared to use one. He opted for shrugging it off and offering her his arm.

They walked the path out front of the Forge, empty now that night had fallen. The Chargers gathered in the clearing just a ways down the road from the forge—an area large enough they could gather around a bonfire and cook and eat and drink. They heard a hoot of laughter and something clattering like armor-plates knocking against each other. Oh. Once the Chargers were in view, everyone was around the fire, Grim and Rocky were sort of wrestling each other over…yup. Nothing. Not anything Krem could see anyway, they were just fighting for the fun of it, it’s not like Grim talked smack. Rocky probably just straight up tackled the guy and started fighting for fun.

“Krem, man! You made it!” Bull called out when he saw Krem and Ellie approaching, he rose from his place around the fire. There was a massive pot hanging from the spit, whatever it was smelled like Grim’s handiwork—dude could really cook. “Boss.” He came to meet them just short of joining the group. “Looking good, you feeling okay?”

She nodded. “Thanks. For everything, yesterday.”

“Hold up a sec,” he said, gesturing for them to follow him away from the Charger’s party. Not far, just over to the tree line for a bit more privacy. Bull knelt to be eye-level with Ellie then. “Just wanted to touch base about that. Yesterday, the offer.”

“You know about that too, huh?” Ellie asked Bull, quietly.

“Yeah,” Bull said, neutral.

“Do you,” her fists clenched, and her chin quivered a bit, but she schooled her features and looked up at Bull, wanting the honest truth, not something sympathetic. “Do you think I made the right choice?” she asked him plainly.

Bull seemed to have put a lot of thought into it. “I think you made a choice. Tough one. There was no right or wrong call there boss, just a call, and you stepped up and made it. That’s what I wanted to talk to you about. No matter what flack anyone gives you about the choices you make, you should keep that in mind that they weren’t in the War Room, and it wasn’t their decision to make. No one’s opinion on what should or shouldn’t’ve happened matters now, no one’s not even mine,” Bull intoned. Then, “Since you’re asking though, you did what you had to do, got the job done, so I’m damn proud of you, myself, Boss.”

Ellie nodded, and she quickly wiped at her eyes with the back of her hands, they’d been a little tear filled, and his praise had her blushing as she thanked him. Bull clapped her on the shoulder.

“Ready to meet the guys? Things get too crazy for you just say the word,” Chief said.

Ellie hugged Krem’s arm a bit more tightly. “I think I’ll be okay.”

Oh, Maker, that was just…nice, that she knew he had her back, trusted him to help if somehow things went sideways.
Chief led them back to the bonfire and announced. “Alright, everyone, listen up. Boss is joining us tonight. So. Best behavior,” he said, spreading a pretty serious look across their numbers. Grim and Rocky sat up from their fight in the snow and went to sit on one of the four large logs laying around the fire as seating. “Boss, these are the guys. Dalish, Stitches, Rocky, Grim, and Skinner,” he introduced, pointing to each member in turn. “Guys, this is the boss.”

“It’s really great to meet you all!” Ellie enthused. “You can just call me Ellie!”

Krem noticed right off the bat Skinner looked better, healed from her beating some sense into those assholes that badmouthed Ellie. She was weird about accepting healing—didn’t like going to Stitches for help, rebuffed efforts from the Human man to treat her when she wasn’t seriously injured but her hands were all better, the bruising on her face was gone and the cut now looked more like a scratch.

Rocky and Stitches wanted Ellie to sit with them—Stitches obviously to check up on Ellie and make sure he and Adan’s potion had done its job, keep a close eye on her as she ate. Rocky, he knew, just wanted to badger her with questions about the Mark. They said that Krem had been hogging her all to himself, he could go sit with Chief, let her hang out with everyone else for a while.

Ellie gave his arm a little squeeze—part of him wanted to pretend he’d mistook one for three and use that as an excuse to sit with her—reassuring him as she said, “That sounds good, thanks!” and then to Krem, “Go have fun with Bull!”

He didn’t want to have fun with Bull!

Especially since the moment Ellie and Krem were seated across from each other around the fire, Bull pounded his back with breath-thieving strength and asked, “How the hell you doin’ Krem-de-la-Krem?”

Ellie started giggling when Krem sent her a helpless look.

“Doin’ just fine, Chief,” he choked out.

“Really?” Bull asked, wagging his eyebrows a bit, “Been busy showing boss you’re A-classi guy I hope.”

Okay the eyebrow wagging was a good indication that he needed hit and then…A classy g —?

Bull grunted when Krem elbowed him in the ribs. Bastard didn’t get to pun up his whole name!

“He’s been holding that one in since the Storm Coast,” Ellie informed him.

“Well the anticipation didn’t kill him,” Krem groused, “so I guess I have to.”

“You, zip it—keep your bickering to Bull. I got business here,” Stitches reprimanded Krem! Bull started it! But he didn’t say as much since he wasn’t twelve and yeah, Stitches needed to do his thing, and the Ferelden man pulled Ellie into conversation then, talking so quietly Krem couldn’t hear, but he just seemed to be asking her questions about how well the potion worked. At one point he had her remove her left glove, so he could check her pulse. She undid the clasp of her cloak, so he could easily press a hand against different spots on her stomach to see if it hurt, the way Adan had earlier. Krem watched, some part of him panicked that it’d be just as painful as last time, but the only reaction Stitches’ actions got was a few giggles—apparently Herald of Andraste,
Rift-sealer, bear-basher, demon-slayer, was ticklish.

Skinner had moved—Krem wasn’t sure when, hadn’t seen the woman do so just one minute it was Rocky, Ellie, Stitches. The next it was Rocky, Ellie with Skinner sitting at her feet facing the fire but almost like a guard dog before the girl, and Stitches who dropped the woman a wry stare for all of a second before he continued talking with Ellie. It might’ve seemed rude or invasive, but it wasn’t like the woman couldn’t hear them talking from where she’d been sitting before—she’d probably have to be in Haven proper get out of earshot, and Ellie hadn’t minded.

Rocky had been practically bouncing in place since Ellie’d removed her glove, eyeing her Mark, but he kept his cool (mostly) until Stitches was done and then immediately, Rocky’s opener was,

“So, does that thing make shit go *boom* or what?”

Shit! She doesn’t know Rocky, she might think he’s accusing her of using the Mark to blow up the Conclave! He almost spoke up to intervene, but Ellie said, “I don’t think so?” giving it some more thought before shaking her head. “Except Rifts maybe, those make a lot of little boom noises and they contract and expand when I manipulate them in battle but like an explosion that affects the Fade mostly I think. They’re usually very up high, I’ve never been close enough to one to feel any back-blast if there is some, but neither have I seen anything else around them respond like there was a physical explosion.”

“Those things are loud as shit when they close up, like thunder,” Bull said.

Ellie blinked sort of processing that a second and then, “Huh, do you need anything like earplugs, the Iron Bull? Rifts are super loud, the sort of loud that shakes your bones a bit, I didn’t think about it hurting your ears or anything.”

“Nah boss. Certain pitches can hurt Qunari ears, or at least be considered unpleasant—Krem’s bitching for instance—but volume doesn’t physically deteriorate our ear drums or hurt or anything.”

“Ellie, do me a favor—ah, thanks,” Krem said as Ellie giggled and covered her eyes a moment. Gave him the opportunity to offer Bull both middle fingers and, “Horns up, Chief. Horns all the way up.”

Chief slapped a hand over his heart and said, “Krem-iclassi Aclassi I have never loved you more than I do now, in this very moment.”

Figures he’d be more delighted than insulted, damn him.

“You ever tried setting something on fire with it or anything?” Rocky asked Ellie then. The girl pecked between her fingers for a second before dropping her hands into her lap.

“‘Tried’, no. But it doesn’t burn hot or anything, on an external level. Otherwise my gloves would be toast,” Ellie said in good humor. Then, “You can touch it if you want to see for yourself, it won’t hurt you, promise.”

Rocky looked close at her offered hand, examining the Mark, holding his hand over the glow to see if he could feel any warmth coming off it, and then he very quickly poked it, looking like he half expected to go up in flames but nothing quite so exciting happened. He did take a hold of the marked part of her hand for a moment then to see if maybe prolonged exposure would burn but,
“Huh. Not what I was expecting but still cool,” he said, letting go, “I mean. You know. It’ll close the Breach or whatever.”

‘Or whatever’, it was the ruddy Breach!

Dalish cleared her throat loudly, looking at Rocky who seemed to remember something then. “Oh, uh, does it uh, interfere with your magic at all?” he asked. For his own interests, of course.

Ellie’s gaze flickered between Dalish and then back to Rocky. “Not with casting spells or anything,” she said with a shrug. “The Mark uses my magic to power it, and my magic doesn’t exactly like interacting with the Mark but it doesn’t outright cancel out or impede my magic or anything.”

Krem wasn’t super sure what her magic ‘not liking’ something meant but Dalish looked sympathetic about it.

She asked about everyone then, where everyone was from, how they ended up with the Chargers. Stitches got a condoling hand on his arm when he said he picked up a sword during the Blight, never put it back down, ‘Darkspawn are wicked scary! All scrunchy faced and snappy teeth!’ she was so glad he came out of it alright, and she was super grateful to have the opportunity to meet him, she said.

She asked about Skinner. Bull explained in a few words, that gave Ellie everything she needed to know—she’d never been there, but like them, she recognized the marriage in Skinner’s voice, accent caught between Ferelden and Orlesian. All she needed was ‘Skinner didn’t take to kindly to nobles testing their new swords on the people in her Alienage’ and that filled in the blank of where the woman came from with ‘Edgehall*’.

“I hope you got those guys good!” she said to the Elf in earnest, with a little nod. She had a look on her face like she ad half a mind to hop on Russel, go to Edgehall and give the guard captain a piece of her mind. Probably not the most Inquisition mission-oriented idea but Krem’d back her up.

“Now I get paid to kill Shems,” Skinner said with a nonchalant shrug. Krem was a bit worried about how Ellie would take that, but she got that Skinner didn’t mean it as a reference to all Humankind, just assholes. She smiled and said she was glad Skinner had a job she liked now, that Bull had been able to get her out of trouble.

Skinner was something like a feral mabari when Bull met her. Understandable. Alienage wasn’t good anywhere, from what Krem’d seen, but Edgehall’s Alienage was called ‘the Edge of Hell’ for a reason. It was a city still to this day devastated by the Second Orlesian Invasion. Noble blood was mixed and their pride there was wrought with turmoil, the caustic combination of colonization and sabotaged-reclamation left nothing but a ruined city with Arls pounding their chests trying to fight over who gets the scraps. Their alienage…you have this hellish city, and then there’s a bridge leading from it. A goddamn siege funnel basically, so enemies passing through it are easy to pick off one by one. Except it’s not foreign enemies it’s meant to work against. It’s to hold control over the Elves. This bridge leads to their Alienage and the place is like a cage, shack-town surrounded by a great circular wall, only one way in or out, and the Humans have the high ground, the control over the bridge—you need something from the Human part of the city? You might not make it there, and you damn well may never come back. Anyone from nobility having a laugh to some commoner seeking to feel bigger about themselves, may take you out, toy with your life. And there was no escaping when nobles decided they wanted to test their new swords on the people there, it was a massacre, weak defenseless everyday people just trying to get by cut down
Bull heard the tell-tale accent when she informed him she’d ‘killed some people’, and knew everything he needed to about the feral, bloody, bruised Elf they found the last time they were this side of the Waking Sea, and took her in in a heartbeat, no questions asked. Got her outfitted for the field, first of her cuts went to paying off her bounty…which got sufficiently decreased when they realized a Qunari would be delivering the payments in person. She was a survivor and to have managed an escape from the inescapable? She might be out-of-her-mind, but who wouldn’t be growing up in a cage, and she had an amazing aptitude for strategy. Shit that saved the Chargers more than once since she signed on.

The Elf woman didn’t speak a single word to any of them for months after her exchange with Bull that got her hired, she was skittish, and violent, ready to cut the throat of anyone who posed even the slightest bit of threat to her in her mind. Everywhere they went, she had what was hers—her area in their camp, she claimed it, marked it off by drawing a circle around her bedroll and pack, you accidentally cross the line you got a knife wherever she could most quickly lodge one. Krem had a scar along the back of his calf to prove it, he accidentally stepped over the line while heading to take a piss in the middle of the night…was definitely more careful after that. But as they traveled that stopped—or at least, they thought it had, until they realized Skinner no longer claimed just her bedroll and pack as her own. The Chargers were hers, even if she didn’t necessarily like all of them—you don’t have to like someone to love them. She certainly didn’t like Krem at all very much he thought, but when he back from Haven the first time, Skinner listened silently when Krem reported to Bull, and he’d seen it when she spoke of Ellie later. The Human girl had taken care of what was Skinner’s, add that to Chief giving her a nickname boom, Ellie had nothing to fear from the Elf woman—huh, come to think of it her freaking out on people talking shit about the girl…yup. Herald of Andraste was one of Skinner’s people. Otherwise Bull’d never have invited her out—Skinner cut loose on anyone that came ‘round that she felt were encroaching on her territory, Krem had to make that clear to the Ambassador when they were deciding where to set up camp in Haven, strangers setting foot in their camp might get knifed. That’d been a uh, fun conversation. Lady Montilyet took it in stride though, Maker bless her.

Dalish was next. Ellie thought she had just the most beautiful Vallaslin! Bull outed her for being sent away from her clan because they couldn’t have too many Mages around. Dalish denied being an Apostate, that her staff was in point of fact, a bow and Krem couldn’t help but rib her about the honking crystal on the tip of the weapon currently strapped to her back. But Ellie seemed to get Dalish not wanting it out there that she was an Apostate and the Human girl agreed, teasingly, that she’d totally heard about Elves using crystals to assist in aiming—“Keep up with the times, Cremisius!” she said with a wink.

A quiet—not quiet enough because Krem heard him!—rumble of laughter hummed in Bull’s chest.

He was going to walk away from this meal with a bruised elbow, from how many times he was going to have to bash Chief. Bastard, with his puns and laughing and Krem was just waiting until Ellie wasn’t around and then he was so so getting Bull back for Russel being a horse. Dude was getting snow down his pants he just had to wait for the exact perfect moment to strike because he was tired, and Bull was fast, knew what someone was planning to do even before they did sometimes, it was hard to catch him off guard. He’d do it though.

Dalish looked almost misty-eyed when Ellie started chatting her up about archery—the girl talked what Krem could only assume was magical theory with the Elf woman using archer’s terminology instead. Arrows instead of spells, ‘knocking’ instead of ‘magical intent’, ‘drawing’ meant charging he thought. It got pretty bizarre sounding at some points but the two of them
seemed to be on the same page at least, and ended with Ellie looking excited, saying she was “totally going to try that out next time!”.

Grim waved and nodded to her when she asked about him. Chief explained that he didn’t talk much, and he had high hopes that the man was secretly the lost king or chieftain of some village. She smiled and waved back to the quiet man, saying it was very nice to meet him, asked him yes or no questions the guy could shake his head or nod to. Did he like his job? Good! How long had he worked for Bull? She mouthed numbers ‘one, two, three’ quietly to herself as she counted the fingers he held up and then asked if he meant years—nod.

When Rocky’s turn came he mumbled about blowing up a bit of the Shaperate, Ellie was equal parts impressed and concerned—he was definitely not to risk blowing up Haven, she insisted fiercely the man was quick to promise he wouldn’t. She also made him promise to just be careful in general, she wouldn’t want him blowing himself up either. If he had any big plans he should maybe collaborate with Harritt—he was super smart knew all about weapons, she said.

Grim got up and took the lid off the pot over the fire, satisfied it was ready. Steam came billowing out in all directions and the smell of beef and potatoes and butter permeated the air and Krem was pretty sure his stomach was eating itself, Maker he was hungry.

“Alright, Grim! Let’s dig in!” Bull announced, and then it was a mess of everyone scrambling to get bowls filled and utensils and Krem was about to get up and take the bowl of potatoes and roast beef he’d gotten to Ellie since she hadn’t gotten caught up in the mix of madness but Grim had ladled a heaping amount into a bowl and was handing it off to Ellie, along with a fork.

The blond man made a motion with his hand that Krem almost thought might be him blowing her a kiss but then he recognized it—Grim did that sometimes, seemed like a habit for when he handed people food, his fingers* extended but still lax, he’d press his middle finger to his lips and then wave the hand at them.

“Oh!” Ellie said, sounding surprised. “Thanks! I’ll be careful,” she promised, spearing a forkful of beef and blowing on it before putting it in her mouth.

Grim had been returning to the fire to get himself a bowl, but at her words his eyes went a bit wide and he whipped back around to look at her.

He moved his hands again, both of them this time, index fingers pointing to each other as he moved them in a circular motion and then he pointed them upward, palm’s facing Ellie as he extended his thumbs, making an L shape with both hands as he pressed his thumbs together and then pulled them apart.

Bull’d stopped eating to watch the exchange intently.

Ellie made a fist and a motion like knocking on a door. “A little bit. I don’t understand finger spelled words, but I understand most straight up signs,” Ellie said with a shrug. “I have a few friends that are deaf, and then there was a little girl in a village I passed through a lot, she was non-verbal and used Sign Language to speak. Do you mind if I ask which you are? I don’t mean to be nosey, but I’d hate to miscommunicate because you need to read my lips or something.”

Read her—

Wait. What?
Grim shook his head and flicked his thumb under his chin before tapping his index finger at the corner of his mouth and then by his ear.

“Cool! Though I’m sure the Iron Bull’s jokes make you wish you were deaf sometimes, huh?” Ellie teased.

Grim’s shoulders shook with laughter, and he grunted, holding his hand in a fist with just his index and pinky finger out, bringing his index finger just under his nose and then making a fluttering motion away from his face.

And she giggled! At Grim’s…Grim made jokes! “I know right?!” Ellie enthused, “Maker, his snores were louder than the storming when we were on the Coast!”

Shit! That was him talking this entire time?! Grim didn’t do much more with his hands when interacting with people other than wave and the occasional, well deserved, middle finger, but thinking back, yeah, he had a few motions that came off like actions of habit. There was the food handling thing, and sometimes like if Krem offered to help with meal prep or backed him up good in a fight the man grunted to him and did a motion that was sort of like blowing a kiss just from his chin, it’d struck Krem as a bit odd but now he thought it was Sign for ‘thank you’. Shit! He’d thought the man had been awkwardly hitting on him or something the first few times it happened!

“Whoa whoa let’s back up,” Bull interjected, Krem agreed honestly, “One. I don’t snore.” Okay that was a lie but whatever, “Two. Grim! You bastard! That’s some cool-ass shit we could use! Expanded method of silent communication across the field? Why the hell didn’t you say anything? Uhm.” There we go, get to the issue Chief! Badly, but he did it!

Grim gave him a dry look, just shrugged. It wasn’t like the man couldn’t hear them, and they’d never run into an issue because he couldn’t talk, guy had a good way of getting his point across without words.

The rest of dinner was full of everyone calling out words for Grim to sign back to them, spitting balling ideas for how to incorporate signs into fight instruction mixed with random words for just in general communicating with Grim purposes because shit, it wasn’t like they never talked to him, they always got along just fine, but if he could be understood in return and included more…he was one of them! Krem definitely wanted to be able to understand the man better—Bull did too though he insisted he had his priorities straight. Chief wanted in on all the swear words first, signs for tactical use, then he wanted the rundown on…other…signs. More uh, tactical stuff. Boring stuff, he said.

Big oaf was going to badger Grim for every single variation of anything even remotely sexual he could possibly think of, Krem knew it. Slag. At least he was waiting until Ellie wasn’t around. The things Bull’d think to ask about sexually would probably scar her for life. As it was though, she was more than amused by Bull enthusiastically shouting profanities at Grim—Maker, if anyone else saw them it would look like Bull was cheerfully slandering the Human man like a total psycho.

“Motherf—”

“Qunari’s don’t have mothers!” Ellie and Krem called out in unison to cut short that particular turn of phrase.

“So? Might not be applicable in Par Vollen, but I’m free-range right now,” Bull reasoned
with a wink—how he pulled it off with just one eye Krem wasn’t sure, but Maker bless the giant lug, he did it, “even mothers need some fun every onc—”

Ellie slapped her hands over her ears, eyes scrunching closed, and then, “Lalalalalalala! Stop! You’re making me think Chantry Mother and that’s painting a much too vivid mental image of you and Mother Gisselle!”

Bull shrugged. “She hot?”

Ellie huffed in mock anger, straightening up she pointed at Bull and ordered, “Cremisius!”

“I’m on it,” Krem assured, just a quick dip of his hand into the snow behind Bull and he slapped a cold wet pile of snow against the back of the Qunari’s head, earning him a surprised yelp.

“Snow was a nice touch,” she commended him, giggling when he offered her a regal bow in return.

Bull stopped focusing on the swear words then, there was something he really wanted to know, more than all the dirty signs in the world, “If you tell me you haven’t secretly been a king or something this whole time, I’m going to lose my shit.” It would actually crush him, Krem was pretty sure.

Grim looked Bull in the eye, put his hands, fingers curved like claws, to the center of his chest and moved them up towards his shoulders in a V.

Ellie’s eyes were alight with excitement as she said, “Mayor.”

And that was good enough for Chief.

“YES!”

Dinner with the Chargers had been…Maker! It’d been so much fun! Everyone was so nice! And funny, Ellie’s belly only hurt now from laughing so much. It’d been the least tense meal she’d had in a week—no sickness, no drama, no stress just fun.

Cremisius looked beat by the time dinner wound down, and she’d felt badly—it was so incredibly kind of him to stay with her, and she was grateful, that potion had really knocked her out. She vaguely remembered…she hadn’t even really been sure of where she was, she heard Cassandra’s voice she thought, someone she trusted holding her and running their hand through her hair. It made her feel better about being so out of it that he’d stayed with her, watched over her. Still, she couldn’t believe he’d done that! And he insisted on seeing her back to her cabin, he had to make sure she was safely back and call for guards to be posted at her door, it was his job after all, though the Iron Bull could have done it. Or Ellie herself, really who was going to kill her between the gate and her cabin? It seemed like all of Haven was sound asleep as they walked arm in arm, and he checked to make sure everything was okay with her room, that she didn’t need anything, and that her cabin was warm enough before he took his leave.
“Don’t hesitate to send for me if you need anything, I’m just outside the gate.”

She popped up on her toes to kiss him on the cheek. “Go! Sleep! I’ll be fine,” she promised, “I’ll probably just sleep until tomorrow,” which was crazy, but she was still tired, and now that her belly was full, and she was warm and cozy in her cabin, she was definitely in for a nap to say the least.

His face looked a bit warm and he nodded a bow, “As you wish.”

After he did a last check around her cabin she saw him out, he waved to her just before disappearing past Haven’s gate.

She had thought she would fall right asleep once he left her and she’d gotten all, soft pajamas, warm blankets, curled up in her bed but she sort of just, thought, mind racing across the last few days.

Cremisius was just. Oh gosh! He was just so sweet, and thoughtful, and funny. Her heart sort of felt a little lighter in her chest somehow when she thought about what he’d said, about making her laugh because it meant she would smile. The thought made her smile too, so.

Ugh! What did that even mean?!

And Maker, he was so handsome, sometimes she got nervous! Like when he caught her when she sort of slipped out of the saddle almost fell on her face, his face had just been right there, and he caught her like it was nothing—and it didn’t scare her! Sometimes people being so much stronger than her terrified her. She loved the Iron Bull, but she still panicked just a little inside when he moved her in battle, or when she sparred with Cullen and Cassandra just, in the back of her mind it sometimes set off a red flag. But Cremisius catching her so easily, and when he carried her to her cabin, it just made her feel safe, and she knew if she ended up on the ground it would be because she was standing on her feet secure. When he caught her, he’d just been so close, and they’d been having so much fun and…well she’d just been struck by the urge to kiss him, right on the lips! That would have been so embarrassing!

She was grateful for how kind he was, and how seriously he took the job of watching over her but Maker! He’d heard all those things Varric had blabbed about her, things that were true, and then she’d cried all over him, and he’d listened to all her angst about it later. He’d been so nice and hadn’t made her feel badly, done everything to make her feel better but he had to think she was just! Batcrap! Absolutely crazy! There was no way he could look at everything going on in her life and think “huh, you know what, I’d be cool with that crazy girl with world problems knocking on her door and a weird glowing hand, having a—” well. A crush on him. It was just a dumb crush! They happened! She’d liked plenty of people before! Just…she liked Cremisius a lot and she absolutely loved that he was her friend, at least she hoped he was anyway. And she definitely didn’t want to mess that up!

Oh! Ugh! She pressed the heels of her hands into her eyes, just, frustrated! Because that reminded her how she’d really messed up with Varric! He’d been so mad with her! And! She didn’t want to be. She hadn’t liked being mad at Thom, and she hated being mad at Varric! He’d been so mean, and Cremisius’s explanation about him just being scared, that he wasn’t really mad at her, that’d…that’d helped, a lot, but she still felt like the Dwarf man was mad at her, she couldn’t help it! She hadn’t seen him since! But she hadn’t really seen anyone like usual except Adan and Bull and Cremisius, because she’d slept so much. Though she’d felt Solas meditating, he’d held her Marked hand and sent a few apologetic and soothing waves through the
bond, so she knew for certain he stopped by, Cassandra too.

She also got the vague impression Sera’d been by? She thought she’d heard her laughing but maybe she’d been mistaken, she’d Fade dreamed mostly, and sometimes that carried over random bits of things she’d heard, from her memories.

She wondered if Marehis was alright. She hoped everything was going well. She was still in Orlais handling Inquisition business, outside the Oasis now it sounded like. Night time, she hoped that meant her friend was safe and warm, in a tavern or inn or an ally’s home. She missed her! Agh! If she didn’t stop thinking about it right this instant she might be a big stupid baby about it, cry again. She understood having to work, and she was mildly horrified at the thought that maybe Marehis felt like this when Ellie went away! Sad and lonely and just aching all through her heart because she wanted her friend back! All of her friends! Marehis would know what to do about Varric! Creminius’s advice had sounded reasonable, wait it out, but how?! And what if there wasn’t time to wait, what if Varric really *really* hated her now?

She sighed and just, tried to relax. It would be hours and hours before sunrise and she didn’t have anything to do really. She was half tempted to see if Solas was awake, maybe he’d come meditate with her, but it was really late and—

She shot up in bed when the door to her cabin swung open and then she was smiling.

“Good evening, da’len, would you care to meditate? Perhaps a midnight snack is in order?”

“Solas!” she bounced a bit in place as the Elf man came inside armed with a tray, a kettle and cups and some sort of sweet-smelling bread. He sat down on her bed and she gasped when it looked like he’d dropped the tray but then her eyes went wide because it hung in the air just floating! “Oh gosh! What kind of spell is that?”

Solas smiled and took a hold of her Marked hand. “Perhaps I’ll teach you someday, lethallan.” He seemed more serious and he gave her hand a squeeze before saying, “I would ask how you are feeling, but I admit I have been paying much closer attention since you’ve wakened.” Oh, so he’d felt her feeling all frustrated and sad the past little while, and came to cheer her up, that was sweet! “I must apologize, truly, Ellie. I allowed myself to become distracted, I should have been of more assistance to you since our return to Haven.”

Ellie shook her head, “Solas! Everyone has problems, I know…” she bit her lip, not wanting to overstep but she said, “I know you’ve got um, friends and stuff, other places that you worry about and if you were like, seeing someone, you know, romantically and they broke up with you that sucks! Because you’re really nice! And smart and you’ve just got a wicked sense of humor, and if someone broke things off with you, I might not know them, but they must be just! Stupid!”

Solas sort of stared at her in surprise for a moment and then he was laughing, so much it was almost contagious, Ellie felt herself getting giggly and her magic was giddy from the amusement-mixed-relief? pouring in from the Elf Apostate.

“Ahh, da’len, dear one, I assure you I have not been thrown over,” he said as he calmed, “I admittedly believed that someone I am close to wished to end their relationship with me, but it was a misunderstanding. They are in a troublesome situation where they cannot communicate at this time. In my worry I attempted to make contact with them to no avail.”

“Oh, gosh, I’m sorry—I mean I’m glad everything’s okay relationship-wise, but I’m sorry you can’t reach them right now. Do they need help? Can we do anything?”
“No da’len, in this instance it is safer I not try to find them on this plane just now. Though, they are not a Spirit or a Mage,” Solas seemed embarrassed to admit, “my endeavor was rather futile to begin with.”

At first Ellie was a little shocked, that Solas would be embarrassed about being with someone who wasn’t magical but then she realized that wasn’t at all what he meant.

“Oh, it isn’t safe to reach out to them in person, so you like, tried to contact them through the Fade?” Solas nodded. Huh. Ellie guessed then yeah, it was little silly, but she shrugged, “If I was super worried about someone I loved I might try reaching out that way, even if it probably wouldn’t work—it’s like you’ve got to do something right? I hope everything works out. Do you… I mean would you like to pray about it or anything? Or I can?” Solas hadn’t ever been super open about his religious beliefs, though his practices with the Fade sort of seemed like a form of religion for him.

“I do not bow to the Dalish gods, da’len. But I do appreciate the spirit in which you’ve offered,” Solas assured her warmly. “I have faith in my friend, and I will hear from her soon enough.”

Her, huh? Awe! Solas has a girlfriend! Cute cute cute! She hoped she was okay and could contact Solas soon! Maybe she could come visit him in Haven? Had she visited before and Ellie just hadn’t seen her? She was only attached to Solas by the magical hip after all and he was the one in control of it—she couldn’t perceive of things on his end unless he allowed her to for communication.

Solas poured them…huh tea, with lots of warm milk in it. It didn’t much taste like tea—not the green stuff or black tea Ellie was used to, which she supposed is why Solas was alright drinking it. It was cinnamon, Solas said, and it was so good! Warm and kind of sweet, with some heat to it like a spice. It was like happiness in a cup! And the bread was warm and super super soft, tasted like apples and brown sugar—she definitely had to brush her teeth again!

Solas told her stories about some of the things he’d seen in the Fade, and they talked a bit about some of the magical theory he was trying to teach her during their Haven lessons. It wasn’t boring or anything, and she sort of thought all the sugar would have her wired, but she did eventually start to yawn. How in the world could she still be tired after sleeping so much! But Solas suggested they meditate and call it an evening. When they were done he actually, gosh! He tucked her in! And then he kissed her on the forehead and wished her sweet dreams! It was almost overwhelmingly sweet, made her heart feel sort of full in a way that was almost painful, and her eyes a little achy. No one’d done anything like that for her since she was really really little, just the barest sort of memory of life before she dreamed in the Fade.

When she woke up next, she heard logs shuffling in the fireplace, smelled breakfast, felt the bit of chill on her face, swept in by night time and the door opening and closing just moments before. Oh! Grounding, like the Iron Bull suggested! Hmm my name is Ellie, I’m in Haven in my cabin, in my bed and…she peeked open her eyes to see Cremisius working to get the fire going warmer. So, I’m safe.

She curled up a bit tighter under her covers before stretching and sitting up.

“Good morning, Cremisius,” she mumbled out in greeting. She was awake, she swears, just. Early. Not as early as usual though, sunlight filtered through the little spaces between the boards on her windows. Huh. Had Cassandra come at all? Maybe Ellie slept through her arrival?

“Good morning. Did you sleep well?” he asked, coming to sit on the edge of her bed. Ellie
nodded.

“Did you?” she asked.

“I did, dropped right off to sleep, not even Bull’s snoring kept me up,” he leaned in a bit and shared, “though Rocky, he’s the real roof raiser, we take turns rolling him on his side or no one’d ever get any rest.”

He handed off her morning potion and then they sat on the floor in front of the fireplace and ate breakfast together—Cremisius took a hold of her unmarked hand and bowed his head so she did too, and he said a nice little prayer of thanks over their food before they ate. He explained that Cassandra had come to visit when she was asleep the other day. She had an important meeting this morning, and she’d asked him to step in for her.

She couldn’t help it, really, she couldn’t. “So, now I get to have coffee with Krem?” she teased lightly, thank the Maker she was officially allowed the beverage again. The Tevinter man choked a bit on his drink. And then he really hammed it up, gripping his throat and throwing himself backward to play dead.

“Tell…Chief…he’s an ass…”

“You’re ridiculous!”

He peeked open an eye. “Hey, I’m dead here, have some respect!”

He popped right up after Ellie leaned over and kissed him on the cheek, told him to behave and eat his breakfast!

“What’s on the schedule today?”

“Whatever you want—only thing is lunch with Sister Leliana,” Cremisius said with a shrug. Oh wow, really? Leliana wanted to have lunch with her? Oh gosh, that’d be great!

“That’s all I have to do today?” she asked, sometimes in Haven she got like a weekend day off but…well gosh that’d been ages ago. Well. Months ago. Whatever.

“You slept most of your day off so, it doesn’t hurt to have one you can enjoy.”

“I did enjoy my day off,” Ellie insisted, “thanks again for last night.”

“You’re definitely welcome to hang with the Chargers anytime,” he replied. And then he started rattling off ideas for things to do—she could stay in, relax, they could talk, or she could read a book…he could grab one from his bunk if she was interested since she didn’t seem to have any on hand. Did she know how to knit? He could teach her. Sera had come ‘round when she’d been sleeping and wanted to see her. He’d seen her asleep when he left the Tavern, but he could send her a note that Ellie was awake and feeling better, see if the Elf girl would want to come hang out. Bull was running drills with the Chargers, but he’d probably be by later.

“If you give me a minute I can change, and we can return our dishes to Flissa’s,” Ellie said, “then we can figure out something to do.”

He looked sort of uncomfortable as he said, “Oh, that isn’t necessary, I can run them back while you change. Maybe um…” he scratched at the side of his head thinking, “uhh do you know Wicked Grace? I know loads of card games, I can get a deck from camp real quick—”
She could do cards, and that did sound fun, but, “Cremisius? Is there some reason you don’t want me to leave the cabin today?” Had something happened? Like a security thing? Or oh, maybe he was still tired after yesterday? Was he not feeling well?

He certainly seemed uncomfortable as he struggled for his words, “No! It’s not that I don’t want you to— I-,” he cleared his throat and then he pushed their trays aside toward the desk and he shifted so he was sitting directly in front of her, his back to the fireplace as he took hold of both of her hands. He didn’t look at her, just focused on their hands, there was a tension in his jaw, brow creasing as he very carefully explained his concern, worried it would be hard for her to hear.

Apparently, there was gossip about her fight with Varric. He was worried she might hear about it if they went out. Someone might be overheard gossiping or making fun about it, maybe something might get said to Ellie’s face and if the instance wasn’t avoidable, and he supposed it wasn’t. He may have been able to sway her to stay in today, only go out for her lunch meeting and then right back to her cabin, but she couldn’t stay in forever. He didn’t want her to be caught off guard. She asked what sort of things people’d been saying.

“It’s not everyone,” he swore to her, “just some idiots.”

“What’d they say?” she asked again more firmly.

He held her hands a bit more tightly, not painfully or anything, but it seemed like he was trying to focus on that, staying seated, holding her hands so he didn’t…oh gosh he was angry! It was like he was worried he might just jump up and go fight someone! He ground out the incident between Skinner and a few Inquisition Soldiers, because they’d been making fun of her for crying and calling her crazy, and Cullen stepping in and taking Skinner’s side—oh, that was a relief but still,

“She didn’t have to do that! Was she alright?” Skinner hadn’t seemed injured or anything when she saw her last night, but she didn’t exactly strike Ellie as the sort to advertise that she was hurting!

“She was fine, Ellie,” Cremisius insisted, “She wasn’t just going to stand by and let them say those things.”

Ellie shrugged. “They were mean I guess, but it wasn’t anything that would’ve really hurt my feelings or something. They didn’t exactly strike Ellie as the sort to advertise that she was hurting!”

“She was fine, Ellie,” Cremisius insisted, “She wasn’t just going to stand by and let them say those things.”

Ellie shrugged. “They were mean I guess, but it wasn’t anything that would’ve really hurt my feelings or something. They didn’t exactly catch me on my most impressive day.” She wasn’t going to get mad or sad over people observing the obvious, if she was just someone else in the Inquisition and saw the Herald getting told off like a toddler and crying about it to boot, she might not think they were suited for the job either. The Breach was frightening, it would only be scarier if the only thing that stood between you and it was some weak-willed brat.

“Those assholes,” Cremisius raged, “they’d probably piss themselves, run home crying if they ever had to deal with a Rift or face the Breach the way you do! They don’t know anything and if they did, if they’d seen what I have, they wouldn’t have said any of that garbage.” The words seemed to tumble past his lips rapid fire, “You’re brave, and strong, and smart, and compassionate and you’re handling something that feels impossible pretty incredibly.”

Well, she was pretty sure her face was permanently red now, Maker! “Gosh, that’s sweet of you to say—”

“It isn’t sweet, it’s the truth.”

Oh. Huh. It wasn’t that she thought he was lying but yeah, she supposed when she said it
was sweet of someone to say something, she thought they were sugarcoating things, trying to simply be kind more so than entirely honest with her.

She gave his hands a grateful little squeeze, “Thanks,” she said. “So, was that it?” oh, he looked even more uncomfortable somehow and she was almost afraid to ask, “it wasn’t was it?”

Nope. Apparently not! Gross! Gross gross gross!

“Oh that’s just groady! No offense to either of them but-! Thom’s like-! He’s so old some days I worry he might die of a heart attack! And Varric’s not a whole lot better! Why in the world would they even think that’d be a thing?! I’m only fifteen!”

Though yeah, she guessed Varric yelling about how very heartbroken she’d been over Thom, and her shouting at Varric that it wasn’t any of his business, that he needed to stop talking about whatever he thought he knew, could be construed as possibly being about an affair or something but yuck! She was half tempted to send something through the bond to Solas for him to come Mindblast her until she had another form of specific amnesia, forgetting all big, hairy, horrible mental images!

“You don’t look just fifteen,” Cremisius said, and his eyes went a little wide, red faced as he was quick to assure her, “Is what Bull told me they said! Sorry, I was quoting I swear—it was creepy and inappropriate and more than enough cause for a solid trouncing. If Skinner hadn’t done such a good job, I’d’ve laid them out, myself.”

It really seemed to be bugging him, and that was sweet, but it wasn’t like they’d threatened her or tried to hurt her or something, he didn’t need to take it so seriously. Did he think ‘bodyguard’ meant he had to protect her from words? She freed her unmarked hand and he looked at her confused as she held up an index finger in front of his face, and his eyes went crossed when she bopped him on the nose with it. “They’re not totally wrong, I’m almost an entire sixteen years old, I’m practically ancient,” she teased. It was certainly older than she ever really thought she’d get to be.

That had him snorting but then then he looked like he’d caught onto something interesting. “Your birthday’s coming up?”

He sounded excited about it? “Sort of. I up my age on the first of the year, so I’ll start saying I’m sixteen then.”

He seemed confused by that. “…up your age?”

Why did they always ask that? That’s twice now someone thought it was weird! She was pretty sure people kept track of their ages why was it weird that she did it?

So, she explained not knowing the exact day she was born, and that it was hard to keep track of things like the date when you didn’t really have a sort of structured thing in your life like a consistent job or school or something so First Day was just the easiest thing to use as a measure.

Cremisius nodded. “Well then,” he said, smiling as he asked, “what do you think you’ll do for your birthday this year?”

…what’ll she do? “What do you mean?” Ellie asked as she thought it over. “I guess there might be First day things happening…um…whatever Lady Josie puts on my schedule? Classes or meetings or whatever. I don’t know if I’ll be in Haven though, we’ll be heading back out into the field sometime soon and it’s hard to tell how long that’ll take, especially once we finally get into
negotiations with the Mages and Templars.”

He just sort of stared at her like he wasn’t sure about something, and then he smiled and nodded. “You’re um, okay about everything? Do you still want to go out?”

“Yeah,” she thought about it, “That stuff doesn’t bother me much, I don’t know those guys. If it were my friends who thought badly of me or something that’d be different.” She sort of worried they’d run into Varric. Like, worry-wished, she wanted to see him and work things out. Well. Maybe yell a bit and work things out, just not in the middle of a busy Tavern. She was definitely mad at him! Little bit more now that she lived in a world where someone thought she’d…slept…with…two really really old men. Just! Gross! The mental images physically burned her brain!

“Forget about all that then. We’ll go have fun today. You get ready.”

He left her to change. She wasn’t super sure what to wear. She kind of…she was struck with the thought she wanted Cremisius to think she looked pretty, say she looked beautiful again, but that was dumb! Blah! Um. She did want to look nice for lunch with Leliana though. Ellie was sort of worried the Spymaster didn’t like her very well. Her relationship with the advisors was different from her party members, she didn’t know them quite so well, but Cullen took time to teach her fighting stuff. And Lady Josie had helped with etiquette things and she usually made a point to see her outside of War Room meetings and lessons, she was just the sweetest! But gosh, Leliana just had to be super busy, all the time it was silly to expect her to want to spend spare time with Ellie, she didn’t have any reason to. But she wanted to get to know the woman—she was the one who’d given her Marehis! Oh, Maker, she could never be grateful enough to the Inquisition’s Spymaster for that!

Oh! Well Leliana’s armor was purple, and whenever she dressed for meetings and meals with people for the Inquisition she wore colors of their heraldry or whatever, and she’d worn brown to eat with the Chargers because Bull and Cremisius had brown in their armor, so did the other Chargers so she figured it was sort of their color. She picked one of the nicer outfits that was a sort of…lavender, Marehis called it, with silvery designs on it, it was pretty, Maker bless Madam Florna!

Huh. She might need to see her again sometime for adjustments. Madam Florna had made her clothing with folds in the back of the tunics and inside the sleeves, in the legs and hems of her leggings so that if her size changed stitching could be taken out and her clothing would fit better—she’d put on some weight since joining the Inquisition, no more dips in her ribcage or jutting hipbones; her face, other places a bit fuller now. Her armor had needed a little adjusting and Marehis had taken the stitches out of her clothing already, and everything fit great! But today these leggings felt a bit tight around her tummy. Not super uncomfortable but it took a little more umf to button up. It was a relief really, she’d been a bit worried she’d drop weight after being sick, she hadn’t exactly been packing in the calories for a while.

She put on her cloak and grabbed their breakfast trays and the second she opened the door Cremisius took them from her, and gosh! He said she looked ‘lovely’ and that was just sweet, and her magic sort of perked up, amused at how flustered the compliment left her. She took his arm and they made their way to Flissa’s. They had to walk by Varric’s tent and she sort of considered seeing if he was in but if he were he might still be sleeping—or maybe he wouldn’t’ve gone to bed yet? She wasn’t sure about his hours much anymore he kept such odd ones in Haven. Either way, she didn’t want to talk if he’d already be grumpy from being tired.

Flissa was on them the moment they entered the Tavern, waving them over and chatting
with Ellie, seeing how she was doing. Sera was sound asleep when they came in, but Ellie heard
crunching and a thump followed by, “Piss!” and when she turned, Sera was popping up off the floor,
rubbing at a sore spot on her bottom with one hand and raising the other overhead to wave at Ellie
like she was some great distance away instead of just the few feet between Sera’s cot and the bar.
“Hihihihihi!!”

Oof! Big hug! Sera zipped across the room and squeezed her super tight, and Cremisius
looked a bit alarmed because his arm was still linked with Ellie’s so now it was caught in Sera’s
vice-like body grip.

Sera wore her sleep clothes, for sleeping like Ellie suggested, but she’d never considered
the fact that the Elf claimed the Tavern as her quarters.

And this is how that played out.

“Tits out!” Sera warned the general population before whipping her night shirt off, reaching
under her cot for her pack, digging out her regular tunic and pulling it on. Apparently it was
common place for early morning Tavern goers, most people either looked away or honestly didn’t
pay attention, night shift people just wanted to eat and go to bed, day shift people were wishing
they could stay in bed, Sera’s bits were the least of everyone’s concern.

They sat at the table by the fire, Ellie and Cremisius drank more coffee while Sera ate
breakfast, big spoonful’s she talked around going a mile a minute, first asking Ellie all sorts of
questions, was she feeling better? Whoo! Was she mad at Varric? Good because Sera was too,
Dwarfy could eat it! Did Krem tell her Sera’d been by? How come she liked calling him his funny
name? Krem was way better!

Huh. She didn’t say as much but, she rather liked his name, she thought. It was handsome
and suited him. And he’d shown a level of preference that she calls him that. It didn’t seem like he
disliked ‘Krem’, but she figured it was sort of like how she was just fine with Cassandra and some
of the others calling her ‘Eleanor’, but if that was all anyone ever called her she’d get tired of the
nickname.

She broke out some cookies to share, she found she liked dipping the sweet thing in her
coffee, made them softer and a pleasant sort of bittersweet. Cremisius took one and she offered
some to Sera once she’d finished eating her breakfast.

“You made cookies, Inky?”

Ellie shook her head, “Nope! Seggrit makes them for me, they’re really good—help
yourself.”

“Thanks Inky but uh,” Sera said, “not real big on cookies.”

Huh. That was too bad, but to each their own she guessed. Sera’d liked their pranking
pudding well enough, she wasn’t sure where she’d got that, had she made it? Maybe Ellie could
find something like that…oh! Sera liked sharing her fruit snacks, like apples, and grapes weren’t
always a go-to cause they got squished easily, super messy but Sera’d liked them a lot—green kind
that were sourish.

The Elf girl was excited to tell her about how ‘Lady Priss Pants’ got Cullen to find some
man for Sera in the southern part of Ferelden, who could jar up bees* and use them as a weapon!
She’d heard about it from one of her Friends and thought the Inquisition could use it—she thought
it’d be great for pranking stupid prissy parties but apparently Cassandra thought perhaps they’d be
of good use for fights. That was so nice that Cassandra had taken the time to listen to Sera and even helped her, too! She wasn’t a hundred percent sure it sounded nice for the bees though.

They were just getting ready to leave, the three of them, when Lord Berand and some of his men came into the Tavern and she stopped dead in her tracks and so did he, his eyes going a little wide and all his men went quiet as he sort of stared at Ellie. Oh gosh! She was so embarrassed after his parents…gosh they proposed! Like! Marriage! They talked at her about ideal wedding dates and how she’d be ‘free’ to wrap up her Inquisition business but then they’d really have to get on with starting a family! She thought for certain Cassandra was about to have an aneurism when they asked how long Ellie’d ‘had her blood’ and if it was ‘regular’ or not yet. Cassandra and Lady Josie had no way of knowing about that really and at first Ellie’d said yeah, she was regular—she was just a person! Thankfully Cassandra realized Ellie didn’t understand the question, because at first her declaration had delighted the Lord and Lady. But they were talking about the whole bleeding ‘cycle’ thing Adan had mentioned in her first check up, and yeah she’d never done that before she didn’t think and that was the point they started being able to get talked down. Not ‘your son has to still be grieving his former fiancée’ not, ‘The Herald really is much too young for marriage’, not Ellie being an Apostate, or the politest way of saying she really didn’t have any interest in their son, no! It was the fact she wasn’t the best candidate for baby dispensing that got them to start to back off and even then—“perhaps we can revisit this in future” blah! Not happening! Maker, those people. Ellie hadn’t ever thought of marriage before, it wasn’t exactly on her radar and then, bam! Hello, thanks for finding our son’s dead fiancée would you like to be his next one?

“I’m sorry—!” she said at the same time as he said,

“My apologies—!” oh. That sort of felt better though, and they laughed, nervous.

“Lady Eleanor, truly. Please. I apologize for my parents’ behavior,” Lord Berand said, “I did not realize their intentions until it was too late to dissuade them.”

“It’s okay, really. You’re not mad or anything are you? I’m sorry I just uh, well I’m not really looking to marry anyone right now? And we don’t really know each other, and I promise I’d be absolutely pants at noble stuff!” She really really would be!

Lord Berand smiled, shaking his head. “My lady don’t worry about offending me. My parents acted of their own accord. I mean no offense to you, you’re lovely, and kind and,” he sort of looked her up and down then, “lovely.”

“You said that already, mate,” Cremisius observed drily. He’d said it to her earlier too, and she’d liked it better then. Cremisius had been speaking sincerely, not just trying to be polite and then…kind of skittish.

Sera snickered.

“Ahh, um. Yes,” the Lord cleared his throat nervously, “I just mean to say I had no part in their actions yesterday and I’m satisfied that the Inquisition was able to give them a refusal, with no offense against you. I hope you are not angry with me.”

“I’m not,” Ellie promised, “I wasn’t to begin with, and not with your parents either really. Yeah I’m not um, interested, but I understand marriage in noble circles is important. They probably just mistook the situation as opportunity to do what they thought was best for you.”

Lord Berand nodded and thanked her for understanding and then he motioned for his men to move Ellie and her friends pass. Whew. That was… That could have been much more awkward. She’d been so embarrassed listening to Lady Josie go on for literally hours trying to convince Lord
Berand’s parents they’d made a mistake, she’d been worried Lord Berand would be offended at the refusal.

Sera accused her of having a ‘secret boyfriend’ and Ellie explained. Oh. It felt better to get it off her chest just how much it’d bothered her, the whole callous affair. She thought she’d rather crawl in a hole and die than spend five seconds alone in the Lord and Lady’s company after they were so! Just! Unreasonable! Thankfully all of her guests had been able to come along on the tour of Haven and Maker, bless the elderly Marquess, she’d seen Ellie was uncomfortable with Berand’s parent’s attentions, they tried pulling Ellie into conversation with them during the tour and the Marquess from Orlais had immediately put herself between them and Ellie, letting her act as her escort on their tour and interrupting all attempts at conversation with questions about the Inquisition and Haven, even going so far as to ask if they’d ever considered dyeing the snow different colors for decoration, when she ran out of more reasonable sounding questions for Ellie. And then Ellie’d apologized, to Lady Velania’s family before they left—they’d only just lost their daughter! And then her fiancé’s family was being so…just cold, like they didn’t care their son’s betrothed had passed if they could get him a better prospect. She’d been so ashamed and hoped they weren’t upset after their visit, she was sorry Velania died, and she was glad she could be peacefully laid to rest. Thankfully her parents had been understanding, accepted Ellie’s condolences.

Cremisius had seemed rather tense during the whole interaction with Lord Berand and when Ellie asked if he was alright he insisted he’d only been concerned because he worried she had some sort of issue with the Lord, that he’d been about to start trouble for Ellie. Sera snorted and sort of cackled at that.

Ellie told them about the Druffalo herd and they wanted to see! She was super excited, she hadn’t really gotten much chance to go visit the herd at all—though Sera was under strict instructions not to terrorize them…or weaponize them, since she’d thought bees should be used as bombs!

They had to walk past the Soldiers practicing, Cremisius seemed to be on guard, studying the faces of the men on the field but he relaxed after a moment, didn’t seem to see anyone that he had issue with. Commander Cullen was walking along between rows of sparring soldiers, giving quiet critiques as he passed huh. He raised a hand to Ellie gave her a small smile when he saw them, and she came to a stop, releasing hold of her friends’ arms and the former Templar came to meet her once he realized she was approaching.

“Good to see you Eleanor,” Cullen greeted, “you’re looking well.”

Ellie smiled and nodded. “I just wanted to say thank you for sticking up for me, and Skinner too, with your men yesterday. I’m sorry for the trouble.” He didn’t look like he felt very well, sort of tired and stressed and pale.

He sighed, wrenching a hand at the back of his neck. “I apologize on their behalf, Eleanor. I assure you their behavior wasn’t tolerated and has been corrected.”

“Thanks, I really appreciate it.”

“Certainly,” he said, looking relieved, “did you need me for anything else?”

He looked relieved but not like he felt much better—gosh he was pallid, and his features strained. So Ellie nodded, and beckoned him with an index finger to come closer, and he crouched a bit to be eyelevel with her, head tilting so she could speak in his ear if she had something she wanted to say just between them, but she just took the glove off her unmarked hand and rested it
against his forehead—she thought he might have a fever or something but yikes! His skin felt cold and clammy, like…was there something that was the opposite of a fever? Was that bad?

“Eleanor?”

“Are you feeling alright? I know Cassandra’s busy this morning but um…well maybe Bull or,” she looked to the Tevinter man standing alongside Sera waiting and keeping watch, he was second in command, so he probably helped with training and things for the Chargers right? She felt a bit badly for offering without asking but gosh, the Commander really didn’t look well.

“Cremisius? Could take over for a bit. Have you been to see Adan? I could walk you. Oh! Or Mister Stitches would probably be glad to treat you, you’ve met him right? He’s the healer for the Chargers.”

He straightened himself upright again. “It’s kind of you to offer but I’m quite alright, my lady,” he said. Well. That was a lie!

But not one she’d hold against him or anything. “I understand privacy and stuff, I don’t need to know your business, but if you’re sick or hurt or something, you should get help.”

“I have. I appreciate your concern, but you’re right, my problem is personal,” he said, “Seeker Cassandra was made aware when she recruited me for the Inquisition, and I’ve consulted with Adan. You needn’t worry.”

Oh. Maybe that’s what they’d been talking about the other day? She hoped he’d be alright, that it wasn’t too serious whatever it was. “Good. I mean not good that something’s wrong, and I hope you feel better, but I’m glad you’ve got people to help you. Um. Is there anything I can do? You wouldn’t have to say why just, if you need time off or want to tone down my lessons or uh…” she tried to think. His forehead had felt frigid, so maybe his head was cold? “Oh! Would you like to borrow my hat? It’s really nice and warm and it isn’t girly looking or anything and it should fit just fine cause I have so much hair—not to say you’ve got a big head or anything just, you know, regular grown up sized head—and I keep clean, so you wouldn’t have to worry about lice or anything.” She pulled her hood back, so he could see for himself.

A smile tugged at the Commander’s lips and won, the man grinned, and a few laughs escaped him as he put a gauntleted hand on Ellie’s shoulder, though he did close his mouth and clear his throat to stop his chortling, his voice full of warm amusement when he said, “That is very generous of you, Ellie, but unnecessary. Thank you,” he said, squeezing her shoulder before letting go. “I’m well enough, and should return to my men unless you’ve need of me?”

Ellie shook her head, “Nope! Just, you know, take care of yourself okay?”

“I’ll certainly try,” he assured her warmly.

When she rejoined her friends, linking arms again, she asked Cremisius if his offer was still on the table about teaching her to knit. He seemed uncertain as to what had prompted the question, but he said he’d be glad to show her—maybe this afternoon? It would take practice especially if it was something she’d never done before, but he found it relaxing. Sera said knitting was booooring but she was somehow the easiest person to entertain she’d ever met, who got bored with anything at the drop of a hat, so Ellie wasn’t sure she was the best authority on the matter.

They picked Elf Root along their way around the lake and had handfuls of the stuff for the babies! Gosh! They weren’t really babies anymore, they were all taller than even Sera, now! Not as big as their parents but still. Sera shrieked a bit when she first saw them,
“I thought you said they was ruddy babies!”

“Well they were the last time I saw them, I told you it’s been forever,” Ellie couldn’t help but laugh at her friend.

They still loved to snack on Elf Root and Sera groused a bit when she got a lick on the cheek for her kindness, but they also snuggled into the three of them in greeting once their peaceful intentions were established. They were so warm! And this time when Ellie got chased it was because the big open field was just much too tempting, and she swatted Sera on the arm and shouted, “Tag! You’re it!” and shot off running away from the Elf girl as fast as she possibly could, dashing across the field, Sera racing after her!

For all of maybe a minute but then Sera seemed to think just the two of them was boring or something. Ellie stopped running to watch as Sera took off in the opposite direction.

“Tag! You’re it, you’re it, Kremmy-boy!” Sera cackled as she peeled off running back toward Ellie. Cremisius looked stunned for a moment, and then looked around as if to make sure everything was safe around them before joining in.

And then he chased after Sera who was giggling up a storm and ran crashing into Ellie, grabbing her by the wrist to pull her along, get her running again.

Gosh, it was fun! Ellie thought it’d been fun when she and Sera played on the Coast but having two people to chase after, the confusion of ‘oh wait Cremisius has just been it but AHH nope it’s Sera now!’, the three of them laughing and shouting.

Sera’d run to be right next to Ellie when Cremisius’s turn to tag was up again, the Tevinter man chasing after them and then, gosh, Ellie’s foot caught on the back of Sera’s ankle just as Cremisius’s hand was in reach of her shoulder, but Ellie went toppling forward with a little squeak as she tried to catch herself and a soft thump as she landed on her back in the snow, something solid against her chest, and the back of her head.

Oh! Someone!

Cremisius had fallen too, or maybe it was more like he’d gone with her, his gauntleted hand cradling the back of her head to shield it from the ground, he’d caught himself with his other hand slapped against the snow by her hair, and his knees, straddling Ellie’s right thigh, his face was flushed as he caught his breath, chuckling a bit.

Her magic did a sort of skip in her blood and suddenly the cold seeping through her cloak from the snow was very refreshing because she felt warm all over.

“All good?” she barely heard him ask, more saw him asking really reading his lips not staring at them, nope!

“All good!” she assured him, her voice sounded a bit high to her. Yup she was pretty sure she had a fever or something, Maker she was warm, and she didn’t think she liked it! Nope!

Magic just sort of laughed at her. It could just mind its own business thanks!

Sera was laughing at her too it sounded like, though Ellie couldn’t really be sure, Sera laughed just at random. Though she seemed sort of pleased with herself about something.

Cremisius sat back and stood up before offering her a hand up, pulling her right up onto her feet.
“So?” Sera asked, giggily, “who tagged who?”

“Hmm I think we have to tag our lunch appointment soon,” Cremisius said checking his pocket watch.

“Iin-kyyyyy?” Sera questioned, sing songy.

Oh she’d been sort of spaced lunch appointment…lunch appointment…Oh! Leliana!

Ellie reached out to tap Sera on the elbow with one hand while with the other she sort of rapped the back of her hand against Cremisius’s chest plate, “Race you to the gate!”

She almost fell, whirling about to run off toward Haven’s gate, but she kept upright and bolted, Maker they set off after her in a flash!

Cullen looked mildly alarmed when Ellie came speeding around the path but Cremisius and Sera were right on her heels, so he just sort of kept his hand on the hilt of his sword, watching to see if anything came after them but they’d been pretty jovial.

As soon as they made their way back around to Haven’s gate the Iron Bull and Thom were just about to head into Haven with Skinner, Stitches, and Grim.

“Incoming!” Ellie called out breathlessly, as she barreled past them to slap a hand on the gate before turning around to see Sera and Cremisius catch up to her, all of them stopping to catch their breath. “Sorry…cut you off…race…fast…won!” Oh gosh, she kind of wanted to lay down in the snow again, her muscles were all burning, and she had to cough to clear up her chest, Haven’s cold dry air always sort of scraped in her lungs, so they were kind of on fire right now, nothing serious though and Maker it was worth it, that’d been amazing fun!

“Way to go boss,” Bull greeted, both groups coming to a stop just inside the gate. “See, what I tell you?” he said, knocking the back of his hand against Thom’s chest to get his attention, “Up, racing, lookin’ sharp purples a good color on you. Boss bounced back in style.”

She wouldn’t call red faced and gasping for air ‘style’ but huh, yeah purple was pretty.

“Ellie,” Thom said, seeming to fumble for a moment, stepping forward, stepping back, it looked like he was debating on hugging her, she was glad he didn’t though. They hadn’t been super hug-y when he’d been Blackwall, but certainly not since then, and she wasn’t a hundred percent sure she’d be feeling quite that close to the former mercenary anytime soon. “Maker it’s good to see you.”

“You too,” she said once she was able to speak normally, “Oh!” she did reach for his hand then because she remembered his cut, the man looked confused but didn’t resist her taking his hand and examining the broken skin on his thumb, now just a little scarring divot along the pad of his finger, “It looks like your hand healed okay, it doesn’t hurt anymore, or anything does it?”

Thom huffed, almost indignant sounding, “It was hardly worth the bandage,” he assured her, cheeks flushing. “But I do appreciate the concern.”

Oh, it was probably embarrassing having her fussing over it, but it couldn’t’ve gotten infected or something! She let go of his hand and moved on to say, “Sorry about the other day, I didn’t mean to ditch you,” she promised.

“You too,” she said once she was able to speak normally, “Oh!” she did reach for his hand then because she remembered his cut, the man looked confused but didn’t resist her taking his hand and examining the broken skin on his thumb, now just a little scarring divot along the pad of his finger, “It looks like your hand healed okay, it doesn’t hurt anymore, or anything does it?”

Thom huffed, almost indignant sounding, “It was hardly worth the bandage,” he assured her, cheeks flushing. “But I do appreciate the concern.”

“Think nothing of it, I’m glad you’re alright,” Thom cleared his throat nervously, “Bull invited me along to lunch, would you care to join us?”
“Oh gosh, I’d love to really, but I actually have plans already, with Sister Leliana.”

“Another time then,” Thom said lightly shrugging it off. “Sera?”

The Elf girl stuck out her tongue at him and blew raspberry—at first Ellie thought that was a refusal but Thom just crossed his eyes and returned the gesture and Sera cackled before letting go of Ellie’s arm to join the other group.

Oh! Ellie’d almost forgotten! “Skinner?”

The woman stared at Ellie unblinking her expression a sort of pleasantish neutral though as she said, “Yes.”

There was still a scratch on her cheek, Ellie’d seen it last night at dinner but now she was decently sure where it came from, so she popped up on her toes to kiss the mark, “Thanks, for sticking up for me.”

Skinner’s eyes were wide struck and her cheeks, and the tips of her ears were pink before she blinked a few times. She reached out in a jerky, halt ridden motion to pat Ellie on the head _pat...pat-pat_ before she snatched her hand back. “It was my pleasure.”

Leliana was weary to her very core. She and Cassandra had spent hours interrogating Butler.

And then, they spent more hours, interrogating the _other_.

This was all such a mess.

Farrier. It had been *Farrier* who’d been compromised. He’d disclosed the identity of the Herald’s bodyguard to Venatori agents. He’d been heading to the Oasis to escort Marehis back to Haven, with the intentions of leading her headlong into a trap—Scout Harding had been under orders to hold her position in the Oasis, keep the area under Inquisition Influence until the Herald and her party could investigate the temple, Madam de Fer had left to attend to matters of court. It was the perfect opportunity to take Marehis out—she would have been alone, in the hands of a traitor she believed to be her ally, and with Madam de Fer out of the way, there was no chance of a powerful mage coming to her defense, too no risk of earning the wrath of Marquis Bastien for the injury or death of his beloved mistress.

Butler had intercepted Farrier’s message to the Venatori, the confirmation that he would bring Marehis to them, when and where. She would have been captured, interrogated, tortured until either she satisfied their inquiries about Eleanor, which was highly unlikely the woman would bite off her own tongue before she spoke a word that would endanger the girl, or they drew the conclusion they wouldn’t get anything out of her. Either way, it would end in her death. Butler had no time to get word out to Leliana, Farrier was already on his way to get Marehis, so the man tracked him down himself and killed him before he could reach the Oasis. He’d tried he said, to contact Leliana but she’d not received it. Butler’s missive had been intercepted as well.

This led to the other. Leliana’s ranks had been infiltrated by a Venatori spy—a man that
had claimed to be from Ferelden, spoke with the accent, had documentation to back up his claims, birth certificates, a lease on a home that dated back years, letters with official seals that gave him the glowing resume that got him into the Inquisition and the Nightingales in the first place. All along he’d been a handler for Farrier on his mission to work against the Herald of Andraste. The handler had been keeping watch on Farrier’s progress, making certain he wasn’t going to double cross Venatori efforts to capture the Herald’s bodyguard. They’d witnessed Farrier’s death and used their position in the Inquisition to dispose of Butler’s letter to Leliana and report instead that Butler had murdered Farrier in cold blood, that he was the traitor.

She’d had not one but two enemies in her ranks, and she’d nearly lost an ally in Butler—she would have killed him outright had Cassandra not interfered on Eleanor’s behalf. She’d been too hard, and somehow Cassandra of all people compelled her to soften* her stance, for the girl.

Eleanor. Leliana handled a great deal of Butler’s questioning and now Cassandra was with their Venatori friend since he was a Mage. Leliana could get creative enough on her own but the Seeker’s Gift was much more effective and Leliana could scarcely stomach another moment in the Chantry dungeons. Josie had seen fit to schedule a lunch date with Eleanor for this afternoon, just the girl and Leliana. It was irksome, Leliana was hardly in the mood to attempt entertaining the young Herald but she had told Josephine to do so. It was not Josie’s fault she could not be made aware of the work Leliana and Cassandra had been seeing to—when Leliana informed her Cassandra would be handling the rest of their private business, Josie’d been delighted because Cremisius’s report had come in for the evening—Eleanor was awake, and all was well, and after all the trouble among her companions, wouldn’t it be nice for her to come have lunch with Leliana, a private stress-free affair?

If she did not love Josie with such ferocity it could drive the Spymaster to her very wits end, she would kill the Antivan woman for making such a suggestion and looking so very earnest about it. She was so excited Leliana had agreed to try and get to know the Herald more, that the Orlesian woman could not bring herself to disappoint her friend. Ugh.

She was exhausted, and Maker she was so enraged. How? How had this all happened? How had she not realized Rainier was a fraud? How could she have ever thought Butler could cross her? How had Farrier made her blind to his own betrayal? How in the world had her ranks been infiltrated by Venatori? The ‘Hows’ of her failures were ever rising, more and more as the days progressed. Questions of her abilities, or their lack. Her lack.

How had she not been there, at Justinia’s side? How had she not defended the woman who meant the most to her in all the world?

How had Eleanor been where she had not, risen to Justinia’s defense in Leliana’s stead? A girl who had not so much as killed another living person in all her life, had probably faced nothing more serious than a street fight before, she’d drawn her weapon and faced down whatever monstrous thing stole Justinia from them all, destroyed the Temple of Sacred Ashes, left none survive save the Herald.

Perhaps that was why the Maker saved her. For all she did not spend time with the girl, Cassandra was quick to assume Leliana knew nothing at all of Eleanor. She did know, some at least. Enough, she thought. Through the detailed reports delivered to her nightly—from Marehis, Cassandra, Cremisius. She did not merely coast her eyes across the pages to be certain they were accounted for, to make a few blasé updates to her security protocols. She read them, every word. They gave Leliana a view into the girl’s sense of justice, her spirit, her unshakable faith in the Maker, and perhaps these were the reasons she was captured in the Maker’s hand, held safe until danger passed, released from the heavens to save them all. But how had He looked upon the souls
of those in attendance at the Conclave, weighed them for purity and strength, and not chosen Justinia to live?

But Cassandra had not been entirely misled in her accusations of Leliana. She’d feared Leliana disliked Eleanor, perhaps hated the girl. In truth, Leliana had, it had been nothing but struggle for her to be amicable with the girl in the days that followed her waking after the Breach. Leliana had hated her, absolutely, it was the form her grief had taken to despise the girl for things that were not her fault—hatred the moment she first laid eyes on her, because she must have destroyed the Conclave and killed Justinia, and then hatred still because she hadn’t done either of those things and now they had no clue as to who was responsible. That worked its way down to stinging resentment yes, but that had now dissolved into what Leliana felt was careful detachment. Well. Perhaps not detachment entirely. She did like the girl, to some extent at least.

When Leliana emerged from the Chantry into the blinding light of Haven the noon sun was casting violent rays against the snow so brightly it demanded all the eye’s attention, left no room for the sickly glow of the breach to contaminate the air. Even as the ghastly thing hang overhead, the sun shone brighter than it, and it was only at night, when Leliana walked the paths to the very edge of Haven estate, where no firelight was found, that the green of the Breach was unrelenting.

Being blinded was certainly not what she most desired in the moment, it made the pound of her headache all the more intense, snap and strain against her tolerance. She wanted to hurt something, someone, eat a good meal, and go to sleep. As it was she was uncertain she could even speak a peaceable word in another living person’s direction. Could she somehow manage entertaining her guests in silence? This was exactly what she’d hoped to avoid, she was most certain if she elected to speak it’d be harsh and bitingly to the point and while it would certainly offer a bit of stress relief she hardly wanted the outlet to be Eleanor.

The girl stood in wait before Leliana’s station out front of the Chantry, chatting enthusiastically with her bodyguard, hands gesturing excitedly as she recounted something that had she and her audience enraptured—not too much though, it was clear the young man cared very much about what Eleanor had to say to him, was listening intently enjoying the delight of her storytelling, but he was ever vigilant, keeping track of the few soldiers and Chantry Sisters roaming the area, Leliana knew the instant she stepped foot out the Chantry doors there were eyes on her, and she realized it had been the Lieutenant, keeping watch of just who might be coming up from behind the Herald before he assessed she was safe and returned his gaze to Eleanor.

“-cut the fuse too short before he lit it and BOOM!” she slapped her hands together, jumping in place for emphasis, “The firework blasts off in one direction and Sam’s sent flying back the other—his face would be non-existent if I hadn’t cast Barrier at like the last second—his are robes on fire, and he’s laughing like a total maniac! Needless to say, the entire thing got a lot of attention from the town guards. So Mabel grabs a bottle of whisky smashes it against a tree and shouts, ‘Scatter!’ which personally I think is just a waste of some perfectly good whisky, but it did the trick. The twelve of us all take off in different directions, and I’m like so so close to getting away but I look back to see if Sam’s making it okay and BAM!” punched the palm of her Marked hand, “right into a tree! Woke up in an infirmary thinking I’m totally toast because of my staff, but the guards thought I just needed it to navigate—they thought I was blind!”

“Well they did see you slam face first into a tree,” the Lieutenant chuckled.

“It was dark, and I couldn’t see where I was going!”

“…could be said of many blind people I’m pretty sure.”

Leliana felt a tug at the corners of her lips. This was all…interesting information. The girl
was so very polite and well behaved a great majority of the time Leliana had seen her. It was almost amusing how very clearly Leliana could picture Eleanor among a group of friends set on mischief, causing sound-barrier breaking havoc, and getting apprehended and delivered from suspicion in such a clumsy fashion.

“Am I interrupting?” Leliana asked as she approached, almost surprised at how easily the words came from her. Something about Eleanor’s enthusiasm must have been catching. The girl whirled around, and Leliana wasn’t sure if she was startled or excited, her eyes were wide and alive.

“Oh! Of course not!” Eleanor insisted cheerfully. Ahh, excited. “Good morning Sister Leliana! Or is it afternoon now, because lunch, right?” Giving Eleanor the day off seemed to worsen her inability to keep track of time, though the girl wasn’t dressed much like she had the day to herself. Her face was clean—freshly so like she’d cleaned up before their meeting—hair as wild as she’d ever seen it, but she’d obviously tried to get it under control, it was clean—and she was wearing one of the nicer outfits designed for meetings with nobility, purple suited her complexion. Huh. She’d obviously put a good deal effort to prepare for their meeting.

It was almost annoying the way she could practically hear Cassandra’s claim that the girl admired her in her mind now, but it would seem on some level she had made some good impression upon Eleanor. It made the Spymaster think she should at least attempt to be hospitable. Made her feel more hospitable.

“It is. Good afternoon. Lunch should be here shortly.” Josie put out the order just as Leliana was getting ready to meet the Herald. Leliana passed the young people and entered her tent, moving ahead of them to pile together the documents laying out on her desk, stacking them neatly before slipping them into a leather journal and smoothly sliding it into a drawer. “Please, be seated.”

There were a few chairs and the Lieutenant pulled one out for Eleanor before taking the seat next to her, he sat with his back to the back corner of the tent though, instead of facing the table, so he could see the entire opening of the tent, a tactical position Leliana herself would have taken but he’d beaten her to it she supposed. He was diligent enough, so she sat at the end of the table, her back to the entrance as she faced Eleanor.

“Thank you, for inviting me to lunch!” the girl thought to say sincerely, she had her gloved hands clasped together on the table before her tightly, and Leliana was amused by the impression that the girl would be bouncing in excitement but was endeavoring to contain herself.

“I’m pleased you could join me,” Leliana replied politely. She hadn’t been looking forward to their meeting but as it happened…it wasn’t entirely horrible.

Well, while Eleanor had been exuberant in her greeting her thanks, still so in her demeanor, now she seemed uncertain as to what to say. Leliana wasn’t sure what she could offer the girl, outside of work chatter and there was nothing to discuss, nothing of use just between the two of them.

“How’s your day going?” Eleanor settled for asking, in earnest, in the way Josie does—genuinely hoping her friend’s day is going well, willing to listen if Leliana is inclined to share. She rarely could, most of her dealings were matters of secrecy but the Lady Montilyet always offered up the opportunity in the rare event Leliana could share her troubles or triumphs.

“Well enough,” she chose to answer lightly, there was nothing she could share with Eleanor, certainly. “Yours? I do hope you’re enjoying your day off?”
The girl relaxed a bit at Leliana’s offered interest and nodded. “Uh-huh! We went to see the baby Druffalos—they’ve gotten so big!” she was delighted to report. And then, “Have you ever played tag?”

What a question, it almost made Leliana want to laugh. As it was, she did smile ever-so-slightly. “Not recently but I do recall enjoying the game in my youth.”

“Sera taught me how to play when we were on the coast! So we played again today, it was really fun! And Cremisius says he’s going to teach me how to knit later,” she seemed very excited at the prospect.

Knitting? “Really?”

“Yup! Do you think you can teach me how to make hats?” she asked the Tevinter man.

He seemed to consider it a moment, “I don’t see why not, but it might be a difficult first project.”

That didn’t seem to dissuade her. “It’s okay if it’s hard! I like learning new things, as long as you don’t get bored teaching me or something.”

Somehow Leliana couldn’t imagine the young man classifying time spent with Eleanor as boring. Josie was practically giddy over the rumor among the Herald’s companions that the pair had a crush on one another. Leliana had been concerned that the young man’s infatuation would make him incompatible to the job he was given but he’d done admirably well thus far.

“I wish you well in the endeavor,” Leliana said, “I never much cared for the practice myself but,” perhaps her words were coming to her too easily now. A sort of pang in her chest when the words came to her, she almost didn’t say it, let the sentence die but she couldn’t bring herself to abandon something that held a piece of her mentor, even just her name, “Justinia enjoyed knitting in her down time, for as long as I knew her. She would make things to donate to Chantry clothing drives, hats and scarves and the like.”

Her eyes lit up at that. “Oh, wow, really?” Eleanor asked in tones of gratitude and it caused Leliana to wonder if the girl had ever needed to use such means to clothe herself. Something told her she undoubtedly had. It made her wonder if perhaps, by some strange coincidence something made by Justinia’s hands had ever clothed the girl, her donations were distributed to poorer parts of the world in and outside of Orlais. If Josie had her way, the girl would never rely on the kindness of strangers in such a way, ever again Leliana thought. When Eleanor was first brought into the Inquisition’s care, and Josie joined their movement, she’d taken all but one look at the girl she’d gone to see while she recovered after their assault on the Breach, and the dusk of Eleanor’s skin had reminded Josephine of her own complexion, “She cannot be older than Yvette, Antoine?” she’d rasped out to Leliana. She immediately reached out to see to it she would have proper clothing. She took pride in being able to assemble the girl’s schedule each day, that in some way Josephine was able to make sure the girl had a proper education and all of her needs met, and Leliana kept her appraised to the reports on Eleanor’s wellbeing on the days the girl’s schedule kept her from seeing Josephine herself.

“That was sweet of her!”

For a moment Leliana thought the girl was referencing Josephine, before her mind brought her sluggishly back around to the fact they’d been speaking of Justinia. “She was generous and kind,” Leliana agreed.
Eleanor bit her lip then, a little nervous to touch on the subject but she said, “I um…I’m really sorry I can’t remember meeting her but everything I’ve heard, Divine Justinia was an incredible person. I’m…I’m sorry. That I couldn’t um, save her.”

It hadn’t been her job to do so. “You are not to blame for Justinia’s passing,” the words hurt to say—in the way it hurts for a Healer to set a bone or clean a wound, because they were true and solidified the idea for the Spymaster. Leliana had longed to blame someone within her grasp for Justinia’s death, if Eleanor could be found at fault, her vengeance would have been easily wrought. “We will find the one responsible, I promise you that,” she cleared her throat, before quietly commending, “You endeavored, it seemed from the vision we saw at the Breach, to come to Justinia’s aid. For that I’m grateful.” Grateful, and ashamed. It should have been her. It couldn’t’ve been, she’d been assisting Cassandra in Haven, dealing with Varric, working with her people to confirm his stories. They should have been with the Divine, not hunting Hawke.

“Still, I mean. Just,” the girl was staring into lap she admitted, “If anyone could have walked away from the Conclave, if there was a choice, I’d want the Divine to have survived.” The Lieutenant looked alarmed by her words.

Oh. Leliana realized it then. She wouldn’t have without hearing the words come from Eleanor’s mouth, but… Leliana had wished the very thing. Wished that it had been Justinia who survived but what she had not realized was, it was an ache she felt in her soul, something that tormented her when she lay awake unable to find sleep. But she hadn’t realized, to wish Justinia had survived instead—instead—was to wish that Eleanor herself had died.

If Justinia had been given the choice—if she had known there was a young mage girl, her entire life ahead of her, compassionate and persevering, full of faith in the Maker Most-Holy loved so dearly, who would have died at the Conclave, been given the choice to either save herself or save that girl, Justinia would not have hesitated to sacrifice herself for Eleanor. And it would anguish Justinia to think that Eleanor would wish likewise, that the girl would wish she could have taken the Divines place, that her life was secured only to live on to consider her survival a bit of misfortune.

Justinia would not have wanted that and neither did Leliana.

“I grieve for Justinia. A part of me always will, but I am not…” another truth, a painful balm to confess, “I am not sorry that you survived, Eleanor.”

She looked up at her then, surprised, like she truly believed Leliana had to resent her. Leliana had, unfathomably, so much so if she focused on it she could revive the feeling of hatred she once held on to like her life depended on it, but it was not so anymore.

Eleanor smiled softly and said, “Thanks. I…I know this isn’t an ideal situation, but I’m really really grateful that I’ve gotten to meet all the people I have through the Inquisition. I’m glad I got to meet you,” she admitted bashfully.

“I’m glad of it as well,” she found herself saying, almost as if she’d been compelled. She suppose she had been…the words were true enough.

Flissa came then, rolling a cart laden with steaming plates of food she placed before them. “Thanks, Flissa!” Eleanor spoke ardently to the woman.

“Certainly, my lady,” Flissa returned, dipping a curtsey to Eleanor before gasping as she looked between the cart and their empty cups, “Oh! I’d lose my head if it weren’t attached! Drinks!
Water will be along shortly!” the barmaid promised, scurrying away with the cart.

“Shall we?” Leliana prompted.

Eleanor nodded held out her hands to Leliana and the Lieutenant, and they silently prayed over their meals before digging in.

Water did come along shortly. A man in plainclothes bearing a pitcher from Flissa’s approached. He bowed his head respectfully as he poured water into their cups to the tune of Eleanor thanking him, she’d been parched. However, the Lieutenant took a cup in one hand and put his other on Eleanor’s thigh—Leliana wouldn’t have seen it if the movement hadn’t caught her eye because her first instinct was indignation, that that was certainly **bold** of the young man. But his hand wasn’t really touching anything it shouldn’t be, his grip on her thigh flexed three times, and that was the action that gave the girl pause, like a signal. She’d been moving to take a drink of water but stopped then, setting her cup down and looking to her bodyguard.

His eyes were on the serving man as he finished pouring water into Leliana’s cup. “Longue vie à l’empereur,” the Lieutenant said delivering the Ciriane* words in light, casual tones, accent spot on, and he looked almost relaxed as he raised his mug in toast. **Long live the emperor.** Emperor…not Empress. A call to supporters of Duke Gaspard. Leliana tensed in her seat, hands slipping to reach for her daggers.

“Peut-il régner,” **May he reign,** the servant responded in reflex, realizing a second too late his mistake.

Lieutenant Aclassi threw his drink in the man’s face before rushing him, putting himself between Eleanor and the supposed servant who was working to draw a blade but the Tevinter man dealt him a solid blow to the face which cast him to the ground and the Lieutenant was on him, flipping the man onto his stomach and grappling him into a chokehold until he laid unconscious.

“Cremisius?” Eleanor asked, rising from her chair.

“I got him Ellie, it’s alright,” the Lieutenant confirmed as he released his hold on the man letting his face fall into the dirt.

“Are you alright?” was what she had been concerned of.

The Tevinter man rose to his feet dusting his armor off a bit, “All good here. Can’t say the same for this poor sod, where’d you want him, Sister Leliana?”

The Spymaster had risen from her seat and was rifling through a drawer in her desk, pulling out a testing kit. A translucent tincture that gained pigment when interacting with poisons. She doused the edge of one of their napkins in the stuff before dipping it into Eleanor’s abandoned drink and it turned a very telling shade of black.

“It would seem the Duke’s people favor Hemlock these days,” she reported darkly, staring at the unconscious man before looking to the Lieutenant, “have the Chantry guards escort him to a cell for questioning.”

Lieutenant Aclassi nodded, waving along the guards posted outside the Chantry, helping them get the man restrained before going and throwing the Chantry doors open for them to carry the man away. He met Leliana’s eye before looking to Eleanor and then back again seeking confirmation Leliana would keep watch of her for a moment, and the young man jogged down the path toward the Tavern, to make sure nothing had happened to Flissa Leliana realized then.
“Gosh, Hemlock’s bad right?” Eleanor asked.

“It is indeed, very bad,” Leliana confirmed. Judging from how quickly, darkly the tincture interacted with Eleanor’s drink, at this concentration, the Herald would have suffered convulsions mere seconds after her body began digesting it, been dead before her body hit the ground.

“That was…that was something to do with my dealings with the Empress? Duke Gaspard did this?”

“I intend to find out,” was as much as Leliana was willing to share with the girl.

The Lieutenant rejoined them then, “Flissa’s safe,” he reported, “she swears she thought she set a pitcher of water out to put on the cart—when she didn’t find it forgotten at the bar she went to get fresh from the pump, she was just on her way back when I checked on her.”

Eleanor looked mildly horrified like she hadn’t even considered Flissa may have been interfered with to get to her. It sent her hugging the Lieutenant fiercely, arms tight around his midsection. He hugged her back, around her shoulders, a hand resting on the crown of her head.

“Thank you, thank you, thank you!” she breathed.

“How did you realize something was amiss?” Leliana asked, satisfied with the outcome though she certainly wished to know how he’d spotted the assassin.

Eleanor leaned back a bit to look up at him, and the Lieutenant shrugged, explaining, “Didn’t recognize him from anywhere around Haven. He certainly hadn’t been working this morning, and shifts don’t change for at least another hour. Security protocol says Flissa’s under orders not to entrust Ellie’s food and drink be delivered by anyone other than her, Marehis or Ellie’s party members now anyway so. Couple decent red flags, but thought I’d double check before taking him down.”

Ahh yes, the Ciriane had been very clever, given her a direction to move in once she got to questioning—the man was possibly Orlesian, definitely a follower of Duke Gaspard, if he wasn’t working directly for the man himself he was working for an ally, it could have taken hours to get that information in interrogation. “Very good,” Leliana complimented. “Eleanor, I apologize but it would seem our luncheon must be cut short, I’ve work to see to.” She had to make certain this was a contained threat and not something that expanded across their ranks like the Farrier situation, and that more such assassins were not waiting in the wings for their chance at the Herald. “But,” she said, resting a hand on the girl’s shoulder, prompting her to look at her. “I would very much like to continue this at a later date.”

Eleanor seemed elated at the offer, she pulled away from Cremisius, placed her hand over Leliana’s on her shoulder for a moment, “Really? That’d be great! Just, you know, maybe no poison next time,” she jested lightly before turning away to look at their abandoned lunch. “Oh! The food is still alright isn’t it? You should at least take it with you? Or I can put in an order for you at Flissa’s?”

“For safety’s sake, since it’s now been surrounded by contaminants it would be best to dispose of our meals entirely,” Leliana said, “I’ll send someone to get rid of everything,” and then, it was true she should eat properly before questioning her guest, and Eleanor seemed eager to be of assistance. So, “If you dine in the Tavern, yes, I’d appreciate your placing an order for me.”
Lunch in the Tavern with everyone was good, Bull thought, he’d wanted to get a feel for how his guys, Skinner in particular, would mix with Rainier’s presence. Krem’d had an idea Bull was thinking of going for, but he was still considering. Wasn’t important right now. They’d been finishing their meals, damn that Flissa could cook, when Bull’d heard a bit of ruckus, almost gone to check in but it sounded like Krem had it well in hand, back to business. Too bad. Been uh…nice, seeing the guy cut loose a bit that morning, act more his age. Playing around with friends, carefree with the girl he liked. Guy’d been sort of catapulted into adulthood, having to hold everything down on his own. Bull didn’t know a whole lot about his life before, didn’t ask, did his best to make sure Krem knew he was all ears if he ever needed, without pressing. Got the impression his father was gone, since he took responsibility for the welfare of his mother…got the impression if he ever met the woman he’d be glad there’s no such thing as mothers under the Qun. Between that and military life, some days, especially when they first met Krem came off like a man of seventy not seventeen*. Knowing Krem was what had surprised Bull so much about Ellie being not a whole lot younger than him. Humans had so much variety it was interesting to see Krem and the Boss-girl side by side—his head was parallel to Bull’s shoulder, Ellie had to be an entire foot or more shorter than that but was a little younger than Krem’d been when they first met, made Bull wonder if she’d ever shoot up like that. First month or two rolling with the Chargers, Krem’d shot up like a damn weed, had to be reoutfitted more than once, but he took good care of his shit, was responsible so Bull didn’t have any problem helping him out, fudged the numbers a bit in his bookkeeping when the boy’s growth spurt broke their usual upkeep budget, quietly dipped into his own pay to settle the difference, the guy had mad pride, didn’t ask for help, but he had enough on his plate and it wasn’t like Bull wouldn’t do the same for any of the others.

They were all just sitting around talking when Krem escorted Boss into the Tavern. Didn’t smell like either of them had been hurt, bit of adrenaline still rolled off Krem, gaze carefully sweeping the entirety of the Tavern like part of him expected an assassin to come leaping out of the chimney or something, but only other person in the Tavern aside from their motley crew was Flissa—second Skinner came through the door everyone else scattered, made themselves scarce. She’d instilled quite a bit of fear in the general population after losing her shit on a total of six soldiers at one time. Woman knew how to clear a room.

Boss looked restless as shit. Fists clenched tight at her sides. Anxious, possibly pissed.

“Hey boss, what’s up?” Bull called out from where he was seated between Rainier and Stitches, Grim and Sera sat on the ends of the table, Skinner sitting in the seat next to Grim, across the table from Thom, sort of watching the Human man in a way that seemed to be making him increasingly uncomfortable. Pretty good behavior all things considered.

Ellie didn’t say anything in response to him at first, lips pressed into a solid line. “I’ll put in our orders, Spymaster’s too, you go ahead and take a seat okay?” Krem spoke in her ear, he put his arm around her shoulders, gave her arm a quick squeeze when she nodded. Shit, they hadn’t even gotten the chance to eat huh. She joined their table, plopping down next to Skinner.

Flissa seemed to already be one step ahead of Krem, as he approached the bar she was picking up a tray to rush to the Chantry for Leliana and she promised she’d be right back to get them some food as well.

“Red have to cancel?” Bull confirmed.

Kid huffed. Angry little sound and then, “Yep! Some jerk tried to assassin me!”
Figured as much but still, “…tried to…‘assassin’ you?” he wasn’t certain he should be concerned, or if he was more so amused, figured he should maybe make light to make her feel better, seeing him keep his cool might help her not get caught up in everyone else’s impending panic—cue;

“What?!” Sera screeched, slamming her hands on the table top as she leapt to her feet, leaning forward on the palms of her hands as she looked Ellie over.

“You were attacked?” Rainier rasped out, alarmed, likewise trying to see if he could perceive of any injury.

“Mhmm,” Ellie confirmed with a nod, “Cremisius stopped him though, kicked his butt—You kicked his butt real good, Cremisius!” she commended as Krem took a seat next to her, resting his arm along the back of her chair.

Real good huh? He supposed he had, damn good, made Bull damn proud just hearing the encounter, Krem’d been quick. Shit like that, you had to work fast, good move on his part going for surprise—sounded like a poisoning attempt but people usually had more than one contingency plan, asshole could’ve slit Ellie’s throat if it’d been given away too soon that he’d caught on. “It was my pleasure,” Krem assured her, though it looked like he wished he could have waled on the guy. Security protocols dictated threats were supposed to be neutralized with as minimal force as possible, so they could be brought in for questioning. Made sense, wasn’t super satisfying though. Bull felt that.

“Who?” Skinner asked, fists clenched, she scooted back in her seat like she was ready to jump up and go fight whoever Boss named. Good ol’ Skinner.

“Neither of you are hurt, I hope,” Stitches asked, looking between the two of them as if he were decently sure they’d’ve covered that ground first thing, but he had to check to make sure. Krem splayed his hand, pressed his thumb to his chest, the sign Grim taught them for ‘fine’. Fucking sign language was boss.

“Guy tried to poison Ellie,” Krem started to explain but that sent Boss gasping. She looked like she’d just realized something and then, “Tried to poison us! He could have killed you and Leliana too! Oh!” she growled in frustration, shouting, “That’s it! The next person who thinks they can mess with my lunch dates or hurt my friends is getting my foot right up their butts! Just!” she punched a fist into the air to demonstrate, “Wham! Like that but feet! Can I punch that guy? I wanna punch him!” she appealed to Krem, like he had a say in the matter.

Guy struggled not to smile at her wrathful enthusiasm, and there was a little levity in his voice as he said, “I’d be happy to oblige but he’s in Leliana’s care now.”

She didn’t look entirely appeased with that. “I hope she punches him. In the face!” she specified, “If he has such a problem with me he should come fight me himself! I’ll fight him! I’ll fight him twice!” she sounded dead-set on the idea.

“Official duels don’t really work like that, Boss,” Bull saw fit to informed her, and then his eye went a bit wide because she…shit Boss could glare, and she was currently doing so right at him. Damn. Pretty good.

Angry huff again and then she crossed her arms on the table, burying her glare there and then there was a muffled, growl “Ugh!” and “Sera!”
“Wan’ me to go shoot him? Or break you into his cell?” Sera rattled off guesses and then she gave a little whooping sound and jumped up from leaning against the table, “Inky needs a swear word?” she asked, excited.

“Big one!”

“Fuck!” Sera shouted gleefully on Ellie’s behalf.

Ellie’s shoulders heaved with a sigh of relief and then, quiet, “Thanks.”

Let her sit like that a minute, see if she’d vented enough before checking, “Still mad, boss?” Bull asked.

That had her sitting up again to look at him, “Yeah I’m still mad! I’m p- p-” pissed it seemed she wanted to say but she stumbled over the word and settled on, “particularly furious! If Gaspard or his friends wanted to come after me because they don’t like who I choose to play nice with, fine yeah, I get that, it’s sort of what I signed up for. Lots of people have lots of reasons for doing that so I don’t take it too personally,” she banged a fist on the table, shouting, the words falling thick from her lips, “But they shouldn’t’ve done something that endangered everyone else too! It wasn’t Cremisius or Leliana that miffed off half the Orlesian nobility, it was me, if they have a problem with it, they’re welcome to pop off at me! Not my friends!”

Ahh. Bull reached out a hand and laid it on her arms, palming her crossed wrists, his thumb brushed back and forth along the back of her forearm an action meant to soothe. “Where are we at right now?”

Boss seemed confused, she almost looked like she might yell at him, but she only offered up a rough, snippy, “The tavern?”

Kind of fun to hear her sounding like a pissy teen but that wasn’t her usual style. “Yup. You feel the chair under you? The table, my hand?” he listed for her, and she nodded. “Who’re you with?”

A bit more calmly, a sort of realization dawning in her features, she swallowed and said, “My friends.”

“And are we all safe?” Bull asked her, reminded her.

She nodded again and visibly relaxed in her seat, seeming subdued. “Yeah,” she admitted, her voice sounded tight and Krem settled a hand on her back to rest between her shoulder blades, wanting to comfort, not sure if she was mad or sad or okay now. “We’re all safe,” Ellie confirmed with a little sigh.

“Oh Inky!” Sera cooed, coming around and Krem had to pull his hand away from Boss’s back before it got wedged between her and Sera’s business as the Elf girl hugged Ellie from behind, arms around her neck, nuzzling her cheek against the top of the Human girl’s head, snuggling her as she asked, “Getting almost assassined got you all brain-wheezy huh?”

Yup. Pretty much. Had enough experience to know sometimes panic attacks weren’t always panic presenting. Sometimes shit came out in different ways. Krem put a hand on Ellie’s arm, one two three, some kind of signal and she nodded, though she seemed a little uncertain about it.

“Did it?” Ellie asked, looking to Bull for clarification. “I mean that didn’t really feel like um. Usual.”
“Things like that can manifest as anger,” Bull explained lightly, “You’re right to be mad, it’s some messed up stuff. Blowing off steam, getting it off your chest wasn’t getting you through it though, you got stuck dwelling on past danger—the threat to those around you that has been prevented.” He shrugged. “Can’t dwell on that stuff too long.”

“Thanks, the Iron Bull,” Ellie said sounding like she had herself more in hand. “I feel better now,” and shit if there was a bit of humor in her smile when she said, “Though if we don’t eat soon I’m probably going to flip my stuff again.”

Grim silently scooted his plate over to the Boss-girl, offering up his left-over potatoes.

Ellie seemed to be feeling better, they’d eaten, chatted, joked around and now she was hugging Krem’s arm tightly as they walked back to her cabin—he was glad she was so agreeable his suggestion of heading back in for the day. Morning’d been plenty of fun, he hadn’t played around like that in ages, but he was nervous having Ellie out in the open after an attempt on her life, he was hoping Leliana would be able to update her security protocols soon, have a full report on just what to expect. It’d been a pretty drastic attempt, genuine. It could be a fucked-up warning of sorts, or it could be the first of many. All the ‘ifs’ made him glad Ellie was eager to get back to her cabin—she was excited, he was going to teach her how to knit. Maker help him he was going to try. He did well enough he thought, helping Bull run drills with the Chargers, but that was about as close to ‘teacher’ as he got and even then it was more like an assistant.

Though…there was something he’d sort of had on his mind, he’d thought about it on and off since meeting her, gone back and forth about outright asking but she’d brought up that friend of hers—Sam, apostate fellow who nearly blew himself up with fireworks was the same friend who had to charm a necklace to tell him when it was time to stretch when binding.

“So…” he’d asked carefully, as they walked arm in arm, down the path ‘round the Tavern, “coming up with someone like Sam…that’s how you knew, when we met?”

“Hmm…yes and no,” she said thinking it over before explaining squeezing his arm in a bit of a hug, “Magic and I communicate all the time, we observe the world together, it gets information from me and the way I see things, and I get information from it. First time I met Sam, he wasn’t out yet, might not have even really known or understood himself—he was wearing his school dress when I first saw him, so I got the wrong idea, but my magic said ‘boy’ and magic is always right. Now, when I saw you, we both saw ‘man’,” she said, explaining quietly, discrete, “my magic added ‘like Sam’—not like a judgement or anything just an observation,” she assured him. “I wouldn’t’ve said anything, never ever unless you wanted to disclose to me. I’m sorry I didn’t give you the opportunity to do so. I was just scared you might be, you know binding and worse—that you might not be doing so safely, with like bandaging or something, on top of being sick, that can get so dangerous. I hope I didn’t overstep or hurt y—”

“Ellie, hush. You were great. I wasn’t offended and honestly I’m glad to not have it hanging over my head,” Krem said, patting her arm. “There’s always a bit of worry, you know? People not knowing and what their reaction might be if they were to find out,” it felt stupid, self-indulgent, or maybe just vulnerable but he still found himself asking, “so you…you saw me as a man?”
“You *are* a man no matter how anyone sees you,” Ellie told him firmly as they reached her cabin door, like she knew it was important he know that. And then, “But yeah, of course I did…” she seemed shy to say, even as she shrugged, “You’re very handsome, Cremisius.”

Well that…um…yeah. Liked her calling him handsome even more than when she’d said as much about his name. “Well uh, thanks. Er…you um, let’s get you in, I’ll post guards and be back with my knitting supplies in a jiff.”

…In a jiff. Maker help him, girl said he was handsome and now he’s using words like jiff. Smooth.

Did a quick look-around her room to make sure everything was to rights and guards arrived shortly to take up post—he planned to keep them around for the rest of the day just in case, switch them out with fresh guards before he left her for the evening—then he dashed off to his bunk, grabbed his knitting supplies. Huh. When he was heading back, Bull, Chargers, were coming back to camp with plans to play Wicked Grace, and Rainier’d been invited along. Good sign, Krem thumped a fist to Bull’s shoulder as he passed in thanks, right good of him to really put an effort in considering Krem’s idea. When he returned to the cabin, Ellie’d taken the opportunity to change into the sort of softer, cozier tunic and breeches she used for sleeping.

“You fancy a nap?” he asked her humorously, though it wouldn’t be unthinkable she’d be beat, they’d had a sort of wild day. Lesson could be put off for a bit if she needed to rest.

She shook her head, “Nah, fancier clothes are beautiful, but I’m sort of done with going out today unless we have to, you know?”

“You’ve nothing left to do today, I can always send out an order for dinner later.”

Ellie gave a happy little whoop and then she set about making a bit of a nest of sorts on her bed—learning and lazing she called it. She got her pillows set up along the wall and she settled in back against a pillow, blankets draped across her legs and she patted the empty space next to her, he could relax too, she said, he was keeping the guards around after all.

True. He’d have to remove his gauntlets for knitting anyway and he decided it was safe enough to take off his chest plate, wearing a cotton tunic underneath. He wasn’t too worried about another attack today with backup on hand and everyone on high alert. And a benefit of his binder was that it was made of leather—it’d stopped blades from cutting into him before when he was caught out of armor. Something Bull’d seen to having made for him, when he joined up. Stitches was absolutely horrified that Krem’d been using bandages for binding before then, proper binder made a *world* of difference.

He set his armor on Ellie’s desk, stoked the fire to get it going warm again before joining her. Ellie shared her blankets with him, laying them across their legs, and in return, he offered her the knitting needles she’d need for making a hat, the sort bound together by a wire.

She wanted to make a hat, for the Commander, it turned out, he’d wondered why she’d been so keen on taking him up on the offer after talking with the man. He worked outside most of the day and it was so super cold, and it didn’t seem like he had a hat, she said. And she liked the idea, being able to make things that could help people stay warm.

Ellie watched carefully as Krem showed her how to cast on the yarn, using a different set of needles so she’d be able to try doing it herself with her own. It was ‘a little tricky’—her words—but she got it, and then he helped her get her first row of connected stitches, giving her directions, though he found it easier use his hands to correct her fingers as she wove grey yarn between them.
and onto the needle. She dropped a few stitches, and he almost wish she’d drop more, it gave him a
stupid sort of pride, how amazed she was over him being able to help her fix it, and it earned him
another kiss on the cheek at one point. She caught on well enough to be left to her own devices
though and soon he was back to working on his own project, pleased when she said the warm
evergreen yarn he was using was ‘very pretty’. He certainly hoped so, Bull’d just about busted a
lung laughing his ass off at him when Krem’d asked him if he knew what Ellie’s favorite color
was. Ass. Owed him everything, would die for that stupid Qunari in a heartbeat, but he was still an
ass.

They worked in pleasant silence because it took a lot of concentration, at least on Ellie’s
part. Krem could probably do this in his sleep by now, the click, clatter and shuffle of knitting
needles a smooth rhythm in his hands that Ellie seemed impressed by. It was still almost distracting
to watch her work, she was getting the hang of it and seemed to be having fun, hyper-focused on
each stitch she made, lip catching between her teeth when she thought she was close to messing up.
There was this excited little wiggle-dance she did when she finished a row of stitches and then
she’d turn and show him her project, leveling him a blinding smile when he’d look it over to make
sure she’d gotten it right.

She stopped her knitting for just a second, before turning to him and asking, “What got you
interested in knitting in the first place? How’d you learn?” sounding truly interested, so that gave
him pause when his first instinct was to shrug and sidestep.

“Well,” he said, keeping his eyes trained on his own project as he spoke, “my father was a
tailor. So, when I was littler I took a great interest in everything to do with his trade, sewing and the
like. My mother used that to get me to sit down and knit with her by saying it was similar to what
father did, I could make a great many things if I learned how to knit and it would help me to
occupy my time,” he said the words ruefully. “For later once I was married and spending my days
minding children.”

Ellie looked insulted on his behalf, sort of blustered momentarily, “She didn’t mean…I
mean…”

“Mother never really understood what was going on with me,” he explained. She couldn’t
at first, and then wouldn’t. “Not the ideal situation. But, I got knitting out of it, found I actually
enjoyed the activity despite the spirit the craft was taught to me with,” he shrugged. “Turns out I
enough time to pass between…” the thought sort of struck him then, “oh Maker. I’m basically
married to Bull and minding the Chargers.” He snorted. Mother’d almost be proud.

“Technically,” Ellie said, “you only watch after the Chargers when the Iron Bull isn’t
around so…if we’re talking traditional roles…mother minds the children, father steps in when
she’s away…”

His hands stilled, and he looked to her. Oh sweet Maker above, “You don’t mean—”

“You’re the Charger’s dad,” she informed him sagely, “The Iron Bull’s the mom.”

“Bull’s the mom! Ha!” he pounded his fist against the cabin wall and called out, “You hear
that you great grey bastard! You’re the mom!”

Ellie’d been laughing but then she gasped in surprise, whispering, “He can’t really hear us
from in here, can he?”

“Nah,” he waved the idea off, “If he was right outside maybe.”
She nodded and then she seemed a bit thoughtful before saying, “Um…I didn’t mean to bring up something uncomfortable for you if…if I ever ask something you’d rather not answer you don’t have to.”

“I know. I wouldn’t’ve said anything unless I felt up to sharing. You uh, I dunno. I’m pretty comfortable talking to you,” he admitted, even his ears felt a little warm as he said it. “Same thing goes for you though, I mean I would like to uh, get to know you, but if past stuff bothers you, I ask something I shouldn’t, just you know. Tell me to shut it.”

So they talked. For hours. Their projects got abandoned, Ellie said she wasn’t quite sure she could listen very well to him while knitting, so she laid her half-a-hat down and he packed his project away too, opting to instead take a hold of her unmarked hand. It was nice, soothing and she didn’t seem put off, she was already sitting right up against him like she had when they’d talked the other night. Bit different, having his armor off, he could feel her warmth, through his shirt. Sort of relaxing really, made it easier to talk somehow.

“How’d you and the Iron Bull meet?” was her first question.

He explained, he’d been in the military in Tevinter. Men and women had different roles they played, and he’d signed on as a man. Bit young, he’d only been fifteen, but it wasn’t like his gender was recognized by the government, getting in involved bribing the healer who did his physical anyway, the guy was already checking off the M box for him, bumping his age up half a year to sixteen wasn’t a big deal on top of it. But the next year’s physical came up, duty called his bribed healer away from where Krem’d been stationed, and a different healer performed his exam. Sixteen was true enough then but the Healer wouldn’t accept a buyoff to keep him from outing Krem as someone who didn’t quite meet the requirements to be in their ranks to his superiors—he’d have been enslaved or imprisoned for being unable to pay the hefty fine that came with falsifying military documents—he settled for punching his lights out and running for it.

“I’d gotten good at punching,” he said, assuring her since it seemed to be a favorite of hers, “punched him right in the face.”

“Good!” she affirmed, raising her Marked hand and giving him a high-five.

He talked about how he’d been heading for Hasmal, was close to the Tevinter-Nevarran border when a Tevinter tribune found him, wanted to make an example of him. Ellie’s hand squeezed his, thumb running across the back of his hand in a soothing motion, worry creased her brow, but he assured her, it all worked out. “I’m here aren’t I?”

She nodded and rested her head on his shoulder sort of snuggling into his side, he shifted a bit, taking her unmarked hand in his other hand as he wrapped his arm around her shoulders, and told her all about the fight of his life, and how he’d been pretty sure he was done-for, when a great honking Qunari came busting in, kicking ass, taking names, and ultimately a flail. Tevinter weapon, coming right for Krem, would’ve taken him out, Bull’d caught it and the weapon had come away with his eye.

“Crazy bastard didn’t even know me,” he shook his head. “just, busted in, saw an opportunity to kick Vint ass, saved my life, offered me a job. Guess getting my ass handed to me made an impression somehow.”

Ellie’s head rocked against his shoulder like she was shaking it, ‘no’. “You kick butt, Cremisius Aclassi. Big time. Jerk healer butt, assassin butt, Venatori butt—that hammer thing you used on the Coast was huge!”
So he might have been using his maul to be impressive. Huh. Nice to know it’d done so.

“My turn,” Krem said, “You know about my job, what about yours? What did you do, before all this?”

That got him a bit of a snort. “Eh. I could get by pretty well doing odd jobs once I got big enough people would hire me.”

“Big enough?” he asks curiously, had she some former grandiose reputation before ‘Herald of Andraste’?

“Old enough,” she elaborated, and explained about how she’d been so young when she started Fade Dreaming—shit, in Tevinter she’d probably have been fought over by Laetan families left right and center—in the Free Marches they just kicked her out, sent her away and at every turn, her mage status meant she had to keep moving, she glossed over it when he asked what happened when he got taken in by someone and they found out she was a mage, something in the ambiguity told him all he needed to know. She’d said when they met it’d always just been her. She meant always, and suddenly her being so distraught, upset with herself over her fight with Varric made more sense. The weird insecurity she had that she’d be cast aside at the drop of a hat wasn’t strange—it was precedence. She had nothing but experience after experience that told her she was disposable, that Varric could very easily cast their friendship aside, that he would leave to be rid of her.

“Before the rebellion there was always something I could do. Boring jobs for the most part, but the not-boring jobs for Apostates were usually gang-oriented or run, and I just…it’s too easy to get caught up in that, really hurt people, so I steered clear,” Ellie said, rattling off her resume, “Kitchen hand, waiting tables, sweeping up in shops, things like hauling ore or helping bring in harvest. Had a nice little job in a vineyard once maybe twoish years ago? Harvesting grapes, helping make wine, didn’t pay much but the couple running the place provided lunch and let workers have a crack at the new wine—three-day-old stuff that’s so sweet you just chug it like fruit juice until it knocks you on your butt.”

“What about after the rebellion?” he asked. Conclave didn’t happen for a good while there.

Ellie shrugged. “Got harder to avoid people finding out I was an Apostle—even everyone was on such high alert for us and it was harder to find people chill with the idea of hiring on someone like me. Too much of a liability. People had always been afraid of mages but after one basically blew up Kirkwall, the rest of us were pretty uh…”

“Screwed,” Krem offered, it seemed like one of the words she avoided.

“Yup. So, there wasn’t much work after the rebellion. Wouldn’t join a gang, couldn’t really at that point even if I’d entertained the idea. Mercenary jobs were more above board—I wasn’t much use for fighting then, but I know a good bit about healing and Barrier’s the first spell I learned to cast so I’m pretty good at it—and offers were almost steady to come by but I got burned enough times to know it wasn’t worth it. Even legit companies, hiring on Apostates under the table gives them the upper hand, someone like me, new with no clout or backing rarely got hired, and definitely didn’t get paid up front, not even half. Most of the time I wound up not getting paid in the end since it wasn’t like an Apostle could take their grievances up with the guards or a council or something.”

Shit. He’d never considered being a mage a position of weakness—in Tevinter it meant you had power and influence, here it made you vulnerable. Some assholes had her risk her neck for their mission and then cheated her out of her cut? He was half-tempted to press her for names, see
if Bull knew these bastards.

“Bull’d never do something like that. Dalish gets paid same as the rest of us. ” Oh. Dalish—yeah, he wasn’t planning on making quite so much fun about her constant need to insist she was just an archer for the Chargers anymore. It really wasn’t like in Tevinter where mage status was all a person could ever hope for—Dalish’d been sent away from her Clan, had to move and keep moving like Ellie had, hiding her Apostate status. It wasn’t strange to blatantly deny her magic, it was a vital part of her survival, didn’t matter that the Chargers all knew, or that the people they worked for usually saw. If she got out of the habit of hiding and needed to later…well it was just best to stay in the habit he supposed.

“The Iron Bull’s definitely the best company leader I’ve ever met,” Ellie said.

“So, you just…what? No one would hire you?”

“Jobs got lean yeah. I wasn’t doing too hot by the time I ended up at the Conclave…little better though. Traveling with Trevelyan, he set me up with proper gear and made sure I ate.”

Wasn’t…doing too hot. Maker had she just been starving to death or something?

“Trevelyan?” he asked instead, not really wanting or needing an answer to that.

“Mage, from Ostwick Circle. He wanted to give Apostates a voice at the Conclave and I got picked to go with him. He was my friend.”

Oh. That’s how she ended up at the Conclave. “I’m sorry,” he said. Something’d bothered him since their lunch with the Spymaster. More than the assassination attempt, even. When she’d been apologizing to Leliana for the Divine’s death, she’d sounded sorry for having lived and that just, it made Krem feel almost panicked, that she might think her surviving was wrong or undeserved. “I know it’s horrible that all those people were lost at the Conclave, but that doesn’t make your survival regrettable or a mistake or something sad. They’re separate.”

“Separate?” she asked, confused.

“It seems like the ideas are clumped together—the devastation that was the Conclave with the fact that you survived it. But that’s wrong, it isn’t ‘sad so much was lost at the Conclave and you survived’. It’s sad so much was lost at the Conclave, period, end of sentence. You survived—and that’s definitely a good thing. You living, it’s…I’m glad you’re alive. You’re grateful you’ve gotten to meet all the friends you have now through the Inquisition? I’m glad I got to meet you.”

She didn’t say anything at first just sort of curled up against him more, her head tucked up under his chin and she squeezed his hand. And then very softly, enough to reassure him she understood, that he’d helped, “Thanks.”

Then, after a beat, “My turn!” she declared it, “You’ve asked like a bajillion questions—” she must have felt him smiling at her exaggeration against her hair, or maybe the huff of amusement in his chest because she defended, “don’t get smart with me Aclassi, I wasn’t actually keeping count, I just know it was way more than one.”

“That’s not terribly fair of me is it?” he asked, technically another question, the bit of mischief in his voice that got him a short indignant sigh.

“No, it isn’t fair at all, wise guy. No more questions for you! Oh. Or, from you is what I mean I guess, huh,” she waved her hands as if to dismiss her words, ‘forget all that’. And then, more serious, gently to make sure he knew she wouldn’t press for something he wasn’t willing to
divulge. “Is it okay to ask why you joined the military, and like so young? You said you’d had an interest in your father’s work but being a tailor and being a soldier are two pretty different career paths.”

Krem shook his head. “I mean when I was little it was just about wanting to know about my father, wanting to spend time with him—he spent his days working so I took an interest in it. Not that I necessarily grew up wanting to become a soldier either anyway that just sort of happened.”

He thought it over. It was complicated and for a moment he was almost overwhelmed with the realization he’d never gotten a chance to ever tell his side of things. His father had been gone when all was said and done, and his mother certainly hadn’t wanted to hear it. Bull’d never needed much more than ‘asshole healer didn’t like what he didn’t find in my pants, I had to run from the authorities, you point me in the right direction and I’ll hit stuff for you’. The Qunari man hadn’t ever pressed him about his life before, not because he didn’t care, Krem was pretty sure he could have a full-blown breakdown scream and cry and pour his heart out and the man would listen, give him some sort of mind-blowing sage wisdom about how to move forward, and then he’d crack a joke or beat him over the head with something, never hold the interaction against him or think less of him.

And there was that business she had with Lord Berand. He hadn’t been jealous when he realized there’d been some sort of talk of marriage between the two, not really. He’d been sick with worry Ellie might end up in a similar situation he’d once faced, escaped—a life where Ellie was trapped and hating herself, hating everyone around her because she was staring in the face of a lifetime commitment to someone she didn’t love, who was planning to use her life, her body to fulfill the roles other people required of her like ‘wife’ and ‘mother’. Those were great things if they were roles derived from choice, when they were forced upon you that…that was an entirely different story.

“The short of it is: I was in desperate need of a decent paying job. But uh, it’s a pretty long story. Not the most pleasant but if you’re willing to listen I’m willing to share.”

Ellie withdrew her hand from his and for a moment he thought she was pulling away, and she did a little but only, so she could give him more attention, she even tucked the curls around her face back behind her ears like that would help her hear better and situated herself a bit more in her seat settling in more comfortably against the pillow at her back before she took hold of his hand again. Ready to listen until he’d said all he wanted to say.

So he started with the basics. His family was Sopporati—barely free non-mages of little note, but his great grandfather on Mother’s side was a Laetan—a mage—and Father’s lineage descended from an allied family that fell from Laetan status in the Blessed Age or some such nonsense—point was there was magic on both sides of the line. So, their families put his parents together, betrothed from birth, in the hopes they might spawn a magical child, re-up the family status a notch. They tried for years to get pregnant with no such luck, put themselves in debt to get some help in having a shot at making a child, got one chance and ended up with Krem. Healthy, great set of lungs he screamed his arrival into the world with, but not one magical bone in his body. However, Father’s work caught the attention of the son of a merchant Laetan*, a Mage named Cornelius.

“Am I going to like Cornelius?” Ellie asked him, skeptically.

Perhaps she’d be sympathetic for him, Krem was sometimes. Definitely didn’t like the guy though. He explained how his father had made uniforms for the workers in Cornelius’s father’s shops. Cornelius liked the way Father did business and his designs, so he hired him to make his
wedding robes. Cornelius used Father as his tailor for everything from then on, and they even became friends. After a while father noticed changes in him—he was a relatively pleasant man, always cheerful—but he’d lost a great deal of weight, father worried about him. Krem had been very little, playing in his father’s workshop, and Cornelius came by for his scheduled appointment, still cheery as ever. He’d always bring Krem sweets, little candies—‘sweets for my sweet girl’.

“Youp, don’t like him,” Ellie agreed blowing raspberry and giving the man a thumbs-down. Summed up his feelings pretty nicely. Thumbs down indeed.

“I was little, and when I was young I had no idea why I felt the way I did. Things that should have been at least acceptable bothering me for seemingly no reason—it’s sort of why my father made up our three-squeeze system, a way of knowing what to avoid and maybe figure out why something made me upset or angry in the first place. ‘Sweet girl’ always rubbed me the wrong way but I wasn’t exactly sure why at the time and ultimately didn’t fuss because, you know, candy,” he said with a shrug. Ellie nodded, yeah that checked out.

That particular day, Cornelius had been all smiles and cinnamon drops, and he chatted up Father as usual, but he said this time though he couldn’t stay for his fitting, he only dropped by to make a payment and then he had other business to get to. He handed Father a bag of money, not one of the small coin purses he dealt out silver in, just the right amount for his clothing, but this was an advance he said—the bag had to be about as big his head, full of gold. Father said that the money wasn’t worth Cornelius’s life. He was absolutely not accepting this payment and Cornelius wasn’t allowed to leave until they negotiated on his bill. Father kept him there for hours, seemed dead set on not letting him leave—the men did not part ways until the early hours of the morning, voices raw. Cornelius’s wife had died in childbirth that year, and their child did not survive long after being born. He’d seemed to be working through his grief but when he came in to Father’s shop, wanting to leave so quickly, paying enough for a lifetime of work, Father realized the man was leaving the money he’d be paid over the course of years the man had no intention of living. Father talked him down.

Cornelius never remarried, and it almost seemed like he never would. Till one day, Krem turns ten, and his parents inform him that—after years of friendship, in return for his family’s kindness—as soon as Krem was old enough to start a family, he would marry Cornelius. Mother had been absolutely delighted.

Ellie’s hand squeezed his. “Cremisius, that’s horrible.”

He nodded, because Maker it really had been. But, marriage would’ve bumped his family right up out of Sopporati status—where anything gets you cast down into slavery especially a lack of money which was something they always struggled for. They’d be considered honorary Laetan’s, and that status would be passed on proper to their children. The magical ones at least. It’d been made perfectly clear non-magical children wouldn’t have been considered much of anything other than mistakes in need of correction. There were loads of horrible blood magic rituals could verify mages from birth and that had been a horrific idea he’d lost countless night's sleep over in and of itself.

After five years of fighting over it with Mother, consoling from Father, there came a time when he realized just how far on the brink of things they were. Cornelius was Father’s wealthiest client, and once a Magistar realized there were people, poor and slaves freezing to death in the southern-most parts of Tevinter for lack of proper clothing, he started homing-in on the business—using slave labor to mass produce clothing that cost next to nothing, and that only expanded into other households getting in on the endeavor. The practice spread to where even his home city had places you could buy clothes like that. Father was basically out of business, barely able to keep
them going as things were. He’d…he understood why the marriage was important. Krem had resigned himself to living as a woman for the rest of his life, if it meant his family could be kept from slavery to pay off their debts. He’d spent years dreading his future, lying awake at night aching to escape somehow, hating his parents, hating himself. He’d tried, Maker how he tried to convince himself he was just confused or something, prayed he would just wake up one day and everything about his biology and his chemistry would be on one accord one way or the other he really didn’t care.

But rehearsal dinner comes. Their families gathered together for a big meal to celebrate the wedding, all those people—family members that didn’t even know Krem—talking about how lucky he was, that his fiancé—a man not much younger than Father—and he looked like they were so in love and how he was just going to make ‘the most perfect wife’…Krem’d just snapped. Lost his actual mind. He caused a pretty big scene. Ripping at his dress, he’d pulled a clump of hair clean out of his scalp, knocked candles and food off the table, smashed a porcelain plate over Cornelius’s head when the bastard put a hand on his arm and told him to calm down. He just started screaming, shouting that he didn’t love him, that he couldn’t love him, and he would certainly never be anyone’s ‘perfect wife’ and then he stormed off, running. Must have run for hours. When he finally worked up the nerve to go home Mother definitely wasn’t speaking to him, but Father sat him down to talk and…he was set to marry at the end of the week, expected to start a family before the year was out and it was the absolute most miserable he’d ever been in his entire life. He just started sobbing and told him…well Krem didn’t think it was something he could do, not long term anyway. Thought at best, he’d get his parents out of their station, secure their place by popping out a passable heir for Cornelius so he’d be obligated to keep his parents around, and then uh. Well. He hadn’t planned on sticking around much longer, one way or the other.

Ellie held his hand even more tightly, quiet and listening. It’s ugly, and it’s not something he’s ever shared since then. No one needed to know, even Ellie but he’d…he’d never talked about it. He didn’t even realize he’d needed to until suddenly he just…doing it and Ellie didn’t judge or ridicule or make light. Didn’t try to breeze through it with jokes and levity to ease the blow of his words when they really needed to land, fully, no leash or safety net to keep the truth gentle and distorted. His mother, any friends he had before, his family, his community, people that raised and said they loved him, they thought he was ungrateful for passing up such an opportunity, crazy even. Thought he was sick and insane and selfish. They didn’t understand he was facing a death sentence and if he’d told them they’d think he was that much more insane, being dramatic or petty. Ellie just listened, understood, and accepted.

As it turned out, Father had returned the dowry and broken the engagement agreement with Cornelius, which insulted the Laetan beyond belief—he’d had to defend the decision to marry Krem at every turn because it was marrying down, a nobody from a line of fallen mages. Father said their friendship should have ended the day Cornelius proposed. Money and status weren’t worth losing his son over. Then his Father had just wanted to talk, about anything, everything. Asked him questions about what sort of life Krem thought would make him happy. Gave him advice for the future and told Krem different things about his own life. Everything ranging from ‘this is how you treat the person you love’ to the time he broke his leg climbing a tree when he was seven. Then he broke out scissors and his shaving kit, helped Krem cut his hair—not the first time Krem’d done so, he used to drive his mother up the wall cutting it himself when he was littler, but this time it was different—he’d never be made to grow it out again unless he wanted to. Then father shook his hand, and said he was happy he got to see his son. Then he woke mother up to kiss her goodbye, the way he usually did before going into work, and left. Except he didn’t go to work, and he didn’t come home.

A few days later they got a package, government seals, a crest from a Magister house, Tilani, on it. Payment. Father gave his business over to the state and sold himself into slavery to
settle the family’s debts, a little extra left over to get them by so they could find a way to avoid the same fate. He smiled a bit ruefully then, working down to the answer for her original question. Joining the military was a guaranteed job, had benefits for himself, his Mother. Hadn’t seen her since, but he always sent money home. It was good work, hard work—he was proud of his job. Life in the military had given him the opportunity to live being recognized as a man but he was constantly teetering on the edge of people thinking otherwise—if he wasn’t quick enough when changing, or if he got caught bathing. Growing up his body hadn’t been a something shameful, it was his thoughts and his feelings that were. Then the military gave him a life that was just the reversal, his identity was accepted, unquestioned until you got down to his anatomy. And then he met Bull, and suddenly he had family again, for the first time in his life he was surrounded with people who just accepted him—inside and out. There was no hiding or shame or secrets, he wasn’t wrong, and neither was his body. Bull reached out using a Viddethari friend of his to find out for Krem if his mother had gotten caught up in everything—he was able to get in contact with a cousin of his. Mother’d been questioned but not implicated in his crime. Takes a bit of subterfuge but Bull gets half his salary to her, cousin keeps him posted on if she’s doing okay, if they think she needs anything. He made a promise to his father he’d do whatever it took to take care of her and live a life he’d be proud of. The man may never know such a promise existed, but it did, and he’d keep it.

Ellie was very quiet, and she sat up, staring down at their joined hands for a moment and then, “You kept the name your parents gave you?”

He wasn’t sure why she’d latched onto that, and it took a second to realize yeah, he’d heard about people like him who changed their names when they started living openly as themselves. “I did. My father named me so, I like that it comes from him. And it’s never really bothered me I don’t associate it with a gender. ‘Cremisius’ is pretty neutral as far as Tevinter names go, it just means *me*.”

“I really think it does. Cremisius,” she said with a nod, like she was thinking something over in her head and then she looked up at him, “To create from belief*. A miracle.”

She launched herself into him then, sitting on her knees straddling a thigh hugging him so fiercely he’s almost overwhelmed by it, how warm she was, how very close and then her face was buried against his neck and she said, “You’re an actual miracle Cremisius Aclassi. That you were born, that you survived, that you’re here! You’re strong and brave, and your father would be so, so incredibly proud of the man you are. He is proud. I just know it. I’m *glad* I know you, I’m *glad* you were born, and I’m *glad* that you’re here!”

He almost feels hysterical and he wasn’t sure if he wanted to laugh or cry or thank the girl hugging him so very tightly, or what to do with her and he settled for hugging her back, as tight as he dares, breathing in the fading scent of coconut oil in her hair, slowly being replaced by something that just smells like her and he likes that even better.

It strikes him then. And he almost feels ridiculous saying so, but she’d just translated his name. “Okay Chief said you speak Dalish, and there’s the Sign language, you know Tevene too?” He’s never had a super strong affection for his homelands near-dead language, everyone spoke Trade, it was only Priests and nobility that still kept Tevene in business but Maker, he might have second thoughts about how unappealing the language is if it’s something she speaks.

She laughed a little, like she thought it was a very silly thing to pick up on. She shook her head ‘no’ as she shifted to sit next to him again, his arm around her shoulders and he indulged a bit, playing with a lock of her hair as she explained, “Hasmal was the only place I could really go to Chantry on holy days—no one cared I was an Apostate there, you know?—and Chantry there was a lot like I imagine it must be in Tevinter, Fathers and Brothers and such. They preached a lot of
the Chant of Light in Tevene, so I picked up some of the commonly used words. ‘Creation’ and ‘belief’ get used loads of times in sermons. When faith is put in the Maker to provide something we can’t achieve on our own, and something is created from that belief, it’s usually called a miracle. So. Word math.” She bit her lip then, before meeting his eye and saying, “Thanks Cremisius, for telling me.”

“Well, thank you, for listening.”

Topics got lighter then, just sharing stories about some of her more creative efforts to evade Templars, or she’d ask him about different jobs the Charger’s had worked. It was relaxing, just sitting with Ellie half laying against him and there’s this heady sort of high from the swing in their conversation. From the sinking horrible feeling he’d gotten listening about Ellie’s life before, alone, fending for herself, and the pull and sting of ripping the almost literal bandage off his past, to Ellie laughingly tell him how she used to think the phrase ‘scape goat’ was ‘scape coat’ because she’d certainly never used a goat to escape—a horse, one time a herd of druffalo, but never a goat—but she’d swapped coats with a friend and gotten all her hair under a cap to help her blend into the mix of a crowd, evade guardsmen looking for her. The most unbelievable aspect of the tale was how she’d gotten her hair hidden, and she informed him she used to just chop it all off all the time. Huh, that was too bad, but he thought it may well have been rather cute. She found no end of amusement in Krem’s tale of the time a nobleman hired the Chargers—Bull—to dress up in chicken feathers and scare an enemy of his who’d received a premonition that his death would come ‘on feathered wings’ who later choked to death on a chicken bone.

Then his throat went very dry, heart thumping in his chest—for all of a second before he was suddenly feeling exasperated with himself. Ellie’s hand had pressed low against his stomach, right over where his tunic covered the waistband of his trousers, but she’d hardly been being forward or making a move on him. She’d been pushing herself up off of him to sit closer to her headboard, arms reaching up over her head as she stretched before asking if he felt like dinner. He didn’t even realize it’d gotten late—the sun was starting to set, shades of Fade-tinged yellow and pink filtering through the gaps in the boards on Ellie’s windows. Krem almost faceplanted when he got up to go put their dinner orders in with a runner, Maker they’d just been sitting for forever, his legs were full of pins and needles.

Not ten minutes later Flissa came bustling in with their meals, insisting she was more than happy to do so when Ellie apologized for not feeling up to going out again today and thanked the barmaid profusely for making the trip. Flissa assured her it wasn’t any trouble, and thanked Krem for about the twelfth time for keeping Ellie safe and checking up on her to make sure she hadn’t gotten caught up in that assassin’s business, before she bid them a wonderful evening and hurried back to the Tavern.

“I think she might just have a crush on you, Cremisius,” Ellie teased when she left them.

“Hmmm, not interested. Don’t go playing matchmaker for me, Lady Herald.”

That got him a little pout, Maker. “Why not? I’d be very careful, I wouldn’t dare set you up with someone horrible who’d have the wrong idea,” she promised him sincerely, and then she looked like she’d just thought of something. “Oh! Do you already have someone? Or are you just not interested in a general sense?”

“No seeing anyone,” he assured her, focusing on his meal, it felt almost foolish, but he said, “I’m interested in a specific sense. In uh, a specific someone really.”

Ellie gave a little delighted gasp, happy for him he supposed. “Who?” she asked curiously,
“I won’t tell, or meddle or anything promise—on my honor as the Inquisition’s official-unofficial matchmaker I vow not to matchmake unless of course you need a wing woman—who is it?”

That was the only question of hers he didn’t offer up an answer for. Ellie just smiled and let it be.

He fucked up. Not the first time he’d done it of course, Varric Tethras had a knack, a penchant if you will, for colossal fuck ups, often of epic proportions, it was one of his more formidable talents he supposed.

He’d yelled at her, made her cry. Straight up belittled her, and shit, he’d been screaming at that bastard for making her sick, when it was Varric who…fuck!

Seeker just about wrung his neck when Varric’d been in the Chantry with the Advisors trying…well he was mostly getting glared at or yelled at, but he was trying to help them cover all their bases—what all had been said in the Tavern, and how many people had heard, could he identify them, so they could be spoken with to make sure he didn’t have the entire world at large be made aware of the more private personal struggles kid had. And then Healer Adan showed up, blood splattered on his robes. The Lieutenant had gotten him, and he’d just been to check on Ellie, Maker the blood was hers. Her ulcer was way too close to rupturing, kid wasn’t to so much as set foot outside her cabin until it was healed. Seeker’d rushed from the Chantry hall to go see Ellie herself. Varric felt like he was the one with the hole in his stomach. But he wasn’t, and he wished he was, wished he could somehow trade places with the kid. Wished he hadn’t said any of the shit he had. He’d just…he saw it, Ellie’d forgiven that asshole, was going to let that bastard back in just so he could hurt her again, and he’d lost his mind! he would have told her the Breach was purple—absolute nonsense of a lie but he’d spew it with conviction if it would somehow convince her stay away from Rainier!

Rainier hadn’t hurt her though, not this time. Varric had and he was pretty sure it was actually killing him. He’d promised Seeker he wanted to help with the kid while Marehis was away and he’d basically landed her in the infirmary!

The advisor’s grilled him for hours though Leliana was called away by, huh, first scouts he’d seen around Haven all week. Seeker was back then, assured her she’d be ready whenever Leliana needed her and then the Spymaster disappeared. Ruffles sat quietly writing everything Varric could tell them down, jaw set like she daren’t open it until she could find it in herself to say something peaceable. Curly rounded up the soldiers and staff Varric described, and Lady Josephine went with him to very discretely, diplomatically ensure they understood their respect and discretion about the things they’d heard would be appreciated and rewarded, smooth over any worries that Ellie wasn’t fit for her role.

Seeker questioned him six ways from Sunday. This time he wasn’t quite so resentful about his interrogation.

Then Bull shows up. They’d just finished up, it was the ascrack of dawn, sun would be rising soon and the Qunari just saunters into the War Room, that Elf chick Skinner looking beat up all to shit but seeming proud and satisfied about it. They missed some people, some real assholes
that Bull let Skinner cut loose on, Curly’s guys so the Commander, feather pauldrons flaring as he swept from the War Room, took his leave ready to make heads roll, Bull and Skinner following after.

Seeker just looked at him like he was the lowest form of life and ground out that she was going to see to it Ellie got breakfast.

He hadn’t realized it, not until Ruffles found it in herself to call it to his attention, that he’d already finished, he’d just been sitting there in a chair around the War Room, staring into space for shit…felt like hours.

When he finally drug himself out of the Chantry the sun was up, he thought he’d been walking back to his tent he was so exhausted, and said exhaustion made him have this annoying thought in the back of his mind, a guilt that his bullcrap kept Cullen, Cassandra, Leliana…awe man sweet Lady Josephine, she never hurt nobody—they’d all been up all night and now they had to go about their days working to keep things going in the Inquisition, they had to be bone-tired. But he got to mosey on back to his tent, get some shut eye.

Except he didn’t not at first. He didn’t realize it until he was staring at that boy, Krem, that he’d completely bypassed his tent, and was out front of Ellie’s cabin. Dude was holding a tray, staring Varric down and huh. He wasn’t sure if he should be grateful or pissed. Guy looked tired too, like he hadn’t gotten much more sleep than Varric had, had stayed all night watching over Ellie. Better have just been watching over her, anyway.

What was Varric even doing here? Kid was probably still sick. And definitely wouldn’t want to see him. Not after everything he’d said, he’d be surprised if she ever wanted to talk to him again. Damn it! He’d thought it was hilarious, felt outright giddy and vindictive when Ellie’d declared she was giving Rainier the silent treatment. Did a shit job at it—she still checked up on the bastard, didn’t seem to understand that silent treatment should mean complete and total silence directed at the intended victim. If Rainier was on fire in front of her, he didn’t deserve her to speak even a word that’d douse the flames—that’s how a proper silent treatment was delivered.

He’d thought it was a good thing, her anger at Rainer. Now he was horrified that he might have earned it himself, hated it. Just wanted to go back, go right back in time to the moment he turned around and saw Ellie and Rainier, and now-self would punch past-asshole-self out before he could open his big dumb mouth.

He couldn’t though. So he settled for going back to his tent and flopping face first onto his cot. Uncomfortable as all get out still in the clothes he’d been wearing the day before, Bianca on his back but. Eh. Wasn’t like he expected to really sleep. Just.

He’d really done it this time.

Sera of all people peeked her head into his tent sometime later. Afternoon. He had actually fallen asleep and he was pretty sure he’d never be able to sit upright again because this Bianca was not made to be a sleeping companion. Not that the other one was much better. Stole all the blankets, elbowed him in the face once, so.

“Here’s food or something dwarfy.”

“You’re talkin’ to me?” Varric asked as he very, very carefully pulled Bianca off his shoulders and set her aside.

“No, I’m not talkin’ to you, you pissfaced pussbucket piece of shit! But Inky’d ugggh,”
Sera groaned, slamming down a tray of food onto his cot, water sloshing from the tankard before she put her hands on her hips and railed at him, “She’d be all worried and pish if you don’t eat! So. Fuck off, eat a sandwich!”

“Wait wait,” Varric, shit he didn’t care if it sounded like begging, “is she awake? Did she send you? How is she?”

“No she isn’t ruddy awake! She’s sick! Healer blokes gave her potion that’s making her sleep like the dead—like just really really asleep! But Krem says it’s supposed to make her better.” Absently she said added, “Got a good look at him, his eyes is just regular brown. Ugh!” Sera’s face scrunched up and she balled up her fists before pounding them to the sides of her head, “I wasn’t going to talk to you! Just! Eat it dwarfy! Literally!” and then she whirled about and stomped out of his tent.

Didn’t particularly feel like eating but he did and when he was done he very cautiously took the tray back to Flissa’s. Didn’t see Rainier or any of the party members around the Tavern, even Sera was gone somewhere. He took the tray up to Flissa and apologized, acting like an ass in her bar.

“I’m not the one you need to apologize to, and don’t you dare think you can just sweet talk your way into drinking in here again,” Flissa snapped at him, cramming a wash rag bearing fist into a mug, almost like she wanted to punch him in the face so…she was a little pissed, “you’re cut off, Varric Tethras!”

Yeah, not the first time that’s happened.

“Wasn’t trying to work an angle or anything Fliss, I’m serious, I’m sorry. I’ll uh. I’ll try to make it up to the kid, soon as she’s better.” Didn’t know when ‘better’ would be though.

It was the next day apparently. He almost barreled out of his tent when he woke up and heard Ellie’s voice chatting away. Sort of sounded like she was venting, going a mile a minute about something and he waited, worried maybe it was about him. But no, she was airing her feelings about those asshole Ferelden nobles trying to wrangle her into a marriage with their son. When he dared to look outside he caught sight of her heading for Haven’s gate with Krem and Sera on her arms. Dressed real nice, was it for that boy? Bah!

He was a rational adult, most of the time anyway; the kid wasn’t just a kid, but she was young and way too trusting, and boys are scoundrels! Dogs, every last one of them! When he teased her about that hunter in the Hinterlands, that boy had seemed just as wide-eyed and innocent as Tumbles, he figured eh, worst case scenario she runs around with a little boyfriend back in the Hinterlands she sees every once in a while, when the Inquisition has work out there, nothing too intense that eventually peters out. Cute, fun, light ‘training’ boyfriend. This Krem dude was…well he was here, in Haven! She was way more likely to be able to hang around him, what if they got serious, and she got hurt! Then Varric’s gotta kill him, Bull’s got to kill Varric, it’s all a big mess. But maybe dude won’t hurt her, he was pretty…okay seeming for a guy. Everything he’d sent her on the Coast was…admittedly thoughtful, dude clearly gave a damn about her, genuinely seemed like he cared at least. And he did a decent job standing up to him for her—couldn’t really hold his words against him, Varric was being an asshole and the guy handled the situation pretty well—and he helped her. Varric’d been making his way back around to his tent, sort of pacing between the Tavern and the Chantry because shit he wanted to run back and fix what he’d done, make sure Ellie was okay—and he saw him carrying Ellie back to her cabin. He didn’t take any liberties, lots of guys would have taken the opportunity to cop a feel, all his hands did was keep her secure and pull her hood over her head. Because she’d been crying, Varric made her cry, see! Right back around to
the male population being scoundrels! Shit!

Oh. Maybe she wasn’t dressed up for the lieutenant. It was the sort of thing she wore for noble business. Was she back to work already? That thought had him grumbling, pulling his boots on tying his hair back and swinging Bianca onto his back never mind he was still in his sleep clothes—he was gonna go tell Seeker off if she and the Advisors thought it was okay for Ellie to just jump back into things already! But she wasn’t down by the soldiers’ tents or at the forge or anywhere around Haven except maybe the Chantry, but when he went there the guards turned him away insisting no one was allowed in or out today, Spymaster’s orders.

Flissa was less snippy with him but maybe that was because she was too busy working on what she said was lunch for Ellie and Leliana. Ahh. Kid had the day off, probably dressed up for her lunch date. But she did take a moment to get him a sandwich he took to go. Almost bumped into a servant walking out with the pitcher Flissa had sitting on the cart she’d been prepping. When he stepped outside he could hear Bull and Sera talking, on their way to the Tavern, didn’t really want to risk getting into it with Tiny he’d been on pretty thin ice the other day, so he swung around, deciding to check in with Chuckles, see if he was in a chatty mood where Varric was concerned, and maybe he’d tell him how Ellie was doing.

The Apostate man was in his cabin, reading some book Ruffles’d gotten him, and he confessed he wasn’t exactly up to date on all of Haven’s goings on, though the Iron Bull had informed him of Varric and Ellie’s fight. The guy seemed okay with him though not pissed off at least, and he said he’d gone to check on Ellie in the night. He wouldn’t give Varric any specifics about things he picked up on in the bond, outside of assuring him her stomach pain was gone now, healed.

Chuckles stopped talking suddenly and his attention went to the door, Varric thought someone might be there but it just seemed like the guy was trying to hear something and he was rising out of his seat, hand reaching for his staff when he stopped, focused for a second, and then sat back down with a sigh of relief.

“What? What just happened?”

“All is well,” Solas said, “I thought I heard something concerning but Eleanor assures me everything is fine.”

Chuckles wouldn’t say much more than that which was infuriating but whatever, he had his confidence to keep in the kid so, Varric wasn’t going to hold it against him. Much.

“What, you uh got that whole magic thing with her—”

“I’ve made it perfectly clear I won’t break faith with Eleanor.”

“I’m not asking you to, shit! I just…want, you know, advice. How do you think I should uh, go about trying to work things out with her?”

Solas leaned back in his chair, hands steepled as he blandly informed him, as if he already didn’t know; “It is Ellie. You’ll have to speak with her. Talk through your problem whatever it may be.” Thanks captain obvious. But then, “And you’ll have to learn to respect her decisions, even if you don’t agree with them. She is not a child, Varric. Young certainly, and in need of guidance but that is something she actively seeks on her own, we cannot foist it upon her and neither can we resent her when she chooses differently from what we would like. There is a difference between having a disagreement and talking it through—as she has exhibited she is capable of doing reasonably—and the inappropriate shouting match you apparently challenged her to in front of all
and sundry. Unless Rainier truly poses himself in his person as an actual threat to her safety you have to accept that she may continue her former rapport with him. If you force her to choose you will lose her, and what is more, she will be anguished by that loss."

‘Anguished’ was a real kick to the balls, he didn’t want to anguish the kid! But he definitely didn’t want her hanging around that rotten bastard! But he got Solas’s point. Shit. He guessed he’d have to suck it up and talk to her.

But he didn’t even know where to begin. It wasn’t like one of his books. Chapter One: I’m an asshole and I’m sorry. Chapter Two: Flashback—it all started when I was in diapers, my parents are social-elitist psychopaths, and they raised horrible, god-awful children, of which I am the most well-adjusted, what does that tell you about my family? Nothing good. Chapter Three: Fucking just let Seeker punch me, and forgive me already kid, I’m a grown-ass man whose entire life feels like it’s turned upside down because some teenybopper brat I’ve known little more than a few months has me totally whipped; how did my life become this, and why am I okay with it?

He almost went to Ellie’s cabin. In fact, he did. He stood at the bottom of the stairs ready to march right on up and knock on the door, but he saw the guards posted and used that as an excuse to chicken out. Never mind it was the middle of the day, guards were usually only around if the kid was sleeping or something. Who was he to interrupt her nap?

When he got to his tent there was a sealed missive from the advisors on his desk. The ‘something concerning’ Chuckles had heard earlier had been an attempt on Ellie’s life, maybe she was taking a nap, or down for the count again—oh. No, never mind. Safe. Spymaster wanted to make sure the party members knew to one, keep an eye out for further retaliation from Duke Gaspard’s camp, two, that Ellie was safe, thanks to Lieutenant Aclassi.

Flissa might have cut him off but he was definitely buying that Krem guy a drink.

Shit. He knew something like this was going to happen, Ellie getting involved in Orlesian politics. He was torn between storming down to Rainier’s place and beating the man into a pulp for…everything! And going to Ellie’s right this instant, apologize, make sure she was really okay but bah! He was more likely to just go do something stupid and confront Rainier than actually try and hash things out with Ellie right now, and guards had been posted so either it was extra protection because of the attack or yeah, maybe the kid did need to rest. She was just getting back on her feet again, an attempt on her life probably wiped her out. Didn’t want to wake her up.

Ultimately, it was Ellie who had no problem waking him up.

It was the dead of night when he heard a blood chilling scream, faint to his ears but he knew, oh Maker, it was Ellie. Varric was launching from the tent, Bianca in his hands as he bolted down the stairs, heart hammering in his chest. The door to her cabin was hanging open and as he burst in, the guards were just on their way out, running like mad, saying they were rushing to get Seeker and Healer Adan. Oh he was gonna put so many bolts in someone.

But there wasn’t any ‘someone’, no assailant lying unconscious but fuck. Fuck.

“Ellie? Sh-sh-shit shit, it’s okay, it’s going to be okay,” Varric croaked out as he holstered Bianca.

Ellie was sitting up in her bed, pale and wide eyed and shaking, covered in blood. Large portion of her bedding was soaked in it, her pajama bottoms, blood on her trembling hands.

Her voice was weak, scared, as she said, “I-I-I d-d-on’t know what’s—” shit she couldn’t
even speak she was shaking like a leaf, and then clutching at her stomach, not high up like the actual organ itself was hurting her, lower reeling forward like something seriously, *seriously* hurt.

“Shh shh shh, Ellie, it’s going to be okay, shit shit,” Varric was out of his mind afraid, his own hands shaking ghosting along the edge of Ellie’s bed like he wanted to help do *something*, but he wasn’t sure what to do, “What hurts, what happened? What do I need to—”

Air! Choking! *Can’t breathe!* Varric’s words turned into a garbled yelp when his sleep shirt collar dug right on up into his windpipe, the Iron Bull was pulling him by the back of the shirt up and out of the cabin, dark skinned man, Stitches was there yelling for them—huh, Krem kid was there too, Bull’d palmed his head in his hand and was pushing him out the door—Healer wanted them all to get out and wait for Cassandra and Adan, before the Ferelden man knelt at Ellie’s bedside, his voice soothing as he asked her questions and tried to calm her down.

“*Get off me!*” Varric and Krem shouted in unison, outraged as Bull cast them out, shutting the cabin door behind him.

Of course, Bull was unfazed. “We’ll wait out here,” he said with certainty, “Or we can go back to bed really, everything’s all good, we’ll just embarrass her if we hover.”

…all good? Was he *bent*?!

“What?!” Varric snapped.

“What?!” Varric snapped.

“We have to find out what happened, who attacked!” Krem insisted. Liking him better every time he opens his mouth.

Oh. Okay, respecting the guy even more now. Everyone had been asleep obviously, as it was Bull was barefoot, harness gone tats on full display, sleep pants riding a bit too low on his hips for Varric’s peace of mind. Krem’s boots were undone, and he was just in cotton breeches, sleep shirt. He heard Ellie was in danger and just grabbed his sword, came running, didn’t give a fuck who saw what, shit. Good man.

Varric nodded. “Kid’s got the right idea, we gotta find the bastards and make them pay!” How’d they get past the guards? What the *hell* had they done to her, damn it there’d been so much blood!

“No one to find, because no one attacked.” Bull deadpanned, leveling Krem a significant look. “Dude. Seriously? Think about it for a second.”

No one attacked? But that…no no no wait.

Did he mean…shit had Ellie done something to herself?

No no no no no, she wouldn’t do something like that, she had…she had some issues, but she was dealing with them!

But she’d been dealing with them in private, with the help of people who were supposed to be looking out for her and Varric had gone and…he betrayed her, embarrassed her about something she was already embarrassed enough about with just the few who did know, and m-maybe—

“Could be,” Krem said doubtfully but calm like whatever Bull’d been suggesting was no big deal? “She was petrified Chief, she doesn’t have a clue what’s going on.”

No clue what’s going on…well at least his and Tumble’s coalition was going strong
because that made two of them, but if she didn’t know then that meant it wasn’t something she’d done to herself. He was jumping to wild conclusions, things that didn’t make sense, but he needed answers damn it, what happened?!

Questions sort of fell on the backburner because he’d never seen Seeker without several inches of leather and steel between herself and the rest of the world and he sort of thought it was a permanent thing—like she’d been born in her Seeker gear, Maker bless her poor mother if that were the case, but apparently it wasn’t.

Seeker came running with Healer Adan at her back, though Varric almost didn’t recognize her in slippers, soft, light purple (dare he think the word ‘periwinkle’ in any context related to the Seeker? The word was too cutey but that’s what she was wearing) robe wrapped around her—softest thing he’d ever seen her wear—and she had hair. Like big time, all the way down to her hips. Huh. He’d never really thought about the implications of the braid she kept wrapped around her head, guess that hair had to come from somewhere. Sera was just about to come barreling down the stairs but Solas was hot on her trail and he reached out, grabbed her wrist and pulled her aside a moment, looked like he was explaining something to her that had her scrunching her nose up and Varric heard her cackle like a loon and then the quiet echo of her ‘Yuck! Inky Inky!’ before she hightailed it back in the direction of the Tavern, Solas following—didn’t he want to help?! And what was yuck?! Nothing made sense! Was he drunk? Was this all some weirdass nightmare?! Maker, please just let this be a nightmare.

“Eleanor!” Cassandra called out as she joined them, looking to Bull and Krem for explanation, “Is—”

“Boss-girl’s fine Seeker,” Bull assured her. “Stitches is talking with her now, explaining.”

“Explaining what?!” Varric snapped, “What the hell is going on?!” if someone doesn’t say something that makes some goddamn sense, he’s going to need the Healer because he’s pretty sure he’s about to have a fucking heart attack.

“Boss-girl’s technically boss-woman now,” Bull said with a shrug, and then as if realizing the very sharp, dark interpretation Varric was just about to make of that, probably because his heart actually stopped, Bull shouted, “Shit! Calm down, I just mean there’s blood on the field you moron!” he snapped, “Ellie’s entertaining her monthly guest. For the first time. Hence her freaking out. Poor kid had absolutely no idea what to expect apparently.”

Oh.

Wait.

Oh.

You know. He’s really getting to old for this shit.

“Oh, goodness,” Seeker said looking almost overwhelmed by the prospect as she offered, “Um. Perhaps I should speak with Eleanor then?”

Took a second to work it around in his mind that yeah, Seeker had a uterus, she’d probably have some insight for the kid. Damn. Monthlies. Tumbles fell right into it all with a literal splash, hadn’t she? He wasn’t totally oblivious, he’d woken up with little bloodstains on his bedsheets from the occasional overnight guest having theirs catch them off guard in the night or because they’d uh…fallen asleep, been too wiped out to change the sheets after their fun. But what he’d seen just now with Ellie shit, there’d been just so much. She was a little old to be starting this
maybe the stuff was saved up or something? He’s not a wealth of knowledge on the subject. Bleh, Sera’d been right, yuck, he was glad now Solas had figured it out and kept the girl Elf at bay—she’d probably humiliate the poor kid right about now. He was…goddamn he was beyond relieved it wasn’t remotely anything like the horror show he’d worked up in his mind, but he knew exactly nothing about this crap, he wasn’t sure how he could help the kid with that. More chocolate, definitely more chocolate.

“Adan better go with you,” Bull recommended, “Kid’s pissed and wants answers.”

She really was, and she really did. The cabin door swung open. Ellie, washed up, in clean pajamas, shoving her feet into her boots and stomping out to join them, not shaking anymore exactly, more like vibrating with rage.

“You!” Ellie pointed an accusatory finger at Adan, “You said I would bleed! I thought you meant like! A little! Where is it coming from, why is there so much, and why the ugh- the- why every month? How am I not dead?!”

“It uh, isn’t all blood, Lady Herald,” Adan attempted to explain, looking around as if uncertain whether or not Ellie realized she had a bit of an audience, “it is merely the lining of your u—”

Ellie slapped her hands over her ears and shouted, “NOPE! Shut up! That’s what Mister Stitches said, and what good does that do me?!” she asked, “I don’t plan on making any babies! Can’t I just! Shut it off?!?”

“She really was, and she really did. The cabin door swung open. Ellie, washed up, in clean pajamas, shoving her feet into her boots and stomping out to join them, not shaking anymore exactly, more like vibrating with rage.

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“Eleanor,” Seeker was tentative to address the kid, “I know it is an uncomfortable thing, but it is erm, perfectly natural. Perhaps we could talk inside, not wake Haven?”

“It’s not my fault you’re all out here! Everyone’s already awake!”

Well, “You did sort of scream down the house earlier Tumbles,” Varric couldn’t help but try to make light.

“Double nope!” Ellie was pointing at him now, how was that scary? She wasn’t even that much taller than him and he had to fight the urge to duck behind Bull for cover. “You don’t get to yell at me and make me cry just because you’re a big scaredy baby, and then try to joke with me! Not happening! If I want to be friends with Thom, you just have to deal with it! Think it’s stupid? Fine! Think I’m stupid? Whatever! If I’m smart enough to fix Thom’s legal stuff with Orlais I’m sure I’m smart enough to work out whatever fight-y nonsense you want to have with me! I’ll fix it!” she shouted at him, “I’m going to fix it! So don’t you dare think about leaving the Inquisition!”

Leave the Inquisition?

“Shit, Ellie there’s nothing you have to fix! Who the hell said anything about me leaving the Inquisition?” Varric wanted to know, “I’ll kick their ass!”

Oh. Maybe not, because she yelled, “I said it! Cause…I dunno!” her chin quivered, “People leave and I…I don’t want you to!” her words came out thick, like she wanted to scream and cry at the same time, so she settled for loud, tear laced, increasing-in-volume shouting, “I love you, Varric Tethras! And I love Marehis, and Cassandra, and Solas, and Thom, and Sera, and The Iron Bull, and the Chargers, and Cullen, and Lady Josie, and Leliana, and Scout Harding, and Seggrit, and Flissa, and Harritt, and Dennet and Russel, and I love Healer Adan even though I just got all yell-y at him. I’m sorry about that!” she said looking to the bewildered Healer, “This whole
monthly thing is very upsetting I do not appreciate it at all!” little foot stomp for emphasis.

“Understandable,” Adan allowed, looking like he wasn’t sure if he should acknowledge that Ellie just said she loved him somehow, or if he should be offended that he came last tale end after a horse. guy probably didn’t know just how much kid loves that horse though.

Varric, however, was still on her declarations to him, shit. It’d been one thing to be pretty sure about it, but it was another, awkwardly overwhelming thing to actually hear the kid say… shout as much. “I uh. I love you too, Ellie,” he said, way to go, word guy. “I’m sorry. For yelling at you—I overreacted, and I never meant for you to think shit- Tumbles, you’re not stupid. I never thought you were. And I’m uh, sorry for being a dick to that a- um, to Thom,” the name sounded like it tasted sour in his mouth, it did, but he was trying. He would try if…if Ellie was still willing to play nice with Rainier, Varric…he’d caused enough problems for her. He needed to have her back. “I’ll um, get over it. Work on it, anyway.”

Ellie nodded, seeming calmer as she said, “Good. Thank you. For apologizing and stuff.”

Bull patted the top of Ellie’s head. “You feel better now, Imekari?”

“No! Sort of,” she shrugged and sighed in frustration, “I’m tired, and upset, and cramping, and my beds all murder-y!” she sniffled, “I woke up and thought I’d been murdered!”

“I know where Marehis stores your bedding, Eleanor,” Cassandra said, taking some charge, “Everything will be taken care of shortly. Would you care to ah…” she seemed to be trying to think of what exactly to do with the kid in the meantime.

He realized then Krem had sort of disappeared, emerging from Ellie’s cabin, the Tevinter man had her hat in his hands and pulled it over her head in the blink of an eye, her cloak was over his arm and he was already moving to drape it around her shoulders, coming around to stand in front of her and clasp it closed himself as he asked, “Bull taught you pancakes, you like them right?”

Ellie nodded. “Y-yeah?” she answered confused but more calmly than she had been just a moment ago.

“Chief! You’re on pancake duty!” Krem ordered.

“On it,” Bull said, already heading for the gate.

“Ellie, you come on out front, while he’s cooking. You can borrow my sword to beat down on the practice dummies,” he leaned down a bit to press his forehead against hers, smiling as he offered, “I’ll even make dramatic sound effects, so it seems more authentic if it’ll help you feel better.”

Huh. Simulated murder and carbs. Might just do the trick.

It seemed it would. Ellie’s chin quivered, and she nodded, sniffing a bit then, “That sounds like everything I want in life right now.” When he stepped away she asked, “Piggyback?”

Varric almost thought it was weird she’d add a request to the already generous offer but as Krem obliged without so much as an ounce of hesitation, he realized she’d seen what he had and was giving the guy a bit of discretion in front of so many unfamiliar people—when she hopped on his back the front of her cloak draped over his shoulders. Huh, good on her, he wasn’t sure how he’d feel if it turned out Ellie was the sort of person to be phased by something like that.
That reminded him, he hadn’t heard from Mae-Mae in a while. Since before the Conclave—sort of lost track of keeping in touch but he should probably let her know he was alive. Check in and see how she’s doing. Tevinter was a long way away but maybe she’d be interested in seeing the Inquisition next time she was in the neighborhood, she liked shopping in Orlais well enough she’d probably be by sometime—she and Ellie'd get on like a house on fire. Kid was practically a life-sized doll the woman wouldn’t be able to resist making her up.

“I better whip up fresh potion for the uh,” Adan cleared his throat, “cramping, headaches and such.” The Healer seemed to be half-addressing Stitches.

“Gave her bandaging but I’ll swing by the Quartermasters and get her a good supply going. Be by to help you in a few,” the Ferelden man assured him before the two went along to the steps, bounding up them to go their separate ways.

And then there were two.

“Seeker, you uh, want help?” he jerked his head in the direction of Ellie’s cabin, place really did look like a full-blown murder scene.

The woman didn’t seem like she very much wanted to accept, but she sighed and said, “Very well.”

Ugh. He hated doing this, it was bad enough all the apologies this got out of him, and that he’d probably have to talk to…and not hit…Rainier sometime, clear the air. But…fuck him, this is why you shouldn’t make friends! “Cassandra. I’m uh, sorry, you know. To you too. I talked big about helping with Ellie and I majorly dropped the ball. Right off a cliff. Into a shark’s mouth. And the shark was on fire.” There.

“You have disappointed me beyond words, Varric. But,” she said, stepping into Ellie’s cabin, there was just the hint of amusement pulling at her lips as she continued, “we shall see how I feel after you remove Eleanor’s soiled bedding, yes?”

Yup. Deserved that.

“I’m on it.”

Chapter End Notes

*Edgehall=a city near the Orlesian-Ferelden boarder, all the history pulled from canon is mentioned above, I mostly marked it for Skinner origin sake. There isn’t any nationality listed for her, and while her accent sounds Nevarran-ish in game, it also strikes me personally as sounding Orlesian, mixed with something else. When I was looking through canon alienage’s for her backstory—the alienage she’s from isn’t listed specifically—and I read about Edgehall and it seemed like a perfect fit to me, the kind of person Skinner is, how untrusting and wild she can be, makes sense coming from somewhere where Elves are living in a constant state of terror, pinned in and easily assaulted and taken advantage of by the rest of the community, the city itself basically built to cage and attack their Elf population.
*Sign Language! First sign Grim uses is the sign to warn someone that food is ‘hot’. Grim grunts instead of talking in game and so I thought, Sign language! Most of my descriptions for signs are based off of ASL, however I straight forget the sign for ‘Mayor’, don’t know signs for other lower-level ranks (didn’t want to go overboard and make him a King or Emperor or something haha!) so I used the description for the British Sign for Mayor instead.

*Inquisition Needs Bees! Is a war table mission you can do for Sera Approval, its how you unlock her Jar of Bees attack in ya potions slots.

* “She’d been too hard, and somehow Cassandra of all people compelled her to soften”—as you advance in the game, you’ll have several options that mark Leliana’s character arch in particular, one of them is your response when Leliana is confronted with handling Butler’s betrayal, Inquisitor can stay silent (harden), encourage Leliana to kill Butler (harden), or spare and question him to see if he can explain (soften). Ultimately what these decisions affect are the Epilogue if you make Leliana Divine. Hardening Leliana will make her harsher if you make her Divine, Softening her will give her a more compassionate reign.

*Yvette and Antoine are the canon names of two of Lady Josie’s younger siblings. She has three brothers, one of which goes unnamed, and a sister, Yvette who we meet during Wicked Eyes and Wicked Hearts!

*Ciriane is just French basically, the language of the Ciriane tribe that was one of the two tribes to settle Orlais, ultimately dominating and creating the Orlesian Empire we know today.

*Krem’s age—for the purposes of this fic, to pull off young inquisitor and KremXInquisitor I worked to make him age appropriate. So, currently, he’s 17, and Ellie will be turning 16 by the time she returns to Haven after she recruits the Mages and Templars. While Krem’s age isn’t a canonized fact, I get the impression he’s older in canon—like early twenties. In Thedas, because of the Medieval-esque setting, people generally consider 16 ‘your life is half over, you’ll soon die of the plague’ grown up age, so I peg that as the legal-adult age, you can own land, join the military, enter a legally binding contract, etc.

If Ellie didn’t have Andraste’s permission slip on her hand, her butt couldn’t be in the Inquisition until she was sixteen

*Krem’s backstory—in canon, Krem’s backstory is represented in this story. Cornelius and other such details are purely made to flesh out the story more than what canon provides. House Tilani is a canon Magistar House. There is a plot-driving point to Krem sharing his backstory with Ellie. Also someone just in general needs to hug the guy.

*Cremisius translation! If you put Cremisius through translation engines…you get Cremisius. However, if you parcel the word out, put a space in the middle and write it as Cremi sius, Italian and Latin offer parts of the word meaning ‘Create’ and ‘Believe’. Which for one thing is a beautiful name for a trans person. But it also got me thinking that something created by people’s belief in a higher power is considered a miracle, that prompted me to consider the fact that Krem is canon, an only child, chances are, his parents weren’t able to have more than one child. Realistically thinking, a couple living in Sopporati status only having one child, and that child being identified as female at birth, means they physically cannot have more children—because in general...
societies, and people seeking to raise their status in that society want cis male children
to raise their status through 1) societal opportunity like higher education and/or
military service or 2) marriage, it keeps the family name going (traditionally) and
brings the family more power in the marriage situation.
TLDR: Cremisius Aclassi is a miracle, I love him and you can fight me
Chapter Summary

Periods suck! Madam de Fer returns at last, so magical lessons ensue. Lessons in hoppin' scotch, the Chargers make some new hires, and Krem makes a decision.

Chapter Notes

Part two!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

With the threats to Leliana’s ranks nullified, an all-clear was getting out to those in the field who had to hide. Scout Harding would be receiving orders to return to the Oasis and hold ground. Marehis would be returning to Haven…just as soon as she could be found. Maker the woman was too impressive by half—Bull’s Viddethari contacts did report seeing her. They trailed her for a moment to make confirmation she’d been sighted, and nearly lost their lives for the trouble. Needless to say the woman evaded them, rather violently, and fled the area believing she’d been further compromised. She’d been spotted in the southern part of the Free Marches, she could very well be anywhere now, but Inquisition birds would find her shortly. Cassandra just hoped for all their sakes the woman has not found refuge farther north, the further she was the longer it would take for her to return to them and Maker, the Elf woman was needed now more than ever.

Eleanor found nothing about her newfound womanhood…appealing in the slightest. In this way, Cassandra found herself in a situation where yes, Eleanor’s upbringing was very much like her own—eleven-year-old Cassandra Pentaghast had found the entire aspect of her biology to be pointless and unrelenting, nothing but a horrible messy annoyance she dreaded each month.

Cassandra had been uncertain if she should endeavor her morning ritual with Eleanor, the girl’s sleep had been disturbed to say the least, spent over an hour in the middle of the night apparently beating a practice dummy senseless—taking a break to eat what Bull termed an ‘impressive’ number of pancakes, which Cassandra worried just how great the Qunari’s standard for impressive may be. The words immediately set the mental image of Eleanor devouring a stack of pancakes her own height. Eleanor’s sleepy, contented mumbling as Cassandra half walked, half carried the girl back to her quarters contained the words ‘bajillion pancakes’ and ‘love the Iron Bull…Cremisius just the best…best best.” Before she fell headlong into her fresh bedding, rolled over, and fell fast asleep.

Cassandra had to agree. Cremisius Aclassi was indeed the ‘best’ of the ‘best best’. When she emerged from her own interrogations to discover Leliana just finishing up from further questioning with an assassin sent in retaliation for her efforts for Rainier, Cassandra had nearly gone to lay eyes on the girl just to assure herself Eleanor was safe. However, she was certain she must be quite a sight—interrogations were arduous affairs this one in particular had lasted nearly the entire stance of two days, she could practically feel the bags under her eyes—she did not wish to worry Eleanor.
Instead she attended to a meeting with the advisors, discussed how to move forward now that Leliana’s ranks were secured, and how to respond to the attack on the Herald. Leliana recounted the incident, the Lieutenant had done well, Maker bless him, guard the man in His hand for eternity. The attempt had been far more serious than what they’d expect from the Duke or one of his allies, a genuine attempt on Eleanor’s life. It was called for by a family member of Ser Robert Chapuis—the man who conspired with Gaspard to take out Callier and eventually took his own life after word spread of the massacre—they were still loyal to Duke Gaspard and resented that Rainier and his men were apparently getting away with their crime while their cousin remained dead for his sins. Leliana was already seeing to it the threat be dealt with, no more assassins would be sent from that quarter. And what was more, the Spymaster asked Josephine if she thought perhaps she could squeeze in another attempt at a lunch date with Eleanor, into the girl’s schedule—if not this time around in Haven, then the next, perhaps it could be a regular affair.

Afterward Cullen pulled Cassandra aside once Leliana and Josephine were gone. The Commander worried that he may be on a downturn of sorts, he had been so poorly that Eleanor had taken note, had insisted the man see Adan.

Cassandra made the point that Eleanor, day one of their training, had landed a slap against Cullen’s side, against his armor, and in earnest asked if he was alright—the girl was prone to worrying after him, all of them. In point of fact, Cassandra informed the man, Eleanor recently asked Cassandra who the Advisors were considering naming Inquisitor, she might just apply for the job she might just apply for the job she might just apply for the job, Eleanor’s first official order—bedtimes all around. Everyone would have to get good sleep and eat regular meals and take days off to rest and relax, stop every now and again to play with the baby Druffalos, it was only healthy, the girl insisted. Then she’d step down after an hour or something and let someone who ‘actually knows what they’re doing’ play Inquisitor. The anecdote worked to ease the man’s concern, made him smile and he agreed, Eleanor wanted to help however she could, even unnecessarily—she’d offered him her most beloved hat because she thought his head might be cold he informed Cassandra with a fondness in his smiling expression. It was nice to see... after such a hard day for him, of course. Though the man was undoubtedly handsome, when he smiled, she observed. Cassandra was watching him carefully, after all, as agreed. He was doing admirably in his position, dealing as he was, and until he displayed otherwise, Cassandra was satisfied with his work.

The Lieutenant was a surprising, but greatly appreciated ally, in helping Eleanor traverse the trappings of monthlies. When Cassandra arrived at Eleanor’s quarters the morning following the girl’s rather unfortunate milestone, prepared to peek in and see if the girl was awake, the Lieutenant was there, waiting with a cart of breakfast trays for them. He said he didn’t wish to intrude on their prayer time, he would certainly make himself scarce, but Eleanor may need assistance first thing waking up. Cassandra assured him he was welcome to join them, though she didn’t fully realize what he meant by ‘assistance’—she thought perhaps he meant the girl would want potion or to eat right away, but no. The man foresaw something that would very much distress Eleanor if she hadn’t had some preparation for it.

Lieutenant Aclassi knelt at Eleanor’s bedside and quietly woke her, Eleanor stirred and smiled wearily as he asked her how she was feeling, and she reported her back did feel rather stiff and the cramping was ‘going pretty strong’. The young man offered her a sympathetic nod, playing with a lock of her hair while he informed her just what he’d wanted to prepare her for.

Sitting up, first thing in the morning, when your monthly was upon you. He termed it, ‘the wake-up flood’. Cassandra realized yes, it was indeed unpleasant, sitting up and... well, especially if one was experiencing a heavy flow, bandaging usually ended up very quickly drenched in a rush of blood, though how the man knew so very much about it she was uncertain, but she was glad someone had thought to give Eleanor some warning. He figured it would alarm her, and what was
more he whispered some form of instruction to her that had her grimacing a bit, but she thanked him, seeming almost embarrassed and he told her not to ‘sweat it, if there’s some mess, it’s happened to the best of us’.

A strange turn of phrase, Cassandra thought, though Eleanor found no qualm with it. The Lieutenant rose and set about making himself busy retrieving the cart of food and bringing it in while Eleanor’s hands disappeared momentarily beneath her covers and there seemed to be some sort of wriggling—ahh, a lesson Cassandra had learned the hard way after months of ending up with bloody sleep clothes and bedding, she was adjusting her bandaging in case it had shifted in her sleep to ensure it would…catch everything—before she took a deep breath and sat up, nose scrunching up in displeasure and she shuddered a bit, cringing once she was upright.

“Gross,” she whispered to herself, something she would do often in the coming days, “Gross gross gross.”

Speaking over his shoulder as he began stoking the fire in the hearth, the Lieutenant said, “Just sit tight a second. Five-to-one if you’d like.” Cassandra wasn’t sure what five-to-one meant but Eleanor closed her eyes, mouthing silent words to herself, Cassandra recognized ‘bed, blankets…Cremisius, Cassandra, cart,’ the girl smiled a bit at the alliteration. Ahh. Grounding.

They prayed together first, the Lieutenant joined them, Eleanor seated between he and Cassandra. She had already stilled her mind, focused on her gratitude to the Maker for the progress the Inquisition had made, for their safety, that He continued to watch and guard Eleanor, when the girl herself laid her head on Cassandra’s shoulder. It was not an unwelcome intrusion, and the Seeker felt a hint of a smile tugging at her lips as she cracked an eye open to look at the girl.

“I love the Maker, like, a bunch, and I did all my big prayer things, but um. I’m kind of almost starving right now.”

After the past few weeks it was practically music to the woman’s ears to hear Eleanor eager for a meal, one she could stomach, that would not go half eaten or lost after the fact to illness. “Certainly, the Lieutenant brought breakfast,” Cassandra saw fit to give the man credit.

“ Miracle man!” Eleanor declared him, causing the man to snort, his cheeks reddening ever so as he rose to his feet and waved for Eleanor to remain seated. He retrieved two trays from the cart he’d brought in, placing them before Eleanor and Cassandra, before he got his own.

Eleanor’s tray bore another paper blossom, like the one he’d sent her on the Coast. The little token made the girl smile, blush as she leaned over and kissed the man on the cheek, thanking him.

Maker it was heartening to see Eleanor eating so well, a sight Cassandra had not seen in so long. She’d made such progress under the care of the Inquisition, it’d been disheartening to see the dip of her cheeks deepen, but it was nothing too detrimental, slight but noticeable to Cassandra’s eye, it would be righted soon enough. One benefit she found in confiding with that abhorrent Dwarf was that it had given her cause to do so in the other members of their party…not quite so embarrassingly, she’d hardly gone around and shed tears before the whole of their companions, but she’d asked they watched over how well Eleanor ate, and they’d all touched base with the Advisors on their efforts. The Iron Bull had hosted Eleanor in his camp, thankfully she was well enough to still accept his invitation, and he’d seen to it she ate several hearty portions of dinner, Solas had consoled her when she was heartsick over her fight with Varric and her missing Marehis so much that her magic expressed her distress to him, and he’d taken the opportunity to bring her a midnight snack, and the Lieutenant had assured her Eleanor had eaten well in all the meals they shared. Sera penned two separate sloppily written missives, addressed to ‘bossy-people’, one the
day Eleanor was in her potion-induced coma to panic about ‘Inky’ sleeping through the noon meal, and a second the following morning rejoicing that the girl had eaten several cookies between breakfast and lunch—a little drawing of cookies scratched into the parchment. Cassandra had been impressed with the lack of phallic symbols in her letters until Commander Cullen snorted and pointed out that the little drawing of three chocolate chip cookies had been placed, portioned to appear like...well. Two symmetrical cookies sitting atop an oval shaped cookie with an interestingly placed chocolate chip at the...ugh...tip. Cassandra was almost inclined to be impressed by her creativity, banal and crude as it was.

As they ate, Eleanor asked how Cassandra’s meeting had gone. Splendidly, Cassandra was pleased to inform her, though more than that she could not say. And gosh, did she know her hair was just so pretty? It was beautiful, and Eleanor ‘called dibs’ helping Cassandra braid it sometime. Eleanor’s own hair had been cleaned and conditioned while she was in the Charger’s camp last night—the Iron Bull’s doing, seeing fit to pamper the girl a bit, and that had apparently started a hair managing chain of sorts. The Qunari assisted with Eleanor’s hair, sitting close to the bonfire he’d cooked over, and when the Lieutenant took the opportunity to armor himself while guarding Eleanor, ‘Skinner’ came to check on Eleanor, which resulted in the Elf woman being sat down and the Human girl brushed her hair for her, because the Elf always brushed her own hair so roughly according to the Iron Bull. Eleanor thought perhaps she could persuade her to be gentler if she was shown how, and it’d been ‘so much fun!’

Laughter burst past the Lieutenant's lips and he had to take a moment, using a hand to cover his eyes, drawing his forefinger and thumb along the underside of them to drag away tears as they met to pinch the bridge of his nose. “Maker, Ellie! I was wondering why she was acting so weird this morning!” he gave an amused sigh, “I woke up to Skinner sitting at the end of my cot—proper heart attack material—taking the upmost care of brushing her hair from the bottom up and said,” the young man spoke with a stilted Orlesian-Ferelden accent, “I am being more gentle with myself,” he snorted, “like I was supposed to know what that meant! Guess she wanted me to make sure you knew she was following orders?”

“Oh gosh! It wasn’t an order or anything I just told her she should...yeah be more gentle with herself,” Eleanor supposed sheepishly. Then, “Snagging tangles hurts!”

And so did cramping, though Adan’s potions were rather helpful. As were the bandages the Lieutenant offered up, saying a woman named Dalish crafted them for apparently whenever anyone in the Chargers was struck with such a thing. Not meant for absorbing blood. They were strips of cotton with emblems emblazon upon them in fiery lettering, in a fashion that looked like the fire runes Cassandra had seen used to enchant weapons. They could be wrapped around one’s hips and would provide soothing warmth that would bring her some ease for several days before their enchantment wore off. It got the young man a rather exuberant hug.

When he stepped out while Eleanor changed to give her privacy and return the cart to Flissa’s, Cassandra assisted in wrapping the enchanted bandaging in place—she wanted to lay hands on the things first to ensure they weren’t dangerous, she felt certain the Lieutenant wouldn’t give the girl something he hadn’t tested for safety, but she certainly didn’t want to run the risk of burning the girl, and she’d never seen such a remedy before. Waterskins full of boiling water, and the like had been a common thing for Cassandra to use, but this was truly ingenious, the warmth from the bandage was pleasant, even when tested on tender flesh on the inner most part of Cassandra’s wrist it did not feel scalding, and it was something that could be worn throughout the day discreetly beneath Eleanor’s clothing.

Eleanor was delighted with it, performing a happy little wiggling dance once the bandaging was secure. Though she was rather candid with Cassandra that she thought it was most certainly
‘dumb’ that something your body did naturally hurt itself, Cassandra agreed. Eleanor hadn’t been one for listening to medical terminology the other night, but the Seeker did try to assure her it wasn’t uncommon an occurrence, informed her that cramping was normal and why it was happening as best she could with what knowledge she had on the subject.


“I don’t much care for it either,” Cassandra said handing Eleanor a clean tunic, “Everyone is different, but in my experience, monthlies have gotten more predictable and exceedingly lighter overtime. Too, there is potion that would regulate it, make it lighter, you could choose to alleviate it from occurring entirely—Adan would be more than glad to supply such potion to you once you’ve established a healthy enough cycle on your own.”

“If Mister Stitches doesn’t marry Adan,” Eleanor said, tugging her tunic on and smoothing it out, “I will.”

Maker preserve them, was everyone to be wed within the Inquisition? It was a holy cause, not a dating service.

Even so, she found herself smiling at Eleanor’s enthusiasm, “I’m glad it pleases you,” Cassandra said, “we could see to it Adan adds such to your regimen in future.”

“That’s so cool! Um…Adan’d make that for anyone in the Inquisition, right?” she asked.

“It’s standard medical care the Inquisition does provide its recruits,” Cassandra assured.

Eleanor nodded, smiling at that as she wriggled to get her leggings over her hips, buttoning them and she commented that her bottoms had been feeling tighter the past few days, Eleanor was albeit disappointed that the snugness of her leggings derived from bloating and not proper weight gain, though she did concede that that made sense and for some reason the information earned Cassandra a hug.

Oh, not that, the fact that Cassandra was merely present she realized then, as the girl let out a happy sounding grunt of effort from how tightly she hugged the Seeker and said, ‘I’m really super glad our schedules are back to normal! I missed you yesterday!”

Ahh. Somehow that felt…almost as if she were the one enduring their monthly cycle. The admission almost made her eyes itch, her throat feel a bit tight. Huh. It was still truth that they had not been separated since the Breach, save now for Cassandra’s time in interrogation with that vile Venatori agent. She’d been preoccupied with the task at hand and it felt…surprising. She hadn’t expected the girl to miss her of all things, though she realized if perhaps she had not been so busy, focused, she would have missed Eleanor as well. In fact, she had felt the pang of wishing to see her as she made her way to her quarters to prepare for bed, had considered checking in on the girl, just to see her even if she might be asleep.

She cleared her throat and hugged the girl back, “I am glad of it as well, Eleanor.” And then, as they did have a moment alone she wished to assess, “Leliana informed me, of how your meal together went. Are you alright?” she’d been safe physically of course but that did not speak for her peace of mind.

The girl’s head nodded against Cassandra’s chest plate and she said, “Cremisius kicked butt, big time. I got a little freaked out. But the Iron Bull helped. And Sera and Thom and Mister Stitches and Grim and Skinner. Oh!” she pulled back to look up into the Seeker’s face, “Did Cullen tell you about Skinner? I’m really, really glad he came down on her side of things the other day.”
“Indeed, I am grateful she rose to your defense. Cullen has assured me it was handled, nothing more will come from that, Eleanor.” Before the month was out those men would be joining Lord Berand and his mercenary crew to go investigate the Fallow Mire on behalf of the Inquisition. Strange reports had been coming from that quarter of Fade Rifts and undead, but they could only get limited confirmation of the former, the place had wildly been abandoned long ago. It may well be an area Eleanor would need to travel to in order to rid the world of Rifts, for now the area would serve purpose to get the men out into the field doing something useful besides hanging about Haven and flapping their gums about—ugh! She should not be so incensed, but it infuriated her beyond belief that they’d even thought to belittle Eleanor! The absolute nerve! “You…you were informed of what was said?”

The girl nodded, seeming unbothered by it, “Cremisius gave me a heads up, just in case something happened while we were out and about yesterday, he didn’t want me running into anything unprepared.”

She was grateful the man had thought to do so, but still some part of her wished the girl had been spared the knowledge. “I do hope you did not take their words to heart, Eleanor. Despite what anyone thinks on the matter you are in fact suitable to the role you play, and erm…”

“I’m not a raging slut, toying with the hearts of men and then playing victim when they get miffed at me over it?” she asked with a gleeful grin, like she considered it some laughing matter. 

*Raging sl— “Eleanor!”* Maker!

“What? Sluts not a bad word. Depends on whose using it and why whether it’s even mean or not,” the girl shrugged. “Doesn’t bother me, what those guys said outside the realm of the horrible mental images. It’s not like we’re friends or something, they work for the Inquisition, so we’re allies in that respect, but I don’t have to care much what they think personally.”

“Chancellor Roderick is certainly no friend of yours,” Cassandra offered up gently, somewhat in accusation, fearing the girl was being reticent to divulge just how very much the gossip had bothered her. But she said,

“Oh…well that was different. Even if Roderick hadn’t blamed me for surviving the Conclave, I was already blaming myself,” she admitted, “It didn’t originate with him, it started with me. Um. Cremisius helped with that actually. I felt badly, that everyone died, and I didn’t. But he explained that it doesn’t have to be one idea, it can be separate things. The Conclave was sad, and I can be sad over it. I survived and that’s okay, it’s alright to be happy about that.”

Cassandra pulled the girl close again, tucking her head under her chin. She thought the passage of time and the progress they were making toward the Breach would have taken that guilt from the girl. She wasn’t sure how Cremisius discovered Eleanor’s feelings on the matter but bless him. Cassandra had always believed it juxtaposition, placing the ideas together, that the tragedy of the Conclave further made Eleanor’s survival that much more incredible, wondrous, good. She’d never considered the girl might hear it as further accusation, the rotting cherry atop the devastation.

“It is not just ‘okay’ that you survived, Eleanor. I will always be grateful for it,” Cassandra said. They may have eternity to spend with the Maker, but she was not certain even with all that time she could express how grateful she was to Him that she knew this girl.

She didn’t have anything to say to that, but the girl blushed, hugging the Seeker more tightly.

When the Lieutenant rejoined them, Eleanor felt at ease informing him that Cassandra had
The girl did continue her training with Cassandra and the Commander, though breaks were more commonplace, and Eleanor was rather apologetic for them, but Cullen waved the concern off, he knew how very unpleasant monthlys were, he had sisters he explained.

“Oh gosh!” Eleanor gasped, absolutely delighted by the prospect that more Rutherfords existed, “Really?”

Their training session dissolved into Eleanor wanting to know all about the Rutherford family*. The man was pleased to speak with her of his loved ones, he seemed relaxed today. Lyrimum withdrawal not hitting him quite so fiercely, thankfully. Mia was his eldest sister, then it was him, his brother Branson, and little Rosalie.

“Rosie’s not so little anymore though. Maker, she’ll be twenty-five come Bloomingtide*.”

Cassandra was tempted to tease the man, that he should send his sister a letter, perhaps keep her appraised to his wellbeing? ‘Happy Birthday, I’m still alive’. But she stopped herself just short of speaking.

Lieutenant Aclassi had informed the advisors in his most recent report, that he discovered Eleanor had absolutely not a single clue, as to what a birthday was.

She knows that people are born, obviously, and that they keep track of their ages. But she did not know that they were a thing of celebration. A fact that was most…well, distressing, it had set the advisors and Cassandra into silence until Lady Josephine gasped and clapped her hands in excitement declaring, ‘Oh! We can throw her the most splendid surprise party! On the day proper! She shall not be expecting it!’.

The prospect was honestly…well Cassandra felt rather excited, almost giddy with it, anticipating what she hoped would be excitement and fun for Eleanor. She wracked her brain for ideas of just what to present her with—it was her sixteenth year, a year that marked her an adult in most of Thedas, and a first birthday for the girl was a rather wild balance. She had time, certainly, but she hoped to find something suitable soon.

When they were finished, the Lieutenant offered up Eleanor’s canteen and Cassandra was almost surprised when the girl turned her back to him popping up on her toes a bit and his gaze went directly to her backside, just a short moment before he leaned in closer to Eleanor’s ear and murmured an assuring, “All good,” to her before handing off her cloak and she thanked him.

Ahh, further assistance, Cassandra hadn’t thought to offer to check for obvious staining for the girl, and the young man hadn’t been gawking at her or anything, it would seem Eleanor felt comfortable enough with him checking for her, he’d been respectful enough.

“What’s next?” Eleanor asked, almost hesitantly. “I know last time I was given the option to learn from Thom but um…I know, I might have to ride around like,” she gestured vaguely to her lower half, “this at some point, and like if someone’s life depended on it or I had to go somewhere for the Inquisition I’d be on it. But, uh, as it is, I love Russell, but I will cry if I even have to climb into a saddle for something not of the upmost importance.”
“Well then, you’re in luck,” Lieutenant Alassi informed her, “magical training is up next. In the Chantry, about an hour from now, since your schedule says you might want to clean up, change out of your roughhousing clothes.”

“Why does Solas want me all fancy?” Eleanor sounded rather ‘miffed’ she would say, crossing her arms over her chest, she informed them, “I feel murder-y again maybe we should run some more drills.”

“As it so happens, Eleanor,” Cassandra offered up, trying very hard to keep her amusement to a minimum, was it so strange to be delighted by familiar ground? Cassandra would be perturbed to be made ‘presentable’ to anyone at the girl’s age, would seek violence even in a mild form to quell her anger even on a good day. But, “Madam de Fer is arriving back in Haven today, she’s requested to see you for a bit of magical training. She put no such request for your state of being but given her standards…”

“Oh!” Eleanor’s shoulders lost some of their tension and she nodded, “Yeah, I probably better get dressed up then, Madam de Fer is very…fancy,” she brightened a bit and said, “I’m glad she’ll be back, I haven’t gotten to see much of her really since she joined on. It was super nice of her to help us with Thom.”

Cassandra would not term the woman negotiating with the Empress to such an efficiency the exchange encouraged assassins to come Eleanor’s way as ‘super’ nor ‘nice’ even if the phrase were a part of her own vernacular. But she supposed it was not the woman’s fault, Cassandra had not been there, it was no doubt unavoidable.

Though she could, and certainly did find fault in her…well…

“I hope you do not mind the intrusion, Eleanor, but Madam de Fer asked that Commander Cullen and myself be present for your first lesson,” first few lessons, the woman had said, when she spoke of teaching Eleanor before they left for the Coast. As if she feared Eleanor would hurt her! The Grand Enchanter requested that Cullen suppress Eleanor’s magic for the duration of their lesson under a Seeker’s supervision. The prospect made Cassandra almost sick, that the girl could ever find herself cut off from something so vital to her survival, what was more it would be, in essence, attacking Eleanor and Cassandra could not think of a situation she could ever bring herself to allow someone to do so.

Cassandra had been forthright with her—Eleanor was not capable of being managed in such a way, and if Madam de Fer so much as made the suggestion to change that status, especially in Eleanor’s presence, Cassandra was not one for boasting of her abilities, but she assured the woman, it was not boasting to inform her that she could cause the magic to burn in her blood far quicker than she could cast that very precious little ice trick she pulled at her salon. She would not have the girl fear her allies, people she relied on for protection, ever using any of their abilities against her. She did not mind Madam de Fer having a measure of caution though. Never the less, when the woman wrote to inform them of her impending arrival, she still requested their presence, and Cassandra was not comfortable leaving Eleanor alone with such a woman who would seek to control and manipulate the girl. Cullen agreed, and together they worked up a response to the Enchanter, letting her know they would in fact be glad to attend, for Eleanor’s sake. Magical suppression would only occur if it became necessary, and they let it set the implication that they were far more likely to do so to Madam de Fer than they were to Eleanor, to keep the girl safe from the Mage if she sought to do something unseemly.

Eleanor seemed pleased at the idea that the Seeker and Commander would be joining them, “Oh gosh, really?” she looked to the Lieutenant and smiled, something wide and excited, “Well, I
better go get cleaned up and stuff! I’ll see you two in a bit, yeah?” she said to her teachers.

The Lieutenant looked wholly amused by something and his hand went to the small of Eleanor’s back as he leaned in close and Cassandra saw the word, ‘Smooth’, cross his lips, the word whispered in the girl’s ear before he escorted her from the practice field, back through Haven’s gate.

Smooth?

Had…had…were…

Had they coupled? The young man had exhibited a great deal of understanding and comfort with Eleanor’s current state, was the girl so eager to be alone with the Lieutenant for privacy sake? Thought perhaps Cassandra would be occupied with Cullen, preparing for Vivienne’s lesson and they could—

Oh. Cassandra. Occupied with Cullen.

Oh dear.

Oh Maker, most high.

That…that conniving, meddlesome, absolutely fool-headed—

“Cassandra?” the Commander’s hand was on her arm the man addressing her with some level of concern. “Is something the matter?”

Oh, most certainly. Matchmaking. That horrible, horrible child had been playing matchmaker this entire time! Eleanor had shown substantial improvement in her fighting abilities as they traversed the Hinterlands, but upon their return the girl suddenly began insisting upon witnessing further demonstration than what she had even required when they first began instructing her. The girl had even asked Cassandra if she believed the Commander to be handsome—at the time the Seeker thought perhaps the girl had a bit of a crush on him.

That horrible child, terrible and precious and blessed and eerily perceptive—was it her magic? Had it prompted her in this way? Solas and Marehis were rather well suited for each other—bah! Just what was Cassandra supposed to do with this?! She was a grown woman, she did not get ‘crushes’ but she did have a certain…measure of…infatuation perhaps where the Commander was concerned—she was only a woman! The man was…well most did find him markedly dashing, handsome. What was more he was of strong character, firm in his convictions, and there was even some element strange though it was of…well she often found his regard for Eleanor, seeing how he cared for her, the pride in his expression when the girl conquered a new lesson or the way he was so capable of speaking easily with her of casual things even making her laugh with what were honestly some of the worst jokes Cassandra could care to hear, these things endeared him to her, set a soothing warmth in her chest.

But it would be highly inappropriate! The entirety of the Inquisition required that they keep their focus, do nothing that might cause discord within their ranks as relationships so very often do. And the last thing the man needed at this time in his life was courtship!

“I merely have a headache.” A ginger-haired, green-eyed, five-foot-tall, headache she could strangle or…or possibly hug, she was not sure. Maker, did she have some attachment to the Commander in such a way? Could they somehow benefit from further—no, foolishness all around!

“I understand,” Cullen said, “It isn’t ideal, being at odds with Madam de Fer. I do promise
you Cassandra, as far as Eleanor is concerned you and I are of one accord,” he vowed sincerely, “If the Grand Enchanter has such qualms with it, you needn’t worry you would be alone in defending our stance, she can simply withdraw her offer of training the girl. Solas has been proving adequate as instruction enough for her magically.”

Of one accord, Maker preserve them. “Thank you, I am glad you would not discount my conviction that Eleanor needn’t be bound in such a way,” she sighed, focusing on the matter at hand, “I do hope Madam de Fer can find it within herself to teach Eleanor, the girl seems to thrive with tutelage and there are several branches of magical study, Solas alone cannot give her an adequate education in them all. While she seems to have an affiliation for Spirit magic that may derive solely from circumstance, she has not had the opportunity to explore other forms of magic.” The Commander snorted in amusement then, causing Cassandra to raise a brow at him, “Whatever could be so very amusing?”

“I was thinking the same thing—it has been on my mind these past few days how just to convince Madam de Fer to find Eleanor an adequate student, was just about to say as much and… well, it struck me that we would sound rather a lot like parents fretting over getting their child into an exclusive finishing school,” he observed laughingly. “I believe my mother baked brownies to take along to their interview with the headmaster of the school Mia went to.”

Cassandra grunted. “I have no such ability for baking,” she assured him.

“Neither did she,” the Commander returned, “I believe the objective was to threaten the man—let our darling Mia in or be forced to eat brownies you’ll break your teeth on.”

Ahh. “Threats I can manage.”

“Very good,” Cullen said, “Shall we head to the Chantry? We could take the path ‘round the Tavern, stop in at Adan’s if your headache ails you,” he offered lightly.

“I’m well. You are…feeling better today?” she asked.

“Yes. A wonder what adequate sleep does,” he said as they headed for the gate, “I prepared for bed rather early last night. I suppose I’d prefer I regulate my own bedtime than risk Eleanor seeking Inquisitor status to enforce one.” And then, with some measure of added mischief, “Though I must admit I regret I missed all the excitement last night. Varric filled me in over breakfast this morning, he informs me…is it called periwinkle, the color of your robe?”

Oh, she could certainly murder that Dwarf.

“A visit to Adan’s can still be arranged,” Cassandra promised him.

“Seeker, are you blushing?”

“Would you prefer he treat a busted lip or a broken nose?”

“Dealer’s choice,” he supposed, his voice warm, teasing.

Maker was he…? He was flirting! He was flirting, wasn’t he? Just how long had that been going on? Had he done so in front of Eleanor? Was that why she had such ideas in her head? Had… had Cassandra herself been flirting, even inadvertently with the Commander? Surely not!

She did not punch the man in the face. But she did give him a solid shove that had him laughing at her as he stumbled momentarily. Somehow that made it worse, like he’d found her response endearing and she might just…not…hate that. And she hated that.
Now was certainly not the time to be considering such things, they had work to do. Madam de Fer would be arriving soon, and she did truly wish to make sure everything went smoothly.

Lady Montilyet was a blessed woman. There was an alcove in the Chantry where Madam de Fer had a bit of an office space—a well-lit area with desk and chair for the Enchanter to study. When they arrived at the Chantry, Josephine was seeing to it that the place was tidy, a tray of tea sitting on the desk, and the woman had lit candles that smelled of...roses Cassandra ventured a guess, the things were popular in Orlais, it was a pleasant enough scent. There was appropriate seating for their lesson, a chair set aside for if perhaps Eleanor’s bodyguard cared to take a tactical seated position during her lesson, and she had made a point—the chair Madam de Fer favored was seated to the right of the desk, while two chairs sat on either side of a high stool, perfect for being seated while a staff was holstered to one’s back, to the left. Cullen and Cassandra would be seated physically on Eleanor’s side, a clear message to the woman in and of itself.

“Leliana says Madam de Fer will be here shortly. Does everything look alright to you, Cassandra? Porcelain was the best I could find in Flissa’s collection,” Josephine gestured to the tea set.

She certainly wasn’t any great authority on the matter, but, “It is all very lovely, Josephine, you needn’t concern yourself. You’ve done well, thank you.”

“I would not wish to impose, but I thought...well perhaps since we have a War Room meeting this afternoon with Eleanor, and she is feeling so poorly, we could keep her within the Chantry—after her lesson with Madam de Fer we could congregate either in my office or the War Room and have lunch together, the Advisors, and Eleanor?” the Antivan woman proposed, “That way she would not have to go back out into the cold, walk to the Tavern for lunch, only to come back for her meeting.”

Ahh, this she certainly could answer with some surety. “I’m certain Eleanor would be delighted,” Cassandra said, “my schedule is agreeable to such a thing.”

“Mine as well,” Cullen said.

“Excellent—oh!” Lady Montilyet looked about as if to make certain they were alone and then she drew closer to the warriors, her hands reaching out to rest on an arm from each of them, as she whispered—badly, but a valiant effort as if she were truly trying to be covert, “Marehis has made contact. Her missive came in, to Leliana, ten minutes ago, making her return trip through Orlais.”

A sigh of relief heaved in Cassandra’s chest, “Thank the Maker.”

Lady Josephine nodded in agreement, “Yes, Eleanor will be so pleased,” she sighed contentedly and then, almost shyly she probed, “Leliana had reports this morning of um, Lady Eleanor’s introduction into womanhood last night,” she was blushing, seeming almost giddy as she asked, “is it true she erm, proclaimed her love for all who work with her?”

Ahh. Cassandra had found the entire display bemusing, the poor girl had been so very afraid she’d lost that...ugh, Varric’s regard, only Eleanor could be so angry with someone it drove her to shout about how much she loved them. “She did, rather loudly, I’m surprised the din did not wake all of Haven. She listed just about every single person in Haven she has regular contact with, including each and every one of her Advisors.”

“Listed?” Cullen asked.
“As people Eleanor loves.”

“Oh ahh,” the man wrenched a hand around at the back of his neck nervously, cheeks going a bit pink, a small smile on his lips he almost looked flustered though, “Should I…we…anyone ahh address that? Speak to her of our own,” he cleared his throat, “regard? Or would that embarrass her, do you think?”

“It might, perhaps,” Cassandra said, “it was rather a…moment of passion for the girl, she was overwhelmed and venting after a fashion. But it is your prerogative of course, and certainly should Eleanor chose to bring it up to you…”

“I’ll sound like a total sap if she does,” Cullen sighed, “Maker help me I love that girl.” Josephine nodded in agreement.

Maker help her, that was…that was obvious enough she supposed but hearing him say as much was rather a lot like when Eleanor said such things—that she loved or missed or was proud of Cassandra—it was almost overwhelming how very pleased she was at his regard for the girl.

And then the Chantry doors swung open and Cassandra almost shuddered. She did not need to turn around to know just who had entered, even the swing of the doors sounded pretentious though she was certain the woman would not deign to open a door for herself.

She hadn’t. The Iron Bull was acting as an escort of sorts, for Madam de Fer, carrying her luggage for her as well. The Qunari man looked almost chagrined, like a child fearing chastisement from a Chantry Mother.

“Madam,” Bull said, offering her a bow as she released his arm and came gliding into the Chantry.

“My dear Lady Seeker, Commander Rutherford, Lady Montilyet darling!” Vivienne offered them each a peck on the cheek—nothing quite so welcome as Eleanor’s—they were airy and false, a polite gesture of sorts just ghosting the skin of her cheek over theirs making grating little ‘mwahs’. Disconcerting to say the least.

Was it reasonable that of all the people in their party, the likes of Sera, Varric, and Thom Rainier outranked the Grand Enchanter as far as Cassandra was concerned?

“Do pardon my state, I only just got in,” the woman said. She certainly did not look like she was fresh from arduous travel, she was immaculate from head to toe, regal as ever as she dusted imaginary dirt from her hips before settling her hands upon them in a stance that struck Cassandra more like a pose than mere body language.

Yes. Very bottom of the list. She actually, admittedly, liked Sera. Varric was on the thinnest of ice after hurting Eleanor. And loathe that she was that the man was even allowed within a stone’s throw of the girl, she would gladly kiss Thom Rainier if it meant she did not have to endure such…had she said pretention? The woman was pretentious.

“You are lovely as ever, Madam de Fer,” Josephine offered politely. “I hope your travels were pleasant?”

“As they can be,” the woman said sounding put-upon. “I say Haven is rather an inconvenient location, could the Inquisition not benefit from relocating to a more central area?”

“Eleanor did warn you that you may find Haven to be unpleasant,” Cassandra saw fit to point out. “You were quite insistent you could endure it.”
The Iron Bull was staring rather wide-eyed between the Nevarran woman and the Grand Enchanter like he was restraining himself from calling for them to fight. Maker, Cassandra was supposed to be amicable, creating a peaceable environment for Eleanor, persuading Madam de Fer to be comfortable teaching the girl—and too, make certain herself that she was comfortable with the woman teaching Eleanor. Though perhaps making her uncomfortable with Cassandra’s presence would do just that—make the woman decline any such observation from Cassandra and Cullen in future because she found the Seeker so very unpleasant, instilled with the fear of the Seeker’s wrath should she do anything to Eleanor’s harm. That would certainly solve both worries.

“I uh, best be going,” the Iron Bull said, an appreciated effort to stop any further confrontation, and he held out the hand that bore the Mage’s suitcase.

“Set that down over there—gently mind,” Madam de Fer commanded as the Qunari crossed the hall and placed the suitcase by the woman’s desk, with the upmost care.

“It was a pleasure meeting you, Madam de Fer,” he said offering a bow to the Human Mage before he took his leave. Cassandra almost felt annoyed on the Iron Bull’s behalf, being made to play manservant for the woman even before she said,

“Oh yes, darling, be on your way,” Vivienne dismissed him with a fluttering wave. Not so much as a thank you.

Bull made to leave though he did stop once the Chantry doors were open, and Cassandra heard the soft rumble in his chest before he said, “Imekari,” ahh Eleanor. The Qunari actually knelt to address her, “you look beautiful, boss.” Cassandra could not see Eleanor over the man’s shoulders, but she could see him raising the back of her unmarked hand to his lips.

“Gosh!” the girl breathed bashfully, “Lady Josie recommended my clothes, Cremisius said. I’m meeting Madam de Fer for lessons—she’s back from Orlais today!!”

“You’re killing it, Ambassador,” the Iron Bull complimented over his shoulder sending the Antivan woman blushing. And then he said, “Introduced myself to Madam de Fer. She’s in and uh,” he glanced over his shoulder at the woman and then turned back to Eleanor and Cassandra caught just the slightest glimpse of his hands splaying before his chest shaking* in what seemed to be a signal of sorts. “Enjoy you’re uh, lesson.”

Whatever it was made the Lieutenant snort while Eleanor giggled, “Thanks, the Iron Bull!”

The Qunari departed leaving way for Eleanor and Lieutenant Aclassi to enter the Chantry and…well.

Cassandra had always abhorred her aunts’ constant berating of her to pretty herself up, wear dresses, but she almost wondered now if they had some point. Seeing Eleanor, there was a sort of aching swell in her chest like pride-mixed adoration. It was most certainly not a ballgown by any stretch of the imagination, paired with her staff holstered to her back, but Eleanor was wearing one of the few dresses Madam Florna had seen fit to make for her, a similar cut as to what Lady Montilyet wore only the sleeves were not puffed, soft tufts of fabric that ran down the girl’s arms, the dark blue material cinched just below her bust, fell cleanly to her knees, warm woolen stockings peeking out over her boots, a bit snow covered on the bottoms but she’d seemed to have taken an opportunity to clean them before she buttoned them up to her knees. Someone had braided the girl’s hair, let it hang over her shoulder and the paper blossom she’d been given that morning was somehow pinned to sit at the very top of the braid by her ear.

Had she ever in her life felt the need to use the term ‘adorable’ out loud? She was struck
with the urge to inform Eleanor she appeared as such, just beautiful, yes she could see why the Iron Bull had saw fit to say so.

“My dear Lady Eleanor you look just darling,” Madam de Fer crooned, going to her and giving her one of those air kisses, which Eleanor returned with an authentic kiss to the woman’s cheek, catching the Mage off guard, but she merely smiled politely and as she stepped back informed her, “Your dress is lovely.”

Eleanor seemed excited about that as she said, “Thanks!” and then her hands disappeared into the sides of her dress, by her hips, “It has pockets!”

Maker preserve them all, guard and protect this most precious girl. Cullen physically flinched as he seemed to catch his laughter in his chest, coughing a bit, Lady Montilyet pressed the back of her hand over her lips to contain her amusement and the Lieutenant was red faced as he turned away arms akimbo and he seemed to be holding his breath like that was the only way he would keep from laughing.

For Madam de Fer’s part she stared at Eleanor like she’d just spoken some foreign language, mouth working before she said, “How splendid. And your hair, my lady, who in Haven is your hairdresser?”

“Marehis usually,” Eleanor said, “but today, Mister Stitches did it!”

“Mister…Stitches?” the woman seemed out of her depth like perhaps she thought the girl so juvenile she had an imaginary friend she was trying to insist had done her hair.

“He’s the Charger’s Healer—he came to check on me after my training session this morning. I was just getting ready to leave for our meeting and he offered to help me with my hair—he keeps his hair super short, but he said he used to let it grow out a lot like mine, only his doesn’t curl up quite the same way, he used to twist it into locs.”

The Lieutenant looked wholly amused by the mental image of his company healer with locs as long as Eleanor’s curls. It actually boggled Cassandra’s mind in truth.

“And your…accessory here, whatever did inspire you my dear?” Madam de Fer asked pointing ever so to the flower in Eleanor’s hair, her tone was pleasant enough but something in it told Cassandra exactly what the woman thought of Eleanor running around with paper in her hair.

“It’s a peony!” Eleanor told her, “Cremisius makes them for me and I thought it’d be nice since you like them so well.”

“Oh, how quaint. Cremisius is…?” uncertain as to whom Eleanor was referring.

“Lieutenant Cremisius Aclassi, Bull’s Chargers,” the man himself said offering the woman a respectful bow, “Acting as bodyguard for the Herald this week.”

“You’re a Tevinter?” asked, sounding mildly scandalized.

“Only on the weekends,” the Lieutenant assured her drily. Ahh, his glibness deflated Eleanor’s outright indignancy, the girl had been ready to rise to his defense, but her eyes sparkled with amusement and she had to bite her lip to keep from smiling. Too much, at least.

Madam de Fer did not seem to take offence at his tone. “Ahh. Well I am grateful you guard our lady’s life and apparently craft her fine origami wares. Lieutenant.”
Lady Josephine cleared her throat, “It is wonderful to see you, Eleanor, I am most pleased you’re so well,” she said as she came forward and gave the girl a quick hug, an added warmth in her expression as she her fingers lightly ghosted over Eleanor’s braid as she informed her, “Madam Florna will be delighted with how your dress has turned out, do you like it?”

“Oh, yeah I mean I haven’t worn a dress in forever so it’s a little different but comfy and pretty,” Eleanor enthused, spinning around once on the ball of one foot so the skirt flared out around her knees, the Lieutenant chuckled lightly, his hand at her elbow as she came to a stop to brace her incase she’d knocked herself off balance. “It’s got pockets and twirl factor, I’m pretty sure it’s the best dress ever,” Eleanor concluded and digging into one of the pockets she withdrew one of Seggrit’s cookies, offering it to the Ambassador as thanks.

Lady Montilyet’s smile seemed almost uncontrollable as she accepted the snack in hand. “Thank you, Eleanor, I am so glad you’re pleased with it! I must be going now, but I will see you later,” she assured.

“Oh good! Have a wonderful day, Lady Josie!” Eleanor gave the Antivan woman a little wave and then her attention returned to Vivienne, “I’m so glad you’re back safe. Thank you very much for going with Marehis and Scout Harding to the Oasis! And for negotiating with the Empress for me, I really appreciate it.”

The woman was still staring at Eleanor’s hip like she was mildly concerned what all the girl was keeping in her pockets, and she certainly didn’t seem to think cookies were an appropriate accessory by any means, but she met Eleanor’s eye and assured her, “It was no trouble at all, my Lady, Halamshiral is lovely this time of year. And I must say I am so very pleased with your decision in that regard, Eleanor. It was a very bold first move within the Game, you’ll be the talk of the courts for months, and you chose wisely, further endearing the Empress to our cause.” And then, motioning toward her alcove the Mage said, “Come, let us sit. There appears to be tea.”

“Allow me,” Cassandra spoke quietly as she brushed passed Cullen to take the seat closest to the table, and the man gave her a small, grateful smile. It was an open enough space but with the wall so close, boxed in between Eleanor, with Madam de Fer before him the man may feel a touch claustrophobic*, as he was prone to. As it was, sitting on the other side of Eleanor he had the open space of the Chantry hall at his side and could even step out if need be.

No sooner were they seated then Eleanor was offering the Seeker and Commander cookies as well, because it would be rude just giving Lady ‘Josie’ one and ‘gosh, Seg gave Cremisius so many this morning!’ So, Cassandra and Cullen accepted, and the Seeker watched with some measure of amusement as Madam de Fer took her seat, the image of prim and proper, only to be struck with momentary confusion and uncertainty as to how best to proceed when the girl was offering her up a sugary treat from her pockets of all places.

The woman cleared her throat and using index finger and thumb, with a motion that seemed tentative like she thought the thing might bite her, Madam de Fer accepted the offered treat, “Thank you, my lady.”

“They’re really good!” Eleanor promised the Enchanter before saying over her shoulder, “No cheating!”

“It’s not something you can really cheat at, El,” the Lieutenant said.

“Oi! You don’t get paid for backtalk, Aclassi!” Eleanor sassed before throwing a cookie over her shoulder, Cassandra turned in her seat, the Commander following suit to see the young man standing with his back against the Chantry wall behind Eleanor, where he could watch the
proceedings and have a clear view of anyone coming or going in the hall, though with a cookie sailing through the air at him, the Lieutenant took a few steps forward, face upturned to catch it deftly in his mouth before stepping back and leaning casually against the Chantry wall, grin on his lips as he chewed.

“Did he get it?” Eleanor asked excitedly.

“Indeed,” Cassandra was bemused to report, starting to feel out of depth, herself. She wasn’t entirely certain she should just allow the girl to wreck her own special brand of havoc, break Madam de Fer into the reality that Eleanor considered her a party member. Not a noble ally she had to play politician with, but merely a potential friend she could play with, or around at least, befriend in the pure honest way Eleanor made friendships. Though, Vivienne would certainly have to get used to it, especially if she truly planned upon actually acting as a party member and joining Eleanor in the field, the girl was hardly going to adhere to such a role of propriety around the clock to appease the Enchanter.

“Excellent catch, Lieutenant,” Commander Cullen commended the man, the Tevinter executed a quick bow.

Eleanor giggled before popping a bite of cookie into her mouth, returning her focus to Madam de Fer who had yet to consume so much as a morsel of the one offered to her, but under Eleanor’s delighted, expectant gaze the woman took a breath, and took a dainty bite from the snack, and seeming satisfied that it wasn’t disgusting, she carefully finished the thing off in a few polite bites. She seemed to take the opportunity to resettle herself in the situation and attempt to take charge again.

“I have been informed that congratulations are in order,” Madam de Fer said as she poured their tea, an almost unexpected motion but Cassandra supposed there wasn’t a servant around to do so. She offered Eleanor the first cup seated on a small plate, which the girl took very carefully nodding her thanks and looking interested in just what Vivienne thought was worthy of congratulating. “The Iron Bull, is it? Yes, I had him relay Haven’s goings-on in my absence and he tells me that you, Lady Eleanor, have received your very first blood.”

Eleanor smiled and said cheerily, “Thanks, I hate it!” before sipping at her tea.

Cassandra could hear what almost sounded like wheezing coming from the Lieutenant, as it was the Seeker nearly choked as she worked to swallow her own drink of tea.

“It is all part of growing up my dear. Though it does raise some measure of concern no doubt,” Madam de Fer said, taking a delicate sip of her tea, the motion seemingly meant to act like a dramatic pause than anything else, “given you are an Apostate,” the word held mild disdain, skepticism. Madam de Fer had been rather candid with the Advisors with her displeasure when she discovered Eleanor had never been a Circle Mage, but an Apostate the whole of her life.

Eleanor shrugged. “I mean yeah it was kind of crazy last night, I kinda thought I was dying,” she admitted humorously, as if she found the misunderstanding to be funny in retrospect.

“That you were not possessed in your panic is nothing short of a miracle my dear,” Madam de Fer assured her, “and we cannot have you relying on miracles.”

“Oh, gosh. I didn’t have any problem with demons. There’s none nearby around Haven much and even if there were it wasn’t like I would have been possessed. Demons don’t have anything I want.”
“Anyone in a desperate enough situation is susceptible to the allure of demon assistance my dear.”

“Nope. Sorry,” Eleanor said, “No offence, but if you think demons could ever give you anything worth having, you’ve got the entire wrong idea about them.”

The woman raised an eyebrow at that, “Seeker Pentaghast informs me you struggled against demon possession in the Hinterlands. You were not tempted to accept its offer, possession in exchange for the lives of your companions? For their revival in the event of their deaths?”

Cassandra had never considered a teacup a weapon, but she had the sudden desire to break the thing in her hand to hue a sharp edge she could lash out at the woman with. The absolute nerve to so blasé bring up a horrific event for Eleanor—

“Absolutely not, not even for a second,” Eleanor sounded appalled. “I would never wish something like that on my friends, on anyone!”

“You would not wish their survival upon them?” Madam de Fer posed in sardonic tones, it came off a touch too mockingly to Cassandra’s ears.

“Is that what you think would have happened?” Eleanor asked, sounding less shocked and more like she was concerned about the woman, like perhaps Madam de Fer did not know something very important, very basic about demons. The girl was explaining, very gently like it was vital the woman be taught to understand, “Madam de Fer, demons do not fix things. If I’d agreed, even if the demon had spared my friends or brought them back to life, it would be horrible. There would be something wrong about it, their lives would likely be short and miserable after that. Why possess only me when they could work their way around my party possessing them one by one as they call on them for further help? If they’d been dead there was nothing I could do about it, and if they weren’t if it was a trick, eventually the demon would be dead. And if neither of those happened well, I wasn’t going to let him have me—I only struggled because I was injured, badly and recovering, and my magic was pretty tapped out at that point. Otherwise I’d have just been able to shrug him off like normal. It was a matter of waiting until I was better, or one of us dying.”

“Shrug him off? Just like that? That is foolishly bold of you to assume. My understanding is it was a rather formidable demon, capable of ensnaring an entire pack of wolves before he set its sights on you.”

Eleanor shrugged, and Cassandra wondered if perhaps the action was meant to be cheeky, shrugging Madam de Fer off as it were, and she said, “You weren’t there, and you aren’t me. I’ve only ever had a hard time against demons when I’ve been really hurt, and I’ve kept out things a lot worse than some Great Terror on a power trip.”

“Truly? Do pray tell,” Madam de Fer invited, with a wave of her hand.

“Tell…?”

“Enlighten me,” the Mage elaborated, “just what was your closest encounter with demon possession, what exactly is the great standard set by the Herald of Andraste?”

“Pass,” Eleanor said, a firmness to her tones, fists flexing in her lap.

“I beg pardon?”

Eleanor’s Marked hand went around to the back of her head like she meant to scratch her scalp but in the peripheral of her vision, Cassandra saw she merely clenched her hand three times—
a signal to the Lieutenant, Leliana had seen fit to mention to her—as she said, “I’m passing on your question,” she dropped her hand back into her lap, “I’m not comfortable answering it, so I’m not going to. You can either move on or we can end this discussion right here.”

That was alarming to say the least—not the girl drawing firm boundaries, that was her right and Cassandra was admittedly proud she could do as much for herself—but Eleanor had never been so reticent to share something of her past, even in those first few days of getting to know each other after facing the Breach. It had been a tenuous process, Eleanor hesitantly padding up to the Seeker at least once a day and engaging her in conversation in an effort to…move past the incredible awkwardness that was only natural when one was faced with befriending someone they once imprisoned. It was almost difficult to picture having any hesitancy to speak with Eleanor now, but the process at the time had been little more bearable than pulling a rotting tooth. Cassandra had initially feared getting to close to the girl, had been worried perhaps she resented her earlier treatment and was merely trying to dredge up personal information to use against the Seeker later, but Eleanor was always forthright with her and she hesitantly returned the favor. Her demon encounter in the Hinterlands had been horrific but she spoke of it freely, even to Sera when the Elf girl albeit rudely, wanted assurances of her own that Eleanor wasn’t ‘going to go all demony’ on her, somehow her denial of elaborating on a past painful experience with a demon made Cassandra curious, gave her questions she wouldn’t dare ask unless the girl brought it up to the Seeker on her own accord, but still she wanted to comfort the girl if she could. As it was, Cullen had also heard the slight tremble in Eleanor’s voice when she first said she would ‘pass’ on the Enchanter’s question, and he’d taken the girl’s unmarked hand in his own.

It was only when Madam de Fer looked like she might still press further that Lieutenant Aclassi’s voice sounded, “The Herald has plenty of other things that could use her attention today. If you’re done here,” backing up Eleanor’s willingness to walk away from their discussion if the Enchanter did not wish to cooperate.

The Mage smiled politely and changed her question. “Demons do not tempt you at all?”

“Not even in the slightest,” Eleanor assured. “They offer me things sure, but nothing I’d ever want, not from them. Imagine your problem or desire is like a remedy to patch up a wound that needs stitches—Demons will give you a bandage every time, something like a fix, that will eventually lead to you calling them back for help again because it doesn’t actually solve all your problems. People usually don’t get possessed on a first brush with a demon because demons have to work their way in—every solution they bring will be trailed after by another problem—probably worked into the fix by the demon themselves—so you’ll call on them again, and again, until they get you. You cannot ever accept anything from a demon—it is much better to either work your problems out on your own, or accept things that are out of your control, even if it means your death, than it is to take something from them that was never meant to work in the first place.”

Madam de Fer seemed thoughtful then. “Perhaps I was mistaken. I did not believe the Apostate Elf could teach you such a sound defense against resorting to blood magic. Scarcely a year with your magic, you were passably equipped to weather brushes with the threat of demon possession.”

Eleanor shook her head. “Solas didn’t have to teach me not to trust demons, I learned that years before the Inquisition. I’m sorry, why do you think I’ve only known of my magic for a year?” Eleanor asked, vocalizing the question for Cullen and Cassandra as well. Solas had shared with Madam de Fer Eleanor’s capabilities, her magical history at length those days when Eleanor and Cassandra had been deliberating in the War Room before leaving for the Storm Coast.

“I do not think that man has quite an accurate grasp on the Trade language, my lady,”
Madam de Fer haughtily sniped with a little grin that spoke of superiority, “He said you had been developing your magic for ten years before the Conclave. Obviously, he meant months. You are only fifteen after all—a little later than most*, many start as young as ten to twelve years of age, but then it would seem you are a late bloomer in many respects. There is no harm in that, as long as long as your magic is nurtured correctly, my dear, as I intend to do.”

She looked startled when Eleanor waved to her as if in greeting and reintroduced herself after a fashion, “Hi, Ellie, nice to meet you. Fade dreamed at five, been nurturing my magic on my own with the occasional help of the friendly neighborhood apostate. Solas speaks trade just fine, thanks. Dear.”

The Commander had to shift, arm resting on the arm of his chair, hand raised so he could press his lips to his knuckles to hide his smile. Cassandra was rather caught between schooling her own expression and her pleasure that Eleanor was not holding any pretense with the Enchanter—she could remain almost completely reserved but she was absolutely certain her eyes held her pride in the girl at her side for not wavering in her convictions even to the likes of someone as intimidating as the Grand Enchanter.

Madam de Fer leveled the girl a cool stare as she very measuredly said, “I will be forgiving with your tone Eleanor, as I do understand you may be finding yourself unbalanced at this time.”

“Nope,” little ‘pop’ of the ‘p’ as the girl assured her, “this is my regular balance, but you’re pretty new so I get you don’t realize that yet,” Eleanor returned casually, no trepidation in speaking against the Mage. “Speak disrespectfully to or of my friends Madam de Fer, I don’t much care what you do with my tone. Forgive it, return it, whatever, it’s yours that needs adjusting. Solas is one of the most intelligent men and most powerful mages I’ve ever met in my life, he’s had much more time with me and my magic to study and understand it, and you just discredited his knowledge on the matter because he’s an Elf, that is just insulting. I can get maybe thinking he misspoke because he’s a person and last time I checked we do that, but you barely need to have half a conversation with Solas to know he speaks Trade just as well as the rest of us—better than me any day. We played along and respected the conditions of the invitation you sent me in Val Royeaux, but you’re in the Inquisition now. Our salon. Solas is a valued member of our team, just like you. His worth isn’t less because of the shape of his ears, so you’ll treat him as such. Same goes for everyone else—if you belittled Marehis or were rude to her in any way while in the Oasis you better apologize and make things right, because I will absolutely not abide any disrespect toward her. Full stop. End of story, that woman does everything for me, anyone that messes with her will have to answer to me and I’m crafty. Sera’s the best archer anyone in the Inquisition’s ever seen, second only to Varric and that’s honestly because Bianca’s such an amazing weapon, and he can negotiate circles around the shrewdest businessman. And I don’t know what you said to the Iron Bull—who is absolutely without a doubt mad intelligent, and the best mercenary commander I’ve ever met—if you were rude to him, you should apologize, and you’re certainly not to speak down to him just because he’s Qunari. Same goes for Cremisius—his being Tevinter doesn’t make him any less an incredible asset to the Inquisition, and frankly I appreciate your efforts with the Empress, but it gave me an actual ulcer and I was almost poisoned over it, whereas Cremisius just gives me pretty flowers and saved me from said poisoning.”

“…I see,” Madam de Fer said working to formulate a response.

“Mmm, I don’t think you do,” Eleanor said. “See, what really miffs me—like most out of all of this—is that I’ve seen you and Cassandra cat-fighting it out with the glares and the stares this entire time,” Eleanor informed her, “but you won’t dare bring your grievances with her out in the open, you’ve been treating her with politeness and respect. You belittle people who haven’t done anything other than, in Solas’s case try to help you prepare for teaching me, but you won’t be up
front and confront the Human Seeker, who you’ve got an actual problem with. In case you haven’t realized I’m more than happy to talk my issues out with people, doesn’t matter that your Human or a Grand Enchanter, what matters is that you’re rude, classist, and racist, and then you go the extra step of not even brave enough to be up front about it. You dress it all up like graciousness, like you’re really putting yourself out to dare breathe the same air as someone you believe to be less than, oh don’t you deserve some grand reward,” Eleanor drawled before informing the woman, “I’m never going to have a tolerance for that. You’re a powerful ally, but that doesn’t mean anything if you compromise the work we do here because you can’t bring yourself to cooperate with your team mates. You can either treat everyone you work with, with respect, or you can go wait the Breach out back in Orlais. I’ll be sure to ask Lady Josie to write you when it’s gone.”

It was all vaguely similar to one of the few arguments Eleanor had had with Sera. The Elf girl had some measure of prejudice—against Elves mostly which struck Cassandra as rather odd—it was almost wild to see the girl railing at the Grand Enchanter in the same way she’d reprimanded her Rogue Friend. Cassandra was not certain just how well the Grand Enchanter would handle Eleanor lecturing her, was ready to put herself between the two should the woman seek to lash out at the girl in any way. But the Enchanter stared at the young Apostleate for a moment, eyes glimmering with something that looked pleased and surprised before she spoke, “The standards for my Salon, while admittedly biased were not based off of my personal views. It is simply how things are in Orlais, that does not make it a sentiment I believe in—it is merely how the Game is played,” Vivienne appealed. “I do regret I left such an impression on you.”

“Welcome to my game, Madam de Fer, the only one that matters if you’re going to work with me,” Eleanor returned offering the woman a small, kind smile, “Good news is, the rules are simple enough—play nice, or don’t play at all. Think you can handle that?”

Instead of answering Eleanor directly, she chose to speak loud enough so the young man she addressed could hear, “Lieutenant Aclassi, I do apologize for my earlier rudeness. You’ve done well to protect the Herald and I must say,” she said, looking to Eleanor, “I’m rather glad of it.”

“No problem,” the Lieutenant assured. “My pleasure really.”

“You’ll find no issues from me, working with the rest of your companions, Eleanor. I do realize my comment about Ser Solas’s grasp of Trade was…uncalled for. I assure you I didn’t discredit the man simply because he is an Elf. I discredited him because you are a girl. I’ve never heard of such a case, a child as young as five suffering Fade dreams,” Madam de Fer explained. “As for my qualms with Seeker Pentaghast it is she who is upset with me. I asked her here, along with Commander Cullen, because I wished for them to suppress your magical abilities for the duration of our lesson. They declined, obviously, and my request offended the Lady Seeker. I must say I’m surprised they still chose to accompany you.”

“Your request offends me as well, Madam de Fer,” Cullen assured. “For the record.”

“We saw fit to join Eleanor, not you,” Cassandra said, more so for Eleanor’s benefit—she did not want her to worry the Seeker and Commander had had a change of heart about suppressing her. “You cannot honestly believe we would allow her to be alone with someone who would wish to leash her.”

Eleanor took a deep breath, head rocking back and forth the way she did when she was mulling something over legs swinging—Maker her feet didn’t touch the floor, wasn’t she due a growth spurt at some point?—Cassandra wondered if the Enchanter would chastise the girl for her unladylike manner, her knees were together and the dress fell past them while she sat but Cassandra would have been reprimanded in a heartbeat if she did the same thing with one of her
aunts around.

“Cassandra, is anyone using downstairs for anything?” Eleanor asked after a moment of contemplation.

Their cells were vacant now—their traitors and assassin dealt with, Butler free and clear, wandering Haven, helping Leliana get her spies regrouped and everyone reassigned to their next jobs. But still that did not make her question any less strange. “…no, Eleanor. Why?”

“Cremisius!” the girl called over her shoulder, beckoning the man forward as she rose from her seat, cringing a bit and whispering to herself, “Gross. Standing.” And then, to Cassandra, “I promised Sera I’d do something sooo…I’ll go do that. You guys work out your stuff yeah?”

…work out their stuff? Did she not understand what the woman had said? “Eleanor, Madam de Fer wanted your magic bound—!”

The girl put a hand on her shoulder then, leaning in close to intone, “Cassandra, she thought I was new. But thank you for sticking up for me.” And then she kissed the Seeker on the cheek before doing the very same with Cullen as she passed him, though having his head level with hers she looked her bodyguard as if in question before looking at the Commander’s hair again, and the Lieutenant spared the man a look before shrugging and nodding.

“Eleanor?” Cullen asked.

The girl hopped backward, hiding her hands behind her back, eyes wide as she belligerently declared, “I’m not making you a hat!” before she grabbed the Lieutenant’s hand, the Tevinter man openly laughing as she pulled him away down into the Chantry basement to give the adults a private moment to argue if need be. And possibly apologize. To not have to do so in front of witnesses may bring them more easily, not sting their prides so very much. Though she did wonder what Eleanor could promise the likes of Sera from the Chantry basement.

“She has quite a way of cutting to the chase,” the Grand Enchanter commented. “Her Marehis gave me some forewarning I would have a lecture on my ‘elitism’ in store for me upon properly meeting with Eleanor, but I did not expect it to be quite so…” Madam de Fer smiled, something that seemed far more genuine than anything she’d done that day, “She’s a tenacious little thing. I believe I might like her,” and then, “I do apologize, Lady Seeker, Commander, for requesting she be suppressed. I assure you I genuinely believed her to have only had active magic for scarcely a year—I have seen Mages with even three, four years under their belts bring near-destruction with accidental magic, and those are people of the highest caliber, trained properly in a Circle.”

Ahh. Eleanor’s insistence that Vivienne thought she was ‘new’. That was…adequate explanation. Understandable, even, the woman feared Eleanor would have zero control, be prone to wild magic left right and center—in which case it was reasonable to desire having someone on hand who could put a stop to the girl’s power. Cassandra…Maker she felt foolish now. She, herself, had had quite a struggle coming to terms with the girl’s magical ability. She’d assumed the same—that Eleanor could not possibly have had more than a few years of experience with her magic before the Inquisition but working alongside the girl had proven her claims of a longer relationship with her power.

“Madam de Fer, I apologize for my candor with you, truly,” Cassandra said, “I did not realize your concern was born of misunderstanding.”

“I’m sorry as well,” Cullen assured. “You must understand, Solas informed us he’d briefed
you on the Herald’s magic. When you insisted upon suppressing her we feared it was out of some form of cruelty, taking an incredibly harsh, unnecessary approach to your lessons that we would not abide from anyone trying to teach Eleanor. Making her incapable of defending herself magically, in your presence.”

“I do see how that could sound…beyond abhorrent,” Vivienne agreed. Though she did see fit to question, “You’re certain of her history?”

“As we can be. And as you’ve seen, Eleanor is not deft in the art of unnecessary deceit,” Cassandra mused, looking to Cullen. “She is apparently, not making the Commander a hat, after all.”

Cullen shook his head, grinning ear to ear at the prospect. “Maker, that girl. She thought I was chilled yesterday,” Cullen sighed asking, “Does she even know how to knit?”

“No, but the Lieutenant is teaching her to do so,” Cassandra informed him, wearily, “it will likely be her first attempt at such a thing…the erm, quality…”

“Will be greatly appreciated,” the Commander insisted, in a way that made Cassandra certain the thing could be some ghastly garish color, have more holes in it than the heavens, and the man would wear it like it was the finest garment in all Thedas. Oh, Maker that was almost infuriatingly endearing was he doing that on purpose? “I swear she worries for me worse than my sisters.”

She did see fit to tease, “Does Eleanor know your favorite color? Or is the color of your ‘not a hat’ dealer’s choice as well?”

Oh, and he made certain she regretted it. “Maybe I should drop hints that my favorite color is periwinkle,” he proposed with an impish grin.

The nerve! “I hope it is…what is that horrible pink color Lady Josephine thought Eleanor might like? It’s popular with the youth in Orlais’ gentry.”

“Fuchsia,” Madam de Fer drily supplied, with some measure of derision, like it was a horrid unseemly disease as opposed to a color. “Please tell me the Lady Herald has better taste than that.”

“I should think so,” Cullen said, “She’s dressed herself since Marehis has been away, fairly well, and I must say while I missed out on the ro- excitement last night,” he chose his words carefully under Cassandra’s glare though it did not wipe the smile off his face, “you missed seeing Eleanor in purple—color of your armor and Leliana’s,” he said, tapping the lavender leather over Cassandra’s forearm. “It was very fetching.”

Madam de Fer seemed rather interested in their banter, eyeing the hand on Cassandra’s arm though she asked, “Where is Marehis? When we parted ways in the Oasis I was under the impression she would be returning to Haven shortly. Before my own return even.”

“Work for the Inquisition kept her in Orlais longer than she originally anticipated,” Cassandra explained.

“A pity,” Vivienne said as if it truly were such, huh. Perhaps the woman was forthright about her standing with Marehis, the women may have bonded in their time together. “She was so looking forward to seeing Eleanor again soon—she spoke of little else, so much I must say I feel almost as if I spent those weeks with the girl herself.”

Wishing to extend a peace offering of sorts, Cassandra listened closely to ensure she did not
hear the young people returning and then asked, “Did Marehis tell you Eleanor’s birthday?”

“She did, in fact,” Madam de Fer preened ever so, seeming excited at the prospect, “it may have lent inspiration to my latest bit of shopping.”

Ahh. That…Cassandra had been feeling rather a lot better about Madam de Fer’s regard for Eleanor now that they were past their confrontations and suppression misunderstandings, but somehow hearing the woman had gotten the girl a present was pleasing, even more so lessened the reluctance Cassandra felt with her. Was that all it took to improve standing with the Seeker these days? Show Eleanor the sparest bit of genuine kindness? Too, while she was almost jealous the woman could so easily know what she wanted to gift Eleanor, she seemed like she’d gotten to know rather a lot about the girl from Marehis—it gave Cassandra the idea perhaps she should confide in the Elf woman once she was back, she might have some idea of what Eleanor would like. She found herself smiling slightly, even as she said, “I would ask you to not bring up birthdays to Eleanor—living as she has, she’s never celebrated the day, we believe she does not even realize people do as such. The hope is to surprise her with a party on the day itself.”

Madam de Fer looked dumbstruck at the notion. And then, “Should any assistance be needed with arrangements, planning, I do have connections that could be of value.”

“Lady Montilyet is handling the better portion of party planning, but I’m certain if you offered she would gladly accept the assistance should she need it.”

The echoing clatter of boots skipping up the stairs and the jovial lilt of Eleanor’s voice announced her impending return, arm in arm with the Lieutenant who was chuckling lowly as he trailed alongside the girl.

“All better?” Eleanor asked cheerily as they joined the adults.

Cassandra nodded as Madam de Fer assured her, “Yes, my dear.”

“Great!” she squeezed her bodyguard’s arm before releasing hold of it, the young man acknowledging them with a polite nod before he returned to his post. Eleanor seemed to be returning to her seat, but she stopped just before Madam de Fer and leaned down to wrap her arms around the Enchanter’s shoulders in a hug. “I wasn’t trying to be mean or rude—we just all have to be able to work together, and I was encouraged to have a conversation with you later, not call you out at your own party. Later just didn’t happen until now. But I really appreciate everything you’ve done for the Inquisition so far and I am glad you’re back, I’m sorry if I made it sound like I wasn’t..”

Madam de Fer seemed patted the girl’s back albeit hesitantly, before Eleanor pulled away, sweeping her skirt against the back of her legs as she resumed her seat between Cullen and Cassandra.

“Think nothing of it my dear. I’m pleased we can move past it,” Vivienne assured her with a dismissive flutter of her hand. “Now. If you’re agreeable, I should like to ascertain your magical maturity for myself. Solas informs me you understand Barrier, yes? To the extent you needn’t a staff?”

Eleanor nodded, smiling as if pleased to hear the woman hadn’t just heard the Apostle’s explanation of her abilities and denoted it as forgettable, and was seeing fit to pull from it now as a credible source of knowledge. Madam de Fer held up her left hand. “Call the spell into your hand, do not strain yourself now, but attempt to match it to this,” the woman instructed, a glow of purple light blossoming in the palm of her hand, “as best you can.”
Eleanor held up her unmarked hand to mirror Vivienne’s and Madam de Fer’s eyes widened when the first pulse of barrier consumed the whole of Eleanor’s hand before shrinking down to fit in her palm.

More pride then, it almost felt strange to be so pleased over magic but seeing Eleanor so proficient made her feel as such. She supposed it wasn’t bizarre, she often found herself pleased when she saw Eleanor’s progress in her other realms of training, magic…perhaps magic should not be any different. It certainly didn’t feel different.

“You’ve…remarkable control,” Madam de Fer commented. “May I?”

Eleanor held out her hand to the woman and allowed her to examine the glow of Barrier more closely, and after she looked to Eleanor meaningfully, received a nod from the girl, the Enchanter very carefully touched her own barrier spell to Eleanor’s for a solid minute before pulling away and seeming…almost shaken, the woman took a moment to compose herself, she was silent in such a way Cassandra felt compelled to remain so as well despite the questions the interaction called to her lips, while the Enchanter poured herself another cup of tea. She sat and did not speak until she had taken five separate, neat drinks punctuated by moments of pause, draining the cup before she set it aside.

“Not quite as refined as what comes from Circle training but…more than passable my dear. Though I do find an almost disturbing oneness with the Fade in your magic. Tell me Eleanor, have you imbibed Lyrium before at all?”

Eleanor shook her head. “Nope! Back alley stuff’s dangerous, costs an arm and a leg to boot and I’ve never had an interest in it. Oh! Well like one time, I think?” and for a moment Cassandra was horrified the girl had tried Lyrium off the street but she said, “I was given Lyrium when uh…I woke up after the Conclave, right?” she asked the Seeker.

Ahh. “Yes,” Cassandra confirmed quickly, not wishing to delve into that matter at all. Though the girl labeling it as ‘one time’ did make her wonder, “Eleanor, you’ve not been using Lyrium?” that…didn’t sound right. Eleanor dealt with Fade dreams, nightmares, Lyrium* is what makes a Mage’s connection to the Fade so very intense that they dream in it consciously after their initial magical awakening, and Adan had been most gratified that the girl found his old potions master’s improved recipe for an advanced form of the stuff, made sure fresh was made for all their travels.

“They’re the glowy blue bottles in our caches, right?” Eleanor asked, when the Seeker nodded she said, “I keep some on hand in my field stash in case Solas runs out while we’re away from camp or on the road, and I’d totally use it if there was an emergency but um, it increases a Mage’s connection to the Fade and I’m already too close for comfort with it. I haven’t struggled much with Fade dreams since I first found my magic, but since the Breach, my Mark makes me Fade dream, s’why I use potion if I just want to straight up sleep, avoid the Fade—it’s not bad all the time I can use the time I’m sleeping to think about things or process things in a conscious way, but sometimes you just wanna sleep you know? Taking Lyrium would probably be counter intuitive to that.”

“The Mark causes you to Fade dream*?” Madam de Fer asked, aghast. And then, “Might I see?”

Eleanor nodded and offered up her Marked hand for the Enchanter’s examination, she practically pulled Eleanor out of her seat, the girl jolted forward jarringly as Vivienne took hold of her hand and brought it close, as it was the woman rose from her own chair to be closer, regarding the Mark now like it were some horrifying, gaping, gushing wound. When Eleanor displayed her
Mark as proof of her Herald status upon meeting Madam de Fer, the woman had brushed it off, aloof and charming about the entire thing…Cassandra had perceived it as the woman being uncaring or disinterested but she realized now she had been *afraid* of the Mark, not willing to show that fear in front of others. It was fear for herself, that the Mark might be a danger to her or others. But now she had no hesitancy to display the urgency fear placed in her, that it might be a danger to the girl.

Vivienne traced a finger carefully along the Mark, calling Barrier into her hand again she said, “I know no spell that would be compatible with your Mark, but I would attempt to examine it in such a way, if you have no objection. It is only a theory.”

Eleanor nodded. “It shouldn’t hurt you but be careful, yeah? Solas hasn’t examined it with anything other than Rift magic.”

Madam de Fer nodded and pressed her spell filled hand to Eleanor’s Marked one, the girl’s eyes went wide as she gasped in surprise though otherwise she remained still and silent as the woman examined her Mark, though Vivienne did not maintain contact for nearly as long as she had when examining the girl’s magic, and when she pulled away she shook out her hand for a second as if it stung.

“Eleanor? Vivienne?” Cassandra prompted. The Mages spoke in unison with conflicting answers. Vivienne’s quiet, shocked, “*It burns.*” Overlapping Eleanor’s surprised, “*It stopped burning!*”

“That thing is unnatural!” Madam de Fer proclaimed as she actually began to pace, out into the Chantry hall and back toward her desk *click click click click* the scrape of her heel as she turned, *click click click click,* and again.

“Eleanor? Has your Mark stopped burning still?” Cassandra asked quietly, some irrational-feeling bead of hope rattling around in her chest, like she knew what the answer would be but did not wish to believe it until the girl herself said it.

She shook her head ‘no’. “Nope! I think it just stopped interacting with my Magic because it got preoccupied with Madam de Fer’s. Sorry, I didn’t think it would do that—it’s never hurt anyone else before, promise!”

“I have never studied this ‘Rift magic’, it is not taught in Circles, but neither have I heard of it even from other quarters, you say Solas knows of it? Has used it to examine your Mark?”

Eleanor nodded. “In some of our lessons yeah. I don’t think the Mark burned him though. Are um, are you alright? Your magic doesn’t hurt, or anything still does it?”

“I’m well, it ceased burning at once when I stopped examining that thing,” the woman said though she still continued to pace, restlessly like she were anxious. When she neared the desk again, Eleanor reached out with her unmarked hand and took a hold of Vivienne’s hand, giving it a squeeze, thumb rubbing a soothing path back and forth along the back of the Mage’s hand, bringing her to a halt. Magic shone in the girl’s fingers before Madam de Fer returned the magical gesture, and Eleanor said, quietly, an almost-whisper, she seemed to speak to the woman’s Magic,

“You’re safe now, you interacted with something scary, but it can’t hurt you unless you reach out to it again. You’re safe, and so is your mistress,” and then to Vivienne, magic
disappearing from their joint hands the girl said, “It’s okay, my magic needs talking down too sometimes.”

“You talk to your…” the woman sounded appalled at the idea even as she flushed with embarrassment, clearing her throat and very primly resuming her seat hands clenching as she placed them in her lap. “I do apologize, I’ve never encountered such a thing before.”

Eleanor shrugged. “It’s no big deal really, happens to everyone I think. Er. Well, everyone who’s a Mage that is—I almost had a full-blown panic attack day one training with Cullen and Cassandra,” she shared, an effort to lessen the woman’s shame. “Magic was absolutely terrified of Cullen. It was certain he was using our lessons as some sort of ruse to lure me in for the kill. Like he couldn’t get away with just outright murdering me, but he might be able to go ‘whoops I was teaching her a move and my hand slipped, my bad!’ or something,” she reported humorously, and she rested her head on the Commander’s shoulder assuring him, “Magic likes you fine now though, thinks you’re just neat!”

Ahh. Cassandra had wondered why the man had seen fit to take Eleanor aside that day, make her laugh, he’d seen her trepidation with him where Cassandra had thought the girl merely breathless from still recovering after the Breach, or perhaps nervous to learn a new skillset. Maker bless him.

The man wrapped his arm around Eleanor’s shoulders, rubbing her arm as he spoke into her hair, “Well, you’re certainly not to tell anyone, but I think your magic’s neat too,” he teased.

“Oi! What about me?”

“You’re alright I suppose,” he understated warmly, smiling as he gave her arm a squeeze and pulled away.

“Rude!” Eleanor accused laughingly.

Cassandra shook her head. Whatever was she to do with them?

“Vivienne, you are well now, I trust?” Cassandra asked, “Would you care for more tea perhaps?” she thought to offer the Enchanter. She appeared to have herself more in hand.

“I am, though I will decline on more tea, thank you,” the Enchanter looked to her wrist then, at the delicate diamond encrusted timepiece there and said, “I believe our time is nearly through, my dear. I should…hope you would be willing to learn from me?”

Eleanor nodded enthusiastically, “Of course! I’d really like that.”

“Splendid,” the woman returned, “I believe I shall go and confer with master Solas, perhaps his expertise will lend some understanding to your Mark, and we can compare what I have learned of your magic to his knowledge.”

“I’ll tell him you’re on your way! I can’t be sure but he’s usually in his cabin, if not the Tavern’s not far, he’ll be there. Oh! Noon!” Eleanor said in realization and then, “Would you like to eat together? Solas would probably be fine talking over a meal?”

“Actually, Eleanor,” Cassandra said, “Lady Josephine is making arrangements for you and your advisors to commune in her office for lu—”

Eleanor gasped and jumped up from her seat to whirl around, pointing an index finger at Cassandra causing the Seeker’s brows to shoot up in surprise, and that was before the girl insisted,
“Nope! No no no no no! We do not say that word in this Inquisition, anymore! Not in a context that relates to me! It’s banished, it’s banned, it’s—Cremisius, I really want another ‘buh’ word!”

“The Lady Herald has officially barred the use of the ‘L’ word for the meal we consume at noon,” the Lieutenant supplied.

…the word lunch…was…barred?

“Barred! Yes!” Eleanor wiggled excitedly, beaming a smile to the young man. And then to Cassandra, “Can we give him a raise? I think Cremisius deserves a raise!”

He certainly did, Cassandra agreed, more so for his work this week than his ability to offer Eleanor alliteration. She had already discussed as much with Lady Montilyet, arrangements to increase the man’s hazard pay after yesterday’s foiled poisoning attempt that could have potentially lost them the Lieutenant and their Spymaster along with Eleanor. “You are barring it because…?” Cassandra prompted instead.

“I’ve had nothing but awful, terrible luck with that word, all week long!” Eleanor explained. “Sunday I got a headache ‘cause I missed it, then the Varric drama, and then I slept through the next day’s noon meal, and then yesterday I almost got poisoned! So, I’m hoping to trick the universe into thinking I’m just going for a largish snack, that just so happens to be at noon, so it has absolutely no reason to make me sick, or get yelled at, or attacked.”

Madam de Fer’s eyes widened at the recap of Eleanor’s…truly hectic week, and she looked at the Seeker like she expected some form of explanation or perhaps for Cassandra to assure her Eleanor was prone to exaggeration.

“You’ve had quite the week Eleanor, but the universe is not conspiring to ruin your l-,” lunch dates, she wanted to say, but chose to humor the girl, “noon meals.”

“Um, that’s,” Eleanor counted carefully, silently mouthing the numbers as she carefully counted her fingers, one two three four, “four times in a row, Cassandra! I’m not usually superstitious, but that makes me at least a little-stitious.”

Maker help her, she felt like smiling at the girl’s bit of wordplay. She heard the Lieutenant snort and Cullen actually indulged her further, chuckling a bit before saying,

“Well then, there’s no reason to tempt fate,” and then louder, as if speaking to the universe itself, “I would be delighted to share a large afternoon snack with you, Eleanor! It’s just a snack mind!”

“Thank you,” Eleanor said, pecking a little kiss to his cheek, “Advisors means you’re coming too, right Cassandra?”

If she did not expire from this girl’s antics beforehand, certainly. “Indeed.”

Eleanor seemed more than pleased about that, “Good! Madam de Fer? Would you care to join us?” she asked the Mage.

“That is very kind of you my lady, but I must decline,” Vivienne said, and Cassandra almost wondered if the woman were perhaps nervous to be near Eleanor during her lunch hour now that it had been established as a cursed event, but she said, “I would like to confer with Solas while our lesson is still fresh to my mind and our discussion will likely be incredibly involved, it would not make for suitable company. But perhaps we will sit down to debate over repast.”
“Oh! Talking about past stuff with Solas should warm him right up to you!” Eleanor enthused, “He loves history and stuff, studies it a lot in the Fade, it’s always really fun to talk with him about! Just, you know, make sure you eat, okay?”

Madam de Fer took in a breath like her chest had filled with laughter she wished to suppress, though she did seem wholly amused as she politely explained, “Ahh, my dear girl, repast means ‘meal’.”

“Oh. Whoops!” Eleanor giggled sheepishly, “That’s good then! Repast away! Oh, but that doesn’t sound very nice, like re-‘passed away’, huh,” the girl seemed to mull it over.

“That was not a proper sentence regardless, I’m afraid,” the woman informed her, though not unkindly. “I do hope you enjoy your own repast with your Advisors, my lady. I shall seek out Solas. In the mean-time, Eleanor, I did intend to discuss with you what sort of direction you would like to take your magic in. You’ve developed strong Spirit magic but I would be more than capable to help guide your magic in other paths of craft you may be interested in—I have a list I was going to go over with you but I’ll leave it for you to examine for next time,” she said her fingers slipping into what Cassandra had thought a seam in the hip of her outfit but it was actually a very thin, small pocket she pulled a slip of paper from offering it to the girl with a wink as she shared almost conspiratorially, “All of my dresses have pockets.”

Eleanor took the offered paper smiling as she said, “Madam de Fer, I think you and I are going to be really great friends.”

“I’ve never been one for befriending teenagers,” Madam de Fer informed her in albeit dry tones as she stood before the girl.

Eleanor was grinning as she bounced on her toes a bit. “That’s okay! I’ll teach you,” she promised.

“And so, you might,” the Mage conceded, delivering them a very regal nod before she was sweeping out of the Chantry doors.

The moment the woman was gone Eleanor visibly relaxed, coming to plop down unceremoniously into her seat and resting her head on Cassandra’s shoulder.

“That went okay, right?” she asked.

“It did indeed,” Cassandra promised her, wrapping an arm around the girl’s shoulders and indulging in a kiss to her hair before asking, “Eleanor, what exactly did you promise Sera you would do for her in the Chantry basement?”

The girl sat up and smiled brightly, something full of mischief and glee as she said, “You’ll just have to wait and see!”

Wait and see indeed. It was almost maddening, for the life of her Cassandra could not think of what Sera would want from the Chantry, and Eleanor’s pockets were thin enough anything too large would be obviously seen so she didn’t think the girl had stolen or planted something for the Elf.

It took some maneuvering to gather around Lady Josephine’s desk for their meal—her office was L shaped and not necessarily large, multiple desks, few chairs, a trunk, it took some rearranging to get everything functional. Eleanor assisted Lady Montilyet in clearing off her desk while Cassandra and Leliana brought in more chairs, and when they returned, the girl immediately
volunteered to help Cullen with moving the thing to the center of the room so they could easily sit around it—though when Eleanor made to lift her side of the desk, she appeared shocked at how very easily she hefted the thing, and then her cheeks colored a very vibrant red when she realized she had not lifted it alone. The Lieutenant had come around, his arms on either side of her as he assisted the Herald and Commander.

Cassandra was heartened by Leliana wishing to be seated next to Eleanor, even more so because when she vocalized that fact, Eleanor seemed delighted, Marked hand eagerly patting the empty chair on her left. The girl was seated with her back to the door, so the Lieutenant sat across from her, next to Lady Montilyet, keeping the Herald and the only entrance in his sight.

Then the girl invited Cassandra to take the chair to her right—sitting before the table end and she realized the girl may have done a bit of maneuvering. Cassandra wasn’t sure how she’d planned it or executed such a scheme…perhaps the Seeker was being paranoid…but she found herself seated directly opposite the Commander.

“Cullen, did Cassandra tell you about the band of bears we fought on the way back from the Coast? Gosh, that was tough, but Cassandra kicked major butt! Bear butt!” the girl giggled at the bit of borderline potty-humor.

Ahh. She was not paranoid. Conniving, sneaky—Eleanor had warned Madam de Fer she was ‘crafty’ and Cassandra had been inclined to find the threat laughable, but now she was not so certain.

“Oh, no she hasn’t.” Cullen said, looking to Cassandra something like pride and amusement in his eyes as he asked, “I would certainly love to hear all about how you kicked bear butt.”

The man could not fight the smile his sentence brought to his lips, Cremisius snorted, Eleanor giggled in delight and Leliana and Lady Josephine were sharing an amused stare before the Spymaster insisted, “Do regale us, Cassandra.”

Regale them indeed.

The Seeker, begrudgingly, recounted the fight, and it there was some vindication to be found when the tables were turned on Eleanor—the Iron Bull had apparently told Cremisius something of that particular battle, the Tevinter man saw fit to mention the girl having used her training with Cullen and Cassandra to unleash the end of her staff on a bear’s snout—she was abashed at the praise the move earned her from Commander and Lieutenant alike.

Eleanor got exactly what she asked for, thankfully, perhaps there was some superstition to be brought to bear. None present used the word ‘lunch’ to describe their gathering, and there was no getting sick, no yelling, and no attack. Just chatter and laughter and a good meal. Leliana asked after Eleanor’s attempts at knitting and the girl was pleased to inform them she thought the activity very fun—Cremisius is ‘just so very good at it!’ and then Eleanor mentioned her discovery that the Commander had siblings, and wished to know about Leliana and Lady Josephine, if they wished to share. The Spymaster turned the question over to their Ambassador who delighted Eleanor with the fact that she did indeed have several younger siblings—three brothers and one sister, most of them not much older than Eleanor.

They sat around talking once everyone was done eating and their dishes were cleared away, since there was technically still a good bit of time before they were scheduled to meet in the War Room, when the door to Lady Montilyet’s office swung open, the Lieutenant’s eyes immediately assessing before he grinned.
“Iiiiiiilinky!”

Ahh. “Sera, to what do we owe the honor?” Cassandra asked, “Are we about to be enlightened as to what you asked of Eleanor from the Chantry basement?”

“Didn’t ask Inky to pinch nothin’ from your basement lady priss, I asked her to put something in it! Did you do it?” Sera asked, coming forward to hug the girl from behind, her arms around Eleanor’s neck, resting her chin atop her hair.

“Done!” Ellie confirmed, “Cremisius helped!”

“Oh shite, yeah I shoulda thought of that,” Sera said, hugging the girl tighter, “Sorry Inky!”

“It wasn’t a big deal,” the Lieutenant said with a shrug, “just figured Ellie shouldn’t be crawling around and getting her clothes dirty.”

Crawling around? Just what on the Maker’s green world had gone on in the bare five minutes Eleanor had left the adults alone? Cassandra could feel the bewilderment on her face, the expression seemingly drawing some measure of delight from Eleanor at the Seeker’s expense, though there was some mercy to be found when the girl said,

“Come on! You can watch and even join in if you like, Sera says it’ll be fun!”

Cremisius linked arms with Eleanor, keeping a good pace even when the girl hopped her way down the chantry steps into the empty basement hallway.

The nearly empty basement hallway.

Cassandra let out a sort of half-disgusted, somehow half-relieved groan.

“You did a good job Kremmy-boy, it looks great!” Sera clapped, before pulling a small smooth reddish stone from her pocket, “Inky? You ready to play hopin’ scotch?”

Eleanor apparently had chalk tucked away in one of her dress pockets—not the one with cookies in it that’d be ‘yicky’ the girl had termed it—and the Lieutenant had used it to draw out this sort of grid thing, a line of boxes, with different places where two boxes were side by side, and each box had a number in it up to ten.

Sera went first and showed Eleanor how to play—some children just took turns hopping in the boxes as fast as they could, but it was more challenging to take a stone, throw it on the grid and hop to where it landed, hold your position whether or not you were on one leg, and try to pick the stone up and toss it again until you finished the course. Sera’s landed on ‘7’ and she squawked a bit as she just barely kept her balance, leaning down to snatch up the stone and gently toss it onto the ten.

Eleanor seemed uncertain how well she’d do hopping from space to space, and Cassandra was albeit relieved when her stone landed on ‘5’ which was right next to ‘6’ and she could stand on both feet while she crouched to pick it up. Lieutenant Aclassi was easily persuaded into taking a turn and then Sera again, and eventually even some of the adults—Cullen first, informing Eleanor that he was in fact, the hopscotch champion of the Rutherford line, don’t let his sisters ever say otherwise.

He was admittedly good at it, Cassandra found herself amused with the man’s antics, his armor jangling, pauldron’s flopping with each hop, and how he managed not to fall over when he bent to pick up the stone was beyond her. The Seeker didn’t play but when everyone else took
turns, Eleanor stood at her side when she wasn’t playing, and Cassandra found herself standing with an arm wrapped around the girl’s shoulders.

Lady Montilyet joined in as well, to Leliana’s amusement, interjecting herself nervously but the Antivan woman was markedly graceful.

Cremisius signaled Eleanor when his pocket watch said they were a half hour out from her appointment in the War Room, she thanked Sera for teaching her a new game, and the Elf and Lieutenant helped when the Herald set about using one of the servant’s cleaning rags and water from her canteen to wash up the chalk, she admitted to being a bit worried about dirtying up the floor but it was the warmest and easiest place to set up such a thing, and the chalk came right up, no permanent vandalism left behind. They made their way back upstairs and got Lady Montilyet’s office back in order.

The Lieutenant verified with Cassandra that it would be alright to step out for a moment, and then he took Eleanor’s canteen and dashed out to the pump to refill it before her meeting. Sera, ever the astute observer, finally realized Eleanor was dressed up, and asked her why. The girl explained she’d had lessons with Madam de Fer, which got a snort out of the Elf girl but she did ask if she learned anything cool in her ‘weird magic’ lesson. Eleanor said it was interesting, but they didn’t really get around to doing much besides introducing their magic to each other. Which Sera thought sounded creepy but good for them, she said, and Eleanor admitted to being quote, ‘excited-ish’ to learn different types of magic though she wasn’t sure about the list Madam de Fer left with her.

“Of course you aren’t sure, Eleanor, you haven’t read it yet,” Cassandra said.

“Well ‘sandra can help you with that, right?” Sera asked the girl.

Cassandra raised an eyebrow at that. “I would certainly be pleased to go over it with Eleanor though I wouldn’t be of much help. I’ve no great understanding of magic that would be of use. Look it over before your next lesson,” she advised, “maybe confer with Solas if you’ve need.” He would be glad to talk the different sorts of magic over with Eleanor should she need more guidance on the matter.

And so was Sera it seemed, she made a frustrated little sound at Cassandra, and held out a hand to the girl saying, “Hand it on over Inky!” Eleanor handed her the slip of paper Madam de Fer had given her and Sera’s face scrunched up and then, “She can teach you icy pish, and fire stuff—oh shite you probably need like the actual, ‘blah blah blah’*. Okay, so like there’s an Elemental school of magic, that’d give you options like fire or ice or nature spells. Then there’s Creation magic which is like manipulating the natural world, and then…En…Enthro…Entropy which she says is like harnessing the chaos of creation? Dunno sounds like some weirdass shite. And then Force magic which would let you move stuff—like your fist fighting but with magic you could knock people over and stuff…oh! Or chairs and pish you could really get some people’s butts good sneaking their chairs out from under them!” Maker, was the girl’s mind focused on nothing but her pranks?

“Mmm, I’ll think about it,” Eleanor said, “but I’m definitely not pushing people’s chairs out from under them—people get hurt that way and that’d be mean.”

Sera snorted. “Yeah but it’s funny mean! Eh, it’s your thing Inky—you want me to go over it with you again? Or…oh! Oi! Ambassador Josie, sweetness, you got a pencil or something I could use?”

“Of course, Sera,” Lady Josie said, looking around her desk a, she wrote mostly in ink, but
she did keep pencils lying about, used for marking up possibilities on drafts and the War Room map. She handed Sera a pencil and the Elf slapped the list onto the desk and started scribbling around a bit before handing the pencil and list back to their respective owners.

Looking over Eleanor’s shoulder, Cassandra could see the neat looping script of Madam de Fer’s handwriting. The list had underlined terms for the different schools of magic, followed by their definitions. Now each set of underlined words had small pictures beside them. A flame, a snowflake, and a lightning bolt, a vine with leaves on it, and so on, so that each option had an explanatory image next to it, which Cassandra found odd, but perhaps the Elf thought it would be easier or a faster way to reference the terms for Eleanor.

Eleanor who, upon examining the list paled for a moment, eyes going wide she appeared the be shocked and then…perhaps embarrassed or overwhelmed before she saw fit to launch herself at Sera, arms around the Elf girl’s neck as she hugged her fiercely and Cassandra was worried something was amiss, the girl had begun…not crying, not outright but a few little tears spilled down her cheeks as she squeezed her friend and breathed out an extremely grateful, “Thank you.”

Sera hugged her back, humming a little as she sort of twisted side to side holding Eleanor tight, the motion made the shorter girl’s legs swing a bit since they hung off the ground. “Don’t sweat it, Inky,” she said, patting the girl on the back of the head

“Eleanor?” Cassandra asked carefully. What…had just happened?

“Oh Inky’s just all inky!” Sera breezed, as she set Eleanor on her feet and pulled away, “Monthlies is a right bitch, making you swing between wanting to cry and murdering shite all day!”

“Ahh.” of course, Eleanor was already so prone to extreme thankfulness even for small gestures of kindness, with all the chemical firings sure to be happening now it was little wonder the girl got swept up in her gratitude.

Leliana was silent as she watched the exchange, seeming thoughtful as she shared a look with Lady Montilyet before the Antivan woman came and put a condoling hand on Eleanor’s shoulder, “Well. You’re quite alright, my lady, we’ve all been there.”

“Not me,” Cullen said, “but Mia did bloody my nose once when she was running her courses and I ate her dessert.”

“Oh gosh, that was mean of her…but um, maybe no touching my desserts unless I’m sharing them?” Eleanor thought to caution the man.

“Oh I quite assure you, I’ve learned my lesson,” he promised her.

Cremisius returned with Eleanor’s canteen and he’d been keeping her cloak with him, either slung over his shoulder or hanging on the back of his chair during their meal and hopscotch fun, but he handed both off to her now in case she needed them while they were separated—War Room meetings were private affairs, even Marehis did not sit in on them. And too, the man was expected elsewhere, if Cassandra understood correctly.

“Oh! Would you mind…?” Eleanor asked, she seemed to feel badly for making a request of the man as she slung her cloak over her arm, holding her canteen in one hand and using the other to reach for the strap across her torso for her staff holster.
“Oh yeah, no problem. Will you want it when you’re done with your meeting or should I just take it back to your cabin?” he asked, holding out his hands to take her staff.

“My cabin if you really don’t mind,” she said. “Thanks, I appreciate it.”

“It’s fine El,” he assured her, and then once he had her staff in hand he stepped in close to whisper quietly against her ear, Cassandra barely catching his reminder to her, “hat and gloves are in your right cloak pocket, I put extra bandaging in the left if you need it, inside pockets have snacks. I’ll be in the Tavern, be back around when your meetings over, but don’t hesitate to send for me if you need me, alright?”

The girl popped up on her toes to give him a quick kiss on the cheek. “Thanks! I’ll be okay, you go have fun, yeah?”

The Lieutenant looked to Cassandra then, and they shared a sort of wry look as he said, “I uh, doubt it,” that almost felt like understatement to Cassandra, “but thanks. Good luck in your meeting,” he said, his hand on her elbow giving three squeezes before he stepped away and waved farewell to the room.

Sera said, “Wait up, I wanna watch! Dwarfy said I could!” and chased after him.

“…Varrie?” Eleanor asked Cassandra.

“Indeed,” Cassandra said, reaching out to her and putting an arm around her shoulders as they left Lady Montilyet’s office and headed for the War Room, “Think nothing of it, Eleanor.” Varric had seemed to want a measure of privacy in this regard, though Cassandra was rather eager to see just how his efforts worked out. But that was not the matter at hand,

“First order of business,” Leliana said as she took her place around the table, the Spymaster looked pleased, “Cassandra, would you care to do the honors? Our good news?”

Oh, most certainly—she hadn’t been certain she should, had been actively fighting the temptation to do so since she’d heard it herself.

“That is my favorite kind of news!” Eleanor enthused, looking up at her.

Cassandra grinned and met her gaze, “Marehis is on her return trip to Haven as we speak.”

Her entire expression lit up and the girl had to take in a rather large double-breathed gasp of air into her lungs as her instant excitement seemed to overwhelm her. “Really?!” she asked, “That’s- that’s so so so so good! Ahh!” she took a hold of Cassandra’s arm, it probably wasn’t professional, but it seemed like the girl was settling to do that as opposed to running around the War Room hugging them all…perhaps taking up the task of hugging everyone in Haven, the enthusiasm she squeezed the Seeker’s arm with was so great, as she said, “I’m so glad!”

“As are we all, Eleanor,” Cassandra assured her.

Leliana pointed to a spot on the map close to the Orlais-Ferelden boarder, near the Waking Sea. “This is where she touched base with our people, word came from her this morning,” Leliana said. something about the woman most surely being in the same country as them by now was relieving, made her seem nearer at hand even though she was likely days away…though, Cassandra thought perhaps roles reversed, had she gone so very long without seeing Eleanor, was traveling with the promise of meeting her again, she would cross any distance in record time.

“Thanks so much for keeping me updated,” Eleanor said to them.
“Actually my lady, we have not kept you entirely in the know,” Leliana admitted then. “Eleanor…we must debrief you on a security breach that occurred last week. We have handled it, and the danger is passed, but it required some measure of keeping you in the dark, which is regrettable but necessary to ensure everything could be taken care of as quickly and safely as possible. We would like to rectify that now.”

Cassandra’s heart stopped. She had suggested they make Eleanor aware eventually but there was something inside her that made her terribly afraid to break faith with the girl—that she would see their necessary omissions and fabrications as betrayal despite the outcome. It did not help that the girl stepped back from Cassandra to her usual spot around the War Room though the Nevarran woman knew it was likely the girl taking them seriously, endeavoring to conduct herself more appropriately. That did not stop Cassandra from taking hold of her Marked hand, nor did it stop the girl from accepting it without contention.

“You guys do everything running the Inquisition,” Eleanor said, “I’m never going to begrudge you doing what you have to do, even if it means I don’t get to know everything. Um. But you’re telling me now?”

“Yes,” Leliana confirmed, and Cassandra’s hand squeezed hers as the Spymaster laid out the betrayal found in her ranks, explaining that Venatori agents infiltrated Inquisition scouts, but their plans were discovered and foiled before they could come to fruition—Leliana didn’t say what those plans were, if Eleanor knew for even an instant that Marehis had been targeted specifically, that it her job as the Herald’s bodyguard that made her such a target, the girl would rebel against any effort to guard her, claim it was too dangerous. As it was, Eleanor did not seem like she felt she needed to know all the details, in fact she seemed uncertain as to why they felt they needed to tell her this at all—she was sure there were ‘loads’ of things the Advisors did for the Inquisition that they didn’t give her every last detail on—until it was explained that the breach in security was the reason Marehis wasn’t back when Ellie returned from the Coast—they’d lied to her.

“Marehis is alright, right?” Eleanor asked, pensive.

“Yes,” Cassandra was quick to promise.

“She is—it is standard protocol,” Leliana informed her, “all of our scouts were given orders to scatter themselves and go into hiding until an all clear was sent out.”

Eleanor nodded, sighing with relief as she nodded.

“I am sorry, Eleanor, that we found it necessary to lie to you,” Cassandra said, nervous as she gauged the girl’s reaction.

Cassandra almost felt dumbstruck with relief when Eleanor merely shrugged and said, “It wasn’t a lie really—for one, it kept Marehis safe and I’m super grateful for that—and I mean technically she was under orders from Leliana, her boss, to hide,” and then looking to Cassandra, smiling, small and genuine as she said, “So, her job was hiding this week, she was ‘busy handling Inquisition business’, just like you said.” the Marked hand in hers squeezed with reassurance before releasing hold.

The girl took a deep breath then and shifted their focus. “Have you decided who we’re going to approach first to take on the Breach?” she asked them.

“Indeed, my lady,” Lady Josephine said, “Everything is falling into place. We’ve successfully secured enough noble allies to assemble at Therinfall Redoubt to call for the Lord Seeker to meet with us. with you, my lady, as the voice for the Inquisition.”
Eleanor blanched at that. “Cassandra can come with me, right? Meeting with the Lord Seeker?”

“Of course, Eleanor,” Cassandra vowed, resolute, “I would not leave you to speak with that man alone. You will have your allies at your side.” She would unleash the Iron Bull upon the man if it put Eleanor at ease, though she was almost certain such a thing would not be necessary. Almost. Even now she was still struck by how very disconcertingly out of character the man had behaved in their meeting in Val Royeaux.

“Cool! Uh…” she cleared her throat, “I mean, that would most agreeable…maybe I should practice my etiquette stuff before meeting the Templars. I’ll probably have to talk in front of our noble allies, I did okay with our Ferelden guests but I didn’t really fancy-talk with them much—I’ll probably have to with those who come to help us with the Templars, I’m so grateful for them, I don’t know where exactly Therinfall Redoubt is, but I get the gist it’s not super in the neighborhood for Orlais, that’s a lot of travel just to help us.”

“You will have some brush-up lessons with me in the coming days, my lady,” Lady Josephine assured warmly.

“That would definitely be most agreeable! We’ve all been busy, and gosh you’ve been working so hard to get our allies arranged for this, but I’ve missed our lessons,” Eleanor admitted, shyly.

Lady Montilyet blushed, looking almost surprised, her hand rising to fidget with the centermost medallion on her necklace, and she smiled affectionately, “I’ve a fondness for our lessons as well, I’ll be glad to continue them.”

“So, are we approaching the Templars first?” Eleanor asked.

“Ahh, no,” Lady Josephine explained, “Our allies will need time to make the journey from Orlais. In the meantime, you will accept the invitation to speak with the Mages and address them, garner their alliance, on the way to meet with the Lord Seeker.”

Eleanor nodded. “And that’s the way we’re most comfortable addressing them? You’ve all agreed?” she asked looking to Cullen, not an accusation or judgment, merely opening the floor so that if the man had been bullied into compliance, had legitimate concerns as to why they should act otherwise, he could speak his piece.

“It took a great deal of deliberation but yes,” Cullen said.

“We’ve a unanimous consensus,” Leliana said, backed up with the Commander nodding in agreement. “Allying with the Templars initially may spook the rebel mages entirely. But coming to the Templars with Mages in our ranks may give them purpose, show them they are needed in some respect…ahh.” the woman cleared her throat, seeming apologetic, “I do not mean to imply that the mages would be out of control, it is merely how things are. Templars are believed to be a necessity, making them feel needed will encourage them in considering our cause.”

“I don’t have anything against Templars doing their jobs,” the girl said with a shrug, “I understand that they are necessary.”

“You needn’t fear offending me, Eleanor,” Cullen assured, “I would understand if our alliance with the Templars brought you some discomfort. I left the Order for a reason. I’m certain you do not think poorly of me, for my past service.”
The girl seemed to take the words as question more so than statement, she gasped and then,

“Oh gosh, of course not! You’re the best! You’re so funny and clever and strong and brave
and I think it’s absolutely amazing the work you do for the Inquisition, that you were able to stand
on your own and leave the Order,” Eleanor was quick to insist to the man as if she thought he
might need a bit of a pep talk about it, “It takes a lot of courage to break away from something
you’ve dedicated your life to!”

The man blushed so fiercely even his ears flamed red, a hand wrenching at the back of his
neck as he ducked his face ever so slightly, wholly abashed as he chuckled quietly, nervously and
then he cleared his throat and said, “Ahh, thank you, Eleanor.”

“I believe the Commander was merely expressing a wish to know your true feelings on the
goals of reforming our system,” Cassandra said, earning her a grateful smile from the man at her
explanation when he’d lost his own words, “You’ve never shared your opinion on the matter. That
is what you came to the Conclave to do, is it not?”

“Oh…um yeah I mean…” she cleared her throat, seeming surprised and nervous all at once,
hands fidgeting before her as she asked, “you guys really want to hear about what I think? I mean I
know I was supposed to represent Apostates, but I didn’t really expect to be heard.”

“Justinia heard you, we believe,” Leliana said, “you did speak with her in the time you
cannot remember, before the destruction. We would like to hear you now, if you’re willing to
share.”

“We would not put you on the spot my lady,” Josephine was quick to input, “if you would
like to take some time to think, compose your thoughts…” she let the sentence hang.

“Oh gosh, I’ve had ten years to gather my thoughts,” Eleanor mused lightly, biting her lip,
she took a deep breath and then,

Oh Maker, she certainly had.

“I think there should be more Templars,” she started with, which was beyond surprising,
but she spoke with such sincerity, such certainty it must be truth. “And I think they should be a
branch of guard systems everywhere, in every city, town, and village, to deal with magical crime,
and assist regular guards when they’re called to handle regular crimes committed by mages. When
people are discovered to be mages they should have to register as such with local authorities—
magic can be dangerous and needs accountability. But Phylacteries shouldn’t be mandatory right
away—we don’t have a system for tracking down every last person who owns a weapon—but it
makes sense that they should be created when a mage actually presents themselves as a threat, is an
actual offender of the law that may need to hunt down someday. And it shouldn’t just be handed
over to a Templar and that’s the end of it—someone should oversee that Templar’s use of it, like
how Seekers are supposed to watch out for corruption in Templar ranks, to ensure that they aren’t
using the Phylactery for anything other than keeping the general population safe. Tranquility
should be reserved for mages who don’t respond to correction—a mage can lash out accidentally,
or even on purpose because of life or misguidance, and be taught to see the error of their ways,
learn from their mistakes. I think people shouldn’t be taken from their homes and families, I think
communities should be set up with the ability to handle magical citizens. Templars working with
guards, the Chantry working with citizens, schools teaching everyone some basic knowledge on
magic thrown in with…whatever they teach in schools, reading and writing and numbers. Just add
magic to the roster.”

“You believe non-magical people would find benefit in magical education?” Leliana asked.
“I’m standing here with two people who had to learn about magic for their chosen career paths,” Eleanor said, gesturing to Cassandra and Cullen. “I think everyone should get some kind of magical education from when they’re little. Like, take Sera for example. She’s terrified of magic because she doesn’t understand it—how it works or how to defend herself from it, she can’t tell the difference between someone casting Barrier or an offensive spell until they’ve cast. But if she’d come up learning just basic things about magic, she would know what her allies were doing, and her enemies, be able to better defend herself against mage attacks if she understood them better. I think everyone could benefit from that—as children grow up and come into an age where they start presenting as magical or not, they wouldn’t just being thrown into this sort of life where they have absolutely no idea about anything to even do with magic, and their friends and family know what to watch out for and expect, create a smoother safer transition into life as a Mage that doesn’t so wholly uproot people from everything and everyone they’ve ever known.”

“What would become of Circles then, my lady?” Josephine asked.

“It’s never made much sense to me, the idea that in trying to protect people from Mages being possessed by demons, the Chantry puts all found Mages into a situation they would be most tempted to call on help from a demon, most abominations crop up in Circles from people trying to escape. People shouldn’t be forced into them,” Eleanor insisted with conviction.

“So what would you propose then? Do away with Circles entirely?” Cullen asked, curious.

“I think Circles should become places of higher learning, it’d be better all-around if there was nothing to escape, that instead Mages willingly go to Circles because they’re branching out, trying to gain some independence in their adult lives through academia instead of being ripped from those lives and locked away for forever.”

“Excellent use of ‘academia’,” Cullen complimented. It was a markedly higher-level word than Eleanor usually used.

“Solas taught me!” Eleanor reported, “It means like, school or education and stuff right?”

“Indeed,” Cassandra affirmed. That was…a lot to process. An entire societal reform that Cassandra found equal parts impossible and…there was this pang of desire she felt at the idea. That is precisely the sort of world she would want for the girl. One where she could be free to live her life as she pleases, no running from the law or Templars, her magic kept in check with no need to reign her. She’d thought to do everything in her power to make Eleanor an exception but…

Maker, they could not possibly reform their system in such a way, surely.

“Thank you, Eleanor,” Leliana said, nodding thoughtfully. “Justinia…I cannot be certain of course but I think she found your thoughts intriguing, if you did get the chance to share them with her.”

“Really?” Eleanor asked, blushing.

“Truly,” Leliana affirmed, “was that all you cared to share?” Eleanor nodded, and then looking to Lady Montilyet and Commander Cullen, then Cassandra the Spymaster said, “I cannot think of anything else I needed to go over.”

Neither could Cassandra, and Lady Montilyet nodded as Cullen shrugged that he too had nothing to report. “I believe we’ve covered everything,” Josephine said, “I will send out an acceptance of the Herald’s invitation to Redcliffe and set up a date on which to meet with Grand Enchanter Fiona.”
“So…meeting adjourned?” Eleanor asked.

“I believe so,” the Commander agreed.

“Eleanor,” Leliana said, “If you would like…I understand you do not write to Marehis?”

For some reason the girl looked very nervous about that, swallowing she said, “Um. Yeah I just…I mean she’s always in Haven when I am, so it’d be pretty silly to write her then right? And when I’m gone I know she has other work she does for the Inquisition and I wouldn’t um…I wouldn’t w-want to bother her!”

…that sounded very plausible. In fact it is what Cassandra had always assumed but Eleanor…it sounded like lying. Cassandra had never heard the girl speak in such a way, and…why in the world would she lie about such a thing? How was it even a lie, it made perfect sense that she would not write Marehis for such reasons but—

Leliana came around then to stand between Cassandra and Eleanor, taking the girl’s hands in her own and speaking in gentler tones than the Seeker had ever heard from the Spymaster, “If you would like…I do have some time. Perhaps you and I could sit down, and we could work on a letter for her. Whatever you would like her to know in the meantime before she reaches Haven? No such thing could be done while she was in hiding of course, but now, I’m certain it would hearten her to hear from you.”

“Um…”

“I’ve a report I must send her, it would be quickest if you dictated and I added whatever you care to say to my own letter, if you’d like?” Leliana offered, squeezing her hands a bit as if in assurance, to comfort the girl.

“Oh gosh…yeah,” Eleanor agreed, smiling shyly as she nodded. “I’d really really like that.”

Leliana returned her smile, gently. “Excellent,” she said, “come with me—when we’ve finished I’ll send for the Lieutenant. Josie we can use your office I trust?”

Lady Montilyet looked almost grim as she nodded absently and then came into focus shaking herself from her thoughts as she said, “Oh, yes! Certainly Leliana, at your leisure,” when Cassandra made to follow after the Spymaster as the woman put her arm around Eleanor’s shoulders and led her from the War Room, the Ambassador said, voice pitching high, hand actually flinging out in a motion to halt her, “Lady Seeker, Commander, wait! I had…just one thing more I wished to discuss with you. Privately.”

“Have a pleasant day, Eleanor,” Cassandra bid the girl goodbye, and out of her peripheral she could see Cullen waving farewell to her as he said,

“Do try to stay out of trouble.”

“No promises!” Eleanor lobbed over her shoulder before Cassandra closed the door behind the Herald and Leliana.

When Cassandra resumed her place at the War Table Lady Montilyet looked at the door as if she could verify that Eleanor was not on the other side of it and then, very quietly she asked,

“Cassandra, Commander…do you think, perhaps, Eleanor may not know how to read?”
Asshole,

Tavern, 2pm, if you’re late you’re buying. Booked a referee, don’t shit your pants. We’ve got crap to work out. For Ellie, so if you don’t show I can shoot you where it won’t kill you, but you’ll never sit right again.

Tethras

That lovely, poignant missive was scratched out on a piece of spare parchment that had been slapped against Thom Rainier’s forehead midmorning by Sera who shouted,

“Dwarfy says I get to watch!” before she cackled and ran from the Forge cabin, slamming the door behind her.

He wasn’t sure what that meant until he read the letter and Maker help him, he needed glasses, but he made the words out well enough. He was just glad the Horse Master and Blacksmith had jobs that drove them from bed in the early hours, so they weren’t subject to his rude awakening.

He probably shouldn’t get used to sleeping in as much, they would be setting out for… somewhere, maybe the Hinterlands again, sometime here soon. And there was the implications of the impending arrival of his men. Former men.

He’d received a much politer missive from Ambassador Montilyet, requesting his presence in the Chantry, after dinner, the other day. Maker, he’d been barely able to stomach his evening meal, he was worried sick after seeing Ellie in the Tavern with claims she’d…for god’s sake the girl called it getting ‘almost assassinated’! No one should be siccing assassins on someone that…that incredibly precious! Didn’t know all the grammatical forms for ‘assassination’!

And then he realized just why she’d had an assassin set on her.

Him. His past, the mess she’d cleared. Suddenly her fight with Varric, the way she’d railed about ‘miffing’ Orlesian nobility, made sense. Ambassador Montilyet and Spymaster Leliana filled him in on the deal Ellie’d struck on his behalf. His men would be released from prison before the end of the month, and the Inquisition was offering them work—offers sent and most of them already accepted, they understood the Inquisition, the Herald of Andraste, had garnered their freedom, cleared their names, offered them a job on top of it all. Of course that was just a way to keep a close eye on them, ensure they were staying on the straight and narrow, but Ellie’d been right when she said the Inquisition was hardly prison—they’d be free, atoning for what they’d done, fighting for an honorable cause.

Maker help him, he was beholden to that girl until the day he died. Didn’t matter where her journeys took them, he’d fight alongside her until there was no fight left in him.

Though there’d been something of a fight last night. He wasn’t sure exactly what happened, all he knew was he’d been waken in the middle of the night because he’d thought the Lieutenant had been in trouble. He’d left the cabin, to find the Iron Bull whipping up pancakes in that clearing he and his men gathered in for group meals, and over along the little drop before Haven’s frozen lake, there were practice dummies set up, Ellie, sword in hand, was beating down on them like they deserved it—they probably did the bastards—and Lieutenant Aclassi was making exaggerated
cries of distress, sound effects for Ellie’s wrath. He…wasn’t sure what was happening, but he wasn’t going to question it, it was much too late, and Ellie seemed vengeful but well at hand and he hadn’t wanted to interrupt their strange but of fun. Whatever the matter was, it was nice to see her well enough to, as she would put it, ‘kick butt’ even if it was just a few unsuspecting practice dummies.

He arrived in the tavern at five after two, coinpurse at his hip, he figured he’d have at least enough for a few rounds…maybe, if Varric was drinking it could get up there.

Dwarf was seated at the bar…maybe he wasn’t drinking, there was a little metal cup in his hand, like the ones Fliss served water in. The Lieutenant was though, frothy mug of beer set before him, Varric held the seat closest to the wall, so the Tevinter was seated as a buffer-state of sorts. The referee, he supposed, the two were talking as Thom entered,

“…/him’s right. Uh. Nice of you to ask, though, thanks,” the Lieutenant was saying.

“Don’t sweat it, kid. Got a cousin whose uh, the other way around. She’s Tevinter too, actually. Been trying to push for ‘they’ and ‘them’ to be legally recognized by the government, but…well shit, you know how it is,” Varric said, and then, as the door closed behind Thom the Dwarf didn’t even turn around, he just spoke over his shoulder, “Late. You’re buying.”


“Sir.”

“Thom.”

Okay, possibly better than the other names Varric had been calling him, though it certainly rang like ‘asshole’. But it wasn’t like he didn’t deserve it, and it seemed like the Dwarf was trying, to some measure at least. “Thought Sera was going to watch?” he asked lightly as he seated himself at the counter.

“Lost interest when she found out we were just going to have a little chat,” Varric explained, “no shouting or violence which is, you know, boring. Dunno where she went, but she’s probably up to no good,” he said, as Fliss came, getting behind the bar and pouring a mug of ale for Thom before taking her leave again, seemed to be giving them privacy.

“You uh, wanted to talk?” he asked.

Varric, ever eloquent, “Look. I hate your fucking guts—don’t you ever dare think otherwise—but we can’t keep…I can’t keep torturing the kid like this, you and me having it out.”

“I’m not going to fault you holding a grudge against me. But you have it with me, Tethras,” Thom ground out, he deserved whatever wrath the Herald’s party members felt for him but, “You take it out on Ellie, take any of this out on her again, I’ll string you up faster than you can string together one of your clever little threats.”

Krem finished taking a sip of his beer mug clunking firmly against the countertop and then, “No one’s keeping a grudge, not anymore,” he intervened, “So, get the fuck over it both of you—if either of you make Ellie cry again, I’ll make you wish you were dead. She gets hurt because you two play fuck-around and don’t work as a team, I’ll make you actually dead.”

“What would you suggest?” Thom asked.

“You two have to settle your differences however you can if you’re going to work
together.” Krem said, “You can’t stir up bullshit that lands Ellie caught in the middle—you’re
grown ass men, she shouldn’t have to referee your spats. Accept that the past is in the past, and the
only things that matter now are Ellie, the Inquisition, and sealing the Breach—in that order.” And
then, “You don’t have to suck each other’s dicks or nothing, you just have to respect one another.”

Thom choked on his own drink, foam burning his nostrils. Maker!

“Dick sucking imagery payback for the ‘jilted lovers’ rumors?” Varric asked.

The boy smirked. “Yup.”

“Fair enough,” Varric drawled, raising his cup to clink against Krem’s mug.

“Indeed,” Thom agreed, joining their toast, Maker. He’d overheard the Iron Bull giving
Krem the rundown on those…he could wring their necks the rotten sods.

“Look man, you do right by Tumbles, you and I won’t have any problems,” Varric allowed.

“Same here,” Thom said, “I…I know my word hasn’t meant much all things considered,
but I swear, I’ll do everything I can, everything to make it right.”

“You better,” Varric groused followed by Krem’s confident assurance of,

“Oh he will, Bull’ll make sure of that,” he looked to Thom, “If you think you’re up for it.”

“…it?” Thom asked uncertain. ‘It’ with the Iron Bull could mean all sorts of things Thom
personally wasn’t up for.

“How does tacking on a more formal title to the name ‘Thom Rainier’ sound?” Krem
proposed, “Something like ‘Sergeant’.”

…“Sergeant?” Thom asked.

“Rank just under Lieutenant, third in command,” the Tevinter explained, “though make no
mistake you’d have no rule over the Chargers…except for our ground troops. They’re getting some
new recruits, hired on through the Inquisition, inbound from Orlais at end of the month. If you and
Chief’re out partying with the Herald, I’ll get them squared away, outfitted, retrained and you’ll
take the reins with them once you’re back,” he shifted in his chair, reaching down into his boot, he
pulled out a thick wad of folded parchment, slapped it against the counter and slid it in front of
Thom. “Make no mistake, they’re your responsibility. They mess up, it’s on you too. Having you
all under Bull takes the responsibility off of Ellie, any good that comes from them will benefit the
Inquisition, any bad can be made to reflect on the Chargers, not on the Herald or her cause, and
Bull will take the heat for anything public, and hold you responsible in-house. Keep your nose
clean, and your men accountable, it’ll be all good.”

His throat felt tight, hands trembling slightly as he carefully unfolded the parchment. A
contract. From the Iron Bull, hiring Thom Rainier into the Chargers. Thom carefully cleared his
throat. “Have uh…either of you got something I can use to sign this?”

“Contract?” Varric asked, curious. Thom nodded, and the Dwarf sighed, holding out a
hand. “Give it here.”

He did only for fear of insulting the man further, but he wasn’t sure why until…ahh.
Businessman. Maker was he reviewing the contract to ensure he wasn’t getting a bad deal? He
hadn’t really read the thing, first paragraph gave him all he needed to know, but there were
“Five percent could sound stiff for third in command,” Varric commented neutrally as he reviewed the contract, “mind if I ask what you make?”

“Ten,” Krem supplied with a shrug, “Bull will take fifteen for himself now, ten percent overhead keeps everyone outfitted and healers supplied, forty percent gets split across the ground troops, leaves twenty to be split even across the core members of the Chargers—I get a cut of that, Thom will too.”

Varric seemed to think that sounded more than reasonable, “Five percent and a cut of his core people’s profit?” he whistled, pitching low as he gave the contract one last look over.

“I will?” Thom asked. Payment alone was generous enough an idea…and he’d caught that—his five percent wasn’t coming out of thin air, Bull was getting 15% now, taking a hit to his own salary to…what? Make sure Rainier accepted the job? A cut of his core people’s salary that was…

“Think Bull just hands out ranks and nicknames? Core crew. You sign on, that’s what you’ll be considered, no arguments. You want to do right by Ellie? Right by your men? This is how you’ll do it,” Krem said firmly. “Family dinner’s Tuesday nights, though uh, tonight Dalish insists on a welcome bash, get you introduced to everyone proper. Word to the wise, Skinner bites.”

Varric slid the contract back over to Thom, pulled his quill and inkbox out for the Human man’s use. For the first time in forever, he signed his name, Thom Rainier on the dotted line.

He huffed in astonishment, a sort of weight lifting from his shoulders and he admitted, “Believe it or not I almost feel like a new man.”

“‘Almost’ is pretty good,” Krem commented, “though in my experience, you want to really feel like a new man, proper haircut goes a long way.”

Varric cackled at that slapping the countertop in affirmation, “Hell yeah! Haircut, and shave that stupid beard while you’re at it, s’not like you’re trying to hide your ugly mug anymore.”

Ahh. True he supposed. His description had been everywhere in Orlais when news broke of his crimes. Growing his hair long, beard that clouded his features, it’d worked to be something of a mask.

“Hate to disappoint, but I don’t even own a razor,” Thom said, though he might invest in one, the suggestion…it wasn’t a bad one.

Varric snorted. “Come on Sarge,” ahh. perhaps that would replace ‘Hero’ and ‘bastard’, the Dwarf slapped enough money for the Lieutenant’s drink onto the counter—yeah, after seeing the Tevinter lad in action this week, Thom wasn’t planning on letting him pay for his own drinks for a while if he could help it, nice to be of one accord with the Dwarf—and then, “settle your bill and we’ll go get you squared away.”

Ended up only paying for his drink—apparently Varric had been animate about buying the Lieutenant’s drinks for a good while after his service to Ellie. So Thom left his coin and followed after the Dwarf and Lieutenant.

And that’s how Thom Rainier ended up sitting out front of Varric’s tent, Lieutenant Aclassi trimming his hair, Varric Tethras dragging the sharp edge of a razor blade along his throat in what was an extreme form of trust building exercise.
Krem’d been surprised when Varric was waiting for him just inside Haven’s Gate last night after Seeker Pentaghast escorted Ellie to bed—Maker, he was beyond relieved Ellie was okay, he felt like he couldn’t move fast enough when he thought she’d been in danger, he was half tempted to walk her back himself but if he’d been scared shitless that Ellie’d been hurt he couldn’t imagine what Seeker Pentaghast was feeling and thought she could use the privacy to get assurances of her own that Ellie was alright. Seeker’d been so stricken with worry when she came on the scene, and he got needing some solid proof that Ellie was really okay after a scare like that—he thought he’d missed something, that the attempt at lunch was only the beginning, some form of distraction like if the Inquisition thought whoever called the hit had taken their shot and missed, they’d let their guard down and get a solid attempt through. As it was, Krem had been doing one last security check, that turned into double, triple checks around Haven before returning to bed—and the Dwarf approached, walking alongside him as he asked Krem if he’d care to join him for a drink—he was going to clear the air with Rainier and thought Krem could give the men some insight on righting things with Ellie, and at the very least keep them honest and peaceable. Overall it’d gone much better than he’d feared it might. The men now had some weird but amicable candor going, though the Dwarf had been a bit too gleeful, really got off on the fear he put in the Human man as he held a blade to his throat giving him a close, thorough shave. Got his hair trimmed up nice, seemed to bum Varric out that all that long hair hadn’t been a massive combover, he’d expected the man to be balding but for a guy getting up there, his hairline was holding pretty strong. Bull’d come ’round when they were finishing up, just about didn’t recognize the man, and when he did, he wolf whistled and declared him, ‘One beautiful old bastard’. Maybe Ellie’d gotten it wrong and Thom would be Bull’s type…probably wasn’t reciprocated though. Though they’d see, Bull wasn’t exactly shy about knocking boots with anyone as long as they were interested.

Ellie was all sorts of giddy when he got the call to retrieve her from the Chantry—Marehis would be returning soon she’d gleefully declared, followed shortly by a very apologetic assurance that she was only happy about that because she missed the woman, it didn’t have anything to do with Krem, he’d been ‘amazing, just super!’ and he got a sweet little peck on the cheek. Maker she was too sweet, he’d hardly assumed she meant any unkindness in her excitement at Marehis’s return, he was glad the woman would be back soon he knew Ellie missed her terribly. Oh, and Leliana helped her drop the Elf woman a note, and had even taken the time to speak with Ellie, just chatting after their war room meeting, the Spymaster was interested in speaking with her further which she seemed grateful for. She’d been worried Leliana hadn’t used to like her very well, she said. And did he know anything about Elemental magic? She knew he wasn’t a mage, but he’d come up in a society run by them, hung around ‘such an amazing archer’. She’d gotten the chance to think about Madam de Fer’s list and most of her offered teachings sounded a little strange or scary—but she figured the Enchanter was most familiar with Elemental magic, and she wouldn’t mind learning more fighting spells.

“Plus I have a fire spell already…fire spell and a half,” she said as she thought about it, holding his arm tight as they walked the path to her cabin. “And a lightning one. So, it wouldn’t be something my magic’s got zero experience in, you know?”

He didn’t know loads about magic but sounded reasonable enough to him. “Sounds really cool Ellie, I hope your lessons with Madam de Fer go well.” It still struck Krem as off-putting, the woman’s desire to suppress Ellie’s magic. He understood it, there was some measure of reason
behind it but still, just rubbed him the wrong way, hadn’t liked the way she’d been bossy about Ellie’s ‘tone’, talking down to her. Woman struck him as the sort to manipulate Ellie or try to at least. Though after seeing how Ellie’d taken her spat with Varric so hard he’d been surprised she got so defensive with Madam de Fer—someone Bull had termed ‘scary’—but he realized it was different. Enchanter was someone coming into the group as far as Ellie was concerned, and it wasn’t like the woman was attacking her personally, she was insulting Ellie’s friends and Maker that was clearly a mistake.

When they got back to her cabin she plopped down on her bed, squirming a bit before settling down in a comfortable position.

“So, what’s on now?” she asked him.

“Rest of the day is up to you, but I’ve got an invitation for you, if you’re interested,” he said, and Ellie sat up straighter, leaning forward in a way that said he had her undivided attention, little smile that grew even bigger when he said, “Chargers are having a get together tonight, dinner after sundown, welcoming a new recruit Bull signed on.”

“Oh gosh, really? I’d love to!” she enthused and then, “Have they settled in to Haven alright, this new recruit? Been given a tour—we could show them around, it’s scary being new,” she said.

“They’re pretty well settled, you’ll meet them tonight, no worries,” Krem said. Bull’d wanted to leave it a nice surprise.

“Alright then,” Ellie thought it over some more and asked, “Would you mind if I worked on my hat then? We’ll be leaving soon for the Hinterlands and I’d like to finish it before then.”

Huh. That was…he knew Ellie’d have to leave eventually, head back out into the field but he liked the Haven thing, seeing her every day, getting to be a part of her routine, and there was a part of him that felt like it could just go on like that but that was just ridiculous—eventually Marehis would be back, and the Chargers would be getting jobs outside of Haven, they’d have separate schedules again soon. Still, sort of ached him. But, he did want to finish his own project before Ellie left for the Hinterlands as well, and that got him more focused in the now—now, “Afternoon of knitting sounds like fun. You want anything before we get to it? Snack, or something to drink?”

Oh, she did. She seemed to be appealing to him, big eyes, pouty lip like she wasn’t usually permitted caffeine so late in the day, but he’d been given no direct instruction not to indulge her in afternoon coffee and agreeing…well he was decently sure if he advised against it, Ellie’d settle for something else but there was the risk that she’d continue pouting and saying yes was easier than fighting the temptation to kiss the pout from her lips. And it got him a grateful smile, she said she was feeling ‘brain foggy’ like she were sleepy, but she didn’t want to take a nap—she had things to do! she said. And she asked for two hours warning before they had to leave for dinner.

So. Coffee, between the two of them they drained the pot Flissa sent them and ate the rest Ellie’s stash of cookies as they worked on their projects sitting in the bedding nest again—took a while but Ellie’s hat came along nicely, and it was large enough. She watched carefully as he taught her how to cast off her yarn, cinch the top of her hat closed. Holding the finished product in her hand looking so excited and proud, he half expected her to jump up and run to find the Commander immediately, but she was going to hold off until she just saw him next—she said she thought he and Cassandra had been very chummy today, didn’t want to risk interrupting them, and Lady Josie’d held them back for some sort of meeting, and did Krem think maybe they were disclosing a relationship to the Ambassador?
“Gosh, they’re so cute! Did you see them today?”

“You know El, I’ve been meaning to tell you…I’m physically incapable of seeing people in the Templar Order, they’re literally invisible to me, it’s a whole thing—”

“Cremisius!”

He grinned at that, “Yeah I saw, they were definitely flirting at uh…during our noon repast.”

She liked that, “I’m learning so many cool words in the Inquisition!”

She did end up taking a little bit of a nap, unintentionally, she’d rested her head on his shoulder watching him knit and dozed off, snoring in his ear until it was time to give her the notice she’d asked for. He was shooed from the room, so she could clean up and then she came, cloak donned, and took him by the arm, a little coinpurse hanging from her wrist as she led him to Flissa’s.

Given she had the time, she didn’t want to show up to the Charger’s campsite empty handed again, and dinner had been great, but they hadn’t had any dessert last time, and they were celebrating a new recruit too, so:

“Sugar cookies—sweet recipe I picked up working a kitchen in Wycome,” she shared as they entered the Tavern and she went right up to the counter—Flissa had everything she would need and shooed Ellie’s offer of payment for the ingredients she’d use, the barmaid had little trouble resisting Ellie’s pout, and instead,

“My lady if you attempt to pay I’ll be deeply insulted!” Flissa insisted.

She did receive a sort of payment—Ellie came around the counter and hugged the woman tight before kissing her on the cheek and thanking her.

Flissa helped her get set up, lending her an apron so she didn’t dirty up her dress, and let her use vacant bar for her prep work. Krem offered to help but Ellie waved him off knowing he was on the job, which was nice. He wouldn’t mind helping, had no problem cooking but he was a little worried being behind the counter with her, hands occupied with messy work, his focus on helping taking away from his focus on the others in the Tavern—something went wrong he didn’t want to not be able to get a proper grip on his weapon because his hands were covered in cookie dough. He took a seat in front of the fireplace so he could keep an eye on everything, entrances, other patrons, Ellie as she worked.

Sera came popping in the Elf girl bound up to the counter and wanted to know what Ellie was up to.

“Cookies! I know you’re not big on them, so no pressure but you’re free to try them when they’re done, I’ll want some taste testing—it’s been a while since I made these, I’d hate to bring something yuck-tasting you know? Um…you could help if you want?”

Sera shook her head, “I’ll try ‘em but uh, I don’t know pish about baking.”

“That’s okay, I could teach you,” Ellie offered in earnest.

“You wanna teach me how to make cookies, Inky?”

“Uh-huh, if you want!”
Elf was quiet for a moment, but she did come around and Ellie lightly smacked her hands away insisting she wash them first which made Sera stop looking quite so serious, though she did take the instruction in cookie making very seriously which was almost strange to watch, but the Elf girl rolled up her sleeves washed up and diligently followed Ellie’s every instruction, measuring and mixing. Cracking eggs was messy work, but Ellie showed her how, helped the older girl when she got a bit of shell in the mix.

“Shite, gosh Inky I’m sorry, shite that’ll just make ‘em crunch or whatever right? Some people like crunch.”

Ellie giggled, “Mmm not in a nice way, but these are supposed to come out crispy,” she jested lightly, “It’s okay, that happens, we just…” she carefully picked the bit of shell out, “there, all better!”

Sera seemed a bit reluctant to help after that, afraid she’d mess it up, but Ellie finished putting the last of the sugar in their mixture and enticed her with, “Stirrer gets to lick the spoon.” So, after watching Ellie mix the batter up a little, Sera tried her hand at it, Ellie hopping up to sit on the countertop and watch, thanking the Elf because mixing is a real arm workout, and ‘gosh’ she was doing such a great job!

They worked together to get the batter on the pans—plural, Ellie was serious about her cookie game, making more than enough for all the Chargers, it was little wonder she’d wanted so much time, she and Sera baked four dozen cookies once all was said and done. While the last pan baked in the little brick oven, Ellie whisked two of their finished product off a cooling pan to hand off to Krem and Sera for taste testing. Warm, sweet, and they had a pleasant crispness to them when you bit in that just melted in your mouth.

“Shite Inky these is boss!” Sera declared them.

“Thanks! I can give you the recipe if you want, sometime,” Ellie offered as she packed up the cookies in a ceramic container to take to dinner.

Sometime turned into two minutes later, after Sera dashed from the Tavern and returned, dragging a loudly protesting Varric by the collar of his leather jacket.

“Stick a cookie in it, dwarfy, gimme your writing pish so I can jot something down for Inky!” Sera demanded.

“Alright, sheesh. Hey Tumbles, you look great,” Varric complimented, “you uh, feeling better?”

“Mostly, still gross but everyone’s been super helpful,” Ellie said, handing Krem another cookie, another one of her quiet ‘thank you’ she’d been giving him all day since he said she didn’t have to keep thanking him.

She’d been doing it profusely all morning, and worried a bit, about his helping—talked to him about it in private before her Chantry meeting with Madam de Fer. He’d been offering her advice all morning and as soon as they had the cabin door closed behind them when she went to change, she wanted to make sure he wasn’t helping her to his own detriment. She was beyond grateful but wanted to make sure it wasn’t picking at his own sense of self. He’d assured her it was fine…didn’t bother him anymore, and she was to stop being such a ‘worry wart’ before he left her to change. Been hell when he lived in Tevinter, he was absolutely prohibited to seek out any form of birth control, or suppressants, but that life was behind him now, Stitches kept him rolling in potion, and in a way he was glad experience made him able to help her.
Varric tried a cookie for himself, had his mouth full as he instructed Sera to write a copy of the recipe for him. Couldn’t bake for shit, he said, but Bianca would kill him if he didn’t get it.

“Just make sure she eats her veggies first,” Ellie teased lightly

“Shit Tumbles, I can’t tell that woman what to do, but maybe you could give it a shot, might listen to you,” he said looking all kinds of relieved Ellie seemed to really have forgiven him, was willing to be playful again.

Ellie worked to clean the mess she and Sera’d made of Flissa’s pans and dishes while she recited her recipe from memory, though Flissa waved her off when she came back from running a tray somewhere, “I’ll finish up, my lady, my apron won’t save your clothes if you get them all wet.”

“Just about time to head that way anyway, El,” Krem said.

“Okay…though I’m going to kind of dirty up just one more plate,” Ellie said, a little apologetically, though Flissa seemed unbothered, immediately offering up a clean plate to her, and Ellie piled on as many cookies as it would safely hold, leaving it on the counter top. “Thanks, for letting me use your kitchen,” she explained, giving the woman another peck on the cheek that sent her blushing and hugging Ellie tight before sending them off, and there was just the littlest bit of motion that caught his eye, Ellie’s arms wrapped around the woman’s middle, she patted her side and he was pretty sure she basically just reverse pickpocketed the woman—carefully slipped some payment for the ingredients she’d used up, Flissa’d just find later and either wouldn’t know where it came from or would just assume she’d forgotten how much she had on her.

“Very sneaky, Lady Herald,” he murmured quietly against her ear as he helped her don her cloak.

Her cheeks pinked, and she couldn’t keep a straight face, grinning as she insisted, “I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

Ellie held his arm tight as they left the Tavern, carrying her offering for the Chargers dinner…campfire, in hand. Maker it was a good thing she’d made so many, something from Ellie would have them all scrambling to eat one just out of the need to be nice to her, once they actually tasted them…Chief didn’t have much of a sweet tooth but even he might eat his weight in the things.

“Lethallan!” Dalish called as they neared the clearing, jumping up from her place around the campfire to rush Ellie, the younger mage had to hold the dish out of the way because Dalish hugged her excited to see Ellie in their camp again so soon. “Enansal, emm’asha.”

Ellie blushed, “Ma serannas,” and then she offered up the dish to Dalish, “I brought dessert, I hope that’s okay.”

“Wonderful!” Dalish said, taking it from her, and gesturing for them to come join them around the fire.

Krem was glad Ellie’d passed off her dish. Because he was pretty sure she’d drop it when,

“Boss! Glad you could make it, we’re breaking in the new recruit,” Bull called, slapping said recruit on the shoulder.

Ellie pulled away from Krem to walk right up to the man next to Bull and offer her hand to shake, “Hi! It’s so great to meet you, I’m El—” she took in a few sharp gasps of air, eyes going
wide as she stumbled backward into Krem who braced her elbow to halt her before she went tumbling into the fire or something Maker. She asked, bewildered, “Thom?!”

“Sergeant Thom Rainier now,” Thom said, seeming to truly have some pride in the new title, or maybe it was the job that came with it, “Inquisition put out offers to my men, Bull recruited them to the Chargers as ground troops, so he signed me on as well.”

“So you…so you’re…and…and…” she seemed to be working it out in her head and then she squealed running in place a moment before rushing full speed at Chief, hugging him tight as she breathed a litany of, “Thank you thank you thank you thank you thank you thank you thank you thank you!” and then, “You’re the best! You’re so smart and clever and mwah!” she pressed a grateful kiss to his cheek.

A chuckle rumbled through Chief’s chest his hand at the back of Ellie’s hair scratching lightly as his other arm hugged the girl back, rubbing between her shoulder blades. His lips went to Ellie’s ear, tucking her head down so he could speak directly into it, quietly for a moment, letting her go once she nodded, and the big lug—oh he’d get so much teasing for this later—pressed a kiss to her forehead (Rocky ‘dawwwed’ and promptly grabbed Grim by the shoulders to pull the man forward a plop a big kiss to his forehead, Chief’d never hear the end of it not tonight anyway) Bull ignored that, and Krem heard him say, “Don’t stress it anymore, alright?”

Ellie nodded again and smiled, turning to Thom and offering him her hand again to shake. “I’m really glad to meet you, Sergeant Thom Rainier,” she giggled around the name, “When did this happen?”

“Signed the contract just this afternoon. Varric invited me ‘round the Tavern to clear the air—and we did, Ellie, really—he asked the Lieutenant come along to mediate, he brought the offer from Bull with him.”

“Gosh,” she reached out with her unmarked hand to poke at the dip between jaw and cheek, “you’ve got an actual chin and everything now! And your new haircuts very dashing.” Dude literally looked decades younger, like a man in his thirties as opposed to his sixties.

“It was the Lieutenant’s suggestion, actually, his handiwork.”

Bull got the most devilish look on his face before he opened his big, stupid mouth, “Krem-puff’s just been full of great suggestions lately,” he said, “haircuts…new hires…”

Ellie gasped and rounded on him, “Cremisius!” she exclaimed looking on him, eyes alight with excitement and pride, “You suggested the Iron Bull hire Thom and everyone?”

Maybe. Big lug’s the one that ended up taking the pay cut though, insisted upon it like the dumb, noble ass he is—he didn’t have to, Krem was sure he could make it work, might get a bit tight if something came up but a cut to his own salary wouldn’t’ve killed him, especially with the unexpected pay he’d be getting from the Inquisition for his time working as the Herald’s bodyguard. Krem shrugged. “Takes a load off—won’t have to work so much with the ground troops myself whenever our third in command is around.”

Ellie leveled him a brilliant smile before launching herself at him, arms around his neck, giggling as his arms came up to support her back since her feet hang off the ground, before she kissed him on the cheek, not just once but three times, and his throat dried up, eyes wide when her lips were just before his own just the barest breath between them, he was overwhelmed with the thought that she might actually kiss him but she just smiled and pressed her forehead against his, unmarked hand massaging at the back of his neck as she said, “Thank you.”
“Of course,” he rasped out before setting her on her feet. Bull hadn’t learned his damn lesson with the snow down his trousers a few nights ago, bastard was chuckling.

Didn’t bother him much once Ellie was pulling him along to sit together, she plopped down across the fire from Thom and Bull, empty space next to Grim, waving cheerfully to the man who waved back. Skinner came and sat in front of Ellie, her back to the fire so she could face the Human girl.

“Hiya Skinner,” Ellie greeted, “your hair looks really pretty.”

Maker Skinner actually preened under the praise, seeming incredibly proud with herself. “I have brushed it. You are feeling better, small one?”

Ellie nodded. “I am, lots better than last night,” she said, and then she remembered, “Oh, Dalish!” she called out to the woman working the large pan sitting on a rack over the fire, “Thanks a ton for the heat bandages they’re literally the best thing in life, I’m so toasty!” she wriggled a bit, arms over her midsection sort of snuggling into herself.

“I’m glad,” Dalish said. “Have you ever crafted an enchantment, Ellie?”

“Sort of, just once—my mentor Ava and I crafted the staff I used to have before the Conclave, she let me help with the spirit rune for it,” she said.

Dalish nodded. “If you’ve time at some point, I would be happy to show you how to craft them yourself.”

Ellie gasped excitedly, “Oh gosh, really? I’d love that!”

“Of course, lethallan.”

“You uh, got the rundown on everything from Krem?” Bull’s voice got their attention, talking to Thom.

“Varric read over my contract for me,” Rainier said, not quite getting what Bull meant, “and Krem told me all about how things are run here, schedule things li—”

“Disclosed to him already, Chief,” Krem said and Ellie’s attention was piqued, she sat up straight looking to Krem and then Rainier as if wary of the elder man’s reaction. Guy’d taken it pretty well—at first he’d been falling over himself apologizing because he misunderstood, thought Krem was correcting him, that he’d been mistaking him as a boy, but he finally got it. Said he’d never met anyone like that before, not that he knew of anyway. Varric had seemed ready to come to Krem’s defense if things went south after that but Rainier hadn’t any qualms—a few mildly awkward questions but overall it wasn’t bad, guy hadn’t been disrespectful just confused and seeking to understand so he didn’t end up disrespecting Krem—said he was a good man as far as Thom was concerned. “He’s cool,” he vouched, giving Ellie’s hand a single reassuring squeeze.

Ellie beamed at Thom for that, relieved the man hadn’t reacted poorly. She bounced in her seat, and her arm looped through Krem’s, snuggling into him—seemed like she felt she needed to hug someone over it and he certainly wasn’t going to complain about being the most easily reachable recipient.

Chief nodded and made with his proposal: “Know you’ve got a little set up at the Forge but, you want, you could bunk with the Chargers.”

Krem figured he should get everything out in the open with Rainier in case he accepted,
he’d rather be up front with it than have the man see something he might find question with without context—figured the guy would accept the offer since things got a bit hinky when you have a sudden reveal that you’ve been using an alias and there’s no real explanation why outside of cryptic answers, disclosing the full truth wasn’t in the cards so. Things were tense with Harritt and Dennet. Chargers didn’t have a reason to question him—they all only knew him as Thom Rainier, most of them hadn’t so much as seen the man before tonight. Krem’d handle things with his old men, see what temperaments were like, how they were feeling about working for the Inquisition, with the Chargers, with Thom Rainier before bringing the man back into their lives. He’d make sure everyone was here to play nice, anyone who wasn’t was out on their ear before any further mess could be made. All in all, a fresh start for Rainier, and any of his men that would cooperate.

“That uh, actually sounds good to me, as long as I wouldn’t be stepping on anyone’s toes,” Rainier said, nodding as he sort of nervously scanned the faces of his new coworkers for any sign he wasn’t welcome.

Maker, guy was still too tense. “Wouldn’t’ve offered otherwise, quit your worrying, old man, bad for your heart right?” Krem goaded him.

“Watch who you’re calling old man, boy,” he threw back jovially, relaxing a bit.

“Gosh, you don’t look so much like an old man anymore Thom, it’s like your beard held all your wrinkly old man secrets,” Ellie giggled, and then she gasped, her hand had been in Krem’s but it went to his knee then squeezing to get his attention as she said, “You know, I thought maybe Thom and Dennet and Harritt could make a bald, mustached, old man club someday,” she looked to Rainier, “but now you can be in a club with Cremisius and Grim and Mister Stitches! Clean-shaven warrior men with dashing haircuts club!”

Bit of a long name, but Maker her enthusiasm was catching—should they get a banner and everything perhaps?

“Stitches is a bit bald for that,” Dalish sniped humorously.

“Oh! You lot just watch, I’ll grow my ruddy hair out!” Stitches vowed, met with the whole of the Charger’s laughter, “I will! Once I’m shedding in all your medicine you’ll be sorry.”

“Wonder if Adan’ll like it,” Krem whispered conspiratorially in Ellie’s ear, earning him a peal of laughter.


“Oh no the horns are big beautiful glorious things, no worries,” she assured, gesturing to her jawline as she explained, “you’re just a bit too scruffy to join, sorry. You and me can form our own club if you want!”

“Sounds great to me Boss,” Bull said, “we’ll think of something, be way cooler than their dumb haircut club!”

“Yeah! Air five!” Ellie called, throwing up her unmarked hand, Bull mirrored the action with equal enthusiasm.

Dalish served up roasted veggies, a whole mix of things she seasoned to the nines always made even Bull’s nose run from the spice but Maker it was good, all thrown together with rice and thick chunks of chicken—it was one of Krem’s favorite things Dalish made and when the Elf woman began serving she did so with two plates, one for Ellie and the other for Krem, passing his
off to him with a kiss to his temple and a whisper of thanks. Maker, the woman was a mother hen. He wasn’t sure if it was for his work with Ellie or for adding another member to their ranks for Dalish to fuss over in Thom, but maybe it was both.

When dessert came, the second Dalish had Ellie’s name out of her mouth the poor Elf woman was almost trampled by Rocky and Skinner making a mad dash to beat each other to the ceramic dish the woman held and Bull had to step in, rise from his seat to confiscate the dish waving for them to sit down before he came over, offered it to Ellie first—she was new so she didn’t know any better, only took one, but that was okay, it was Krem’s turn next so he used both hands, snatched up three in each, handed half off to her. Then Bull took an actual Qunari handful for himself had to be close to a dozen cookies in one hand while he passed the dish to Grim to take and send around the campfire, dish came up empty after everyone had a turn with it.

“The Iron Bull, you’ll give yourself a bellyache!” Ellie chided laughingly.

“Worth it, we don’t get stuff like this under the Qun*,” Bull said, “gotta get while the getting’s good!”

“They don’t allow cookies under the Qun?!” Ellie asked sounding absolutely appalled by the fact—like that was the most abhorrent thing the Qun could possibly demand of its followers.

“Not like they’re banned, Qun’s just efficient, so are its people. Cookies, cakes, pastries, desserts in general really derive from abundance—making too much dough or batter for a necessity like bread and having enough left over to experiment with doesn’t happen, we’re very precise, make what we need and nothing more.”

“I’d like to chat up your Qun leader people—you’ve got tamassrans that’ll shag you whenever you need a good romp, but dessert isn’t a priority?” she questioned, declaring “Sweets is just as important as sex, they’re good for the soul!”

That got her a round of encouraging laughter from most of the Chargers, overlapping Dalish’s cry of,

“Dread Wolf bite off your tongue, you horrible man,” she hollered at Bull, “what sort of things have you been teaching the girl?!”

“She had questions about the Qun, I answered!” Bull defended.

“Dunno,” Ellie said, grinning because she knew it would get him in trouble and he deserved it, “Could’ve done without the phrase ‘they’ll pop your cork’,” she shuddered making a face. “Sounds violent.”

And all too casually Bull returned, “Sometimes it is.” Rainier thumped Chief upside the back of the head. Yup. Having a third in command was already taking the load off Krem, good man.

Everyone was chattering then, signing hands and speaking mouths going a mile a minute, introducing Thom to the Chargers chaos proper. Ellie seemed completely at ease, content, smiling as she watched, listened, joining in where she saw fit, her head resting against Krem’s shoulder the entire time, her hand on his forearm, underside wasn’t thickly armored, just the cloth of his tunic and Ellie’s fingers traced ticklish patterns over the fabric, warm and soothing.

Ellie was…Krem just, he liked her. She was kind and honest and brave and maybe it was just sleep deprivation and fire light, but she was just beautiful. He thought that all the time, but
seeing her warm and bubbling with excitement, carefree as she chatted and laughed with the Chargers, with Bull was something else. Nearly everyone he loved in all the world was gathered in once place, just like any day with the Chargers and somehow having Ellie in the midst of it all feel more, the fire felt warmer, conversation lighter. Dalish really knew how to cook, but he was pretty sure the food tasted better because it was a meal he was sharing with her. Maker, everything about her made him want to know her more. Be more. Anything she would let him be. Scarred him, that he would try, and she might reject him, but if she did he’d survive, smooth it over he was hardly going to ruin their friendship over this. If friendship was all he could ever have with her that was amazing in and of itself. Damn, she did right by her friends, cared about them, was there for them, her love on that level was definitely not something to turn your nose up at. He’d gotten more than his fair share of firsthand experience with the kind of friendship Ellie offered.

Bull was never going to let him hear the end of it. When Chief taunted him over his feelings for Ellie, he’d insisted he just wanted to be friends. Told himself to keep his dumb, stupid crush quiet, wait it out, it would go away. But it wasn’t, and he was pretty sure that wasn’t happening anytime soon. He’d hold off for a while, wait until he wasn’t her bodyguard anymore, that’d hardly be appropriate but…yeah.

Maker watch over them all, he was going to court the Herald of Andraste.

Herald of Andraste…uh…maybe the Maker shouldn’t watch too closely, mind.

Chapter End Notes

*Cullen’s siblings are all canon siblings! Mia is a boss big sister and Cullen is her dumb little brother that gets into trouble, his workplace gets blown to hell multiple times and he sends her not even a ‘sup I’m back on my bullshit’ card or nothing, she has to track him down—as revealed in conversation in Skyhold. Love Cullen, he’s precious and he too could use a hug.

*Bloomingtide is the Thedas equivalent of May “April showers bring May flowers” #Bloomingtide and since Cullen’s baby sister’s name is Rosalie, ‘Rosie’ I thought it was a nice fit. This month also brings the holiday Summerday on the 1st! Dedicated to the Old god of Unity, it marks the beginning of Summer and in Orlais it’s a big deal, children who are of age are dressed in white and taught the responsibilities of adulthood and all that jazz, like how to pay taxes and do their laundry. Hopefully.

* The Sign Bull uses to describe Madam de Fer means ‘Scary’

*Cullen’s claustrophobia is a canon/fanon thing, he suffers due to his time in Circle Tower, in Lothering’s now-fallen Circle where he was tortured by demons while keeping watch over a Harrowing. The idea that the hole in Cullen’s roof in Skyhold is never repaired=fanon idea that he keeps it that way so he can easily see the sky, see that he’s out in the open and not closed in and trapped.

* “fifteen…a little later than most” so, my ass was researching mage whateverness in Dragon age and it struck me I made Ellie super young to be Fade Dreaming and discovering her magic, but I’ma roll with it. in actuality most people don’t realize their mages until around puberty.

*Lyrium=so, I also realized, while reading about Lyrium (because I never have before,
I just chug it in game and POOF mana!) but in canon, Mages experience consciousness in the Fade while sleeping when their magic first is like “whats up, whats good, yer a Wizard Harry”. This is due to a oneness with the Fade. This same experience can be had again, through Lyrium consumption, Lyrium connects mages to the Fade giving them the boost in mana and whatnot, which also prompts Fade Dreams. If Solas wasn’t a lying dog, he’d probably have to habitually drink Lyrium to dream in the Fade as often as he does, as it is he may have to do so anyway.

*The Mark does cause the Inquisitor to Fade Dream, at different points in the game, since I don’t have Ellie hopped up on Lyrium for most of this fic, I figure the best explanation for her Fade Dreaming, and the need for her sleeping potion to disconnect her from the Fade is because the Mark does connect the Inquisitor to the Fade in the way magic and lyrium can for Mages.

*All the schools of magic listed in Madam de Fer’s offer to Ellie for lessons are Dragon Age canon schools of Magic

*There are no cookies under the Qun! Its literally a Trivia mention in the canon of Dragon Age that the Qun is all about efficiency and they don’t do ‘abundance’ they just do ‘enough’, and list desserts like cookies and cakes and an example, all ingredients for things like that are used for more purposeful recipes, and usually desserts derive from having left over ingredients and batter for something purposeful, that you need to use, so you get creative. Thanks to Seggrit, Ellie can never successfully convert to the Qun, cookies are too good for the soul, and she likes the Maker just fine.
In Hushed Whispers

Chapter Summary

In Hushed Whispers! Wicked Grace, crushes, the B-Quad is formed, reunions, new friends, horrible enemies, and Time Magic exists, so that's fun.

Chapter Notes

DISCLAIMER: I own nothing, still literally and for the purposes of this fic. All dialog used to be canon complaint during cut scenes belongs to the creators of Dragon Age Inquisition--Bioware, Frostbite, Electronic Arts, etc. Don't come for me, I am so very very poor.

Here we go! I appreciate all the Kudos and comments--I think I've replied to everyone, I really do appreciate the feedback!

A bit of a heads up just in case it ruffles any feathers, I do have the Iron Bull refer to himself, a pansexual man, and a character that's...more borderline demisexual, as Bisexual for the purposes of alliteration for a punny name, but we all know what's up. <3 no hate or erasure intended, there may even be a discussion about it at some point, it just didn't make it into this Chapter.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

So. Lots of weird, confusing, crazy, and unexpected things were going on in the Inquisition.

*Weird* and *confusing*—Cassandra. She was acting very strange around Ellie. Before her lesson with Lady Josie they had breakfast together and the woman had just been...well she seemed like she was concerned about something but unwilling to speak of it, insisted that there was nothing the matter when Ellie asked if everything was alright. She asked Cremisius when they were alone, walking the path to the Chantry afterward, if he thought Cassandra seemed off and he posed that perhaps the Seeker wished to discuss something with Ellie privately. So, after her promised proper lunch date with Leliana, Ellie caught Cassandra on her own later that afternoon—Cremisius gave them some space, going to chat up Bull while Ellie went to Cullen first, at the soldier’s practice field.

“Eleanor, to what do I owe the pleasure?” the Commander asked as he joined her.

“Um so...” she sighed, she was kind of nervous! She wasn’t sure he’d like it or if it’d embarrass him, so she just thrust the hat at him, holding it out in her unmarked hand. “You need a hat! You work outside all day and it’s just no good not to bundle up if you can.”

Cullen knelt before her, grinning as he took the hat in his hands, “*Ellie*, you made this yourself?”

Ellie nodded. “Cremisius taught me how, he was lots of help but yeah, I knitted it,” she told
“This,” he responded, whipping the hat onto his head, and she was so relieved it fit well, covering his hair, and ears and she thought the gray was nice, sort of went with the steely parts of his armor! “is the most excellent hat I have ever owned. And,” he said, brushing a lose lock of hair out of Ellie’s face, the back of his gauntleted finger skimming along the bottom of her hat, “I do believe we match.”

Oh gosh! “Yeah, we do!” she realized, and then, “Does it feel okay? It isn’t itchy or anything?”

He shook his head. “It is very soft, and I feel warmer already, truly, Eleanor, thank you. Seeker!” Cullen called as he rose to his feet, waving to the Nevarran woman who’d been practicing, beating down a dummy. She sheathed her sword and came to join them.

“Commander, ahh. What is this? The mysterious ‘not a hat’?” Cassandra asked.

Yeah, that’d been lame, but she’d been trying to be covert! Just checking to make sure she had a good idea how big she needed to make it, and it wasn’t like she got tons of opportunity to see the man’s head that well gosh—everyone was just way too tall! She was almost sixteen! She got big enough for her uterus to decide it was time to bleed out all over the place—when were her bones going to decide it was time to stretch a bit? She needed height! She had things to reach! It was officially on the prayer list: Protect all her friends, watch over them and bring them happiness, help them seal the Breach, make her taller.

“Not mysterious! Just…a surprise, sort of,” Ellie explained. “I wasn’t super sure it’d turn out okay.”

“It is lovely Eleanor,” Cassandra assured her.

The Seeker was standing right beside her and Cremisius was still talking with the Iron Bull, awe! Thom now too. Gosh he looked so different now, and it wasn’t just the massive lack of facial hair, he didn’t hold himself quite so reserved as he chatted with his new teammates, he was welcome there and was made to feel as such. He seemed at ease. Oh! Cassandra—focus, the woman definitely hadn’t been at ease at all that morning—so Ellie smiled and took her arm, “Thanks!” she said, looking to Cullen then, “I’ll let you get back! Have a good day!”

“Alas Eleanor I’m afraid that’s impossible,” Cullen spoke with put-upon regret, grinning as he informed her, “as I’m already having an amazing day.” Ellie giggled at that, he’s ridiculous!

“Um, can we talk?” Ellie asked Cassandra.

Cassandra looked to her a moment and then, “Of course, Eleanor,” she said, squeezing Ellie’s arm in a hug, “truly, you may speak with me of anything,” she assured as they began walking the path past the tents, heading for Haven’s frozen lake.

…Maybe she’d gotten it wrong, did Cassandra think Ellie had something she needed to talk about? She’d been so weird this morning, seeming awkward and wanting to bring something up—oh.

The crazy. Not a bad sort of crazy not really, just in the hectic sense.

Word came from the rebel mages late yesterday evening, Lady Josie informed her during her lessons. Today was their last day in Haven. Tomorrow morning as soon as they were through with breakfast, she’d have to armor up, pack her underthings with as much bandaging as possible
because Maker help her, she was going to ride a horse. Russel—sweet Russel, he was always good and careful with her when she was hurt, she’d just have a quick talk with him that her body had betrayed her, and she was definitely hurting right now.

Cassandra may have known when they sat down the breakfast, been afraid to bring it up because their leaving tomorrow also meant…gosh she…she wasn’t going to see Marehis she was pretty sure. The woman was amazing, and incredible and she was sure she was making the journey back as quickly as mortally possible, but chances were Ellie would be long gone by the time Marehis returned to Haven and…well Ellie wasn’t coming back, not until they’d dealt with both the Mages and the Templars.

“Oh, Eleanor,” Cassandra actually hugged her as Ellie admitted that yeah she was…Maker she hadn’t seen Marehis since they went their separate ways, to the Coast, and the Oasis! That was so long! And so much had happened and she just, she missed Marehis so much! She got a little teary eyed when Cassandra tucked Ellie’s head under her chin, began rubbing her back, promising, “You will meet with the Mages as soon as we are in the Hinterlands, secure their alliance, and we will immediately set out for Therinfall Redoubt and I swear to you Eleanor, I will see to it the Lord Seeker does not unduly lengthen our negotiations. All of our allies are secured, everything is prepared. And while I know it is stressful business, you will be so busy with our dealings on behalf of the Inquisition…you will not have the time to dwell on homesickness, you’ll be back and seeing Marehis again before you know it.”

Ellie nodded, squeezing Cassandra tighter. “Thanks. And thanks for, you know, coming. It’s so much traveling and fighting and work and you’re so due a break, I really appreciate you always being along for the ride, you know? Gosh I’d be a mess,” she laughed a bit wetly, pulling away to wipe at her cheeks, “an even bigger mess. Can you give yourself a raise? I think you deserve a raise. Like. All the advisors do. Everyone in the Inquisition.”

Cassandra smiled ruefully, taking Ellie’s face in her hands and, thumbs brushing away leftover tears from under her eyes, “This is the exact reason you cannot be Inquisitor, Eleanor. We would go bankrupt for your gratitude.” And then, “Is there anything else that is troubling you?”

Nothing she could think of, so, “No. Was um, was there anything you wanted to talk about?”

Cassandra seemed to consider it a moment as her hands came to rest on Ellie’s shoulders, regarding her curiously, “What are your plans for the rest of your day? Do you need assistance packing?”

Ellie shook her head. “Nope! My afternoon is clear now, I’m all packed. I had time once I was done in my lessons with Lady Josie, so I went ahead and gathered up my stuff. Cremisius helped me with a potions run for everyone at Adan’s, so everybody’s all set there. You seemed busy earlier, so I took all the potions you hang on to for me and your health potions—Adan’s got something new for stamina he says, mid-battle pick-me-up of sorts Mister Stitches taught him—and I put them in your quarters. I hope you don’t mind—I didn’t snoop in your things honest I just left everything on the empty space on your desk and locked your room back up.”

“It was my understanding I locked the door myself this morning,” Cassandra said drily, though she was grinning a bit seeming amused, not upset that Ellie’d technically broken into her room. “Thank you Eleanor, that is one less thing I’ll have to see to. I’m finding I feel a bit of procrastination is due then, for my own packing since you’ve seen to gathering most of what I’ll need. If you’re free perhaps you wouldn’t mind joining me?”

“In your procrastinating?” Ellie asked, giggling because Cassandra procrastinating was just
a fun sort of out-of-character, coming from the Seeker who worked nonstop.

“Yes,” Cassandra confirmed, “You’ve been to my quarters, while I believe you when you say you did not snoop, I’m sure it was hard to miss my collection.”

Collection…oh!

“Oh, yeah you like reading, just a little I guess, huh?” Ellie teased. Cassandra had a little room in the Chantry, just her bed and a desk, little washbasin and a trunk, and then stacks and stacks of books everywhere.

“Indeed,” Cassandra said, “I was considering getting something warm to drink from Flissa’s and spending the afternoon curled up with a good book, if you’re interested, I’m sure we could find something that would suit you.”

“Oh,” Ellie said, and then it wasn’t that far from the truth to say, “I’m sorry, I’m actually feeling really tired,” she was, it was hard not to want to sleep all day, woke up feeling tired no matter that she’d slept really well last night. Adan assured her that was normal. Now the exhaustion was sort of rolling through her chest. “I think I might need to lay down for a little bit.”

Cassandra put an arm around her shoulders, began walking them back up the slope toward Haven’s gate, “Of course, Eleanor. Perhaps another time.”

_Nope_, but Ellie wasn’t going to say as much.

“Hey Boss, Seeker,” the Iron Bull greeted as they approached, Thom nodded politely as Cremisius turned to them and Ellie stepped out of Cassandra’s hold to take his arm and gosh her eyes burned, stomach turning like she might be sick, her chest just felt heavy, she was worried if she spoke she might start crying so she tried smiling to the Qunari but even that didn’t feel right. She squeezed Cremisius’s arm three times.

He looked to her, then Cassandra, and back again. “We best be going Chief, I’ll see you later.”

No questions asked, not even when they got back to her cabin, as promised. Maker bless him.

“Sorry, I’m just not feeling very well,” she felt she should explain as he surveyed her quarters, led her inside.

“It’s alright,” he assured her warmly, helping her remove her cloak. “Do you need anything? Potion, something to eat or drink?”

She shook her head, though that felt a bit silly because he’d turned his back to hang her cloak up for her, “I’m just going to take a nap I think—if that’s alright.”

“Of course,” he said, laying a hand on her shoulder squeezing in reassurance, “you don’t need permission to take care of yourself, El,” he smiled, reprimanding lightly. “You want me to stick around? Need anything to help you sleep?”

“Nope! You go, relax, have some fun, yeah?”

“Alright, I’ll arrange for some guards,” he agreed, “I’ll come back around dinner time and check in, but you need anything send for me, okay?”
When she was alone she curled up in her bed, thought for sure she’d sleep but her head pounded with ache. She was sort of miserable with herself, didn’t feel like getting up and getting potion. It was dumb!

She told them—flat out told Cassandra and the Advisors, Marehis day one, when they asked if she had any form of education—she didn’t! She explicitly said she hadn’t had any schooling aside from the occasional lesson in magic from someone like Ava or something. And she thought they got it—Cassandra asking if Ellie knew she could write to people from Haven, she thought that’d just been an offer for the woman to send word to Ellie’s loved ones if she had any that she was alright. After that no one, not even Varric or Solas questioned her asking them for help handling things like letters or requisitions when they were in the Hinterlands, Cassandra helped her the most and she thought…she thought they knew! That they understood, and it wasn’t a big deal.

And then they got back from the Hinterlands and Solas asked if she wanted to read with him and…well she thought maybe he didn’t know after all or had forgotten or was just being polite. Then Varric tried teaching her lockpicks with that guide he drew up, told her to study it, pictures and words and all—and she definitely didn’t feel like flat out informing a man who wrote books for a living she’d never read a word of one in her entire life! And then Cassandra wrote that letter to Lady Josie for her when they were in Orlais, wanted Ellie’s opinion on her wording when she hadn’t read it out loud and it clicked. They just assumed—no matter that it didn’t make any sense, where would she learn something like that?—they all thought she could read!

And then she came to realize that was because everybody knew how to read. Every single person in the entire Inquisition could read and write, even Sera and she had a similar background to Ellie! Everyone knew how to do it, so she thought it must be easy, but she tried! Nothing made any sense to her, there wasn’t any rhyme or reason to the squiggles, circles, dots, and lines, she couldn’t figure it out all on her own and she definitely wasn’t asking for help. They’d have think she was a total idiot! Just so dumb! And she was but she didn’t want her friends to think that!

Magic drew up the fact that Sera had figured it out, and she just did what Ellie thought everyone else had been doing—read things for her, and gosh that’d been sweet trying to make Madam de Fer’s list a little more understandable if she wanted to look it over later on her own. She didn’t even make Ellie feel badly or stupid over it but…

Blah! She yanked her covers over her head and just—she wasn’t going to think! She was just going to lay there until she slept and hopefully when she woke up her headache would be gone!

She felt better, wasn’t sad and angsty when she woke later, Fade Dreaming gave her time to sort of disconnect from how badly she was feeling, think without her physical aches picking at her concentration. Her headache wasn’t quite so bad but oh Maker, the cramping. Rolling pain in her guts from dull aching to stabbing…literally, she’d officially been stabbed enough times to verify as much, it felt like being stabbed. Why? She knew why, understood it was just her body trying to help get everything out but why did it take so long? It’d been two entire days almost! And Adan said it could last an entire week! What sort of nonsense?!

But Adan also supplied potion, and she was properly motivated to climb out of bed and drain a draught, capping the bottle right when someone knocked on her cabin door before peeking their head in. Cremisius, glad to see she was up and feeling better.

“Did you have a good afternoon?” she asked him.

“I did,” he was happy to confirm, “Hung out with the guys—Thom’s settling in well, him and Chief are all set for tomorrow—finished my knitting.”
Oh! The scarf he was working on! Huh, “Really?” he wasn’t wearing it, “is it warmer out now?” dare she hope? Haven just seemed to be getting even chillier as they transitioned into the wintry months.

“Oh Maker no, I wish,” he said as he realized what she meant, “I wasn’t making it for myself. It’s a gift actually.” He explained, “Specific someone.”

Specific…oh!

“Oh gosh, did they like it?” she asked, excited…mostly excited…she was happy for him if he had someone he really liked. She just hoped they didn’t hurt him, whoever they were. Oh if someone broke his heart or hurt his sense of self they were so toast!

“Dunno yet, I’ll get around to it soon enough,” he shrugged. “If you’re feeling up to it everyone’s going to meet in the Tavern—whole-party dinner to kick things off before you leave tomorrow.”

Oh gosh, everyone?

He meant everyone—every single one of her party members, Madam de Fer and all, were gathered around two tables scooted together so everyone could fit comfortably, Maker what time was it? There wasn’t anyone else in the Tavern, but it was regular dinner time.

Everyone’s greeting was sort of garbled together, but enthusiastic enough it seemed everyone was getting along pretty well which was…definitely a relief, Ellie was a little nervous about heading out tomorrow, with a party of seven of her companions, but everyone had wanted to come. Varric didn’t want her going out without him, Thom too, and the Iron Bull was sincere when he’d said he wanted to be a frontline bodyguard of sorts. Cassandra was going to help her with the actual addressing the Mages and Templars thing which was just a relief because Ellie was nervous enough doing it with help. Solas didn’t like being too far away from her now that they knew their connection had limits, and his being around able to link with Ellie in emergencies gave everyone peace of mind. Madam de Fer wanted to oversee everything, watch over the proceedings and offer guidance as she could. Sera wasn’t super interested in the ‘Mage pish’, but she wanted a proper look at the Templar business and she was pretty determined to go just about anywhere Ellie went which was just really really sweet.

The Iron Bull pulled out one of the two empty seats on his right, “Hey boss, foods on its way, have a seat.”

So she did, thanking him. It wasn’t exactly table manners, but she wasn’t at a fancy party or something, so she leaned forward, resting her arms on the table top, sat so her left knee touched his thigh so he’d know she was there. Cremisius’s gaze sort of swept the room before he sat next to her, keeping his own arm—left one, right beside hers in case she needed to signal him quickly, she noticed he always did that when they were at meals with others, it was sweet.

“You are feeling better I hope, Eleanor?” Cassandra asked, seated across from Ellie.

“I am, thanks. I’m sorry about earlier,” she really was.

Cassandra’s hand reached out and covered her own, “Think nothing of it.”

Everyone chatted amicably with each other—Varric and Thom sat across from each other down the table from Ellie, and she caught a few mentions of ‘tourney’ so it was nice to see them trying to find common ground again, Sera was sitting across from Cremisius, rapid-fire tonight,
talking about everything from pranks she’d pulled to Friends missions, asking him about Charger stories, and had he seen any Qunari women? She was very disappointed that he hadn’t. Madam de Fer talked about her time in the Oasis with Cassandra, Solas, and Ellie—gosh it was so far away, but she was sort of excited to go check it out at some point, Solas had all sorts of theories for what could be waiting there in the strange temple they’d found.

“My dear girl, have you considered the list I gave you at all?” Vivienne asked.

“Uh-huh! I was thinking maybe Elemental magic would be the way to go, if that sounds okay to you? I know a little, so my magic has already started developing that way, and it likes it well enough.”

“That sounds most agreeable my dear,” Vivienne agreed crisply. “I do hope our travels will afford us opportunity for some tutelage. Working together in the field should give us some active educational experience.”

Ellie nodded. “It’ll be fun! Oh! Do you mind being included in mine and Solas’s Barrier spells, Madam de Fer?”

Madam de Fer huffed a laugh, “Of course not my dear. The questions you ask. Why ever would I take issue with such a thing?”

Ellie shrugged. “Just because you’re a mage doesn’t mean you trust other people’s casting or that you’re comfortable with their magic touching you—you’d have to ask the others if they’re okay with you casting on them. And you’re absolutely not to cast on Sera at all, ever, unless she says otherwise.”

Vivienne dipped her head in a single nod. “Certainly. I would not wish to make the young lady uncomfortable.”

She spoke a bit drily, in a way that made Ellie feel like she was being sarcastic about it, but she did it in that pithy ‘being polite to mask rudeness’ way but she wasn’t being outright mean, so Ellie’d just have to wait and see. She was pretty sure it meant Madam de Fer had no problem not casting on Sera because she didn’t particularly care about her either way which was…not ideal but okay. If it meant she was going to cast on her anyway…oh gosh she’d be in for so much! Many words! All of the words Ellie knew—and the Inquisition was teaching her loads of them! She’d never been so angry at Solas before the time he cast on Sera when she made it clear she didn’t want magic on her, oh gosh that’d been just infuriating! She really hoped they could all work together well.

Dinner was so good, Flissa made that stew, the kind out of butternut squash, with warm, fresh bread gosh, it was just yum! Ellie got the impression Cassandra remembered her liking to the dish, that she’d asked Flissa to make it for their last night in Haven—when their dinner was delivered the Seeker had been watching like she was looking to see her reaction, seeming pleased when Ellie’d smiled. Gosh she was just the best.

Oh! She really was—when they were all done eating and their dishes cleared away, Ellie thought they’d chat some more or go their separate ways, but Cassandra pulled out a deck of cards!

“I thought perhaps we could enjoy a game of Wicked Grace,” she said, and then she looked to Ellie and seemed almost nervous to ask, “would you care to play, Eleanor? Purely for fun, not coin.”

“Coin is the fun, Seeker,” Varric griped.
“I will gladly confiscate your money if you’re so eager to be rid of it,” Cassandra returned drily sending a glare down to his end of the table before looking back to Ellie. “If you do not know the game I’m certain it would be no trouble to teach you.”

Ellie held out her hand again. “I can deal if you like?”

She definitely didn’t mind at all it seemed, she looked almost relieved like…huh dunno it was just an extreme amount for something so small but maybe Cassandra didn’t like dealing herself, had hoped someone else would offer?

“Careful Tumbles, if you send the cards flying everywhere you’re picking them up,” Varric jested as Ellie split the deck, taking half in each hand. And the Iron Bull turned in his seat to watch her.

She quickly riffle-shuffled the deck a few times, keeping all the cards in hand thank you very much—she wasn’t new!—before sliding them around the table one at a time to make sure everyone got the same number of cards. One two three four five.

Sera watched her wide-eyed and declared, “Shite! Inky’s gonna hustle us!”

“Sera, if I were hustling you, you wouldn’t know it,” she tried to keep a straight face, it was enough to get Sera looking a little gob smacked, but that just made Ellie laugh.

“Shit boss, had me going there for a second,” Bull said, discarding a card and selecting a new one from the deck.

Ellie looked to her own cards. Huh, she had two daggers which was eh, and one of the Snake ones, ‘D-e-c-e-i-t’, two of the Knight ones—one that had ‘R-o-s-e-s’ written at the top, whatever that meant, but Ellie liked him, he was a favorite because of the pretty flowers in his hands, roses she thought, and the other one was the bleeding one, ‘S-a-c-r-i-f-i-c-e’. Not sure but the pictures were clear, they were both in armor like knights, and she knew her numbers okay-enough to tell what order they should be in when played.

She swapped out a dagger first in hopes she’d get another part of a set, she ended up with one of the Angel ones, but it wasn’t Death, no creepy black, blown-out candles. It was the coin one. Eh, she liked Angel cards better than Snake ones so when her turn to swap again came she discarded that one and took up another.

“Deceit,” Cassandra said.

Deceit? “I’m sorry?” what…what did she mean?

Varric looked over the table to the pile of discarded cards and snorted, nodding at Thom. “You poor bastard, it was only a matter of time before she got the truth out of you—Tumbles here’ll even cast out the deceit card given the chance,” he quipped.

“Right good of her on all accounts,” Thom said as he rearranged his own hand of cards, unbothered by Varric’s teasing and it’d been actually…well, as close to friendly about the situation Ellie’d ever heard him be, maybe joking about it was his way of getting over Thom’s lie. “Well, possibly not the card one, if she’ll regret that move later.”

Deceit…card…move—oh! Her card! Was that what it said?

“I’m just not a big fan of the snake ones,” she explained, “they’re not as pretty as the others.”
That got her a series of groans from around the table and the Iron Bull said, “Imekari, you’re killing me here—don’t tell me your strategy is just playing the ones you think are pretty?”

Krem snorted, “Oh she’s playing great, mind your own cards Chief! Knowing your rotten luck, El’s already way ahead of you.”

Well yeah, if Death got dealt right now she’d have a half-and-half hand, she wouldn’t lose, it’d be more of a draw unless everyone else just had super crappy hands. But! “Cremisius! Keep your eyes on your own cards you cheat-y McCheater pants!”

“My most sincere apologies lady Herald,” he said, much too smoothly before his tones turned dry, “how dare I see the cards you’ve practically got laid out on the table,” he teased.

Oh, she’d put her hands out once she’d finished dealing, keeping her cards turned away, more toward Cremisius so the Qunari couldn’t see what was on them huh. “What did I say about backtalk, Aclassi?”

“Hmm…” he made a show of thinking it over, “I’m not getting paid for it?”

“Yup! So button it, mister!” she ordered humorously.

Cremisius raised a hand to twist his fingers before his lips like tucking a button done on a shirt, dedicating himself to keeping his mouth a solid line until the action made Ellie giggle, which took all of a second, and huh, her laughing made him smile to so that was nice. Made her feel blushy though if she thought about it.

She got very blushy the following morning…because of the unexpected part of things happening in the Inquisition. Could also easily be categorized as ‘crazy’ and ‘confusing’. She certainly didn’t understand it.

Everyone was gathered out front of Haven’s gate, horses saddled, packs secured to backs of masters and beasts, sweet, sweet horses. Russel was very understanding, he nodded and nuzzled Ellie’s cheek when she quietly informed him that she was so, so so so so not looking forward to this trip on a physical level, she felt all sorts of yuck. But she was going to suck it up—she had enough bandaging to soak up a river tucked in her underthings, worst case scenario she has stained drawers and have to clean the inside of her armor, it was kind of made to be bled on anyway, and her cramping and headache potions had already kicked in from breakfast. She had this!

She had something else too.

The others were getting on their horses or getting ready to—Cassandra and Cullen were still talking over by her horse, the Seeker absently petting her steed’s face as they spoke in hushed tones—Ellie was just finishing her own talk with Russel when Cremisius came up from behind her and she turned to greet him—or, well, say goodbye really, this was it. They were really going to go settle these things with the Mages, the Templars, it all made Ellie excited and nervous—like the rush you get from standing on the edge of a cliff, precariously balanced on the heels of your feet and thee wind could either blow you back into safety or cast you to your doom.

“All set? Need anything before you head out?” he asked as he came to a stop, hands behind his back.

Ellie shook her head. “Not really…just um, maybe give Marehis like the biggest hug in the world for me when you see her, yeah?” she asked, rising up on her toes to hug him around the neck.

“Biggest one, promise,” he said squeezing her tight before releasing her. She realized then
he’d been holding something, folded over several times, clenched in his hand—oh!

“Your scarf!” she looked over her shoulder to see if the Iron Bull was paying attention, but he was rather preoccupied climbing into Bitsy’s saddle—biggest. horse. ever! The name was clearly for irony’s sake…kind of like Varric’s nicknaming the Iron Bull ‘Tiny’—they matched! Anyway, she still kept her voice low in case Cremisius would be embarrassed talking about a person he liked with his boss in ear shot, “Are you giving it to them today?”

“In a bit yeah. Still on the clock,” he said with a shrug.

Oh! Yeah she supposed it wouldn’t be super professional to go make his moves on the person he fancied when he was technically supposed to be seeing to Ellie’s safety, but she was leaving! She was practically gone already so, “Cremisius! Are you kidding me?” she smiled and said, going for encouraging levity, “Thank you Lieutenant Aclassi, you’ve been absolutely amazing this week, and now you are officially released from bodyguard duty! By order of Andrsaste’s Herald! Go! Do your thing, you’ve got this!”

Cremisius breathed out a little nervous sounding laugh, smile tugging at the corner of his lips. “Alright then.”

And then he was very close, looping the scarf around her neck, around her hair really it sort of got in the way a bit but um…that was not really a concern at the moment. Her eyes sort of felt like they were going to fall out of their sockets and her face felt very, very red, and she was pretty sure she officially lost the ability to breathe ever ever again.

“No pressure,” he said to her quietly, “none at all just…be safe, and I’ll see you when you get back.”

Her mouth worked for a moment while she tried to figure out just how to put words into it again he…wha…who…huh?…what?!

He smiled at her, chuckling a bit as he turned to let his sentence stand on its own, no pressure even from the beginning to respond at all and that made her stomp her foot, pointing at his back as she shouted,

“I will definitely see you when I get back, Cremisius Aclassi!”

“Looking forward to it,” he called over his shoulder as he headed for Haven’s gate, throwing up a hand to wave.

He! Was- did- how?! What the! The!

What the flip!

“Everything all good there, Boss?” Bull called from where he sat successfully astride his horse.

Ellie turned to see all seven adults up and ready to go, staring at her like they weren’t sure what was happening but also way too amused, and magic was half racing with excitement and half laughing in her blood over everything and she was just! this was!

“All good!”
Way to go Krem!

Dude really had to wait until the last minute like that, huh? Bull got it, waiting until he wasn’t working directly for Boss girl…damn good of him really, Ellie was relying on him as a source of protection, springing something like this on her might pressure her to respond positively when she wasn’t truly interested…and damn telling her they’d see each other when she got back gave her time to think it over, but nothing that would distract her from her mission. State his interest, put it out there for her to consider, without any pressure to touch on it while she was away, he wasn’t going to clutter her inbox with love letters, and didn’t expect as much in return, Herald of Andraste had business, work. Enough occupied her day, complicated her life. A scarf would keep her warm, and a promise would leave her looking forward to picking up where they left off in a time and place that was best for them both and damn it all if that wasn’t just smooth. Spoke volumes to the thing that worried him most about Krem’s pursuit—handling the ‘Herald’ thing, sort of what inclined him all the more to lend Krem out for Bodyguard duty, it’d given him a crash course in seeing the ups and downs and stresses of being so directly in the Herald’s life. Something like this, everything about it said yeah, he knew what was up, wasn’t going to make unreasonable demands or burden her further, wasn’t going to tax himself with unnecessary jealousy or childish expectations for constant attention. He’d focus on his work, let her focus on hers, and any time they had together would be that much better—absence makes the heart grow fonder and all that noise.

Oh man it’d been fun to hear those two during Wicked Grace, he didn’t have to see them to hear Boss-Girl at play, lively and flirtatious with the young man at her side. Krem definitely enjoyed goading her, liked riling her up playfully. And he appreciated that everyone sat back, didn’t try to meddle one way or the other, they didn’t need encouragement—but they definitely didn’t need discouragement either. He’d had his eye on Madam de Fer, woman was snooty as fuck, but she didn’t seem like she was going to object to the two getting to know one another—worried she might try to manipulate Boss into a more ‘lucrative’ situation but uh, he’d heard the girl hold her own against her that day in the Chantry, got a recap from Krem to boot, so he wasn’t too worried about it. And Tethras hadn’t run his mouth off or anything, seemed almost pleased which was…better than his outright working against it but gah dude really pissed him the fuck off, yelling at that girl, degrading her in front of her people, kid looked absolutely gut-punched when he was through with her. Considering the circumstances though she technically had been.

Bastard got points back for apologizing—in front of others, which was only fitting. He’d embarrassed her in front of subordinates, it was a good step up to apologize in front of people he wanted respect from, foregoing his own pride. And doing right by Krem—seeing and not judging, even checking to make sure he was addressing him correctly. Shit, his Lieutenant wasn’t going to be paying for drinks anytime soon—Bull’d settled the Charger’s tab before he left, put down money to cover them while he was gone, got a good peak at Flissa’s books—Dwarf had paid in advance, bankrolling Krem’s drinks for…well the dude could get pretty well plastered every night of the week if he cared to.

Boss girl was all kinds of bashful as she led their party, red faced, new scarf wrapped securely around her neck. Sera was a giggling mess in the saddle behind her, to a point the kid threatened to make her walk if she didn’t quit.

Elf cackled at that, her arms around Ellie’s waist squeezing in an apologetic hug. “Sooorry
“I appreciate it but maybe less with the squeezing yeah?”

Boss was tight-lipped about the whole affair, shrugged off any effort to question her on her goodbyes with Krem from Madam de Fer and Varric—not even the Dwarf’s offering of chocolate got him any details, not that that kept him from handing the treat over anyway, poor kid deserved something for her trouble. Monthly crap was hitting her hard. When they finally stopped for the evening, Bull stepped up to help her down after Sera slipped out of the saddle. Her whole body was stiff, sore, she flinched against him, quietly thanking him. He made sure she sat next to him at dinner—seeing side this time for his peace of mind that she ate well enough, and he kept a hand on her back, massaging at her shoulders as she talked shop with Vivienne and Solas. Had to stop after a while though because he almost put her to sleep in her dinner, head lolling forward, shoulder’s lax after he’d worked to loosen them up.

She did confide about the day’s events with Seeker once they were alone in their tent, Sera had been cast out with demands from Boss that she go brush her teeth for fear the Elf would get cavities. Madam de Fer had her own sleeping arrangements, a snowy-white tent she kept to herself.

The girl sounded shy as she informed Cassandra that Krem vaguely informed her that he had an interest in someone in their camp, and later admitted to making the scarf he’d been working on as a present for them…and then proceeded to present it to Ellie herself once he was no longer crossing the boundaries of his employment. Seeker was doing that thing where she held her breath to restrain herself from being too enthusiastic about something—deep down the woman was a romantic and everything about the story seemed to strike her as…adorable, ten to one that was the word she wanted to use, even if she’d never say it out loud.

“…do you think Cremisius really likes me?”

Koslun’s entire ass-crack. Bull was reclined in the tent he shared with Rainier, Thom whittling away in his own bedroll while the Qunari read over reports from Red on their mission in the Hinterlands, and he couldn’t help himself, he called out,

“He’s crazy about you, Boss,” his words got him a minorly confused look from Thom before Bull pointed to his ears and the Human nodded with realization, snorting when, after Bull heard her indignant huff, Ellie called back loudly enough to be heard by even Rainier,

“You mind your own beeswax, I wasn’t asking you! This is girl-talk—no boys allowed!”

Sera took that as leave to catapult her way into the tent, heard Boss-girls little ‘oof’ as the Elf collided with her, shouting, “Inky’s got a booooyfriend!”

“Oh shush it! I do not have a boyfriend! I have a very good friend. Who is a boy. And. We might maybe sort of like each other. Like a lot.” Uh-huh.

“Clearly,” Cassandra teased lightly.

Sounded like she nodded and then, “It just seems…I mean I’ve got all this, going on. It’s a lot to get involved with. And I mean he’s so…” yeah she probably didn’t want him listening if she was about to gush over the guy in detail but it wasn’t like he could shut his ears off, “gosh he’s so incredibly kind and compassionate and thoughtful and, you know, handsome…and…he doesn’t scare me,” she swallowed, quiet for a moment before saying, “sometimes people scare me.”

Well that was a big fucking…Bull sat up and listened closer. Had…had some putrid,
lowlife asshole harmed that girl? Seeker must have gotten the same idea because he heard Ellie gasp, the soft slap of her hands taking the woman’s as she was quick to assure her she meant people in a general sense but that definitely wasn’t any better.

Following day during lunch they almost had an issue—Thom’d gotten it, been cool with Krem, hadn’t stared or made the guy uncomfortable when he was securing his binder the first morning Rainier spent as an official Charger, never misgendered him, treated him the same as he would any other boy Krem’s age, but he didn’t quite understand it was Krem’s business alone who knew and who didn’t, almost outing the guy in front of the others when he asked,

“So you’re er…comfortable, with this young man,” it was how uncomfortable and uncertain he seemed that tipped Bull off, “You know with him uh, that he’s—”

Must have tipped her off too, split second before Bull was about to intervene, “Cremisius being Tevinter doesn’t bother me,” Ellie cut him off smoothly, shrugging, “I’ve dated a Tevinter before.”

“So the Herald of Andraste has a history of Imperium lovers?” Madam de Fer asked, sounding amused.

Kid’s face scrunched up at that. “Not a history of them, that sounds almost creepy like I’m building a collection or something. First person I ever dated was a Marcher, this boy whose father runs a bakery, so he’d always swipe something for me in the hopes that I’d agree to go on a date with him if he plied enough baked goods. He was always nice to me, so we went out a few times,” she shrugged, “but he’d talk terrible trash about everyone, even people he claimed were his friends, talking them down to make himself seem better and that’s just ‘nope’,” she shook her head, “didn’t like that at all. And then I don’t know if you’d count them as ‘Tevinter’ necessarily when I really think about it—I dated a girl from Hasmal, first generation born in the Marches after her family escaped the Imperium.”

Sera squawked at that, excited, “Inky has a girlfriend?”

“Had one, yeah.” Ellie said, “She was sweet and pretty and fun, nothing super serious just a ‘hit me up whenever you’re in town’ thing.” She caught Thom’s eye though using the opportunity to answer the question he’d been asking without outing Krem, just a casual summation of her own interests, “It’s more about hearts than parts with me.”

Nope, girl outed her damn self instead. Shit. It wasn’t as big of a deal, and he figured as much given the circumstances, but some people were weird about it though, enough that he wasn’t going to leave her hanging, plus it struck some cord of inspiration, “Hell yeah! Boss! I got it—B-Quad.”

“Bee…squad?” Boss-girl asked, confused.

“Quad—as in four—but it’s like Squad you know? And B as in B-words. You and me, Boss we’re the Big, Beautiful, Bisexual, Badasses,” Bull explained, yup, that about summed them up. “Sealing Rifts, kicking ass, stealing hearts! Suck it Sarge,” he said to Rainier, “your dumb cool-guy hair warrior club is over, B-Quad’s where it’s at.”

Ellie gasped in excitement, returning his enthusiasm, “Yeah! B-Quad, I dig it!” she declared, rising from her seat next to Seeker to run around the campfire to where the Qunari sat, she still had to jump to slap the hand at the end of the Iron Bull’s fully extended arm with glee but she did a good job, Imekari always put lots of effort into her high-fives.
“I can see it, Eleanor supplies the beauty, you supply the big,” Madam de Fer saw fit to tease.

“Oh! The whole thing applies to both of us—The Iron Bull is gorgeous! And I’m plenty big!”

He…he never thought he’d ever want a deity to pray to, but he almost felt like he needed outside divine assistance to handle the bombardment of unadulterated hilarity that overwhelmed him at the sight of Boss-Girl flexing her biceps like she had mad muscle going like Bull.

“Yeah Boss-girl you’re out here gettin’ your gains!” Kid beamed at his laugh ridden encouragement and moved to sit on one of his thighs—he had his plate resting on the other and the little brat proceeded to steal his bread. He thought traveling sans Skinner would keep his food and drink safe from theft, but…eh. He was done anyway and shit if mischievous wasn’t a good look on her, little spark in her eyes, smile at her lips as she munched on her stolen goods, pulling him and Sarge into conversation, wanting to know how he was coming along with learning different Signs the Chargers were integrating in their battle tactics, Boss girl helping him learn ones he didn’t have quite down.

That was one crisis averted, and Rainier was apologetic as hell later when things were winding down for the day and they were alone in their tent, Bull gave him a better run-down on the ‘dos’ and ‘don’ts’ of knowing someone’s gender identity conflicts with what they were assigned at birth, kept Krem’s name out of it in case that Solas guy or Sera could hear, but he got the point across that if you know, you keep it to yourself. End of the day, his heart had been in the right place—he’d been worried for Krem, thought that Ellie didn’t know, and while she was kind there was still the chance she might be wholly unfamiliar with the concept, react badly and hurt the guy’s feelings over it. and fuck if he didn’t mean it, he caught the drift, didn’t name names, but he said,

“I’ve been a decent man, and I’ve been the worst sort of man, but regardless of good or bad I’ve never had the ‘man’ part called into question. Can’t imagine having to actively defend the claim, worry that people could find some fault in that identity. Hardly seems fair, that boy isn’t even grown and he’s already far better man than I could ever hope to be, and there are people that would dare think otherwise.” Thom shook his head. “Hell. I ever finally grow up I want to be half the man he is.”

“Right there with you Sarge.”

Following morning had them making the last stretch into the Hinterlands, kid was absolutely miserable, nerves over having to address the rebel mages had her knocking back draught to stomach her breakfast, and she’d had trouble sleeping even with potion, her heating bandages died out on her in the eleventh hour and it was only getting colder out with winter months on them. There were only a two, three hours before they had to be up and at ‘em when Ellie came to him, maybe twenty minutes sleep under her belt, blanket wrapped tight around her shoulders, tired and cold and cramping all to hell, mumbling incoherently about how ‘they’re coming’ which was spooky as shit what with being startled awake to find Ellie standing over his bedroll looking like a specter of death voice rasping an ominous message, Mark casting a sickly green glow along her features in the pitch-ass black. He took one good look at her and got over it pretty quick, waved her in, let her catch a few winks curled up against him, kept his arm around the small of her back in the hopes the extra warmth would help the way Dalish’s heating bandages or a warm waterskin would. Still wasn’t nearly enough sleep and the poor kid got startled herself—she didn’t even remember waking up earlier, just trying for hours to fall asleep in her own bedroll, only to wake up splayed half across Bull’s chest, drool on her face, a foot planted firmly against Rainier’s cheek as
the elder man snored through all the excitement, he woke up when the kid did because she jerked in surprise, ended up kicking him in the face which was just damn funny even the girl struggled with her laughter as she apologized and made sure the old bastard was alright. Damn that was good. But Imekari wasn’t feeling good at all, Sera was extra careful holding onto her as they rode, the Elf snuggling against her, quiet and comforting the younger girl who held herself stiffly, drawn and dreary looking for all the world like she could sleep for a week.

But the second the Inquisition’s infiltration camp in the Hinterlands came into view, he heard Ellie’s heart skip a beat, lungs do that twitchy-gasping thing they did when she got overwhelmed, and she practically jumped off her horse—as it was, Russel was still in forward motion, Sera screeching in surprise when Ellie threw herself out of the saddle rolling onto her feet and when she was up, she screamed with excitement, and then bolted, rushing to get to camp as fast as her legs could carry her.

“Oh my gosh, oh my gosh, oh my gosh, oh my gosh!”

“Da’vehnan!”

Boss bodily collided with a tall, lean Elf woman in scout armor, who fell to her knees, taking Ellie with her as she held her like her life depended on it, hand reaching up into her curls, openly crying as she pressed a kiss to the top of Ellie’s head, rocking back and forth as the girl squeezed her as tightly as physically possible.

“I missed you so much!” came Ellie’s muffled wail.

“Oh my sweet girl, I missed you too!” the Elf said, pulling back, hands taking Ellie’s face in them, thumbing away the girl’s tears, “Elgar’nan it has been far too long.”

Huh. Marehis, he was pretty sure, they were all caught up, gathered near the camp, dismounting to join the Herald but it didn’t look like she had introductions much on her mind as she sobbed, sniffling before launching into,

“We hired the Chargers! And s-some of our soldiers got killed but Thom took care of the person responsible—Blackwall’s Thom now you know that right? And I got really sick, but everyone helped me so much, Sera made me soup and the Iron Bull, he’s a Qunari! So he’s like super warm, and Cassandra sang to me I think?” Seeker actually choked on air and she turned a nice shade of red. “And I met the nobles from Highever and they proposed! Marriage! Like total lunatics! But Lady Josie and Cassandra stopped them! And I got an ulcer! But Healer Adan and Mister Stitches fixed it. And I almost got assassinated but Cremisius kept me safe—he watched out for me while you were away, he taught me how to knit, I know how to knit now I made Cullen a hat! And Varric yelled at me real bad but he apologized, and he got me chocolate, and I’m having my first blood thing which sucks so so so so so much—I thought I’d been murdered but the Iron Bull made me pancakes! And I had a talk with Madam de Fer, she’s going to teach me magic and she says you’re friends, she’s been nice to you right? Oh! Gosh! You haven’t met the Iron Bull—you don’t know him yet but he’s like one of my favorite people in life! He hired Thom! So he’s a Sergeant and Thom now! And- and- Cremisius likes me, he made me a scarf, see? Oh! And a hat but that was before,” she haphazardly summarized, holding a portion of the woolen length up for Marehis’s bewildered inspection.

“Da’len, da’len breathe,” Marehis intoned, patting the girl on the back, “you’ve really had a time of it, huh?”

“I’m so glad to see you! Are you okay? Did you like the Oasis? What happened last week, you were safe right? Leliana told me about everything.”
“I’m well, da’len, the Oasis was beautiful, it’ll be even more so once you’ve cleared the Rifts. I was perfectly safe, you needn’t worry. Leliana sent out a report on your time in Haven while I was away, with that sweet note from you—I apologize I didn’t pen a response, but her report was followed shortly by orders to make my way to our Hinterlands camp.” She smoothed back the girl’s hair, “After all, with all these formal negotiations for the Inquisition, the Herald of Andraste may have need of her handmaiden.”

“She does! She really, really does!” Ellie insisted, squeezing the woman tight before releasing her full-body grip. “I’m so glad you’re here!” And then she gasped, “Oh gosh! Sera!” whirling back around looking for all the world like a Tamassran who’d just realized they’d forgotten their Imekari at the Mashev-Esaam. “I left you all alone on Russel! Are you okay?!” she scanned the crowd of her companions, relieved to find Sera safe on the ground,

“You just about gave me a ruddy heart attack!” Sera griped lightly, “But it’s all good innit? Wassup Marehis, sweets? I think Inky missed you a smidge.”

“It’s good to see you again Sera,” the older Elf woman greeted, “Solas,” ooooh so neutral, so polite, and yet there was just a bit too much fire in the eyes to contradict that, if Krem hadn’t tipped him off to their relationship, that would have told Bull all he needed to know. The second those two had a moment alone, clothes were coming off. Or whatever Elves did together. Lots of ear biting in his experience. Elf took in a breath, hand rising to her chest before she moved to embrace the Seeker, hugging the Nevarran woman tight, “Thank you, thank you so much, lethallan,” she whispered quietly against the Human woman’s ear, either for keeping Ellie safe, or interrogating the shit out of the people responsible for Leliana’s security breach. Both, probably.

“Praise Him most high you are safe, I am grateful you’ve returned,” Cassandra whispered back, squeezing the Elf.

“Marehis, darling, I am so pleased to see you again, you are well I trust?” Madam de Fer asked, her tones regal, light, but sincere enough, and she came forward to hug the Elf in earnest before pulling away to look her up and down like she was truly concerned the woman might be hurt from her adventures in espionage.

“It is wonderful to see you again Vivienne, I’m well. And you, must be the Iron Bull. I’m pleased to make your acquaintance,” she addressed Bull then, offering her hand to shake, “your Lieutenant spoke very highly of you when he came to deliver your offer to Haven, though I’m glad to hear you’re Ellie’s ‘favorite person in life’.”

Ha! Little bastard loves him, and he knows it, ‘spoke very highly’, hell yeah! “I have that effect on people. Glad to finally meet you, boss-girl’s had nothing but great things to say,” and then, because he’s an asshole and the Elves were so very intent on keeping their relationship a secret…it could only help that, right? “I believe she said you’re the sweetest, smart, brave—didn’t mention beauty on top of all that,” little kiss to the back of the Elf’s hand just, you know, top that off.

“Oi!” What the actual fuck was that a pebble? A pebble bounced off the back of his head! “One, I told you Marehis was the prettiest, you jerk! Two, what I tell you about hitting on people who give me food?! Knock it off or get knocked!” Ellie threatened, tossing and catching a second round of ammunition rhythmically in her unmarked hand, ready to strike.

Oh yeah, he had promised that hadn’t he?

He released Marehis’s hand, dipping his head respectfully, “Sorry Boss.”
She cast down the rock into the dirt, hands on hips as she informed him, “You better be!”

“You know, now that I think about it you did say she was the prettiest,” and to show the poor guy he was only yanking his chain, tip him off that he knew what was up, he gave Solas a wink and a heads up, “Also said you’d personally destroy any man who broke her heart.”

Solas gave a low, quiet huff seeming bemused and then he blanched a bit when boss girl backed up the claim with,

“Yeah I will! So watch it!” she reprimanded Bull, unmarked hand pointing a finger at him while her other arm pulled her minder into her side.

Fei-sty. Love it.

Bull wasn’t the only one who better watch it—Marehis was outright warm with most of their party members but Rainier and Tethras received a tightlipped, polite nod of greeting. Got the impression that if Ellie wasn’t looking the woman would have backhanded the both of them. Instead she opted for leading Ellie into the camp as she announced she had presents. They all gathered around the fire going in the Inquisition camp, Ellie sitting just about as close as she could get without actually sitting in the flames and Bull got pulled into sitting at her side—having him sit where he could keep her in sight.

“Presents?” Ellie asked, confused.

“Of course, da’len, I missed you while I was away! I had some things to take care of for Leliana on the way to the Oasis that took me to places of business, and I was thinking of you so,” she leaned into an Inquisition tent coming out with a floral-patterned cloth shopping bag. She plopped down next to Ellie offering the bag to her, “presents.”

“Oh gosh, you really didn’t have to but thank you,” oh man, kid’s birthday was going to be all sorts of fun shit. Wasn’t sure what he was gonna get her himself, Krem was a smug bastard about his own plans he refused to share with Bull, wasn’t a damn bit of help like the traitor he is—but thanks to Seeker’s reports from their last venture into the Hinterlands, Bull had a good idea of what he wanted to get the kid now, and it was gonan be kick-ass, so the little vint can suck it! She was excited and blushing like mad as she peeked into the bag lip catching between her teeth as she pulled out a few small, colorful glass bottles, warm green, a soft pink, different shades of blue swirled together in one. She set them down carefully and unscrewed the top of one, a little brush attached to the cap she pulled away and she lightly sniffed the contents. “Oh wow, paint?” smelled like it to him, definitely not something you drink.

“Very close,” Marehis explained, “it is nail polish, like paint but for your finger nails. Toes as well if you’ve a mind to.”

“Oh really? Thanks, that sounds cool!”

“It is growing increasingly popular,” Madam de Fer said with satisfaction, holding out an ungloved hand for the kid’s inspection of the white tips of her nails, “I myself get frequent manicures, Orlesian style—a more natural look, but colors are fashionable among people your age.”

“Ohh, they’re very pretty,” Ellie offered sincerely, smiling to the Enchanter.

“Thank you my dear.”

Her gift bag still had shape to it like there was more inside, and Ellie pulled out a small,
“Can you guess where these came from?” Marehis asked warmly as Ellie popped open the box.

“Val Royeaux!” she gasped out pulling the ring out to look it over more closely, a long oval shaped ring that would cover the length of a finger from joint to the lowest knuckle, shield that knuckle a bit on Ellie’s hands and that was just fine—she’d leave a pretty nasty mark on someone’s face if she punched them sans gloves while wearing that thing. It was made of lines of silver with hallows between them, like lines cut out from a map—a map of the streets of Val Royeaux.

“Excellent catch,” Marehis congratulated her, taking the ring in her hand while Ellie removed the glove from her unmarked hand and the Elf slid the ring in place on her index finger. “Do you like it, da’len?”

“I really really do, thank you so much, Marehis!”

The Elf woman was beaming, pulling Ellie into a hug, resting her head atop the girl’s hair as she held her like she couldn’t get enough of it, shit. Kid had Tamassran’s left right and center right now.

They regrouped then, Seeker gave a rundown of their schedule, boss-girl had to go into talks with the Rebel mages starting this afternoon, could take a few days if negotiations were rough, everyone was tagging along for the ride, but it’d be Ellie and Seeker taking point.

Or uh, maybe just Seeker. Between piss poor sleep, the rapids of nerves over the work ahead, the excitement and surprise of Marehis’s appearance, being seated around a warm fire, surrounded by her friends, Marehis practically had the girl laying up against her, seated in the Elf’s lap, arms wrapped around Ellie’s shoulders, the kid conked out.

The Elf woman raised a hand to check her for fever and when she found none just smoothed her hair back, absently playing with a lock as she spoke quietly, “Poor girl. Monthlies are horrid things.”

Madam de Fer nodded sounding genuinely sympathetic as she said, “She is exhausted.”

“She said she had trouble falling asleep, took her hours, and then a nightmare or something woke her up before she came to bunk with me for warmth,” Bull said now that she was out, hadn’t wanted to sound like he was snitching on her, make her feel babied by everyone keeping track of her habits, but he kept Seeker in the know on the down low as far as Ellie was concerned, whenever he saw something.

Sera let out a little groan, “Poor Inky. Nightmares isn’t any fun.”

“Fool girl did not wake me,” Seeker sighed worriedly before asking, “You’re certain it was a nightmare? Eleanor took potion last night. If she is Fade Dreaming regardless I will have to consult Adan.”

Bull shrugged. He hadn’t heard Boss wake up scared, or anything but then again he hadn’t woken up until she joined him. “Pretty sure, but kid was real out of it, talking out of her head, and was out like a light pretty fast, didn’t remember any of it when she woke up.”

“I sensed something disconcerting in the Fade as I slept,” Solas admitted, “a mass amount of magical and demon activity. Perhaps that disturbed her.”
That sounded just great. Fucking magic.

“I will admit I sensed as much as well,” Madam de Fer said, “our fights yesterday required my use of Lyrium. I did not see Eleanor partake of any, you’re certain she took her sleeping potion?”

Cassandra nodded seeming uncomfortable like something got under her skin, but she didn’t want to kick up a fuss over it. “She realized you may be uncomfortable, traveling with a young mage Fade Dreaming, so Eleanor is determined to take potion for the duration of our trip.”

“Is that wise?” Solas asked, tones sharp, concerned. “I understand the need for restful sleep, she desperately needed as such when it was first prescribed but Ellie has been able to Fade Dream without disturbance more often as of late,” he looked to Madam de Fer, “Fade dreaming does not equate possession, I myself use them for mindful thought, processing information, learning new pertinent things. Ellie avoids them when they might call an unpleasant experience, rob her of adequate rest entirely, but while sleep is meant to rest the body, it is dreams, even if we cannot recall having dreamt, that allow our minds to process our day’s events, retain and store information. Ellie is not capable of doing as such naturally—she must either Fade Dream or render herself unconscious with potion to find physical rest but that does little for her mind as it keeps her from dreaming full stop. With potion if she falls asleep despairing of something, she wakes up equally distressed whereas…well a few days ago her magic brought her distress to me. Eleanor was very upset, anguished over something—the prospect of leaving Haven and not getting to see Marehis until our return with our new allies I suspect—but she woke up far more at ease for having time to herself in the Fade to process and cope.”

“I’m hardly going to debate you on the finer points of Fade Dreaming, our opposing views are plain enough,” Madam de Fer insisted, “If the girl has had no issue with it in the past I would not dissuade her from it—it is her prerogative. I did not make any such demands—it is the Seeker and Sera who share a tent with her,” bit of a mischievous smirk on her lips as she drily jested, “if she rises and murders you in your sleep, that is no problem of mine.”

A joke, bad one, but Sera didn’t take it that way,

“You shut your mouth you bitchy priss! Inky’d never do that! You tell her—”

“Sera,” Solas reprimanded softly, shooting a meaningful look to the Boss girl snoozing on Marehis’s shoulder.

“I got her, should let her rest while she can,” Bull rumbled out and when Marehis nodded he scooped the girl up in an arm, grabbed the bedroll off the top of her pack and carried her into one of the cleared Inquisition tents got her settled—as it was he was pretty sure Sera could have screamed down the house and Ellie’d still be out, she didn’t stir in the slightest.

Still, probably for the best given, the second he emerged from the tent, had the flap sealed,

“You tell her she can sleep however she wants to!”

“Uh Ser’, you want Tumbles Fade Dreaming?” Tethras asked, uncertain if the Elf understood that’s what would be happening.

“I got ruddy ears dwarf, I heard Solas! And he’s the brainy one if he says it’s good for her to dream in the Fade…s’long as it isn’t scaring her none, I don’t care. I trust Inky not to let a demon in, she’d never do that!” Sera round on Madam de Fer, “So you’re gonna tell her she don’t got to take sleep potion unless she wants to, or I’ll pop you right in the melons!”
“I don’t see why I should, I did not demand she take potion in the first place,” Madam de Fer refused calmly, looking at Sera like she thought the Elf was just about the lowest form of intelligent life on the planet.

“So?! Gah! You’re all so stupid!” Sera shouted, “Inky doesn’t need us to tell her to do things—she needs us to tell her not to do things! Like being too thanky or worrying too much—or doing something that makes you more comfy cozy even if it’s bad for her!”

Madam de Fer scoffed. “You’re one to talk, you are the only one here who denies any magical assistance whatsoever, including Barrier of all things—even the Qunari allows the girl to cast upon him.”

Yeah, the Qunari allows a lot of shit. At least Boss’s magic doesn’t feel like cold, dry-ass distain.

“That don’t hurt her none,” Sera defended, reasoning, “it probably helps ‘cause she don’t got to cast so much!”

“Au contraire, mon ennui,” well fuck him, Krem’s the one who knows Ciriane for shit…though the guy called him ‘mon ennui’ more than once so he was pretty sure it translated close to ‘pain in the ass’, “it is rather an inconvenience, even a danger given the circumstances.”

“What’d’re you on about? It’s not…it’s not dangerous!” Sera snapped.

“Do enlighten me then Sera,” Madam de Fer posed, “how is it you manage to come away from our scrapes so thoroughly under-scathed? I myself have had to treat injury and I’m hardly in the thick of things. You don’t necessarily run headlong into battle, but it is still so very remarkable how you, with your paltry attempt at clothing yourself—while I’m certain that plaid monstrosity is defense enough against the attention of well-bred lovers, it is hardly proper armor. And yet time after time, you walk away, no armor, no barriers, and nothing more serious than a cut or a scratch on you. Just how does that happen, do you think?”

Veshedan. Fuck him for real, seriously? Boss’s business, it wasn’t anything he wouldn’t do for his guys but he was the Qunari, the Iron Bull, he could do that no problem, she isn’t…Aah! This is another place where Boss and kid conflict all to shit.

Marehis looked pensive, hands on her knees as she leaned forward in her seat. “What are you insinuating, Vivienne?”

“Solas, you make active your connection to Eleanor in battle, do you not?” Vivienne asked before addressing the group as a whole, “We’ve all seen her more than capable with Barrier, hers in particular are strong despite her tawdry upbringing, as are Master Solas’s and my own. That is three, thick layers of powerful magic warding us all against injury and yet, whose barriers seem to wear down first?”

“It would have to be a tossup among our warrior fri…friends,” Solas faltered as he lost himself to thought and realization struck home. “Ellie’s can be a close second.”

“Very close, in my observations. Sometimes first if our enemies catch sight of not only the Herald of Andraste but an unarmored archer in the wings, an easy target that could cause the most trouble, best to dispose of quickly to rid our warriors of a great deal of their cover fire.”

“Shit,” Varric breathed, rising from his seat to pace along the tents hand wrenching at the back of his neck.
“Why would Inky’s barrier whatevers fail fast if people are hitting at m—” Sera went very quiet like the air had been punched from her lungs then, “No. No no no no no no no! You take that back, you’re lying!”

“You and Ellie have always stuck close together during fights,” Rainier said, rubbing at his forehead as if he could squeeze a rising headache away.

“Yeah so I can protect her, not the other friggin’ way around! She- she- Damn it!” Sera screeched, burring her eyes against her balled up hands.

“When you can’t get to high ground, she takes some extra hits to her barriers, it just wears them down faster Sera its not the end of the world, she’s got armor on top of that,” under it, still, “I haven’t seen her seriously hurt over it,” Bull said. He’d have realized it himself if that were the case. It was hard to keep an eye on the kid mid-fight, it wasn’t like they could watch her non-stop, still. Dinged him like hell he hadn’t noticed, he’d seen the habit the kid had of pushing Sera behind her the handful of times they’d been in his sight when fights broke out, that should have tipped him off. Madam de Fer…she obviously kept a close watch on the Herald and it sort of sunk in that despite her, uh, extremely frosty disposition, the ideals she had for mages that a kid like Ellie couldn’t live up to, she was becoming attached in her own right, and…huh. Shit she did care about Marehis, had bonded with the woman in their time together, knew how much the Elf cared for the girl and had taken it upon herself to do what Seeker said Marehis did whenever she traveled with the Herald’s party. Madam de Fer watched that girl like a damn hawk, eyes on Ellie and less on their enemies when they were in battle.

“Shut up!” Sera hollered rising from her seat and it looked like she wanted to take off running, the way she did to burn off energy when they were on the Coast, pent up frustration or angst but she wanted this fixed, right now because, “I-inky was bruised all over all the time when we was on the Coast, coming back and- and- shite last night her shoulder was all purply before she took potion! I thought she was just falling down a lot or somethin’, piss!”

“She’s doing for you what she’d do for anyone else on her team,” Bull reasoned out for her, his hand on her arm got a nasty look but she didn’t shake it off and he made sure she could have if she wanted to. “You’re her people, her responsibility. You’re afraid of magic so she works around it, doesn’t cast spells to land near you, since you don’t let barrier on your person she basically lends you hers—her getting bruised is better than you getting killed. I mean shit you don’t even uh…Ser’, Boss made sure I had a contract with the Inquisition, you get paid right? There some reason you don’t have legit armor?”

She groaned. “Never needed no ruddy armor before! I just shoot at things, things don’t usually get to shoot back! And I’m all,” Sera groused, gesturing to her gangly limbs. “One-size-fit-all don’t work for me, can’t just slap Elfy armor* on me! Ugh! I got money I can get armored whatevers made or somethin’ and I’ll tell Inky she better stay out of the frickin’ way!”

“Sera…” Cassandra spoke up looking to the Elf girl, reserved like she didn’t want to get caught caring but, “if it would please you, I could assist you in getting properly outfitted for the field. Too, I understand your reticence with magic, but I have training that offers me insight on the inner workings of the stuff, how to tell offensive spells from defensive spells and the like. Perhaps, if you’d care to, I would be glad to teach you to do as such for yourself. I would not pressure you to accept casting upon your person before you were ready but in time, would that make you more comfortable receiving magical assistance in future?”

“I- you- ugh!” Sera stomped her foot, hands slapping to either side of her head squeezing her scalp in frustration, “Well I have to do something! Frick, she’s only tiny! I have to
“Kid does it for everyone Ser’, don’t beat yourself up,” probably should have chosen his words more wisely because Sera was looking at him, expression wrecked like she was about to have a colossal breakdown thinking the kid was letting herself get beat up on behalf of all of her team members which was definitely not the case, she was one person, they’d have noticed the kid trying to bodily shield every last one of them...somehow it might actually be funny to watch her try, “You ever see Seeker start our campfires? If Boss doesn’t get them started herself she always makes sure one of us handles it, never tasks it to Cassandra. Solas never meditates alone if she has a say in it, and I’ve never seen her use the Lyrium in her stores, so who do you think she’s carrying that around for? Tethras is the most hydrated he’s probably been in years, kid delegates or does things herself that give him time to write when we’re on the road, and somehow he never seems to run out of ink—caught boss switching out inkwells on you more than once when you start to run low, cuts a sharp edge on your quills if she sees they’re getting worn. Thom’s got the healthiest diet I’ve ever seen an old bastard eat—don’t look at me like I’m crazy, you had egg whites this morning who the fuck else here eats that crap?—she even makes sure I keep your flask full of wine instead of mead or beer, better for you she says.” Chargers all have a little something to drink besides water on them, helps keep them loose, mild pain reliever, and there’s a hole in the damn sky so everyone deserves a fun flask. “And yeah, she takes sleeping potion when she doesn’t need it, so Madam de Fer can sleep soundly knowing she’s not near a young mage mucking around in the Fade at night,” he looked to the Enchanter saying, “and you haven’t broken a single fingernail have you, caring for your horse? You realize you gotta clean out their shoes every day spent riding, right? Boss got you covered this entire trip.”

Madam de Fer raised a brow at that not liking at all the implication she couldn’t sort for herself. “And what does she do for you?” she returned.

“Always mindful of my handicap.” Eye, and bad ankle both*. Even when sitting around eating, playing, kid had her knee to his thigh, hands where he could see them in the innermost peripheral of his good eye when she sat in his blind-spot. And most people assume the brace on his leg is just extra armoring covering a low appendage on his blind side, so he wasn’t about to say otherwise. Kid saw, understood it could be a matter of privacy, respected that while quietly making sure he had access to heating balms, things for stiff joints, and there were times on the Coast the girl was like a damn foot servant working around the campsite fetching anything he had a mind to get up and get for himself, so he could take a load off. In that vein, “Makes sure I’m not hurt just as often as she does with the rest of you—might not seem like a major deal but I’m big, a Qunari, yeah I’m tough shit but people lean on the side of assuming I can’t get hurt or feel pain, Boss has never held that bias and I sure as hell appreciate it. Checks in to make sure I got enough to report to my own bosses, checks in to make sure my guys got everything they need. Treats my people like they’re her people,” he said. “We’re a team. Her team. We take care of her, take care of each other, and she takes care of us.”

“Ugghh,” Sera said slowly thinking it over. “Still. She shouldn’t be getting hurt!” She looked to the Seeker, “You’d really teach me, ‘sandra? How to not be scared of mage shite*?”

“I would,” Cassandra vowed in earnest. “It will take time of course but I’m certain you could be put at ease.”

“Don’t bite my head off,” Tethras spoke up, holding his hands up defensively as he halted his pacing, “but uh, that won’t stop the kid in the meantime. Buttercup, you ever let Tumbles explain barrier to you? You trust her right?”

“But you’ve never let her explain how it works or what it feels like?” Sera shook her head and Varric continued, “Look, I get being scared of Chuckles or Iron Lady over here—”

That piqued Vivienne’s interest, “Excuse me?”

“Everyone gets a nickname, take it up with my muse if you’ve got a problem with it.”

“…I rather like it actually,” she graciously allowed.

“Glad to hear it. Any-way,” Tethras stressed, moving back to his point, “I get being uncomfortable with their magic, but you might test the waters with letting the kid cast on you, see if you really don’t like it. It doesn’t hurt, and I mean it uh doesn’t feel bad either.”

That seemed to pique Sera’s interest, “Whatc’ you mean?”

Word guy didn’t seem to have words for it so Bull offered, “You know how you feel when you see boss get excited about something, gets all bubbly, big smile, sometimes she does that little dance? Its like that on your outsides.”

Sera looked a bit wide-eyed at that, “Oh shite really?”

“Just, test it out,” Varric suggested, “See how it feels and if it doesn’t bother you, tell her you’ll let her cast on you—just leave it at that. It’ll be enough to imply to her you’re accepting barrier from your team mates even though no one else will cast on you until you’re ready. You’ll actually get the benefit of Ellie’s barrier, it’ll be enough to offer you some level of protection all while convincing the kid to stop taking hits for you.”

“Oh pish, that’s bloody genius that is,” Sera enthused. “I…yeah I never did let Inky explain her magic shite it’s all noise to me, but I’ll try—hers! I definitely didn’t like baldy’s fucking creepy crawly bullshit, I didn’t know Ellie’s’d be any different! And Casandra will help me get armor and more…okay with the weirdo stuff.” She growled, sounding frustrated with herself, “Magic’s just freaky!”

“Sera, I do sincerely apologize,” Solas spoke up, chagrined. “It was unworthy of me to cast on you to your discomfort. I regret I left you with such a horrible impression of what it would be like to accept our assistance. If there is anything I could do to put you at ease do inform me.”

Sera just blew raspberry at that, arms crossed over her chest. Marehis rose and offered to take the younger Elf aside and get her measurements, leading her off—standing upright in one of their tents wasn’t really doable for someone Sera’s height, fuck if Bull didn’t feel that, so Marehis took her down the incline to a place that overlooked the crossroads but offered enough privacy from foliage. Wasn’t like Sera was hyper concerned with who saw what but no one really needed to see her butt-ass naked getting every last bit of her business measured.

Everyone was quiet for a moment staring into the fire before Solas spoke,

“Seeker, I would not wish to pry but if you’ve erm, a aversion to fire, I would offer to be mindful, when casting in battle.”

“I as well, certainly,” Madam de Fer said.

“I appreciate the offer, but it is of little note. I did not even realize Eleanor was doing as such,” Cassandra said, “I shared with her an unpleasant experience from my past that involved a great deal of fire. She must have thought it might put me more at ease to not have to make as much myself.”
“Where the hell does Tumbles get my ink?” Varric asked, and then he groaned, running a hand over his face, “Shit she’s not buying it, or something is she?”

“The Inquisition provides your writing supplies, Eleanor merely retrieves wells from Quartermaster Threnn when she packs for the field,” Cassandra said.

“Huh. Thought it was weird I wasn’t running out,” then, “Wait a second, I tried getting ink and crap provided in my contract with the Inquisition and you said no!”

“I am aware,” Cassandra drawled. “However I may have had a change of heart upon discovering your intent to chronicle the events of the Inquisition. Technically that is a service to us, at the very least it may benefit us in future, it is only reasonable we would provide the means for you to do so. I sent a missive to you on the matter.”

“…we got so much shit in the beginning between Tavern menus and briefs on the Breach assault, security protocols, I uh, didn’t look at half of it.”

Cassandra scoffed, rolling her eyes, tones bone-dry, “And surely you jumped at the opportunity to read anything I would care to send you.”

“Come on Seeker, don’t play it like that. We hated each other then.”

“We do hate each other.”

“You only mildly dislike me now and you know it.”

“You’re incorrigible.”

“And you only mildly dislike that about me.”

Elves returned, Marehis handing off the list of measurements to Cassandra and the Seeker nodded, moving to the requisitions table to start writing up specs and instructions to be sent off for an estimate, or…huh. She put it all in an envelope and the woman dug around in the leather pouch at her hip, dropping a good bit of coin in to foot the bill herself before sealing it up and sending it off on a messenger bird. She might not care to ever admit as much, but Sera was a good friend for the kid, and Seeker appreciated that more than she’d say.

Sera didn’t notice any of that, though her attention did immediately turn to the tent Boss girl was snoozing in, Bull heard it too,

“Eleanor is beginning to stir,” Solas confirmed for the Human and Dwarf ears around their campfire. “Should we get lunch underway?” Marehis nodded in agreement, rising to her feet to get to work.

“Certainly,” Cassandra agreed, though she stopped and then spoke very quietly to Marehis, not sure when they’d get another opportunity to speak without Boss-girl directly underfoot, “I do not know if Leliana informed you—First Day we shall throw a surprise party for Eleanor,” at the Elf’s confused look at how they’d pull off the ‘surprise’ bit Cassandra added, “she has never celebrated the day before, she doesn’t know people do as such.”

Marehis’s mouth dropped open, working to find words for that, hands stilled midair almost like she was physically grasping for a response when Boss girl came trudging from the tent, rubbing sleep from her eyes and stretching.

“What’s uh, um. Is it today still? Didn’t mean to fall asleep,” she yawned, and then she
looked at Marehis. “What’s wrong?”

The woman twirled on the balls of her feet to face the kid. “I just…missed you so very much and I want to kiss your precious face!” before she descended on the girl, grasping her chin in hand and pressing a kiss to her cheek, making Ellie smile, face scrunching up as the woman plied another and another while she wrapped her ward up in a hug, “mwah! Are you hungry, sweet girl? We’re just getting ready to make lunch.”

Ellie nodded. “Lunch sounds great, can I help?”

“Nope,” Sera interrupted, “Inky! You come with me a minute right? I wanna try something if you aren’t too sleepy.”

“What’s up?”

Kid was suspicious as hell when Sera asked her to try out barrier, took both of her hands and made her look her in the eye as she asked if she’d been pressured into it, but Sera was pretty damn sincere that she wanted to give it a shot. Ellie sat her down in the grass at the edge of the field near their camp and asked her to hold out her hand, tested it on a small scale first, just called the spell into her own hand and held it hovering just over Sera’s, worked up to holding her hand like that, then letting it spread along her arm, explaining the spell would slip over her clothing, it would only touch exposed skin, an entirely exterior thing. By the time Rainier, Marheis, and Solas had lunch whipped up for everyone, and Madam de Fer was putting their tea kettle on to brew something, Sera was giggling up a storm after letting Ellie cast on her properly with her staff, the glow of barrier washing over the Elf head to toe.

“That’s so friggin weird! Not a bad weird just, weird!” the Elf shook her head like she needed to clear it. “Alright Inky, I don’t got no problem if you wanna add me to your little spell pish. Just that one mind, you singe me or something I’ll…I’ll be right pissed!”

“No singeing, promise!” Ellie offered up her pinky which Sera happily wrapped her own around before taking the girl’s hand and leading her back to sit around the fire.

Marehis handed her a plate laden with two sandwiches cut into halves, and a pile of apple slices, and the Elf woman almost forgot to eat her own meal she just sat there watching the kid dig right on in. Sort of struck him then how rough her time away must have been, she’d almost been captured by enemy forces, forced to go on the run, not knowing if she’d live to see her ward again, no clue if Ellie’d gotten caught up in it somehow, if she was safe, hell if the Inquisition was able to find an appropriate replacement to protect her. He’d shoot Krem a message, tell him to send on copies of the reports he had to make for Red of his time watching out for the Herald for Marehis’s inspection, might help her catch up and reinforce the fact that her faith in her allies was rewarded.

Once Ellie was finished up with her meal, Madam de Fer handed her mug full of hot tea and...honey, lemon too it smelled like.

“This should soothe your throat my dear, I always prepare my tea like this before a day of speaking events, lectures and the like.”

Ellie carefully sipped at the drink, smiling once she swallowed. “This is so good, thanks! My throat doesn’t feel so scratchy anymore. Oh!” she looked like she’d been caught doing something she shouldn’t as she turned her attention to the Seeker whose brow had shot up, was staring at the girl like she had half a mind to yell, or maybe just lecture her, but Ellie was quick to say, “I’m not getting sick, I promised I’d tell you if I was feeling badly, I’ve kept my word, honest. It’s just in general dry-air sore, not ‘coming down with the dread-plague’ sore,” she assured...
humorously. Seeker nodded—still looked to Solas for silent confirmation but took the kid at her word well enough.

“Message for you, ser,” an Inquisition scout spoke quietly to Bull as they handed him a letter that’d just flown in. Report from Krem Bull cracked open to look over while he ate—Seeker got something in the mail too, and she looked…dare he think shy? Bit red around the cheeks, pleased little smirk on her face as she cleanly slipped a finger along the underside of the parchment to break the wax seal. Another letter from the Commander, he presumed. Kid was gonna flip if she found out her endeavors in Matchmaking were having successes big and small.

“Oh yes the weather in these parts is simply horridous,” Madam de Fer agreed with the kid, “Eleanor, would you care to join me this evening when we’ve settled for the day? I believe a bit of pampering is in order. We could chat, you could even feel free to…what is that precious little word I keep hearing, ‘bunk’? You could feel free to ‘bunk’ with me for the evening.”

Ellie lit up at the offer, “Oh wow, like a sleepover?”

The Madam looked like she sincerely believed that phrasing to be genuinely precious. “If you wish to term it as such, yes, Eleanor, we’ll have a sleepover,” the woman sounded damn delighted at the prospect, “Marehis is more than welcome to join us, if she wishes. Seeker Pentaghast and miss Sera as well.”

“I would be delighted,” Marehis insisted.

Okay. Woman was smooth. If both Sera and Vivienne had sudden changes of heart on things, Ellie’d know something was up, that they’d been talking about her amongst themselves. Too, there wasn’t any reason for Madam de Fer to know the kid was taking potion for her peace of mind unless someone snitched. Inviting her to spend the night would offer an organic, natural way of taking note that Ellie was doing so, telling her she didn’t have to. On top of that—Madam’s offer gave Marehis excuse to take a beat, the opportunity to step out while the Mage kept Ellie occupied with gossip and manicures, and let the Elves have a moment alone to talk, get reacquainted.

Maybe he should have taken boss up on her offer of ear plugs.

“Hold up now, why do the girls get to have all the fun?” Varric asked.

“Damn straight,” Bull agreed, “guys, sack up. We’re drinking tonight—Charger style, bonfire, booze, boy-talk—no girls allowed,” little wink to the kid, when she caught the reference, a return of her earlier insistence for him to ‘mind his own beeswax’.

“Sounds invigorating,” Solas conceded with a nod of acceptance.

“I’m in,” Tethras shrugged. “What about you, Sarge?”

“Might have to move some things around on the old social calendar, but I’m sure I can manage,” Rainier drawled with a grin.

Boss girl sort of ran in place—her butt was still in her seat, but her feet lightly stamped the ground a few times before she jumped up and went around the fire to squeeze the Dwarf in a hug, kiss him on the temple, repeating the gesture with a bewildered Rainier, the man dropped his own sandwich back onto his plate and he hesitantly patted the arm around his neck.

“Thanks, you know, everyone, for working so hard on getting along,” she addressed the group as she pulled away from the Sergeant, “I’m kind of dying from happiness overload, you’re all just the best!” looked like a slight kick to the balls for most of the people gathered around the
campsite to have the actual teenager commending the adults in the situation for behaving well but making the kid happy of all things perked them, especially Varric, right on up. She sighed contentedly, biting her lip before saying, “Um, I’m all done eating so, I’m gonna go freshen up before we head out—like please don’t rush, take your time eating and stuff, but I’d like to go ahead and get a move on once everyone’s ready.”

“Certainly Eleanor, but your meeting is not until later in the afternoon,” Cassandra reminded her.

“I was thinking maybe we could walk to Redcliff?” Ellie proposed hesitantly, “It isn’t like super far and I’d like to give our poor horses a break, and its kind of easier to seem approachable when you’re not zipping through the Crossroads on horseback—I’d like to check in on the refugees if that’s okay?”

Madam de Fer sat up, leveling the girl a regal smile as she said, “I’ve no qualms stretching my legs a bit.”

“Sounds good to me Boss,” Bull assured her, she seemed happy about that, relieved like she was worried he was having a rough leg day.

“I believe we’re all in agreement,” Marehis said, rising, “would you like help getting ready, Ellie?”

Her nose crinkled a bit and she held out her arm, index finger raised as she said, “I just need like one private minute and then yeah I’d really appreciate your help!”

“Certainly um, do you need erm…anything for your private minute?” Marehis asked. Bandaging, Bull figured she meant. Kid did too,

“Nope! Thanks though. Between Cremisius and Mister Stitches and Healer Adan adding more and more and more to my pack before I left, I’ve got enough bandaging to suture an entire army. Oh! Should I send left over bandaging somewhere when I’m done? I feel like I’ll never be done, but I’m still holding out hope.” And then that seemed to inspire the thought, “Oh gosh! Do you think people around the Crossroads and Redcliff have access to bandaging for things like monthlies?”

“I’m not certain,” Cassandra said as she considered the matter, “but I can address the issue with Corporal Vale if you’d like, get them resources if there currently are none.”

Kid blew her a kiss in thanks before snatching up her pack and disappearing into a tent. Everyone finished up their meals, cleaned up and by the time Marehis was done with her, Imekari’s armor was all spiffed up, scarf tucked close around her neck, looped several times so none of it was left hanging, hair braided, hat on, hands gloved, cloak secure. Kid was just about as bundled as she could get, and she looked ecstatic over it.

Well, she was about to get even more pumped ‘cause. “Boss. Message for you,” he said, beckoning her closer with a crooked finger, so he could deliver it properly. Ellie stepped right up to him and he dropped to his knees to be more level with her before, as per his instructions, he wrapped her up in hug before pulling back and informing her, “You got this.”

She smiled shyly at that, blushing as she said, “Tell Cremisius I say, ‘thank you’. Oh! And he doesn’t have to be on hug duty for me anymore—Marehis showed up!” she looked to the Elf at her side, “Cremisius promised to hug you for me whenever you got to Haven while I was gone!”
“I’ll pass along your thanks…guy knows Marehis is here though,” at the woman in question’s and Ellie’s inquisitive looks he added, “he got worried you might of run into trouble when you didn’t show up a day or so after we left Haven, so he checked in with Red, offered to take the Chargers out to go look for you, back you up if you needed help. She let him know what was up,” shook the report he’d just received, “so he asked me to keep an eye out, let him know if you didn’t show.”

“I like that boy, I like that boy very much,” Marehis shared quietly with Ellie as she took her arm, “you are to tell me absolutely every single thing I missed while we were apart young lady, I want all the details tonight.”

Meanwhile Boss-Girl looked beyond pleased Krem’d been so concerned of her minder and almost…frustrated, she buried her face in her hands, letting out a long slow breath, and on the very tail end of it, whispered so quietly to herself Bull just barely caught it, “I want to kiss his entire face.” Marehis chortled in delighted sounding surprise.

Way. To go. Krem!

Elgar’nan her heart was so full. Never since their meeting had they been separated for such an indeterminable amount of time, before orders came from Leliana…which she felt might have been the influence of Seeker Pentaghast, to have Marehis report to the Hinterlands and join the Herald in her negotiations, she thought she would not see the girl again until they were both returned to Haven. There had been times of rest in her travels she lost to the ache in her chest, the fear and anger and bitter sadness. She had missed Ellie with such a ferocity, feared the girl would be harmed in her absence, worried about how the Spymaster would chose to handle the situation—a part of her had been horrified that perhaps Leliana would be so caught up in handling the threat she would not consider the girl’s tender feelings, leave Ellie thinking Marehis had simply abandoned her as opposed to making believable excuses for her absence or allowing her to know about the security issue. How it played out…she would be forever grateful. Cassandra and Leliana had stepped in admirably, covering for Marehis, assisting in the interrogation that garnered her freedom to return to her post, explaining what had happened to Ellie once the danger was passed.

There were times she was certain she may never see her ward again. To be able to walk alongside her, hug, hold, braid her hair, heavens it was even longer now! It was pure relief. Oh and her first monthly, it felt strange to almost mourn missing that milestone to some degree at least, to not have been there to explain and comfort the girl, it sounded like it’d given her quite the fright. She wondered what else she had missed—Lieutenant Aclassi had been given charge of guarding Ellie in Marehis’s absence, she wondered just how close the two had gotten, oh had she missed some milestone there as well? She would be excited for the girl but still, she did not like having missed so much. She supposed to some degree that was par for the course, loving the girl as she did, there was some element of lost time, something in her that wished with everything she had somehow met the girl sooner, born her herself—she could not love the girl more if she had—but who had gotten to bear witness to her first words? First steps? The first time she smiled or laughed? Anyone that would have gotten the chance to see such a thing had sent her away, cast her aside, it felt like such a waste, a maddening, infuriating waste.
Oh but there was something that had not been lost. A first birthday, the celebration of one at least. That excited Marehis beyond words. Her splurge in Val Royeaux on the way to the Oasis had just been the influence of the city itself mixed with the company of Madam de Fer—the woman had wanted to shop for Ellie’s birthday and while Marehis had already successfully completed her birthday acquisitions shortly after that night when all of Ellie’s party gathered in her bed their first time in Val Royeaux together and she informed them the day on which she marked her birth. The ring, nail polish had been a mere urge to spoil the girl after a fashion but gifting the things had given her a taste for what it would be like come First Day.

Walking arm in arm with Ellie through the Crossroads, it was different than when they were in Haven, or even her time working in Orlais. In Haven there was a bubble of sorts around the Herald, she was streamlined to meet with key people at certain times, had a distinct schedule to adhere to, there were a few familiar faces that differed from those in her party or council. In Val Royeaux she’d been entirely closed off—spoken on behalf of the Inquisition at decisive points, and the rest she’d been locked away in the safety of their ally’s home.

Here, the girl had taken a deep breath once they reached the bottom of the sloping hillside leading into the refugee site and seemed to be tempering herself—she’d practically raced her way down the hill eager to get where she was going, but now she walked a steady, careful pace making eye contact with all they passed, waving, calling hello to different people by name. She’d worried passing through on horseback would make her less approachable, now Marehis realized the girl wished to give anyone who cared to, access to the Herald of Andraste. Some people greeted her in passing, others wished to thank her or show her some new progress made in the Crossroads with the help the Inquisition had given them. More than once the girl let go of Marehis’s arm, often enough the Elf decided it was best to let the girl to her own devices and keep watch over her as she worked, and Ellie went to huddle with strangers, her hands on their shoulders, or hands clasped with theirs, and she prayed with them—to the Maker, the All-Father, any deity they cared to ask blessings from or for aid.

“Ma falon! Ellie!” an elderly Elf man called from on high, there was a home on one of the Crossroads stone platforms, he stood in the doorway waving to the girl as he turned into the home to say, “Vehnan, the Herald of Andraste has returned—she fought her way through the south, sealed the rifts, and got your medicine for you,” he summarized as an Elf woman was just emerging from their home to join him as Ellie scrambled, pulling herself up onto the platform to speak with them.

“Oh gosh, I had loads of help doing that, it’s all thanks to the Inquisition. I’m just so glad we could help! I’m very pleased to meet you!” Ellie greeted the Elf woman, taking her hands and asking after her wellbeing. Apparently the woman had asthma as well, had been suffering illness from it—her son made remedy, the recipe for which had assisted Ellie on the Coast. Elgar’nan she’d been sick herself with worry when word came from Solas. It had taken everything to remain in the Oasis—the fact that the work they were doing in that land was to secure the place for Ellie’s eventual arrival, and her letters full of assurances and updates from Solas and Cassandra alike there was the only things that kept her to task.

Solas. Ellie was still addressing the Elven couple—chatting with them while Marehis watched over her from below, standing near the statue in the center of the Crossroads, of Andraste she was decently certain—when Solas carefully approached, coming to stand alongside her.

Oh. She had missed him as well, dearly. She’d worried he would fret over her sudden cut off in communication. It had been conflicting, the need to remain hidden and the ache of longing that somehow he might endeavor to find her. It was ridiculous, but she’d even dreamt of such a thing one night when she stowed away aboard the ship that unwittingly gave her passage to return
to this side of the Waking Sea. Even as it was a dream, it felt almost like she’d waken in the night and Solas was there, sitting across from her in the dark, cramped place between heavy crates of cargo she’d slipped between to stay out of sight, he looked startled and then relieved, breathed the single word, “Antishan, ma Vehnan,” and then he’d vanished. It felt strange, almost like it’d been real. Of course she also dreamt once that Ellie turned blue from head to toe and Varric was chasing her down with claims she was supposed to have turned orange, and all Marehis could do was sing the alphabet backwards which for some reason seemed like it should be helpful to the situation somehow—that had certainly felt real while she dreamt it despite what sense it made. Dreams were bizarre, strange things.

“I’m glad you’re well,” Solas said quietly.

“I am. Thank you,” Marehis replied, “for watching over her while I could not.”

He looked a bit chagrined at that. “I’m afraid most credit goes to our friends. I’ll admit I became rather distracted—had I been Eleanor’s sole source of protection and guidance I would not have allowed myself to become as such, I assure you,” he promised, knew it was important she be certain she could truly trust him to watch over her ward, “but as it was, she had help of all sorts and I found your absence…troublesome.”

Understandable. Though it did bring a mischievous smile to her lips, “Then I’m glad we have such capable friends and allies. The Iron Bull for instance.” Flatterer, he was. How had he discovered their relationship, had Cassandra informed him? He was Ben-Hessrath, her reports said, so perhaps that had been brought to bear. And Leliana informed her the tail she’d discovered and lost through some measure of…well, arson had been involved. She might have destroyed a bridge in the Free Marches evading what was actually a Viddethari agent of the Ben-Hessrath, a man who owed Bull a favor, had been asked to keep an eye out for Marehis and report back on her wellbeing.

“Seeking to upgrade, lethallan? Would it persuade you otherwise if I told you young Ellie has indeed figured out my heart is bewitched,” he drew dangerously close for keeping their cover, breath in her ear as he elaborated, “Stolen, *enraptured*.” He resumed his more platonic distance as he assured her, “By who she is uncertain, but she did realize I was saddened by a loss in communication with that someone and thought I had been…” ‘broken up with’. She insisted that any such person is quote, ‘just stupid’, were that the case.” Oh he was having far too much fun.

“Oh, well, I wouldn’t want to be just stupid, now would I?” she quietly returned.

“It is not the most desirable trait. Of course perhaps it is whoever courts you who is the foolish one. I would not advise any to brave the risk of invoking Eleanor’s wrath. She is, after all, rather determined to destroy any man who breaks your heart.”

Her turn for a bit of fun. “Ahh—perhaps I should seek the company of women then, for all men’s sake.”

“I have a feeling Eleanor has no double standard, she would just as easily seek vengeance on any who scorned you regardless of their gender,” Solas chuckled at that. Ending his flirtations he shared, “Ellie has recently admitted to such practice—did you know she has had a girlfriend?”

When had Ellie discussed as much, what all had she missed?! “Truly? She has been open with me about gender not dictating her preferences, but she’s never discussed it at length, however did that come up?”

“The Lieutenant has expressed his interest, and Eleanor saw fit to talk of her past dalliances in all things romantic. Before the Inquisition there was a bakers son, and a ‘sweet’, ‘pretty’ young
lady from Hasmal,” Solas listed.

“She does have a love pastry and sweet, pretty people,” Marehis conceded, that certainly sounded like her Ellie. Ohhh and the way some had spoken today, including Ellie herself, she had the idea Mister Aclassi had staked some claim to the girl, was it silly she wished to skip over their important meeting with their potential mage allies, who they were approaching to seal the Breach, so she could interrogate Ellie about things like boys and girls and the things she’d missed while she was away?

“Ma seranas! Don’t hesitate to approach members of the Inquisition if you need anything, alright? Take care!” Ellie called as…Elgar’nan the girl dropped down off the high platform—there were stairs! She could have used them, was she tempting fate? No, she was likely just excited to return from her conversation…or perhaps it was she was determined to move forward swiftly with some mission, she seemed to be thinking over something serious as she approached, sighing as she reached Marehis, though it was Solas she looked to. “There still isn’t a proper healer around.”

Was she feeling poorly after all? Did she need a healer? But Solas asked,

“The Inquisition could not find one to deploy for the refugees?” Ahh. For the refugees, that made sense.

Ellie shrugged. “Our own healers are spread thin what with how much the Inquisition is expanding, and as we add the Mages and Templars…Lady Josie’s going to be up to her ears in resumes while we’re gone, trying to fill new positions for healers and servant staff and just about everything you need to spread forces and simultaneously house more in Haven itself.”

“Everything we have needed has come to us eventually, I trust we’ll find someone,” he assured her, patting her on the shoulder.

Ellie nodded. “Um, have either of you seen where Madam de Fer went off to? The Elven couple said that mage is still living nearby— Ellendra*, the one we found the phylactery for? I was thinking maybe Vivienne could talk to her? She’s out here all alone and she mostly just scares the refugees, but Cassandra read up about her, files from her circle, and thinks she could be of use to the Inquisition.”

“My dear girl, did you have need of me?” Madam de Fer’s voice came as the woman herself approached, coming up the path from Corporal Vale’s post, she’d gone with the Seeker and the Iron Bull to touch base with him on their efforts in the Hinterlands, though the warriors were nowhere in sight.

“Only if you’re up for it—you don’t have to, but I’d appreciate you coming with me. I’d like to invite a mage we met to be an agent of the Inquisition, but um, I’m just a kid, you know? Herald of Andraste or not she might not listen to me.”

Madam de Fer linked arms with Eleanor as she said, “Well that certainly won’t do. Eleanor you are the Herald of Andraste, it matters not if someone sees you as a child, you must prove you are otherwise. I’ll escort you certainly,” she said as Ellie led her away, “but perhaps regard her as a fellow mage, instill some comradery and command…” her voice was lost as she and Ellie strayed further away, disappearing from sight to speak with—

“This Ellendra is near, yes?” Marehis asked, she almost made to follow after, she trusted Madam de Fer but it was worrisome to have Ellie out of sight.

“Huh. I expected Madam de Fer to jump at the opportunity to speak on Ellie’s behalf…”
Solas shook himself from thought, realizing he hadn’t answered the question and said, “Yes, Marehis, she is near, and has not presented herself as a threat. Eleanor rescued her phylactery from falling into enemy Templar hands, returned it to her for safe keeping, with the unfortunate confirmation that her lover had apparently passed on, but it brought the woman closure and she is grateful for it.”

Ellie returned seeming very proud of herself, Madam de Fer congratulating her on her apparent success—she’d spoken to the mage herself, convincing her that magic was indeed a positive force, and shouldn’t she work to use her own magic for good on behalf of the Inquisition?


“It was indeed,” Madam de Fer said, arm around Ellie’s shoulders, standing closely with the younger mage as she intoned, “you did very well, Eleanor. That was excellent practice for what is to come. You will speak with Grand Enchanter Fiona, do not belittle yourself—you are the Herald of Andraste, you are the voice of the Inquisition, deigning to offer alliance where you have every option not to.”

“But we do need the mages, Vivienne,” Ellie said.

“Darling a great portion of negotiation is playing hard to get. Make them grateful you are offering in the first place—you claim the upper hand, and it will be given to you whether it was yours to begin with or not.”

“Huh,” Ellie thought it over. “That makes sense, gosh you’re so smart.”

The compliment made the Enchanter smile ever so, “As are you my dear,” Vivienne assured her warmly.

Ellie shrugged and said, “I’m all done here I think, except I do want to say hi and check in with Corporal Vale—I’ll go see if everyone’s ready, you guys are, yeah?”

Oh it was nice to be arm in arm again, taking a lap around the Crossroads gathering their party, Ellie chatting away, giving Marehis a tour of sorts then, talking about the work they’d done, interruption as she took a moment to speak amicably with Corporal Vale as the man assured her he had everything well in hand, and he promised to see Ellendra was given an escort, so she could safely report to Haven as their newest agent recruit. It was something to watch her at work and hearing her excitement at all they had been able to do in the Hinterlands, pride swelled almost painfully in Marehis’s chest as they regrouped and set way for Redcliffe.

“Here’s where we sealed one of the Rifts,” Ellie said as they approached the large stone fortification that could, if gates were dropped, bar the path to the village. “Oh! Can we hold up just a minute?”

“Certainly,” Cassandra said.

“Something up, boss?” the Iron Bull asked.

“Magic found something,” there was something like excitement and mischief in Ellie’s grin as she bounced on the balls of her feet and asked, “Would you like to help me with a little short cut?”

Ellie led them through the gate—on the opposite side there was a stone shed attached to the structure, and rich laughter rumbled in the Qunari’s chest as he put his back against the wall and dropped to one knee, lacing his fingers together palms up to form a foothold for the girl as she
released Marehis and before she could protest, Ellie put her hands on the man’s shoulders, stepped into his hands before he launched her up onto the roof of the shed.

“She!” in warning from Cassandra and Marehis’s mildly panicked, “Dal’en do be careful!” overlapped as a peal of laughter left the girl who waved to them before climbing the onto the top of the wall, and following the path out of site, Marehis heard the thunk, thunk, thunk, of Ellie climbing a ladder, and the girl hummed to herself as she explored the highest tower of the fortification before,

“Oh! There you are!”

There what is?!

And then Ellie was sliding—Elgar’nan preserve her, the girl gripped the sides of the ladder and slid, toes of her boots palms of her gloves scraping in a rush against the wood—down the ladder landing with a soft, thump and Marehis didn’t breathe again until the girl was climbing over the lip of the wall back onto the roof, something held between her arm and body, a book. She crouched and handed the tome down to the Iron Bull first, and he passed it off to Rainier and then,

“I got you, Imekari,” he invited. He certainly better! Ellie leapt from the roof, into the Qunari’s arms. Goodness he was massive, but…careful with the small Human girl, though he did indulge in whirling around a few times to make her squeal with surprise and excitement before setting her on her feet.

“Thanks!” Ellie giggled breathlessly, smiling as she nodded to Thom as he returned the book she’d gotten, she rushed over to Madam de Fer and held it out, “This is one of your Circle tomes, right?”

“My dear girl, you remembered! You are an absolute treasure,” Madam de Fer crooned, brushing at the book cover and giving it a look over before she sighed contentedly, “this is an excellent find.”

Solas stepped up and offered to tote the book in his pack for safe keeping until they could return to camp, and Ellie giggled out an apology for worrying Marehis with her need to climb. The Elf woman shook her head, wrapping an arm around her ward’s shoulders to keep her even closer as they continued on their way, Ellie pointing out different spots they’d been—apparently they found a smuggling plot afoot between thugs and someone in Redcliffe named ‘Tanner’ they hoped to confront, near a cabin over the hill from where she’d found Vivienne’s book, and there was a cabin along the roadside a demon had been haunting.

“Varric jumped right out of his skin when the demon popped out of the ground!” Ellie informed her.

“I was not jumping out of my skin, I was backflipping while shooting that damn thing right between the eyes—it’s a move! It was cool!”

“It was very ‘cool’ when you landed on your own coattails and falling flat on your face when you tried to stand,” Cassandra drawled.

“While the move did indeed fall flat, the amount of bleeding your nose did was rather impressive,” Solas quipped.

“Tumbles!” the Dwarf complained, “They’re ganging up on me!”

Sera snorted, “Don’ be such a big baby, tattlin’ to Inky!”
Ellie hugged Marehis tighter, laughing as she teasingly threatening, “You lot, I’ll turn this party around, I swear! Then I’ll have to tattle to Lady Josie that you couldn’t behave and made us late!”

“We could stand to dally a bit my lady,” Vivienne said, “there’s never any harm in arriving fashionably late.”

“I still can’t believe it’s polite to show up everywhere late,” Ellie said shaking her head.

“It is not politeness my dear, it is style.”

A sickly crackling sound startled their more sensitive-hearing numbers, the sound of a Rift where…well all of the Rifts had been sealed in the Hinterlands. In that same moment Ellie’s heart pounded and then stopped, air shuddering through her lungs as she choked back a cry, and Marehis felt the girl’s entire body seize up quaking head to toe before she doubled over.

“Ellie?!” Marehis asked, kneeling before her, supporting her so she didn’t fall, trying to get a look at her ward’s face as the girl trembled, heart thumping to catch its beat again.

“He’s…opened?” Cassandra’s voice, “her Mark, is it spreading?”

Ellie’s arms quaked as she reached behind to unholster her staff, Marehis rising with the girl when she slammed its butt into the earth and used it to support her effort to remand standing on trembling limbs, her voice, hoarse and thick, speaking with shock-mixed-alarm, “N-no. I…I think a Rift just opened.”

…just…opened? Marehis could hear someone in the distance shouting to ‘keep an eye on that damn thing’ and the cracks and snaps she’d heard echoing endlessly across the Oasis. Was the Breach expanding again? What just happened? What could she do? Her hands hovered over the Herald’s Marked arm, everything in her screaming to find some way to help, but the girl took off, rushing down the path to Redcliff, staff held out behind her poised for casting in her unmarked hand. This was followed by the sound of swords and shields, staffs and bows being made ready as her party made chase, Marehis drawing her own daggers as she sought to catch up with Ellie.

Oh, she had never been one for praying to the Maker in her days before the Inquisition, it was only her faith in the Herald and the need to ask for divine protection over her ward that she beseeched the Maker most high, and she did so now, a silent plea for His protection.

As soon as Ellie was in reach, taking in the sight of demons descending on the few guardsmen outside the gates of Redcliff, the purple glow of barrier shot down her staff sending the whiplash of fear and anxiety conflicting with the glee-ridden security washing over her party in the same instance her Marked hand was raised before her to cast against the Rift. Solas and Vivienne’s Barriers were spread, and their warriors rushed the Demons as, sensing the Rift being manipulated, they turned their attention on the Herald, and then the more pressing danger of her party members rallying against them. Marehis kept close to Ellie’s side, and Sera, All-Father bless her, made a point of putting herself before Ellie before taking her shots at their enemies.

Oh but with such fierce warriors, the precision of their marksman, and three mages casting against the horde, their group was like a small army, demons were sent swiftly back into the Fade and Ellie, Solas and Cassandra raised their hands to suppress and seal the Rift completely.

A crack of energy swept across them as the Rift sealed shut and Marehis felt almost seasick, like the entire world had rocked and shifted underfoot that…that was not something any had described happening before, Solas had sent rather detailed accounts of their every encounter with
Rifts and that...something strange had just happened.

“That was...real fucking weird,” Varric affirmed.

“Ellie,” Rainier rounded to look at the girl, as he sheathed his sword, “are you alright?”

Marehis sheathed her daggers, moving to brace Ellie when the girl swayed like she was still caught up in whatever motion they’d just felt in the ground beneath their feet.

“That...that wasn’t-” she swallowed harshly, pressing the back of her Marked hand to her lips like she might be sick.

“Boss,” the Iron Bull spoke, coming to stand before Ellie, kneeling, bottom resting on the heels of his boots as he got level with the girl, “what do you need?”

“C-Cassandra,” Ellie breathed, and Marehis was almost infuriated with herself at the frustration she felt, the jealousy that Ellie would call on the Seeker for comfort, before the girl said, “white one.”

The Seeker came to Ellie’s side and offered up a vial of potion Ellie downed in one grateful swallow before she left Marehis’s hold to put her hands on the Iron Bull’s shoulders, pressing her forehead against his, trembling, her breathing choppy with panic before she struggled in a few bracing breaths, the Iron Bull carefully placing his hands on her shoulders in return.

“Grass, boots, dirt, my hair, The Iron bull,” she listed quietly. “Your hands, the ground, cold air, my scarf. Wind, our breathing, my voice. Sweat and sulfur.” She huffed a small, wry laugh. “Taste is kind of yuck right now, sorry if it smells. Had to re-swallow my lunch.”

“Don’t sweat it boss, Humans all smell like crap to me anyway.”

Ellie gave him a small smile, “Yeah well, Cremisius says your feet smell so bad sometimes he lets Rocky blow up your boots, just so you’ll replace them.”

“Whole flock of birds dropped dead once cause of the fumes. We ate good that night.”

The girl huffed a little laugh, squeezing his shoulders before she pulled away and turned to Marehis, and the woman’s heart clenched. There were lines of exhaustion drawn in the corners of her eyes, and there was a discoloration at her temple, a blood vessel had burst beneath the skin there, and low on the opposite side of her face, along her jaw, lip bleeding like she’d bitten into it harsh enough her teeth sank beneath flesh. She rose up on her toes to hug Marehis around the neck, resting her head against her shoulder. Ohh. ‘What do you need’ the Iron Bull had asked. There was a great measure of relief found in that Ellie had needed a hug, and that she needed it from Marehis specifically. Somehow it made the woman feel capable again, that despite her inability to help in some tangible, necessary way against the foul magic of her Mark, she was still needed, could still help. She held the girl as tightly as she dared, worried she might be hurting, and then Ellie released her, took a deep breath, and turned to address the others.

“Everyone alright? How are we on potions?”

“Everyone is well, lethallan,” Solas assured her in summation after everyone looked to each other and confirmed their health and potions status.

“You okay, Inky?” Sera asked, pensive, she stumbled up to Ellie and tentatively raised a hand finger ghosting over the dark webbing on her forehead as she eyed the matching mark on her jaw, she reached a hand into her own potions stores and pulled the stopper from a vial of Healing
potion, thumbing the blood off of Ellie’s bottom lip before holding the potion out to her, though she did hesitate momentarily, “Oh shite. You just took stomach calming pish. Will your tummy hurt if you take heal-y stuff too? It’s supposed to, you know, heal right? So it shouldn’t make you sick up?”

Ellie smiled and took the potion in hand, knocking it back and wiping her mouth with her back of her hand, “Thanks.”

“Here my dear,” Madam de Fer said, offering the girl some remedy for the almost-vomit followed by…well Ellie’s stomach potion always smelled like chalk, and Elf root tonic was hit-or-miss, some liked it, some were wholly turned off by the scent. The combination of all three were hardly the making of the Herald of Andraste’s signature scent for certain. What the Enchanter held out to Ellie looked to Marehis almost like a stick of chewing gum, but thin and translucent, smelled heavily of mint, tasted of it too since Ellie popped the thing in her mouth and shuddered, not as if it were unpleasant, just assaulting to the senses as she went,

“Wowza, that’s minty! Thanks,” Ellie said to her and then, “Let’s watch out for each other in here, okay? Stick together. I know nothing about anything going on right now is normal with, you know, the hole in the sky, weird glowing hands—Apostates, Elves, Qunari, oh my—but that Rift was definitely not normal, we need to be careful.” She huffed a wry sounding laugh, “Something even weirder than usual might be going on.”

“We are with you, Eleanor,” Cassandra affirmed.

Marehis was pleased to see Ellie’s lip heal, the discoloration on her face clear up as they entered the village, greeted by a young Elf mage who seemed…curious as to why the Herald of Andraste was visiting, but allowed them passage, telling them Enchanter Fiona was in the local Tavern.

There was still time before their meeting and Ellie wanted to get a feel for what was happening beyond the gate their party had once been turned away from when they first traveled the Hinterlands. She chatted with the local storyteller, and worked her way around the town, starting at the lowest tier closest to the waterfront, introducing herself and the Inquisition to the townsfolk. An elderly Dalish man caught her interest, discussing how well the Inquisition had secured the Hinterlands—his wife passed some time ago. Once a year he would travel to clean and lay flowers at her grave, but it had been so dangerous as of late, and the journey was too long, arduous for him in his old age.

Ellie released her hold on Marehis’s arm to take both the elder’s hands in hers, “We’ve cleared that area of serious threat. I think I’ve actually been there before when we passed through. I could see to it myself on your behalf or…well we’re scheduled a few days in the Hinterlands, I have a very good friend Russel—he’s my horse and he’s very smart and gentle, and we’ve a camp right nearby. I would be honored if you’d let me help you.”

“Lethallan…”

“We’d go at your pace. Whatever you need, however long you need—we’ll make a day of it!” she enthused, assuring him, “You’d be more than welcome to rest in our camp, and we’d see you safely there and back to Redcliffe.”

He shook his head, “You offer to do a foolish old man far too much kindness.”

“Hmm…” Ellie seemed to think it over, “I’ve seen a lot of impossible things in my time with the Inquisition, but I still think it’s impossible for there to be too much kindness.”
quiet rumble from the Iron Bull, ‘Imekari’ and Varric actually slapped a hand over his eyes whispering ‘killing me, Tumbles’. “You love your wife and wish to honor her, I couldn’t sit back and not help you however I could. I’d be grateful if you’d let me.”

“We shall make a day of it then,” the elderly man agreed, “by your leave my lady.”

“Ellie,” she insisted.

“Ellie.”

Marehis wrapped her arms around her ward’s shoulders as they left him, the man had seemed sincere, and non-threatening but she’d ensure it was not some elaborate trick or trap, but Elgar’nan she was just…proud did not seem to cover it.

They met the smuggler Tanner…Sister Tanner, actually, and with some help from Varric the woman would now be putting her skills to good use serving Leliana. And then a young man named One-Eyed Jim enlisted Ellie’s help in keeping an eye out for his very special Ram, the girl vowing to send the thing his way if she crossed his path, suggesting that they may as well spend the evening at their Inquisition camp south of the Crossroads—near the lake and caves, the young man had reason to believe his Ram may have run off to play with the Ram that could be found all around the lakeside.

And they did indeed find a Healer for their crossroad refugees—an Elf woman, with some encouragement from Solas, agreed she could offer her services outside of Redcliffe as well and help those the warring in the area had displaced. And it was something just so incredibly endearing to see Ellie the picture of grace and composure as she settled the agreement with the Healer, and then the very second they were back down the path, headed for her meeting, the girl rounded on Solas, letting lose a small, quiet squeal of glee as she launched herself at the Apostate Elf, arms around his neck as his arms came up to support her and she gave him an enthusiastic kiss on the cheek.

“You were right! We did find someone, and you were so helpful just…ahh!” she squeaked before she heaved a sigh of relief, and Solas’s hand wound its way into the curls at the back of Ellie’s head, mindful not to pull her braid eschew as he held her tightly, pressing a kiss to her forehead as he said,

“I am pleased that is a worry taken from your mind da’len, I was glad to be of help.”

What was Ellie’s claim earlier? That she was dying of ‘happiness overload’? The ailment must be catching because she was certain her heart could not take much more, old-gods preserve her, she loves this man, loves this girl, loves that he loves this girl as she does.

They made their way to the ‘Gull and Lantern’, Ellie stopping just outside the door to turn and address her party.

“I know Cassandra and Vivienne are coming to help, Solas and Marehis too, but is everyone coming with?” Ellie asked. “You’re all welcome to of course but I know mages and negotiations aren’t everyone’s thing, it could be a while.”

“I’m tagging along for the ride,” Varric said, gesturing toward the Tavern.

“Some of us are gonna go shoot the shit, stay out of the way, keep an eye out for trouble,” the Iron Bull said, “Holler if you need us though.”

“Knock ‘em dead, Ellie-girl,” Thom said, holding up a hand for Ellie to high-five.
“Thanks!”

“I’m goin’ with them,” Sera said, “no offense Inky just negotiations sounds boring.”

Ellie nodded in understanding, “If I wasn’t so involved with them, I’d think they were boring too. Go, have fun! Stay out of trouble.”

The Iron Bull chuckled. “Can only have one or the other boss, can’t have both.”

“Trouble, trouble, trouble!” was apparently Sera’s vote as she trailed after Rainier and The Iron Bull.

“Okay, so. Mages. We can do this right?” Ellie asked as she looked across her remaining allies, nervous now that their meeting was so close at hand, “Our offers solid, and Enchanter Fiona approached us in the first place, so…easy peasy yeah?”

“We have hope it shall indeed be ‘easy peasy’, Eleanor,” Cassandra assured, “You will speak well on our behalf, and I would not let you flounder on your own. Should you need assistance you shall have it.”

“I have every faith in you my lady,” Madam de Fer said, drawing near to intone, “Remember who you are and what you represent,” her hand cupped Eleanor’s chin, drawing it upward a fraction more, “Chin up, shoulders back, you are not beholden to anyone.” And then, “I promise you my dear, you’ll have all the assistance you need with Enchanter Fiona.”

Ellie nodded and then she took a deep breath before facing the tavern, looking at the door like it were some possible threat before she cast it open and led her party inside.

It was anything but easy peasy, unfortunately.

First and foremost, ‘Enchanter Fiona approached us’ was apparently no longer accurate, to the Enchanter at least.

“Welcome, Agents of the Inquisition,” Fiona greeted them cautiously. She caught sight of Madam de Fer, offering a respectful nod, “Grand Enchanter Vivienne.”

“My dear Fiona its been so long since we last spoke…” Vivienne said, sounding incredibly sympathetic, “you look dreadful, are you sleeping well?”

…oh that was almost deliciously petty, the perfect balance of politeness and insult with…well, a justified measure of accusation. The woman was currently leading a faction of rebel mages that displaced actual citizens of Redcliffe proper taking over the village to offer sanctuary to people who had no claim to the land, sent their people running headlong into the crossfire of warfare breaking out between Mages and Templars in the Hinterlands. So yes, Marehis did wonder herself, just how well this woman could sleep at night knowing innocent lives had been uprooted, some entirely lost, in her gambit to secure sanctuary for she and her fellow mages.

“What brought you to Redcliffe?” Fiona asked Ellie.

“I’m here on behalf of the Inquisition to discuss your mages assisting the Inquisition with sealing the Breach…It’s Haring 4th right? 3pm?” Ellie confirmed with Marehis who nodded yes—granted, by her watch they were a few minutes early—while the Grand Enchanter just looked at her like she’d spoken a foreign language, Ellie elaborated, “…we met back in Harvestmere, when I addressed the Grand Clerics in Val Royeaux, you extended the invitation for me to come visit you here, to consider looking to my fellow mages for a solution to the Breach?” she offered to jog the
woman’s memory.

But Enchanter Fiona shook her head. “Harvest…You must be mistaken, I haven’t been to Val Royeaux since before the Conclave.”

“Well then I’m not certain who I spoke with,” Ellie offered up breezily, “she certainly looked like you ma’am, introduced herself, and her identity was verified by Seeker Pentaghast and my mage friends.”

“That is…certainly very strange…regardless, the situation has changed. The free mages have already pledged,” the word dropped more like ‘sold’ from her lips, “themselves to the service of the Tevinter Imperium. As one indentured to a Magister, I no longer have the authority to negotiate with you.”

“Do you truly wish for all of Thedas to turn against you?!” Cassandra snapped, appalled.

Ellie’s hand went to rest on Cassandra’s forearm as she said, “Very well. May I please speak with whoever is in charge here then?”

Marehis saw the hand on Cassandra’s forearm gripped tighter, and Enchanter Fiona looked to Ellie alarmed, though her gaze swept across the whole of their party, trying to discern from who she’d just heard…well it was the sound of Ellie’s heart skipping and then hammering in her chest, and the girl held her breath entirely for a moment holding herself very stiffly until it sounded like she could breathe normally again. This was followed by Solas slipping away, quietly making his way around the Tavern, and Marehis saw him disappear into the kitchen, heard him leave out the back exit following some silent command of the girl through their bond.

That was before the door slamming behind them startled Ellie slightly, directing everyone’s attention as…oh fenedhis.

A Tevinter had just entered the Tavern, high ranking if all the points of his robes were something to go by, they did dress strangely, Magisters. “Welcome my friends, I apologize for not greeting you earlier.”

“Agents of the Inquisition allow me to introduce to you Magister Alexius,” Enchanter Fiona introduced the man.

“The Southern Mages are under my command,” the Magister said as he came to stand between Ellie and the Enchanter. He looked at the girl hard, some strange interest in his eye as he asked, “and you are the survivor, yes? The one from the Fade? Interesting.” The word was spoken with what sounded to Marehis almost like the quietest of growls, muted outrage that the girl before him survived the Conclave and the Elf wanted nothing more than to throw Ellie over her shoulder and flee. Magisters…Magisters were a threat all their own and this entire situation was growing increasingly out of the range of the ordinary.

“Avanna, Magister Alexius, it’s a pleasure to meet you. I’m from the Free Marches, originally, the Fade was a little side trip,” Ellie released the grip she’d had on Cassandra’s arm and held out her hand to shake. “My name is Ellie, Herald of Andraste and agent of the Inquisition. I came here to discuss the possibility of the Free Mages assisting in sealing the Breach, since you’re in charge now I would be honored if you’d speak with me on the matter. I’m sure we could come to an arrangement.”

“…Avanna,” he greeted in return, and somehow it almost sounded strangely predatory when he said, “it is always a pleasure to meet a reasonable woman.”
It took every ounce of restraint not to reach out and grab Ellie, pull her back, away, leave. Keep her from taking that horrible man’s arm and allowing him to lead her to an empty table to discuss anything.

“Felix, would you send for a scribe, please?” the Magister asked a young man in Tevinter armor. And then, “Pardon my manners: my son Felix, my lady.”

Ellie looked at the Tevinter man as he bowed in greeting like she felt something was off, but she said, “A pleasure to meet you, ser.”

The man merely nodded leaving to do his father’s bidding, fetch a scribe, though Varric grumbled under his breath that he could have done the job himself—she certainly hadn’t appreciated the news of he and Ellie’s fight, but she did appreciate that the Dwarf was likely currently just as concerned as Marehis, wishing he could impose himself on the conversation, have an excuse to sit at Ellie’s side and protect her from harm.

“I’m not surprised you’re here,” Alexius sympathized, “containing the Breach is not a feat that many could even attempt. There is no telling how many Mages will be needed for such endeavor, ambitious indeed.”

“Well ser, when you’re fighting a massive tear in the veil, you can hardly afford to think small,” Ellie returned. “I’m young and not fully mature magic wise, so I need help powering the Mark. We’ve done so successfully on a small scale with my mage allies, that helps seal Rifts, but the Breach is very powerful. Templars are capable of suppressing the Breach—the hope is we could all work together, with enough power, weakening the Breach enough to seal it. Would your people be willing to work with the Templars, if the Inquisition acted to keep order between them?”

“Ahh my friend, even without the current strife between Mages and Templars in the south…my alliance* with the Southern Mages was forged in battle against Templar forces—the brutes tried to cut them down directly after the Conclave. Luckily I was in the vicinity, drawn by the dealings of the Conclave, I could not stand idle by while my fellow Mages were in danger, and came to their aid.”

“Yes it was all very…timely,” Enchanter Fiona said quietly.

That was…none of that was possible. Not even in the slightest. No one from the Imperium had been invited to the Conclave, and Leliana had no reports of anyone having taken an interest, outside the few spies that attended the event proper and were lost in the destruction. Something was very, very wrong.

Ellie didn’t get a chance to formulate a response to that, as Felix returned, sans scribe. The younger Tevinter trudged toward the table, staggering ever so slightly, and Ellie was up and out of her seat, rising to meet him just as his legs gave out from under him, the much shorter girl bending to support his weight against her frame, and it looked like she meant to raise her hand to check him for fever or his pulse or hold up fingers for him to count, but his hand held hers fast, low as if he didn’t wish to be caught holding it.

“Felix,” Alexius breathed worriedly as he rose from his own seat.

“I’m so sorry,” Felix said, righting himself, the hand that held Ellie’s had released its hold and was now holding his side as if it hurt, he stood slumped, weary, “please forgive my clumsiness, my lady.”

“Are you alright?” Alexius asked.
“I’m fine. Father.”

“Come, I’ll get your powders,” and then loud enough to cast his voice across the Tavern Alexius called, “please excuse me, friends. We will have to continue this another time. Fiona I require your assistance back at the castle. I shall send word to the Inquisition, we will conclude this business at a later date,” he vowed.


“Vitae Benefaria, lady Herald.”

When Alexius was leading his son to leave Ellie looked into the hand Felix had taken, pulling open a note he’d apparently slipped to her. As soon as the Tevinters and Enchanter were out the door, Ellie’s team was surrounding her, Madam de Fer asking,

“Eleanor, honestly, where did you learn that filthy language? Don’t tell me that boy has been teaching you Tevene.”

“Hasmal. Holy days. Tevene isn’t filthy and I might have to talk to a Tevinter for Inquisition business—as I kind of just did. So. I’d do the same talking to an Orlisian or Antivan,” Ellie waved dismissively, as if to physically clear the matter away, “Language isn’t important right now, there’s another Rift—sorry I squeezed the crap out of your arm,” she said to Cassandra, “it opened just before Magister Creepy came in and Herald of Andraste probably wouldn’t seem super impressive keeling over and screaming the house down so, squeezing. I hope I didn’t hurt you.”

“I hardly felt…Eleanor another Rift—Maker, do you need potion?” the Seeker asked.

Ellie shook her head. “Maybe later. Solas went to look for it since it’s so close, but he hasn’t sent me anything, we should go.”

That had them speeding from the Tavern but Solas was out in the square, having gathered their fellow party members to wait for Ellie to be out of her meeting.

“The Rift did not open anywhere in the vicinity, Ellie,” Solas reported, “no one is under attack, no distressed villagers, you’re certain—”

“Yup! It’s close, super super close,” her voice pitched high, tight from pain, “follow me!”

It was indeed, Ellie led them directly up the path to the Chantry throwing open the doors and it was then the heady smell of atmosphere and sulfur reached them, the crack and rumble of the Rift that had opened right in the center of the Chantry.

And there was yet another Tevinter Mage it seemed, fighting off the Demons pouring from the Rift.

“Good, you’re finally here, now help me close this would you?”

The next wave of Demon spawn was short lived with the help of their numbers and while the Rift fluctuated, preparing to spawn again Ellie looked to the Tevinter wide eyed and said,

“You just came through this, right? Piggybacking on whatever bat-crap magic Alexius cast?”

“Not...not through the Rift, I arrived some time ago. If you mean did I cast interdimensional magic across space and time to tear a hole in the veil itself that would create a portal to transfer me...
from the casting site of that raving lunatic I call a former mentor, yes. I piggybacked. How perfectly plebian.”

“Mind your tongue, Tevinter, you are speaking to the Herald of Andraste,” Madam de Fer informed him sharply.

“…she’s the-” he stopped speaking the moment more Demons appeared from the Rift.

“Yup!” Ellie assured him.

And it didn’t take long to garner proof positive of her Herald status when, as the last Demon was felled, Ellie cast against the Rift and sealed it closed.

“Fascinating, how does that work exactly? You don’t even know, do you? You just wiggle your fingers and boom, Rift closes.”

“It’s not an exact science yet but we get by just fine,” the girl replied, “are you alright? you weren’t—oh ouch, your poor arm, here.” There was rather the horrible gash across the man’s exposed bicep, perils decisively wearing a single sleeve. Ellie withdrew potion from her stores, extending it almost like a handshake given she used it to introduce herself, “I’m Ellie, and you are?”

“Ahh, getting ahead of myself,” the Tevinter said as he holstered his staff, and after carefully examining the bottle in the bit of light shining through a broken slat over the Chantry windows, he knocked back the drought and then bowed with an air of regality, “Dorian of house Pavus, most recently of Minrathis.”

“Careful boss,” the Iron Bull warned, “pretty ones are always the worst.”

“Curious friends you have here,” the man, Dorian said. “Magister Alexius was my mentor so my assistance should be valuable to you.”

“Oh!” Ellie chirped, pleased of all things, or maybe relieved like that explained some matter she’d been confused about. “Was your mentor, care to elaborate?”

“Certainly. This time magic you’ve deduced is at play, I helped him to develop it. It was mere theory when we worked together mind, it wasn’t something he was ever capable of getting to work until now. The Rifts you’ve encountered today, I’ve been studying the magic that created them—more will appear, further and further from Redcliffe, if Alexius isn’t stopped. It is dangerous, and it could unravel time itself.”

“Time unraveling…doesn’t sound ideal,” Ellie agreed nervously.

“Eleanor, darling,” Madam de Fer interjected, coming to stand alongside the girl, laying an arm around her shoulders as if to stand guard on her behalf, defending her from the unwelcome influence of the Tevinter Mage. “I simply adore your trusting little heart but please. Time magic? No such thing has ever been possible before,” Madam de Fer insisted.

“It’s not a matter of trust so much as time magic just…makes sense weirdly enough?” Ellie supposed, reasoning, “I know you weren’t with us when we met Fiona in Val Royeaux, but I’m pretty good with the whole names and faces thing. We did meet her, many here can back me up, and Lady Josie was in communication with Fiona as early as a few days ago confirming our meeting, but she genuinely had no idea we were coming today, believed it when she said she hadn’t been to Val Royeaux since before the Conclave—she wasn’t lying, to her it’s the truth because…I guess it sort of is now? Marehis?” Ellie looked to her. “You’ve got um, you know.
Experience with espionage. And Cassandra, you’re a Seeker of Truth, do either of you think Enchanter Fiona was just bald-faced lying that she hadn’t invited us here?”

Marehis had to admit, “…Fiona did seem forthright, I too was struck by how earnest she was but…” Elgar’nan none of this made any sense.

“I likewise observed as such,” Cassandra offered, “I thought perhaps it might be some form of manipulation magic, an enchantment cast to make her forget meeting you so that Alexius could indenture the southern Mages.”

“That could be possible,” Solas spoke up, “but Fiona had some measure of free agency in the interaction, mind control, manipulations of the magical sort leave their victims more like puppets, drones. They are incapable of speaking words that have not been fed to them directly from the manipulator while under the influence of their spell. While she’s clearly subservient to Alexius she chafes at the restraints, resents it, she has not the lax complacency of someone enchanted.”

“The only thing I don’t understand…” Ellie said, amending, “well, I mean there’s loads about this I don’t understand but…gosh why would Alexius want these Mages? Last time I checked Tevinter was flush with Free Mages. What does he want them for?”

“That’s what I don’t understand myself,” Dorian agreed, “Alexius wouldn’t risk unraveling the world for a few hundred lackeys.”

“He’s not doing it for them,” Felix declared as he emerged from the Chantry’s side entrance, nodding to Ellie as he joined them.

“took you long enough,” Dorian complained, “Does he suspect?”

“No, but I shouldn’t’ve played the illness card, I thought he’d be fussing over me all day.” He sighed ruefully as he addressed Ellie, “Glad to see you got my message. My father has joined a cult, Tevinter Supremacists, they call themselves, ‘Venatori’. And I can tell you one thing, whatever he’s done for them, he’s done it to get to you.”

“Me?” Ellie asked.

“These Venatori they’re obsessed with you for some reason,” Felix explained, “perhaps because you survived the Temple of Sacred Ashes.”

“You can close the Rifts,” Dorian offered theories, “perhaps there’s some connection there? Or perhaps they see you as a threat?”

“Alexius…is risking unraveling the world to get to me?” Ellie asked, and then, “Huh. And here I didn’t get him anything.” The notion that the Venatori were so heavily targeting Ellie further still had Marehis’s stomach plummeting, she would be sending word to Leliana the moment they returned to camp, but it was heartening to hear the girl make light, that she wasn’t outright frightened.

“Send him a fruit basket, everybody loves those,” Dorian quipped, “You know you’re his target. Expecting the trap is the first step in turning it to your advantage. I can’t stay in Redcliffe any longer, Alexius doesn’t know I’m here and I want to keep it that way.”

“Sounds good to me,” Ellie said…and for some reason she began removing her cloak.

“Ellie?” Marehis questioned.
“Magic pinged,” Ellie threw over her shoulder as explanation before telling Dorian, “Another advantage: I don’t know why, but you were meant to be here, meant to meet me and help stop the Breach. Sound good?”

“I apologize, you southerners I swear you speak an entirely different language,” Dorian said sounding taken aback, “your magic did what now?” tones nearing braggadocios as he said, “I understand I’ve a glorious presence and my abilities are many and astounding, but you wish my help to stop the Breach?”

“Yup! My magic tells me when I meet people necessary for Breach banishing.” Ellie informed him as she held out her cloak to the Tevinter Mage. “While I don’t appreciate the threat to time and space, Alexius inadvertently turned things, so you’d be in the right place at the right time.”

“No pun intended?” Dorian offered up in jest staring at her offered cloak as if he found it more than questionable.

“Oh no, with me, the pun is usually always intended. The Iron Bull loves puns—big Qunari fellow who thinks you’re pretty,” Ellie explained, sounding pleased. “You’re mister mysterious, with the need to be incognito. You don’t want Alexius knowing you’re here, and I don’t much care to leave you to your own devices when you’re an ally. So. Cloak.” She insisted, tossing it to the man who caught it clumsily, “It might be a little short on you, but it’s got a hood. Put it on and we’ll just mosey on out of Redcliffe like we’ve not a care in the hole-y world.”

“…very well. I do wish to bear witness, assist when you confront Alexius, I suppose going with you now suits that.” Dorian haltingly agreed. “If this thing gives me lice or rash you’ll have worse to fear than Alexius’s rampant magic,” he vowed as he donned the thing, which fell to Ellie’s ankles but on him came just barely to his waist, though the hood did do well to cover his head, shielded his face from view if he kept his head down.

Ellie stuck out her tongue at him, eliciting a derisive ‘ha!’ from the Mage before she looked to Felix. “Thank you, Felix, for everything today. I um…know it isn’t worth much with…well its your private business,” she said, “I just want to say I do hope you feel better.”

The man nodded to her. “Thank you, my lady. Your kindness is worth plenty.”

Ellie nodded back before whirling about to face her party, her attention going directly to —“The Iron Bull! You’re my official escort on the way back to camp, its freezing and also I like walking with you so, it’s a double win for me.”

“You got it Boss.”

“Shit, Tumbles, don’t—” Varric opposed—not the Iron Bull’s escorting of course, but the in general idea of her walking around without the extra warmth of her cloak, handing it over to their strange new ally. The Dwarf grumbled as he pulled at the straps to Bianca’s holster, set the weapon on her butt before him while he removed his leather overcoat. “Here. No ‘buts’ just put it on kid,” he insisted holding it out with a definite motion that said he meant business.

“Varic its freezing out—”

“I don’t get cold. Dwarf thing, you wouldn’t know about. Just take the damn thing.”

“Well then, I suppose your pants being on fire will keep you warm enough on the walk to camp,” Ellie breezed as she kissed the man on the cheek before accepting his offered coat, pulling
it on, arms a little long and hanging on her, hem falling just below her bottom as she pulled it on and wrapped up in it, prompting,

“Oi! If we’re all trading clothes I wanna switch with Viv!” Sera declared.

“I don’t believe my apparel is cut quite to your…build,” Madam de Fer returned.

“Oh I know my bits won’t fill your boulder holders,” Sera snorted, “I just wanna see you in plaid!”

“I quite assure you my dear, I would burn any plaidweave before it dared touch my skin.”

“Not-Beardy then!”

“Alright,” Rainier amicably agreed, ahh yes, he was indeed ‘not-beardy’ now, “but I warn you, might’ve shaved the beard, did not shave my chest and your little tunic’ll be a tight fit.”

“Oh good heavens,” Madam de Fer groaned though Ellie and Sera were rather giggly over it. Marehis watched as Dorian shot Felix a look that said ‘whatever have I gotten myself into?’ and then,

“Well then, we’ll be off?” he asked.

Ellie nodded, “You can walk with me and the Iron Bull if you like, I’ve got loads of questions.”

Marehis was not certain she liked having Ellie out of reach walking alongside…oh goodness arm in arm with the Tevinter Mage they’d only just met, but the Iron Bull was a sound defender and Cassandra and Rainier had both moved to flank them, on guard on Ellie’s behalf. Madam de Fer came and took Marehis’s arm, patting it reassuringly.

“Jolly good,” Dorian said as Ellie linked arms with him, “Oh and Felix,” he called to the Tevinter man, “try not to get yourself killed?”

“There are worse things than dying, Dorian.”

Worse things than dying indeed. Fasta vass. Always has to get the last word in, that Felix, but he supposes that is his due.

This was all very strange he wasn’t certain that perhaps he wasn’t just hallucinating somehow. When Felix wrote him asking for his help with Alexius he’d been having a lovely time squandering his life away…technically just last week, Dorian Pavus was vying for his next meal on the hopes his date was a proper gentleman…boring fellow, desperate, but so was he. It was such he would prefer swifter ends than starving to death, which was preferable to choking down another measly morsel from some gutter. Then the benevolent golden child Felix sees fit to deign reach out to his old friend—who was fine by the way thanks so very much for asking. That mightn’t be fair, necessarily, Felix had more than enough of his own issues to deal with, not to mention Dorian had rather spectacularly burned that bridge when he left the tutelage of his father, and certainly Halward and Aquinea* had covered their own shame well enough after their own falling out, disparaged their son’s name for the sake of their own reputations, and Felix had no way of
knowing otherwise, but Dorian was hardly a fair man. Maevaris of all people was a better ally in those first days he’d fled his family home. She was…she was the only person Dorian could think of that would hear his plight, understand given her own circumstance. She knew the rituals his parents had tried to foist upon him, helped him recover after his escape, done what she could to aide him quietly, get him out of the Qunaris. He did not like being indebted to anyone but Maevaris was a good sort and she never dreamed of helping him without getting something in return, told him despite the luck of his stars he’d turn things around eventually, she’d call on him for recompence when the time came.

Somehow, that didn’t seem to be happening anytime soon. One day he was rotting in the streets, the next he was infiltrating a Venatori base all the way in bloody Orlais for Felix—because Alexius had taken it into his head that the hole in the sky wasn’t big enough, lets tear one in time too—mind, Dorian had not once said ‘I told you so’ through all of this, despite the fact Felix came crawling to him months after Dorian had tried to warn the man his father was falling in with Tevinter supremacists after Alexius himself reached out endeavored to reconnect with his former apprentice to recruited him into their leagues, and at the time Felix in his infinite wisdom had called him a liar, insisted his father would never fall in with the likes of the Venatori!* And now, here they are. He’d been able to follow them to Redcliffe, and in a strange turn of events he was holed up in a study again with Felix sneaking him snacks, anything he could anytime he could slip away to the small room in the Chantry where Fathers…Mothers, whatever, prepared their sermons. But there was a divan he could sprawl out on books that held little interest but at least he could read, occupy his mind even if it was tripe and blather about the Southern Andrasten tradition, broken up with moments of poring over anything Felix could get his hands on about this spectacular Tevinter cock up.

And now, now he was wearing the upmost ridiculous item of clothing he’d worn in public being dragged around the Hinterlands by the bossiest, chattiest little tyke the Inquisition itself had to offer, touting her the ‘Herald of Andraste’.

She chattered up a storm as they meandered the paths from Redcliffe to their Inquisition camp south of a dusty little town christened the ‘Crossroads’ near a lake which sounded…quaint. And possibly something like a passable washing up, better than what he could do in his days of Chantry squatting hmm…perhaps the Iron Bull would wash his back?

Oh but this girl, on and on, what did he have with him? Nothing. What did he need? Nothing! Was he allergic to anything? Not a thing save, perhaps, incessant questioning—she giggled at that, giggled! Would he mind being included in her party’s barrier spells that…well he hadn’t been expecting any of her questions but that least of all and it was…appreciated that she would do so, he’d been…it was appreciated. As he had no aversion to magical protection, yes, barrier was fine. What kind of mage was he—that got him a ‘oh! huh’, she wasn’t frightened as he hoped she’d be when he informed her he was, for all intents and purposes, a Necromancer*. He heard more than enough sounds of disapproval and disgust from her companions, and the Iron Bull had grunted, and pulled his arm out of the girl’s hold to wrap it around her shoulders like a physical barrier between them, rumbling out,

“Here Imekari, stay close. Cold as shit out here.”

“Yeah,” the girl agreed wholeheartedly, “Are you still comfortable, the Iron Bull?” she turned a question on him, “We could get you a coat, I’m sure of it!”

“All good Boss.”

Even the Qunari called her Boss? Well she certainly was, that much was more than
established, even more so once they made it to their camp.

“Nobody pay me any mind, we’re essentially home, we’ve got this camp to ourselves so just, give me a minute,” and then she proceeded to remove the coat of that Varric…Tethras? Oh that name was so familiar…he…oh. The writer, though Dorian was certain he’d heard that name elsewhere…huh. Anyway, she returned the jacket and unholstered her staff and then plopped unceremoniously straight down onto the ground slumping forward as she wrenched a hand at the back of her neck massaging it.

“Eleanor?” the Seeker asked, concerned.

The girl looked up at her, grimacing, “That’s not ignoring me!”

“My apologies,” the Seeker said with a nod though she sounded albeit amused, “let us know when your minute is over if you’ve need of anything,” she intoned as she and the female Elf…cleaner one, Marehis, moved to a large table laden with maps and parchment, setting about working together to write something, reports or the like.

“Thanks!” Ellie chirped and then a series of popping noises that could not be healthy came from her knees, her spine as she laid out flat on her back and she groaned, hands falling back to rest beside her head as she moaned out, “I’m dying. My soul rejects this mortal form, I have been of this world for far too long, and I am ready to ascend.”

The other Human Mage with them, she introduced herself as ‘Grand Enchanter of the Imperial Court Madam Vivienne de Fer’ in tones that implied Dorian was to address her as such in full. She looked startled by Ellie’s over dramatic declarations as if concerned the girl had suddenly found herself possessed.

“Ahh. Lethallan,” the Elf…Solas? said, “while I have an appreciation for this bit you do, where you speak like an ancient being encased in a fifteen-year-old’s body whenever you are world-weary, some would be quick to take you literally.”

Fifteen. Good heavens, the Maker had sent them an entire infant.

“It feels pretty literal to me. My body is still rebelling against me, my everything was set on fire times a thousand twice today, and time magic exists. I need a nap before I take a nap,” and then she snorted, giggling out, “I need a nappetizer.”

It…certainly sounded like it. He wouldn’t shy from as much now himself if he weren’t in such strange company.

The not-as-cleanly Elf, Sera, dropped to sit on her bottom next to the Human girl looking worried, “You need a nap Inky? I’ll snuggle with you yeah?”

“Totally gonna take you up on that, but first!” She grunted as she swung her legs up over head before swinging forward to roll onto her feet wincing slightly as she stretched and then, “You,” she said pointing to Dorian, “Come on, food. I’m famished, anyone else? Cool—dinner time!”

“I do hate to inform you, lady Herald, but I’ve not a culinary bone in my body,” Dorian assured her.

That had the girl whirling about looking absolutely delighted, giddy over the fact, “Really? Then you’ll not be in charge of feeding anyone, especially me! I wasn’t going to suggest you cook anyway, you should sit, like, now. Can I have my cloak back or are you chilly?”
Freezing but that fellow, Rainier was setting about getting their campfire going, and he was hardly going to keep wearing the ridiculous thing for any longer than needed, he could have removed it once they left Redcliff he supposed though the hood did do well to shield his face and he was wary some vagrant in that Crossroads place would somehow pass word of the dashing Tevinter fellow that passed through and devastated the hearts of many back to the village Alexius held hostage.

“By all means, I’ll not keep you from it,” he said, and when he handed it back to her she held his hand fast a moment like she was looking for something and was pleased she didn’t find it. “Looking for a ring?” he drawled.

“Nope! Just checking for spooning, but there isn’t any so that’s good.”

…spooning?

“Sit!” she insisted, pointing to a stool by the fire.

And then she started rummaging about their food stores looking for something, talking with Solas, Rainier, the Iron Bull about what they thought would be good for dinner. Oh Maker. Food. An actual, proper meal, dare he dream?

He daren’t, while the Iron Bull and Rainier worked to make something that smelled just…he would murder someone, possibly the Herald of Andraste for a morsel it smelled heavenly…the girl handed him a fork and a bowl. A salad. A salad comprised of mostly spinach. In fact it was essentially a bowl of spinach with an assortment of fruit and something that mentally he was certain it was some kind of vinaigrette but…

“Eat up, dinners on soon but this is to get you started.”

Oh no. No no. “While I do appreciate the gesture I assure you I’m not eating this.”

“You’re not allergic to anything in it and you need it like yesterday so. If you eat it all you can have steak!” she promised.

“You’re a bossy one.”

“Well, they do call me boss so…” she returned cheekily.

“You’re a toddler.”

“And you’re anemic.”

What?

“…anemic?”

“A blood disorder caused by vitamin deficiency. Spinach is rich in all the sort that the lack of causes anemia, lean meats too to an extent. Unless you want to eat liver instead which is definitely yuck, I’m prescribing spinach salad, then steak.”

A…blood…disorder.

“Who died and made you healer?”

“My mentor, Ava actually,” she quipped cheerily, was that…macabre humor? Kaf-fas. “I wouldn’t call myself a Healer, but I did come up with one, and I’ve worked as one for a few
mercenary companies before,” she explained. “Look, see? Your cut isn’t healing, not like it should…do you mind if I…?” she gestured to the injury on his exposed arm and he nodded. Huh, he’d just thought the potion he’d taken insufficient, poorly made despite the quality he’d seen and tasted, felt in his magic, and yet it contradicted the persistent sting of his still open wound. The Herald knelt and pulled clean cloth and bandaging from her pack, she laid it across her lap, and retrieved a vial of Elf Root tonic, dousing the cloth with the stuff before using it to carefully clean and medicate his cut before she wrapped it up tight, “I don’t know when the last time you looked in a mirror was but here,” she pointed touched the inner corner of her own eye, “super super pallid, and your fingernails aren’t spooning up yet but they’re practically grey where they should be rosier see? And um. Well. You fought very well—brilliantly—but you’re clearly exhausted, you’ve probably been feeling sluggish and foggy right?”

“…you…that…” well he certainly felt foggy headed now, and he had been feeling some malaise for quite some time, but he’d chalked that up to in general apathy with life, the lack of sunlight cooped up in the dusty Chantry, the occasional venture into the bowels of Castle Redcliffe. It wasn’t like he’d had a particularly vitamin-rich diet in who knows how long now what with time travel and everything. He strangely felt the urge to accuse her, a Mage, of being a witch. He opted instead for spearing a forkful of spinach and verifying, “my fingernails will spoon?”

“Yup. And like, you could eventually die you know, either from weakness or the eventual lack of oxygen to your organs and muscles…that’s if the heart failure doesn’t happen before then.”

“Cheers,” he raised his fork in a toast before…oh it wasn’t quite as ghastly as it looked, and it wasn’t nearly as ghastly as what spooning fingernails would appear. He was in dreadful need of a manicure as it was, jagged edged and simply filthy.

“So,” Ellie said as sat down on the ground before him, her back to the fire, “Venatori— we’ve had some run-ins with them before, on the Storm Coast and we’ve had more serious issues with them. You said they might be interested in my Mark?…huh, okay so a Rift opened up when we got close to Redcliffe, just popped open out of nowhere. When I closed it, that’s where we started running into time discrepancies. Like I met Enchanter Fiona in Val Royeaux and she invited me here months ago. She was in contact with the Inquisition as recently as a few days ago, finalizing plans for our meeting to discuss an alliance with the Inquisition.”

Dorian grinned, feeling a little vindictive he got a chance to show off after a fashion, he laid the fork in his bowl and reached into his robes to withdraw a slip of parchment. “I’m well aware.”

“Another note huh?” Ellie asked wearily as she unfolded the parchment. Something immediately caught her eye. “12.4.9:41 3…” her hand slipped into the outer pocket of her cloak and pulled out the note Felix had passed to her earlier, holding them side by side to compare a moment before looking to him, “Felix wrote you about my meeting?”

“Venatori spies infiltrate your ranks, and those of Enchanter Fiona,” Dorian airily explained. “As soon as she confirmed a meeting with you, Venatori higher ups sent word to Alexius, and Felix sent word to me. To beat you to the punch of recruiting the Mages he had to know when to beat you. Today, Haring 4\textsuperscript{th}, 9:41, technically perhaps two hours or so ago Alexius cast the spell that transported he and his Venatori friends back in time. The Venatori gave him this amulet, when he powers it, it glows green like your Mark. One moment they were gathered in a Venatori base, portal opened up and boom, Felix tells me they appeared outside the gates of Redcliffe.”

“Just after the Mages took Redcliffe over after the Conclave, with…” Ellie’s head bopped side to side as she considered the matter, handing him back his note while she tucked the one Felix
had given her into her pocket. “I’m guessing hired mercenaries or are the Venatori crazy enough to
dress up like Templars and let their allies cut them down to earn the trust of the Rebel mages? The
whole ‘I could not stand idle by while my fellow Mages were in peril’ thing seemed super
convenient.”

Huh. Well. At least if he’d fallen into the company of a demanding, chatty toddler, she had
some measure of intellect to be brought to bear. “Swords for hire, yes, they came through the portal
with Alexius.”

“So that explains Rift One and why they’re here,” Ellie said. “What about you? You said
something earlier about interdimensional space time stuff?”

“Felix got me into the Venatori base where I lay in wait until Alexius made his move.
Using the residual magic in the wake of Alexius’s casting, and my understanding of the spell being
used, I was able to follow after, setting to arrive in Redcliffe’s chantry. I wasn’t capable of casting
myself as far back as Alexius using only the leftover magical signature of his amulet, and not the
device proper. I’ve been hiding in that dross-ridden edifice for nearly a month now.” Alexius
wouldn’t deign set foot in a southern Chantry, hadn’t set foot in a Chantry period since the
accident that took his wife, was still to this day working to take his son.

“You both cast though…” Ellie asked for clarification, “So. Two Rifts. One marking where
Alexius came through, the second opened where you appeared. Cool. Major ouch but cool.”

“Boss, I don’t wanna rain on your parade…” the Qunari spoke up.

“Rain away!” she permitted cheerily.

“If the guy was just going to send his people back to just after the Conclave why did he
need to know when you would be meeting with the Mages? He went back before you were even
proclaimed the Herald of Andraste it sounds like, he more than ‘beat you to the punch’,” the Iron
Bull said, “I’ll admit everything back there was hard to explain. But the plots got holes in it other
than Rifts.”

“Because he needed my Mark to do it didn’t he?” Ellie asked Dorian who wasn’t certain
how to answer that, he didn’t know, “You thought perhaps the Venatori are have an interest in my
Mark, this amulet you say they gave him glows like my Mark, the magic it uses might be Rift
Magic or something, it might all have something to do with the Breach. Alexius cast today, little
bit in advance to my meeting so I’d come across the Rift that formed at his set destination,” she
reasoned. Huh. Well, he’ll be damned. He hadn’t considered that. “Their timeline—the one where
Fiona never went to see me in Val Royeaux because she was already in service to Alexius—didn’t
‘click into place’ for us until after I sealed the Rift. Rift sealed—boom. Alexius and everyone got
sent back and indentured the Mage rebellion…” she looked up at the Iron Bull, “that’s why One
Eyed Jim hasn’t been able to go or get anyone to go look for his Ram, the Healer’s out of vital
ingredients that are easily collected from around the Hinterlands I mean I think I literally picked
everything she asked for from here—Alexius has kept everyone locked up it sounds like. No one in
or out so…” she gasped, “hopefully that means his playing around time travel haven’t affected the
Inquisitions work with the Refugees, ugh!” she actually slapped her hands on the ground at her
sides for emphasis as she informed him, “If he’s messed up any of all the hard work we’ve done in
the Hinterlands in any way I will completely flip my entire business, I swear! I’ll go off!”

“I’m fairly certain it hasn’t,” Dorian assured her, amused though, he was rather tempted to
see just what the Herald of Andraste ‘flipping her entire business’ would look like. “While I’ve
been toiling away in that Maker forsaken Chantry, Felix assured me Alexius saw to it no one set
foot outside the gate fearing what interaction with the outside world would do until you came to
interact with his change in timeline.”

“Good. Though its tough toenails if he has a problem with me taking one of the villagers out tomorrow,” she looked to the Seeker still writing away, “I really do want to make good on my promise with that man, getting him to his wife’s grave. Since we’re still technically dealing with this mage business, I think tomorrow would be good for that, yeah? While we plan on how to proceed? I’m not giving up on the mages here and we absolutely have to stop Alexius meddling with time, we’d be crazy to realize his plans and not do a thing to stop him*.”

“We shall see what tomorrow brings, Eleanor,” the Seeker said, wearily like it disappointed her she might let the girl down, “while I’m certain it should be doable I can make no promises of my own other than, should worse come to pass we shall extend our stay here to fulfill your deal with the Dalish man.”

“I’ve almost finished my report to Leliana, da’len,” Marehis said. “We’ll see where to go from there.”

“Thanks, you guys,” Ellie sighed with relief, then, “Oh! Would you thank Leliana for me for sending you—is that okay to put in a report?”

“It’s not a problem, I’ll pass your thanks along, although,” Marehis said, as she continued her work, “I do believe my change in assignment was the suggestion of the Lady Seeker.”

“…I may have made a suggestion in passing,” the Seeker reluctantly admitted.

“Cassandra! Gah! You’re just the best!” Ellie enthused, “Seriously! Mind your inkwell, as soon as I’m physically capable of rising from this sitting position, you’re getting hugged!”

Physically capable indeed it took her an almost pathetic amount of time but she did trudge to her feet and then stumbled the path to the desk to lay against the Seeker’s back wrapping her arms around the woman’s neck.

“Think nothing of it Eleanor, it was merely a suggestion made in passing.”

Ellie hummed her enthusiasm as she squeezed the woman more tightly and pressed a kiss to her head.

Surprisingly enough he did manage to eat his way through the entirety of that green monstrosity she’d offered him and then oh. Maker. Steak. Actual steak and potatoes and carrots were an upgrade from the spinach most assuredly—he was not allowed wine with his dinner which was sacrilege, but Ellie insisted he was not to partake of any alcohol until his anemia was taken care of since over imbibing in the first place can cause such an affliction which was…not appreciated in the slightest, but likely wise given he’d been doing far too much of that the past few years, the first six months of his exile he had only glimmers of memory from, in the good old days when he was young, blissfully ignorant as it hadn’t struck him yet that things cost money which he no longer held a beautiful ever flowing wealth of.

Ahh well, dinner was good enough on its own, the Iron Bull certainly knew how to cook, as did that Rainier fellow, the finest, largest meal he’d had in longer than he’d care to think of. Their entire mismatched crew gathered around the fire and filled Dorian in on the work the Inquisition had done in the Hinterlands and…well yes he could certainly see why that girl would be furious if any of that had been undone, the Inquisition was rather a rising noticeable force in Thedas, so much so word of it had been circulated through the Imperium, he’d heard about it in passing more and more, though his first real focus on it came when Felix got him involved in
thwarting his father’s schemes. And they had plans for more—smaller tasks like searching the nearby lake for someone’s missing Ram, and that prompted the Dwarf to ask,

“Uh Tumbles, you know how to swim?”

“Yup! I mean it’s cold as all get out right now and I’m not necessarily in a ‘swimming for fun’ condition but I can swim fine. Why?”

“Just, you know, making sure. Never know, you might have to. We can’t have the Herald of Andraste drowning on us can we?” That certainly would put a damper on things.

When she’d cleaned her plate the Herald seemed almost tentative, despite her earlier enthusiasm over the prospect, “Um, I really am beat, would it be okay if I took a nap? I’d just take a half dose,” she proposed to Solas as if asking the Elf’s advice on the matter.

“Oh my dear girl you’re more than due a lie-down,” Madam de Fer was quick to interrupt with an assurance. Though there was a mix of concern and sympathy as she questioned, “Today’s affairs have been more than daunting, do you fear you’ll sleep unpleasantly without the assistance of potion? If that’s the case then by all means do imbibe, but otherwise I would not think it wise to risk tempting the chance of sleeping too late into the evening, it simply wouldn’t do to get your waking hours amiss.”

That seemed to be all the leave she needed, Ellie, Sera and Marehis in tow as well, disappeared into one of the Inquisition tents. As almost-annoying as he’d found the girl, he did feel almost abandoned, being left to chat up the other strange adults.

That…Sergeant, he’d been introduced as, the Rainier fellow looked concerned as he watched the trio disappear into one of the tents. “Um…Solas? How’s she feeling?” he prompted for some reason.

“She is sore from our work today, weary, but otherwise she is well,” the Elf shuddered a bit, “Well, and cramping. Which is not a familiar concept for me, insofar as location and it is a very unsettling sensation.” That got a laugh out of Madam de Fer and a quieter one from Seeker Pentaghast who raised a hand to her lips as if she were merely having a coughing fit.

That led to…Maker’s breath, time magic baffled these people to the extent most of their conversation was spent—talking to someone who had developed, and he himself been thrown back through time—talking about how such a thing could not exist, but they had encountered this strange phenomena in Solas’s magic that allowed him to monitor the Herald’s well-being and no one sought to question it.

And then there was a softness that came into the Elf Apostate’s features, a slanted smile as his eyes warmed and his gaze rested on the tent the Herald had disappeared into.

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“Solas?” Cassandra asked.

The Iron Bull motioned for them to quiet and listen, “Imekari’s almost asleep.”

There was a sound just barely perceivable to Dorian’s ears from the tent, a voice, quiet and muffled but musical.

“Marehis,” Solas murmured in explanation, “an old Dalish lullaby.”

The thought of that seemed to melt something in Madam de Fer, “Oh she missed that girl terribly.”
He felt more than out of place, part of him was absolutely certain he would not stay here, surely not. He would have to move on soon wouldn’t he? It was strange he felt almost half-invited, Ellie had all but taken him in like some mabari pup, but that wasn’t on he still had his pride but, just…he felt antsy like the other shoe was about to drop, the uncertainty of the future rolling in his gut—they needed to stop Alexius, but could they? And what if this was all part of some greater, darker scheme? And what would happen once it was over would he…Maker he was in bloody Ferelden. He’d barely scraped together the means to make it to that Venatori base, had to pawn the last of his ties to his old life off just to get to that place by the barest skin of his teeth. Would he…could he even dream of returning to Tevinter? Did he even want to was more over a question though…it was more and more an impossibility. He’d barely a copper to his name ha. His name. Why did he continue introducing himself as Pavus, what good did that do him? There was still some measure of pride in his roots, it was ingrained in him.

Then there was some strange chance in pace, Madam de Fer set about very regally erecting a snowy white tent, though she did call for the Iron Bull to ‘be a dear’ and assist her in adjusting the thing—it was a very simplistic set up if it were just she alone housed in the tent, but apparently there was a sleep over of sorts planned for that evening, whatever that meant. It was a silky, several layered construct that could expand to hold an out in out gala if she so chose, but it required more than one pair of hands to hold and pull and drive supports for the entire thing, but in the end there was a big, glorious tent set up across the stream from the rest of the Inquisition’s set up.

And then the Iron Bull announced that the men were going to convene to gather around a bonfire and make merry while the women ‘did their thing’. This led Dorian to trail after Solas, Rainier, Tethras, and the Iron Bull up the hillside a way, turning left, opposite direction of the lake to set up in a clearing they could still have an excellent view of the camp below in case they were needed—Solas could be communicated with through his bond to the Herald if she were in danger, and the Iron Bull could apparently hear if their companions below called, but it would put their better-hearing men out of earshot of the ladies ‘girl talk’ and vice versa. Apparently Herald of Andraste came with world defining decision making and threats of all sorts ever pressing in her life, and the poor thing was due some relaxation though she was currently still napping…on hour three of her lie-down, the sun had set, it was nearly 8pm, he wasn’t sure that would be conducive to getting proper rest that evening but then again, sleep overs didn’t involve much sleep.

“Nah. Kid’ll wake up, have some fun, but it’ll mostly be relaxing shit, she’ll be out like a light before midnight guaranteed, she barely slept a wink last night and…” the Iron Bull paused as he threw another log onto the fire he and Rainier were working to build, he looked to Dorian. “Fuck me. Imekari had all kinds of trouble sleeping, something in the Fade freaked her big time and she came waking me up, half asleep, mumbling about how ‘they’ were coming.”

“There was much activity afoot in the Fade last night perhaps…” Solas reasoned, “perhaps it was some form of preparation for the casting that took place. To send a group as large as what it sounds like Alexius supposedly did though time would have been no small feat.”

“I ought to pop that Vint bastard right in the mouth,” Rainier railed, amending, “no offense to present company of course.”

“Oh, if you mean Alexius, by all means, pop away,” Dorian invited him.

“Lady Josephine worked tirelessly to arrange these negotiations with the Mages and Templars and Ellie’s been nerve wracked about handling them, only to have this rubbish blow up in her face,” he seethed.

“Tumbles handled it all pretty well though,” Varric informed them. “I mean shit, I was still
wrapping my head around trying to figure out just what angle the Enchanter was trying to play and she just rolled with the punches. Fiona acts like she doesn’t have a damn clue what’s going on? Cool. Tevinter Magister’s come and indentured the entire mage rebellion? Alright, bring him on—she felt that second damn Rift open up, didn’t let the bastard see her down, and greeted him like he hadn’t totally derailed her entire game plan. In Tevene.”

“Truly?” Dorian asked, surprised. The girl’s accent sounded more like a Marcher, not quite so low-brow as what Ferelden’s jargon produced, she did have the sort of dusk common to Tevinter skin, but such was also common in Antiva, Rivain, though her hair was wild red, like cousins of his he’d met in passing from Ferelden.

“Kid traveled a lot, seems to pick up languages pretty okay, Dalish, little Tevene she says.”

“Krem says she speaks Antivan* with Ambassador Montilyet when they have their lessons together,” the Iron Bull said.

“Yeah she mentioned Antivan. Anyway,” Varric got them back on target, Alexius, “bastard was creepy as fuck with her though. Felix kid seems okay, just about trampled Ellie with his whole fainting act…he uh, okay? His dad made it seem like he was really sick, its uh, nothing contagious? Tumbles can’t really afford to get sick.”

“No, nothing contagious,” not in any way they had to worry about, it wasn’t as if the man had committed a blood pact with the Herald of Andraste.

“He did seem a good sort that Felix,” Rainier said, “too bad he might have to witness his father die—exactly what level of creepy are we talking here, Varric?” Ahh. Alexius…well the Alexius Dorian knew years ago mourned his late wife in such a way he couldn’t so much as look at another woman, but so much had changed, the man hadn’t been a scoundrel had he?

“I almost doubled back on my search for the Rift when I heard him call it a pleasure to meet ‘a reasonable woman’,” Solas offered up wryly.

“Yup. Made my damn skin crawl, the way he said it,” Varric said. “I thought Marehis was gonna start chucking knives.”

It all certainly sounded…ugh.

Fire lit, company gathered, the Iron Bull broke out his promised booze, bottles of a very oaky smelling bourbon and red wine, not a proper vintage but it would do, all very tempting and the Qunari did see fit to indulge Dorian, passing off a tankard of wine.

“Better listen to Tumbles, Sparkler,” Varric warned him before sipping at his bourbon.

“Sparkler?” Dorian asked drily.

“Nickname. Yours. Deal with it.” Varric sniped and then, “I mean the kid’s magic ‘pinged’ so that pretty much means you’re stuck with us right? You sign on with the Inquisition, keep Tumbles alive, hell—Chuckles, how long before you bet this asshole wants on the kid’s roster, teaching her…fancy Tevinter magic or whatever.”

“I hardly think that would be appropriate, neither is it necessary,” Solas replied, “between Madam de Fer and myself Ellie has more than adequate training for where she is at the moment magically. And the world at large would balk at the Inquisition allowing the Herald of Andraste to learn magic from a Tevinter Necromancer of all things.”
Well the Elf didn’t sound like he much approved of him but uh…well he was an Altus, obviously came from the upper crust of the Imperium and it was true his family did have slaves—it was their system, and no one family could change it overnight, for his family it was more the equivalent of non-monetarily-compensated servant staff, they were housed well, fed the same, their meals were not revoked as a weapon against them, saw Healers when necessary and there was not an Elf among their numbers, at least their hadn’t been when Dorian could last check. Still there was a more than tenuous relationship between the Imperium and the people they’d so thoroughly subjugated Ages ago.

He didn’t have much time to focus on any of their chatter as, he’d had no more than a sip of his wine when,

“Oh! Lop-head! I said no alcohol and I meant it!” Herald of Andraste, hair loose and wild, cloak donned over what appeared to be soft pajamas bottoms and tunic, feet tucked into unlaced boots. He was surprised to see her not flanked by one of her…were either of them her mother—the Seeker or that Elf Marehis? Who claimed this girl, where were her parents surely they could reign her in? Give her a time out, leave him in peace?

“Oh goodie, the ickle Herald is up from her nap. Feeling rested?” Dorian questioned innocently, but all that got him was the tankard, forcibly removed from his grasp…huh. He would hardly fight the girl over it, not physically that would hardly be appropriate, but still she did take it from him with a great deal of ease, passing it off to the Dwarf and glaring at the Iron Bull for providing him with alcohol, perhaps Dorian was bad off, weak. And that was before, “Ow! Ow! Fasta vass!” she twisted his damn ear! Just a quick yank she held for two seconds but still!

“Da- Darn it Dorian, take this seriously, you have to take care of yourself!” she insisted, stomping her foot, hands on her hips. Oh the girl she…well she looked fierce as she lectured him but scared for him. That was…he wasn’t sure how he felt about that.

“I tried to warn you,” Varric said smugly, the cur was double fisting it now with wine in on hand and his bourbon in the other—he drank at the wine just to spite him, surely.

“How’re you feeling, Ellie?” Rainier asked in earnest.

“Loads better now that I got a bit more shut eye,” Ellie said, the man looking wholly relieved to hear as much. Huh. Rainer, maybe the girl’s mother wasn’t present, perhaps this man was the Herald’s father? The Iron Bull was apparently some sort of Mercenary leader, ‘Chargers’, perhaps that was how they’d gotten involved in all this? One of them surely had to be responsible for her, she was awfully young to be going about without some relative or another trailing after her on her misadventures, but most of the Herald’s party were fair skinned, a couple of them together weren’t likely to produce a child of Ellie’s complexion—the only combination among them would perhaps be Rainier and Madam de Fer but that…definitely did not seem like an obvious match. Then again, perhaps she was someone’s niece? Cousin?

“So, you ditching your gal pal party Tumbles?” Varric asked.

“Nope! I worried you lot might let Dorian drink and I thought about it,” she turned to the Tevinter Mage. “Not that you’re a girl or anything, but you don’t have to be to like what we’re on to better than sitting sober with these loons all night. We’re just talking and relaxing— Madam de Fer’s tent is warm, and there’s fluffy blankets and hot cocoa—you’re definitely welcome to that. Just offering, if you’d rather not it’s no worries but you really really shouldn’t drink.”

“…I’ll admit I’m intrigued.”
The girl whooped, and held out her unmarked hand to help him up. And then she led him down the hillside to the plateau their camp rested on, she’d been chattering away about how much fun they were in for but as they approached the Inquisition tents she dropped her voice to a whisper and said, “I’d like to check how your arm is healing if that’s alright,” and when he nodded she peeked under the bandaging and smiled. “Oh good, it’s all healed up, it doesn’t hurt or anything still?”

“Not at all.”

“Then its healed inside and out, whew,” she breathed a sigh of relief then, stepping away from him, giving him space, “There’s things on the requisition table for you if you want a bit of a wash, the water in the stream is clean and I promise you’ll be toasty as soon as you join us in the tent. I had to guess size wise but there’s robes in our storage, so I set one out, and if you leave your clothes out I promise no one will mess with them, they can be washed. Shout if you need anything alright?”

He found himself nodding dumbly, and the girl spared him a warm smile before she gave him his privacy.

He wasn’t sure what to do with any of this. He knew how to bathe himself, obviously but what was left for him was a neat arrangement of a fresh bar of soap, unopened bottles of shampoo, conditioner. A toothbrush, paste, and razor and cream—he’d had...he’d had the implements and made them work with water alone, but they’d been left abandoned in the Chantry. A clean towel set folded with a washcloth on top of it and next to that was a robe, not exactly his style but it smelled freshly laundered, not like it’d been pulled out of a musty trunk—storage, she’d said it came from, and there was a balled-up pair of thick woolen socks. And then, there was his beaten-up leather satchel he’d had strapped to him for forever now, he’d almost forgotten he’d set it aside when they ate. It’d been cleaned and the little hole that had been working itself larger and larger over the past few months had been mended and when he pulled it closer to examine it something inside shifted and clinked, he opened it to reveal a store of health and lyrium potions. Lyrium.

These were things, services, resources that cost money, money he didn’t have. He supposed there was some level of repayment for coming to their aid against Alexius to be had, he was their ally, and there’d been some talk of him joining their Inquisition though he’d taken it mostly as jest but...were they serious? He had no interest, though...it was more like it wasn’t something he’d ever considered. It hadn’t been so much as a passing interest in the slightest. Talk of the Inquisition in Tevinter hadn’t inspired the man to join their cause, he’d been focusing on his own life issues, the hole supposedly forming in the sky over Ferelden was the least of his worries until this Alexius mess came up. He didn’t...he was Dorian Pavus, a damn treasure to the world thank you very much but he didn’t feel much like he had a thing in the world to offer right now.

He couldn’t just stand out here all night so he decided to go against the warning voice in his head that said he was only indebting himself, as he took up the offerings and went to have a quick, frigid but painfully needed bath in the stream, Maker, he’d never felt so clean in...far too long he could feel layers of grime and dust and disgust peeling from his skin, and oh his hair, it was silken when he was done with it, gone was the horrid grease he’d been convincing himself gave it a pleasant shine. Proper shave, maintaining his mustache while getting rid of the scruff along his jaw. Then came the robes, soft, clean and as he finished up he hesitated only momentarily before storing the offered toiletries in his satchel, leaving his own clothes on the requisition table as instructed.

He could hear the women in the tent talking as he approached, he wasn’t certain just how they’d feel about him joining them though he had been invited, and he wasn’t some slaggard...not
in a way that concerned anyone present mind, but still.

It was no matter though, the moment he reached the tent the flap flew open as if by magic, and it certainly was, Madam de Fer was reclined on a pile of pillows gesturing airily at the entryway and saying, “Do come in my dear.”

Kaffas, the tent was warm, as promised the chill of the Hinterlands did not follow him in, and the scent of lavender permeated the air. Soft light emitted from what reminded Dorian of a chandelier, only there were no candles just glowing tear drop crystals hanging along a silver frame in the center of the tent’s ceiling. The women were gathered in a circle of sorts, Seeker Pentaghast sitting alongside Madam de Fer, a buffer state between the Enchanter and the Elf, Sera, then Ellie who was already patting the place at her side for Dorian to take a seat, behind her sat Marehis who was carefully managing the girl’s hair. He found himself seated on a cushion, no sooner was he down then Ellie was passing him the length of what was indeed a wonderfully fluffy blanket and once that was settled around his shoulders, she was handing him matching crystal saucer and teacup full of hot cocoa and he was certainly hallucinating even as she clinked his cup with her own with an offered toast of, “Benefaris!” she said.

“…Benefaris.” It was official, he’d actually perished in the battle against the Rift…maybe before that, maybe he died of exposure before he even heard from Felix about his father’s plans, there was no such thing as working time magic, he’d merely given up the ghost and now he was in some strange but glorious afterlife.

“Sup, Dorian,” Sera greeted giddily, “…hey how come you’re all fancy Tevinter but you’ve got a normal sounding name?"

“…as opposed to…?” he asked.

“Cremisisisisssssssss.”

That certainly was a strange sounding…sound, it didn’t seem much like a name.

“Cremisius!” Ellie corrected, and my how her cheeks pined in rather spectacular fashion, the Herald of Andraste was blushing, “His name is nice!”

Huh. A bit religious, but yes, Cremisius wasn’t the most bizarre name he’d encountered among his fellow countrymen.

“And who is he, exactly?” Dorian asked.

“Cremisius Aclassi, he’s the Iron Bull’s Lieutenant,” Ellie explained, and when Sera opened her mouth to add something the girl was quick to cut her off, “and my friend! Who’s a boy and we like each other.”

Ahh. Apparently they’d been talking about all things ‘last week’. Ellie wasn’t half-Elf apparently, she was too short for that anyway—Marehis was her bodyguard, a minder, but not her mother. Alexius’s meddling had kept them apart apparently, which pissed the Herald of Andraste right off, understandably all things told, while the woman was not biologically her mother, it seemed to Dorian she was currently the closest thing unless the Seeker…no he doubted there was a genetic connection there as well. Her summary of her time with the young man from Tevinter—a non-mage, so Sopporati then, that must be why Madam de Fer wasn’t balking entirely at the possible relationship—was concluded with an admittedly cutey declaration of interest…huh. He’d apparently given her a hat which wasn’t wholly notable but flowers, and a scarf, those were par for the course of Tevinter courting custom.
Though her summation of the week did kill his theory that perhaps Rainer was her father, that he’d followed after her and brought the Chargers with him—it turned out he’d only just been recruited. None of her party were familial relations by any means to this girl.

“Your parents aren’t able to join you in the Inquisitions work?” Dorian asked. “That must certainly be worrisome for them.”

She smiled, shaking her head ‘no’, “Parents don’t worry about me because I don’t have any—well, I mean obviously I have some, I came from somewhere, but I was dropped off at an orphanage naked as the day I was born…quite possibly on the day I was born.”

No parents? Lucky girl. Oh but that wasn’t fair really, that was sad. She seemed unbothered by it but still, he felt like he’d stepped in things and he knew all too well what it was like to be cast aside. Twice in her case as magic apparently deemed her ‘unadoptable’. Well it may have done so then, but now Kaffas, they say it takes a village, granted this village housed a Qunari, three Elves, and a Dwarf atop her Human allies, but they all were very taken with this girl, they practically oozed with it. Even the Seeker, she was rather the foreboding presence, he wasn’t sure if the chill he’d felt on their journey from Redcliffe had been merely climate, or her cold shoulder, being so uncertain of their new ally. But the moment Marehis, finished with Ellie’s hair, suggested a manicure was in order for the girl, instead of coming around to sit in front of the Herald, she had her shift places—Cassandra was open warmth as she waved the girl over before Ellie scooted and turned about, sitting with her back against the Nevarran woman who wrapped an arm around the young Mage’s shoulders, other hand absently playing with a lock of her hair while the Elf woman began cleaning and smoothing the Herald’s fingernails, the girl was apparently a nail biter.

Marehis turned the conversation to past romances as she worked, the Elf had apparently one serious relationship under her belt, in her youth there was a young boy she grew up with, they were sweethearts, and even had plans to wed until they came to the realization there was a world outside the alienage, he and Marehis had been hired as waitstaff to the soiree of a noble family—their first dalliance in espionage, they was to listen and report back anything of interest. While her fiancé hadn’t much interest, Marehis found her calling—where Marehis found excitement and fulfillment, he found anxiety and fear, which was more than reasonable, the dangers were many and rewards few, and the two grew apart. She’d mostly smaller affairs after that, casual dalliances. Madam de Fer and Seeker Pentaghast glossed over their own ventures—the Enchanter found love at a young age in her patron Bastien of Ghislain, and the Seeker hadn’t much interest in relationships being wholly dedicated to her training, her work in the Order but she admitted to her fair share of flirtations. Sera talked about her own past girlfriends though she seemed to struggle keeping things non-explicit, attempting to be mindful of the more tender ears among them, for a filthy peasant the girl got around.

Ellie had apparently gone on a single date with a young man that she had liked well enough but lost interest in almost as quickly as he’d garnered it when he turned out to be two faced, had the sort of ego where he felt it necessary to degrade others to promote himself. And then, there had been a young lady from Hasmal, Aelia. She was the Mayor’s daughter and Ellie’s first time passing through the refugee state, the girl had invited her to sit with her during Chantry—it was the first time the Herald of Andraste had been able to attend a holy service since the discovery of her magic, and it became a regular occurrence, anytime Ellie was in town they hung out, and always sat together during service—apparently the Chant was always recited in Tevene as it was back home, the Chantry Fathers would read aloud and Ellie blushed as she admitted she’d known the Chant in Trade and picked up on the Tevene version pretty quickly but she liked Aelia leaning in close to whisper translations for her so she ‘played dumb’…the Chant as a mode of flirtation it did sound like the very way to seduce someone who ended up the Herald of Andraste.
“Inky put the moves on the Mayor’s daughter during Chantry!” Sera screamed, absolutely enthralled by the idea.

“It wasn’t a grope fest or anything—the most we did in Chantry was hold hands! It was Chantry!”

Sera just snorted, giggling up a storm before she jumped up, fleeing the tent as she cackled out something about needing to tell ‘Dwarfy’ and Bull because they would apparently ‘lose their shit’.

“She sounds like a nice girl, da’len,” Marehis said, “You had a falling out?”

Ellie shook her head. “No we’re still friends, but I’m not exactly allowed to step foot in Hasmal until certain people retire or something, and um she’s married now since last Bloomingtide—happy, so that’s good.”

Apparantly when the Herald of Andraste last visited Hasmal, fourteen at the time, Aelia had broken down into tears on the spot—her parents had made arrangements for her to marry Titus, the Captain of the Guard’s son, a nice young man they’d always been good friends with, it wouldn’t be a terrible situation, he was kind, always got along well with Aelia and Ellie, and given he’d had a girlfriend of his own at the time, he was just as disappointed as they were at the arrangement—he and Aelia could make it work, it was just…well Dorian understood the absolute frustration of having such life decisions foisted upon you, made on your behalf, but at least he’d always had a say in things up until his parents endeavored to strip him of that ability. As far as things with Ellie went, she’d talked it out with Aelia, done her best to comfort her and assured her they could still be friends, but yeah, it wouldn’t be appropriate to carry on if she was engaged. All in all it sounded rather responsible, civil, nothing that would get Ellie out in out banned from the city proper, but apparently it had. Aelia had walked Ellie to the gate to see her off, and as it was the end of things, a goodbye between friends and a goodbye to their relationship, they’d kissed.

“I take it he didn’t react well,” Cassandra offered gently.

That got her a little snort, “Oh gosh no, he wouldn’t even let us explain, he just beat the crap out of me, and said if he ever saw me again he’d kill me so: banned.”

…beat the…Dorian wasn’t certain how to respond to that, it sort of knocked the wind out of him. There was a mix of quiet horror and outrage coming from all gathered, a terrifying look shared between Marehis and Cassandra that said they may be seeking some form of penance paid from a certain Guard Captain if the opportunity arose. As it was Cassandra held the girl more tightly and it seemed to strike Ellie she’d revealed something uncomfortable and she wasn’t sure how to take it back or side step getting much further into it, but Marehis just squeezed her hands and asked,

“Which color would you like me to paint your nails, sweet girl?”

Ellie blushed and gave her minder a grateful smile before she requested the polish that was a lovely evergreen color, matched the darker tones of her armor, her scarf.

“Oh yes, it’ll suit you nicely my dear,” Madam de Fer voiced, and while her features were reserved the Enchanter actually reached out tucked a lock of the girl’s hair behind her ear like she
was struck with the need to display some form of affection.

When Marehis finished with Ellie’s nails Madam de Fer displayed a neat little magical feat. The woman had Ellie hold out her hands while Vivienne called an ice spell into her own, holding the icy chill in the palms of her hands hovering just over the Herald’s for a short moment that sent the girl shivering ever so slightly but she smiled in surprise when she realized the act left her fingernail polish instantly set—she wouldn’t have to worry about accidentally ruining it or getting it on anything.

“Golly that’s so cool!” and her nose crinkled a bit as she smiled and said, “literally too I guess, thanks Vivienne.”

“Enough practice darling, and you’ll be doing that yourself soon enough.”

Surprisingly Ellie offered to tend Dorian’s nails next, he thought she’d return the favor for Marehis but he realized the woman’s nails were already done, and a lovely shade of pale pink, the Seeker’s as well though the woman hadn’t indulged in nail polish aside from the clear coating they’d used that made them shine. All in all, this was rather a lot more pleasurable than sitting in the cold huddled around a fire, exhausted and filthy and sober in the presence of drunken strangers. He was warm, clean, had a decent meal in him, and the cocoa wasn’t brandy by any means but it was wholly delicious—definitely Orlesian proper—and the Herald of Andraste was cleaning under and smoothing the jagged edges of his blessedly non-spooning fingernails surprisingly well.

Seeker Pentaghast seemed to be enjoying herself, but she did keep a careful eye on the time and she said, “I believe I should do a perimeter check—Marehis, would you join me?”

“Of course,” Marehis was quick to agree, though she did make certain, “do you need anything at all, Ellie?”

She shook her head, “Do you guys need any help?”

“No Eleanor, it is merely a precaution,” Cassandra said, “we have it well in hand.”

“If it isn’t too much trouble, maybe check in on the guys and Sera, yeah? I hope they’re having fun just…maybe not too much fun, I’d rather they not make themselves sick or get hurt or something.”

“Oh, I have every intention of disturbing their fun,” Cassandra assured her with a small, almost devious looking smile on her face as she and Marehis took their leave.

Madam de Fer started talking about Circle standards then, endeavoring to tout their ways to Dorian apparently, as if he might find his own upbringing inferior. It was apples and oranges, their differing Circle systems, and it was only further proven to him how horrendous mages were cared for outside the Imperium. He’d asked Ellie about her own experience in a Circle and Maker’s actual breath. Southerners were wholly barbaric in their handling of Mages, at least she hadn’t been sent to the bastardization of Circles that was popular in these parts and merely cast out though that…ugh. Was that…was that sympathy he was feeling? Absolutely disgusting emotion, he didn’t care for it, not at all. Even more so when he asked just how old the girl had been when she represented magically he nearly choked on his damn cocoa. Five was the last thing he expected to hear. That was dreadfully young for homelessness and magical awakening even by Imperium standards where magical children were purposely bred, everything in their upbringing made to encourage and nurture the spark of woken magic—he’d always lorded over later bloomers—peers who were eight, nine, ten years old (practically ancient to be discovering magic by Tevinter standards) his own Fade Dreaming in record time, his parents had been so very proud that he did so
well within the same time his own father had in his youth.

“How absolutely dreadful I do so hate not being the most impressive person in the room,” he lamented humorously. “I was seven when I had my first Fade Dream, it was glorious! I was fed so many grapes—in my dream and as a congratulatory snack when I awoke of course. My parents saw to it I was accepted into the best Circle of course.”

Ellie looked bewildered by the thought, “Gosh that’s so little. Were you scared?”

Had she been when her magic surfaced? “Not in the slightest. It was all very exciting, a long-awaited rite of passage, I thrived on my education…until, of course, I got expelled for injuring another Magister’s son in a duel*,” he shared with a mischievous wink.

“Oh ouch, for both of you I suppose. Was he mean to you or something?”

“Not particularly,” Dorian returned lightly with a casual shrug. Not at all really. Dorian had merely been young, realized the aberrations in his design—he’d had quite the terrible crush, and lashed out at the boy. Not in some twisted form of flirtation. He’d tried to convince himself he didn’t feel the way he was feeling. Taking what was supposed to be nothing more than a friendly practice duel too far had, in hindsight, been his desperate attempt to stop liking the boy so very much by making an enemy of him. “I always aim to impress, I suppose I overdid it then, but as I’ve always adhered to the saying: go big or go home.”

That sent the girl wide eyed, slapping a hand over her mouth as she was struck with an absolute fit of giggling, it certainly seemed to strike her with even more amusement than he’d intended, like he’d struck a private cord with her he wasn’t in on. And then she seemed to find further humor in it with, “Well you did get expelled, so its more like go big and go home.”

“Ha, indeed it was,” he had to concede.

“My dear girl your cup is empty, as is the kettle,” Madam de Fer spoke up, “I was thinking I could do with a spot of tea before I retire, would you care for some?”

“Gosh, that’d be great,” Ellie agreed.

“I’ll be just a moment then,” the Enchanter said, taking up the tea pot. Though she did pause before setting foot outside, intoning, “I’ll be right outside, should you need anything Eleanor.”

“I’m good, thanks,” Ellie assured, and Vivienne leveled him a look that said if he so much as displaced a curl of this girl’s hair, she’d see him tied and quartered. Reasonable, he was a stranger after all. He nodded to her in acknowledgment and she left them.

“So Ellie, you traveled a lot in your time then. Varric tells me you’ve got quite the knack for picking up languages?”

“Enough to be polite, mostly. Antivan and Trade have always been my main languages though knowing Solas and Marehis, they’ve both taught me loads more Dalish. Tevene pleasantries and lots of words from the Chant of course, and I know some Ciriane—our Spymaster, Leliana, she’s Orlesian, and she’s offered to teach me more, not like as a class, I have loads of those, everyone’s always teaching me stuff, but she’s rather busy so she just mixes it in when we have meals together, it’s fun.”

He wasn’t sure he’d necessarily term learning outside the realm of his specific magical interests, ‘fun’. “You’re a disgustingly intelligent little thing aren’t you?”
Her eyes widened at that and she looked at him like…like he’d said something insulting and it hadn’t angered her so much as made her sad and she was a bit red-faced as she said, “Yeah I’m not the smartest.”

…not…the…but he’d said—? Had she taken the word ‘disgustingly’ the wrong way? “Ellie, it is a compliment, granted I did deliver it rather pithy—it means that you’re very bright, smart to the point I’m nauseated, likely with jealousy but it could be that anemia business you diagnosed me with,” he jested.

“Oh!” she said, like she’d just gotten it. “Thanks then, that’s sweet of you to say.”

Maker he was uncomfortable as he more seriously said, “You…Eleanor if I had meant it badly, you should have disputed it, better yet slapped me in the face or something, why…why ever would you think to agree?”

She shrugged seeming just as uncomfortable as he was. “I um…I dunno. I’m not like you or Vivienne, I’ve never been Circled, and there’s not much in the way of schooling when you’re just sort of scrambling from place to place.”

Ahh. “A lack of formal education hasn’t seemed to leave you an ignorant. And the Inquisition has been apparently endeavoring to make up for that what with ‘everyone always teaching you stuff’.”

She nodded. “There’s just…there’s some things I don’t know—well I mean there’s loads I don’t know,” she amended, “but there are…things that everyone, well almost everyone, just assumes I understand when I really haven’t the slightest clue about it. I’d…I think I’d like to learn if I could but…”

“But?” he prompted.

“I mean, almost everyone seems to think I know already, and if they find out I don’t…well I mean they’d have to just think I’m a total idiot.”

Ahh. He…well damn it all that had him feeling outright guilty. He’d quipped earlier, made fun when they first met that she didn’t understand her Mark at all, did she? Just wiggled her fingers and ‘poof’ Rift closed. Of course she didn’t understand it, Rifts, the Breach, her Mark were all foreign magical entities! He took her proficiency with her Mark as ‘she must not understand a single thing about it, and its sheer dumb luck the thing works for her’, but had her companions taken it as a sign she knew absolutely everything about how the Rifts and her Mark worked? The Elf, Solas, had mentioned something—Ellie too, about ‘Rift Magic’. Perhaps the Elf had some understanding of such things, and could teach her?

“Ellie, *everyone* has to learn *everything* they know, every single thing—no one just knows anything, not usually. If there’s something that would be impossible for you to have had the opportunity to learn, your friends can hardly think badly of you for not knowing about it, now can they?”

“…I guess not?”

“It’s not a guess, it’s a certainty. Not a single one of us would know even basic things like how to walk or to talk if we hadn’t been taught. It might surprise you Ellie, but I didn’t just pick up a staff one day and start casting Time magic. I had to be taught how to read, to understand mathematics, and logic, critical thinking, years and years of research atop it all, *just* to garner an understanding of the theory that *might* lend to making such a thing work.”
She was quiet for a moment, thoughtful, and then she squeezed his hands, “Thanks…I’ll…I dunno. I’ll think about it, asking if someone would teach me just…we’re kind of in the middle of a lot right now, and I don’t even know that learning would help with much of anything it hasn’t caused a problem, not really.”

“It’s your prerogative,” he said, but just, “but regardless, remember there’s no shame in being uneducated about something if you’ve never had the opportunity to learn. If you need help, your allies would surely help you.”

Ellie nodded, offering him a quiet but sincere, “Thanks.” And then, more brightly, “So. Your nails are all cleaned up, do you want in on some of my nail polish? Marehis got them for me while she was in Orlais.”

That was how Dorian Pavus, most recently of Minrathous, ended up sleeping in the Imperial Grand Enchanter’s tent, swaddled in a pile of cumulated fluffy blankets, tucked between the Herald of Andraste and an Elf named Sera, nails painted a glimmering swirl of different shades of blue reminiscent of the nights sky.

And Maker did he sleep, he didn’t rise until the smell of yet another delicious meal pulled him from his near comatose state, the tent was void of other occupants, and the clothing he’d left atop the requisition table was laying folded neatly at his feet, clean as promised, boots polished. He dressed and left Madam de Fer’s tent to the smell of coffee, bacon, eggs and warm bread.

Everyone was gathered around the fire and Ellie was sitting on the Iron Bull’s lap, bundled up and talking to Marehis who was seated beside them. It was the Herald who acknowledged his arrival first, greeting him cheerily and offering him the empty space in the Qunari’s line of sight saying she saved it for him in case he woke in time to join them all for breakfast. He had to admit he was grateful, the Qunari did certainly throw off a good deal of body heat.

“How’re you feeling?” she asked as he sat.

Feeling well. Better, news of which got him a relieved smile and the girl informed him, “Marehis wrote Adan for me while I was napping yesterday and he sent things um…he agrees your symptoms sound like anemia but it’s important to test just in case it’s something else so he sent along…oh thanks,” she said as Marehis offered up a small circular crystal with a long thin sharp point, the girl took it in hand, passing off her still full plate of breakfast for the Elf to hold a moment as the girl addressed Dorian, “I know it isn’t any fun and if you’d rather not…well I dunno, I’m sure we could find another way but this is something that will take just an itty bit of your blood to see if you’ve got low oxygen levels, and figure out what exactly you need to get better—if you only need vitamins and no iron, and we load you up on that particular mineral you can have some serious problems from that so it’s important to find out, you know?”

“You want me to stab myself with that thing?” he asked, mildly horrified.

“Oh gosh no, no stabbing, promise!” she said, “I’ve used things like this before, working with Ava she had one like this. I’d be very very careful, I’d just prick a finger and you’d be all done if that suits you. I could easily explain how to do it if you’d like to try it on yourself or have someone else do it.”

“…can’t I have breakfast before the Herald of Andraste asks my permission to stab me?”

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“…can’t I have breakfast before the Herald of Andraste asks my permission to stab me?”

“It’s best if you’ve been fasting a bit sorry, I’d have let you have a cup of coffee first otherwise,” she assured him. So he held out his hand and she came to crouch before him, implement in hand and indeed she was very careful as she took his hand and then casually,
“Dorian, how big do you reckon the Iron Bull is?”

His eyes went wide, breath catching in his throat, he nearly choked on air before rasping out, “Fasta vass!”

And then she was giggling as she rose, examining the crystal that was glowing a vibrant shade of red at its circular base, “What? I mean how tall, what did you think I meant?” she asked all too innocently while she watched the thing shift from red to yellow. “Yup, somebody has an Iron deficiency.”

It struck him then she’d…she’d distracted him in some gambit that made him ignore whatever pain was involved in the process—he’d not even noticed her prick his finger in the slightest, it was over with before he realized, and she was already swabbing a little dab of Elf root tonic to clear away the minor wound she’d inflicted at the very tip of his right index finger. “Clever,” he allowed.

“Shit, Boss, just about gave the guy a heart attack,” the Iron Bull rumbled out laughingly.

“Sorry,” she apologized, holding out the cloth bag, “Here. Supplemental potions! These ones,” she retrieved one of the darker, purplish vials from bag, “You should take one, twice a day, with a meal until you run out. There’s plenty of everything if you’re hungry—eggs, bacon, rolls, Solas is working on chocolate chip pancakes—”

“Uh, they’re actually gonna turn out regular pancakes, Tumbles,” the Dwarf was regrettable to inform her, “don’t know what happened—I swear I had a whole boatload of them in my pack, laid eyes on them…huh before we made it into Redcliffe yesterday,” he looked up from the pan he was working over, “shit. I always go for Tevinter chocolate, Tumbles. I think time travel fucked with my chocolate connections somehow.”

“Wait, you’re telling me there’s no more chocolate with you? None at all?” Ellie asked in awe.

“All out,” he confirmed.

She groaned lamenting dramatically, “It’s official. Time magic does exist, and we are in the timeline the Maker abandoned.”

“Oh most assuredly,” Solas confirmed jovially, “is all hope lost then, da’len?”

“Yup! Let’s pack it in! We can officially call the Breach a lost cause!”

“Flissa did make apple butter,” Rainier spoke up, “I saw it in our stores last night. It’s not chocolate but it’d be right good on pancakes.”

Ellie perked up at that instantly, “Flissa! She really is the last beacon of hope against the Breach, Maker bless her—the Inquisition is back on!”

“Thank the Maker,” Cassandra drawled even as she smiled, wholly amused.

The potion was rather foul tasting, but he’d certainly tasted worse and at least once he’d knocked it back the Herald was handing him a plate piled high with bacon and an actual hill of eggs, and a warm roll, pouring him a mug of coffee she set at his feet for whenever he was ready for it before she resumed her own seat Marehis looking exceedingly amused as she handed her back her plate so she could finish eating.
The Herald began informing Dorian about their plans for the day—their spymaster, Leliana, had been in contact and was on her way now to meet them in the Hinterlands so she could assist their move forward. In the meantime, that left them the opportunity to make good on a promise she’d doled out to a Dalish man in Redcliffe, so she and most of her party were going to spend the day fulfilling that, though they should be back in the afternoon sometime.

“You stay here and rest, I wouldn’t want you getting hurt while you’re sick, and the more you have the chance to recuperate, the more likely you’ll be fit to come along when we confront Alexius,” Ellie explained, “no worries, I’ve asked the Iron Bull to stick around in case of an emergency—we’ve pretty well cleared the Hinterlands of threats but there’s always the occasional brush with bandits or wildlife,” she looked leaned back, the crown of her head resting against the Qunari’s chest as she looked up into his face, “Cremisius and I have a theory that you can take two, possibly three bears on all on your own.”

“Possibly three? Boss, rude. I can totally take on three bears. Blindfolded. And naked. That’s a legit Qunari position—fighting off three bears while blindfolded.”

“…Does ‘bears’ mean the same thing to Qunaris as it does to Humans or are we talking bears from the wilderness?”

Had…had that potion been some form of hallucinogen? Or was this conversation truly happening?

“Wilderness bears…but you know,” The Iron Bull shrugged, “people aren’t always down for wildlife battle sex. We adapt how we can.”

“Eleanor…” Cassandra asked, genuinely lost, “what would humans refer to as ‘bear’ other than the sort from the wilderness?”

Oh good heavens it was.

“It’s…a descriptive word for a type of man based on his physical appearance,” Ellie carefully explained, “Like, Thom was a total bear, with his beard and everything. I mean he still sort of is, just, not quite so much.”

“Billowing shirt, couple buttons popped…” the Iron Bull proposed.

“Oh totally!” Ellie agreed cheerily.

“Billowing unbuttoned shirts sound cold to me, I’ll pass thanks,” Rainier said.

“Well yeah here and now I’d definitely not recommend it but, you know, you ever want to put yourself out there with your visible jawline, dashing haircut, a billowing shirt wouldn’t be amiss,” Ellie informed him sagely.

Everyone began gathering their things—Seeker Pentaghast had been keeping an eye out toward the sky like she expected a messenger bird, and one did arrive, bearing a bundle of small scrolls, but apparently it wasn’t what she’d been waiting on necessarily as the Nevarran shared a look with Sera who sighed and said,

“Hey Inky, you’re gonna be taking that Dalish bloke around on Russel so it’s not like there’ll be room in the saddle for three—even if you let him ride on his own you and me would have to ride with someone else and that’s just not gonna fit good. And no offense but going to visit some lady I don’t knows grave just isn’t my jam. I think I’ll hang back and keep camp safe yeah?”
“Not a problem!” Ellie assured brightly, hugging the Elf, “I’ll miss you, but I’m grateful you’re staying to help hold down the fort, do you need anything before we head out?”

Sera sort of groaned at that, hugging the Human girl back tight. “Just be careful out there, you got it?” she looked to the adults gathering behind the Herald, raising an arm to point an index finger at the likes of Madam de Fer, Varric, Marehis, Solas, and Rainier, “You lot better keep Inky safe or there’ll be arrows everywhere! All up in your bits! And your pieces!” Ellie giggled at her threats, pulling away as she said,

“We’ll be all good, no worries.”

“I would stay as well,” Cassandra informed the Herald, “I have correspondence from Lady Josephine I should see to, and I should keep appraised to updates from Leliana.”

Ellie nodded. “Thanks so much for handling that, I hope it goes well, if you need my help with anything I promise to work with you when we get back.”

“We’ll be all good, no worries.”

“I would stay as well,” Cassandra informed the Herald, “I have correspondence from Lady Josephine I should see to, and I should keep appraised to updates from Leliana.”

Ellie nodded. “Thanks so much for handling that, I hope it goes well, if you need my help with anything I promise to work with you when we get back.”

“Eleanor, Marehis was going to ride along with myself—she’s of course free to my steed in my absence, and you are welcome to as well should you care to.”

Ellie smiled her thanks, rising up on tip toe to pull the Seeker into a hug.

The Herald led her following party members out of camp once their things were together and the mess from their breakfast was cleared. The Herald had potion to take too it seemed, Dorian’s stomach dropped a bit, the yellow hue reminiscent of potion for Depression Felix required in the wake of the Hurlock attack when he lost his mother to death and his father to tireless, crazed research, all atop the bleak fate he’d been given. She drank it quickly and did a last look around their camp to make sure everything was to rights, made certain Dorian had no need of anything—nothing at all, she checked and told him of just about every last thing in the entire world she could think of, what all food they had in their stores, things he could just pick up and eat as opposed to having to cook although she promised the Iron Bull would whip something up if he wanted something warm for lunch, where the type of kindling they used for signal fires was in the event they had an emergency, the war horn if there was a ‘super’ emergency, and if he had anything he wanted to write down, or anyone he wanted to write to, there was parchment, ink, everything on the requisition table he was welcome to. When she was done rattling off her list she delivered one of her hugs to him and wished him a pleasant day before she and the others took their leave.

“I do believe I’ve been adopted by an orphan,” he said as her party disappeared from view.

“That’s pretty much how it goes down here,” the Iron Bull assured him.

“Inky’s just like that,” Sera said. “You’ll get used to it.”

He wasn’t certain he would, he still didn’t think he was going to stick around…not that he had anywhere in mind he could particularly go but this was all still strange to him.

“Armor didn’t come in yet?” the Iron Bull offered, it sounded like a guess, to the Elf.

She sighed. “No. Friggin Harriet said it’d be in—”

“The Inquisition’s Master Blacksmith is a busy man, though as you are a member of the Herald’s party, actively out in the field, he did assure me your requisition was bumped to the top of his list, he and his assistants are working on it,” Cassandra assured, “your armor will arrive soon enough, before the day is out I’m certain. As it is, if you allow me a moment to handle this,” she
said, motioning with the hands that held the correspondence she’d received from the messenger bird, “I do believe we’ve been presented with a rather fortuitous opportunity to attempt the training I promised you, should you wish.”

“Oh yeah…” the Elf seemed uncertain for a moment before she seemed to steel herself with determination, “you got it! Do your writey thing! I’m…gonna run around, yeah? That’s all good innut?”

“Certainly, Sera, just be mindful of your surroundings, stay near camp if you would, I’ll call on you once I’ve finished.”

“Sweet!” the Elf had actually meant run around, the girl set racing off from their camp, up the hill toward the lake. Running…for…fun or…needlessly, without being given chase. How absolutely bizarre.

Well, she could do enough of that for all of them, for all Dorian cared, he was…well he was certainly feeling better, but he had been given the day to rest and he was still admittedly weary. Madam de Fer had not said he could not return to the bedroll and blankets he’d been allotted last night, so he returned to the Enchanters tent and had a bit of a lie-down. A lie-down, that turned into him sleeping the entire morning away. He was roused again by the smell of food Fasta vass. He sighed and stretched, before pulling himself out of the swaddle of blankets he’d buried himself in. When he emerged from the tent, the Iron Bull was flipping cuts of chicken in a frying pan, the Elf Sera and Seeker Cassandra nowhere in sight.

“Good, you’re up. Take a seat, lunch’ll be ready soon. Everyone’s still out but Marehis sent word when they reached the southern camp, they’ll be back before dinner,” the Iron Bull greeted. Then, as Dorian did take the offered seat across the campfire from the Qunari, he said, “Just a heads up, Boss girl thinks she’s real slick, leaving me behind, but I know what’s good. Kid’s a bit of a matchmaker, fair warning, she’s definitely trying to set us up.”

“…I quite assure you, you mean mismatch-maker,” Dorian drawled, “You may have mage allies here, but I know well what you Qunari do to Mages in your ranks. You’d likely prefer me bound and leashed.”

“I’d buy you dinner first,” the Iron Bull assured him.

“Hopefully before you sewed my mouth shut.”

“Depends on how much you keep yapping,” the Iron Bull chuckled and then, “It’s a thing, just don’t encourage her. Solas and Marehis—she doesn’t know that worked out, so if you see something, keep it to yourself, they’re trying to keep it on the down-low, they don’t want Ellie putting herself in danger trying to score her bodyguard alone time with her boyfriend.” Ahh. he’d wondered what that woman got up to—when she returned from assisting the Seeker in a ‘perimeter check’ while he was certain the Seeker had genuinely done a security check, the Elf on the other hand had to placate Ellie’s concern at her state with a claim that she’d tripped in the dark and fallen, she was rosy cheeked, and her lips bitten bruising and she kept her sleep shirt with a sleeve hanging off one shoulder, so the other side rode up on her neck a ways. Huh. He hadn’t pegged Solas as the sort to indulge in the fine art of ‘hickies’, but these were certainly strange times, time travel, holes in the veil and all that, too he hadn’t thought the Herald of Andraste’s nanny the sort to…well she’d obviously brushed them off but there was some lingering dirt on the knees of her sleep pants. Good on them. “Then uh…well Krem said she’s been working on Inquisition’s Commander, Cullen, setting him and the Seeker up, and the dude just started writing her on this trek out from Haven so…kid’s already two for two.”
“Krem…short for Cremisius?” Dorian deduced, “The Herald’s ‘friend who is also a boy and they like each other a lot’?”

“Yup, that’s him lucky little bastard. Ellie deadass was ready to set him up with someone too.”

“But he would rather be with the matchmaker, than matchmade. Fair enough,” Dorian said, seeing fit to warn him, “You’ll want to keep your eye on that. Flowers, a scarf. If you see the lady Herald with a new pair of gloves or Maker forbid binding ribbons, well—those are followed up with engagement rings.”

“…what the fuck do gloves, and ribbons have to do with marriage?”

“Tevinter courting ritual—a long affair, several steps along the way but it starts with flowers to denote interest…scarves aren’t usually brought out so soon though so that’s albeit worrisome—those are more sexual in nature, if you aren’t careful you’ll end up with little Tevinter-Herald tots running underfoot.”

“Not uh…not what dude meant by it. He wouldn’t be pushing sex so soon with Boss girl, she just gets cold as shit real easy, and the guy knows how to knit. Flower thing just happened back before he even thought about pursuing her—granted Chargers were taking the piss out of him, teasing about his ‘little girlfriend’, I might have mentioned she’d had a rough time, been real down for a few days, guy sent along a paper flower to cheer her up. Plus Krem could give a flying fuck about Tevinter courting rituals, he’s not exactly brimming with patriotism.”

Ahh, that was fair enough too, he supposed. Sopporati were not given much benefit from their nationality, after all.

It was sandwiches, the Iron Bull was preparing, warm chicken between halved rolls. It was entirely plebeian, eating with ones hands something too large to be considered a finger food, but he was hardly going to complain. Not genuinely, he did let the Qunari know this was a meal fit for peasants, it got him another threat to sew his mouth shut with his sandwich crammed between his ‘flapping gums’. How delightful. The man piled two plates with food after passing off Dorian his meal and left him to take lunch to the Seeker and Sera who were apparently off training—not too far from where they’d set up their bonfire last night, that desolate, ruined fort, Calenhad’s foothold he called it.

He was half tempted to return to the sanctuary of his bedroll but now that felt more like hiding than resting. He wasn’t tired anymore, but he wasn’t sure what to do with himself.

What resulted, was a game of chess, between he and the Qunari. Dorian had decided to stretch his legs and ventured out of bounds just up the hill to the lake when the Iron Bull found him, offering a friendly game to pass the time. There was a board tucked away in the Inquisition’s stores, so they set up, seated on the grassy bank. Most of the pieces were present—though several pawns and the white mage was missing, the black tower as well, but they replaced those with small stones from the wealth found along the waterside, though that led to bickering over which piece was which and to whom they belonged.

“Checkmate.”

“That’s a pawn, Sparky,” the Iron Bull ground out, “they don’t move like that, you can’t checkmate my Arishok.”

“I quite assure you, that is a Mage, and we do indeed move like that. The Arishok is dead.”
The Iron Bull growled at that. “Rematch. More distinctive rocks this time.”

“If you wish to muck about in the mud in search for more distinctive rocks, then by all means, be my guest.”

“Not sure if you’re lazy like any other aristocratic dick, or you just wanna look at my ass.”

“Can it not be both?” Dorian returned.

“Eww get a room you two! Yer out in the middle of the friggin wilderness, the little nugs can see you and everything!”

Ahh. “Sera, how lovely of you to join us,” Dorian drawled, “care for a game of chess?”

“Piss off with that noise, chess is straight boring, blek,” the girl groused, dropping onto her bottom with a weary sigh.

“Rough day, Ser’? Seeker run you ragged?” the Iron Bull asked. Huh. He almost felt sympathetic for the Elf, she looked exhausted. Was that a thing now? Instant sympathy for any and all downtrodden? When had that happened? Ahh. Well. He supposed that came with the territory of having been the very definition of downtrodden. Still, he didn’t like it, not at all.

Seeker Pentaghast herself came to join them, coming to stand at Sera’s side, placing a hand on the Elf’s shoulder, squeezing as she commended, “Sera did admirably.”

“Friggin just about killed me!” the Elf complained.

“And you still live, admirable indeed,” the Seeker jested lightly but then in all seriousness, “have you need of anything, Sera? More water, or potion? Something to eat?”

The Elf stretched her arms overhead, legs flinging out before her as she flopped onto her back. “I need a ruddy nap! When’s Inky coming back?”

“Do you always nap with the Herald?” Dorian asked, jovially cautioning the Iron Bull, “This Cremisius best look out, perhaps our young rogue friend has her eyes on laying claim to little Ellie’s heart?”

That had Sera sitting bolt upright, and for an instant his mind panicked, like perhaps her throwing her hand forth to jut an index finger at him would send an unfriendly spell flying his way as she shouted, “You watch your rotten mouth you friggin wank! Inky done taught me cookies—she’s like my proper little mum so mixing bits just isn’t on ever! Don’t be making me wanting to nap with her sound dirty—I like girls plenty that doesn’t mean I wanna shag them all. Friends is friends.”

Ahh. Yes he’d certainly stepped in it hadn’t he? He loathed the misconception that his sexuality leant to finding any and all men desirable. Granted he wasn’t entirely choosey at the worst of times, but he wasn’t predatory by any means. “I do apologize, that was unworthy.”

“Quite,” Seeker Pentaghast assured him, then to Sera, “I’m certain Eleanor will be back soon enough. I’m sure if you laid down now, you would rally in time to greet her.”

“Oh frick, yeah!” Sera rose up onto her feet, satisfied at the prospect, “You lot have fun playing with your whatchers,” she bid them as farewell before trudging her way back to camp.

“You laying down too Seeker or are you up for a game?” the Iron Bull offered. “Sparky
here owes me a rematch, but you can play me next.”

“Is it not customary for the next opponent to play the victor?” Dorian questioned.

“Like I said,” the Iron Bull replied, “she can play me next.”

“Very well,” the Seeker agreed, seeming almost amused as she came and sat alongside them to watch, “do, proceed.”

Dorian did end up watching them play next. Damn Qunari was a surprisingly formidable foe, far far too clever.

“Boss’s back—we’re up here, chess match, me versus Seeker, and yeah, it’s about as hot as you think it is,” the Iron Bull rumbled out for...huh Dorian thought he’d heard some ruckus below, he supposed the Qunari was speaking to assure their Elf friends who could in turn inform the others their camp hadn’t been abandoned. Though his words earned him a derisive grunt from the Seeker even as she took his Mage. “Everyone’s headed our way. Imekari too, she’s just gotta take a beat. Private minute.”

Everyone indeed, the whole of their returned party joined them, sans their youngest members. “Shit, Seeker,” Varric said as he got a good look at the chessmatch underway, “you uh, haven’t played in a while, huh?”

“However you’ve got the board figured out, flip it,” Bull said, eyes trained on the board as he considered his next move carefully, “Seeker’s got me on a run for my money, I’m pretty well fucked.”

“Ahh, yes it would seem as such if I’m deciphering your more creative pieces correctly,” Solas agreed.

“How did it go? All is well, I trust?” Cassandra asked as she took the Iron Bull’s ‘Tamassran’ earning her a quiet growl.

“Indeed,” Marehis confirmed, “it was all very nice, we had pleasant journeys save the one brush with bandits trying to reclaim the southern territory the Inquisition cleared of mercenaries for themselves. It has been dealt with.”

“Tumbles made a grown man cry with all her sentiment, paying respect to dude’s wife,” Varric said, sounding amused over it.

“Well she was his wife, Varric,” Cassandra chided.

“I’m talking about Sarge. Had to get the bastard a handkerchief.”

“Allergies, Dwarf,” Rainier insisted.

“It was admittedly rather moving,” Madam de Fer said. “Have the Advisors perhaps considered offering sermons from the Herald? Mother Giselle preaches marvelously on holydays in Haven but a little message delivered by Eleanor when there are noble allies visiting could attract the right attention.”

“I’ll pass along the suggestion to Lady Montilyet, if Eleanor is agreeable,” Cassandra allowed, “much is asked of her in Haven as it stands and she may not feel comfortable with such a task.”
The adults were all startled then, chess board knocked into disarray as the Iron Bull and Seeker shot to their feet, even Dorian could hear Ellie’s high-pitched shrieking but then there were giggles echoing up from their camp followed by Ellie and Sera bounding up the hillside…what in heavens—

“I’m free! I’m free!” Ellie exclaimed as she ran with Sera chasing after. The girl was stripping off her overcoat and left it lay on the hillside as she worked with the clasps of her armored tunic, “the flood has ended! Peace has returned to the lands!”

The Herald of Andraste stripped herself topless, shucked off her boots socks and all, bare feet slapping against the nearest dock before she launched herself—cannonballed—into the lake clad only in her breast band and leggings, a cackling Sera following after wholly naked, clothing abandoned along the dock before she jumped into the lake after her friend, giggling like mad the pair of them as they started a splash war of sorts.

“Eleanor!” the Seeker cried, startled.

“Da’vehnan, you’ll catch your death!” Marehis chastised, albeit half-heartedly, pleased to see the girl having such fun.

“Tumbles fell into monthlies with a splash,” Varric supposed, “I guess it’s only fitting she end it with one.”

“And now you’re most certain she can swim,” Cassandra said, sounding somewhat amused, though she did threaten, “honestly Varric you’re horrible influence, if she catches chill I’ll cast you into the lake myself while you sleep.”

Ahh. Monthlies. Perhaps that was what inspired the Herald’s bossy attitude.

The girl, however, had backstroked her way to the shore near the bit of land in the center of the lake, where there was a crumbling archway and…the most spectacularly colorful Ram—had that been there the whole time? Was he hallucinating?

If he was, it was shared. The moment the Herald caught sight of the thing she rolled to float on her stomach before finding her footing, standing half out of the water, she whipped the great mass of her dripping wet hair over her shoulder, slapping against her back as she said, “Oi! Lord Whoolsy I presume? You can’t just run off like that—Mister Jim is terribly worried, and he misses you something awful!” she ordered firmly as she pointed, arm raised toward the direction of Redcliffe, “Get on with you then, home!” Ahh.

The Ram ‘baa’d at her before splashing its way along the shallow part of the lakebed to gallop across the little bridge, and past the Herald’s party, disappearing down the path to home.

At least all the excitement worked in the Iron Bull’s favor, in that their game pieces had been knocked out of place, the Seeker very smugly accepting to call it a tie as they all knew just who was really going to win that match, her victory needn’t be declared in full. The Herald and Sera clambered up out of the water—Maker preserve him he got way too much of Sera’s business burned into his brain, the Elf just meandered her way out of the lake, around their gathered group, to get to where she’d left her string of clothing, Marehis had taken up the Herald’s armored tunic and laid the thing over Ellie’s shoulders as she came to shore, the Elf woman hugging the girl into her side, insisting they needed to get her warmed up and dried off.

The Dwarf, Varric had apparently lost some such bet or another—something between he and Solas, over just how many interferences they’d deal with during their mission that day. Varric
Tethras, ever the optimist, expected hell and highwater to impede their journey as they had nothing but good, peaceable intentions for the day and the Maker usually had a sense of irony about that, whereas Solas was certain they may have to put up something of a fight, but they’d secured the Hinterlands rather soundly. So the Dwarf ended up having to prepare their dinner. Alone, as was the deal they struck, and it was amusing enough no one seemed to much mind how long it would take the man to cook enough for all of them. Madam de Fer took the opportunity to retreat into her tent and freshen up. The much-awaited armor of Sera’s had arrived as the girl napped, and Marehis and Cassandra were in a tent with her, helping her don it, teaching her how to do so on her own and the like Dorian supposed, she’d apparently never owned armor before. The Iron Bull and Solas had taken up a game of chess between themselves by the campfire, Ranier sitting by and watching their match, prepared to take on whoever won, while Varric cooked. Dorian ended up falling victim to yet another Inquisition courtesy of a very question-filled Herald.

About slavery of all things. The girl wanted to know every last thing about Tevinter’s slave-system. How it worked, how did one end up enslaved, how were they treated, were their legal protections in place that kept masters from being overtly cruel to those indentured to their service, and just how, exactly, could one get out, earn their freedom?

“Well, it varies, case to case.”

“What about when someone sells themselves into slavery? Like in exchange for paying off debt?” Ellie proposed.

“Ahh. Well. A master pays off the debts of the slave and in return that person is bound to their service until their debt is repaid, after which they can earn their freedom. Of course mind, its rather the slippery slope. Once indentured, a master takes over care of their servant—housing them, clothing them, feeding them, caring for them when they fall ill. Such things rack up further expenses which only further indebts them you see and…well, it is customary that, like when one takes on debt to a bank, there is a matter of interest added, to make money lost to providing for their slaves back with added profit via free labor. However there are sometimes exceptions I suppose, if a particular servant shows promise—there was once a slave freed from her captivity when a Marquis visited a their Tevinter friend’s home and fell madly in love with a slave woman. It was the talk of court for months.”

“She got freed cause some Marquis married her?” Ellie asked.

“Certainly not, but the Marquis was able to petition his friend to forgive her debts to him personally—meaning forgiveness for anything her master spent on her upkeep. With the time she worked already, the debt that got her enslaved in the first place was more than repaid. She was freed and then yes, I do believe they married.”

“So…someone like a Marquis could petition a Magister for a slave’s freedom?”

“A Magister? Oh heavens no, not in the slightest. In their case, the owner was a Laetan fellow. Not all powerful Tevinter’s are Magisters mind you, in that case it is rather unheard of, petitions being considered, save from family or fellow Magisters.”

“Oh…Dorian…you’re a Magister aren’t you?”

“No,” he insisted wearily, “I am an Altus. My father, however, is a Magister.”

“Do you happen to know a Magister Tilani?”

“…” “I certainly do. Everyone knows Maevaris Tilani, there’s not a Magister, goodness, I
daresay even the gentry know well of her. She’s quite the reputation—"

“You keep Maevaris Tilani’s name out of your damn mouth, Pavus,” Varric Tethras snapped, as he looked up from the pot he was stirring.

“I quite assure you I’m no enemy of Maevaris. We are allies after a fashion. I hold no disrespect for the lady, I quite assure you.”

“Varric, what’s up?” Ellie asked, questioning the Dwarf’s defensiveness.

“Maevaris is like uh…she was designated male at birth but came out as a woman when she was about your age, her parents rolled right with it, but Tevinter’s all sorts of fucked up about that, it was a pretty big deal for a Magister’s kid, let alone the kid that took over as Magister once her father passed. But she’s out, proud of it.” That was indeed the case but Dorian wasn’t certain how Varric knew so very much about it, cared so very much about it…huh, well she had caused quite a stir both in Tevinter and Dwarven circles as well, possibly those top-side like Varric, but certainly in Ozamaar. Still.

“Oh!” Ellie chirped.

“Well that, and the rather scandalous affair surrounding her marriage,” Dorian saw fit to mention. “She attempted to marry the Dwarven Merchant representative to Tevinter, from Orzamaar, a man—given that her gender identity, despite her Magister status, goes unrecognized by the government—their marriage wasn’t legally recognized. That certainly didn’t stop them from combining their wealth, signing him into her estate, and she into his, living as man and wife.”

“Didn’t stop a lot of shit,” Varric commented darkly. Ahh. Yes. Thorold’s death, despite what his death certificate said, was certainly no accident. Not at Maevaris’s hand most assuredly, even Thorold’s family was certain, no, the woman loved that man even now, such a way she ached with his loss. He’d been assassinated plain and simple, for the threat he posed to the status quo. Huh. Thorold…his last name was just on the very tip of his tongue, what was it again? Te…Teth…”Why you asking questions about Maevaris, kid?” Varric asked.

“I…there’s someone I know,” Ellie said, “a friend, that sold themselves to Magister House Tilani. I just wanted…I dunno, it’s complicated.”

Ahh. Bit of misfortune that. He found himself wishing he could be of some assistance, at the most maybe he could seek Maevaris connect Ellie with her enslaved friend, give the girl assurances that they were alright—while slavery was admittedly not an ideal life situation, Maevaris was not a cruel mistress. More than that he could not do, he owed the woman far too much as it was, he was in no position to seek further favor from her.

But perhaps Dorian Pavus, gift to Humanity, was not the ally the Herald needed in this situation.

“Tumbles. Don’t shit yourself,” Varric cautioned with a wide set grin, “but Maevaris Tilani is my cousin*.”

*While it is not explicitly stated, it is implied that the relationship is likely a cousin due to the reference to a family connection.
Do you think, perhaps, Eleanor may not know how to read?

Cassandra had never considered such a possibility. In fact it was impossible—Eleanor had duties she’d fulfilled to the Inquisition that required her ability to read, correspondence, requisitions, the like. But as she called those examples to mind there was the ever-present fact that Eleanor had never once, done such a thing on her own, it was always with the assistance of Cassandra herself, or another member of her party. The Seeker had always thought it a mark of maturity on the girl’s part—that she knew well she did not know everything and was seeking the guidance of those she could trust to help her as such. Now she worried it…surely Eleanor was not illiterate!

Oh but what if she was? So much would be lost to her, in opportunity and accessibility if she went the whole of her life incapable of reading…of writing, goodness! Could she even sign her own name? They had never required as such since… technically while yes, they did have an agreement with Eleanor, terms of her employment, pay she received, benefits of working with the Inquisition, she was not of an age to strike a legal agreement. Given the miraculous circumstances, she had to work for the Inquisition, but it was through mutual understanding, nothing binding. They’d worked, the advisors and Cassandra, to create a contract for Eleanor to sign once she was of age, something that would cement the promises the Inquisition made to her for her role.

If she did not know such things it was vital she learn. The girl thrived in her tutelage, the ability to read, to write would only further her opportunity to do so! And too there was the realm of reading that allowed for leisure, relaxation—Cassandra loved to read, and it was horrific the idea that the girl was incapable of knowing the joy of casting one’s personal worries aside to delve into the planned out, plotted strife of fiction, something that guided you to a resolution, usually a happy ending, but always something satisfying that took your mind off of real-world troubles that may have no such end. It horrified Cassandra that the girl had not the ability to lose herself, cast away her own troubles to seek refuge in the passage of a book. Reading had always been the barest bit of salvation throughout Cassandra’s life. Maker it had gotten her through so much…when their parents were lost, and she and her brother were cast into the care of strange relatives, her heart did not ache quite so much, her mind did not burn with the fear and trepidation of traversing a future without her parents when Antony would slide into her bed, hold her closely as he read to her, book after book, things of all sorts from children’s books to texts and tomes he required for schooling—upon reflection she realized her brother had been so busy looking after her, he did not often get opportunity to properly study, and had made up for it by reading his texts aloud to her until she fell asleep, there were a handful of times she’d woken in the night to find him hunched over his desk, poring over his school work by lamplight, kept low eyes straining to see but not daring cast something brighter that would risk waking her. and when he was lost to her, she found her brother again when she holed up in her bedchamber focusing solely on the words on the pages of the storybooks they once shared. And when she pursued her training to become a Seeker, up until her work with the Inquisition even to this day, she often found herself so busy she could not spare more than a short moment for relaxation, and reading was always a reliable source for such. If…if Eleanor did not have the ability to do so herself, well that wouldn’t do at all.

She wanted to be absolutely certain before she made any such accusation. Eleanor…recently she had been expressing more and more an insecurity in her own intelligence, in a way that alarmed Cassandra to be honest.

I’m not totally stupid!

Think its stupid? Fine! Think I’m stupid? Whatever!

And then there had been that awful evening on the Coast, when Eleanor was still fresh from
Rainer’s betrayal. Cassandra had woken in the night to find the Herald no longer tucked between she and Sera, in fact when she first woke, she thought the girl was there—someone was snoring directly into her ear, slobbering drool onto her shoulder and an arm haphazardly thrown to lay across Cassandra’s face. All Sera, and the Herald was nowhere in sight.

Cassandra found the girl sitting atop the hill over camp, alongside the now dormant occularm, cloak pulled tight around her, hood overhead, face buried in the arms that held her knees curled up into her chest, quaking with sobs. When Cassandra placed a hand on her shoulder to alert her to the Seeker’s presence, the girl had gasped, head snapping up to look at her, eyes red and face tear stained, the girl had brushed her hands across her cheeks so fiercely as if she thought if she rubbed hard enough she could rid all evidence, even the observation itself, that she’d been crying entirely.

“I-I’m sor-” the girl fell silent save the squeak of a suppressed sob when Cassandra knelt in the cold grass to the girl close, into her lap, hold her fast and fierce. The sound of the girl’s despair had twisted knots in Cassandra’s stomach, fear alive in her veins as she worried the struggle to breath through her sobbing, the sniffling that was building thicker and persistent would send the girl sick again, that her sorrow and the wet chill would send the girl sick again. But what was even more concerning to Cassandra now was the declaration, “I’m such an idiot! He- he- I just…I just took him at his word, never qu-questioned, never thought there was anything off b-but Varric did! He knew we co-couldn’t trust him and I didn’t believe him I’m sorry Cassandra, I’m so so sorry!”

She did not wish to embarrass the girl by flat out assuming she was illiterate, questioning her to her face as such may only cement any idea the girl had that her companions felt her ignorant. So, Cassandra began investigating, carefully. Lady Montilyet verified that she had never assigned Eleanor any sort of reading for their lessons. Neither had Solas, the man himself confirmed with her when she asked, masking her questions as mere interest in teaching technique—perhaps Eleanor would understand some element of fighting better through manuals on the subject, she said.

Cassandra continued her investigation. Eleanor’s clear afternoon the day before they left Haven made for an excellent excuse to invite the girl to read with her—she’d hoped such a thing would verify Eleanor’s abilities one way or the other and create the opportunity to assist her, let her know it was no character flaw to not have had the same opportunities as everyone else, that if she desired to learn to read, she could be taught.

Her heart had sank when the girl claimed to be feeling unwell, though it did not come off like a lie from her lips, and Cassandra had felt the weary trembling in the girl’s frame as she returned her to the Lieutenant, the young man had obviously seen something of concern, had immediately seen her to her cabin to rest. Cassandra…she wasn’t certain if perhaps the girl was feeling some sort of nerves at the prospect of admitting an incapability she found embarrassing, or if she had just truly been stricken with the exhaustion and pains this time of the month was bringing her.

She had gone to Sera, on the matter as well, but the Elf was of no help one way or the other. She claimed her ‘doodlin’ wasn’t a big deal, she didn’t really need a reason for anything she took it into her head to do did she? And it wasn’t any of Cassandras ‘stinking’ business anyway, apparently. So.

Dinner provided the perfect opportunity. Everyone was agreeable to a full-party meal, something that enticed Eleanor to join them, put her at ease, let her be secure in the fact that she was surrounded by friends and allies, and then she offered a test of sorts.
Relief was rich in her blood when Eleanor was immediately agreeable to the game, no hesitation, no discomfort at all with the workings of Wicked Grace—so tenuous and taxing was the innerworkings of Wicked Grace, fully literate people struggled with it, surely she could not even begin to weather the trappings of the game without some basic knowledge on how to read the cards she dealt.

Though Eleanor’s claims of finding preference in the pictures on the cards did cause some confusion of fact and evidence, Cassandra was confident enough in her findings, and that was only further encouraged by their strange Tevinter allies. That Felix—he’d passed Eleanor a note, and when she gathered her party she immediately set to the Chantry with certainty, and Felix had commended her for following his written instruction. And then that Dorian had shown her another missive penned by Alexius’s son, and Eleanor had read aloud the date and time, confirmed Felix’s signature. The girl could read most certainly, and Cassandra felt almost foolish for believing otherwise in the first place. Perhaps…oh. perhaps the girl simply did not enjoy reading. That was unfortunate, but certainly less so than Eleanor being wholly illiterate.

Though that did raise some very minor concern, Cassandra was careful when she received her mail, to keep their sender’s name from view of the girl, keep the growing bundle out of sight. Letters…not quite daily but almost as often. Of course, it was ridiculous, they worked together, Eleanor would have no reason to question Cullen and Cassandra corresponding but she…it was not a secret, not like Marehis and Solas, she did not fear the girl would be put to harm attempting to further intervene, but it was more that…it wasn’t like Marehis and Solas. Cullen had caught her ear before they left Haven, asked if he could write her while she was away, and she saw no reason not to agree so…she had. She’d expected the man merely seeking to keep her up to date on his wellbeing, the work he was getting done in her absence, and he did but…well often the letters were merely personal rather than work related it seemed. Informing her of his day, asking after hers, after Eleanor’s, sharing…it seemed the man was endeavoring to only send along something he could tack some interesting anecdote to, a humorous occurrence in his day, some fond memory called to mind from his youth, or his time training to be a Templar, all of which enticed Cassandra to return the favor, sharing and shared alike. Getting to know one another more intimately without the awkwardness that could occur in spoken word, face to face. It was…wholly ideal and they were certainly…Cassandra was unsure. Coworkers, friends, building upon something with a potential for more. But until more was established Cassandra did not wish to get Eleanor’s hopes up. If the girl thought that they had coupled, were together, she would be truly elated, but devastated if their pairing did not work out, ended before it even began so. She kept her newfound inflow of correspondence to herself, for now.

“You’re very smiley, did you have a good day?” Eleanor asked as she knelt onto her bedroll and scooted to snuggle in close to Cassandra who, as soon as she heard movement outside their Inquisition tent, quickly folded up the letter she’d been reading, the latest from Cullen, tucking it away in the pack next to her bedroll with one hand while her arm came up around Eleanor’s shoulders, resting her chin atop the girl’s freshly conditioned hair—she’d been made to bathe after her day of traveling to the Dalish grave and back, and her impromptu swim—that had made it into the letter Cassandra penned the Commander, sent off just after dinner, he would certainly be delighted by the girl’s mischief.

“I did indeed. Your day was well, Eleanor?” the girl nodded, sighing contentedly. “Good.”

“What’d you do all day while we were gone?” Eleanor asked, “The Iron Bull said everything was quiet, safe I think he meant.”

Cassandra was keeping Sera’s training in confidence—it was Sera’s business alone, and she was…she was truly frightened of magic, absolutely terrified, which lent to the Elf’s lacking
confidence that their lessons would bear success, but Cassandra had born witness to more than
even evidence that the girl would succeed. Sera had trained tirelessly, of her own volition—at
every point that the Seeker offered her reprieve, the girl dug in and pressed further, she did not stop
until Cassandra made the point that if she wore herself out too much she would risk sleeping
through Eleanor’s return to camp, perhaps be too weary to make play with the girl if she was in the
mood to unwind after a day of traveling for such bleak purposes as graveside visits. Maker it was
strange, but she was unspeakably proud of that girl, of Sera. It was a sort of training similar to that
which she received to become a Seeker, arduous, required a great deal of focus and endurance,
meant to master fear, and learn and understand magic one could not wield themselves, to be able to
perceive it being used, understand what was about to happen as a mage began to cast, and if need
be, suppress magical attempts against oneself. Going into her lesson she feared Sera would not be
suitable to the task—not through any inherent fault, not necessarily, the girl, for what she lacked in
polishing, was not an imbecile—the act of magic is to tap into the power of the Fade in order to
question reality itself, rendering the real mutable and therefore be able to be reshaped—where
there was no fire, fire appears, what once was penetrable is now shielded by an invisible force.
Magical suppression requires the reinforcement of reality and impervious nature of the world—
Cassandra had initially believed Sera would find difficulty mastering a task that required a mind
focused and grounded in the sense of what was real, the girl operated on a constant tangent of
nonsensical fun…but she knew what was real. Perhaps that was the very reason she was a
consistent source of levity, she knew all too well the truth of reality and sought to unburden herself
from it as often as possible.

Calenhad’s Foothold was where they sealed one of the Rifts, a place where the Veil had
once been torn, and while mended was left thinned. According to Solas, the Fade was very near in
this place, so much so when they last made camp in the area the man had spent a night Fade
Dreaming in the ruins. It was the perfect place to begin Sera’s training, a place where magic was
not in use, but it was so entangled with the unbalance in reality the Fade could cause that it allowed
the girl to practice in steeling her mind, focusing on the real, and suppressing the Fade’s influence,
following Cassandra’s example.

All in all, it had gone remarkably well, and in time, Sera would have a comfortable amount
of knowledge surrounding the workings of magic that would allow her to be more fearless in the
face of it and be able to protect herself from it.

Ahh, but Eleanor’s question deserved some answer. “Lady Josephine wrote in regard to
your new dealings with Alexius, arrangements have been made for you to meet with him in Castle
Redcliffe, Leliana left immediately after our reports came in to Haven on the turn out of your
meeting with Enchanter Fiona. She will be in soon with plans to move forward.”

“All by herself?” the girl worried, “Should we go meet up with her do you think, catch her
halfway?”

“Leliana will be fine, she’s more than capable of handling herself, and too the ways we
travel as a large group are different than the paths and shortcuts she’ll be capable of using traveling
on her own. She should be in sometime tomorrow.”

But in the night, as Cassandra, Eleanor, Marehis and Sera laid sleeping their Inquisition
tent, a hand slipped over Cassandra’s mouth, startling her awake, her heart pumped wildly in panic
quelled by the overlap of her eyes opening to see her intruder—just a moment quick enough to stop
herself from striking—and Eleanor’s sleepy hum and surprised,

“Hmm…oh! Leliana!”
“Leliana?” Marehis croaked out, half asleep, almost parroting the name as she held Ellie more tightly, mumbling, “Go back to sleep da’len.”

Sera snorted up a snore, sitting bolt upright in her bedroll, “Wuss’on?”

“My apologies,” the Spymaster said, as she removed her hand from Cassandra’s mouth, “I did not intend to wake everyone.”

But she had woken Eleanor. And now the girl was up, the motion jarring Marehis fully awake to find Eleanor on her knees, hugging a crouching Leliana tightly, a happy little hum of effort as she squeezed and then, “I’m so glad you made it in okay—were you safe? Did you run into any trouble—you’re not hurt are you?”

“I was able to travel undetected Eleanor, I’m perfectly fine, thank you.”

“Oh gosh, thank you for coming—are you hungry?”

“Not at all.”

“Have you eaten in the last twelve hours—a meal?” Eleanor specified.

Ahh. The answer to that was, apparently, no. This led to a camp-wide midnight snack—Leliana woke Eleanor, she woke Marehis and Sera, the culmination of Eleanor and Marehis being awake roused Solas who tripped over Varric, waking Dorian who was invited on the Dwarf’s behalf to bunk with them. The Iron Bull woke as soon as he heard someone enter their camp, had some foresight that the woman would inevitably wake the Herald and fall victim to the girl’s need to make sure no one in her line of sight went hungry. He was already setting about putting something together when they emerged from their tent. Madam de Fer even joined them, greeting Leliana amicably and asking after Lady Josephine.

“She is well, Cullen has promised to ensure she sleeps—between our problems here in the Hinterlands and expanding cooking, serving, and medical staff in Haven and—” she stopped short.

“And?” Eleanor asked, interested.

“I do apologize, I’ve lost my train of thought, perils of traveling so long without a proper meal,” Leliana breezed, an obvious maneuver, at least to most of the adults, to turn Eleanor’s focus away from pressing for what Leliana had stopped herself from speaking of.

“Well you’re to eat everything on your plate and then wash up if you’d like and come sleep—you can squeeze in with us!”

“Certainly,” Leliana agreed.

What followed almost made Cassandra wish she was the sort for bad jokes—how many Elves does it take to put the Herald of Andraste to sleep? Three. Marehis, ever the vigilant Nightingale, made herself busy getting them the sort of privacy Leliana required, holding Eleanor close as they sat together around the fire, humming quietly, playing with her hair, she caught Solas’s eye and Cassandra suspected the man was aiding her, sending subtle waves of calm across his bond to lull the Herald. The girl nearly fell asleep in her seat, shaking herself to stay awake, and Sera actually caught on well enough, the Elf crouching before the Herald.

“Hey Inky, I’m real sleepy and it’s way cold for sleeping by myself,” Sera said, holding out her arms to the girl, “come snuggle, yeah?”
Eleanor nodded, rising with Sera and stumbling to wrap an arm around the Elf’s waist as the older girl threw her arm around her shoulders. “Mmkay…” and the youngest of their numbers disappeared into their tent.

Leliana gave it a moment and then, “There has been…one further complication.”

“More than time magic interfering with our plans for the mages?” Cassandra asked.

“Indeed. It is our plans for the Templars we need remedy for as well,” Leliana informed them. “Given…the very polarizing nature of Eleanor’s first move in the Game, showing an alliance of sorts with Empress Celene at least insofar as being willing to allow herself to owe the Empress a debt of favor…we have unfortunately lost several of the noble allies Lady Josephine secured to meet us at Therinfal Redoubt to demand the Lord Seeker give audience to the Inquisition, as they have strong ties and political attachment to Duke Gaspard.”

“…we had more than enough coming to throw their weight against the Order,” Cassandra insisted, surely they did not lose that many of their allies.

“And now we have too few. There is nothing to be done for it, save…well. It has been made clear that there is something of interest that would regain some who have turned against us and there are others who have said they would pledge their loyalty and assist us in Therinfal Redoubt.”

“What must we do?”

“It is not so much ‘we’ as it is you, Cassandra Pentaghast,” Leliana said, and it fell into place in Cassandra’s mind then, just why Leliana hadn’t wanted to say as much in front of Eleanor—not because the girl might feel guilty her decision to aid Rainier interfered in their mission to obtain Templar allies but, “We need you, and any you would take with you, to slay a Dragon, as a representative of the Inquisition.”

“Hell yeah!” the Iron Bull roared out, earning him a slap on the back of the head from Rainier.

Hell yeah indeed. Ugh.

“If any of you so much as breathes a word of this to Eleanor before it is taken care of, I will feed you to the Dragon.”

“The indigestion the Iron Bull’s horns are likely to give it would indeed make it easier to kill,” Solas said.

“Seeker, I need this—for real. I was planning on getting a couple of you guys to team up against the Dragon I know is here in the Hinterlands, north, near Redcliffe I can just smell him,” the Iron Bull growled with satisfaction. “and uh, read the reports you sent Red last time you were here. Anyway, it’s for Imekari. Birthday present.”

…“You wish to slay a dragon for Eleanor’s birthday?” Cassandra questioned. She’d yet to…Maker she’d yet to come up with just what she wanted to get for the girl and time was running out, dragon slaying certainly wasn’t on the list of ideas.

“I wish to slay a dragon for anything-day. Need something off of one for her present though. Real little, just consider it my cut for helping take it down.”

Cassandra sighed.
“Very well. Once we have concluded our business with Alexius we can make camp in the north, the Iron Bull will certainly join me…I would certainly appreciate the assistance of a Mage, but I understand reticence facing a dragon.”

Madam de Fer lightly scoffed, assuring her, “My dear, I would be delighted to assist you against such a creature.”

Solas looked to Marehis from where he sat across the fire from her. “Vehnan, emma lath, lasa ghilan ma halani? Ar dareth, dirthvaren.”

“Fen’harel ma ghilana!” the woman swore in tones of disbelief.

“Certainly vehnan—bellanaris,” Solas returned with amusement.

Marehis sighed, shaking her head but she conceded, “Ma nuvenin, vehnan. Dareth shiral.”

“You would have my aid as well, Cassandra,” Solas volunteered.

“Not a mage, but I’ll gladly back you up, if you’d care for it,” Rainier offered as well. Cassandra nodded. She wasn’t…entirely disgusted by the man’s in general existence any longer, he had done well in his penance, was every day proving himself a true ally to their cause, to Eleanor.

“Shit Seeker, you’ll have anyone’s help you want,” Varric said, “but uh, someone will need to keep the kid distracted if you really wanna pull this off without Tumbles running headlong at a dragon. She’s a bit too bite sized for comfort.”

She vaguely wondered if perhaps she was being somewhat sexist. Antony had been slaying dragons since the age of fourteen, two entire years of experience killing the things before his death. But no—there was some measure of truth in that the Pentaghast name came with the affinity for Dragon slaying, it was in their blood it was as close to what Cassandra supposed wielding magic must feel like as possible without being a Mage, when facing a Dragon there was a call in her bones, in her blood, instinct that drove her forward guided her hand in battle against such beasts. Antony had been the same, and furthermore he had been trained to do so, such training started nearly a decade before he went head to head against so much as a Dragonling.

They put off further discussion of dragon slaying, it was a task for another day, now it was late and they all needed rest before they regrouped with the Herald, and planned their next move to secure the mages if they still could, everything about this…Maker, they could not turn a blind eye to a Magister running amuck with time magic of all things but the very idea that such a thing was even happening, even plausible was horrifying, the danger all too real and she wanted Eleanor nowhere near such caustic vile magery. She did not wish for the girl to be anywhere near that Alexius. Ugh, the threat he posed, the way he’d spoken to Eleanor, the warning from Felix that Alexius had done all he had just to lure her here. She did not want Eleanor to take any part in this.

And that trepidation only grew once the letter came.

It arrived at breakfast, while all were gathered around the campfire, an unfamiliar messenger bird, an owl, landed in their camp, Marehis rising to stand as a bodily shield, intercepting it before it landed near or on Eleanor, retrieving the message herself and handing it to Leliana who read it over carefully with Cassandra.

Every character every punctuation of every line worked together to spell ‘trap’. That Alexius believed Eleanor would come, and he would have her, hand her over to these Venatori as promised—they needed no warning from Dorian to know as much was true.
“Is something the matter?” Eleanor asked with some interest, though she was currently giving attentions to their winged guest, it rested on Marehis’s arm and the girl was leaning forward, index finger scratching under its chin as it cooed and she was endeavoring to offer it some warm biscuit from her unmarked hand.

Varric groaned. “Tumbles, kid, I love you to death but you gotta stop coddling the enemy.”

“Haven’t you heard of not shooting the messenger, this poor little fella can’t help it his master’s a time-manipulating mad man, no he can’t,” she cooed scrunching her face at the creature, “Lil cutie do you like bread?”

“Bad for birds, Ellie-girl. Owls eat raw meat, mice usually,” Rainier informed her.

“Hmm we don’t have any mice and I’d feel badly feeding you one. The Iron Bull, hand me some of that ram meat you haven’t cooked up yet would you please? Thanks, oh!” the girl giggled when the owl snatched up the raw ram’s meat she offered.

“Da’vehnan please do mind your fingers.”

“Sorry Mare,” Eleanor apologized to her minder, and then, “Cassandra? You seem um, upset or something, you kind of look murdery.”

She was feeling murdery. Her rage had such a ferocity she felt almost certain she could march down to Castle Redcliffe, kick down the door and tear that lunatic Magister limb from limb for threatening Eleanor.

But what she did was inform her allies, Eleanor, “Magister Alexius wishes to meet with you to finish your negotiations. Given he had spies deliver to him our confirmed meeting with Fiona, he knows our original plan was to remain in the hinterlands until we finished our negotiations, that we planned to be here for several days, knows that we are still here. He has invited you to join him in Castle Redcliffe this afternoon.”

Eleanor nodded, taking a deep breath, “Alright then. Will we leave after lunch or do I need to start getting ready now and head out as soon as possible?”

“Neither, Eleanor,” Leliana said. “My lady…his letter it is disturbing to say the least, this is obviously a trap and I do not feel certain at all that you would be kept safe. He and his Venatori allies lay in wait to capture you, even with the whole of your party at your side I would not advise it, as it stands, he wishes for you to come alone.”

“Well I’m only little—underage I mean,” Eleanor said, “he’s an idiot if he thinks I’d show up to something he wants to disguise as a negotiation for a legally binding agreement between he and the Inquisition when I can’t so much spit on a contract much less sign one. I-in a legal sense;” she was quick to assure.

“That is true, Eleanor,” Cassandra agreed, “it would not be difficult for us to join you I’m certain but that does not stop the fact that he has numbers greater than ours according to Dorian.”

“Felix assures me his father brought along a small army of Venatori agents,” Dorian confirmed.

“We can’t just give up, there has to be something we can do,” Eleanor insisted.

“…The Hero of Ferelden, she used a secret passage way, from the dilapidated windmill in Redcliffe village that leads to Castle Redcliffe, to assist the Arl,” Leliana reasoned out, “I could
have my agents in the Hinterlands gather within the hour, we could infiltrate the castle during your meeting, take out his Venatori forces and secure your safety as you confront the man.”

Eleanor pointed to their Spymaster, “You see! What do I say? The smartest, Leliana you’re just a genius and I am proud of you not only as a person but also as a redhead.”

“Why thank you, my lady.”

Ugh. Very well. “You will stay here, Eleanor,” Cassandra conceded. “I will go and negotiate in your stead, distract this man for Leliana and apprehend him.”

“And then what? His Mages are just going to come with you?” Eleanor asked doubtfully. She argued, “Cassandra, if I don’t show he’s got no reason to let you in—its not like he really wants to chat up the Inquisition, he wants me, so let him have me. Its just talk, and everyone is free to come help keep each other safe.”

“It will certainly be more than just talk!” Cassandra insisted, “Eleanor this man means to capture you,” hold her captive, take her life within his hands, give her over to the Venatori and Maker only knows what they want with her! To study her Mark, rend it from her body, get information on it, on the Inquisition, on the Conclave—an event she could not even hope to remember, and when one does not have answers to questioning, questioning turns to torture. She almost felt overwhelmed with her panic, the very real fear of such a thing befalling the girl, “He has made it perfectly clear—”

“His letter has you freaked out so badly?” Eleanor asked, surprised.

Cassandra extended the parchment to the girl, garnering her a questioning look from Leliana and the Seeker firmly verified, “She can read it for herself.”

Eleanor regarded the offered missive warily before taking it from her, holding it carefully like she were uncertain and then she looked to Cassandra as if she’d thought of something, a deal of sorts, ‘Cassandra…if I look at this, and it doesn’t scare me, I’m still determined to go through with this and meet him, will you let me?’

Ugh. She did trust the girl had a good head on her shoulders, was reasonable, and brave. If she truly felt it was worth the risk, if Alexius did not intimidate her…Cassandra could not sit by and choose cowardice where Eleanor would chose to challenge. “Yes, Eleanor.”

The girl took a deep, bracing breath, and then her eyes scanned the letter before her, carefully, looking upon each and every word of Alexius’s writing until at last her gaze lingered on his looping signature.

“He wants to meet at three?” Eleanor asked for verification of the time specified in his letter, 3pm. Cassandra nodded. “Well then, Leliana, you best start gathering your people and preparing. Everyone else, do the same—whatever you have to do, be ready to head out after lunch. Are you still feeling up to going with us, Dorian?”

The Tevinter man looked pleased, almost proud even, “I wouldn’t miss it.”

And so it was done. Cassandra felt heavy with dread as Leliana set about the task of gathering her ranks in the Hinterlands and heading out to prepare their infiltration. Eleanor had instructed they all prepare themselves, and her preparation was prayer, Cassandra went and sat at the edge of the drop from their camp, near the occularum long dormant since their first venture into the Hinterlands, looked out over the Hinterlands before she closed her eyes and prayed with such
intensity, she did not even hear the subject of her prayers approach, join her on the cliff’s edge.

“Though I am flesh, Your Light is ever present,” her sweet voice spoke with certainty, returning to Cassandra the Chant she’d used when she last feared she would lose this girl. “And those I have called, they remember, and they shall endure. I shall sing with them the Chant, and all will know, we are Yours, and none shall stand before us.”

“Praise be,” Cassandra said quietly as she opened her eyes, she did not look at Eleanor, not until the girl took her hand in her Marked one.

“I know you’re scared, but this is what we have to do. The Maker is watching, always always, Cassandra. He will be with us when we face Alexius. Even if all that went to meet his threat was me, I would not be alone. We encountered this mess for a reason, we were meant to stop this, and we will. I know it.”

“The Maker does always provide,” Cassandra had to agree, tucking one of the girl’s loose curls behind her ear.

Eleanor grinned mischievously. “Well…not always. The Iron Bull’s providing lunch again,” she giggled and said, just a bit louder to be certain he could hear her, “though the Iron Bull is a god among men.”

“Fuck yeah I am, Boss. Guess who just earned herself extra potatoes?” the Iron Bull called.

“Nice!”

The whole of the Herald’s party was going to attend the meeting with Alexius, even Sera—she certainly wasn’t going to let ‘Inky’ go without her to face off with some ‘pointy git’, and now that she had appropriate armor there was no reason she should not join them in a potential battle. Harrit had done well, followed Cassandra’s every instruction from the proper reddish leather chest piece and leggings to the thick, metal-spun red and brown plaid weave that would protect the Elf girl’s arms and throat. She even had proper boots now, an idea she’d balked at, at first, but she did not mind so much once she examined them and realized her preferences had genuinely been taken into consideration—she always went barefoot or in those thin-soled flat shoes, so her boots were made in like fashion, not too thick on the bottoms, no heel to speak of.

“Shite, Harrit does a proper job. How much do I owe him, ‘sandra?” Sera had asked when she first tried it on.

“It has been paid, Lady Montilyet will just render your next months pay with the cost of your armor deducted.” A small deception, the Elf would forget the matter entirely and think nothing of it when she received her pay in full…she was a member of the Herald’s party and…what was more she was Eleanor’s friend, a reliable one at that. It was a small thing, to provide for her as such, Cassandra was admittedly glad to do so.

“Wow Ser’, you look awesome!” Eleanor complimented when she joined her gathered party, armored up herself and prepared for her meeting. “Everyone ready?”

They were. But they were wholly unprepared, not for what happened next certainly.

Varric whistled as he finished his own examination of Alexius’s letter, he’d wanted to see it for himself, “Shit Tumbles, you sure you wanna meet this wack job again?”

“Uh-huh,” Eleanor affirmed with confidence, “if he thought his fancy lettering writing could scare me, the jokes on him,” she said as she finished pulling on her gloves a smile met her
lips and then, “I don’t even know how to read.”

Sera screamed with laughter.

Good Maker on high. He’d sent them an entire infant, an illiterate infant. And now they were lost in time.

Ahh. Getting ahead of himself as always. Let’s back up a bit, shall we?

The Herald of Andraste was greeted by some homely looking Mage, one of Fiona’s ranks, when she arrived, with her struck-dumb entourage, at Castle Redcliffe. Surrounded by Venatori agents in those gaudy masks they insisted upon wearing. How in the world had Alexius believed Dorian would ever agree to join Tevinter Supremacists? Their ensemble was as tacky as their beliefs were bigoted.

“The Master’s invitation was for the Herald alone, the others must wait here.”

Ellie sighed as if disappointed. “Gosh, that’s just too bad. Well, do please give Al my warmest regards,” she instructed before turning to face her party, gesturing toward the great castle doors, “come along everyone. Say, do you think they serve hot chocolate at the Gull and Lantern?”

“W-wait!” the Mage retracted desperately. “Your friends are welcome as well, my apologies. I’ll just let the Master know you’ve arrived.”

Huh. That worked well enough. Dorian kept to the back of their numbers, he needn’t give the game away after all.

“My lord Magister, the agents of the Inquisition have arrived,” the Mage announced as the Herald and her small army approached, the Iron Bull was certainly a protective one, he flanked the girl opposite Marehis, Cassandra standing directly behind the Herald still...well she’d been watching the girl like a hawk their entire journey, silent and pensive.

“My friends!” Alexius greeted amicably, rising from his throne, oh heavens preserve him, the man sat in the Arl of Redcliff’s throne like he was born for it the colonizing trogolodyte. Felix stood at his side, pale, jaw set as he watched his father betray everything they’d been taught to believe as rational, strong Tevinter men. “It’s so good to see you again, and you’re associates, of course. I’m sure we can work out some arrangement that is equitable to all parties.”

Oh that Enchanter Fiona woman, she didn’t care for this arrangement she’d struck with Alexius at all. More than once Dorian had had to hold his breath, pray the woman didn’t barge into the priest study in the Chantry—Alexius had forbidden practice in the Chantry from all his followers, and still, any chance the woman got to rebel against that particular rule, she did so, holding secret services a handful of times while under their Magister’s rule. She came forward, her every motion speaking of quiet outrage, “Are we Mages to have no voice in deciding our fate?”

“Fiona,” Alexius spoke as if to calm someone who was being unreasonable, “you would not have turned your followers over to my care if you did not trust me with their lives.”
“If the Grand Enchanter wishes to be part of these talks,” Ellie spoke up, smiling to Fiona, “then I welcome her as a guest of the Inquisition.”

The Enchanter regarded her with some measure of surprise, gratitude. “Thank you.”

Alexius was silent as he turned his back on them and instead chose to resume his seat on the throne. “The Inquisition needs Mages to close the Breach and I have them. So, what shall you offer in exchange.”

The Herald of Andraste did remarkably well playing it up, her careful consideration, humming a bit as she brought her unmarked hand to her chin, index finger tapping against her jaw as she pondered just a moment before saying, “Nothing. Not a thing. I think I’ll just take the mages with me if its all the same with you. I mean fair’s fair. You did use time magic to beat me here, and gosh, I mean even the ‘templars’ you fought off were fake, I mean for goodness sake, didn’t anyone ever tell you cheaters never prosper?”

Oh well then, just like that, was it?

“What?” Fiona asked fiercely.

“I…I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Alexius quietly denied.

“She knows everything, Father,” Felix assured him warily, sick, dare he say it, to death of his father’s lies.

“Felix, what have you done?” Alexius asked.

“He’s worried about you,” Ellie defended the man. “You’re his father and he sees you going down a dangerous path.”

That had Alexius rising from his seat coming forward to accuse, “You walk into my stronghold with your stolen Mark you don’t even understand, and you think you’re in control?” he asked. “You’re nothing but a mistake.”

“Oh, no doubt,” Ellie assured him, “But what’s interesting to me is the claim I’ve stolen something? You know something about my Mark?”

“It belongs to your betters! You wouldn’t begin to understand its purpose.”

“Father, listen to yourself. Do you know what you sound like?” Felix asked in disbelief.

“He sounds exactly like the sort of famous cliché everyone expects us to be,” Dorian drawled as he came forward to join the Herald.

“Dorian,” Alexius regarded him gravely. “I gave you a chance to be a part of this. You turned me down. The Elder One has power you would not believe, he will raise the Imperium from its own ashes.”

“Elder one, huh?” Ellie asked. “A tired old man thinks only one sort of people is best for all the world? I can get that anywhere.” Maker he did like her.

“Soon, he will become a god,” Alexius insisted. “He will make the world bow to Mages once more, we will rule from the Boric oceans to the Frozen Seas!”

“You cannot involve my people in this!” Fiona declared, finding his claims of his master’s
godhood wholly blasphemous.

“Alexius, this is exactly what you and I talked about never wanting to happen,” Dorian ground out, “Why would you support this?” Hours they’d railed against this very idea, like minded individuals sharing their disbelief that such people existed that held these ideals, and now here they stood on opposing sides.

“Stop this father,” Felix pleaded, “give up the Venatori, let the Southern Mages fight the Breach, and lets go home.”

“No, it’s the only way Felix,” Alexius…Alexius pleaded in kind, insisting, “he can save you.”

Oh. Oh Kaffas. No.

“Save me?” Felix asked, appalled.

“There is a way,” Alexius railed, “the Elder One promised. I-if I undo the mistake of the Temple.”

“I’m going to die,” Felix insisted. “You need to accept that.”

And Alexius refused, commanding, “Seize them, Venatori! The Elder One demands this girl’s life!”

The clatter of armored bodies hitting the floor rang through the throne hall as Inquisition forces appeared from the wings, effectively dismantling Alexius’s gathered forces.

“So…that doesn’t look like that’s happening,” Ellie supposed, looking to Alexius. “I’m sorry you’ve been manipulated into this, Alexius, and I get where your heart is but this isn’t the way. Let’s talk—”

“No more talk! You are a mistake,” Alexius hissed, and Dorian realized all too late the man had been clutching something in his hand. The Amulet. It began to glow sickly green, hover in the palm of his hand, “You should never have existed…”

“No!” Dorian shouted, putting himself between he and Ellie as he casted counter to whatever foul spell the man sought to…Maker he wished to eradicate the girl entirely wipe her very memory from the face of the world.

And still, a portal opened up and Dorian felt the sickening pull as he was drawn through, Ellie’s scream echoing in his ears.

And that, ladies and gentlemen, was how Dorian Pavus was cast once more through time, with the Herald of Andraste.

They fell out of a portal, landing splat into a waterlogged prison cell…no a store room, the bars were meant to keep people out and things safely in. unfortunately there was no such safety for them, Dorian was on his feet in a moment casting Barrier across himself and the Herald as two Venatori agents, guards assaulted them.

He felt Barrier in kind and the Herald charged forward, it was such close quarters and she beat against one of the Venatori with her staff while Dorian cast against the other and Maker just what were those people teaching this girl? She pulled a dagger from her boot plunging it upward and in through the soft of the agents stomach just beneath the apex of his ribs to pierce his heart
before pulling back and away, wiping the blade clean against her overcoat before sheathing it again.

“Are you hurt?” Ellie rounded on him, unmarked hand on his exposed arm as she looked it over and then up to meet his eye.

“T’m remarkably unscathed. Are you alright, Ellie?”

“Alright isn’t the word for it, but I’m not hurt if that’s what you mean,” she said, taking in their surroundings as she took a long, solid deep breath, “Okay. So. That definitely wasn’t according to plan. Time magic?” she asked.

Ahh yes, best to get to the point and not have a complete breakdown at the possibility becoming ever-pressing reality. “It would seem so.”

“Kay. Forward or back? This…this doesn’t look like anything I saw in ‘back’,” Ellie said as she examined their surroundings oh Kaffas there was…there was red lyrium growing along the walls. “You cast against Alexius?”

“I did. He wished to cast you back so far that you would cease to exist, the hope was to cancel his spell entirely.”

“He was trying to send us back, your casting propelled us forward instead which is…good but we really really need to get back,” her hand raised to the cell door, shaking it to see if it would open. Silvery keys caught Dorian’s eye, hanging on the hip of their fallen foe and he snatched the set up.

“Let’s take a look around, shall we?” he asked, setting about unlocking the door and the Herald offered her arm as if for all the world they were about to take a leisurely stroll. Well. They may as well.

And their first hall led them to a fork of sorts—two separate directions.

“Let’s check out this level first—then go up,” Ellie decided, “work our way through and figure out just where we are. This isn’t the throne room but the uh…the architecture looks Ferelden, I think we might still be in the Castle.”

“The Venatori are a good indication we’re still in Redcliff,” Dorian offered.

“Yeah but the lightest ‘worst case scenario’ I’ve got on replay up here,” Ellie said, free hand tapping her temple, “is total world take over, the Venatori are everywhere, Alexius rules the world and has my friends chained up feeding him grapes.”

“We’d be in luck then,” Dorian was pleased to inform her, “Alexius is allergic to grapes.”

Further luck. They were indeed still within the halls of Castle Redcliffe—“Ahh, yes, I recall this part of the castle, they had the tackiest carvings of dogs I’ve ever seen…though I’ll admit that was preferable to their latest redecorating,” Dorian admitted as they searched, Fasta vass there was red lyrium everywhere, casting a feverish warmth that made his skin crawl.

“Okay, so. Let’s keep looking, figure out when we are and how to get back…do you…do you think we can?”

“I can certainly make no promises, but…if Alexius is still here, and has the amulet he used, I do believe I understand the spell well enough, with the amulet powering it I could send us back.”
“Let’s go get that amulet then.”

“I cannot believe Alexius has done this, of all the fool headed, cockamammy schemes. How could he not see the destruction he was heading for this…this isn’t what he wanted.”

“I know. I understand him wanting to save Felix but…I mean…I know the Wardens aren’t really around at the moment, but he’s been Blight sick a while right? They haven’t considered that?”

… “What makes you think it is the Blight that afflicts Felix?”

“He sort of fake collapsed into me when passing that note of his without his father seeing, to distract him too so I could go meet you I suppose. He sort of smells like spores, like when you freshly cut deep mushroom, they smell like that because of their entanglement with Blight, and he was talking right into my face so I got a good whiff of his breath, there was definitely Crystal Grace, Prophets Laurel in whatever he takes, those are only mixed for serious potion either for intensive healing from disease or um…well…”

“Prolonging the inevitable?” he offered. “Felix accepted his fate early on. His treatment is meant to keep him going for as long as he can, do what he feels he must before his time comes, he hopes to bring his father some peace of mind before the end. He would prefer spending what time he has spent being a force for good and change in Tevinter, than submitting to a lifetime of servitude, as honorable as the Wardens are, it’d take his say on things back home.”

“I get that,” Ellie acknowledged, “Life doesn’t have to be long to be good. I feel sorry for his father though. And, you know. I’m sorry to you too. Felix is your friend.”

Well. Now was not the time to get into such things. Never suited him he…he would miss Felix when his time came, such that he didn’t much care to dwell upon it now.

“Curious thing—Eleanor, just how did you manage with our note passing? If you ahh…”

“Didn’t read Felix’s, my Mark reacts to Rifts pretty intensely, I felt when one opened in the Chantry and used my Mark to find it. I didn’t even really think about his note until all was said and done. I know numbers well enough so his note to you with the date and time wasn’t any problem getting the gist of. The handwriting was the same, plus there wasn’t anyone else at our top-secret Chantry meeting so I figured he was the one who wrote you.”

At the top of the stairs they came across a room…more like a cavern, a high platform in the center of four drawbridges and Fasta Vass that was a long drop he found himself being very very mindful of where he was when fighting, Eleanor too for that matter Maker that Dwarf called her Tumbles, they certainly couldn’t have her tumbling into an abyss.

“Kay, so that ways no good,” Ellie said looking to the drawn bridge ahead of them, forward wasn’t an option, only left or right. “Preference?”

“Do you think your Mark could perhaps lead us in the direction bearing a marble bath? That would be delightful.”

“Gosh, I wish,” though she closed her eyes a moment and Dorian felt himself holding his breath waiting for some strange, Fade driven power of divination to come pouring out of the girl to show them the way as she raised her Marked hand and then, “Hmm…ennie meanie miney—that way!” she pointed.

Maker preserve them.
They did not find a marble bath, but they did find a mumbling lunatic. This cavernous place was Castle Redcliffe’s dungeon. Enchanter Fiona was one of its many prisoners, trapped behind bars and her body…Maker her body was slowly becoming encased in Red Lyrium, she was practically melded with the cell wall. He had…he was of a mind to urge Ellie back, cover her eyes from the disturbing sight Kaffas she was a child.

“Enchanter Fiona?” Ellie breathed in disbelief. “Are you…can you tell us what happened here? Where is everyone?”

“You…Herald of Andraste, it…it is impossible. I saw you…disappear,” the woman rasped out weak, withering.

And then she informed them of the date.

“Maker, an entire year?!” Ellie gasped, looking to Dorian, wide-eyed, “I’ve missed everything, we have to go back, we have to stop this. Fiona, we’re going to get this sorted, I promise. I’m so sorry.”

“Go, do not worry about me…stop him.”

The girl nodded looking torn like she wanted to do anything she could to help but…well there was nothing to be done, not now, save for…well save for saving the day.

Humming drew them to the next corridor of cells, humming, and loud, deep…tired singing.

“Hmmm hmmm hmmm hmmm hmmm hmmm…”

“Ninety five bottles of beer on the wall, ninety five bottles of beer,” he sighed, “take one down…pass it around…ninety four bottles of beer on the wall.”

“Varric! The Iron Bull!” Ellie cried.

Oh Maker, she did—or she nearly was, chin quivering as she knelt before the Dwarf’s cell, hands shaking as she reached on her belt to remove a set of picks and work the lock.

“Andrastes favorite knickers,” the Dwarf swore, breathing, “you’re alive! Where…Tumbles where did you go, how did you escape?”

The moment the door swung open Ellie was rushing to the Iron Bull’s cell to free the Qunari as well,

“Alexius sent us forward in time, we only just got here,” she explained.

“…Imekari no, you…you were dead. We saw you both die there were burns on the ground and everything.”

“Alexius can bill us for the cleaning when we get back then. I’m alive, you’re alive—we’re finding the others and getting the heck out of here. Help us we get to Alexius, Dorian can use his amulet to send us back in time and stop all of this from happening.”

Maker they looked wretched, the pair of them had Red Lyrium practically sweating from their pores, their skin let off a reddish haze.

“Alexius isn’t our biggest problem kid,” Varric informed them, “it’s the Elder One. He means business—he assassinated the Empress Orlais, used the aftermath to launch a full-blown
invasion. Using an army of demons. South is completely under his control.”

“That Vint bastard is still here though,” the Iron Bull said, “overheard the guards saying he’s holed up in the throne room.”

“How nice of him, we won’t have to go looking for him then,” Dorian scoffed.

“We’ll fix this, promise. Gosh I want to hug you guys, but it looks everything hurts right now,” she said as she examined her friends.

“Best keep your distance, Tumbles, this Red Lyrium shit spreads. Hug the hell out of me when you get back though, stupid bastard doesn’t know how lucky he is.”

Ellie nodded, biting her lip harshly, turning her back on her friends to keep moving, though her eyes were rather wet, she likely feared crying in front of them and…

Dorian carefully put an arm around her shoulders as they continued their search.

“That’s Cassandra!” Ellie gasped, surging down the next flight of stairs into another corridor of cells.

“...the light shall lead her safely through the paths of this world and into the next, for she who trusts in the Maker, Fire, is her water.”

“As the moth sees light and goes toward flame, she should see fire and go towards Light,” Ellie recited as she reached the cell, kneeling to undo the lock.

“Maker...Eleanor you...are you truly alive?”

“Yup! Time traveled, it’s a long story—we’re going back to stop all this, but we need your help to do it.”

The Seeker was shaking as she rose to her feet eyes struck wide as she took in the sight of Ellie, alive and well, and coming to the rescue, hands tentatively reaching out and Dorian realized the woman was about to hug the girl,

But Varric beat her to it after a fashion, the Dwarf surged forward into the cell and wrapped his arms around Cassandra’s waste, holding her fast. “Hold up there Seeker. We’re all...fuck we missed the kid but you can’t risk touching her, its bad enough she’s walking around all this Red Lyrium shit.”


“No worries,” the girl assured.

Madam de Fer was not quite so pleased to see them.

“What trick is this? Staging a fake rescue to earn my trust?” Vivienne questioned suspiciously.

“Ellie, I am here as well, da’vehnan,” Solas’s voice echoed through the hall.

“It is a trap, Elf, wretched demons—”

“Not a demon, though I’m like super proud of you resisting demon influence after all this nonsense. Demons don’t fix anything at all, anything they’d offer you would result in something
worse never mind that it’s the end of the world and whatnot,” Ellie said to the Enchanter, it sounded like somehow what she was saying was meant to prove to the woman she was truly speaking to Ellie and not some demon come to trick her into possession.

“Ahh. Darling, do be a dear and open my cell then, that’s a good girl.”

“Varric—” Ellie started as knelt.

“On it kid,” Tethras said, heading to free Solas from his cell.

Solas was all business, this future version more willing to speak with Dorian, discussing the ramifications of getting them back, how best to cast in order to do so as they made their way, back up the stairs to cross the bridge to the other end of the prison, if more of their allies had been captive, they’d be there.

“Get back, Eleanor, let us handle this,” Cassandra ordered, drawing her sword as Venatori guardsmen came to fight, “you and Dorian should save your energy, potion.”

They did just that, the host of the Mages cast barrier and their warrior allies surged forward to take down their enemies before they could so much as hurl an insult at the Herald or Dorian, let alone a weapon.

“Damn its good to do this again,” the Iron Bull said.

“So much Venatori butt is getting kicked before we leave—all of it!” Ellie insisted as she led them across the platform and down into the cells.

Sera was singing, trying to at least, her voice was still markedly pleasant despite the horrible grating undertone Red Lyrium gave it, but she couldn’t seem to remember the words to the tune she was attempting to keep. “Agh…stupid!” and then, “Shite! No! No no no no no, you’re dead, I-Inky you can’t be here!”

“I’m alright, Sera, I’m sorry, gosh you must be…I’m so sorry magic did this, we can fix it,” Ellie promised.

“Piss, all of you’re here?” Sera asked, looking on their gathered numbers, “Inky, Sparky you look just…yeah you look like not a friggin minute has gone by, oh thank tits! All the tits! Especially yours Ink if you’re gonna go back and fix this.”

“My tits gladly oblige,” Ellie jovially assured as she pulled open the cell door. And then she gasped, as she laid eyes on the cell in the back of the hall, “Oh gosh, Thom!”

The man went remarkably pale when he saw her, red crystallite forming in the corners of his eyes oh Maker, Red Lyrium tears.

“Oh Ellie-girl, no…no the dead should be made to rest in peace we…we tried but there wasn’t a body to bury, sweetheart I’m so sorry—”

“Thom. You stop this instant or I’ll start to cry too,” Ellie warned as she picked the lock.

“I’m alright, I’m not back from the dead, I just didn’t die full stop. Alexius sent us forward in time, now we’re going back.”

“…Maker help me I might be going crazy. Either way, I’m with you then,” Rainier vowed joining them.
“You…there was a funeral?” Ellie asked.

“We thought you’d died, Eleanor,” Cassandra said, “Alexius let us go, we retreated and…”

“Boss,” the Iron Bull interrupted, "Bunch of bullshit happened, you don’t wanna know. Inquisition went all to shit, the world is overrun by a demon army, we were hunted down by Alexius, trophies from the Herald’s allies for the Elder One. The only thing we can do now is get you back.”

“Is…are the Charg—”

“You don’t want to know.”

Ellie looked stricken at that, but she dug in, and led them further in their search, down one flight of stairs more, and as they reached the next corridor of cells,

“Iras ma ghilas, da’len, Ara ma'nedan ashir,” there was a broken sob, “Dirthara lothlenan'as, Bal emma mala dir. Tel'enfenim, da'len, Irassal ma ghilas, Ma garas mir renan, Ara ma'athlan vhenas,” Marehis, curled up with her face pressed into her knees as she rocked and sang to herself, sobbing out, like she wished for all the world whatever she was about to say could be true, “Ara ma'athlan vhenas.”

Ellie looked wretched, openly crying as she fell to her knees in front of Marehis’s cell. “I am here, Marehis, I’m here, and I’m going home. We all are.”

The Elf woman gasped, looking up, her spilt tears leaving scathing scratches like tear tracks down her cheeks, Red Lyrium gravel falling from her lap as she rose up onto her knees and came forward on them, reaching for Ellie her hand shaking hovering just inches from the girl she dare not touch, like if she did she might just disappear.

“Da’vehnan,” she moaned out.

“S-stop crying, p-please, everything’s going to be alright,” Ellie begged and Dorian placed his hands on her shoulders—her hands were shaking too much to be of any use, and he was startled when she turned and pressed her face into his throat, wrapping her arms around his neck, his own eyes ached rather fiercely as he patted her back, resting his other hand atop her head, giving her a moment to grieve while Varric took on the task of opening Marehis’s cell. The woman began crawling forward like she intended reach Ellie, hold the girl again but Solas slid on his knees to intercept her, wrapping her up fiercely in his arms, rocking her side to side as he pressed his lips to her hair.

“Vehnan, you cannot. You will hurt her. She has to go back, emma lath, safely, coming into contact with Red Lyrium as we have would spell her doom.”

Ahh. Dorian wasn’t sure what exactly he should do. The Iron Bull had made it very clear Ellie wasn’t know but he wasn’t sure he could dissuade her from the notion the Elves were together—and now their kissing that’s just. Well.

But Ellie just smiled, wiping her eyes as she rose to her feet, Dorian rising with her uncertain what to say but she didn’t comment on their interaction just yet, though she did say, “When I get back, everyone’s getting hugged, so much—just focus on that, this timeline is crap, and it’s getting replaced with a nonstop Inquisition wide hugfest. Some of you never met the mega-tent, but it’s making a comeback!” she proclaimed before she began leading their way out of the dungeon.
“You aren’t upset?” Dorian asked quietly as he followed close behind.

Ellie shook her head. “None of what is happening is exactly thril- oh you mean Solas and Marehis? No, I’ve known about that. I mean, I can’t read to save my life but I’m not blind—Solas told me these letters he got all the time when we were separated from Marehis were from his girlfriend, and I’d seen the name he’d put on the envelopes—when Marehis had to hide from the Venatori, those letters stopped but I didn’t really put two and two together until Leliana offered to write Marehis for me. The word shapes matched, so,” she shrugged.

…word…shapes…Maker help him did she mean letters?

“They believe you to still be in the dark,” Dorian saw fit to inform her.

“I know,” Ellie said, “I don’t plan on saying anything. It’s their business, as long as their happy, I am too.”

She fell silent as they found the drawbridge to the final door was dropping, and Maker, he didn’t even get a chance to cast Barrier before Marehis launched herself, followed after by Cassandra, Thom, and Bull taking out their numbers in a flash.

They moved carefully, quietly down the next corridor, the sound of one of Alexius’s men,

“Tell me how the Herald knew of the sacrifice at the temple!”

“Never. Aah!”

“Leliana,” Ellie breathed, then, “The Iron Bull.”

“There’s no use to this defiance, little bird—”

He was cut short by the resounding thud of the door being knocked out of the frame entirely, and falling to the floor. The Venatori agent had his knife at Leliana’s throat but he turned at the sound and the Inquisition spymaster who looked like the exact idea of literal death warmed up, pulled her body up on her chains, legs wrapping around the Venatori’s neck and snapping it between her thighs before dropping him to the ground.

Ellie ran forward to grab the keys off his belt, undoing the woman’s chains.

“You survived,” Leliana said.

“So did you, Maker Leliana—” she pulled back looking horrified. “Oh th-the blight… they…”

Maker on high. What wretchedness. Torture, experimentation, oh he feared what fate had befallen Felix, he had hoped the man had died, expired of his illness, but this…this looked like Alexius had ordered experimentation in the hopes of figuring out just how to cure the blight by inflicting the worst sort of remedies on the Inquisition Spymaster. She was ghoulified.

Ellie fell silent and stepped aside as Leliana pushed forward to the chest by the door, retrieving weapons for herself before she dared to speak a word to the girl, “Alexius keeps to his chambers these days. Let’s finish this.”

“Let’s go,” Ellie agreed.

Dorian wanted nothing more than to interrogate the lot of them but if the fifteen year old
had more restraint than him, well. He didn’t’ much care for that. Focus. Find Alexius, and get back to where everything makes…at least more sense than what’s happening here and now.

Ellie stopped dead in her tracks as they traveled the next passageway, paling as she doubled over and her Mark crackled and then spread,

“Da’len?!” came Marehis’s horrified cry.

“Inky whas—shite shite, frick!”

A Rift tore open right in front of them, demons descending on Venatori agents that found them, made to attack but were thankfully…well actually no thanks, Dorian would prefer dealing with the Venatori himself as opposed to another bloody Rift.

But a wash of relief seemed to overcome the whole of their future allies when, as the last demon was felled, the Herald of Andraste, back from the supposed dead, raised her Marked hand and sealed shut the Rift.

“Maker,” Rainier chuckled out, “I have missed seeing that.”

“Well done, my dear,” Madam de Fer commended.

“Lets keep moving,” Ellie said tightly, and the Iron Bull moved ahead to start turning the mechanism that would pull up the gate barring their path forward, and up.

“We’re getting closer, there is a courtyard ahead,” Leliana announced hollowly, “once we are through that we will be in the halls that lead to the throne chamber.”

He thought…he thought one rift was bad.

The entire ruddy world was over. The moment they reached the courtyard, Ellie was aghast as she took in the sky.

“The- the Breach its—” she whispered breathlessly.

“It’s covered the world,” Dorian was certain.

Ellie was sent to her knees, clutching her Marked arm, a scream tore from her throat and the horrible thing spread like the slow drag of a knife against flesh, up her hand, her wrist, her entire fist was consumed in the glow as not one, but three Rifts tore open in the Maker damned courtyard.

The only blessing, if there was any to be had, was that demons only emerged from the first one, Dorian moved to shield the girl, standing before her as he cast alongside their allies and she sat in utter shock, oh Maker was she going into actual shock?

“Ellie,” Dorian knelt at her side once he was no longer needed to fight, “Ellie what can I do? What do you need?”

“I just…dying’d be sort of great right now I think, but that’s not on is it?” she asked staring into space eyes unfocused before she shook herself. “I- sorry. Help me up?”

His stomach felt like lead as he did, his arms bracing her elbows as he helped her to rise.

It was hell. All of it. Every inch of that damn courtyard, the Herald sealed the Rift, and they faced the next, and the next and when it was done Ellie was silent and drawn, pale, and her temples bore black webbing of her veins, burst blood vessels beneath the skin, and when he offered
her potion she shook her head, swallowing like she was endeavoring to keep from throwing up.

“Hold Inky’s hand—not that one you dolt, her Marked one, it’ll help,” Sera snapped at him. He regarded the young girl for a moment holding out his hand for her to take and she did, squeezing it tight shaking as if she did feel some form of relief.

Leliana led them forward, and Dorian held fast to the Herald’s hand as they followed after, he leaned to speak more directly to her, quietly, “If you break my hand I’ll never let you forget it, but I quite assure you you’ll be forgiven. Whatever you need. We’ll get through this.”

He almost wished he could call the words back when the next Rift tore open Ellie, Maker she had a grip, she did not break his hand but he felt almost certain she could Kaffas. In his free hand he wielded his staff, casting Barrier and defending himself when need be but the center hall was full of demons and Venatori so busy fighting one another, added to the benefit of their gathered allies hellbent on their victory, he wasn’t needed much and…just out of the corner of his eye he saw the Herald’s unmarked hand flex once…twice during their battle and he felt the wash of her Barrier ghost across his skin, saw likewise the purple shine spread along their numbers.

“Hold on, bring that here,” Dorian called as he holstered his staff. The Iron Bull grunted and looked around a second before his good eye caught sight of what he meant, something strange, a large rectangular totem of sorts, glowing with red lyrium. “What in the world is this?”

“That looks like some bastardization of the keys the Herald discovered,” Madam de Fer said, “there are occularums that unveil their location, and we’ve been collecting them, they’re meant to open the door to a magically sealed temple in the Oasis.”

“There’ll be more of those wretched things then,” Vivienne informed them, “you cannot open it with just one.”

There were several corridors that branched off this part of the castle, they followed Leliana’s lead as she picked one at random and went in search of another trusted member of Alexius’s men. They uncovered several Venatori praying in what appeared to be a small library, their spellbinder bore yet another shard for them once they were felled.

“Shit, Tumbles,” Varric swore, wrenching a hand at the back of his neck. “Kid’s gonna give up the ghost if we take much longer.”

“Our numbers are great enough we can afford to split up,” Cassandra said, “one group will take the east, the other the west—”

“How the fuck do you know which way is—”

“Oh just follow me you wretched dwarf,” the Seeker snapped, “the rest split up between myself and Leliana.”

“Agreed,” the Spymaster said, looking to Dorian, “you and Eleanor should remain here, rest a moment. We’ll return with the keys.”
Well they would certainly get no argument from him. ‘Eleanor’ either it seemed except for her quiet plea, “Be careful.”

They sat in silence once Dorian led the girl to sit alongside him on a fallen pillar near the bookcases, his eyes scanning over spines he could see…literature did not take a turn for the better a year from their time, not at all. “I wonder just how long they’ll be, I could go for some light reading,” he jested quietly. When he was met with silence he asked, carefully, “Eleanor…do you truly not know how to read? To write?”

She didn’t look at him, but she did speak, “Numbers,” she said quietly.

“…well then. That simply won’t do,” he said. Damn him. He was really in this wasn’t he? “I believe I will join your Inquisition, I’d like to stick around and see what happens in his hug infested future you’ve promised.”

That seemed to give her a bit more life, “You will?”

“Certainly. And perhaps, since it would be inappropriate for the benevolent force that is the Herald of Andraste to learn magic from a Tevinter Necromancer…if you’d like…perhaps I could teach you to read.”

Ahh, her eyes regained some of their light and her lips turned up in the barest of smiles, but it seemed a great improvement to him, “Really?”

“I believe I would be honored.”

She squeezed his hand again, far more gently this time, “I’d like that I think.”

“Then we have a deal.”

And just in time…pun intended he supposed if he were truly an ally of Ellie’s. Their companions returned in force, bearing the last of the keys they needed to face Alexius.

“Are you ready?” Dorian asked.

Ellie nodded, knocking back a drought of Health potion before rising to her feet, broken blood vessels slowly healing before his eyes. “Let’s do this.”

The hall they earned passage into was nearly vacant, desolate. Alexius stood with his back to them, not daring to turn around as he gazed into the roaring fire before him, his voice dull, lifeless, “I knew you would return again, not that it would be now…but I knew I hadn’t destroyed you. My final failure.

“It doesn’t matter now. All we can do is wait for the end,” Alexius said.

Oh, that seemed to pressed a button with the Herald, Ellie looked up, the fiercest expression on her face as she railed, “It does matter, and I will fix this!”

“How many times have I tried?” Alexius asked himself, “The past cannot be undone. It was all for nothing. The Elder One comes for me, for you, for us all.”

Alexius was not the only occupant of this room, Dorian realized too late. Leliana had moved, abandoned her place in their group to come up to some crouching creature hunched near
the fire, pulling him up and back to hold her knife at its...at his throat.

“Felix,” Dorian breathed, a knot forming in his throat, he could barely speak past it, “Alexius...what have you done?!”

“He would have died, Dorian! I saved him!” Alexius insisted oh Maker this man was truly broken.

Felix...that wasn’t living. That wasn’t alive, it was many things, horrible, awful, disgusting things, suffering, anguish, despair all placed upon the very last person in all the world that deserved it, but it was not life.

“Please...don’t hurt my son, I’ll do anything you ask,” Alexius begged.

Dorian saw, whoever held Felix’s corpse in her hands was not the same Leliana he’d met... Maker scarcely twelve hours ago, and somehow a year away. He could see a deal, or a plea ready to cross Ellie’s lips but he stopped her, pulling her toward him by the hand he still held, wrapping his other arm up and around to hold her face against his chest in the moment just before Leliana slit her captive’s throat, and Ellie flinched as whatever remained of Felix dropped to the floor with a thud, mercifully dead.

“No!” Alexius roared in anguish, casting against the Spymaster and sending her flying back off her feet.

Facing the whole of the Heralds enraged, revenge-fueled party did not bode well for Alexius, and though he fought them tooth and nail, twice he cast to create a tear in the Veil to call demons to his aid, Ellie fought, sealed those Rifts as soon as she could, and Gereon Alexius lay dead and defeated, at least here, in this time.

“We must move quickly,” Dorian urged, swallowing back...Maker he didn’t know what he felt, how he felt, there wasn’t time to process wrenching away that damn amulet out of Alexius’s cold dead hands.

Sounds of warfare, intrusion echoed through Castle Redcliffe and Leliana called out with grave certainty, “The Elder One is coming.”

“We will hold him off,” Cassandra told them, looking to Dorian, Ellie, “Maker watch over you both.”

“We’re going back Ellie, none of this will have happened, they’ll be safe,” Dorian promised the girl as she looked upon these people, those she loved most in all the world holding back tears as they lined themselves up to die in their stead so that they could hope to reach a better future.

He held Ellie’s Marked hand fast in his own, and the Amulet in the other pouring as much power as he could summon into the cursed thing, and just as soon as the chamber doors were thrown open...

Dorian and Ellie appeared, standing before Gereon Alexius, alive and well, falling to his knees in despair as his just-fallen enemies returned from whence he cast them to the sound of their allies clamoring in awe and relief the Herald of Andraste returned.

“It’s over, Alexius,” Ellie said, wearily leaning against Dorian for a moment before released his hand and went forward to kneel before Alexius. “You were lied to, and I’m so so sorry but the future you’re creating, it is nothing that you want. You fail in every single way imaginable and ultimately? I am sorry, truly but Felix is better off the way things are than the absolute horror you
Inquisition soldiers came and saw Alexius in chains, a prisoner for his crimes against them.

“What is the meaning of this!” oh. Maker. Was that uh…the Arl of Redcliff? It was. Beautiful woman, maybe someone should tell her as such? Placate her, a bit before she tore their heads off now that she was finally able to access her Castle once more, “Fiona, I tried to grant your people safe haven and this is what you’ve brought into my home. Ousted me with a Magister, sent my people to their doom. You are no longer welcome in Redcliffe.”

“Arl, we have no where else to go—we were tricked and fooled, I regret what alliances we have made,” Fiona pleaded.

“Actually,” Ellie spoke up, coming to stand at Fiona’s side. “The Breach is still at large, a threat to us all.”

Fiona looked taken aback, and then sullenly she conceded, “I suppose we have no choice but to accept your offer.”

It was the closest to Ellie losing her cool when the Inquisition needed her to be diplomatic, that Dorian could imagine the girl could get without…any of that ‘flipping her business’ she’d threatened before. Her fists clenched, jaw setting as she cleared her throat trying to…either trying to remember that no one here save Dorian witnessed the future she experienced and she must be patient with them, or trying to forget that future in full as she said, “We would like to come to an agreement, yes. If you would work with us, join the Inquisition, your people could find refuge in Haven. I will ask for guidance on how best to move forward with you, and send my final decision to Lady Montilyet, when you arrive, she will give you the terms of your employment. If you wish to stay, you’ll have to sign.”

“By your leave,” Fiona granted, bowing respectfully before leading the few fellow mages of hers present out of the Arl’s throne room.

“Arl, I apologize, I understand this is your home and you’ve been kept from it, but would you mind if we stayed just a moment more?” Ellie asked.

“Certainly, Herald of Andraste. Do what you need to rid this place of the Imperium scum that sought to claim it. I appreciate the assistance you and your people have been to my own, and your work in the Hinterlands has been noted,” the Arl assured her.

“Thank you,” Ellie said, bowing before she turned and faced her party, “Just a minute.” And then she went to Felix, who stood still reeling from his father’s shame. “Hi,” she said.

Felix blinked only then noticing she’d approached. “My lady, Eleanor I apologize—”

“Don’t. None of this is your fault, it was your father’s decision. And I get it, really I do,” she said holding out her hand to him, “I want to show you something.”

He nodded, taking her hand and Ellie led him to…well to her gathered party.

“This, is Seeker Cassandra Pentaghast. Hand of the Divine, she’s been a driving force of the Inquisition since the very beginning, she’s the bravest woman I’ve ever known, strong and dependable, and honorable,” Ellie said, “and this is Solas—a powerful mage, he knows just about everything there is we can know about the Breach and the Rifts, he studies the Fade constantly and he’s doing tremendous research for the Inquisition to help us stop the Breach. Varric Tethras, our resident rogue storyteller, he’s chronicling the events of the Inquisition so in the future, no one will
forget what we did here, or anyone who helped us—he’s a powerful archer and one of the best people I know, he’s very brave and so so clever. My handmaiden Marehis who…well she’s incredible, strong and capable, and I can’t really say, but she does a lot more for the Inquisition than braid my hair. Then there’s Sera—she’s a Friend of Red Jenny, that’s this amazing organization that helps small people affect change with noble houses and the wealthy, fighting against corruption in those ranks, she’s my best friend and an incredible archer, a prodigy really. Madam Vivienne de Fer is an accomplished mage, the Imperial Grand Enchanter for the Empress of Orlais herself, and she’s an incredible ally, powerful and strong, helping the Inquisition politically as well as magically. This is the Iron Bull, a mercenary leader of his own crew, the Bull’s Charger’s, as you can see…he’s amazingly strong, he’s got the actual biggest heart literally and figuratively, he’s tough and brave, and he gives the most amazing hugs. Then there’s his Sergeant Thom Rainier, an amazing warrior, he’s…made some mistakes in his life, but he’s learned from them, knows how to move forward and every day he proves that you can come away from the lowest low and achieve great things, he works hard for the Inquisition, and I’m glad to call him a friend. And of course, Leliana, our Spymaster, she advises me along with Cassandra, and takes care of some seriously complicated operations for the Inquisition, we wouldn’t be here today without her help.” Ellie looked to Felix, “There’s also a Lady Josephine Montilyet and a Commander Cullen Rutherford, advisors back in Haven—Josie’s the sweetest, most compassionate person I’ve ever met, she handles all of our political dealings herself, as our Ambassador, and Cullen’s just so kind and funny, and tough he’s incredible in his work with our forces,” she led him at last to Dorian and said, “and this is our most recent recruit, Dorian Pavus. You know him already but I have to tell you, if you ever get lost in timetravel, he’s definitely the one you want having your back.”

“If I must travel through time ever again, and I pray I never do,” Dorian acknowledged, “I must say, there’s no one else I’d rather team up with.”

Ellie smiled at that and then she released Felix’s hand only to offer her unmarked hand to shake and when he did she said, “And I’m Ellie. This,” she held up her Mark for his examination, “is my Mark. It seals Rifts and we are beyond certain it can and will seal the Breach. With the southern Mages powering it, and the alliance we hope to have from the Templars, working to suppress the Breach, we’ll seal it closed and it will never consume the world.”

“It is an honor to meet you all,” Felix assured, sounding mildly confused as to why Ellie was leading him around in introductions.

“I know…I know its not the same but…when I faced the Breach for the first time, I was in pretty rough shape. I was absolutely certain I was going to die…I did die technically. Anyway, I didn’t expect to live after sealing the Breach and that…well I know something about coming to terms with what you’re facing now. Something that helped, brought me peace was all the incredible people I got to meet—Cassandra, Varric, Solas, Leliana, Cullen. Seeing them, knowing that when I was gone the world would move forward with these amazing, incredible people in it, handling things, I knew I was leaving everything in capable hands, that there was so much hope for the future, and that…that really helped. So,” she admitted shyly, uncertain if she’d mis-stepped, “I thought maybe it might just help you too. That you know everything is going to be okay and the future is in good hands.”

Felix Alexius stared at the girl before him mouth working to find words before he stepped forward, and enveloped her in a hug, tears escaping his eyes just for a moment and he breathed, “Thank you.”

When at last the Herald and her party made their weary way out of Castle Redcliffe, Cassandra was the first to question,
“Eleanor... just what happened when you went through the portal?”

“I... I’m going to explain everything, promise, but um,” her voice broke and she’d chosen to walk arm in arm with Dorian, hugging his arm more tightly now, chin quivering. She had done well to keep her composure but...Maker he needed to sleep for a week and have a good solid cry, he couldn’t imagine what she was feeling.

“The Iron Bull, do join us would you?” Dorian asked, and the Qunari made his way to Ellie’s side, Dorian jerked his head in her direction and he seemed to take the hint.

“Come on Imekari, I got you,,” the man rumbled out, crouching to take her up into his arms and her hand left Dorian’s momentarily as she wrapped her arms around the Qunari’s neck, her head resting against his shoulder as he carried her, shuddering as she tried to keep quiet while she cried, and she dropped the arm that was nearest to Dorian, holding out her hand.

“The short of it is this, Seeker Pentaghast,” Dorian said as he took a hold of the Herald’s hand and they resumed their journey to camp. “You are to reinstate the use of something called a 'mega-tent', and I am going to teach young Ellie here how to read.”

Chapter End Notes

Qunlat
Mashev-Esaam: Food hall. Mashev is basically Qunari gruel/general term for 'food', and Esaam 'Place'.

Tevene
Avanna: a respectful hello
Vitae Benefaria: a respectful farewell
Kaffas: Shit
Fasta Vass: untranslated but the way Dorian says it in Here Lies the Abyss sounds like the swear, "Fuck (me)!
Benefaris: In Dragon Age II Fenris is heard saying this whenever he takes Health potion, believed to be 'bottoms up' or 'to your health', something that would be used as a Tevene toast

Dalish
Da'vehnan: little heart

Solas/Marehis's conversation
Vehnan, emma lath, lasa ghilan ma halani? Ar dareth, dirthvaren--My heart, my love (laying it on thick), grant my help? I will be safe, I promise
Fen'harel ma ghilana!: Dread Wolf guides you!-a common Dalish curse
Bellanaris: as always/(eternity)
Ma nuvenin...dareth shiral: as you wish...go safely.

The song Marehis is heard singing both to Ellie as she falls asleep, and when they find her In Hushed Whispers is a canon Dalish lullaby (I'm sorry):

Iras ma ghilas, da'len/Where will you go, little one
Ara ma'nedan ashir/Lost to me in sleep?
Dirthara lothlenan'as/Seek truth in a forgotten land
*Sera's Armor: in her specs, Sera can't wear Elf armor because she's human trained. Since she's programmed to be a head taller than all Elves in game, I opt for going with she needs custom armor to reasonably fit

*Bull's bad ankle: implied canon, he wears a brace on his ankle in game, lots of people speculate its for an old injury and not just extra protection low on his blind side

*As you travel with Sera and Cassandra in your party, they have a conversation where Cassandra offers to teach Sera how to not be so afraid of magic, but in game Sera just tells her to stuff it and stand in front of her in fights, Cassandra agrees she can do just that. Obvs, for this story, there's a different character arch.

*Ellendra: she's from the quest 'My Lover's phylactery' and can be recruited to the Inquisition. You can recruit her yourself or let Vivienne do it for you, but if you do let her do it, Solas disapproves, so I reference that a bit, having Solas be pleasantly surprised that Vivienne doesn't jump at the opportunity Ellie offers, and lets Ellie do it instead

*When you ask Alexius how he came to indenture the southern Mages, he tells a tale of him being there after the Conclave and helping save the mages from templars

*Halward and Aquinea are the Maker given names of Dorian's parents

*Alexius did reach out to Dorian after their falling out and Dorian leaving his parents, to recruit him for the Venatori in the hopes he would help master Time Magic

*Necromancer is Dorian's given specialty in game

*I literally believe DA:I could have been so much better if they didn't make us pick between Mages and Templars and let us play both routes because you don't just find out some dude is unraveling time and go 'cool, see you later' plus the whole point of the Inquisition in canon was to end the war between Mages and Templars-anyway its a whole thing that's why we're here

*Antivan is Spanish, just like Ciriane is French

*If you talk to Dorian about Slavery in game, his family doesn't own any Elves

*9 year old Dorian was a brat...but then again so is 30 year old Dorian our precious son. Dorian's history in this fic is canon compliant, his upbringing, apprenticeship, when he ran away from home, his homelessness etc though some of his backstory, how long he's been in Redcliffe/how he got there and such was interpreted in a way that might possibly differ from canon there isn't a lot of solid details there, so I just went with what fits best for this story and makes the most sense given the Rifts we encounter blah blah blah

*Arishok instead of king: when playing chess in DA:I Bull uses Qunari terms for
chess pieces

*Maevaris Tilani: FRIENDS when researching for this fic, I wanted the Magister house Krem's father was sold to, to be from around where Dorian is from, and he lives in the Qunaris. So I look that up. Magister house Tilani is there and lo and behold its Magister is the FIRST canon trans character Dragon Age had to offer (Krem is the first canon character offered in game). Maevaris Tilani's backstory is canon, she married Varric's cousin and she has a place in his little dwarf heart. Later in Trespasser Dorian and Maevaris have teamed up to form the Lucerni which is an organization meant to bring progress to Tevinter and restore its good name. Her actual nickname is Mae, so of course Varric calls her Mae-Mae
Champions of the Just

Chapter Summary

Aftermath of time travel, lots of hugs, a little dragon slaying, and Ellie learns the alphabet.
Oh and almost gets possessed by a demon of Envy so that's cool too.

Chapter Notes

Hi! I'm back! I still own nothing!
So, picking up where we left off! Thanks for all the Kudos and comments, and just, for reading in general!

Imekari was heartbreak as they made their way to their northern camp, clung to Bull like her life depended on it just crying her heart out, and he wasn’t sure if he should be worried or grateful that she fell silent after all of five minutes, lulled into some state of unconsciousness before they set foot out of Redcliffe’s gate the hand in that Vint, Dorian’s grasp went limp, but he kept his hold, thumb rubbing circles. The guy looked like hell. Shit. That was some fucked up casting, one second they thought the kid’d been blasted, totally annihilated, all that was left of her and Dorian was scorch marks on the carpet, there wasn’t even time to process that horror show, that Ellie was dead, gone and there wasn’t a damn thing they could do about it, before that portal opened up again and boom, they’re back, alive and…somehow different than when they’d disappeared. Kid had said something to Alexius about the horrible future he created, but Bull didn’t want to even begin to think about the possibility that the girl had actually time traveled but there wasn’t a lot of explanation outside of that for, gone one second, back the next looking like… she didn’t seem badly hurt, beat up the pair of them, bruises and scrapes, and for a split second after they emerged from the portal Imekari’s Mark…Bull’s eyes had to be playing tricks on him because her entire hand had been engulfed in fadelight, halfway up her forearm, but it dissipated, or at least shrank back to normal size once the portal closed behind them.

“As are you injured, Dorian?” Cassandra asked quietly they approached their camp. Everyone had to have questions like mad, but they weren’t even sure where to begin. Checking in health wise was probably a good start.

“Nothing serious. I’ve health potion,” he said, though he didn’t make a move to retrieve any.

“Imekari’s out,” Bull said.

Marehis came near and rested a hand on the kids back, rubbing gently, “Da’len?” she prompted, concerned even more when the kid didn’t so much as stir.

“Exhaustion. Dermal injuries, bruises,” Solas reported, “It feels like she might have strained tendons in her Marked hand.”
“Let her sleep, if you can she…that was…” Dorian swallowed, “there are several troublesome things that should be addressed and reported to your people as soon as possible, I can tell you what we saw. You shouldn’t…she should speak of it at some point, but I would not press her before she’s ready.”

Marehis and Seeker took the kid from Bull…and Dorian, the guy almost hadn’t realized they’d been taking her, he’d startled and held her hand more tightly, seemed reluctant to let it go, and then seemed embarrassed about that, clearing his throat. He finally did dose himself with health potion and Thom was already stoking a fire in the camp’s pit. Sera trailed after Cassandra and Marehis when they slipped into a tent with Ellie, sounded like they were trying to get her changed, out of armor, check her out and get her resting comfortably.

Sera stayed with the kid, lying awake and listening, she’d told Marehis and Cassandra to go on, they were the ones that would know what to ask, had questions that needed answered, go get Sparky to tell them ‘what friggin’ happened!’.

“The Elder One is some man, claiming godhood that the Venatori follow, worship. We did not meet him in the future, but we saw what he wrought. After Ellie and I’s supposed demise, you lot retreated. You didn’t have much to say about what happened outside of holding a funeral for the Herald, Solas told me—”

“Wait, shit, we were there? Did you guys show up in Haven?” Varric asked.

“You were all there and no, we were merely transported to the basement of Castle Redcliffe a year in the future.”

“Do not interrupt him, Varric,” Cassandra snapped. “Please, Dorian, continue.”

A year in the future sounded fucked. “The Elder One is working to orchestrate the assassination of Empress Celene. In the future we went to, he succeeded, and used the aftermath to launch an attack on Orlais, Ferelden…‘the south’ is what Tevinters call the whole of everything from Antiva to Ferelden so, it could just as easily be assumed he took over the world at large, using an army of Demons. The Inquisition, according to The Iron Bull ‘went to shit’ and Alexius recaptured the Herald’s party as trophies for the Elder One. You were all his prisoner when we arrived. There was Lyrium—Red Lyirum everywhere, growing out of the walls, out of people, you were all infected with some sort of ailment from it, like your bodies were full of the stuff, you glowed red, your eyes were strange and…you weren’t handcuffed or bound in your cells I think the implication was you would eventually begin merging with the walls or floor once it started growing from you, and that seemed imminent I mean Maker you cried the stuff, not wet liquid tears but chunks of red Lyrium crystals that…it was disconcerting to say the least. I do not know the nature of your disease, how it was contracted, but you were all rather insistent that none of you touch Ellie.”

“Did any of us?” Cassandra asked, alarmed. Red Lyrium disease was definitely not what the kid needed right now how the hell would you even treat that?

“No, a few close calls. Most of you got the impression that Ellie was risen from the dead, thought she was a specter or something—Marehis was rather inconsolable—she did not think she would hurt her, I don’t think she realized for a moment that Ellie was actually alive and real. Solas…” Dorian cleared his throat, “stopped her. I did plan to cover for you two but your future selves seemed to have lost their resolve to disguise your relationship.”

“You make it sound like the world was ending, and we took the time to tell Ellie of our romantic entanglement?” Solas asked in disbelief, like perhaps Dorian was confused—maybe they
hadn’t been sent to the actual future, perhaps they’d been cast into some pseudo-reality or something.

“Nothing quite so couth—you lot started sucking each other’s faces off. It is of little use anyway, the girl well knows of your relationship, she has for some time now.”

“She has?” Marehis asked.

“She didn’t plan on informing you…doesn’t perhaps but all this sneaking around is rather trite, isn’t it if she already knows? She’s pleased, happy that you two make each other happy,” Dorian assured them. “She explained something about how Solas would write letters to his ‘girlfriend’, while she couldn’t perceive that the name was yours, Leliana wrote to you also and Ellie saw that, quote, ‘the word shapes matched’.” Fuck. Word-shapes. But then Dorian was waving dismissively, “That isn’t necessarily important right now. Where was I?”

“Elves sucking face,” Varric supplied helpfully, and Bull could hear Sera giggling quietly, moaning out a soft ‘ewww’.

“Ahh yes. After that we found Leliana, she’d been taken captive and the Ventatori were torturing her for information—their Elder One, he believes Ellie knew about a sacrifice that was meant to take place at the Conclave, and they wanted to know how.”

Cassandra shook her head thinking it over, “Eleanor has no memory of the Conclave. But we bore witness to a vision we believe to be evidence of what took place when the Temple of Sacred Ashes was destroyed—a man…ugh horrible awful voice, he may well be this Elder One, he held the Divine captive, referred to her as ‘the sacrifice’, Eleanor came to her aid, but it did not seem like she knew what she was walking into, it was mere coincidence, she was near and heard Justinia’s pleas for help.”

“Alexius…he was keeping Felix alive somehow, did some sort of experiment on Leliana, infected her with Blight, ghoulsed her, whatever he did to her it looks like happened to F-Felix as well he…Maker he was just a husk of a body, nothing that resembled a living person and Leliana slit his—” sounded like the guy had gotten caught up in it, he shook himself, trying to regain focus, “I apologize, I’m getting off point again. We regrouped after finding Leliana and Maker, I don’t know how—no one had much to say on what happened while we were gone save the highlights, but perhaps it was because Ellie’s mark had been out of play for neigh on a year—the Breach had expanded, was actively expanding, it covered the whole of the sky and Rifts were tearing open left right and center, Ellie’s Mark gr-grew…I counted five naturally torn rifts that we were able to face and seal but it…Kaffas her Mark kept crackling and growing, I think Rifts were opening all over the place, out of reach, it was misery she said she wanted to die, and that was before Alexius, Maker, his…he could summon them, I thought we wouldn’t- she- the damn thing grew up to her elbow I worried it might just stay that way once we returned, but thankfully…oh we made it out just in time. Everything was just…ruin, That Elder One, he was coming, you- you made sure we got—she watched you all go to your deaths.”

Shit that was bad enough all on its own, but the guy seemed real torn up about it, pale, he definitely looked like he wasn’t doing too hot, heart racing and his breathing picked up almost like a panic attack, Bull reached out patted him on the back before resting his hand on the back of his neck, squeezing a bit to ease the tension there, “Did a damn good job keeping it together, getting her out of there.”

“Thank you, Dorian, truly,” Marehis said, and Bull could see the actual moment Solas realized he could never say a damn thing against the Vint again—he’d been bordering on cold rudeness since meeting the guy but it looked like he didn’t care to keep up whatever animosity he
felt, and he certainly wasn’t going to risk his woman’s wrath, she looked like she felt she owed the world to the guy.

The tent Imekari was in opened and Sera’s head popped out. “Oi. Sparky. Get in here and snuggle.”

That got her a mirthless laugh and, “Well. I suppose a nap wouldn’t be amiss.”

Scouts had been holding down the fort in this camp, keeping track of the dragon’s movements oh man, a dragon it was exciting shit, but they had other things to focus on right now. Seeker asked the Scouts to head to Redcliffe and help the forces Leliana was orchestrating there, bringing Alexius in as a prisoner of the Inquisition, and escorting the Mages to Haven. Then she sat with everyone gathered around the fire as Cassandra wrote up a report on everything that happened, going to meet the Magister, everything Dorian had reported happening in the future, and then she wrote up word for Adan to ask the man about the red lyrium disease they’d witnessed, and the fact the kid’s Mark had spread and shrank. Took all of an hour before a return message came in from Haven, Stitches writing on Adan’s behalf to inform them their Healer had taken all of two seconds to throw his shit together before he hauled ass out of Haven to come meet them in the Hinterlands—he didn’t give a damn if they had to postpone their meeting their allies at Therinfal Redoubt, he didn’t want them stepping foot outside the Hinterlands before he could get there and examine the girl and Dorian properly.

And then there was the uh…four-hour long hellshow when everyone sort of lost their collective shit. Everything settled, everyone safe…Bull wasn’t sure who started it but Seeker and Tethras got into a shouting match over why no one realized the kid couldn’t even read, and why the kid felt she needed to hide the fact, Madam de Fer got involved going on about how it slipped the Inquisition’s notice the girl hadn’t any proper education before, and Solas started…not shouting, but close, that none of that mattered now, what was important was they knew now, what they should be concerned about is catching the girl up in that regard and working to help her regain her self-esteem insofar as her intelligence is concerned, he realized she’d been feeling guilty for not confessing to her lack of knowledge, but too embarrassed to ask for help. That turned into Marehis airing her grievances against Rainier and Tethras all at once, how dare Thom mislead Ellie about his identity, his vile past, make her feel tricked and betrayed, and that obviously the girl now had some sort of insecurity in her intelligence after being so fooled, and then having Varric insult her further, make it so the girl did feel stupid over the whole thing, it was reprehensible. Woman just about popped that vein traveling up the center of her forehead, railing at the two who weren’t really going to defend themselves, outright admitted they deserved it, Rainier was apologetic, remorseful as said he’d seen Ellie talking down about herself and wished with everything in him he could do something to set her to rights. Tethras looked sick with worry that his fight with the kid had sent her thinking if she asked for help—was forthright about her lack of education—her friends would look down on her.

Everyone let off steam, finally worked their way back down to agreeing, it didn’t matter the fault, they needed to work together, do what was best for the kid.

Which started with getting the mega-tent was back in full force. Thankfully they didn’t have to butcher any Inquisition tents. Took all hands on deck, but Madam de Fer offered up her tent, it could be stretched to accommodate them, they had to really coordinate to spread it into something big enough for all of them to sleep under but there was no way in hell they weren’t doing it—it was only concreted further when Imekari woke up from her nap.

Kid could be heard getting restless, stirring a bit, and then her breath caught, heart thumping wild in her chest, Sera gave out a concerned sounding whine,
“Shite, Inky, wake up, its o-”

Ellie sat bolt upright and screamed, panicked as she incoherently begged for Marehis to please stop crying before she got a bearing for her real surroundings, found herself with only Sera and Dorian in sight and she started hyperventilating, rasping out a question of where is everyone between stolen breaths she worked to catch.

She only really calmed once she was seated with her entire party around the fire, in her pjs, Marehis had wrapped her Marked hand up before the kid had laid down because they were pretty sure it was sprained, Dorian sat at her side and she clutched his hand in her unmarked one, shaking like a leaf and Madam de Fer came armed with one of those blankets of hers, wrapping it around Ellie’s shoulders, hugging the girl from behind in the same motion, rubbing her arms for a moment murmuring about how she must be frigid before she took to her own seat. Solas was working on brewing up something warm to drink and everyone just sat in silence. Marehis looked like she was close to tears as she came and got Ellie to scoot so she was sitting on the Elf’s lap, Marehis wrapping her arms around her, keeping her head tucked up under her chin quietly comforting her, “We’re all safe, da’len. Dorian gave us a full report, everything you could forewarn us of, the Inquisition will be preparing for. We’re going to sit tight for a few days. Healer Adan is coming to check you over.”

Kid got this startled look on her face like that worried her and Bull was quick to assure, “He won’t be traveling all on his own, Stitches is tagging along,” the guy had gone to catch up with the Healer, told Bull to consider it a chunk of his yearly leave, “So he’ll be safe. And Haven’s covered — Adan’s got applicants in vying for apprenticeships and healers positions so there’s lots of helping hands right now.”

That seemed to placate her, kid was quiet as shit though for the rest of the day, and she jacked the worry factor in her party way up when she shook her head at the offer of potion when Marehis realized she wasn’t eating her meal at dinner, just barely pushing the food around her plate absentmindedly.

“Tumbles, come on, you gotta eat something,” Varric tried when they were cleaning up from dinner, but the kid just shook her head and for a minute Bull thought she was getting up to retreat into a tent, but she just went to where Varric was sitting and wrapped her arms around his neck and curled up against him.

Dwarf sighed. “Okay kid,” Varric conceded gently as he held her back.

She didn’t say anything just buried her face against his neck and Bull could smell the salt of her tears, though Varric looking like he’d accidentally set off an explosive was evidence enough that she was crying again.

Got late enough, Solas sat her down with an offer of meditation and even Sera joined in on the practice. Apparently Cassandra had said it would help with her training, and the youngest of their Elves made a damn good effort at meditating for the first time, it was definitely not her calling but she gave it her best before giving up and just flopping onto her back to wait it out while the others finished.

Mega-tent wasn’t that awkward, Madam de Fer hadn’t sounded certain of the idea when it was first explained to her, but everyone settled in to the warm clean tent, basically… the inquisition was a cuddle party, that was it, just everyone gathered together in a massive pile of bodies to sleep surrounding what Bull was certain had to be the saddest kid in the world. She did take potion for sleep not wanting to risk revisiting the actual timeline the Maker abandoned in her dreams again and Bull wasn’t certain how well anyone slept, everyone just seemed to be thinking too loudly or
too busy listening for any distress from the kid.

Dorian was the first one up. Maybe the guy hadn’t slept though, Bull heard him swearing in Tevene, fucking with something outside the tent.

Trying to get the fire going again apparently, guy was tired as shit, squinting in the dark, sweating despite the chill as he tried getting the pretty well burned out bits of ashy wood to spark under a fire spell to no avail.

“Sit down, I got it,” Bull said.

“Vasta fass!” Dorian hissed, whirling around to see him, heart hammering in his chest, “Maker’s breath, I didn’t hear you!”

“Sit.”

Guy finally did as he was told, straight down on his ass, slumping before the fire pit while Bull got it refueled and a proper fire going again. Something was broken about him. Came that way, before this time travel business, Bull’d seen it when Ellie asked the guy’s permission before daring to cast Barrier on him. There’d been this quiet gratitude for that. And then when Madam de Fer had been grilling the guy after a fashion, trying to seem aloof about her interest but she clearly didn’t approve of Tevinter magic, wanted to make it clear she wouldn’t abide the use of Blood Magic—something like sympathy had twisted in his guts when he saw how the guy’s jaw set, looking like he was holding back something heavy, weighed him, as he ground out very coldly that Blood Magic was the resort of a weak mind, and he certainly held no such weakness. Something… something had happened there, and Bull didn’t like the idea of blood magic in general but fuck this guy’d had some kind of experience with it that left him scared. Internal, not external, at least none that Bull’d gotten a look at, wasn’t sure what the guy had going on under his robes…and damn it Imekari he wasn’t going to find out. Nope. Not happening. He didn’t know what kind of magic the kid had at her disposal, but he could practically hear wedding bells with Marehis and Solas, and Seeker…shit she was pretty struck with Cullen, and he definitely had a mad thing for her, the makings of long term, committed relationships and that was so, so not happening here.

“You know, time travel’s real fucked up. Kid saw some rough shit but uh…so did you. Can’t have been easy watching the world go to hell, especially at the hands of someone you used to respect. Seeing what happened to that Felix, he’s your friend. Or er…?”

Dorian leveled him a menacing glare. “Alexius was my mentor, took me under his wing when I seemed a lost cause, welcomed me into his home. I would hardly betray his kindness dallying with his son. Felix is a friend, better than I deserve really.”

“Hey, no judgement here, just, you obviously care about the guy is all I mean. It’s okay to not be okay with what you saw, everyone’s watching out for Imekari, but uh, you need anything, to talk or whatever, about yesterday’s shit or anything else, Qunari are pretty good listeners.”

Dorian regarded him for a moment and then nodded. Didn’t say anything, they sat in silence, but sometimes that was all you needed too. Maybe that’s just how Vint men were. Lots of silence the first few days after Krem joined on, poor kid tried and tried to work up the ability to apologize, or thank him, just walk up to Bull, mouth working little spurts of sound coming out and then he’d just deflate and offer him water or potion from Stitches or food. Always came armed with something to fall back on like he knew he wasn’t going to be able to say anything. ‘til one morning he came stomping up to Bull, shouted, “You crazy bastard—you don’t even know me! What the hell were you thinking?!” and slammed a breakfast tray down in front of the Qunari. “Always down for a good fight,” he’d said. And he was, and he sure as hell wasn’t down for just standing
by when something messed up was going down but uh…well shit, he’d never said as much but seeing this kid, getting beat on by an entire Tevinter Tribune, and still fighting, still holding his ground like he stood a damn chance…reminded him of himself, his last fight in Seheron before he submitted himself for Reeducation. Could of use a hand in that fight, thought maybe it was only fitting he be the turn of the tide in this one when he busted in to break some Vint heads.

Everyone rallied for breakfast, even the kid, though she didn’t come out for her usual prayer thing. But she did show up as they started getting breakfast going and didn’t say anything, quietly helped Rainier and Marehis cook, ate enough to take potion when Seeker quietly reminded her it was important she keep to her regimen and if she didn’t she ran the risk now, skipping a dose of crap that kept monthlies at bay, of it not working when the time came if it wasn’t thoroughly in her system. So she ate enough to take potion without it making her sick, wasn’t what Bull’d qualify as a meal though, not by a long shot, and then she retreated into the tent. Day was pretty quiet, Seeker sat with those who would join her in taking down the Dragon and talked strategy, preparing them for what it would be like to face off with one of those things. Sera, Dorian and Marehis would hang back and sit tight with the kid while the others went out, watch her, keep her distracted if she noticed anything was up.

And he hated himself for saying it but…well damn it, it had to be considered, “Seeker uh, I know we technically need this for the whole ‘allies bending the arm of the Templars’ thing, and I’m the last damn person that wants to naysay fighting a Dragon but. Uh. Kid’s pretty well wrecked over the shit she saw, us all uh dying and all. Taking such a big risk, even though we know we got this, might not…uh…might not sit well with her. Freak her out. Is there some other way to get those Orlesian assholes on our side?”

“I do see your point, the Iron Bull,” Cassandra sighed. “I worry as well. It is something we must do, I plan to sit Eleanor down and explain the situation, showing her there is a necessity for our actions, and a surety that we have it well in hand. It is not something we can keep her from ever knowing—there will be celebration of our Dragon slaying when we return to Haven, the invitation to which will be reward for our allies.”

They had planned on talking her through it over dinner, but a new level of debauchery came from her time in the future.

Got the meal underway, Madam de Fer actually deigned to assist in its preparation, making some kind of grilled Ram’s meat and creamy sauce working alongside the likes of Rainier, and Sera was working with Solas making what the younger Elf called ‘Vegetable pish s’good for Inky’. Vegetable medley, he was pretty sure she meant. Pretty sure.

Solas just about chopped his damn thumb off instead of a carrot when Ellie screamed—not scared, not ‘frightened’ scared, panic scared—in pain. Marehis and Seeker had been sitting with her, and they let out overlapping shouts for Solas who went diving into the tent beating everyone to Ellie’s side, they all sort of crowded because fuck.

Ellie was wide eyed, dazed and confused as she clutched at her Marked hand, shaking and sweating, hyperventilating. Solas sent active their connection when she screamed to figure out what was hurting her, and he shouted for someone to lay eyes on the Breach because her Mark was spreading.

Except it wasn’t. Not even a little—Bull laid eye on the Breach himself, it hung in the distance big and menacing, but no larger than it had been, and Solas was carefully examining her Mark, it had been her Marked hand hurting her, and it felt like the Mark was flaming, spreading further up her hand, up her arm at a horrifyingly accelerated rate, but that wasn’t the case, it was
still nestled securely in the palm of her hand.

“We should consult with Adan when he arrives, Ellie. But I do not believe your Mark is truly spreading, it is, well—” Solas seemed at a loss for how exactly to explain, but it was Asala-Taar, straight up.

Everyone cleared way when Bull came back into the tent, had to basically crawl or risk getting Madam de Fer’s expensive ass tenting caught up in his horns, but he went to Ellie sitting up in her bedroll with Marehis holding her tight against her, and he sat before her on his knees, holding out his hands in invitation, he didn’t want to grab at them himself on the off chance she didn’t want the contact, and her Marked hand was still bandaged, so it might be painful. But she put her hands in his and he held them carefully.

“Imekari, sometimes when we experience trauma our minds latch on to specific aspects, it can make you re-experience those things, even if they aren’t actually happening again. Like how panic attacks derive from the body interpreting danger that isn’t physically present and threatening your life,” he brought her unmarked hand to the scar slashed across his chest. “Got this, most of these,” he said, jerking his head to indicate the rest of his body, the scars on his torso, biceps, his legs, all from getting some payback in Seheron. Tal-Vashoth got to a baker that poisoned his unit, killed most of ‘em, used that same poison to kill a school of children*. Sent him right over the damn edge. “infiltrating a Tal-Vashoth base, under manned, and we were overpowered, and uh… well, it wasn’t pretty but I’m still here, can’t say the same for the people I went in with. Had to turn myself over to the Reeducators after that. Even after I got all healed up, there are days these things feel fresh like when I was lying in the dirt waiting to die, reopened—actually did reopen one on my back once, thought it was just my brain’s bullshit till Krem was dragging my ass back to camp. I know it sucks big time kid, you gotta breathe through it, and try to separate real and not real. Grounding helps.”

The kid’s gaze was hollow as she nodded mouth working like she wanted to say something but all she did was sit up on her knees, pulling out of Marehis’s hold, slipping her hands out of Bull’s to wrap her arms around his neck, felt like one of her ‘sorrys’ but fuck, the kid hadn’t…she hadn’t said much of anything since the castle. He wrapped an arm around her and made their precarious way out of the tent, sat himself down in front of the fire while everyone resumed their cooking, meat came out a bit crispy but still edible. Imekari wasn’t…she didn’t say a word, just ended up sitting in Bull’s lap staring into the fire, plate sitting untouched in her lap, he even left some of his food on his own plate to see if he could tempt the girl into stealing it but no such luck. And the following morning at breakfast the kid didn’t even try to make an appearance. She just laid still and silent, even when Sera tried getting her to come out and join them, all that resulted in was the Elf emerging from the tent, shaking as she said,

“Inky won’t say anything and sh-she…I don’t know, shite I think friggin time magic broke her!”

Seeker seemed to have a solution of sorts. Mulled it over a moment and then she reached a hand up to pull something from her hair and the braid she kept wrapped like a crown around her head came falling down and she pulled out the hair tie, rising and leaning forward to shake her hair out, completely loose before whipping it back up over her shoulders which was damn hot, and then she went to stand in the tent entry way and said, “Eleanor? Would you help me with my hair? I am having difficulty with it today, and I believe you did call ‘dibs’ braiding it, have you not?”

That at least got the kid to come out and get some damn sunlight, and she…he wasn’t sure what the fuck they were going to do but she needed to eat. She was wan, pale, legs unsteady as she
came to sit on the ground by the fire behind Seeker, gently combing the Nevarran woman’s hair.

“Your hair’s really pretty.”

Fuck yeah, those were whole-ass words! An entire sentence! Seeker looked like she was thanking every otherworldly power out there as she smiled and said, “Thank you, Eleanor.”

When Ellie finished with Cassandra’s hair it wasn’t the usual tight braid the Seeker worked her hair into to wrap around her head, it was looser, and she let it hang over her shoulder. She turned to face the girl, taking her hands in hers. “How are you feeling?”

Kid shrugged. “Um. I’m pretty sorry, actually. You…you aren’t mad at me?”

Didn’t really click with him what the hell the kid was on about until the Seeker sighed and said, “Make no mistake, I do not appreciate being intentionally mislead, Eleanor. By the time you were forthright about your semantics, you put me in a position where I had to allow you to move forward with a plan I felt was unsafe for fear of compromising Leliana and her forces already in position to strike castle Redcliffe.”

Oh yeah, the kid’s whole ‘if I look at this and I’m not scared’ bit she pulled with the Seeker. Smart-alecky but uh, Bull had to have mad respect for it, sort of reminded him of when he was imekari—wasn’t the exact same situation but the whole reason he ended up becoming Ben-Hessrath in the first place* was because he was a little smartass, kind of cool to see something of the same in the kid. Little Bull, just called ‘Imekari’ then like everyone else his age, had always looked out for the other kids…admittedly he was a snitch when he thought someone was gonna do something stupid and get hurt doing it, already a spy of sorts, and then ultimately, he had a serious bone to pick with broccoli. Shit was nasty, but it was the only thing left on his dinnerplate and a Tamassran said he couldn’t get up and go play with the others until he ate two more things off his plate. She meant two more pieces of broccoli, but he’d done that dance more than once so he’d been prepared, had a two chunks of meat hidden away in his pockets from the start of the meal. He’d looked the Tamssran right in the eyes as he pulled them out, plopped them back on the plate, and then ate them—technically doing what he was told—before running off to join his friends. Soldiers were expected to follow rules and protocol both to the word, and in the spirit they were given in so, ‘Imekari’, child, became ‘Ashkaari’, one who thinks, given over to the Ben-Hessrath to train.

“But,” the Seeker allowed as she rubbed circles along the back of Ellie’s unmarked hand, “I do understand your drive to deal with Alexius, and it was necessary—we know now all too well the future he was bringing about, one we can stop now thanks to your forward experience. And it has born severe consequences for you as it stands, I would not seek to punish you further, whether it be in deed or being cross toward you,” the kid looked absolutely relieved she hadn’t pissed off the Seeker.

“I am really, really sorry I mislead you,” Ellie promised the woman.

The woman scoffed at that as if to say it was not worth being ‘sorry’ over, and Cassandra reached out to cup the girl’s face, “Fool girl, why did you simply not tell me sooner you did not know how to read?”

Imekari sighed, “I did tell you,” she insisted. “I said day one of this Herald business I’d never had an education outside of a little magic, I don’t say things I don’t mean—not usually, anyway. I thought you all knew I couldn’t, you never hesitated to help me with letters and requisitions. By the time I realized everyone had gotten it twisted, thought that I did know how to read and write I…well I realized everyone does! Everyone in the Inquisition can do it, so I
thought it must not be that hard, but I tried figuring it out on my own and it doesn’t make any sense to me, so I thought… I thought I was just so stupid, but—"

Solas had to subtly rest a hand on Marehis’s arm, hold her back from launching herself at Varric, and the kid startled when she suddenly had nine adults clamoring at once, half-shouting to her in a reprimand/encouragement/denial, Bull’s own booming “Imekari!” in the mix. Straight up scolding, in what world did the Iron Bull scold? But the kid wasn’t-! She wasn’t allowed to say crap like that about her damn self!

“Ellie, da’vehenan,” Marehis rasped out, “why in the world would you ever think such a thing?”

“Everyone knows how to do it and I couldn’t understand—and I tried!”

“Of course you couldn’t Eleanor,” Cassandra argued, “you lack of knowledge— knowledge, not intelligence. You merely need to be taught.”

“But Sera came up like me and she figured it out on her own—”

Sera looked startled at that, “Shite! Inky! I just meant arrows!” she screeched, “I didn’t- frick! It’s like friggin pride cookies all over again! I en’t doing that, fuck it,” that didn’t make much sense but then again it is Sera. The Elf shot up onto her feet and stomped away to the bushes off near the edge of their camp, breaking off a long branch, wielding it in her hand like a sword as she came marching back, “You’re not stupid! You just haven’t had the same opportunities as everyone! Half of these prick heads we work with were born with silver spoons in your friggin pieholes, and some of us got there!”

“What do you mean?” Ellie asked quietly looking very wary of the branch in Sera’s hand like she worried the girl might start smacking people with it.

“Inky I…I’ve been living like you, on my own sorting for myself, no help from nobody, that wasn’t a lie, but I didn’t exactly grow up that way. I don’t talk about it none cause yeah it en’t nobody’s business, but…I guess there’s a sense of pride in people thinking I’ve always toughed it out, never had nothing from nobody but…gah! That isn’t true. We’re different*,” Sera let out a frustrated sound and then, “I got caught stealing food when I was a little thing, way littler’n you, I was an actual tot at the time, and people usually get alienage or worse for theft but instead I got taken in by this bitchy…bitch! Lady Emmauld, she couldn’t have kids of her own, she was sick or somethin’, she saw me getting into trouble and since I didn’t have anyone she became my ‘patron’ or whatever. She left me her estate and pish but I signed it away, didn’t want any part of that garbage, money and things, power, too much of it, with no accountability is the exact recipe for a shitty person, I saw that plainly coming up under the likes of Lady Emmauld she…she was just a bad person. So I went out on my own did my own thing without any of that garbage. But I grew up alright Inky, lived in a house, had a cook and pish, and I had tutors that taught me shite, reading and writing and math and science.” She planted the stick in the ground and dragged, started writing something in the dirt before their campfire, “Lady wouldn’t let me learn fighty shite, wasn’t ladylike she said, but I did learn pish like geometry, physics,” the Elf rattled off, “aerodynamics, energy, velocity, blah blah blah blah blah.”

Bull’s brain went ‘blah blah blah’ what the actual…between the variables and fractions involving deltas and velocity and something to do with the thousandth power…maybe…this…he was good at math, especially money math, but just looking at the damn thing Sera scrawled out gave him a headache.

When she finished she cast aside her writing stick and crouched as she examined the
formula she’d written, “Fill that in with all the right things and I got myself a decent shot, every
time.”

…that…uh…well holy shit.

“Buttercup,” Varric said with quiet amazement, “…are you an actual genius?”

“Piss up a rope!” Sera snapped at him before looking to Ellie, “Point is, I had help. Nobody
just knows shite, Ink.”

Kid nodded in understanding, “Everyone needs taught everything,” Ellie agreed seeming
thoughtful, “Dorian said something like that, that I shouldn’t be embarrassed about not knowing
something I’ve never had the opportunity to learn.” Well damn, the guy was earning points all over
the place, helping the kid out, “So I did plan on bringing it up maybe when we got back to Haven,
if someone wouldn’t mind teaching me—I mean its not exactly something I need need to know,
like how I had to learn how to fight or ride a horse or use my magic or act fancy. But then, you
know. Everything sort of just happened.”

“Eleanor the Inquisition would hardly begrudge giving you tutelage in anything you
needed,” Cassandra insisted, “We…misguidedly assumed you had such knowledge of your own, if
we had known, you would have been offered lessons months ago. You are…comfortable learning
from Master Pavus?”

“Uh-huh! If he still wants to teach me,” Ellie said, looking to the Tevinter in question.

“I would be absolutely delighted,” the man graciously assured her.

“Ser’…” Ellie said, holding out her unmarked hand to the Elf who took it, swinging their
arms a bit, “Thanks, you know, for saying all that. You didn’t have to but…I mean there isn’t
anything to be ashamed of, I mean all kids are supposed to come up with help, its not a character
flaw that you had a roof over your head, that you were fed and educated. Um…should I be sorry
Lady Emmauld died?” that…wasn’t a usual turn of phrase but kid had obviously picked up what
Sera was putting down…fuck, what kind of wack-job raised this girl? Elf had serious issues…
mostly with being an Elf and that spoke volumes to the sort of attitude ‘kindly human’ woman
taking in a little orphan Elf girl had.

“Nope!” Sera assured her.

“Well then I’m sorry for whatever makes it that way,” Ellie said sincerely. “Um. You can
always talk to me and stuff, you know?”

“Bleck! I’m done with the therapy session!” Sera griped, pulling her hand away, though she
did sigh and say, “But thanks, Inky.”

Kid seemed to be feeling better, more like herself. She was chatty, checking in on how
everyone was doing since the Castle—apologized for having been so out of it, ‘getting in a mood’
she called it.

“Sweet girl,” Marehis shook her head, “Dorian explained the things you saw when you
were cast into the future. It is understandable, while we are all well and unharmed now, you…you
experienced the loss of those you hold dear, da’len. Needing time is understandable.”

“But you guys are alright. I was such a baby about it for like, gosh its been like three days
or something right?” Kid had really been out of it, huh?
“Eleanor, it is only now the second day since our dealings at Castle Redcliffe,” Cassandra said. “You’re allowed time to process and cope. Wasn’t it you who said I am the ‘bravest’, strong and dependable?” she questioned, and when Ellie nodded she said, “You taking a day to mourn is hardly ‘being a baby’. I was bedridden for months after Antony’s loss.” Oh shit. Brother—Seeker had mentioned him a few times when talking strategy for taking down the dragon. Damn.

Imekari hugged Cassandra tight, sat with her when they all gathered around for breakfast. All said and done, kid ate everything she was given—two bowls filled to the brim with oatmeal, melon Bull had chopped up for her cuz kid needed some damn vitamins, and every last slice of toast Sera kept pushing her way—doing a sort of potions toast with Dorian since the guy was still knocking back supplemental nutrient potions…what the fuck had happened with him that he’d been so malnourished in the fir-? Nope. Don’t care. Not really. Just a little bit, but that was just on account of his training, he observed everything. Just about everything anyway. Really ground his damn horns he hadn’t realized Imekari couldn’t read—he’d seen the look on her face when he gave her her first present from Krem, the soft realization dawning in her face when he told her it was her name scrawled out on the tag. Kid had never seen her own damn name before just- he should have figured it out!

He. Really. Should. Have. He was pretty sure he was having an aneurism. Because mail came, right as they were finishing up breakfast. Fucking. Krem.

“Imekari, I swear, he didn’t hear it from me,” Bull promised as he handed off the parchment that had been folded in half and nestled in the center Krem’s latest report to Bull with ‘In the case of a sad Herald, break seal’ written across the back. Guy’d been filled in on what he could be told about their Mage talks go awry, that Ellie was in rough shape.

Kid looked confused for a moment as she accepted the parchment and unfolded it to see what Bull had seen, and a smile spread across her face before she broke out laughing.

“Eleanor?” Madam de Fer asked after the girl, looking bewildered.

“Sk-Sk-Skinner she- ahhh!” the kid couldn’t damn breathe she was laughing hysterically.

When she finally calmed down enough she gleefully declared, “That’s so mean!”

What came for Ellie was a…Bull wasn’t sure what it was. No words, just illustration? Krem uh, well shit he’d done a pretty damn good job. Sometimes the guy would doodle on things, usually crude-intentioned drawings to amuse himself or Bull when reading over his Lieutenant’s reports, but this was way more elaborate.

He’d drawn up these boxed images, different panels told a story, about what definitely resembled Skinner, scowling expression and all, creeping into the tents where the Charger’s ground troops slept, among them were now their newest recruits, and Skinner had uh. Welcomed them. Next was the image of Skinner perched on the foot of the cot owned by what Bull supposed was either whoever Skinner pegged as a ringleader among them or just some schmuck that struck her wrong. Then Skinner striking a match followed by the view the poor guy must have seen when he was startled awake by the sound—Skinner staring silently, her scowl illuminated by the ominous glow of match light. She’d blown it out and it was all weird and strange enough to send the guy backpedaling out of his cot onto the ground, and when the ruckus woke everyone else in the tent woke and when they saw him scrambling to his feet, making a run for it, they all started running with him only to find that Rocky and Grim were waiting outside their tent, holding a rope taut for their retreating numbers to trip over, resulting in a massive man-pile.

“Maker’s breath, that’s…” Rainier squinted at the parchment when Imekari shared it with the others, “Cyril*,” he named the man Skinner had startled, “has to be, poor bastard. Krem’s got
quite the talent though.”

Huh. He really did, sort of ticked in Bull’s brain a bit, made him wonder if the boy had once had an interest in it—never really got into specifics of what drew him to his former career in the Military.

“You uh…told Krem you can’t read?” Bull asked. Sort of made more sense the guy not putting any pressure on the girl to write him or wait for him to do so to her, if that was the case.

Ellie shook her head. “Nuh-uh.”

“He said you talked about how you didn’t have something consistent like school or anything to keep track of time and pish any when you was little, and he noticed you’d always ask for words by sound,” Sera…for some reason…could explain, “buh-words instead of ‘b’ words and shite. Somethin’ too about you know something called sign language but you said you don’t understand fing—” the Elf cackled a bit, decided not to risk the temptation of turning ‘finger-spelled’ into something dirty, “spelled out words. He put it together, didn’t wanna embarrass you so he ran his whole ‘telling Inky he likes her, that they’d just chat each other up when she gets back thing’ by me when Inky was all napping before we left,” she fessed up. “Said Inky showed him the list I marked up from Viv, and figured I knew too, otherwise he’d just gone with his gut and left me out of it.”

Fucking Krem was getting put in a damn headlock when Bull got back—he knew, and he hadn’t given Bull a damn bit of heads up! It’s not like Bull would’ve made Imekari feel bad about it but…yeah, he got keeping it on the down low, out of respect for Ellie since the kid had been embarrassed as shit about it. Eh. Still, headlock—it as basically their form of low-level hugging. Saved actual hugging for the big stuff—wasn’t about that toxic masculinity bullshit but he never wanted to coddle the guy too much either, ding his pride any.

“Would you please thank Cremisius for me?” Ellie asked Bull, “Tell him I liked his drawing. And to maybe tell Skinner not to terrorize Thom’s men quite so much.”

“You got it boss,” he said, “No promises that Skinner will lighten up…that was literally her form of warm welcome.”

Ellie smiled at that before she took a deep breath then and looked to Seeker. “Um, so. What’s on now? We’ll be headed for Therinfal Redoubt?”

“Ahh. We…we’re still awaiting Healer Adan—he and Ser Stitches have sent word that they’ve entered the Hinterlands and should be here soon—to look you and Dorian over, ensure you’ve not picked up whatever Red Lyrium illness that was apparently catching in the future,” Cassandra explained.

“Oh, gosh, I forgot about that—that they were coming, I mean, not the—” kid shuddered a bit. “That’s sweet of them, to come all this way.”

“There is also the matter of…well Eleanor there is something we must do, a majority of us as a team. But I would ask…I would command you, to stay here, in camp. I will hear absolutely no argument on the matter, do you understand?”

“…Cassandra I’m always a bit arguey if its important, but I don’t mean any disrespect by it. What am I supposed to restrain that impulse for?”

Seeker carefully laid out the fact that some of their Orlesian allies with fealty to Grand
Duke Gaspard, had backed out of the agreement to meet at Therinfal Redoubt. But, they could regain enough allies, they were decently certain, if they did something that would catch the nobilities’ attention—at the very least, garner their loyalty just to be connected to such a feat. Cassandra Pentaghast, of the famous Pentaghast line, would slay a dragon as a representative of the Inquisition. The woman was quick to assure Ellie she would be doing no such thing alone—though given time, a few days to properly bait and trap, subtly lead the dragon to injury and capture, she could very well do so single handedly—she would have more than enough help but she would not hear of Ellie being a part of that.

Ellie was quiet as she listened, fists clenching but after a moment of consideration she said, “I don’t like it. At all. Not even a little. And I might freak out a bit but…I…I guess it’s sort of like how I had to go face Alexius when you were scared. You have to do this, too. My turn to be scared. Just. Don’t get eaten, kay? Any of you. As impossible as time travel is, I feel more confident about coming back from that than I do about you making your way out of a Dragon’s stomach safely.”

“Oh I quite assure you, if swallowed whole, Eleanor, the feat is rather possible,” Seeker said, “It is a risky but effective, accredited method of Dragon slaying my great grandfather preferred.”

Kid crinkled her nose at that. “Yick.”

“Yick indeed. I hold no such preference myself,” Cassandra assured her warmly, smiling softly as she patted Ellie’s hands, “we will head out after lunch—the Iron Bull, Madam de Fer, Solas, Varric, Rainier and myself—and we shall return before dinner, it will not take more than a few hours.”

“War horn on my belt kid, I’ll signal—big long victory blow when we kick that things ass,” Bull promised.

Imekari jutted out a pinkie at him, “No getting eaten, be super safe, and stock up on potion before you leave, all of you. And yeah, signal the second you’re done and safe.”

It was clumsy going but he got his pinkie carefully intertwined with hers as he sealed their struck deal.

“Oh. Wait…” Ellie said, looking to Cassandra, “um. I sort of remember…Lady Josie asked me not to pick sides about the whole ‘throne’ situation, but to try my best to lean in favor of Duke Gaspard if I ended up having to talk about it with Marquis and Marquess Marchand when we met. Did they…are they not coming to meet us then?”

“Unfortunately, the Marchands are among those who decided against further alliance with the Inquisition, Eleanor,” Seeker Pentaghast verified.

He wanted to fight whoever the fuck these Marchands were, Imekari looked so sad about losing them as allies. “That’s too bad,” she murmured.

Kid hadn’t washed up since the Castle, so Madam de Fer took up the task of gathering some of her fancier oils, soaps, everything one needed for a classy bath in the lake near the gate that marked the northern edge of the tamed Hinterlands. Then the Grand Enchanter threw her arm around Ellie’s shoulders and led her along to get cleaned up, Marehis slipping her hand into Ellie’s bandaged one to join them.

And when they returned, kid got…not a surprise for her really, it was still nice like one though. Imekari was clean, changed into fresh pajamas for a lazy day, hand rebandaged to keep her
from using it too much, and it seemed that Vivienne and Marehis had bathed as well. As the trio rejoined the camp, Solas approached the Elf woman, wrapping his arms around her waist and pulling her close, murmuring that he quite liked the smell of the lavender soap they’d used before he pecked her on the lips.

“Ack!” Sera yelped, “Don’t go getting your cooties all up in the same air Inky’s breathing it’ll get in her asthma! *Gross!*”

Imekari giggled, looking like she could burst she was so happy, “You guys aren’t going to be so hide-y now?” she asked excitedly.

Marehis considered the man that held her, “I don’t believe we’ll publicly engage in…what did Dorian refer to it as? Face sucking?”

“Hey! Sparkler just talked about it, ‘Elves sucking face’ is copywrite Varric Tethras,” the Dwarf called from his place around the camp fire.

“But yes, we see no point in hiding the exact nature of our relationship,” Marehis said.

Ellie shot a fist to the sky, “Yes! Two matches down!”

“…two?” Cassandra asked, alarmed, looking like she was trying to think over any instance Ellie could have possibly seen Cullen’s name in writing and been given verification it was his—any chance she could have ‘matched the word shapes’ on them.

But no, “Solas and Marehis, and Seggrit and Flissa!” Ellie cheerily reported to Cassandra’s relief, “…possibly three but I can’t really take credit for Adan and Mister Stitches, they just sort of happened. Oh! But Sera’s got a drink date with Scout Harding next time they’re both in Haven!”

“Who the frick told you that!?” Sera shrieked in surprise.

“You did, Sera,” the Seeker reported drily, “Granted I believe you were asleep at the time—were you aware you talk in your sleep?”

“Pfft. Well, that sleepy bitch better stop blabbing my business.”

Kid seemed okay with their impending dragon fight, as much as she could be at least. Definitely scared her, she shyly admitted to needing potion at lunch before she could so much as take a bite, but she listened as they went over their strategy again—talking it out in detail to put it fresh in everyone’s minds and to lay it out for Ellie’s benefit, getting walked through their plans reassured her they knew what they were doing, that they would be as safe as possible doing it. And Dorian assured her he was going to distract her after a fashion, he felt confident the requisition table held enough parchment and writing supplies to get started with the basics of reading—the alphabet.

“Oooh, Inky! Alphabet’ll be fun, you like singy stuff,” Sera assured her, well damn if the little Elf wasn’t trying to be an encouragement.

“There’s singy stuff?” Ellie asked, intrigued.

“Yeah, there’s a lil song that goes to with it,” Sera hummed a few notes of the Trade alphabet song. Hmm-hmm hmm-hmm, hmm-hmm hmmm.

“Huh, I kind of remember something like that, a little—I know the sounds a bit from the orphanage, like I had to use numbers and stuff so I never forgot them, and then, gosh I kind of…I think there was something like, ‘aah bae seh, che, dea hmm, hmm,’” she sang, humming the last
two sounds with uncertainty. “Is it different in Trade?”

Bull didn’t know what the fuck ‘che’ was so yeah it was different in Trade.

“…the sounds are, and I suppose some of the letters as well,” Dorian said carefully, as he regarded the girl with newfound curiosity, she was getting looks from all the adults pretty much. “Ellie…you told me your ‘main languages’ were Trade and Antivan. Which is your first?”

“Oh! Antivan es mi lengua maternal,” Ellie chirped, fucking…just…dead ass whipped out the damn accent and everything before 180°ing it back around to her lilting Marcher mode, “It’s what they spoke mostly in the orphanage, some of the older kids spoke Trade in their lessons. I didn’t really learn Trade super well until I met Ava.”

….oh man. “Boss,” Bull said. “Are you…are you Antivan?”

“I was born there I guess, its where the orphanage was,” she shrugged.

Well damn. Krem went an found himself an Antivan. A red-haired Antivan. Tamassrans would crack down hard on him if they could hear his thoughts but—there is a Maker. And dude has a sense of humor.

“You hail from Antiva?” Cassandra asked slowly.

“Border town somewhere. Ended up in the Free Marches pretty quick when I got a move on, wasn’t too keen on going back, got my footing there good once I had Trade down. Going by Ellie, speaking with the accent I picked up learning Trade from Ava, and my hair being so red, no one questioned the little brown girl running around without her papers.” Though the kid thought about it, “…not that I’d have proof of Antivan citizenship either. It’s not like I’ve got my birth certificate on me or anything.” She shrugged.

Seeker seemed confused at why the kid would feel the need to shorten her name to keep people from questioning if she was an actual Free Marcher or not, “Eleanor is a Free Marcher/Ferelden-esque na-” and then it looked like something almost physically clicked inside the Seeker’s brain, “Maker preserve me Eleanor gah! Child! I swear to the Maker you could drive me to madness! When you were apprehended you said your name was Eleanor Trevelyan granted the Trevelyan was borrowed but-!”

“The guest list said Eleanor. I told you my name was just Ellie,” the girl giggled out at the Seeker’s frustration. “It’s just about all anyone’s ever called me for as long as I could remember. When Trevelyan wanted me to pretend to be his cousin, ‘Ellie’ was too simple sounding for the name of a Marcher noble. So. Eleanor.”

Sera gasped, pointing at Ellie as if in accusation, “Inky’s had a secret identity all along! It’s not-beardy all over again!” she called out, sounding gleeful at the twist.

“Tumbles,” Varric said, “If you tell me you led a life of toddler crime and had to fake your own death, I’m gonna flip.”

Kid seemed like she was struggling not to smile. “Apostacy is my toddler crime,” she conceded, “and I’m sure there are people from Antiva who think I’m dead.”

“Ellie…hmm…short for Elia then? That’s Antivan,” Dorian guessed.

“Pfft. Dumb guess,” Sera booed. “Eliana! S’got actual ‘Ellie’ sound already in it, we don’t call her ‘Ay-lie’.”
“Ellie-girl?” Rainier prompted, “You feel like sharing your secret identity, so this lot’ll shut up.”

“Rude,” Sera and Dorian accused in solidarity, and when the Elf girl raised her hand to him the Tevinter man shrugged and gave her a high-five.

Imekari just giggled at that, “It isn’t short for anything. There wasn’t anything that identified me when I was dropped off, I was the eleventh unidentifiable baby on record—they just use the Trade system for math and numbers so eleven inspired them to name me ‘Ellie’ once it was time to put a more adoptable spin on me.”

“Imekari,” Bull saw fit to inform her, "no shit—Qunari just get numbers for personal identification under the Qun.”

That had Ellie gasping excitedly as she asked, “Really?” and then declaring, “We’re practically twins!”

“Hell yeah we are!” Bull matched her enthusiasm holding out a hand for a high-five, damn good to see the kid in higher spirits.

“I…apologize, I didn’t realize your name was truly just ‘Ellie’,” Seeker spoke up as she sort of came out of thinking something over, “Are you put to discomfort at the use of Eleanor? I would call you Ellie, see the other advisors corrected if you wish,” she offered awkwardly.

Kid shook her head. “It didn’t feel super weird to me or anything. I just thought you liked using Eleanor because it was fancier for Herald business and it just seemed like a nickname sort of like Tumbles or Inky.” She was bashful to admit, “And you’re the one that calls me Eleanor the most and it’s always sort of sounded like when Solas and Marehis call me Da’len or the Iron Bull says ‘Imekari’ and I like it.”

Seeker looked like she’d been knocked with some emotion at the kid finding endearment in how the Nevarran said her kind-of-name.

“If your Ava lady taught you Trade um…how come she didn’t teach you how to read Inky? Was she…I mean was…” Oh. Sera seemed to be stumbling, not wanting to press a nerve if the woman had been using knowledge as some kind of abusive tool, keeping Ellie ignorant to make her dependent.

“Oh, Ava was super old when we met, like over a hundred when I first met her, and she’d started losing her sight long before then, so she wasn’t reading, didn’t write things down. She was still a good healer though, knew different ingredients by smell, feel too for things that were safe to touch bare handed. And not being able to see didn’t really hinder her diagnosing people or helping with injury, and I helped out whenever I was around, so it gave me good experience. She could stitch people up and things but…people were just a bit more comfortable with the little kid who could see doing it instead.”

And speaking of experienced Healers, they just about finished lunch when came the call,

“Horns up, Chief!”

“Horns up!” Bull called back as Stitches and Adan came around the last bend around the mountainside that led to their camp, “Glad you could make it.”

“You lot had to keep the Herald at the farthest ass-end of the Hinterlands,” Adan complained as he dropped his satchel at his feet before sitting straight down on the ground before
“Oh my gosh, you didn’t walk all the way here, did you?” Ellie asked, concerned.

“This one started to, but I caught up to him on horseback,” Stitches said, “rode with me the rest of the way here.”

“Yes, our knight with shining horse crap,” Adan crooned facetiously, “He’s getting watered down and some rest at the infiltration camp,” he said before barking out the order, “Hand me a thermometer, Liam, I need to take our little time-traveler here’s temperature.”

Fucking Liam, is it? Well shit, Stitches better save up his work leave for the damn honeymoon.

‘Liam’ didn’t say anything just shook his head and handed off a thermometer, and a waterskin which Adan rolled his eyes at, but he did stop to drink after he plopped the thermometer under Ellie’s tongue while they waited for it to get a good reading.

“Look at that, I’ll be damned, a normal temperature for once,” Adan said as he shook out the implement, cleaning it off before asking, “Which one of you lot’s Dorian, then?”

Dorian did not appreciate having to have his temperature taken, but he came and sat alongside Ellie, and he shot her a sort of helpless look when he ended up the sole recipient of Adan’s gruff care as Stitches took a seat beside the other Healer and started checking over Ellie himself. Checked her pulse, took out an instrument he plugged in his ears, placed another piece to her chest to help him listen to her breathing, her lungs. Guy was firm, no nonsense, but he was damn soft as he asked after Imekari, and he definitely handled her possibly strained hand with all the gentleness he lacked when stitching up a battle wound. He unwrapped her Marked hand, looking it over before gently squeezing along her fingers, asking her to squeeze his hand if she could, tell him if it hurt to do so. He ended up messaging her knuckles and saying nothing was broken but she shouldn’t use it much for a while, wrapped it back up to keep it stable. Asked a few questions about if her Mark was giving her trouble, and Adan was listening carefully as she explained about her Mark spreading while in the future and shrinking once they returned to the present—that she’d sprained her hand when it spread so much so fast, sort of pulled it wrong while convulsing, and she’d squeezed ‘the crap’ out of Dorian’s hand he’d apparently given her to do just that. Adan looked at the guy’s hand then to make sure it hadn’t been hurt. There were little spots of bruising, looked like the tips of Imekari’s index and pinkie fingers pressed into the back of his hand and the poor guy looked startled when Ellie ‘awed’ and rocked to the side to kiss him on the cheek in apology and thanks.

She waited until Adan was done with Dorian to talk to the Healer about feeling her Mark spread when it really wasn’t. The Healer rested a hand on her shoulder, nodding in sympathy as he thought it over, looking to Stitches to see if he concurred. “I don’t right know a medicinal way to assist with that, the advice you’ve been given to attempt grounding is sound. There’s a sort of pain reliever I could get for you—topical, it would need applied with a gloved hand or an implement, it would sink into the dermis and down, tell the nerves in your hand to stop sending pain signals, that might be of assistance if its persistent.”

“I wouldn’t want you to go through more trouble for me on something that might not work but…that could be super useful to have on hand,” Ellie supposed, looking to Bull for some…awe Boss.

“We do have it on hand,” Bull assured her, Stitches had beat her to the punch, whipped up that sort of thing for his ankle, made the damn thing numb when he needed it. Shit. Hadn’t thought
to offer it for something her brain was tricking her with, but it was just a guess that it could work it sounded like, still, “Be glad to share if you need it.”

“I’ll get you some more, can’t have too much around with all this roughing you’re out here doing,” Adan said. “My lady. Maybe give the Healers some notice before you go bending the laws of time and space again eh?”

“I’ll do my best,” Ellie promised.

“Speaking of time, now that healer’s business is out of the way, I’m under orders to play delivery boy,” Stitches announced as he began digging around in his satchel…orders huh? Not from him. Better not be anyway, Bull’d have to kick his ass if he went around divulging the orders Bull gave him when Stitches informed him he was coming to meet them in the Hinterlands, those were top secret, birthday business. He was going to just have Harritt send things, but he figured his guy could save the Blacksmith the trouble.


“When I ran catching up with Adan by our Lieutenant, he gave the all-good as long as I pass this along to you, didn’t want to risk it getting damaged sending it along with a bird, he said,” Stitches explained as he handed something Bull could hear softly ticking away under the soft cloth bag it was encased in.

Ellie unsinched the bag and a silver pocket watch slipped into her unmarked hand as her eyes widened, “I- he-, but he needs this!”

“That’s not the one he uses, Imekari,” Bull assured her, guy was real careful with this one, keeps it under lock and key, “Got himself one he’d be okay using regularly in the field.”

“He trusts you with this one, that you’ll take good care of it.” Stitches explained.

“It’s too-!” she was protesting,

“He figures as much, says he does want it back, but only if you’re bringing it to him. You’re just hanging onto it for a bit.” Stitches assured, “He wanted you to have it because it doesn’t just tell the time of day,” he explained gesturing for her to ‘go ahead’ and the girl carefully pressed the release at the top, the lid swinging open smoothly. “In the center there’s a dial that gives you the day’s date. Tevinter craftsmanship so, it uh, you know, its got magic whatnot in it, keeps the date accurate on its own correlates with the sun and moon or the tides or some such nonsense. He thought it might um…reassure you.”

Imekari was very quiet, swallowing like oh man, she might cry, but at least it didn’t seem like she was sad, not very sad anyway, overwhelmed more like it as she carefully traced a finger along the dial, and then the inscription in the underside of the pocket watch cover. “Dorian?” she asked quietly.

The Tevinter man leaned over to get a look over the inscription himself. “Ahh how lovely, it appears to be a wedding gift,” and Imekari paled at that, looking startled, not like she was jealous but scared, shit Krem…Krem wasn’t married…he wasn’t married right? Nah. Definitely not but she got spooked by it until the Tevinter man read, “Tonio*, to mark the passage of forever and always, your love Liviana.” Kid looked relieved.

“Tonio and Liviana?” Ellie asked.

“Liviana’s his mother’s name,” Bull offered, he knew that much at least, so it was safe to
“Then Tonio,” Dorian said…weirdly loud, like he was trying to be heard by someone in particular, “must be Cremisius’s father’s name.”

“Got ears Sparkler, thanks,” Varric deadpanned.

“Just practicing vocal projection,” Dorian breezed, “you never know when one might be called upon for rousing oration.”

Sera let out yelp and then, “Inky’s right there! Don’t be talking ‘bout arousing orat- just gross!”

“Sera!” Ellie giggled out in gentle reprimand before looking up at Bull, “The Iron Bull, do you think I should keep this? I…it’s super thoughtful and gosh, the whole, accurate date thing is… it’s nice enough he thought to do this, I wouldn’t want to risk something of his father’s getting hurt.”

 “…Trust works both ways Imekari, even when its extended outward. He trusts you, and you’ve gotta trust that trust in return, if that makes any sense. You’ll do okay kid, just take good care of it you do all your other things.”

Ellie nodded, gently closing the pocket watch up, “Kay…” she returned her attention to Stitches, “Would you please tell Cremisius I say thank you and that I promise I’ll take care of his father’s watch, and bring it back safe?”

“You got it,” the healer nodded.

“Are you two hungry?” Ellie asked him and Adan, “You’re welcome to lunch, dinner too, and we’ve room if you need to stay tonight before heading back to Haven.”

“Oh we’re staying,” Stitches said, “we have it on good authority this lot is heading out for a little dragon slaying.”

“I’ll keep out of the thick of it, but I’ll be waiting in the wings to help patch you ingrates up when you’ve finished,” Adan assured.

“I’ll tag along for the fight, extra sword, a medic on the field if needed,” Stitches said, looking to Bull, “Fair warning, our Lieutenant has put me under direct orders to nut-punch you if you’ve concocted some elaborate scheme to take a certain young lady dragon hunting—” he was quick to say, “while he’s sure the Lady Herald could give any dragon a run for their money, we all know Bull’s horrible influence. Dalish worries sick though.”

Ha, she’s not the only one, Imekari surged forward to wrap an arm around both Healers’ neck and pulled them in for a hug, “Thanks for coming and helping and-! Be safe! All of you!” she pulled back to look at Adan, “You’re not fighting the dragon?”

“I’d rather not,” he said, sounding uncertain if maybe the Herald was unimpressed with his lack of desire to get caught in the fray.

But what he got was, “Good! Adan’s my favorite now—my favorite one!” Ellie declared him, “At least of the people going. My actual favorites rank Marehis, Sera, Dorian, cause they’re not going full stop! Then Adan!”

“Woah woah wait, back up—I thought I was your favorite person in life?” Bull asked, in
mock offense. Mostly mock offense. Damn it!

“Nope! Sorry! I just did the whole ‘watching everyone die’ thing already, if you jerks go
risking your lives again so soon, I have to either be mad or sad about it. Sad means laying in my
bedroll waiting for death until I know everyone’s okay, that doesn’t really work for learning things
—Dorian’s teaching me how to read!” she said for Adan and Stitches benefit. “If I’m mad at you
lot, I can be all ‘ha! I’ll show those punks for ticking me off! I’m gonna learn the alphabet just to
spite them! The spitephabet!”

“Ahh yes, I can work with that,” Dorian was sure, “A is for attitude. B is for bi- ahem,
boss, C is for catty, D is of course for Dorian as I do live on spite.”

“Yeah!” Ellie high fived the Tevinter man. “Should eat more vegetables though, man
cannot live on spite alone, I’m pretty sure Andraste said that.”

“Eleanor!” Cassandra gently reprimanded the blaspheme, laughing despite herself.

“What? I’m the Herald of Andrsaste aren’t I? And She probably said lots of stuff that isn’t
written down,” Ellie defended, giggling though she caught herself and gasped, pointing at
Cassandra she ordered, “No laughing with me! Mad! At you! And you and you and you and you
and you!” she pointed to her friends in turn, “starting now!”

Seeker sighed as she said, “I am truly sorry we must do this, Eleanor, if there were another
way I promise, we would explore it.”

“Well that’s just tough!” Ellie told her, then, “But, go kick dragon butt and come back in
one piece…and I’ll consider forgiving you.”

A dragon! Holy shit!

’sandra pulled Sera and Marehis aside before they left cause they was staying behind, gave
them more of a rundown on just how long it should take and she passed off Ellie’s potions to
Marehis, apologizing that she hadn’t to do so earlier, but she thought Marehis should have them in
case Inky got panicky, and blah! Dumb! But Sera felt all proudy when Cassandra told Marehis that
Sera knew what to do if Ellie had an asthma attack and that she trusted her to help take ‘excellent
care of Eleanor’!

Sera took a hold of Inky’s Marked hand—oh! it was still bandaged, careful—as the others
went off to fight a frickin dragon. Cripes! That was...Sera was half tempted to join them,
something about the adventure of it all sounded like fun, but...nope, she wasn’t crazy! It was a
freaking dragon! And there was still just the barest bit of panic digging about in the back of Sera’s
mind at all times, since Inky went poof through that portal. She felt like any second she didn’t have
a hand on the little Human girl, she might get poofed away again and that just wasn’t on! Shite, she
thought Ellie was dead! And then she came back alright but...not alright, that future business
sounded...it just wasn’t any good and Inky was all brain wheezy over it, almost physically wheezy
as the dragon fighting brigade disappeared out of view of their camp, she was shaking a bit and
Sera’s eyes felt itchy when the younger girl’s chin started quivering and her breathing picked up.
Nope nope nope, she promised ‘sandra she’d take good care of Ellie!
“You’re mad at them, right Inky?” Sera tried reminding her.

“Right!” Ellie agreed determinedly, it seemed like it made her feel better, even if just a bit, and that Marehis lady came to stand on Ellie’s other side, wrapping an arm around her shoulders, leading them back toward the center of camp.

“Come along da’vehenan,” Marehis said, “Dorian is getting everything ready for your first lesson.”

He was a magey git but he’d been good by Inky so…Sera liked him okay. Dorian was already sitting at the requisition table, all the Inquisition businessy stuff was cleared away, inbox and outbox scooted off to the side huuuuh-uh-oh Sera reached over and flipped the envelope sitting on top of the outbox upside down. Inky was gonna learn all the different ‘word-shapes’ eventually and ‘sandra probably needed to be more careful with her mail if she wanted to be all secretive about Commander Dreamy’s little love letter thing they had going. Sera took a seat on the edge of the table and Marehis actually…awe she was real scaredy over losing Inky, she took any chance to have the girl close so Mare’ sat in the chair next to Dorian’s and pulled Inky along to sit in her lap and Ellie was all smiley when the Elf woman kissed the top of her head.

Dorian’d laid out stacks of parchment before them and was finishing up writing something down, took up a huge piece of parchment, writing in big letters.

“Alright Ellie,” Dorian said, “first thing first, the basics—letters.”

“You want me to write a letter?” Ellie asked, tentatively.

“Ah. Not just yet—we’ll get there,” Dorian assured her, “These,” he said, running a finger along the Alphabet he’d written up, “are letters. They make up words which make up sentences, that make up what we call the letters we get in the mail.”

“Oh! Neat! So we call them letters ‘cause they’re made up of a bunch of letters!”

“…I suppose that is so,” Dorian allowed amicably.

Inky did end up liking the little alphabet song cri pes it was cute, though Dorian…huh, it was nice of him, he seemed to take into account that Inky wasn’t a baby or nothin’, he set the song to the tune of a Chantry hymn®, still simple but not as childish…sorta, Ay be-e ceee eee Eee-ee Eff-ff Gee! H I-ii Jay Ka-ay L-M-N-O Pe-e-e-ee-ee! Oh that was kind of fun though, Sera couldn’t help laughing at that part!

Marehis was all smiles as she listened to their lesson though after a while she hugged Inky around the waist and asked, “Do you need anything sweet girl? Water, coffee, tea? Something to eat?”

“I’m okay,” Ellie shook her head, “but thanks!”

“What of you, da’len?” she already asked Ink- oh. Cripes, Mare’ was lookin’ at Sera as she reached to rest a hand on her knee, “Would you care for anything?”

That wasn’t…she didn’t like elfy words getting used at her but…Marehis was okay, and she called Inky da’len, and she wasn’t an Elf so. Sera let it slide. Huh. Maybe Inky’d get snacky if Sera did, “Yeah, I could go for something to eat.”

Marehis nodded, giving Sera’s knee a squeeze, and Ellie stood so the Elf could slip out from behind her, and she went to start digging around in their food stores. While she was at it,
Dorian got out a pencil for Inky to try her hand, unmarked one, at scribbling down the different letters in order, copying from Dorian’s sheet. Ellie took her time trying her best to copy them down alright.

“It’s kind of…messy,” she said, looking at her shaking handwriting.

“Oh cripes Ink, I write like that! Cause I write too fast—you’re just starting out; a little practice and you’ll be writing as fancy as you like!” Oh, Marehis was back and handed Sera a plate of huh, green grapes but they was all freezed over.

“Indeed da’len, you’re doing an excellent job,” Marehis assured Inky as she leaned forward, didn’t sit back down just stood with her arms wrapped around the girl’s shoulders and looking over her as she worked.

“Thanks,” Ellie said shyly as she bit her lip concentrating hard on the last line of her Z.

Shite! The grapes were freezing but so so good the cold sort of made them taste more sour! “Wowza that’s good! You gotta try these!” Sera said, holding out a grape to Inky.

Ellie carefully bit into the offered grape, her nose scrunching up as she shuddered a bit, “Gosh! Yeah! You like them that way Ser’? Solas has this little leather pouch charmed to keep cold he says he’ll let us use for taking grapes around as snacks, I figure if they’re frozen they might be less likely to get squished you know?” Oh yeah, they’d tried taking grapes around, but they got smashed and got their mess got all over everything when they’d been just sitting in Sera’s pack on the way back from the Coast—her night clothes got stained but they was clean now, though she thought maybe Cassandra had cleaned them she’d been…getting more friend-y with Sera on the return trip from the Storm Coast. Might’ve had something to do with Sera not pranking her quite so much. Seeker was a good sort, scary, super wow looks wise, but Sera knew better than to try chatting her up like that. They was friends now definitely. Anyway, grapes!

“Friggin’ brilliant that is!” Inky was a genius! And Dwarfy was getting arrows in his bits if he ever started shouting at her like she wasn’t again!

Dorian had her practice writing up the alphabet a few more times before he took away his cheat sheet and the papers she’d written on, and had her try writing up the letters from memory—just as many as she could do, and it wasn’t any pressure, “Just try your best, Ellie, it’ll be good enough,” he said.

Oh gosh she looked determined, the sort of look she had on her face before they came up on a big fight, Sera almost wanted to cheer but she didn’t want to be distracting. Learning was hard. Sera’d found it boring, most of it anyway. Science and maths was fine—fun even, chemistry was the literal bomb. But history was lame—shite already happened, what was she supposed to do about it? And reading ‘literature’ and whatnot, well…she’d rather go do something story worthy than read about some made up prick having all the fun.

Huh. That was…Inky’d been okay about Sera being more…openish with her past. She hadn’t lied like Lady Emmaud had about that baker bloke, but Sera’s pride kept her tight-lipped about her background, and if the misconception that Sera’d always been living by her own means and hadn’t had any help with anything was hurting Inky’s heart like thinking she was hated so Lady could play pretend ‘perfect’ had hurt Sera’s…that just wasn’t fricking on!

And maybe Inky got it. People usually didn’t. She’d made the mistake being too honest about it before, people thought she was a spoilt little rich kid that didn’t know what she was on about, slumming and whatnot but she wasn’t! She’d hated living all—ruddy trapped she’d been!
Having food on the table and a roof over your head and an education and money was right blessings, if the things weren’t used to manipulate and control and break a person down. She didn’t have any say in anything living under Lady Emmauld’s pruney old thumb. Yeah Sera didn’t ruddy well know how to cook good—she was learning as she went! Having her every meal prepared for her sounds nice, and yeah food in your belly is ultimately what’s important bout food, but it was straight up meant to make Sera rely on Lady Emmauld’s kindness—keep Sera incapable of providing for herself, and Cook…Cook was on payroll, did whatever Lady said, she only made pish Lady approved of, and only when Lady approved of it, she’d take away meals if she thought Sera was getting too big. Fat, or something when she was littler and then too tall, Lady complained. Everything she did was criticized, stupid stuff, just growing-up stuff—nothing she took interest in was important, nothing she thought or felt mattered. She put Sera under a microscope and picked at every little thing until Sera just…didn’t like herself very much. She’d get all wheezy like Inky does, not asthma but the way Ellie gets panicky over things and can’t catch her breath, heart gets all poundy. It’d happen over talking with people, anyone, or leaving the house because…what if she said the wrong thing, did the wrong thing and it got back to Lady and…just, it was bad when things got back to Lady that she didn’t like, that she said ‘embarrassed’ her. When she did get wheezy there wasn’t any words for it, like panic attacks or anxiety or pish, Lady just called it ‘fits’ and get pissy about it, they was Sera’s fault, being dramatic or whatever. And when Lady died it’d…Sera cried and that just felt dumb. She was sad, because she knew Lady Emmauld had taken care of her, fed her, put a roof over her head, shite parents was supposed to do, but Sera didn’t grieve, not like how people described grieving. If anything she experienced the sort of grief over the fact that she wasn’t sad if that makes sense. To be sad because you don’t feel sad about something everyone says you should. Upset that she hadn’t had the sort of life with Lady Emmauld where the woman’s loss was loss. And then she realized she had all the tools to do whatever she wanted with her life but…that was terrifying! She didn’t know the first ruddy thing about running an estate, and…the only way to move forward with that pish was follow all the rules other people made up for being noble and shite, and she saw…Lady Emmauld had the same tools, passed them on to Sera, they were how she’d lived her life, the ways she abused people to have her own way and it was scary that Sera might just do the same thing. So she started over, signed everything away, kept only the clothes on her back, decided if she was going to make it, it would be on her own, no help from anyone, she would rely on herself and make do with that, she would call the shots, and no one could take her own power away from her if it was all hers to begin with!

“Sweet girl, you got all the way to H perfectly!” Marheis’s voicing congratulations sort of jolted Sera a bit, oh cripes! Ugh, stupid brain! Focus!

“Oh wow Ink, you did great!” Sera enthused, looking over the younger girl’s work. Gosh she’d done great, missed a few after H, but she got L good and M, forgotten a few and tried Q but the lowercase came out more like a g but those was confusing! She got T and then W through Z great though like pish that was sixteen entire letters from memory and the alphabet had like twenty-six right? Only ten more to go!

“Thanks…” awe Inky was all blushy! She seemed proud of herself and that was just! Friggin yes!

“An excellent first endeavor,” Dorian agreed, oh he spoke warm to Inky, he had a sort of air to his voice where he could be real snooty, talk down to you easy, but he didn’t do that to her. Good, cause Sera’d have to beat his stupid pretty face in if he made Ellie feel stupid trying to learn something new. “Would you like to try studying some more and trying again?”

“Uh-huh, I think…I know like, the little song now so I can say them all in my brain, but the shapes just aren’t a hundred percent yet,” she said as Dorian spread out the alphabet page for her to look off of some more.
“You friggin got this, you’re doing so great!” Sera was quick to encourage, “As soon as you know all your Alphabet Inky, it’s over for these hoes!”

“What um…?” Inky seemed confused.

“You know! The in general hoes in the world!”

Inky giggled at that, and then turned her focus on the page before her, studying. Though she did look up, same as everyone else because the low tone of a war horn rang out in the distance and even Sera was heaving a sigh of relief, ‘sandra and them were okay! All done! Inky hugged herself a bit and said, “Solas sent me a little ‘okay’ too.”

“You’ll have to show everyone how far you get whenever they get back,” Marehis said softly, massaging Ellie’s shoulders as she looked over her work scattered across the requisition table, “I think I’ll get started on dinner,” she said, pressing a kiss to the top of Inky’s head.

“Do you need help?” Ellie asked.

She didn’t seem burned out or anything, like she needed a break, so Sera hopped down from the table and said, “You sit tight Inky, keep up the good work! I’ll help Marehis, yeah?”

The woman smiled and reached out to take Sera’s hand pulling her closer to link arms with her, patting her forearm warmly, “I would certainly appreciate it, emm’asha,” Marehis said, oh yuck, her skin sort of crawled when her brain immediately perceived the Dalish to mean ‘my girl’, but it wasn’t…totally yuck as Marehis pulled Sera along to figure out what to put together for everyone…they’d been gone a few hours now and Dragon slaying sounded like hungry work.

“Hmm…what looks good to you?” Marehis asked as she and Sera looked through the cold chest.

“Uhhh…dunno really. Bread’s always real good, all regular temperature but we could always warm it up a little, and there’s stuff for stew, ram meat’s already cooked up its just freezed. Um. There’s carrots and potatoes and pish, Inky likes peas. Oh and I think there’s corn…I can um, get it off the cobby part,” Solas had taught her how. He wasn’t always a total wank. He taught her cool stuff sometimes. And he’d been helpful sorta, when Sera left Viv’s sleepover thing to go tell Bull and Varric about Inky’s Chantry dates with her little ex-girlfriend, baldy waited until she’d finished talking ask her if she’d mind joining him. Hadn’t been excited about it or nothin’ but she did, and he had her walk with him to that Foothold place saying he’d recommended it to Cassandra for Sera’s training and…he’d been helpful. Explained the whole ‘Fade feeling thin’ in the place and giving her advice on how to…dunno, sounded like mage shite to her, ‘perceive and manipulate either to provoke or suppress’ the bit of Fade that touched the place. But then ‘sandra had her do that, to focus on it and sort of send it away, make what was real more-real and push the Fade back, Solas’s advice on how to find the Fadey parts and ‘manipulate’ them helped.

“Excellent idea, we can have everything ready in no time,” Marehis said.

So she and Marehis sat by the campfire and worked together, Marehis wanted to know more about the ‘Friends’—they hadn’t really gotten to talk much, this was the first time they really got a chance to—Marehis thought the Friends sounded like her early days starting out working parties for Leliana’s Nightingales.

“…I uh, had an idea kind of, I’ve thought about running by the Spymaster,” Sera admitted. “For protecting Inky.”
“Well I’d certainly love to hear it,” Marehis said…sincerely, usually people said they’d love to hear ideas of hers sarcastically. So…nice.

“I dunno, there was this…Inky told gave you a run-down sort of, on shite that went on while you were away. The bloke nicking a pitcher from Flissa’s and trying to poison Ellie,” when Marehis nodded that she knew what she was talking about, Sera asked, “Leliana doesn’t got any of her people mixed in with the servant people?”

“Flissa is technically one of Leliana’s but she isn’t a fully trained Nightingale,” Marehis said. “Leliana has been wanting to put plants in the serving staff around Haven but the Inquisition has grown so much, so quickly, everyone is necessary where they are, and getting raw recruits out of the waitstaff would require training we haven’t numbers to spare to provide.”

“Well I was thinkin’ Friends is always looking out for each other—I’ve been chatty with lots of the people that work with Fliss, and in the Chantry and stuff, um. They all like Inky good—maybe I could recruit a few little people around Haven into the Friends of Red Jenny, no pranks or nothin’…not too much anyway, but just a few people that could keep an eye out. People get caught up in their dayjob, they’re focusing on waiting tables and cleaning hallways and pish, but put a spin on it being part of a secret club feeling all spy-y might make them keep their eyes and ears open, you know? No training required. Anyone sees anything, they can tell me and I’ll go put arrows in people that wanna hurt Inky.”

“That sounds like an excellent idea, Sera—protocol dictates threats should be neutralized and brought in for questioning…but if you could work with that,” she said, “I’m certain Leliana would find your reasoning sound. If you’d care to, write up a proposal—I could assist you if you’d like. Leliana could have time to consider it before we return to Haven.”

Oh shite, really? “Sweet!”

Sera and Marehis could hear everyone making their way back, round the time they started coming past the little waterfall, through the cavern that lead back to camp, Bull sounded…right pissed. Drunk, not angry. He was practically singing, his arms slung around Thom and that Stitches bloke’s shoulders. Oh.

Inky gasped, shooting up from her seat next to Dorian once she caught sight of them, “The Iron Bull? What’s wrong, what hurts?”

“Nothin’ Imekari, I’m great! I just killed a motherfucking dragon! I’m the Iron Fu—” Seeker looked right pissed—angry not drunk—as she elbowed him in the ribs. “Sorry, language, got it.”

“Stupid oaf’s rolled his bad ankle, other than that and being a total idiot, big lug’s alright,” Stitches reported as he and Rainier helped the Qunari seat himself by the fire, stretching out his leg. “Just needs to sit it on down a bit, he’ll be fine.”

“Is everyone else okay?” Inky asked, pensive, she sort of spun around, trying to lay eyes on everyone as they gathered in their camp.

“We are well, lethallan, our adventure was dangerous, but we were victorious, and Healer Adan and Master Stitches were very helpful seeing that everyone is in good health,” Solas assured.

“Oh, shit, Tumbles, everyone’s okay, really~” Varric was trying to promise urgently like he could stop her but nope, Inky was…damn it she was all teary, and that was making Sera teary!

“I was so scared! I’m so g-glad you’re all alright!” Ellie wailed, muffled as she wiped at her
eyes, and her arms got a bit trapped between her and the bodies that collided with her—Varric, Solas, and Thom had all moved at once to hug her, ended up hugging each other too which was friggin hilarious that! Even more funny when they ended up just hugging each other, Inky ducked out of their hold when she saw Madam de Fer, she didn’t look hurt or anything, just kind of dirty, her armor, but Ellie was rushing to hug her tight, asking how she was.

“I could certainly do with another bath, but I’m well, my dear girl, truly,” she said, pulling back to wipe tears out from under Inky’s eyes. “I take it we Dragon slayers have earned your forgiveness?” she asked teasingly.

“You all came back okay so I can stop being pretend mad,” Inky decided.

“Wonderful,” Vivienne said, then, “Now, did you have a pleasant lesson with Master Pavus?”

Oh Inky was excited then, nodding as she rushed back over to the requisition table and pulled away her newest sheet, “Dorian taught me about letters!” she reported, handing it off to Madam de Fer. Sera was nervous at first, Viv wasn’t exactly…she was a bitch, most the time, and didn’t seem like the best person to start off showing off Inky’s alphabet skills but the Enchanter took Ellie’s work in hand and she smiled in a way that seemed encouraging.

“Oh darling, this is simply marvelous,” Vivienne breathed as she smoothed a hand along Ellie’s handwriting, “just excellent work my dear,” she commended as she wrapped an arm around Ellie the two coming to join everyone around the fire, stew was just about ready. Baldy was sitting right up behind Marehis…they was kind of cute, right groady hearing them carry on their first night in the Hinterlands, jeeze. Maybe not having to be so secret would keep them from having so much…pent up…bleck! The second they sat down, Viv was passing Ellie’s work back and Inky was showing it to Sera and Marehis. Oh!

“Ink! You got so many!” Sera enthused, twenty down! Friggin boss! And her little q looked like a proper q!

“Da’vehn, you did so well!” Marehis said before passing it on to ‘sandra.

“Eleanor, this is wonderful,” Cassandra sounded…huh almost choked up about it, sounded kind of like she was worn out too, but she reached out for Inky and the girl went and sat with the Seeker, ‘sandra wrapping her arms around her while she sat with her back against the woman’s chestplate, “Did you enjoy your lesson?”

Ellie nodded, “Dorian’s a really great teacher!”

“Of course I am,” Dorian said proudly, “though I must say it isn’t terribly difficult when one’s student is focused and imbued with a disgusting—not an insult—amount of optimism.”

“I wasn’t feeling very optimistic,” Ellie said, resting a hand on the forearm around her neck, “I’m glad you’re safe, and you killed the Dragon right? Was it um…I don’t like killing things, but the Iron Bull makes it sound like Dragon slaying’s supposed to be fun. Was it fun?”

“It…was trilling, yes,” Cassandra allowed as she passed Inky’s work on to Varric who let off an appreciative whistle nodding as he looked it over, giving Ellie a thumbs up so he didn’t interrupt the Seeker, “it was a Ferelden Frostback, they are notoriously territorial creatures, but we were able to track it back to where it nests and hold our ground. Its greatest weakness is Frost—so Madam de Fer’s magic brought to bear was extremely helpful. The Inquisition won’t have to fear holding this camp, using the area beyond—there is clean water from the falls, and all sorts of plant
life. If you wish, perhaps tomorrow you could have your run of the valley and refill your personal stores? I believe...there was Elfroot, Spindleweed as well."

"Oh yeah, that sounds like fun! Do you need anything from around there Healer Adan, Mister Stitches? Would you like to come?"

What those two needed was a room. Shite. They wasn’t cuddlin’ or nothin’ but they was sitting right up next to each other and arm to arm, hands overlapping on the ground, and Adan seemed...he’d definitely been worried about the other man fighting a dragon of all things but he also liked the idea, like really liked it, the guy kept catching himself smirking, staring at the Charger’s Healer like he wanted to play...did healers play healer? Or would that be borin’ for them cuz they was Healers for real? Maybe it made it hotter, more authentic or whatever? Blah! Gross! Nope! Mental images! Sera didn’t like peeps, nowhere near her bits or her brains!

"We could use more blood lotus, I spotted it near the water," Stitches supposed.

Adan nodded. "Fresh would be best for trying again—"

"—oh you think we could make—?"

"—exactly, little bit of that Royal Elfroot..."

"Brilliant," Stitches breathed.

"So you’ll come?" Ellie asked.

"We will," oh cripes they spoke in unison and Stitches went a bit red, looking to Bull who was looking all sorts of amused as the Chargers Healer said, “Cork it. I will poison you so help me Maker.”

Bull just chuckled at that, “I wasn’t saying nothin,” he assured as Inky’s parchment got passed to him.  “Hold up! Imekari, you wrote all these?”

“Uh-huh,” Ellie nodded.

“You did an amazing job, Ellie-girl,” Thom said as he craned his neck to see the parchment from where he sat next to Bull.

“Thanks,” she said shyly, though she was excited to report, “Dorian taught me—I know the song, and I’ve almost got all the word shapes down!”

“Hell yeah! Song! We just killed a dragon, and Imekari’s gonna put Tethras out of business once she gets this writing thing down—hit it!”

“...hit what?” Inky asked uncertainly.

“My eardrums with the alphabet!”

So that’s how they celebrated the slaying of a Ferelden whatsit Dragon. Gathered around the campfire warm and cozy, everyone joining in or at least laughing along, as the Iron Bull belted out Inky’s alphabet song once he got the tune, eating some pretty bangin’ Ram stew, if Sera said so herself.

She didn’t have to though, Inky did, saying it was just ‘so good!’ and Marehis gave Sera credit for dinner and everyone even Viv complimented it.
Lady Emmauld could friggin’ eat it!

Their time in the Hinterlands blessedly came to a close, with a morning well spent allowing Eleanor to run wild with Sera on her heels all around the Dragon’s former territory, picking roots and herbs, though somehow…they were girls, and therefore Elfroot ended up woven into circlets they bestowed upon each other. It wasn’t a serious excursion by any means, it was merely a last opportunity to just…let them make play before they had to forge the path to Therinfal Redoubt. What was more, they found more of those shards for the Temple in the Oasis, and Sera did well to keep Eleanor distracted while the adults worked together to collect them, there was one perched precariously along one of the jagged rises of rock in the center of the valley. Cassandra endeavored to climb up and retrieve it herself, and she did. She also elbowed—quite accidentally, even now she felt badly for it—the Iron Bull in his good eye, she’d fallen off balance when she had the shard in hand and the Qunari had stepped up and caught her but she half-landed on the man, her back against his face and ultimately her elbow caught him in the eye. It was fine, he assured her though she was regretful, had a worried knot in her stomach until their Healers and Eleanor were declaring the man’s eye well, bruised, but his sight had not been damaged further and he grumbled, cheeks tinging in purple as the girl fussed over him for the stance of an entire five minutes of concerned questions and gently applying ointment to the injury, kissing his temple. And it had been nice when Eleanor made certain Cassandra was well, unhurt in her fall, amusing even to some extent to hear the young girl lecturing that Cassandra really should be more careful, gosh she could have been really hurt! From the mouth of a girl that once fell into a gulch collecting the things.

The journey to Therinfal Redoubt was long, and not entirely unpleasant, but trying in certain respects. Eleanor still relied on potion for sleep, though she had been able to catch a night or so without assistance as they traveled. They all still held to their word of sharing a tent which was cramped, and somewhat awkward but when fear struck Eleanor when she first woke in the morning, or drew her from her sleep in the night, she was easier to calm being able to lay eyes on them all, and what was more…to her mind, sometimes when she woke she feared in that way, she would slip it open, and under the light of her Marked hand she could see proof positive she was still secure in the present date. And there was once on an attempt at potionless sleep when nightmares scared the girl awake, she woke only Cassandra, holding true to the deal they’d struck that she would wake the Seeker if she had unpleasant dreams, and not the whole of their party because she’d risen, taken in the sight of her friends surrounding her and knew they were all safe, was able to relax once she made certain of the date, and then gently roused Cassandra to whisper to her that she’d been frightened but was alright, before curling up against the Seeker and falling back to sleep once more.

Twice more did Eleanor’s Mark feel as though it were spreading, grounding was able to cease her mind’s tricks the second time it happened, but the third had sent her breath pitching and they had to stop, Solas and Dorian worked together surprisingly enough, while Madam de Fer did have powerful elemental magic, the Tevinter man was able to call the warmth of fire into his hands without the caustic flame, Solas doused a rag in Embrium extract and water, while Dorian warmed it until it let off steam and then Eleanor was made to breathe through the rag for a moment to halt
the onset of an Asthma attack. The Iron Bull had taken care in swathing a layer of numbing ointment directly over her Marked skin, more along the inside of her wrist to where her mind was perceiving pain. Of course the Qunari…she wasn’t certain if it was merely panic to ease Eleanor’s suffering that sent the man rushing and forgetting that applying the ointment using his bare fingers would leave them numb, or if he knew well what he was doing and intentionally created a circumstance where the girl’s mind would be taken off her own trouble to fuss over his numb fingers, and ultimately to give her amusement at the misstep—it was his non dominant hand regardless and he endeavored to use it for menial tasks, clumsily trying to scratch an itch, handling his canteen, and he had the girl giggling over his attempts at eating dinner, persisting until she laughingly reprimanded him, insisting he use his other hand.

Cassandra was uncertain what the Iron Bull was planning for Eleanor’s birthday but in the aftermath of their Dragon fight, the Qunari hadn’t made to take any of the valuable things one could remove from the corps of a dragon, webbing or scales, or any of the weapons lodged between plates of scaling, struck there from former battles the beast had won through either death or forfeit of its opponents. He’d not even taken much of what he did seek as repayment for his hand in the creature’s defeat. He’d turned to Stitches, asked the man if he’d ‘brought it’ and the man had given him a large implement Cassandra was vaguely familiar with, a tool used in smithing to cut through bolts, and in this instance, a tooth. He did not take the whole of the tooth just the very, very tip of the sharp curved bone, and handed it off to his Charger with instructions to get it to Harrit, the Inquisition Blacksmith apparently knew what Bull wished with the thing, the only thing he said further on the matter was intoning to Stitches that Harrit was to ‘do whatever he think’ll look best, set it with Dawnstone, or whatever, just make it pretty’ but no matter what ‘they just gotta match’.

Cassandra had at last gotten a solid idea what she wished to get the girl. She’d already confided in Varric and the Dwarf was actually an admirable ally in this regard, had been encouraging of the idea and connected her with the right people. She’d actually worried they may have the same idea for what to get Eleanor, but Varric…had something similar planned, they’d need of the same leathersmith, but not the exact same idea.

Her idea came to her, as she watched Eleanor’s progress throughout their travel, with her studies under Dorian…Maker bless that man a thousand times over. When he and Eleanor vanished from the throne room Cassandra’s heart had stopped and there had been pain like hot sand ground into an open wound in her chest and she was not certain if she were about to collapse in her grief or surge forward and end the life of every Venatori left standing in Castle Redcliffe starting with Alexius. Leliana…oh that man was lucky it was Leliana and not Cassandra handling his extraction from Redcliffe, to Haven. She understood the man’s desperation, perhaps all too well now there had been…if the foulest demon in existence had approached her in the wake of Eleanor’s momentary demise, with offered means to bring her back she may well have disregarded her every vow, every bit of sense she had grasp of, and struck such a deal. But Alexius had attempted to remove every trace of Eleanor from time, and he may well have succeeded had Dorian not intervened, miraculously so, casting against the man, protecting Eleanor as they traversed that dark future, returned her to them.

And now he was teaching her to read, to write, and it brought back a part of Cassandra’s life she hadn’t expected to find again. Varric had connections that had connections to libraries, was able to send out a missive with a list of book titles Cassandra had written up, and they received most of what she’d asked for, a few small books that Cassandra had enjoyed in her youth. Every night as they settled in their tent for sleep, Eleanor lay against her and listened as the Seeker read to her—it lent something to the girl’s understanding of how the words on the page connected to spoken language, figuring out just how the different letters connected to make the assortment of sounds they did, even when they were unexpected. The letter x vexed her to no end, as did the combination of ch when it made shhh sounds, ‘Why don’t we just use s-h instead of c-h then?’ and
silent ‘k’ s boggled her mind. She came to acknowledge that yes, the k in know was the only way to be certain if someone were saying ‘now’ or ‘know’ but was it really necessary in ‘knife’? she leveled these questions at Dorian of course and the man had the damnedest time coming up with explanation for her. It amused Cassandra to no end, that the man had to handle Eleanor’s appalled questions while the Seeker got to enjoy the girl’s quiet contentment simply enjoying having a story read to her. It was relief that the girl did truly enjoy books, and Cassandra…oh she could not regret more that she’d so blindly seen what she wanted to see. But it was being righted now, and in admirable fashion. Dorian Pavus had not struck her as a patient man, but he did well with Eleanor in their lessons, did not lose his temperament with the girl and she was imbued with a newfound confidence. In part, due to Dorian’s instruction, helping her learn to read and write and being so very encouraging while doing so.

But her confidence was also regained by using her newfound, building knowledge in simple ways, often at the suggestion of one Thom Rainier. The man was older, and he insisted his eyes weren’t great—though the Iron Bull had seen to it that Stitches gave the man a proper eye exam after he signed on in Haven, and on the way to the Hinterlands, spectacles had arrived for Rainier’s use. But he ‘lost’ them—often in an inside pocket of the leather overcoat he now wore, made of the brown leather common to the Bull’s Chargers, matching the armor that had been made for him, uniform. He would call on Eleanor to assist him reading notes he’d written down to remind himself of something, and as they traveled if they came across a sign he would squint at the hewn image and ask ‘Ellie-girl’ if she could tell him what it said. What was more, he’d written down every recipe he could think of from memory, and created a sort of loose-leaf cookbook, pulling out recipes when it was time to prepare meals, more of which he took over, with Eleanor as his helpful assistant. He would sit patiently and wait for her to carefully sound out the words written with painstaking neatness to not hinder her further, and congratulated and encouraged her every victory, and softened every misstep, carefully correcting, and heartened her to try again on her own, and he seemed to keep track of words she’d struggled with—such recipes got reused a day or so later, and Eleanor was bright with enthusiasm when she realized she understood more easily.

Their journey to Therinfal Redoubt also rendered answers on how best to move forward with the Mages and the fact that there was an amulet that could cast one through space and time.

Or at least, there was such an amulet.

First thing first. The Mages. Eleanor kept to her word and discussed how to accept the rebel mages into their ranks with those she trusted. The whole of her party gathered around, and she opened the floor to their opinions. Even the likes of Varric and Rainier, Sera and Marehis who would hold no strong ties to magic.

Eleanor’s greatest reticence over the Rebel Mages was what she bore witness to in the future. She lamented they’d not the time, ironically enough, to gather more information. She’d spoken to future Enchanter Fiona, imprisoned in Redcliffe, the worst afflicted among them, Red Lyrium had been growing from her body, merging her into the wall of her cell Eleanor shuddered to inform them. The woman had been imprisoned for…something. There was some reason Alexius had turned against her—Dorian spoke of how Enchanter Fiona defied Alexius’s ban on the Chantry, she was Andrasten through and through, and he was certain enough to postulate that Fiona refused to bow before another god when the Magister commanded his followers to worship the ‘Elder One’, and landed herself imprisoned for her insubordination. Eleanor and Dorian bore witness to other mages in captivity, that Eleanor recognized from their time in present Redcliffe, however they had also witnessed converts to the Elder One, rebel mages that sacrificed their fellow Mages and themselves to become abominations because the Elder One had demanded it or some such nonsense. Horrific nonsense, and Cassandra’s heart clenched when Eleanor began rubbing at the palm of her Marked hand as she spoke.
With all said and done, Eleanor and Cassandra met privately to compose a letter to the advisors in Haven—with the Rebel Mages inbound, a decision would need to be made and the Advisors would need it to know how to proceed, how to handle the Mage’s arrival. The Inquisition would be taking the Mages in on a probationary status—they would know that they had not yet secured their place in Haven, with the Inquisition. Depending on their actions, how they did in their training to face the Breach, they would either be conscripted, made to seal the Breach the prisoners of the Inquisition, or they could prove themselves to be allies, be offered as such with all the freedoms that implied. Their actions would dictate their fate.

As for the curse-amulet Alexius used…

One night on the road—after Eleanor was dosed with potion and sleeping soundly, choosing to do so tucked up against Varric—Cassandra, Dorian, Solas, Madam de Fer, and the Iron Bull slipped out of the tent and held a meeting of sorts to discuss the ramifications of time magic.

“While it seems Alexius could cast using the Amulet without the aid of Ellie’s Mark after his initial messing with time, it would seem it is still bound by the magic that created the Breach,” Dorian reasoned as he withdrew the amulet from a robe pocket, setting the thing on the ground in the midst of the circle they formed just outside the tent. “Ellie agrees that its reasonable to deduce that the amulet ultimately could not have cast her from time completely, Alexius’s endeavor was fruitless. Likely he originally wished only to access time magic that would allow him to go back and stop the attack that killed his wife and infected Felix with the Blight, but this amulet is tied to whatever power is in Ellie’s Mark, in the Breach. The amulet cannot go back any farther than the very moment the Breach exploded into existence.”

So that meant that it was not as great a threat to all of time as they once feared.

But ultimately, it was why the amulet needed to be destroyed.

They could have kept it in safe keeping, Solas seemed rather animate that they endeavor to do so but even he came around to the idea that nothing could be worth the risk, the temptation the Amulet bore. Cassandra honestly could think of no end of reasons to cast herself back in time, to see if perhaps she could replace her former self, that it would be the Cassandra that loved Eleanor with the very fullness her past self had hated her with, that she could make better choices. Save Eleanor from imprisonment—be there the very moment the girl fell from the sky, care for her, gently break the news of the destruction at the Conclave, the loss of the Divine, of her friend Trevelyan, be better prepared for the assault on the Breach, suppress the Rifts, suppress the Breach, actually listen to the girl in their first official meeting with the Herald of Andraste, see to it she was not made to feel ignorant, stop the soldiers on the Coast from dying, secure the Mages before—

It was for naught. Things were the way they were, to mess with time was unsafe, selfish, and ultimately undoable. And Cassandra could not replace her former self…save killing the woman and taking her place but the ramifications of such an action were unknowable and likely would result in her own demise, to destroy her past self would mean her present self wouldn’t exist…but then she wouldn’t exist to come back in the first place and…ugh! It was all very confusing. And ultimately pointless to think of. Dorian had experimented after a fashion. Before time travel, as he was going to infiltrate the Vinatori base, at multiple settlements and the last sign of civilized life, Dorian had penned letters, dropped them off at a handful of different mail carriers as he passed through on his way through Orlais, sent letters to be delivered to himself in the Hinterlands. And then he was cast back in time—he wondered if he would replace himself in the timeline, that there would be only one Dorian Pavus in existence, and he would be living in hiding in Redcliffe’s chantry. However, lo and behold, on their last day in the Hinterlands one of his
earliest sent missives came to him—postmarked just days before their meeting in Redcliffe, and now as they traveled Leliana had intercepted the rest, sent word that the last missive, postmarked the day they met Dorian, written in his hand, was delivered. Even as the timelines overlapped, there was a Dorian Pavus traipsing about Tevinter, and eventually Orlais heading for his first adventure in time travel, even while the Dorian they knew, was present in Redcliffe.

So ultimately, they decided to destroy the amulet. Late that evening, Maker they did not seek their bedrolls until nearly three in the morning, but that damned amulet was powerful and it had taken much…well…and then again not truly. She wasn’t sure what to think. One moment they had all been working together to destroy the damn thing—leaving their camp entirely as they were certain it would be loud work, but it would not be crushed under the Iron Bull’s might, even when Madam de Fer froze the thing solid and the Bull came down on it with his war axe. Dorian endeavored to banish the thing but it was resistant to such magic and Cassandra attempted to melt it down, disintegrate it by pouring out an entire bottle of lyrium and sending the liquid boiling as hot as she could, all she did was set the thing aflame momentarily and give herself a nosebleed and a terrible headache, such she felt even as they made their journey forward, and when she insisted to Eleanor she was fine and there was no need to stop, the girl asked Marehis, who occasionally rode with Cassandra but more often rode in the saddle with Solas now, if she would mind riding with Sera so the Elf girl wouldn’t have to ride on her own. Surprisingly enough Sera said ‘I got this, Inky’ and took the reigns herself while Eleanor slipped into the saddle before Cassandra and took the reigns of her steed in hand, had the Seeker wrap her arms around the girl’s waist and was instructed to lay her head on Eleanor’s shoulder and just rest, even if she could not sleep she could at least close her eyes and not have to focus and concentrate on riding.

Ahh but the amulet—it did end up destroyed. When all their efforts failed Solas stepped forward and with a wave of his hand and a muttered incantation, sounding of some strange Dalish, the thing began to crack and crumble until it was ashes that blew away in the breeze. It seemed simple enough but Solas assured them it was a very arduous spell, required much power and concentration focused and brought to bear that the caster could not put much effort into showmanship.

The Iron Bull had stared at Solas a moment, something in his gaze that startled Cassandra…not that she was frightened of the Qunari, but suddenly made to feel she should be cautious of Solas. And then the Iron Bull patted the Elf man on the back and told him he did a damn good job. The Qunari had been consulted throughout due to the nature of his occupation. His reports to the Ben Hessrath. Dorian and Madam de Fer were let in on the secret of his spy work as…well there was no real reason not to, the whole of Eleanor’s party knew aside from them simply because Vivienne had not been with them on the Storm Coast and Dorian…well neither had he, he’d only just joined. As it was, the Iron Bull had been holding off on reporting to his superiors out of respect for Eleanor. Informing his superiors that time magic existed and it was in the hands of Tevinters, let alone Tevinter supremacists, on top of them using it to meddle with the affairs of the Breach, would spell their doom. He was certain, as were they all, that if he reported such a thing to Par Vollen, an army of Qunari would be inbound for Ferelden fast enough to make their heads spin. So, upon the destruction of the amulet, the Iron Bull composed a report that merely informed his superiors they’d encountered and dismantled a Tevinter Supremacist cell, their ringleader was in the custody of the Inquisition, the Mages were allied to seal the Breach, and they were on their way to secure the Templars—all mention of time travel and the magic that created it, left out entirely.

There would be repercussions of their time travel eventually but that wasn’t Par Vollen’s concern. Eleanor sat straight up in her bed roll where she lay between Cassandra and Marehis the first morning on the road to Therinfal Redoubt, gasping awake with the panicked premonition, “A Rift is going to open inside that storage cell in Castle Redcliffe in 9:42!” tumbling from her lips.
This was met with Dorian shifting in his bedroll sleepily, sighing and mumbling out in concurrence, “And in the throne room where we returned.”

It was all rather mind boggling and a half-asleep Cassandra had sought to figure out just what they were on about—the fact that Rifts had appeared where time travelers appeared, one at Redcliffe’s gate, and one in the Chantry where Dorian arrived, likewise there would likely be Rifts that marked where he and Eleanor were cast forward and came back. Once her mind caught up and Cassandra pulled the girl back into laying alongside her, Sera lay on the Seekers other side and snorted before rolling over to snuggle against Cassandra’s back, “You okay, ‘sandra? S’Inky okay?”

“Everyone is well,” Cassandra whispered back before she pulled Eleanor so the girl’s head was tucked up under her chin, bending to murmur assurance against her curls, “We shall send word to the Arl, advise her to be cautious in the coming year and to send for you at once should such a thing occur.”

And they did, ‘we’ being Cassandra and Eleanor, she enlisted the girl to assist in composing the letter to the Arl. Eleanor was not quite so confident enough to attempt penning any of the missive of her own power, she’d only just begun learning then, but Cassandra had taken more time in doing so, explaining the words she chose, how they were spelled, why they were spelled as such.

No, the first thing Eleanor penned was, well, it wasn’t a letter exactly. Marehis woke one morning to find a spare piece of parchment laying at the head of her bedroll with her name written out in shaky but steadily improving handwriting. When she picked it up and flipped it over, there was just ‘Hi’ written on the back and a circle with lines coming from it meant to depict the sun, like a wish of good morning.

Little notes from Eleanor began cropping up all over as they traveled. Varric took some of his own parchment and cut it into strips that he then stacked, folded in half and sewed the crease so the pages would be bound together but easily torn away. A sort of flip-open parchment pad he handed off to Eleanor and told her to ‘knock herself out’. She did, any opportunity she would leave little, usually one worded, though they grew to sort of sentences over time, missives where she would greet her friends, or something small but encouraging, found left in boots or slipped into their packs. She wrote to the Iron Bull, just his name but in her hand ‘the’ and all, and he woke with the missive adorning a horn, a move that made the Qunari chuckle. Madam de Fer received a ‘thank you’ note for sharing her tent, even though the girl had been rather vocal of her gratitude, and Vivienne…the woman had been kind, no biting remarks that the girl should have no need of such coddling. Cassandra had worried the woman would find fault in Eleanor’s distress, but no. In fact, there was a new ritual in Eleanor’s routine. After they settled in to camp for the evening and had dinner as they made their way to Therinfal, Madam de Fer started taking tea with Eleanor—Marehis sometimes joined them but it was usually just the girl and Vivienne, drinking tea and having a chat for the better part of an hour or so, and Cassandra had heard when Eleanor was thanking her again for allowing them to share her tent, Madam de Fer had regally informed the girl that she did not ‘entirely despise’ sharing her tent with all and sundry. In point of fact, she was pleased it could bring her comfort.

One of the first of such little messages Cassandra received was when she had suffered that horrible headache from her failed attempt to destroy the amulet, and they’d settled in for the evening. Sera was concerned enough over Cassandra’s exhausted, pained state, to offer to lay down with her if she needed a nap. It was kind, and it convinced the Seeker to curl up in the darkened tent to rest while dinner was prepared, though she insisted that Sera enjoy her evening, perhaps find some amusement with Eleanor. When she rose to join the others for supper, her place was set,
and there was a little folded up piece of parchment made to stand by her dinner plate, with ‘Cassandra’ written upon it in Eleanor’s scrawling script. At first she perceived it as an attempt at writing the Seeker’s name left as offering, perhaps as a marker like at some official banquets Cassandra had attended in her life, but upon further examination, when she turned it over, inside there was the instruction to ‘Feeel Beter’ oh goodness she did try, and there was a little humped, pointed shape at the bottom of the missive, ahh. It was a ‘heart’, not anatomically correct, but much cuter than what an accurate image would be. It was almost heartbreakingly sweet, and Cassandra was very careful with it, folding it neatly and mindful of where she tucked it away, she wanted to safeguard it as keepsake.

“I am feeling better now. Thank you, Eleanor.”

“Gosh, I’m glad,” the girl said as she came and sat in the Seeker’s lap, facing the woman so she could raise a hand to feel her forehead, and while she was not feverish Eleanor still worried, “You’re not coming down with something, you’re sure?”

“It was just a migraine.”

Eleanor had nodded. And then cautiously, “Um. Cassandra. I know its none of my business, so you can tell me to take a leap—”

Certainly not. “I meant it when I said you may speak with me of anything Eleanor, you’ll be told no such thing. What troubles you?”

“I know Templars take Lyrium, and its addictive when you’re not a Mage. Do Seekers do the same? I mean headaches, migraines that bad—before you washed your face this morning your nose had a little red under it like you’d had a nosebleed—did you um, forget to take some?”

“Ahh. No, Eleanor, Seekers do not imbibe Lyrium as Templars do. But I appreciate you endeavoring to think of what could be making me feel unwell and how to fix it, it was merely everything catching up with me I suppose.”

Eleanor sighed with relief. “That’s good. I’m glad you didn’t have to take Lyrium to be a Seeker. Poor Cullen though. The Inquisition keeps him supplied right?”

“The Inquisition would supply anyone who had need of Lyrium,” Cassandra replied. It was not her place to discuss Cullen’s private business, and it was not a thing either of them saw fit to burden Eleanor with.

“I’m really glad,” Eleanor said. “Lyrium withdraw is horrible and dangerous. You get so so sick and,” she shuddered. “It’s just bad.”

“I am sorry,” Cassandra said sympathetically, taking the girl’s hand in hers. Street lyrium was dangerous at best, she was not certain how common addiction was among non-magical people in poverty seeking a high, “…someone you knew suffered as such?”

“Oh gosh, no, not really,” Eleanor said, and for a moment Cassandra held her breath to brace for Eleanor to reveal she’d somehow discovered Cullen’s battle with Lyrium withdraw but no, “Ava…Ava had a boyfriend, a Templar that worked in her Circle. They escaped together.”

“Hold now,” Dorian interrupted, interest piqued. “Ava, mentor. She was a Healer you said —she was also a Mage and she escaped a Circle?With her Templar boyfriend? Do you lack the details? You must, otherwise by now you would have told me to shut my trap and be enthralling me in a regaling tale of star-crossed lovers.”
“I wouldn’t tell you to shut up,” Eleanor said, “that would be mean, and you talk pretty—both voice wise and I appreciate ‘enthralling’ and ‘regaling’ in the same sentence.”

“Albeit redundant,” Madam de Fer noted drily.

“I liked it, it was very fancy,” Eleanor giggled. “But you’re still the fanciest Madam de Fer, no worries.”

“As long as that’s clear,” Vivienne said, mirthful.

“Hmm…okay. So. Ava’s magic cropped up when she was around twelve. She was Circled and it was pretty miserable for her. She…was an easy target for Templars. Different and poor. No one big on the outside to defend her on the inside. But she had good friends, they always looked out for each other, and eventually, as she got older, there was this Templar—Alec—that was sweet on her, really came to know her, they loved each other very much.”

“So they decided to run away together?” Dorian asked sounding excited by the idea.

Eleanor shook her head. “Harrowing was coming up soon and Alec wanted to make sure Ava succeeded, so he got her and some of her friends access to Lyrium, so they could practice entering the Fade in their dreams to train. One night, Ava was asleep, and she heard one of her friends screaming in the Fade. Um. A Templar had…um. He’d been making passes, unwanted advances, always targeting her friend, making creepy compliments, grabbing at her, and when she told him she wasn’t interested, tried convincing him to lose interest—relationships were forbidden and he would only get in trouble—he just got her written up for fraternizing with him. So, that night, he’d decided to take what he wanted regardless of how she felt about it—and he’d been trying to keep her quiet, ended up knocking her unconscious. Her distress in the Fade woke Ava up and she broke into her friend’s dorms to stop him, you’ve got one shot you know? Templars can suppress magic and she wanted to make sure he wouldn’t just be startled and in a position to fight back. She cast knock him on his butt, but it ended up killing him. More Templars come and um, well Ava was in serious trouble. They spun it to their superiors that Ava and her friend had been attempting to escape, killed the Templar in cold blood.”

That…that was abhorrent, every bit of it.

“The Seekers, surely they did not believe such a thing?” Cassandra asked, appalled. “He would have suppressed their magic immediately if he found them making escape. They would not be able to murder him, with magic at least.”

Eleanor shrugged. “I don’t think any of this was brought to the Seeker’s. I mean I’m sure they got called in once there was an actual escape. The Circle didn’t particularly care about the Templar’s misdeeds—just that he was dead. It wasn’t like Ava or her friend had parents that could have pull with Circle higherups.”

Cassandra had never thought to take such note but she’d been called to investigate claims of abuse among Templars, and as she thought on it now, it had always been in instances where the Mage in the situation had been the child of nobility, once an Arl’s daughter, and another the son that was not gentry, but he came from an affluent merchant family that made heavy donations to the Chantry, to the Circle they entrusted with the care of their child. Only once had a Templar been exiled from the Order because of their misdeeds, the rest, despite Cassandra’s recommendations, the rest, no matter that they’d been found guilty, their superiors had seen to it they were merely relocated to other Circles to placate their donors.

Cassandra had often lamented Eleanor’s upbringing. A Circle would have provided her
security in her welfare, she would have had a roof overhead, food, healers, caretakers. But the Maker’s ways were above her own, the girl had been born in a country that housed only one Circle*, where their Templar forces were nothing to speak of in comparison to Antiva’s southern counterparts. If Eleanor had led such a life she may well have perished in the fall of the Circles, Antiva’s had been horrific. And now, it horrified Cassandra to think that in another life she may have met Eleanor under such a circumstance as an investigation into the Templars…and then further still because she realized no, if such a thing befell the girl, she had no one to defend her, no outside influence to kick up a fuss if she were mistreated or even harmed in the worst of ways. No Seeker would be called to investigate the claims of copperless orphan. And she did not feel much better about what exactly happened to such victims, those whose voices would go unheard,

“So, Ava and her friend were slotted to be made Tranquil,” Eleanor explained. “But one of her Mage friends was apprentice to the Grand Enchanter, and so working with Alec, they stole the Grand Enchanter’s and the head Templar’s keys to the Phylactery vault* and stole Ava’s Phylactery, those of her friends, and broke out of the Circle.”

“Good show!” Dorian cheered, although he was mindful that, “I don’t suppose they got to live happily ever after?”

Eleanor shook her head. “I mean at first yeah, they were glad to be out but…it was a lot to deal with, you know? Having to go into hiding, putting distance between them and the Circle, fending for themselves. They couldn’t go back to their families, that would be the first place Templars would look especially since they’d be going in blind. And then um. Well Alec…Lyrium’s hard to get outside Chantry supply. And it costs the world on the street, and the risk isn’t worth it because more often than not, its fake, or cut with something dangerous to spread it out more across customers. So he just stopped cold. Withdraw hit him hard, made him so so sick and after a while he went into shock and died.”

That had Eleanor…well Cassandra had already been pulling the girl closer of her own accord but she wrapped her arms around Cassandra’s neck murmuring how very glad she was Cassandra did not have any such affliction.

It was a concern of Cassandra’s. Getting involved with the Commander. While was not suffering quite so badly, and as time went on, it was trying but there was always the chance, the possibility that eventually he may begin using Lyrium again, or suffer such from the lack of it, and it wasn’t unthinkable that as it stands, no matter what, the stress and strain he puts on himself will undoubtedly strip years off of his life. It seemed reckless, foolish to get involved with someone in such a situation, but she’d come to understand the loss of a loved one was not love lost. Even as she faced the ultimate loss of Eleanor, she’d wished for many things, for the girl to be returned, for Alexius to pay for what he had done, for the Venatori to rue the day they sought to harm the Herald, but she hadn’t regretted knowing the girl, did not wish to forget her altogether. And life was such an uncertain thing, nothing was without risk. Cassandra herself, Maker forbid, could suffer some demise at any time, in battle, to some such illness, her horse could throw her and crush her head under hoof. She would not rob herself the opportunity to know this man in any capacity they desired to, simply because it, like all things, would eventually find some end, either in a dissolving of their relationship or in death. That was simply life.

And Maker he was…truly something. Kind and compassionate and brave, she understood his conviction to leave the order and all its hold behind him, respected it. His letters were a sort of reprieve she found, like that she found in books as a child, though of course his missives were not quite so long. Some were—obviously not novel length—but lengthy letters, page after page of what seemed like he was dumping the entire contents of his mind onto parchment. What he had done that day, what he was thinking of from the past, the present, plans and ideas he had for the
Inquisition’s future. And always, always he asked of her wellbeing, and of Eleanor. When their report came in to the Commander and Josephine of Alexius’s misdeeds in Redcliffe, he had written, offered to take leave, join them on their way to the Templar fortress—he would face his former comrades if Eleanor had need of him...if Cassandra, had need of him, insofar as if she wished for his assistance in negotiating with the part of the Order he had once worked in, or if perhaps just to help Eleanor feel more secure—another ally at her side, another person she could rely on for guidance or comfort or protection.

And he did not just write Cassandra. Eleanor, oh her eyes were alight with delighted surprise when mail came and there was a letter addressed directly to ‘Ellie’. She would get a few notes from the Lieutenant passed along through Bull once she gained the confidence to send him a note herself, and his response came the following day sent along with his report to the Qunari who had taken a sacred vow of ‘no peeking’ with Eleanor—under penalty of having to cleave his pinkie from his hand if he broke his word. But her first piece of personal correspondence came from Commander Cullen, Cassandra had seen the letter come in, handed it to the girl and she immediately...she hadn’t the most secure grasp on reading yet but she knew her name by sight after Cremisius’s gift. She smiled and carefully broke the wax seal before looking up at Cassandra and shyly asking if she would help her.

The two sat together and they took their time, Cassandra encouraging the girl as she very carefully worked to quietly sound out the message she’d received, Cassandra ready to step in if she found a word she could wholly not conquer and while it was slow going, there was no need, and it set a warmth in the Seeker’s chest when she saw the Commander had been mindful, considerate of Eleanor’s reading ability. Her name came in his usual jagged script, the man wrote...quickly, sometimes Cassandra struggled with its legibility, especially if he were writing about something that excited him, but to Eleanor he’d taken the time to write in neat precise, somewhat larger than usual lettering, all of them capitalized as Eleanor may struggle with their lowercase counterparts, and he’d chosen carefully the vocabulary he used. He asked after her wellbeing and offered to join them if she wished his assistance with the Templars. Cassandra was a great deal more help when Eleanor took to the task of replying to him, unsteadily writing out that she was alright, that ‘Cassandra and everyone’ were taking great care of her, and that while she did appreciate the offer, she knew the Inquisition would need him in Haven for their inbound Mages, but...oh she wrote that she missed him and hopes he’s feeling well and everything is going well in Haven. ‘Love, Ellie’.

It was incredibly precious, and she would throttle the man if he did not keepsake the missive. Though she felt most certain he would and Maker she did love that. And he did—his next letter to Cassandra said as much, and he was so incredibly proud of Eleanor’s progress. That he missed the girl likewise—he admitted he hadn’t been certain how he would swing joining them when he offered, but if she’d said yes, he would have merely called it ‘Herald’s orders’ and made leave.

However, as Therinfal Redoubt loomed in the distance, Cassandra grew nervous about who else wouldn’t be joining them. They required ten noble families of Orlais to bend the arm of the Lord Seeker, so that he would have to meet with Eleanor and discuss a possible alliance with the Inquisition. Half of their numbers had been lost, denounced their allegiance to the Inquisition due to their ties to Grand Duke Gaspard. Their dragon slaying efforts were wholly useless, Cassandra feared. The slain beast regained them quite a good deal of acclaim, several new allies in Ferelden given their location, but only four new alliances of Orlesian noble houses, and Lord Seeker was not a generous man, but he was a stubborn one, even before his strange display in Val Royeaux.

But when they woke to make the final stretch to the Templar fortress, Lady Josephine was pleased to inform them there would indeed be ten couples of Marquis and Marquesses representing
their houses. Confirmation went out from the Seekers of Truth that Lord Seeker would speak with Eleanor when they arrived. There was a Marquis and Marquess that traveled nonstop for days to catch up and be there in time to stand with their allies to secure their chances with the Templars.

They were the first Eleanor greeted when they arrived, she, like Cassandra, was wholly shocked to see them, though it took a moment to fully make the connection it was them, thankfully they wore the same style masks they’d adorned in Haven—with only their eyes covered.

“Marquis and Marquess Marchand!” Eleanor enthused as she slid out of Russel’s saddle, and Cassandra heard Madam de Fer make a ‘tsk’ing sound of disapproval at how the girl rushed to meet their surprise guests as the Seeker moved to join the Herald, though there was some measure of dignity to be found when the girl reached them and dipped them a polite bow.

“Bonjour Herald Eleanor, it is wonderful to see you again,” Marquess Marchand greeted with a regal nod.

Cassandra came to stand at Eleanor’s back, Marehis on her heels for the very reason the Seeker had been so swift to join the girl. she’d gone bounding up to people that may well be her enemy now, perhaps here to do some harm, subterfuge for the sake of earning a few points with the Grand Duke. “We were informed you had rescinded your allegiance to the Inquisition,” Cassandra said.

“We did, and we humbly seek to apologize,” the Marquis said, “we are honored to assist you in your endeavors to acquire the Templar’s assistance with the Breach.”

… “I apologize but I would ask why the sudden change in heart,” Cassandra questioned. It…it could not be as simple as them merely resuming their alliance on a whim, there could be ulterior motives, there could be—

The Marquis said, “When we sent word to your Ambassador that we were dissolving our alliance, she wrote back that while it was regrettable, the Inquisition wished us well,” Lady Montilyet did have quite the way with words and tact but Cassandra found it doubtful her well wishes so moved the Marquis and his wife.

And they hadn’t. But the scrawling, ever-improving handwriting of the Herald of Andraste had. Marehis’s cherished ‘Hi’ was not the first missive Eleanor had penned.

“But then Lady Eleanor wrote to us, saying she understood our decision, that friendship is important,” the Marquis explained, Maker help them, Eleanor termed their allegiance to a political head seeking to usurp the throne of Orlais a ‘friendship’, “and that she hoped that, while we are no longer a friend of the Inquisition, that we would still consider her our friend, that she was regrettable of our decision only because it meant she would not get to see us again, as she’d intended to return our daughter’s storybook to us in person when we arrived. So she sent it along with her letter, so it would be safely returned to us.”

The Marquess withdrew a small blue tome. There was a silk ribbon sewn into its binding that could be used to mark its pages but there was also a slip of parchment, it looked like it had been torn for scrap paper, and used to mark a place in the book, ‘Read me’ written at the top of the scrap-paper bookmark in the earliest carnation of Eleanor’s handwriting. The Marquess opened to the passage it marked, but it was not the story there, that was of great importance to the couple, but the underlined passage, the last line underlined in such a way it blended into the margin to point to the neat, cursive handwriting written within. “This is a saying I think on often. When I was found a Mage I lost my family, but gained a new one—friends and mentors. When White Spire fell I lost them all, but I regained my family. Loss is always great but I’m always stronger for it. I’m...
to go to the Conclave, that we will not find peace, that I might be recaptured by the Templars, separated from my parents again, but I have faith. The Maker will provide and I believe, no matter what happens at the Conclave, we can be made stronger for it. No matter what happens, ‘Family is a circle of strength and love with every birth and every union the circle grows. In every crisis we face, it strengthens*’.”

“I wasn’t…I’m just learning how to read and write—I had to dictate my letter to a friend of mine,” Eleanor admitted, “he wrote what I said, and then I copied the best I could since…well Charlotte asked me to deliver her message personally and since you weren’t coming, I tried to do it as personally as possible. But I wasn’t sure how exactly to phrase what Charlotte wanted me to pass along to you, and when I looked through the book I saw she referenced the Conclave…I might have picked up that word pretty fast, Dorian—my friend—he read it to me and I thought it would be better if she spoke for herself. Charlotte didn’t want you to be weakened by her loss, she would want you to find strength in it. She wants you to live the best life you can. To be happy. She knows you’ll see her again someday and when you do, she wants to hear about all the marvelous things you did.”

The Marquess looked to her husband and the man nodded before his wife knelt before Eleanor, never mind that her skirts were pressed to the dirty stone underfoot as she extended the tome to the girl. “Thank you, Eleanor. You’ve given us all we needed from this book, we would like you to have it now.”

“Are you sure?” Eleanor asked cautiously, she knew well it was rude to turn away an offered gift but…well that certainly did not matter here Maker. Was Marehis crying? Cassandra felt she might cry. Where was Solas with his handkerchiefs?

“We are,” the Marquis said, “It would please us very much if this book were to be used as the Maker intended—it was the first book Charlotte learned to read on her own when she was a girl. Perhaps the same could be said of you.”

Eleanor smiled as she took the tome in hand and nodded, determined as she said, “Thank you. For the book, and for still being my friends.”

“And as your friends, we will see too it the Lord Seeker must speak with you, my dear,” the Marquess said as she rose, smoothing her skirts. “by your leave, Eleanor.”

The girl nodded, and the couple went to join the group of gathered nobility, many of which were staring at the Herald as if trying to gauge just when to approach her themselves…though they held an air more like circling vultures than anything else, Eleanor certainly paid it no mind as she turned to face her friends and allies gathering now behind Cassandra and Marehis.


“Gosh, I can’t believe they came! I just wanted to make sure they got their book back and Charlotte’s message, she went through so much trouble to get it to—,” she stopped short as if she’d just thought of something.

“Eleanor?” Cassandra asked as the girl remained silent.

“Huh. Magic feels full when I think about it.”

“Full?”

The girl shook herself as if to clear up her thoughts and she said, “Well the book reminds
me of all the allies I met in Val Royeaux—our team here, and magic says I’ve met everyone I needed to, I guess, for my party. Dorian was the last but…Cole hasn’t popped up again. I wonder where he is.”

“Cole?” Marehis questioned. Cassandra’s mind drew a blank.

“Oh! I forgot to tell you about him I guess. Sorry. We met in Val Royeaux.”

…they had been with Eleanor that entire trip, met everyone she had, save the Elf she met when she made her rooftop excursion that bore the peonies she gifted to Madam de Fer, “Your magic said the rooftop gardener was meant to join our cause?” she asked uncertainly.

Eleanor shook her head. “No, I didn’t meet Cole on the roof—he was in my room. Well the Marquis and Marquess’s room, but I was using it.”

“Da’len there was a stranger in your bedchambers, you did not- I-” Marehis looked horrified at the notion that someone had slipped past them, that the girl had been intruded upon by someone they did not know. In…it had to have been the night that was the only other time the girl was on her own!

“Not a stranger. Cole. He’s nice, he wasn’t up to anything bad and magic pinged the moment I saw him…he’s a friend of Charlotte’s. She had this book with her when she was at the Conclave, took it with her into the Fade when she died. She knew Cole from White Spire, she said….he’s dead but then not-dead,” the girl spoke slowly as if carefully recalling something that she had thought to have forgotten entirely, “He was able to go meet her in the Fade and return to our world—she gave the book to him, and he appeared and gave it to me. He’s the one that told me that Thom carried me in after Madam de Fer’s party and that Marehis changed me into my sleep things… I’d…I’d forgotten all about him until…” Eleanor looked about then as if she expected to find the boy she spoke of in the crowd. “Huh.”

“Eleanor, you say you spoke to this Charlotte in the Fade. You were likely still dreaming and did not realize it,” Madam de Fer offered.

“Nope Cole just startled me right to death, I was ready to scream for Marehis, he just poof! Was there on my bed when I woke up from seeing Charlotte. and his hand was real, and the book is definitely real.”

“His hand?!” Cassandra and Marehis asked in unison, over the chorus of the Iron Bull’s rumbling in time with Varric and Rainier’s variants of what was in essence, the realization there was a boy somewhere in the world they had to kill—make dead and just-dead.

“Inky, you see him again, you point and I’ll shoot!” Sera seethed.

“No shooting! It wasn’t anything bad! I know it sounds bad but…Cole isn’t…from literally any other stranger in the world I would have found the entire thing creepy, but he wasn’t being groady. And magic wouldn’t ping on someone who wanted to hurt me. Cole doesn’t seem the sort to want to hurt anyone really.”

That was…not entirely…Cassandra did not know what to think. Though her next thought was rather rude, and toward the Maker, and she profusely apologized to Him in silence it was just…it had started to rain quite suddenly, it actually startled her, and Eleanor’s head was bare to the sky and rain just…set worry in her now, it might be ‘rude’ or out of etiquette for Eleanor to cover her head but any Marquis or Marquess that held issue with it could face Cassandra’s wrath.
“Oh da’vehenan!” Marehis said, startled as she immediately moved and pulled Eleanor’s hood overhead for the girl, making certain it was secure, tugging up the scarf wrapped around Eleanor’s neck so it more fully covered her skin, “You are warm enough, yes?”

“Uh-huh, I’m okay! Though someone should check on Dorian, he only has one sleeve and…Dorian would you like to borrow my hat? Its in my cloak pocket. I don’t want you getting sick,” Eleanor said.

The Tevinter man was cut off by…just…ugh. Cassandra was grateful they had the numbers to grant them entry to see the Lord Seeker but…ugh.

“Herald of Andraste!” one of the Marquis addressed Eleanor. “Esmerele Abernache,” he introduced himself, “honor to participate. It is not unlike the dispersal of the reclaimed Dales. Ahh! Madam Vivienne! We met at last summer’s ball! The Duke introduced us!”

“Indeed. I could not possibly forget the occasion.” Madam de Fer said as she excused herself and began heading up the path to the Templar fortress not wishing to invite the man to speak with her further, and oh it felt like vindication, that she implied she could however well forget the man she’d been introduced to. It was…nice to find the woman’s brand of pettiness endearing now.

“The Lord Seeker is willing to hear our petition about closing the Breach, a credit to our alliance with the Inquisition,” the Marquis said, asking, “Care to mark the moment? Ten Orlesian Houses walk with you.” did the man expect a speech?

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, Marquis Abernache. Thank you for coming. I really appreciate it, and I look forward to settling things with the Lord Seeker himself,” Eleanor said politely. And… oh Madam de Fer had to be rubbing off on her at least in some small way, it wasn’t pithy or rude, but the girl’s words were a brush off of the Marquis demand and she steadily…oh goodness it was almost strangely adorable as she sauntered forward copying Vivienne’s confident slinky step to join Madam de Fer, slipping her and into that of the Grand Enchanter’s and leading her party toward the fortress proper. Vivienne looked mildly pleased when Cassandra caught up with them, like she’d perhaps coached the girl…she likely had.

It did not stop Marquis Abernache for endeavoring to keep up with their massive group, chattering away that it was so very strange the Lord Seeker would have such a drastic change of heart after their ‘spat’ in Val Royeaux, to wish to speak directly with Eleanor himself as opposed to one of his subordinates on his behalf. Cassandra moved to walk alongside Sera more directly to stop the girl from assaulting their ally if need be. She’d heard her grumble, seen her tense in her periferial. The Elf was worried about Eleanor talking to Templars—‘Inky’s scared of Templars! We can’t let her get chatty with the biggest Templar! Especially if he hates her guts!’ she’d argued when Cassandra confirmed with her that yes, Eleanor would be leading their discussion with the Templars as she did the Mages. Cassandra did not like it anymore than Sera did. and now the Elf girl clearly did not appreciate the Marquis…she would likely term it ‘yammering away’ at Eleanor with reminders of the Lord Seeker’s ill regard, the girl had to be nervous enough as it was.

Though their next new face was one that Cassandra was gratified to put with a name. Cullen had mentioned the man to her as they prepared for this meeting,

“I present to you Knight Templar Sir Delrin Barris, second son of Ban Jevrin Barris of Ferelden,” the Orlesian Ambassador sent to handle contact between the nobility and the Templars introduced the Templar awaiting Eleanor at the gate of Therinfal Redoubt.

“I’m the one who sent word to Cullen, he says the Inquisition wishes to close this Breach in
“Barris…” was that man still following them? Marquis Abernache saw fit to attempt to tout superiority, “moderate holdings, your family. And the second son? Peh.”

“I’ve certainly no holdings to speak of,” Eleanor said, “and in my experience, when you think you can make something better, you try again, so being someone’s second endeavor in parenthood isn’t anything to balk at,” she reasoned blithely, “Marquis Abernache, as you’ve officially gotten off on all the wrong possible feet with me, you may wish to take their example.” Cassandra was not quite certain what the girl was getting at with that but Madam de Fer picked up on her line of thinking,

“My dear Marquis, I assure you you’re quite forgettable,” the Grand Enchanter elaborated, “leave us and return with a better attitude. I’m certain Lady Eleanor will be more receptive to your second ‘first’ impression.”

The man looked as taken aback as one wearing a ridiculous mask can, but Marquis Abernache did finally take a hint*, he gave Eleanor a rather small, stiff bow before leaving her to speak with the Knight Templar.

“Sorry about him. I’m Ellie, thank you for coming to meet with me,” the girl said offering her Marked hand to the Templar, “Um. I’ve only ever really spoken with Cassandra and Cullen—Seeker, and Commander—so I’m not quite sure how to address you. Sir Delrin? Or Knight Templar Barris?”

The man regarded her hand for a moment before taking it to shake, “Sir Barris would serve just fine. Er, Lady Ellie,” he said. “This promise of status has garnered interest from the Lord Seeker beyond sense. The sky burns with magic but he ignores all calls to action until your friends arrive.”

“I’ve a Seeker of my own, Lady Seeker Cassandra Pentaghast, she says its protocol—when there’s no Divine for guidance, and no stable chain of command yeah, the Lord Seeker has to look to the noble houses of Orlais for how to proceed, but she agrees that the Lord Seeker should have chosen to do something about the Breach sooner, given the threat it poses. There’s a difference in waiting for the Chantry to give you permission to change the colors of your heraldry, and deciding whether or not to fight the gaping hole in the sky that could destroy the world—we’re in a more of an ask forgiveness not permission situation.”

“He’s taken command permanently,” Barris stressed, “The Lord Seeker’s actions make no sense. He claims he wants to restore the Order’s honor then marched us here to wait. Templars should know their duty even when held from it.”

“bout time one of you gobs said that,” Sera muttered, and then whispered, “Templar gobs not Seeker gobs ‘sandra, you’re a right boss.” Cassandra scoffed but the girl did not take it as a sound of disregard. And it hadn’t been meant as one so that sorted. Ugh, she really did care for the Elf girl now, what utter nonsense. It was boggling that months ago she’d been railing against Eleanor for hiring the Rogue on.

“Win over the Lord Seeker, and every able-bodied Knight will help the Inquisition face the Breach,” Sir Barris vowed.

“You’ll understand if I don’t necessarily feel like winning him over after what I saw from him in Val Royeaux.”
Barris seemed regrettable. “That was…reprehensible my Lady, I’m…that isn’t what the Order is, it isn’t what it should be. My superiors…everyone that can do something about it is parroting his decisions right now. Otherwise I quite assure you, you would have the aid of the Templars long before now.”

“You’re doing something about it right now,” Eleanor said gently. “I suppose lots of impossible seeming things have been happening all over the place lately, the little apostate girl Lord Seeker hates winning him over…stranger things have happened.”

Sir Barris nodded and then the Templar led them through the gate into Therinfal Redoubt’s courtyard where…ugh. Truly. What nonsense. The banners were in place, lowered to where they nearly touched the ground, that which represented the Maker, the People, and the Order. But… Cassandra was curious to see what would unfold.

“A test all Templars take before they’re permitted to remain in Therinfal Redoubt,” Barris explained as he led Eleanor to where she could turn the wheels that would raise the flags. “Lord Seeker would like for you to complete it as well, if you’re willing. Raising the flags in order of importance. Whatever you think is most important, you place highest, and the rest follow in descending order.”

“Alright, I’ll do the ritual,” Eleanor supposed as she stepped forward to look upon the banners a moment. Cassandra nearly went to join her to help her parcel out which was which when the girl looked over her shoulder to look to the Seeker but then she realized it was only to study the symbol on her chest plate, she did the same with Barris and she had all she needed. The Maker’s Symbol, and Order’s sigil left only one that could mean that which represented the People and that, is what Eleanor chose first, going to its controls and gripping tight the wheel that was…well the things were nearly her height and Cassandra could almost hear the Iron Bull wondering if he could step up and turn the dials for her, but the girl did well enough on her own, raising the People’s flag until it was high along the wall of the Templar fortress. It seemed much to Sera’s pleasure, the Elf at Cassandra’s side let out a whispers, ‘alright Inky, good job’, and then the Eleanor moved on to the next. She raised the flag that represented the Maker next, and lastly, the Order and…well Cassandra wasn’t certain how to think about how the girl had done.

“Traditionally,” Barris stressed…a kindness, Cassandra thought, it left Eleanor free to decline answer if the girl was perhaps struck shy, or uncomfortable doing so in front of their stranger allies and the members of the Order gathered in the courtyard, “a participant in the right would explain their reasoning to those assembled.”

“The Maker needs nothing from us and we, need everything from Him, His love for us is infinite. He puts people first, so I put people first, both in life and in this test. That makes Him second, and the Order…well it isn’t intended as an insult, there are millions of things in the world and here, we can lay out the top three. It’s incredibly honorable, to join the Order. The Maker needs nothing of the people He makes, but Templars, the Seekers of Truth, you’ve chosen to serve Him, choosing to put Him, above you, so that you can enact His will to ultimately serve and protect the people He loves so well.”

“Very good, my Lady,” Knight Templar Barris replied. “The Lord Seeker will see you now.”

They had discussed this in advance, who would go in with Eleanor to speak with the Lord Seeker, and who would remain cooling their heels in the courtyard, ready go come in at a moment’s notice should Eleanor need their help. The whole of her party remained in the courtyard,
with the exception of Cassandra, Marehis, and Madam de Fer...and Sera, trailed along after them, she hadn’t given a decisive answer when asked what she would do but Cassandra supposed the girl thought she might be intentionally excluded from the talks if she outright said she wished to attend and...there was no harm in her presence. And Sera did not like it at all that Eleanor was made to speak with the Lord Seeker after he’d been a ‘right prick’ to her in Val Royeaux, was a leader in the Order that set fear in the young Human girl.

“Knight Captain,” Sir Barris said, surprised as they entered the meeting room to find…not the Lord Seeker, but Knight Captain Denhem.

“You were expecting the Lord Seeker,” the man supposed in tones that set Cassandra ill at ease, and that was even before he said, “he sent me to die for you.” which was strange enough phrasing in and of itself, and then he approached Eleanor, “This is the great alliance the Inquisition offers, you be ready. The Lord Seeker had a plan but the Herald ruined it by arriving with purpose. Its sowed too much dissent.”

Suddenly the halls of Therinfal Redoubt were clamoring with the sounds of battle coming from beyond where they gathered—nothing behind them in the courtyard where their noble allies laid in wait, but forward. Maker.

“Knight Captain, I must know what’s going on!” Barris demanded, alarmed at the sounds of warfare.

“You are all supposed to be changed! Now we must purge the questioning knights!” the Knight Captain cried, “The Elder One is coming and none shall leave Therinfall unless stained red!”

“Maker’s breath!” Barris exclaimed.

Their numbers were descended upon by…twisted Templars, and the moment the fighting broke out, the Iron Bull was in the room backed by the rest of the Herald’s party, their separation short lived.

“Is the Knight Captain alive?” Eleanor asked when the final enemy Templar was felled.

“Barely,” Barris said, “healing elixir brought to bear, he would live.”

“Leliana might want to bring him in for questioning,” Eleanor said as she pulled potion from her stores.

“He’s hardly deserves our charity my dear,” Madam de Fer said, her hand on Eleanor’s arm and for a moment her stance spoke of protection like she meant to pull the girl back and behind her, so the Grand Enchanter could put herself between Eleanor and the fallen Knight Captain. As it was Vivienne shared a look with the girl a moment and she did take the potion Eleanor held in her unmarked hand from her, deigning to administer it to the Knight Captain herself, and Cassandra was admittedly grateful, the man could well be feigning the seriousness of his injury and the Enchanter seemed more willing to fall victim some trap or trick than to allow Eleanor to risk it.

Or perhaps it was to instill some fear in the man, the Iron Bull rumbled in approval and Marehis looked appreciative of whatever Madam de Fer was whispering to the Knight Captain as potion slipped down his throat. What was more the action, healing the man, earned the woman a grateful smile from Eleanor, who hadn’t the faintest idea of Vivienne’s motives outside the realm of agreeing with the girl that he should be brought in for questioning.
“Okay, let’s go see what’s going on,” Eleanor said, leading them from the meeting room, Barris removed the ring of keys from the Knight Captain and rushed to catch up with her, unlocking the door on the far wall and leading them down into the lower barracks.

Where… oh Maker, more Templars, and this time they were obviously twisted by Red Lyrium, it almost looked like the disease Eleanor and Dorian recounted from the future, had it started its spread here?!

“They are monsters!” Cassandra called out in warning as she surged to get ahead of Eleanor, push the child back and away, perhaps they should not allow her to lead like this, be so far ahead of their numbers.

“What are these things?!” Sera asked in fright.

“Templars,” Cassandra was horrified to confirm as she fought against one in particular that’s arms had been wholly replaced by shards of Red Lyrium.

“That’s shite!” the Elf screeched.

“I know,” Cassandra assured her.

As they approached the door that would lead them out into the midst of whatever hell had broken loose further in Therinfal, Eleanor stopped in her tracks, eyes wide as she paled and she turned to look up at her allies following after her.

“Was that the Lord Seeker?” she asked them.

Was… was what the Lord Seeker?

“What the what?” Sera asked in return, “All I hear is fightin’.”

Eleanor shook herself and then, looking grounded in determination before she surged forward, throwing open the door and leading them headlong into the fight.

It was utter chaos, madness, Barrier spread so thick powered by so many mages kept them safe as they endeavored to fight as they could but there was no clear battle to be won, and Eleanor pressed forward, rushing to get through the thick of it, “We have to find the Lord Seeker!” she said.

Barris led them through a short cut of sorts, through the Knight Captain’s office, Barris had removed the keys from the man when he’d been taken down, but upon their entry they found not only a path through that diverted from the fighting. There lay a dead Templar ugh, the smell. The man had clearly been dead for quite some time… not just any Templar,

“That’s the Lord Vigilant,” Barris breathed in disbelief, betrayal, “the Lord Seeker told us he died at the Conclave…”


They continued the ascent, running higher and higher up seemingly endless flights of stairs, Eleanor leading them all the way.

When at last they made it to the top of the final flight of stairs, Lord Seeker was there, standing at the doors to Therinfal’s Great Hall, his back to them as they approached and he just… stood there.
“Lord Seeker,” Eleanor said, wary as she approached the man, staff drawn and ready to strike if the man meant her harm.

And then the Lord Seeker turned to face her, surged forward and a startled cry of outrage broke past Cassandra’s lips as the man grabbed Eleanor by the collar of her over coat and pulled her closer to him, hissing, “At last.”

Eleanor took in a startled breath as she was drawn eye level with the man.

And then in the very next instance the girl was dropped to her feet as the man…no it wasn’t a man it was some ghastly horrific looking demon, pale and multilimbed, falling onto its back, slamming into the doors to the Great Hall with such force they opened behind it, and it let out a shrill cry before it…it hadn’t fallen back, it merely landed on its feet and had been bending unnaturally to bend over backwards and up its face a gaping mouth of jagged teeth open and screaming in Eleanor’s face before it disappeared in a cloud of black smoke that moved, sweeping through the great hall—the end of the Hall was open to an outdoor area meant for training or ceremony but it was now blocked off, the Great Hall completely closed in as the creature left a great barrier in its wake.

Eleanor was reeling back, gasping for air, and Cassandra was quick to brace the girl by the elbow to keep her upright.

But the girl flinched from Cassandra’s hold, turning to face her party and she blanched eyes wide and darting from face to face of her gathered allies as if she were fearful, frightened of them. “Cole?!” she called out, panicked as if she were yelling for help as she fell onto her bottom expression crumbling and she started hyperventilating when she found there was…there was no newcomer in sight but her Marked hand had landed on her fallen staff when she fell and she stared at it and the girl lifted her hand to dig into the inside pocket of her overcoat and she visibly relaxed and began to be able to catch her breath when she found something there, pulled Cremisius’s pocket watch from there with a relieved, whispered, “I’m back,” as she clicked the thing open and she looked upon the time, “whew, it’s still today at least,” and then tentatively like she were afraid to, she looked up and met Cassandra’s eye, “just how long was I gone?”

“Eleanor…” Cassandra breathed, utterly confused, “child, you never left.”

It was dark.

One…one second the Lord Seeker had grabbed her, was hoisting her up as her heart pounded in her chest and Maker, her brain felt on fire with panic.

And that…that didn’t get much better when she found herself in a cold dark stone chamber lit by burning corpses made of solid ash, like at the Temple when they’d gone to seal the Breach, mist that glowed fade-green ghosting over a floor covered somehow in growing grass and weeds, and she made to pull her scarf up over her mouth and nose that…that certainly couldn’t be safe to breathe in—

But her scarf wasn’t…it wasn’t the scarf…it wasn’t the scarf she’d been wearing a moment ago she didn’t think. It was the olive color cloth scarf that came with the Mercenary armor
Trevelyan had outfitted her with. She wasn’t wearing her usual armor, her hair wasn’t in the braid Marehis had put it in that morning, it was loosely bound at the back of her head by that old…it’d been a shoelace she found—and cleaned!—to keep her hair out of her face.

She reached behind herself to draw her staff but that was gone too.

Where was she? Where was everyone?

Ellie shuddered trying to block out the creepy whispering coming from the shadows, tentatively taking a few steps forward, fear in her blood like any step could be her last as she blindly went headlong into a trap. Another trap. This was a trap wasn’t it? Whatever this was?

There’d been a voice, the Lord Seeker’s she’d thought when they were running through the Templar fortress, a horrible voice that kept demanding that she show them who she is. And it had just been her who could hear it, the others…they hadn’t heard it at all, not even Solas she was sure.

Oh Maker,

“Josie! Cullen!”

They…they were here! Lady Josie and Commander Cullen were standing at the end of the horrible chamber and Ellie ran to them, so relieved to see something, someone, and then her heart leapt in her chest when she heard a wretched gasping sound and suddenly Leliana appeared from…from nowhere, coming forward and…all three of her Advisors they were just still. Silent and staring forward unseeing until Leliana met Ellie’s eye and asked, in a horrific warped version of the Spymaster’s voice,

“Does this shape please you? Will it let me know you?”

…okay. Okay cool, she wasn’t quite so panicky now. She knew exactly where she was.

She was in the Fade. And this was a demon.

“Everything tells me about you,” the demon in Leliana form said as she came up behind the Commander and for a moment Ellie’s mind flashed with the memory of poor Felix, goulified, a husk of his former self, helpless and docile in Leliana’s arms as the future form of the Spymaster slit his throat. “So will this,” the demon said as it raised a blade to Cullen’s throat.

*That wasn’t Leliana, Ellie told herself, not really, and neither is this…that isn’t Cullen, it isn’t, it isn’t!*

“You’re a demon, I get it. Are you trying to tempt me, or are you trying copy me?” Ellie asked. It…she wasn’t sure what it was doing—it seemed like she wanted to provoke Ellie to ask it for something, save Cullen but it all seemed too simple, it was obvious this wasn’t real, and it kept asking to know Ellie.

Oh Maker she felt like she might vomit at the squelching sound from demon Leliana slitting Cullen’s throat and the…not him, not him! He fell to the ground, dead.

And then in a horrible, deep toned, bastardarzation of Ellie’s voice the demon asked, “Are you trying to copy me?” as Leliana backed away.

And then Lady Josie…no no no no! She came forward bearing a knife—

_Lady Montilyet can handle herself I quite assure you_—Cassandra had said once
Lady Josie laughed with that horrible demon voice, “Being you, will be so much more interesting than being the Lord Seeker,” she said as she circled Ellie, the girl carefully followed her, turning to keep the demon in her sights but then she vanished.

“Do you know—” Maker! Demon Josie suddenly appeared directly behind Ellie and she whirled around to see the creature, “what the Inquisition can become? You’ll see. When I’m done, the Elder One will kill you, and ascend. Then I will be you.”

“Well he sounds like a conceited jerk, running around trying to play god.”

“He will come, and you will serve him as all others will, by dying in the right way,” Josie said before she turned her back on Ellie and started walking away.

“I am not your toy,” Ellie’s heart leaped in fright as she whirled about at Cullen’s demon-warped voice, “I am Envy, and I will know you. Tell me Herald, in your mind,” and suddenly there was some silvery-black copy of…of Ellie, standing before Cullen and he drove a blade into her back, it cried out with something that sounded dangerously, horribly close to Ellie’s voice as the demon said, “tell me what you think,” and then he blinked out of existence and Ellie felt the hairs on the back of her neck stand on end and she turned to find the war table behind her, Cullen standing on the other side looking over it, both hands resting on the table the way he did when he was poring over the maps trying to figure something out, and he looked up at her, “tell me what you feel,” and then Ellie was turning again or…or maybe she hadn’t turned, it felt like the whole room turned under her feet while she stayed perfectly still and suddenly that silver-black copy of her was standing before her, face contorted in anguish as it cried out, clutching at an injury in its stomach and blood sprayed and Ellie felt a scream build up in her throat, she kept it there but Maker a blade was clattering from her own hand, it…it hadn’t been there before had it? where…where was she? What was happening?

The demons voice, unadulterated by any other, purred out, “Tell me what you see.”

Fade, demon, Ellie.

My name is Ellie, I’m in the Fade. I’m fifteen years old, I’m an agent of the Inquisition. It…grounding was little help there wasn’t anything to ground to, not that would bring her any sense of security but what she could think of off the top of her head, things she had to remind herself of now. This was almost as bad as…

Focus. Right here, right now. A demon of Envy, trying to possess her right now.

A door swung open to Ellie’s left and she followed it only to find herself standing in observation over her own interrogation…she was in Haven’s dungeons again, watching as Inquisition soldiers held swords at the throat of a shadowy Ellie knelt on the…it was Haven’s dungeoun but a forest floor underfoot that was somewhat reassuring, helped her remember she wasn’t really there.

Cassandra…not Cassandra? She was standing before shadow Ellie.

“You think me a fool?” wait was it Cassandra, Maker it sounded so very close, “Explain this! Do you deny it? Do you deny your crime?” there was some sort of garbled nonsense, it almost sounded like Ellie’s head were under water and someone were speaking to her in a deep, baritone voice, none of the words came through, “Tell me why we shouldn’t kill you?” and after something that sounded like a hissing whisper, “You’re lying!”
I’m not! I mean I did, about reading not the Conclave—

Focus! Not real! Not real not real not real!

Ellie found another door behind Cassandra and she rushed to it, grateful to find it unlocked only to have it open to…to strangers. A man and a woman dressed in Inquisition uniform, and between them another shadow copy of Ellie.

“Our enemies have surrendered unconditionally,” the woman said.

“The Inquisition’s strength rivals any kingdom in Thedas,” said the man.

And then shadow Ellie, in that horrible demon voice, “Our reach begins to match my ambition, but we will strive for more.”

A refusal rose to Ellie’s lips she’d—she’d never want that for the Inquisition! She just wanted to seal the Breach, not take over the world! But…no this demon was trying to copy her, become her, trying to get some sort of response that would tell it what she was really like…

She didn’t…this was bad. She’d faced worse, at least as it stood now, she’d faced worse. She didn’t know how bad this would get though. That wasn’t the point! It could get bad, and maybe she wasn’t going to make it out of here. Maybe this shadow Ellie would be the one that greeted her friends whenever all was said and done…

“I could really take over the world?” she asked, oh gosh this was dangerous but, “You would help me do that? That’s all I’ve ever wanted, you…” sorry Ava, “shit. Damn. You really get me, don’t you?”

Be good, don’t let this make you hard, Ellie. This wasn’t your fault, don’t…don’t become like them.

Stop stop stop!

“An arrogant little thing, aren’t you little Herald? Shit. Damn.” It said in almost a perfect copy of Ellie’s voice, and then it cackled, the Inquisition soldiers at its sides disappeared and her shadow self burst in a pop of dissipating smoke.

Ellie took a deep breath trying to calm down. Okay. Keep it cool. Either make it out, or send something they’ll know isn’t you.

She almost feels like she might cry, a part of her hopes…she almost hopes she dies. That this demon in Ellie form will go out and get gutted by Cassandra. She’d know it wasn’t her the moment she laid eyes on it.

She took a few steps forward to find there were pillars, lines of three with dragon heads on all sides of them and they rained down fade-fire from them, turning in time with each other, some sort of pattern she’d have to work her way through, she did her best to slip through when there were gaps in the flames, press herself close to the pillars in an effort to not get singed.

“Were you embarrassed when you raised the people’s flag?” the demon’s voice poured out of the walls, “When I am you, the people will never forget what you do to them. do you see what glory the inquisition will be when you die at the hands of the Elder One?”

She wondered what was happening to her. real her. her body. Was it being dragged off to be sacrificed under the Elder One’s blade? Oh Maker she hadn’t considered…where her friends
Alright? They wouldn’t just stand by while the Lord Seeker took her, would they?

Cassandra might, she hates Ellie, wants to lock her away, kill her for destroying the Conclave—

No! She did! Once but not anymore! Gah! Cassandra loves her! She wouldn’t let someone hurt her! Neither would M…who…Marehis! Marehis! She wouldn’t let anyone hurt Ellie! Neither would Solas or Varric…or Sera or Vivienne, or the Iron Bull, or Blackwa—he hurt her, but he didn’t mean to! Thom! Thom was her friend, he’d protect her too! And…who…who else?…C…C…

“You’re hurting, helpless, hasty,” a soothing voice said, “What happens to the hammer when there are no more nails?”

That’s a lot of ‘sss’ sounds—

No! ‘H’ sounds now!

“What are you?!” the demon hissed in outrage, “this is my place! Get out!”

Ellie followed the other’s voice, the soothing one, into what looked like a strange bedroom, but all of the furniture—desk, dressers, a fire place, it was all on the ceiling for some reason and there were chairs and upside down paintings on the walls—the bed was still on the floor at least. A bed. She wanted to sleep, sleep until the Breach was gone and everything was back to normal, why couldn’t she do that? Her hand always hurts.

What…what was she doing again? She turned around, looking over the strange room, the door had closed behind her. She walked to it, ready to leave when suddenly,

“Wait,” oh, that voice again, the nice one—soothing voice with the nice hands no, not that one, a different one, not as familiar as So…who? What was she thinking about? The door was open now but she didn’t…she didn’t want to walk through it yet did she? She walked back into the room further, “Envy is hurting you,” Ellie looked over her shoulder but he wasn’t there, “mirrors on mirrors on memories. A face it can feel but not fake. I want to help. You, not Envy.”

“…you…I’ve seen you before haven’t I?” Ellie asked.

“I’ve been watching, I’m Cole, we’re inside you. Or I am, you’re always inside you,” he nervously corrected himself. Oh! Ellie turned and found him…standing upside down on the floor-ceiling thing, “Its easy to hear, hard to be a part of what you’re hearing, but I’m here, hearing… helping, I hope.” He swallowed, “Envy hurt you. Is hurting you, I tried to help, then I was here in the hearing…it’s- it’s not usually like this.”

“I’m…in my own head? This isn’t making any sense,” Ellie confessed. Gosh she was stupid. So dumb.

“St…st…stir until sm-oh…oh…”

“Smoo…” Rainier prompted gently.

Oh right! Double o! “Smooth. Stir until smooth, and the…then, let it rest for 10 min…minutes before add-ing to the p-pot.”

“Excellent job Ellie-girl, you’re really getting the hang of this!”
“I forgot double o.”

“But you remembered the rest! Maker that was an entire sentence full of different sounds and spellings. You’re doing amazing, you’re so very smart sweetheart. Keep it up, what does it say to do next?”

She’s smart! Really smart! She just tricked a demon into thinking she’s cool with world domination! Gah! Focus focus focus. This is your mind, Cole says…oh gosh Cole!

When she turns around he’s sitting on the bed.

“Cole! You came back! Gosh, I was wondering where you went!” Ellie enthused as she rushed forward and leaning over the footboard to hug the boy around his waist, this was! Gosh it was so good for there to be a non-demon possessed ally, he was Cole, not Envy, and he was here to help her! Big squeeze for helpful Cole!

“You…you remember me from before…” he said in quiet surprise, he didn’t return her hug and he looked down at her like he wasn’t certain what she was doing, but he didn’t seem uncomfortable, just curious. “I was watching. I watch,” he explained, “Every Templar knew when you arrived. They were impressed, but not like the Lord Seeker.”

“The Lord Seeker is an Envy demon…he wants to be me,” Ellie explained, voice wavering a bit as she pulled away from Cole. Gosh she was such a baby sometimes—

“You’re brave, and strong, and smart, and compassionate and you’re handling something that feels impossible pretty incredibly.”

Who…who’d said that?

“Don’t press, you wouldn’t press him, and he isn’t here. We’re in your hurts, and he heals them, he hasn’t made any, and I…I wouldn’t want not-him to make false hurt real him would have to hope to heal.”

Him…him…it almost rhymes with…

She’s not sure.

“Alright, I won’t uh…press,” she said to Cole.

“Good,” Cole breathed with a sigh of relief, “Don’t worry, you’ll get him back once we’re away.” And then he went on to explain, “Envy. It twisted the Commanders, forced their fury, their fight, their red inside. Anyway, you’re frozen, Envy is trying to take your face. I heard it and reached out, and then in, and then I was here.”

“Is that…usual for you? I get uh, here isn’t usual, but reaching out and into people? Are you…” Ellie gasped in quiet delight, “Cole, are you a spirit?”

“I was…am…it is different.”

“Charlotte said she knew you from White Spire.”

“She knew Cole yes. She saw him when the Templars brought him in, dragged him down to the dungeons to deal his doom. She wanted to help…and so did I but he died and now I’m him.”

“That…kind of sounds like possession,” said a bit wary.
“Cole is gone, his body beaten broken busted burst. But I was trying to help. I reached out and in—”

“And now you’re him…huh. Okay. Not exactly possession then. More like someone leaving their home and another person moving in?”

“What’s home? So many people miss it, but it seems to be different for everyone.”

Huh, she guessed that did get confusing. “Home is a concept that can be placed on any place. Do you understand ‘friend’?”

“I do…did…I did not have many friends and now they’re gone.”

Ellie reached out and took Cole’s hand, “I’m your friend I think. Magic says we’re going to be, anyway. So. Not all gone, yeah? They, whoever they were, were your friends, just like now we’re friends. Friend is a concept that can be put on any person you love, whether its big love or small love. Home is a concept that can be put on any place you love. Right now, home for me is wherever my friends are—our friends. Will you help me get back to them?”

Cole nodded, and then he slipped off the bed staring down at their joint hands. “All of this,” he gestured, to their surroundings, “is Envy, he took root in your hurts and moved from there. People, places, power, if you keep going, Envy stretches. It takes strength to make more. Being one person is hard. Being many, too many, more and more and envy breaks down. You break out.”

“So we keep moving, and Envy will tire out?”

Cole nodded. “Maybe. I hope it helps. Its more than sitting here waiting to lose your face.” That was…creepy but it didn’t sound like he meant it meanly, it didn’t even sound like bluntness just…clean observation, nothing attached to it, something in the way he said it made it light.

“Is it okay that I’m holding your hand? I wouldn’t want you to be uncomfortable, but I know its scary in here and I wouldn’t want us getting separated. You...you’ve just been in this room since we arrived? You’re alright, right?”

“…alright, right? You’re waiting, wanting, worrying, you add me to the list. Hold my hand to hush any hurts you hope I don’t have because you’re here. And you can fix this.”

Ellie nodded. “I think I can now, anyway. Your explanation, how to tire out Envy, it’s brilliant Cole.”

Cole didn’t release hold of her hand so she figured he was okay with it, and he began moving forward, Ellie following alongside as he said, “This way,” leading her out the door to the strange bedroom.

It seemed like he wanted to lead her further down the hall but there were dragon pillars hurling fade-fire down to block their path, no pattern to break, just blockage.

“Ideas are loud here, think louder. Think of water,” Cole instructed.

“…okay, you got it!” Ellie said, this was her mind right? Envy was just mucking about in it making everything twisted up. She could twist it back—

Water poured out of the Dragon’s mouths.

*It was a Ferelden Frostback...its greatest weakness is Frost.*
Cassandra’s voice overlapped, almost drowned out the sound of the demon screeching,

“That thing cannot help you! I will see more!”

“Let’s give him more to see, yeah?” Ellie asked Cole lightly as they ran through the water falling from the dragon’s mouths and safely to the door on the other side, swinging it open.

Suddenly they were in…it looked like Haven’s dungeons but the war room table…or a table that was meant to represent it, oh Maker the demon really was stretching out, confused, making things up as it went, losing a grasp on what as real to Ellie. Cassandra stood on Ellie’s side of the table, and…ugh, Chancellor Roderick stood on the other. Oh. And then there was shadow-Ellie laying on the table with a dagger in her chest.

“Betrayed allies will curse your name, like the first Inquisition, you will bring blood and ruin and fear,” the demon swore.

“Unless you don’t,” Cole offered simply, “you don’t have to. None of this is real unless you let it be.”

Okay…yeah this was nice, easier, “Thank you,” she whispered to him, speaking softly in case they disturbed whatever was unfolding before them, she didn’t want to interact with it, whatever it was.

“Get out, thing!” the demon hollered, “I am learning!”

*Fuck off – I’m teaching here!*

The Iron Bull’s voice then, huh.

Ellie and Cole moved around the dungeons wall to get to the door on the opposite side, moving forward, moving forward was good. Stretch it further.

They came into a hall where shadow-Ellie was apprehending Mother Gisselle for not bowing to the Elder One, being a heretic and spreading the Chant, and the Maker still.

And they were stopped, Ellie and Cole, oh. another place Envy wanted her to react. She squeezed Cole’s hand. If all else failed, everyone would know Ellie wasn’t herself if,

“It’s about time someone put that Chant-thumping bitch in her place. Where was her Maker when I needed him, huh?” With her, always.

The demon cackled as the scene before them—shadow-Ellie, Inquisition soldiers, Mother Gisselle—all burst into flames.

They searched the strange…it was like a hall with different branches that held cells, Ellie could hear Mother Hevara in one, oh gosh Lady Josie’s voice too,

“It is dark now,” Cole said, “but think of spark. We need to get higher, you’re more you there than Envy is.”

Oh. There were these sconses like Solas helped her find sometimes in the Hinterlands, they made Veil Fire, and they responded to Spirit magic, the sort that Ellie used to make Barrier. She could get them lit okay on her own. They worked their way around, finding all the sconses, Ellie kept her focus forward, not daring to look at anyone in the cells, Maker—this wasn’t real, her friends weren’t imprisoned again! Everything’s alright she just has to get out of here.
The final sconce was where Lady Josie’s cell was…oh gosh she wanted to go home!
Haven! She wanted a hug!

*Give Marehis like the biggest hug in the world for me when you see her, yeah?*

That was her talking to…huh.

There was a cavern then opening out of the room Josie’s cell was in, and Ellie followed it out until it led her to…a…forest. Okay, might as well. At least it was outside, and there was some slope to the ground like it was leading up! Cole said she needed to get higher, so, yeah!

Oh gosh but where was Cole?

“She’s here,” Ellie called out, he wasn’t holding her hand anymore, he was gone!

“I’m still here,” his voice rang out from the trees, but he wasn’t in them. “You’re more you here, keep going up.”

Ellie ran as fast as she could through the forest, and it led her… it led her back to Therinfal Redoubt, not like she was coming at the entrance, no, it just sort of opened up into one of the inner courtyards they’d had to run through to get to where the Lord Seeker had been.

Okay. Forward, and up!

Ellie ran back through the path she’d already tread, up the stairs, more and more, until… well she was scared, afraid to find the Lord Seeker waiting for her at the top of the stairs again but he wasn’t there…

“Cole!” she cried excitedly, reaching for her friend.

But then a hand gripped her arm and she was wrenched around by shadow-Ellie, Envy trying to take her form, it pushed her back until she was up against the door, hoisting her up by the scarf of her mercenary coat.

“Unfair, unfair!” the demon screeched in her face as it slammed her up against the door, “That thing kept you whole! Kept you from giving me your shape!”

“What could you gain from being me?!” Ellie wanted to know. Just about flipping nothing that would matter to a demon, she was just an agent of the Inquisition, not their leader! A kid!

“What could you gain from being me?!” the demon parroted back in a horrible impression of her, voice still to warped to sound anything like Ellie. “What…gah! We’ll start again!” it decided, raising a glowing, faux-Fadelit hand to Ellie’s temple, “more pain this time! The Elder One still comes!”

“Its frightened of you,” Cole’s voice said, from where Ellie couldn’t see him but Maker she was glad he was still here. He distracted the demon as it turned its head away, its hand leaving Ellie’s temple as he shouted at Cole,

“Get out of-!”

Ellie was on her feet again, and she moved forward, quickly, like…Cassandra, and Cullen, they loved her, wanted her safe, protected, to protect herself! Forward, knee up, pull them toward you and then, boom! Headbutt!
And then she was standing facing the doors to the Great Hall again, face to face with the Demon of Envy fully revealed and screaming in her face before it disappeared.

Ellie was still trying to catch her equilibrium again, she’d just been in the air, and then headbutting, and she’d been facing the opposite way hadn’t she? Where was the demon going, was it doing it again—that thing where it pretended to walk away and came back looking like something else? Her lungs were sucking in air of their own volition like she’d been holding her breath and they rebelled like they needed to breathe again, like she’d gone a moment without doing so. And then there was a hand on her elbow.

Oh no, no no no no no not again, it was back and now it looked like Cassandra! Ellie flinched away, falling off unsteady legs and onto her butt, oh gosh she was so tired, and weak and scared and how did she ever think she could get away? Where was Cole, he’d just been here hadn’t he? Where did he go?

“Cole?!” she called out in fright, oh Maker please let him be here, let him help her, oh gosh she can’t breathe, she started hyperventilating, but then her Marked hand had landed on something __

Her staff.

She…her staff was here.

And she was back in her armor.

She reached into the pocket of her overcoat and pulled out Cremisius’s pocket watch, that…that Cremisius. Krem! Krem kind of rhymes with him almost! He was the one that wasn’t in any of her hurts and now that she was out of them she could remember him!

“I’m back,” she whispered, relieved, and she pressed the release on the watch to reveal the time…she wasn’t certain what time it had been when she’d gotten mind trapped, but the date was still the same as it had been that morning when she checked, “whew, it’s still today at least,” and then tentatively…it was Cassandra. She, not it, she was Cassandra, Ellie was pretty certain at least, she looked up to meet her eye, “just how long was I gone?”

“Eleanor…” Cassandra breathed, sounding confused, “child, you never left.”

…she never…

But she had. And she almost hadn’t made it back, and oh sweet Maker they…they didn’t even know she’d been fighting possession it…it’d only been a second or something but she felt like she’d been gone for hours and she was…exhausted and tired, felt like she was a rag someone had wrung out repeatedly from one end to the other, and the relief she felt that everyone was okay, the whiplash of worrying she’d been gone and they’d been in danger, and suddenly discovering the danger had come and passed in the blink of an eye for them, it felt like she’d released something heavy and now she was just left with the ache in her muscles from her work. Her head lulled to the side and then snapped forward and her eyes felt heavy…

“Eleanor?” Cassandra knelt, hands on Ellie’s shoulder’s gripping tight.

“Da’vehnan?” Marehis asked, stumbling forward from the group to crouch in front of Ellie, her hand raising to feel her forehead. “You feel chilled, sweet girl are you cold?”

It’d been freezing it felt like in the Fade…was it cold there? She didn’t notice it all the time when she Fade Dreamed, maybe going there with a demon made it different…demon…
That was what was important, and Ellie wasn’t sure…she really wasn’t feeling well,

“Cassandra…” Ellie murmured, “you…you’d kill me, if I wasn’t me, right?”

“Eleanor!” the Seeker called out appalled, "I would nev-"

“*You have to,*" Ellie insisted, "if I’m ever not me, if I got possessed, you…you’d have to ’kay? Someone has to. Cullen did it…and I think I…I killed it too. And you, or maybe it was Chancellor Roderick, you were both there and fake me was on the table…”

“Eleanor—” Cassandra’s mouth was moving and Ellie tried to focus on it but there was this awful ringing in her ears and something like rust, the taste of it filled her mouth, the smell in her nose and she felt her head snap back.

It was dark.

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It almost felt like the morning she woke after the failed assault on the Breach. She was laying somewhere warm and soft, there was give in what she laid on. A mattress, and there were blankets tucked up all around her, her armor was gone again and that almost made her panic except…well she’d never worn this before it was someone’s shirt. Big someone, bigger than her anyway, a large linen tunic, it was clean, and she felt clean, like someone had done so while she was down for the count, the smell of coconut lingering from their efforts with her hair.

“…Inky?”

Ellie opened her eyes…oh gosh ouch, light. But Sera was there too once she could see, huh, it wasn’t that bright, it was lamplight from a fixture hanging on the ceiling, fear sort of ghosted across her magic, in under her skin, she was in a stone room…but there wasn’t any furniture on the ceiling, she groaned as she rolled on her side to make certain the floor was…floor and not forest. and there was something ticking…

Oh, thank the Maker, there'd been a niggling worry in the back of her mind when she woke up in a different place without her things but Cremisius's pocket watch was safe and sound, sitting open on the nightstand.

“Take it easy Tumbles, you’re okay, you’re safe,” oh Varric. He and Sera were sitting by her bedside, Sera came forward and shifted to sit on the edge of the mattress, resting her hand on Ellie’s arm a moment before coming to press the back of it against Ellie’s forehead,

“Er…” Sera hummed, concentrating.

“Not sure how to check a temperature?” Varric asked.

“She feels warmer now than she did before, but not sicky warm it just took me a minute!” Sera snapped, Ellie flinched at the tone and then, “whoops, shite. Sorry Inky.”

“s’okay…” she rasped out quietly, reaching out to poke the older girl’s cheek. Oh she felt like she was real, that was nice.
“Here, drink up,” Varric said as he handed her her canteen, uncapped. Oh, he wasn’t handing it so much as holding it to her lips and gosh she was thirsty. “You good, or you need more?”

Yes but he might leave, or Sera would and she didn’t-want that more than she wanted water. Where was everybody? “I’m okay,” she said, “um…where is everyone? What happened?”

“We're still in Therinfal, but this wing's secure, everyone's making sure it stays that way and cleaning up after uh, well. Everything. As far as what happened, it’s a long story and we got a lot we don’t know from your end Tumbles,” Varric said, “short of it? Elder One was doing a take over of the Templars, we stopped it for the most part, Barris guy’s their top guy now. Sort of.”

“Sort of?”

“Sandra might’ve went berserk,” Sera said, sounding impressed.

“What…what did she do?”

Varric blew out a weary sigh, “Well kid, here’s the thing. Lady Seeker’s taken control of the remaining Templars and she’s conscripted them to the will of the Inquisition.”

Chapter End Notes

*This is canon backstory, some of which isn't fully mentioned in game. The Iron Bull tells Inquisitor about the baker in Seheron poisoning his crew.

*Also canon backstory I found that just! It's so cute I couldn't help but slip it in, little bby Bull being a smarty pants and getting set on his career path because of it!

*Canon backstory, I don't recall from the game--Sera inherited Lady Emmauld's estate when she passed, but Sera signs it over to the state and goes out on her own, ultimately joins the Friends.

*Cyril=this is the man that Blackwall blows his cover with the Inquisition to go to Val Royeaux and save from the noose, turning himself over to the authorities in the hopes Cyril will be spared.

*Tonio and Liviana=Krem's parents aren't named, so. I named them using Roman names, based a little on how they sound with 'Aclassi' but ultimately meaning won out. Tonio means 'man whose worth cannot be estimated' and Liviana means 'a woman who envies'.

*Ellie's alphabet song is set to the tune of the RL hymnal 'Seek Ye First'

*Antiva has only one Circle, it's Andrasten, but other than that there's no info on it, it doesn't have a name or even a listed location in-world but I assume such a thing would be kept near Antiva City, since there's only one. Given Antiva's crazy set up government wise, their Circle system is probably not exactly the same as it is in the south, less focus on running and maintenance, less structure, fewer official resources, and I figure when shit hit the fan with the rebellion it was either the most peaceful
rebellion where everyone wove flower crowns and had a marvelous garden party....or uh, everything went to actual hell in a handbasket.

*The only way to obtain a phylactery is to unlock the Circle's phylactery vault using a key from the Circle's Grand Enchanter, and a second key from the highest ranking Templar, both have to be used at the exact same time or the door doesn't open.

*"Family is a circle of strength and love with every birth and every union the circle grows. In every crisis we face, it strengthens" is a lovely French saying.

*Marquis Abernache is repugnant and just clunks up the Templar story line, he bothers me in my soul. So I dropped him, I understand somewhat his purpose in the story, but he isn't wholly necessary.

Update: Chapters 13 and 14 (the Birthday chapter) will be posted on December 31st, 2018 and January 1st, 2019 respectively since they'll be cleaned up and ready to roll in time to match the days in story!
Return to Haven: First-Day Eve

Chapter Summary

The aftermath of Envy and Therinfal Redoubt, the journey back to Haven just in time for a certain someone's birthday, but first—First-Day Eve! Lots of firsts for First Day fun.

Chapter Notes

Happy New Year's Eve! Since this chapter is set in the Thedas equivalent, I figured, why not go full corn, and post this chapter, and the Birthday chapter, on the matching dates.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Cassandra...” Eleanor murmured, the Seeker knelt before her, hands gripping the girl’s shoulder's Maker, she looked exhausted, spent, trembling so fiercely in Cassandra’s hold that, for a moment, she feared the girl might be seizing and then she gasped in air, grew so very still, and made the most horrific request, “you...you’d kill me, if I wasn’t me, right?”

“Eleanor! I would nev-”

“You have to,” the girl insisted, sounding ill with her conviction, “if I’m ever not me, if I got possessed, you...you’d have to, 'kay? Someone has to. Cullen did it...and I think I...I killed it too. And you, or maybe it was Chancellor Roderick, you were both there and fake me was on the table...” what...what in the world had—

“Eleanor, sweetheart, you’re not making any sense,” Cassandra said, and the girl seemed dazed, blinking rapidly and then squinting like she were trying hard to focus on what the Seeker was saying, “what just happened? Are you hurt? What did that demon—” her heart leapt into her throat when the girl’s eyes rolled back in her head and her head snapped back and her body went limp, and to her horror she feared, lifeless, “Eleanor?! Eleanor please-”

Sera’s hand on her shoulder then, letting out a shuddering, oh so relieving, "I-Inky's alright, she...she's gonna be okay, h-hearts still beating 'sandra, and she's breathin'."

It had been a kind of hell, fighting the horde of Red Templars turning against their non-infected ranks, while keeping Eleanor as safe as possible...Maker they hadn’t the slightest idea what to do for her. Solas could only perceive that she’d endured some great psychological trauma her mind processed in under a second, it had been overwhelming for him to observe, a wave of something that started with fear and desperation that fluctuated from resolve to panic to hope to worry and back around to fright and despair the moment she was out of the Lord Seeker…a demon posing as him, it's hold.

It had been taxing and sent the girl comatose, she could not be roused, she was pallid and chilled like when she’d fought demon possession in the Hinterlands, but this had been some fight
far worse than that—that demon had taken so much longer to fend off but Solas, when there was a
moment of reprieve between waves of Red Templars, he examined Eleanor. He deduced the Great
Terror hadn’t been powerful enough to take a deep foothold in the girl’s mind, Eleanor had been able to keep her at the edge of her consciousness and was able to hold it there until she was either
well enough to cast it off herself or it was felled by her friends. This demon, a demon of Envy, old
and powerful and Cassandra couldn’t fathom just how it had been acquired for this job—there was
more than reason to believe someone had summoned it, given it purpose to take on the task of overtaking the Order. It had penetrated Eleanor’s mind, cast the girl deep into her own subconscious in an attempt to ‘learn her shape’. It did not seek possession, it wished to destroy the
girl’s mind while learning how to copy it, so that it could take on her form when it was through.
The Elf explained it was rather a lot like dreaming—while our minds perceive dreams happening
over a great span of time, they truly only happen in an instant.

It was also confirmed by their strange new ally. He came to their aid in the final battle with the
demon of Envy. Eleanor’s ‘Cole’. Cassandra…she did not know what to think of the boy, but Eleanor clearly saw him as an ally, had cried out for his help when…Maker she’d seemed terrified
of everyone when she broke free of the demon’s hold and this boy had apparently been with her in
her mind helping to guide her out, he explained when they encountered him while assisting
Knights of the Order under assault as they attempted to join their ranks in the Great Hall.

The Lord Seeker had been dead for months. He’d been replaced by a demon and no one had
questioned him. He’d turned proud, dedicated members of the Order into monsters, twisted them
from their purpose made demons of them himself. The whole of their higher ranks were abolished. It was…

So much corruption, the Order defiled, and none had done a thing to stop it until the
Inquisition arrived and foiled their corrupted part’s plans. They were meant to stop abominations
and yet Lord Seeker, he’d fallen victim to one himself! Allowed one to take his form, and now their order lay in ruin!

And they were party to the plans to assassinate the Empress of Orlais. Defeating Alexius
bore the information that such a thing was to occur in the future, and now in the destruction at Therinfal, they affirmed such a thing was afoot, that this Elder One planned for the Empress to die at her peace talks she was holding in the coming spring—marking the end of winter with a grand ball in her Winter’s palace.

The Order had been destroyed by its own, while others stood blindly by and allowed it to happen.

They’d been taken over by a demon their highest-ranking member had not been able to keep from destroying him. A demon Eleanor, after torture and torment, broke free of.

And the thing…oh it had tried. Tried to take the girl’s form. It had, in a way, when its health worsened, the demon of Envy had taken on the shape of Eleanor, her small body in shadow form. Even as the Seeker knew—knew it was not Eleanor, it was more than obvious, it was still…disconcerting to say the least to kill a thing with the girl’s resemblance.

Heartrending, at its core.

You’d kill me, if I wasn’t me, right?

Cassandra felt hollow, like someone had scraped her empty, left her raw in their wake.

“We’ve numbers across Thedas but we let this happen,” Barris’s voice, Cassandra barely
perceived the words past the roar in her ears. “Our officers either failed to see it or were complicit. The Templars are ready to hear with the Inquisition needs of us.”

Barris had shown remorse, humility, ready to make things right however possible. But he was right, and Cassandra…she’d never found herself questioning the Order more in her entire life.

“You know what you need to do,” she snapped. “It was you who ignored the threat of the Breach, at the word of a *demon* who has been in your midst for who knows how long.”

“You speak truths we should never have ignored,” Barris said. “The Order is leaderless, gutted by betrayal. We must rebuild it.”

“Leaderless?” Cassandra seethed, “You were so willing to follow a raving madman, your Lord Seeker, a demon in disguise. I am Lady Seeker Cassandra Pentaghast.”

“Y-yes ma’am, of course, I meant no disrespect-”

“You will submit to my guidance! The Order you have worked for is broken. You will yield and serve the Inquisition without question as you seem so capable of doing!” They certainly hadn’t done nearly enough to question their former leaders. “You will be knights of the Inquisition, serve us, and rebuild without stain on your honor.”

And when Barris turned to his fellow Templars, sought their opinions, they knelt before the Lady Seeker, subject to her will.

She *willed* to wring each and every one of their necks, this was all…frustrating, infuriating, overwhelming, her mind ached as it tried to comprehend just how far they’d fallen.

Cole was an anomaly to say the least. He’d helped Eleanor, helped them in the destruction of the demon of Envy. And he remained to help further still. Their new conscripts were sent split up, a portion making certain a wing of the barracks were clear of enemies, see to it Knight Captain Denam was secured as their prisoner, and the others going to make certain their noble allies were alive and well. If some unfortunate fate befell their allies it would not bode well for the Inquisition…and Maker, Eleanor would be wracked with guilt, blame herself for their joining them here and being led to their demise, especially the Marchands.

In the broken, destruction-wrought Great Hall of Therinfal, their party gathered around the Iron Bull who was kneeling, still holding fast to Eleanor, as she…Maker, she could not be roused, no amount of jostling, calling her name, Solas sending pulses through their bond would wake her if…oh if Cassandra could not see the steady rise and fall of the girl’s chest she would fear the girl was dead. It’d been her first thought, the first horrific thing that came to mind when the girl went limp in her hold just seconds after being dropped by the demon of Envy, that in the mere blink of an eye, Cassandra had failed and Eleanor was gone.

“What is *wrong* with her, Solas?” Cassandra asked.

The man looked listless, struggling to find words as he searched their bond for some explanation further. He wrapped an arm around Marehis, holding her close as the woman looked over her ward, tucked in a single arm of the Qunari. The Iron Bull’s eye was closed as he listened closely, fingers carefully pressed into her wrist as he checked her pulse.

“Her heart’s pounding hard, her pulse is thready,” the Iron Bull rasped out.

Sera shrieked, startled when Cole appeared, crouching before Eleanor, paying no mind to the Iron Bull’s low wary growl.
“It got in her hurts and used them against her, faked faces of her friends to learn her face and form, she did not realize she was free at first,” Cole said, an explanation of the girl’s behavior, her initial fright with Cassandra. “She knows now, but her mind needs to heal.” He held at a hand, hovering just over the center of the girl’s chest.

Cassandra heard the strain of an arrow being knocked and bowstring pulled back, as Sera screamed, “You keep your ruddy hands off of Inky you creep!”

The boy wasn’t alarmed by her actions, “Hurtful, hateful, hands touching what isn’t meant for them, She doesn’t want it she said! I’ll show him, arrows will teach him not to touch my friends! I wouldn’t touch Ellie like that, this is meant for healing, not hurt, my hand will stay where it is, I only need it to look,” he said, and then, “Her heart—the physical one—it is under pressure, pushing pumping powering blood to her brain, trying to help but it is hurting itself.”

Ahh. If that diagnoses didn’t sound so very terrifying Cassandra would find amusement in the thought that perhaps he found such fast friendship with the girl for her love of alliteration. Was he...was he correct, about Eleanor's condition? Solas was quiet, head bowed as he searched their bond trying to verify and perhaps come with something that would help.

Sera looked startled by Cole's words, “You…that’s…what the frig?!”

“Sera, silly, sisterly, smart. She's amazing, someone to be proud of, does she know she's perfect as she is? Old hate should have no hold on her. You're hurting because your friend hurts, you all are, I...” he found pause, deciding instead to say, “it hurts me too. I like Ellie, she sees hurt and she tries to heal, like me, but she isn’t a Spirit, she doesn’t have the things I do, still she tries and keeps trying until she succeeds.”

"sandra he's saying weirdy shite!"

"Leave her be, demon," Dorian said, and he shifted to stand more so alongside Sera as if to back her up or perhaps give her the ability to allow him to shield her from Cole attempting some sort of foul manipulation. There was some solidarity* there Cassandra was unsure just how it was struck, but it had only grown as the Mage made himself a friend to Eleanor and by association, Sera.

"Dorian, delight, daring, dulled, why doesn't he understand he's so much more than circumstance? He can build better than what was broken because he is brave. I'm not a demon. I'm Cole."

"Kaffas!"

"No...Cooole," the boy stressed as if Dorian misunderstood his pronunciation.

"What is..." Cassandra sought to question the young man's strange way of speaking, was he proclaiming some relation to Sera, 'sisterly' he'd said? What exactly was he going on about? How was this helping anyone?

"Love makes bonds, not blood. Cassandra, caretaker, careful, compassion, I like it when she smiles, doesn't she know she deserves so much love? She has such an amazing heart. I know Ellie's mind, she sees your hurts and hurts with you. I can help you, I want to help you. Let me."

That was a touch too raw for Cassandra's comfort, but it did sound like the Eleanor she knew, Maker her eyes ached, she had to speak past the tightness in her throat, “What would you have us do?” Cassandra asked quietly.
"Envy forced her into the Fade, put her in her hurts, played, pained, punished." Sera flinched as this Cole explained. "Her Mark makes her go back, but her mind…it is broken, and she cannot perceive the Fade yet," he looked to Marehis, “You—you’re the one that watches, her Marehis—minder, motherly, missed, waiting watching but who watches after the watcher? Oh she’s so very glad you have Solas, your friendship with Cassandra, you build each other up and it makes her heart happy. She nearly forgot you in the Fade, you aren’t in her hurts, not deeply rooted, you didn’t put it there. You have her potions. The one for sleep would see her safe, steel her from the Fade, allow her physical mind and heart to rest and recover.”

Solas nodded, agreed, and they set about doing what they could. Maker, she hoped it worked. Marehis administered sleeping potion, and all they could do was wait.

And so they settled in. They found a room they felt was most secure, and everyone went to task. Dorian was animate they try to scrape together as much information as possible on this ‘Elder One’ the Red Templars were receiving their order from, so he was going back through the wings of Templar barracks they’d had to fight through earlier to search for any documentation that might be lying around, the Iron Bull going along in case they weren’t clear of enemies. Madam de Fer went to smooth things over, make certain their allies—the nobles, they were all safe, merely frightened and confused at what had happened—did not leave Therinfal rescinding their allegiance to the Inquisition. Rainier stood guard to ensure the wing Eleanor was to be kept in was safe, remained clear of any straggling foes, their remaining Templars were ordered to follow suit, assist him as need be. Cassandra…supposed they would have to return to Haven under her watch, and she was not leaving, not until she could do so with Eleanor.

Cole and Solas were sequestered. Solas would ascertain what nature of Spirit the young man was, just why he held the form he did, it seemed strange even to the man who studied such things, a Spirit in a seemingly mortal form. The Elf Apostate had spoken directly to Cassandra to say he’d examine the Spirit, and then he was silent as he led Cole into the room they chose for such purpose, and closed the door, something flashing across the wood like warding, Cassandra supposed to keep the Spirit in bounds or perhaps to secure privacy, she could hear nothing of what was said even as she did admittedly press her ear to the door, trying to make fathom out if the spell meant something had already gone awry but Solas was more skilled than that she trusted, he had things well in hand.

Varric waited in the wings, taking point outside the door to the room they tended to Eleanor in. Cassandra, Marehis, Sera took the task of getting the girl some peaceful rest. They all worked to remove her boots, her armor, and Cassandra was mindful of the watch still in the girl’s pocket it…it would bring her comfort, perhaps, to be able to lay sight on it when she woke, so the Seeker placed it on the nightstand and left the clockface open for her.

“Inky’s feet is stinky,” Sera announced quietly as she plied a wet washcloth against said stinky feet, breaking their longstanding silence, “but once I clean them up good, do you think Viv’d be prissy about redoing her toenails? Paint’s almost chipped all off. Inky thinks the polish’s pretty, it might make her happy.”

“Hmm, if you look in my pack there is remover that would suit for now,” Marehis said, and Sera twisted around to dig in the Elf woman’s pack, pulling out a bottle of clear liquid marked as such, “it would leave her nails pigment free, clean, to be repainted later.”

Sera began cleaning off left over nail polish from the girl’s nails—toes and fingers as well, it was all rather chipped and the Elf girl groaned in sympathy when, as she moved on to her hands, she found deep cracks and chipped pieces of her actual nailbed, fingernails bleeding and broken like they’d scraped harshly against stone. Sera broke out a vial of Elfroot tonic and a clean cloth,
carefully swabbing Eleanor's nails so they might heal as she slept.

Marehis was working a comb through the girl’s wet hair. Cassandra held her upright, Eleanor’s head resting back against the Seeker’s shoulder, her hair lay down Cassandra’s back. As it was, the Nevarran woman had removed her chest plate, and she could feel the girl’s heartbeat against her chest. Cole…had certainly been of great help, her heart beat slow and steady now. It was a comfort, like it had been on the Storm Coast, to feel it’s certainty.

“…’sandra?” Sera asked gently.

Ahh. Cassandra had not realized it until the young Elf voiced concern. The Seeker…well admittedly she was crying. Possibly. It felt like a stone was lodged in her throat tears steadily streaming down her face, her chest felt tight.

“Shh, da’len,” Marehis hushed Sera in gentle reprimand, that she should have not brought attention to the Seeker’s distress. But it wasn’t necessary, Cassandra was…albeit embarrassed but she did not feel ashamed at her show of weakness.

She reached and laid a hand on Sera’s forearm, “It has been a trying day,” Cassandra said tightly. Maker it was understatement.

Tears welled up in Sera’s eyes and she sought to comfort, “I’m…I’m sorry your Order thing’s all broke ‘sandra. And that Inky’s hurt but…it’ll be okay. Ellie’s tough, she’ll bounce back, and we’ll help her,” Sera promised. “And you…you’ve got this, you really do, you’ll get those assholes whipped into shape,” and then trying for teasing, “Commander Dreamy might rethink his decision to leave the Order once he finds out you’re running things, bet he’d like you barking orders at him.”

“Sera,” Marehis spoke laughingly, sniffling as she wiped at her own eyes with the back of her hand.

“Honestly,” Cassandra drawled halfheartedly. Then, with all sincerity, truly, “Thank you, Sera. You…you do well, being Eleanor’s friend, cheering her up, encouraging her. I do appreciate you.”

“I do as well, da’len, truly,” Marehis said.

“Cripes you two, we’re already all weepy, shush it!” Sera snapped, ears tinging red with embarrassment though she said, “Thanks…”

And then after a moment of consideration Sera ventured, “Um. I got play time with Inky when we was in Haven ‘cause she got all sick and had a few days off, and we get some meals together but…I…” it sounded like she was endeavoring to request more time with the girl once they returned to Haven, and certainly Cassandra did wish they could supply Eleanor with more downtime, but the Elf proposed, “I know I don’t talk all fancy but I am smart. Dori’s teachin’ Inky all kinds of reading stuff, and I was wondering…maybe Josie’d put me on Ellie’s schedule. She’s never had school, she seems okay with numbers but maybe you’d like her to learn some math things—I can teach her that, good. And she likes potions and stuff and she knows cooking, so I thought she might like sciencey lessons.”

“You would like to teach Eleanor math…and science? Of what sort?” Cassandra asked.

Sera nodded. “Littler math to start and see where she is, work her up to algebra soon enough I reckon. Science’s easier sort of, we’d do basic things, but she could do a little chemistry’n’pish
for fun and application,” she flushed, ducking her head and Cassandra felt badly, she was sure she’d given some sign of hesitation in her expression—she did not think the girl was an ignorant and she’d spoken of her education to some degree, but ‘fun and application’ sounded like experiments and experiments and Sera didn’t sound like a safe mix, but the young Elf defended, “Look. If you…if you poke around the University of Markham*, Professor Farkus, he uh, might remember me. I applied for their Chemistry program few years back, got accepted. Full scholarship gig, he thought my shite was impressive.”

…that was certainly a bold claim and Cassandra...could not imagine Sera lying so brazenly about something of the sort, “You studied at the University of Markham?”

“I was Inky’s age, needed um, permission, in the end,” the girl shrugged. “Lady shut it down big time. Professor was real upset ‘bout it. If you ask, he can probably vouch for me or whatever, I wouldn’t let Inky get blowed up or nothin’ and it’s fun. She likes learning and it um might make her feel…you know. Smart and stuff.”

That…she…Maker what sort of- it was the University of Markham! It was only one of the largest universities in Thedas, rivaling, and in most circles it could be said to be surpassing, the University of Orlais! And Maker to be so young! What sort of mother, adoptive or otherwise would deny their own child the opportunity?! Marehis looked as appalled as Cassandra felt.

“I’m certain you would be an excellent tutor for Eleanor,” Cassandra said, “if she is agreeable you’re more than welcome to a spot in her schedule.” And then, "Sera...do keep me in mind if you’ve ever a wish to continue your education in future. I would make certain the Inquisition provided letters of recommendation, myself personally, I would accredit you to any university you wished. And if Eleanor accepts your offer of teaching, that would certainly be a bright spot on an application, the personal tutor to the Herald of Andraste."

"Oh you keep that crap to yourself!" Sera snapped, and for a moment Cassandra thought she'd misstepped egregiously, been overbearing but, "Might take you up on letters or somethin' but don't put it in Inky's head I'd want to teach her just for some bright spot on my shitty whatever. Not using Ellie's business like that."

Ahh. That was understandable, honorable even. "But you would still use mine I hope?"

"Pfft yeah, you're Seeker, no one's lookin' for handouts from you, you're too scary, too strong to let people take advantage. But Ink's kind, wants to help everyone so bad, she's gonna have people pulling on her in all directions wanting to break her into pieces they can build themselves higher with. Assholes like that will get arrows from me. Besides I...I dunno, I never thought about trying school again. It wasn't...uni was an out for me, or at least I thought it was going to be. Got nothing to be out of now, so."

"Well...perhaps you should consider it, if it is something you may find passion in. You have your entire life ahead of you sweet girl, whatever you decide with it...I'm certain it will be incredible no matter what,” Marehis encouraged, reaching out to tuck a bit of Sera's hair behind her ear, it sent the younger Elf blushing, smiling slightly despite herself it seemed, but still shaking her head to shift her hair back into place shortly after.

Once Eleanor was clean, they had to find clothing. Her pack was on Russel, and he and their steeds were...someone should check on them. Their steeds were outside the fortress. Since the girl had place for her potions stores in her armor’s belt and Madam de Fer had reasonably suggested the girl not carry her pack around when meeting with her noble guests, with the Lord Seeker. It wasn’t exactly intended to be a fashion accessory, but she did look more ‘presentable’ without it. There was a bit of fear washed with relief when Cassandra recalled how they’d
considered having the girl wear one of her nicer outfits to meet with their noble allies and represent
the Inquisition before the Lord Seeker—Lady Josephine had been certain the girl packed as such—they’d no idea the danger they were walking into, Maker. Cassandra was so relived they’d thought
against it, had the girl been without armor…she was just grateful they’d reconsidered. There was
the thought that perhaps, had the girl been unarmored, she could have been persuaded to stay with
their noble allies while her party went ahead and dealt with the Lord Seeker when trouble rose, that
perhaps she wouldn’t have faced Envy as she had, but the past could not be undone, and Eleanor
would not have been compliant to such a decision, she would have merely gone forward less
protected.

“She can wear my sleep shirt,” Marehis offered, pulling a surprisingly large tunic from her
own pack that…certainly did not look to be made for the slender woman holding it.

“Solas’s shirt you mean,” Cassandra was certain.

“He has long since come to terms with the fact that he is no longer the sole owner of his
wardrobe,” Marehis informed her humorously.

Ahh. Implying should things stand, and they were here for the evening, Marehis could
merely commandeer her…other sleep shirt, poor Solas. Sera’s nose wrinkled up at the thought of
the Elf Apostate running around topless.

Ohhh, Cassandra wished Eleanor would wake. It felt foolish, but she sat holding the girl’s
hand until the very last second she could possibly spare…she lingered longer than she should have,
there were things to do. Still, she hated leaving, but she needed to take charge further still with their
newly acquired Templars, and she and Marehis would need to get reports out to the advisors on the
day’s events. Once they had the girl situated, Varric came to take post, sit with Sera and watch
over the girl. The young Elf took the bag of Eleanor’s potions from Marehis, and Sera rattled off
the instructions for each to confirm she was certain when and how to administer them if there was
need. Blessed girl. Cassandra sighed, and if someone had told her she would do such a thing when
she first met the wretched little prankster in Val Royeaux, she would have thought them crazy, but
the Seeker came up behind where Sera sat at Eleanor’s bedside and dropped a kiss to the top of
the Elf’s horrible, horrible bowl cut. Varric snickered at her open affection, and Cassandra might
have felt a mite vindictive, so she smoothly stepped up behind the Dwarf and kissed the top of his
hair before smacking him upside the head, earning a grunt from him and a snorting giggle from Sera.

“If you’ve need of anything, Rainier is just out in the hall, and the Iron Bull should return
shortly,” Cassandra said, “if Eleanor wakes before we are returned, do please send word to us.”

“You got it, Seeker,” Varric said, rubbing the back of his head.

She and Marehis set up in Knight Captain Denam’s office. It lacked the hidden corpse of
the fallen Lord Vigilant now, and there was room to work. It was a sort of torture, waiting for
Eleanor to wake, but at least there was some distraction found in getting their report written up.
Cassandra…Sera had jested that Commander Cullen would find pleasure in Cassandra’s decisions,
but some small part of her feared he would greatly disapprove. It would not make her regret her
decision, but she did hope he would see reason, if he heard the things that transpired this day and
thought Cassandra’s decision lacking, that would certainly speak to…well she wasn’t certain it
would speak well of his character, his ideals, and perhaps they were not an adequate match if that
were the case.

What she got was understanding and support of her decision, and a request to be kept
appraised as to Eleanor’s recovery, another offer to join them she would again decline out of fear of
what the girl bore witness to in the Fade—she’d spoken so incoherently, but there’d been some
horrific mention of Cullen killing her. Cassandra was desperate for the girl to wake and fearful of what would happen when she did. She had already been through so much and they hadn’t any idea what may have transpired when the girl was cast into the Fade with a demon of Envy.

The Templars were eager to help however they could. They secured Knight Captain Denam for Cassandra—Leliana had agents near the fortress who would come and take custody of him, turn him in to a cell in Haven’s dungeons with Magister Alexius, and Cassandra almost wondered if perhaps the Spymaster would indulge in vindication, have the Templar and Tevinter mage share a cell…Cassandra would certainly see that as fitting, but Leliana likely wouldn’t do anything of the sort. She would perhaps threaten the men as such though, and that was pleasing enough in and of itself. As for their new helpful Templars, The Knight Fletcher assisted Madam de Fer her in reigning in their steeds inside the Fortress safely, retrieving Eleanor’s pack. Barris came and sat with Cassandra and Marehis, he willingly submitted to questioning from the women, laying out every last thing he’d witnessed in his time with the Lord Seeker since the Conclave.

Though he did start out with questions of his own, offered tentatively as though he were certain the Seeker would snap at him for it, but he endeavored none the less,

“If I may…” Barris spoke carefully, “I would ask after Lady Ellie. Is she…has there been any change, do you know?”

“She is still unconscious,” Cassandra allowed, “but we made certain she is comfortable. We will know more when she wakes.”

And then it was time for Cassandra’s questions. Barris admitted he worried perhaps the Lord Seeker may have been taken even before then, and Cassandra…well that was very possible, the man had been replaced without raising alarm. She had not seen the actual man in quite some time. Bah! Somehow she felt badly that she herself hadn’t called the man to question when she saw his change in behavior in Val Royeaux, and her anger redoubled at those in the Order who saw the man every day and hadn’t thought to question his change when it took only a few minutes in Val Royeaux for Cassandra to spot something amiss.

There was a knock on the office door then, and followed by Thom Rainier’s voice, “It’s me,” before he entered, “Apologies, Lady Seeker, but uh, it’s getting late and I…well. Is this a proper interrogation or can you and the lad eat?”

Ahh. The man came bearing a tray of sandwiches and drink. It was nearly gone seven in the evening and the Seeker was admittedly peckish.

“Well, thank you, Sergeant,” Cassandra said gesturing for him to join them, and he came and carefully set the tray on the desk, “Is there anything to report?”

“Ellie-girl’s still out like a light,” he was sad to say, “Solas has concluded his investigation of Cole. The young man seems to have passed his inspection, Solas wrote something up for you,” Rainier said, reaching into the inner pocked of his over coat to withdraw a folded stack of parchment to hand off to the Seeker. “Cole has been assisting um, telling us things, and Solas has been using their bond to confirm.”

“Things?” Marehis asked.

“Ellie’s sleeping peacefully, there’s something…some kind of disconnect where it doesn’t feel like she’s hungry but she does need something to eat so Solas and Sera are endeavoring to get something on her stomach, broth at least. And Dorian is working on getting some Embrium steam going in the room to help her breathe more clearly, cold air’s getting to her, Madam de Fer is trying
to make the room warmer. And our artist extraordinaire Varric Tetrhas has taken it to task to paint her nails.”

Oh Maker that...well that all sounded like help to the girl, and that last interesting factoid was equal parts amusing and unsettling, Cassandra personally wasn’t certain of the author’s ability to paint nails.

“I’m glad she’s still a...well. Does this Cole have any idea when she’ll be better?” Barris asked, pensive. When Rainier shook his head, the Knight ran a hand over his face, sighing, “Maker, today was...I wish I had done more. I thought I was doing well to prepare the Herald for facing the Lord Seeker truly, I still cannot believe I didn’t see what was right in front of me all these months.”

“You will do more now,” Cassandra said as she gathered her work in a neat stack and rose from her seat, “Serve the Inquisition—Eleanor—well, you and your fellow Templars can find redemption,” she felt just the barest bit of mercy, and moreover it was more to bring the girl comfort, “When Eleanor is better, perhaps you could speak with her, assure her of our security in the Templars helping us to seal the Breach.”

The young man looked like he did very much wish to take her up on the offer but still, “I...Maker I would be glad to be of assurance but...she...she could not possibly wish to see anyone from the Order let alone me. I saw what was happening and did not do nearly enough about it. She stood up to the Lord Seeker when he—it—behaved so reprehensibly in Val Royeaux. I should have done more.”

It was his prerogative, she wasn’t going to spend more of her own breath offering pity to the man, she wasn’t feeling that generous just now. Though Rainier rested a hand on Barris’s shoulder, “The fault is not entirely your own, it is that of your superiors. And Ellie took note that you were the only one that sought to reason with the Lord Seeker that day, appreciated your assistance with the dealings today. You’ll find...Ellie’s a good sort, there are those in her ranks who have done far worse than you, and she’s found them redemption still.”

“...Thank you er, Sergeant?”

Rainier offered the hand he removed from the young man’s shoulder to shake, “Thom Rainier, Bull’s Chargers, and personal recipient of the Herald of Andraste’s mercy.”

It felt like all mercy was gone that night. They finished their work and made certain the fortress was clear of enemies before Cassandra organized the Templars into rotations—to keep watch in the night, some would sleep while others stood guard. The Herald’s party made quarters in the barracks though Sera was rather irremovable from Eleanor’s side, but that suited well enough. There was much to be done, reports to be written, their findings in Therinfal to be sorted through, accounted for, Marehis looked wholly torn between the desire to be there the very moment Eleanor woke, to hold and soothe her as she slept, and the girl's need for her to secure her safety, make certain their efforts, Eleanor's efforts, did not go to waste. But Sera was not needed for such things, so the Elf girl slipped under the covers and held the Human girl close, settling into sleep with the Herald’s party taking turns standing guard outside the chamber door. Cassandra and Marehis pored over everything written up or discovered that day, the report from Solas on Cole, Madam de Fer actually came to the room Cassandra had claimed and the two discussed the Elf Apostle’s findings. Cole was apparently a young man that died at the hands of cruel Templars in White Spire. A Spirit of Compassion found him and tried to help, but while they ‘reached out and in’ trying to bring him peace and assistance, the young man expired, his soul leaving his body, and the Spirit found their self inside the broken body, they became Cole. Not possession, accidental replacement—the body was empty when the Spirit entered it, and was now its sole...soul in
residence. Madam de Fer was as skeptical as Cassandra was but they both understood the young man had been of assistance to Eleanor, they would watch carefully and make certain he wasn’t a threat.

*Cole is a Spirit of Compassion, meant to help with injury and trauma, healing both mentally and physically. He is intuitive to thought in relation to that goal—for example Sera’s panic when it seemed he might touch Eleanor inappropriately—he spoke as if he were Sera, and then explained his intent. He quotes thought, I don’t think its to be revealing of our privacy, it seems he’s incapable of keeping it silent, he reflexively recites what he hears at times, though there are others where speaking thought assists in the healing process by addressing the issue in their own words. Others he summarizes what he's observed on reflex, he's trying to understand our group, and how he can best work in it, he's decided to do so using what he's learned from his time in Ellie’s mind.*

Ahh. Unnerving. Put possibly helpful. They would see, Cassandra supposed, the boy had helped Eleanor admirably so far. How did one strike a contract with a Spirit in Human form? Would he even desire payment for his work in the Inquisition?

Before sunrise, the Seeker was holding a gathering of their Templar conscripts, discussing plans for how to move forward, and how they would traverse their journey back to Haven, when Varric and Sera, having resumed their bedside vigil, sent word through Rainier that Eleanor was finally awake. Awake and asking after everyone. Oh, Maker, asking implied talking, Cassandra feared the girl would shut down as she had before, put perhaps this was a sign she would not, that she would talk through her troubles.

Eleanor’s room was full. The whole of her party was gathered around save Cole. Solas and Rainier stood off to the side while Varric and Sera, Dorian and Madam de Fer had taken seats on the sides of the mattress, though it was nearly full as it stood before their added numbers—the Iron Bull was sitting upright, his back against the headboard, Eleanor seated in his lap.

The moment the door was closed behind them Eleanor’s bedside companions were up and out of the way, making room for Cassandra and Marehis who joined them from her own work corresponding with Leliana, to descend on the girl—very wise, Cassandra was admittedly prepared to bodily force her way through.

“Eleanor, are you well?” Cassandra asked as she sat on the edge of the bed, Marehis mirroring her.

The Elf woman raised a hand to push curls back behind the girl’s ear, her voice tight as she asked, “Da’vehnan?”

“I’m okay I think,” Eleanor said quietly, “Tired. Head still hurts but it's just me in here now, so that’s good.”

“Do you need potion?” Cassandra asked, she’d been tentative to risk touching the girl in case she still found some reticence there, but her hand had moved almost of its own volition to reach out and take the girl’s Marked hand, and Eleanor grabbed a hold of it, squeezing tight like she wanted reassurances of her own in some regard. Huh. Varric had managed his adventures in nail polish admittedly well, his handiwork neat, the girl's nails were now pink.

Eleanor shook her head ‘no’ at the offer of potion, though the motion did make her wince, “Um…maybe, yeah,” she admitted.

“Here Inky,” Sera said, thrusting a bottle of nearly-translucent green potion.
“Thanks—” though she gasped in surprise, along with the alarmed cries of her friends when their large-hat wearing Spirit suddenly appeared, crouched and balancing on the footboard of the bed, “Cole!”

“You’re awake, hurting. Piercing, painful pound,” the young man announced.

“Potion,” Eleanor offered another ‘p’ word with light amusement as she raised the vial as if in toast before knocking it back.

The boy sighed with some relief. “I want to help,” he said, and then he looked to Eleanor for a moment, “you…you want to do that thing again. You wanted one from Lady Josie, when you heard fake-her crying out in the Fade. You want one from me now?”

Eleanor nodded, holding her arms out and the boy was on the bed then, letting her wrap her arms around his neck while he crouched before her, his arms limp at his sides. “Hugging,” she explained, “and I want hugs from lots of people, Lady Josie’s in Haven though, the real one not the knifey one. Real Lady Josie wouldn’t pull a knife on me…don’t um, let what went on in the Fade give you a bad impression of my friends.”

…Lady Josephine pulled a knife on Eleanor in the Fade? Maker. Oh Cassandra wanted to know just what had happened, but Eleanor had questions for her own. Cole made himself scarce, he did not leave but he took to sitting on the footboard, everyone gathered to listen and help fill in the blanks for the girl.

“Varric said you took over the Templars um…Envy’s dead, right?” she asked, “It didn’t…it wasn’t able to copy me or anything?”

“It is dead, Eleanor, truly,” Cassandra promised, “it endeavored to copy you but failed rather spectacularly. Did it divulge it’s intention?”

Her chin quivered at that. “It said the Elder One was going to kill me and let Envy take my place, use the Inquisition t-to take over the world. I wasn’t….I wasn’t sure I was gonna make it out of there, so if I didn’t, I wanted to make sure whatever you got was something you’d know immediately wasn’t me.”

“You tricked a demon, Tumbles?” Varric asked, sounding proud.

The girl nodded. “Tried to, anyway. I pretended that I’d be cool with world domination. Took up swearing for a bit, um…I might have called Mother Giselle a bad word and renounced my belief in the Maker in the same sentence.” She looked to Cassandra brow creased with worry as she asked, “Do you think the Maker hears things in the Fade? I felt badly, and I’m sorry, but I didn’t know what else to do, the Lord Seeker wasn’t upfront with his plans to corrupt the Templars, no one saw until it was too late, so I figured world domination might happen the same way—you wouldn’t question Envy-Ellie until it was too late to do anything about it, and swears would be a good clue but you might find excuse for it. A complete loss of faith, no more praying, denouncing the Maker, making Envy think I would talk like I felt He’d abandoned me my whole life—but I don’t feel that way, honest,” she insisted tearfully, “I never have! I l-love—”

Cassandra pulled the girl close, hand cradling the crown of her head as she endeavored to put a stop to her worry, “That wouldn’t sound like you at all,” she agreed, “The Maker knows your heart, sweet girl. I’m certain He is with you always, even in the Fade, and I’m certain He took no offense.”

“Oh da’vehenan, you were so very brave, and that was such a clever move, you did nothing
in meanness,” Marehis breathed in agreement.

The girl nodded, pulling back to wipe at her eyes with the back of her hands, “Thanks.”

But that was all they got on Eleanor’s time in the Fade…and a great deal of what she offered, they’d already surmised. Her attempts to trick the demon they hadn’t guessed though Maker, she was so very glad Eleanor had been able to keep her wits about her, had thought to do such a thing. The girl shrugged off further questioning—Envy was dead, and she’d given them confirmation that the plot afoot had been to kill and replace her. The girl listened quietly as Cassandra explained all she had missed while unconscious, what they learned of the impending assassination attempt on the Empress, the conscription of the remaining Templar forces.

“I understand that conscription wasn’t the goal,” Cassandra started carefully.

“I don’t like conscription on principle, I mean its…a fancy word for militant slavery, and I feel badly I wasn’t able to help,” Eleanor apologized, promising, “I understand it and I trust your judgement I mean, you did amazing—saw what needed to be done and did it, so I’m really proud of you for handling everything.”

“Thank you, Eleanor,” Cassandra said, admittedly relieved. “Now, how are you feeling? Your headache is better I hope?” the girl nodded, and the Seeker asked, “Are you hungry?”

“Do you think um…c-could we leave, or do we have to stay here?” the girl asked instead of answering.

Cassandra looked around to meet the gaze of her teammates and when she received nothing that looked like reticence she said, “We could move on, take on breakfast once we’ve some distance. Do you feel well enough?”

Eleanor nodded though to Cassandra’s eye she still seemed weary, pallid and exhausted despite having been unconscious for neigh some seventeen hours, but she would have help if she needed it and right now… it truly seemed the girl needed to be out of the Templar Fortress.

Though there was a moment of panic when the girl realized she would be given privacy to change. Granted the shirt she wore fell to her knees, it wasn’t proper clothing for riding, let alone the weather, and everyone was already making leave of the room when Eleanor stood up on shaky limbs atop the mattress, preparing to step down, though her eyes went wide when Rainier’s hand was on the door latch.

“Wait!” Eleanor called out, halting him, “Um, w-where are you guys going?”

“I can help you change, da’len, the others are just stepping outside,” Marehis explained, sounding uncertain.

“You don’t have to! Um…is it okay that I use this shirt?” she asked, looking around to see who would answer her as she wasn’t sure who’d given her their clothing.

“Of course,” Solas and Marehis answered in unison, sending their ears turning red.

“…cool. Thanks. One sec, just stay, please,” the girl instructed, though she shrieked as she tripped rather spectacularly, her foot caught on the bedding and she would have fallen, crashing against the stone floor face first if the Iron Bull hadn’t reached out, his hand palming the back of her neck, fingers fitting over its curve to her shoulder and pulled her backward and down to fall on her bottom into the cushion of mattress beneath her.
“Eleanor—” Cassandra made to object when the girl thanked the Qunari before making to rise again.

“One sec!”

It took more than a second, but only slightly. Her next attempt off the bed was made by Eleanor thrusting her arms out to Sera who obliged her, taking her by the hands and pulling her forward until her legs slid over the edge of the bed and she was on her feet. The girl had spotted where they’d left her armor, and she grabbed at her leggings, hastily pulling them up, hopping in place to get them up, and over her hips faster before buttoning them, and then she grabbed her cloak and slung it around her shoulders, shoved her feet into her boots and looked around before setting sight on the nightstand and taking up the pocket watch still sitting there, tucking it away in her cloak pocket before she threw her overcoat and armored tunic over her arm to carry them and announced herself, “Ready!”

“If they leave, they might come back different,” Cole murmured quietly to himself.

“Ell-” Solas started but the girl was already in motion making way for herself through the group of her allies standing by the door saying,

“Let’s go!”

Eleanor was quiet and tense the rest of their time settling things in the Fortress, always clinging to one member of their team or another, following after those who went to their allotted sleeping quarters to gather their things, keeping the group together, and trying to keep the whole of their numbers in sight, looking back over her shoulder or turning about in circles to check and recheck that everyone was accounted for. It was a rather impossible feat, and as they gathered in the courtyard where Eleanor had been tested to grant them audience with the faux-Lord Seeker to begin with, a solution of sorts was offered, given there was no longer anywhere between them, and their exit, that held a low roof overhead.

“Imekari. Come here,” the Iron Bull ordered, kindly but firm, it had the girl whirling about immediately and looking up at the Qunari before she reluctantly detached herself from the strange pairing she’d made of Madam de Fer and Varric and came to stand before the man who then got down on his knees and extended his pinkie finger to her, “If you’re up for it, we’re about to do something that you can never—never—tell Dalish we did, or she will find me, and she will kill me,” the girl stared at him wide-eyed for a moment before he said, “Piggyback. Qunari style.”

Which meant Eleanor riding atop the Iron Bull’s shoulders, using his horns as armrests and support to keep her securely seated. Cassandra’s heart leapt in panic when the girl had settled sitting with her legs hanging over the Iron Bull’s shoulders, and the Qunari man, the tallest person—being the Nevarran had born witness to in her life, rose up onto his feet, no slouching, full height. Eleanor was more than two Eleanor’s up, and it was very disconcerting, even as the excitement of the man hefting her skyward sent her gasping out the barest bit of a giggle.

And it also meant that, with the Iron Bull keeping toward the back of their party, the girl could keep everyone in view, all while being constant physical contact with one of their members.

Barris and Fletcher led the lineup of their sixteen fellow Knights, following the Herald’s party out of Therinfal Redoubt. The sun was out, blessedly so, no rain clouds in sight. Their steeds walked alongside them, their master’s holding the reins, Sera kept Russel walking alongside their group, and Rainier held the reigns of both his horse and the Iron Bull’s. Cassandra was certain they’d stop to partake of breakfast soon, and riding...well Eleanor understood the Templars were conscripts, punishment for their compliance that led to the fall of the Order in Therinfal, but the
girl might feel badly, riding while their Templar counterparts walked. It wasn’t punishment exactly, though it could serve as such. The Templars had marched to Therinfal under the rule of a demon playing Lord Seeker, they could stand to march back—they’d traversed their way from Val Royeaux, they could stand the much shorter stint to Haven without detriment.

They took a break in a clearing, clean lines of sight of anyone traveling along the road, and they were near a stream they could reup their water supply. Rainier stepped up to help Eleanor down off the Iron Bull’s shoulders, the Qunari crouched and Eleanor twisted about to wrap her arms around the Sergeant’s neck and be pulled from Bull’s shoulders though she did hang, holding onto the man a moment longer and he hugged her back, “There we go, Ellie-girl. What’d you say we whip up some breakfast?”

The girl dropped to her feet and nodded, smiling lightly as she followed him.

With the help of Marehis, the Iron Bull, and Sir Barris, Eleanor and Rainier had a campfire and breakfast underway although…

“Hey Kid, you uh, do you eat?” Varric asked their strange Spirit…friend. Cole was over in the clearing near their stop, studying the horses it seemed, they garnered a great deal of his curiosity. Varric had gone to join him, Cassandra watched from where she was securing copies of her reports into the leather pouch she kept tucked away in her steeds saddlebag.

“...Varric, violent, vulnerable, valiant, he shouldn’t be so very hard on himself, he’s so brave and capable, doesn’t he know he’s enough? He always puts himself at fault. I can eat if you need me to,” the young man said in earnest, “but I don’t need me to.”

Varric looked wholly startled and then he cleared his throat. “No thanks Kid, don’t put yourself out on my account,” Varric said. “You don’t eat…at all?”

“I didn’t before. I haven’t needed to.”

That was…mildly disconcerting but at least it was one less mouth to feed?

Two less. Breakfast made, everyone seated around the fire, Cole nor the Herald ate a bite. Eleanor did not endeavor a turn at the food she could take freely from, but instead drained her canteen of water, and when pressed if she was going to eat—Marehis offering to make the girl a plate—she shook her head and made a run to refill her canteen, taking it to task—making herself busy refilling everyone’s water source at the stream. With the aid of Sera and Sirs Barris and Fletcher who volunteered when she approached. There was a segregation of sorts—the Herald’s party gathered around the camp fire while the Templars had seated themselves together nearer to the clearing where they dropped the lines for their horses. Eleanor seemed timid, like she were worried they might not respond well to the Apostle girl coming up to them—she left her staff laying behind where she’d been sitting during breakfast and approached them without it on hand. It startled her when their numbers stood but they did so in earnest, as if expecting some command from the Herald of Andraste they were ready to carry out, but Sera was the one who spoke to them, after her initial squeak when Ellie stumbled back, hand gripping the Elf’s when the Templars rose to their feet and Barris asked,

“My lady, how can we assist?”

“Calm your bits,” Sera, ever the diplomat, told him, “Inky just wanted to see if you lot need to refill your water pish.”

Eleanor nodded, smiling as she held out her unmarked hand in offer to take their canteens.
“That is kind, Lady Ellie, miss Sera, is it?” Fletcher asked.

“Call me miss again and I won’t miss your danglers,” the Elf threatened though she found something funny and giggled, patting Eleanor on the forearm as she shared jovially, “but he would—miss his danglers, get it Ink?”

Ugh. Sera, Maker. Though it was gratifying she’d taken the opportunity to try and tempt the girl to talk, whether it be in joking along or in gentle reprimand, it was a valid effort but all she received was a wry grin and Eleanor blushing at the crude joke.

“Sera then,” the Templar noted with some measure of amusement, “We would appreciate it, allow us to assist.”

So. They had plenty of water, but nothing in reassurance to how Eleanor was coping. She’d fallen into that painful sort of silence where she wouldn’t speak a word, and Marehis passed along an apple and Solas’s cold bag, full of grapes, to Sera who would be riding with Eleanor, intoning that the Elf should seek to entice the girl into snacking at the very least.

They kept a good pace without outriding their Templars that followed on foot, marching. Though getting onto horseback was albeit awkward. They had two new members since they’d last been in Haven—Dorian rode with Varric oddly enough. Apparently Varric had family in Tevinter that Dorian was well acquainted with and too, the duo had bonded over some shared venture they were keeping tight-lipped about, to an extreme, Cassandra only knew such a matter existed because Eleanor would, on occasion, slip a bit of paper with the request that the Seeker occupy the Iron Bull somewhere out of ear shot, so that she and her co-conspirators could conspire in privacy. It was not a difficult task, she would merely request the Qunari assist her in collecting firewood, and guided him into a distracting, long conversation on the finer points of Dragon slaying.

There was also Cole to consider. Rainier actually offered to share his steed with Cole, asking kindly if the young man had ever ridden before. He hadn’t, but the prospect didn’t seem to scare him he was rather…for someone who was supposed to be so in tune with the struggles and emotions of others, the boy was rather passive. He swung up into the saddle with little help from Rainier before the older man climbed on after him, and Cassandra was near enough to hear him offering some form of assurances, while the boy didn’t appear fearful of riding, Thom talked about how to best seat himself and assured him if they had to break out into a gallop in an emergency, he would be safe as he was. Though this prompted,

“Thom, trust torn, then tightened, forgiveness fumbled but fought for, found, does he know how great he can be? I’m so proud of the man he’s become. Thom, but you’re also Sergeant? You were Commander, but you like this name better. The lesser feels like more.”

“I…yes. I’m happy with the work I do now,” Thom spoke cautiously, as if he worried what else their Spirit friend might say in relation to his past.

Sera sat next to Cassandra when they broke for lunch, flopping down next to the Seeker with a defeated sigh.

“Inky wouldn’t bite. And I ate all the grapes. I was trying to get her to eat them with me, honest.”

Sweet girl, she did try. “I appreciate your efforts, Sera…did she…has she spoken a word since we left Therinfal?” Cassandra asked, looking to those seated around her—most of their party were gathered in something of conspiracy near the Seeker, while the Iron Bull enlisted Barris and Madam de Fer’s assistance for making lunch. Eleanor was across the way, seated with Dorian or…
well she was seated but nearly slumbering, she had to keep shaking herself to stay awake even a her head rested against the Tevinter man’s shoulder. Why did he only have one sleeve? The Lietuenant dressed like he had sense.

"Not a peep," Sera sulked.

Solas sighed, “She has been quiet.”

“What do you mean?” Cole asked, startling them, Cassandra had to restrain herself from drawing her weapon on reflex, Maker.

“Creepy!” Sera shrieked.

“Shh! Sera,” Cassandra gestured to Eleanor as reason to be more careful with her volume, they hardly needed the girl overhearing them.

“He’s the one poofing everywhere,” Sera whispered loudly.

“We were merely noting Eleanor’s silence today,” Cassandra offered as answer to the boy’s inquiry.

But that seemed to confuse him further, the boy sat straight down onto his bottom looking up at her with curiosity, “She’s been loud since she woke up.”

“What the frig are you on about?” Sera asked.

“Thoughts twisted need untwisting, but they’re twirled tight. She wants to fix it and she will, she…” Cole seemed to think on it a moment and then, “Ellie’s always fixed things. More often than not, there has been no one else to turn to, when things go broken, she’s had to fix them on her own. So that’s what she does, she thinks and thinks until its fixed.”

“Shit,” Varric swore, “kid always says crap like that, that she’ll fix things when everything goes to hell. She thinks she has to fix her mind being turned into a demon’s torture palace all by herself?”

That…that was enlightening, in an almost infuriating way. It was a pattern of behavior Cassandra had seen but she had not identified what it meant. She merely believed the girl to be subdued but when she thought about it with what Cole had to offer up…when they’d been on the Coast, in the wake of Rainier’s reveal Eleanor did not speak almost at all for nearly three days except for in apology, and when she finally did, it was with a solution for the issue.

“But surely she knows she can talk to us,” Marehis said.

“Can and should are different things—you’ve told her she can but not that she should,” Cole said, “Painful press, what if she breaks? You’re worried if you push she’ll fall.”

Cassandra thought perhaps she might just like this young man after all, strange as his being a Spirit was…well he was ever-proving his allegiance and ability to aid Eleanor.

Even more so when they had lunch underway and Eleanor smiled her thanks when given a plate but made precious little effort to consume its contents.

“There is also a difference between can’t and won’t,” Cole observed suddenly while Cassandra was working up the nerve to prompt the girl to eat, perhaps demand it to see if she’d at least try if she thought Cassandra was frustrated with her lack of appetite.
“There is…” Solas supposed uncertainly, looking to the Spirit, “in what context are you speaking?”

“Ellie’s,” Cole said simply, his attention on the girl who looked to him, confused, “it isn’t like before. Hurt hand in hand with hunger—quiet crying crave, you were left to starve but you don’t have to now. You’re used to bad things happening meaning you’ll have to go without food, your body learned to adapt, to ignore hunger in the wake of wicked things. It doesn’t realize that ‘can’t eat’ is ‘won’t eat’ now, you should tell it, that will help.”

The girl’s mouth worked momentarily, and then very softly, “Oh…”

She seemed to think it over a moment and then Cole bounced in his seat and there was a ghost of smile in his features just before Eleanor tentatively took one of the carrots on her plate between her thumb and index finger and took a careful bite.

Cole seemed to focus on that a moment and then he looked to Sera, “Preening pride, the good kind, I can take care of Inky, I’ll keep her safe! You have her potions.”

“You need potion, Ink?” Sera asked, and when she received a nod from Eleanor the Elf girl yelped and leapt into action, Cassandra had to act quickly to snatch the plate in Sera’s lap before she could send it toppling when she shot to her feet after digging a vial of potion out of Eleanor’s potions bag. The Seeker vaguely wondered if Sera had the ability of Cole’s to teleport, the girl moved so quickly to join the Human girl, armed with potion. The Elf sat next to Eleanor for the remainder of the meal, keeping an eye on how much she ate, though perhaps they all were, there was a collective sense of relief when Eleanor’s plate was left nearly empty, close enough to qualify as an appropriate meal. Eleanor took the potions she normally took in the morning, she was a few hours behind schedule but nothing detrimental. Sera fussied over it, but Solas was able to informed her it would be fine, and the younger Elf surprisingly took him at his word. Though perhaps it shouldn’t be, there was a bit more comradery there as of late, he’d been of some help in her training with Cassandra, and Sera had appreciated it.

“Sir Barris, divide your numbers—to scout ahead for danger and perform a perimeter check, ensure we’re safe while we prepare for our final stint of travel for today,” Cassandra ordered once lunch was through. The young man nodded and immediately saw to it. It was prudent and offered their party privacy. Cole’s intuition had been accurate thus far, it had even gotten Eleanor to eat, now, Cassandra hoped, they could get her talking.

They regrouped, the Herald’s party, gathering together to ensure they were all of one accord, they would approach, be as open and comforting as possible.

“We’re gonna go over there and talk to Imekari,” the Iron Bull whispered to their group, “Get it all out, help her process, cope, internalize, externalize, re…turn…alize… psychology bullshit.” Little affirmative nod to assure yes, he did know what he was talking about, certainly.

“You still got hankies on you, Baldy?” Sera asked Solas quietly. “Better have ‘em on hand.”

“Of course. Did I not give you yours?” Solas asked, and when he received a look like Sera thought he’d grown another head he dug around in the side pocket of his pack, and with an “Ahh,” withdrew a few handkerchiefs he handed off the younger Elf, red, with a golden ‘S’ and the tiny image of an arrow embroidered in the corner.

“Blah!” the girl complained, “Don’t-! Don’t be so nice to me Baldy, it’s right- right weird!”
“Are they not to your liking?” Solas wondered. “I can keep them if you’d rather not—”

“I didn’t say nothin’ like that!” Sera was quick to amend belligerently, tucking the handkerchiefs away in a pocket of her armored tunic, “Just…starting now don’t be so nice to me. Just freaky otherwise. We ain’t friends! N-not really. Be meaner!”

“I do apologize Sera. Your hair is especially horrendous today.”

“Thank you!”

“It’s getting a bit long, da’len…” Marehis said, brushing a hand through the younger Elf’s hair as she examined it, “do you think I could help you with it when we make camp tonight?”

Sera shrugged. “Depends on what’ch’you wanna do with-” she caught herself, shaking her head she stomped her foot and, “blah! Helping Inky! Focus! What the frig do we do just, ‘Hi, what happened in the demon Fade yesterday?’”

“Something just as direct but perhaps…gentler,” Cassandra allowed, “we don’t want to demand the girl speak with us, but neither do I wish to move much further without more fully assessing the situation.”

“We…” Rainier sighed, “I’ve attempted talking with Ellie about things—whenever I’ve offered comfort over troubles in the past she’s had the tendency to flip it around on me. I received three lectures on self-esteem on the way back from Val Royeaux. If we appear to need comforting ourselves over yesterday, or if she thinks what she has to say will make us, erm, sad, she may not be forthright.”

Madam de Fer...she’d been remarkably silent all day, and Cassandra realized then that the woman had needed to speak yesterday, but only done so by seeking Cassandra out in private. The woman feared speaking in front of Cole, maybe not feared exactly, but she was wary of prompting the young man to say anything of her. She seemed contemplative, building a resolve before offering, “Perhaps I could open the conversation?”

And Cole replied, "Vivienne, virtue, vibrant, valued, doesn't she know she is loved not because she is lovely but because she is worthy, for being her? Irreplaceable, precious, she doesn't need to bring others low to raise herself up, she's already enough."

Madam de Fer looked stricken, struck still and silent like she were trapped by the Spirit's words. Cassandra thought perhaps offering the woman someone else to address in the stead of Cole would suit best. "You wish to open the conversation with Eleanor, Madam de Fer?" the Seeker asked.

"On the premise that I wish to assess just how well she handled her dealings with demon possession, perhaps," the woman confirmed, her voice tight like she might be uncomfortable or perhaps...while she did not wish to believe Cole a benevolent ally, his supposed knowing of Eleanor's mind, that the impressions he had of her friends were his interpretations of her very thoughts and feelings may have admittedly overwhelmed the Grand Enchanter who was so usually frigid and petty. "An educational discussion that might lead her to sharing the more emotional aspects of her trials,” she reasoned as she regained further composure.

“Sneak attack, smooth,” Varric agreed, “Tumbles won’t realize it ‘til we’ve got her talking.”

“You take point, Madam de Fer,” the Iron Bull said, “we’ll back you, help keep Imekari
focused, kid really knows how to side track…mostly unintentionally, got a lot of anxieties her brain pops around to, but sometimes she’s just outright deflecting. Either way, we got this,” the Qunari rumbled out arms swinging like he were stretching before a fight.

“Certainly,” Cassandra agreed. “Our plan is sound.”

It. It seemed that way. In theory.

The Seeker wasn’t sure how surely she felt about that as she turned to face the girl in question who was looking at them in mild confusion from where she sat by the fire. She couldn’t have heard them of course, but Cassandra supposed the girl wasn’t blind, had plainly seen her party huddled together before turning on her in unison. And now they were descending upon her all at once.

And then despite their plans, Madam de Fer took one look at Eleanor’s…the girl’s eyes were dull, troubled even as she tried to offer them a smile, tension in her shoulders like she were nervous, her complexion was still more pallid than usual and she’d worried her lip so much it bruised, sitting huddled in her cloak and Solas’s tunic swallowed the girl, made her seem impossibly small. Whatever it was that stuck out to the Enchanter left her mouth working and she cleared her throat unable to find whatever words she’d had clear in her mind just a moment before.

Which left the rest of the adults scrambling to start them off.

“Ellie,” Solas said overlapping,

“Imekari—”

“Ink—”

“Tumb—”

“Shank Mistress,” was the endearment Dorian offered up brightly, it sent Eleanor’s brows raising in amused surprise, her attention—all of their attention—held by the Tevinter man who shrugged, “Don’t care for it? Eh, I don’t much either, though I find it more fearsome, and it’s rather befitting given that all of three seconds after being launched into the future, young Ellie here shanked a Venatori guardsmen, right in the heart.”

The girl bit her lip and then, “Cassandra taught me,” she offered shyly, “the room was so tiny I worried my spell backblast might hurt you.”

Ahh! Speaking! And it was nice…while it was an unpleasant necessity, there was a certain sense of pride Cassandra had that she’d been able to equipped the girl to defend herself, to keep herself safe when Cassandra wasn’t there to protect her.

“An admirable solution. We worked well together, you and I, sorting out how to get back from the future,” Dorian said as he sat before the girl, taking her Marked hand in his, his fellow team mates sat close together around him then, backing him up so to speak while curious to see what the man was doing. “You were instrumental in our return, Ellie, but it was team work that got us back.”

The girl gasped, looking regretful as she apologized, “O-oh, gosh, Dorian, I really appreciate all of your help, you were amazing of course, I’m sorry if I- I haven’t talked about it much but I hope you don’t think I mean to sell you short—”

The man was kind enough to cut her off, “Oh, Ellie, while I do so love hearing how very
amazing I am—"

“Boss girl just said ‘amazing’ there was no ‘very’ about it, Sparky,” the Iron Bull drawled.

“—never the less,” the Tevinter stressed, shooting a glare at the Qunari, though his expression warmed when Eleanor giggled over the exchange and he returned his attention to her. “We made it back, because we worked together. Yesterday, you made it back from what sounds like a harrowing experience…erm, perhaps not the best term given we’re in the South—your struggle with Envy. You made it out, with our flighty friend Cole’s help.”

“Does he see me and think I’m flying?” Cole could be heard quietly asking Varric who shushed him, clapping the younger man on the back of the neck as he assured the Spirit it was just a turn of phrase.

The girl nodded, “I don’t know that I could have done it without Cole,” she said.

“You’re good at sorting for yourself,” Dorian said. “But Eleanor…you don’t have to. What scared you the most about our friends going to fight that Ferelden Horsetail Dragon?” that…alright, there was no such dragon but it was close enough she was sure Eleanor would get Dorian's point.

“It was a dragon, Dorian.”

“Not quite where I was going. Hmmm...alright, what if Cassandra had proposed she faced it alone. She had it well in hand, do you not think her capable?”

“Of course she is but it was a dragon, Dorian,” the girl reiterated again. “Wh…why are we talking about this?”

“So if Cassandra had something big to fight, you would want all of us to step up and assist her with it?” Dorian asked instead of answering.

“Of course!”

“Why?”

“B-because—that’s just crazy!” Eleanor reasoned, “We’re a team!”

“So no matter the enemy or situation, if we were descended upon by those who mean us harm, even just one of us, what should we do?”

“F-fight them?” Eleanor answered sounding uncertain as to why he would have to ask.

“Together?” Dorian prompted, and when Eleanor nodded he asked, “So why is Envy any different?”

Eleanor flinched, paling as she whimpered out, “C-C-Cassandra s-said Envy’s dead!”

What…what was this man doing?

Dorian reached out, taking the girl’s hands in his, voice soothing as he said, “Yet you’re still dealing with it. A fight in and of itself. And not once, during this fight, have you let us join in.”

“…join in?”

“You’re still in a fight, and we’re still a team.”
Maker, she understood now. She’d been about to intervene, stop the Tevinter as it sounded like he were trying to scare the girl. When Cole said Eleanor wasn’t talking while she processed, Cassandra had heard a point of action—go in, get Eleanor to talk through her troubles—but Dorian heard what was actually said. The girl already knew well she could talk about these things with her friends. The point wasn’t to get her to talk. It was to get her to understand that she should.

“B-…um…” Eleanor fell silent, chin quivering, “it’s…”

The Tevinter man didn’t need Cole’s intuition to realize the girl needed a hug. He leaned forward and wrapped her up in a hug that almost looked like he were doing something wholly unfamiliar but trying his best. Cassandra wasn’t one to judge, she’d not indulged in such practice in decades before the Conclave.

“Come to us, any of us, whenever you’re ready to, Eleanor. Think on it, perhaps, like our agreement on nightmares,” Cassandra offered gently. “This was rather a similar thing.”

“Thanks,” Eleanor said, pulling back to spread her gaze across her party, “I… I will just um…”

“Whenever you’re ready da’vehenan,” Marehis assured her.

“I… I don’t know that I feel up t-to everything right yet, b-but I know I’ve been kind of a whack job all morning. En… Envy made me see people in the Fade—some of you, the Advisors, and um… it would show up looking like one person, then walk away, come back as someone else.”

“That would explain what our resident… Spirit,” Madam de Fer spoke the word with the same intonation she would have ‘demon’, she was still wary of him, as were they all really, “said this morning.”

“Imekari,” the Iron Bull said, gesturing for her to come to him where he sat kneeling, she joined the Qunari before he said, “Everyone huddle up.” It was only mildly uncomfortable, they’d all been sharing quarters as of late after all, still it felt albeit strange to gather around so tightly around Eleanor, Cole looked mildly pleased, excited like he were witnessing something amusingly curious, ending up between Varric and the Iron Bull who said, “Your name is Ellie. You are the Herald of Andraste, agent of the Inquisition. We are your allies. Your friends, we are real, and you are safe.”

Eleanor wrapped her arms around the Qunari’s neck and hugged him tightly, shoulders shaking, and she had hands resting on her shoulders, her back as everyone reached out to comfort her. Cole could be heard humming as if pleased, content.

Despite their reticence with Eleanor’s matchmaking the pair made quite the formidable team. Because Dorian laid down the footwork of helping the girl understand she should talk, and the Iron Bull created a space she felt compelled to do so in, holding the girl even more tightly as Eleanor cried, and details of her time with Envy in the Fade falling from her lips. The cruel version of the Inquisition Advisors, Cassandra felt her stomach turn at the mention of Envy in Leliana form slitting the throat of a false-Cullen. The foul thing created some horrible faux-fortress the girl had to work her way through witnessing horrific possibilities, renewed trauma twisted a different way—Cassandra and Roderick arguing over some wildly inaccurate version of their War table, down in Haven’s dungeons for some reason, with a specter of Eleanor laid out with a dagger in her heart between the quarreling parties. Cole was indeed of assistance, telling Eleanor how to free herself, to push the boundaries of how far Envy could push its creation, expanding its mind trap until it grew too great for the creature to be capable of powering. Even then, the demon had Eleanor in the vice of its grasp, prepared to cast her back to start the torturous process again more painfully this
time, so it might learn how to replace her, and Cole distracted it, and Eleanor had found herself on
her own two feet and,

She bit her lip seeming pleased with herself, “I did that thing…Cullen taught me actually, Cassandra helped too but I practiced on him? Pulling someone a lot bigger than me in for a nasty headbutt.”

“Right on, Boss,” the Iron Bull commended.

“He will be so proud to hear that, as I am,” Cassandra assured once she could trust her own voice.

Eleanor nodded. “I miss him. Everyone in Haven,” she admitted. “You know, all this wacky powerful magic we keep coming across, it’d be great if the next nutcase villain we encountered was all ‘mwahahaha here’s instant travel! One minute you’re here, the next you’re wherever you want to be in the world in a flash! Also there’s…’ I dunno, it’d be nice if in all these meetings there’d at least be cakes or something for our trouble, Lady Josie always gives our guests great snacks and tea.”

“Lady Montilyet isn’t usually set on our guests demise,” Cassandra jested lightly, gratified that it made the girl smile.

“You’re alright now, Inky?” Sera asked, offering the Human girl a handkerchief, “You’ve got sniffles.”

Eleanor gave her a small smile, nodding. “Thanks.”

It was awkward to say the least when they did part ways to find the Templars had only just returned—made themselves scarce but still they bore witness to the Herald’s party all on their knees, huddled in what was essentially a massive group hug around a girl who was now very enthusiastically blowing her nose into a handkerchief. It was hardly the picture of a fearsome Inquisition.

Thankfully, they had some measure of decorum, they weren’t staring and Sir Barris only approached after they’d had a moment to collect themselves, to say, “Area’s clear, secure ma’am.”

“Very good, ready yourselves, I’ll let you know when we’re prepared to move forward,” the Seeker said, receiving a nod from the Templar before he went to pass her orders along. She turned to look upon Eleanor who was returning Sera’s handkerchief, “Eleanor, we would like to cover just a bit more ground before we make camp for the evening,” examining the girl closely, she asked, “Are you well, or should we stop here?”

“I don’t want to hold us up, gosh I miss Haven. Um…” Eleanor looked nervous, staring down at her feet, a boot twisting against the dirt underfoot before she asked, “the Iron Bull?”

“Yeah, Boss?”

“Would…would it be alright if I rode with you please? I-if it’s okay with you, and Sera that is,” she looked to her Elf friend, “it’s no offense to you I’m just really tired and cold.”

“I’m good on Russel, Ink,” Sera promised.

“Not a problem with me, Imekari,” the Iron Bull assured her.

Not wishing to risk casting her mind to the Fade, especially while on horseback, Eleanor
took an experimental sip of sleeping draught, stoppering it back up, and when she was ready, the Qunari reached out to pat her on the head before he wrapped an arm around her shoulders to lead her to Bitsy.

Eleanor was fast asleep mere moments into the journey forward, and Cassandra quietly passed along the idea of pressing further than they’d planned—cover more ground before calling it a night, move them toward Haven at a quicker rate. She was admittedly relieved to hear Eleanor eager to return, she feared the things she’d seen in the Fade would make her frightened to see the advisors again, but if anything it sounded like she needed assurances further still, to see the real Leliana, Josephine, Cullen.

"Good work back there, kid. Helping us help boss," the Iron Bull seemingly decided to get on with it and rip off the proverbial bandage keeping Cole's commentary on the Qunari personally at bay.

"*The Iron Bull broken, boisterous, best. Even protectors need protected, doesn't he know he doesn't have to rely on himself? Strength can only be strengthened not strained when you rely on strong friends.* I like you, the Iron Bull," Cole noted as he rode along, seated in the saddle with Rainier at his back, the man usually rode close to Bull.

"I make a good first impression," the Qunari allowed. "You seem okay too."

"Not your impression, Ellie’s," Cole corrected, "you aren’t in her hurts—not deeply. You didn’t put the hurt there, you’re just in it a bit, but you soothe more often than you ache."

"Cole," Cassandra ventured, "What are hurts, exactly, how can someone be in them?"

"Like regular hurts," Cole said as if it were simple, "like a cut or a scrape. Something, someone, somewhere puts it on you. Other people and things come along and they may never touch the hurt, or they may end up getting in, tearing deeper.” Tearing deeper sounded horrific to Cassandra and as if picking up on that thought the Spirit was quick to assure, "You've never set in something and torn it worse. None of you have, without leaving it fixed except for Varric."

"*Me?*" Varric asked incredulously.

"You yelled and yelled and did not listen, didn't let her explain, you just got angrier, louder. Ellie has too much experience in that, belittlement betrayal, being found wanting and unwanted, it has often ended in bones bruised and broken, and skin scraped scarce. You made her afraid to be near you and afraid she might loose you all at once, the fear of her loss won out, but...she does not realize it but she flinches when raise your voice even to jest or to laugh, she knows you would not hurt her but there is a part of her that is waiting wary, scared for when you will decide to strike. You should talk to her."

"Shite, someone shut him up," Sera's voice wavered, something caught between fear and tears, Cassandra felt struck dumb herself it...called to mind Eleanor's telling of her departure from her former girlfriend, witnessed by the father of the young man she'd been arranged to marry.

...he wouldn’t even let us explain, he just beat the crap out of me.

"He shouldn't b-be airing Inky's business!" Sera insisted.

"I'm sorry, I only thought it would help. It's a hurt, it's almost healed between he and Ellie but her mind would feel better with promises."

Varric was pallid, looked like he might be physically pained by his anguish, "I'll- I'll talk to
her. An actual real talk."

“T’m in her...uh...hurts?” the Iron Bull asked uncomfortably. Cassandra understood Sera’s objection to discussing the girl in such a way, but...too she understood the wish to know what 'hurt' was there and if it could er...be healed. They rode with enough distance from their Templars—all Human, they would not be overheard by their stranger followers.

“You’re strong, so much bigger than her and that usually makes her feel safe but she’s startled easily, you pick her up without warning—it isn’t your fault, it’s that hurt or a physical one. You mean to protect but there were hands that came before, human hands on a much younger smaller Ellie, and...they fit the same—her mind doesn’t always know the difference between the hands that protect, place her securely on her feet, and the ones that grab, would throw her into the wall, into the street, hit and hate. It isn’t your fault, and you help. Every time, she’s startled a little less, it secures the idea that when that happens she isn’t going to get hurt. You press into the hurt but then you soothe, eventually it will heal. So I like you. Just like I like Sera and Cremisius and —”

“Don’t friggin like me!” Sera snapped, shooting the young man a glare. “Stop mucking around in Inky’s brain, I fucking told you!”

“I’m not in her brain, I’m here,” Cole explained. “You aren’t in her hurts—you’ve never meant to make them, and you always leave them healed.”

Sera looked like she felt she shouldn’t be so pleased to hear that but she was, despite herself, “…I do?”

Cole nodded. “Cremisius isn’t in them either though it’s different. He doesn’t get in her hurts, he’s only seen and touched hurts to heal them, she does the same for him. It’s nice.”

“She talk to you about Krem?” the Iron Bull asked warily.

“No, I watched. They didn’t see me, I wanted…I heard Ellie’s hurt, stress strain872 snap, bubbling burn boiling over Varric’s so mad at me, I really messed up! I always mess it up. They can’t send me away but what if he leaves… I wanted to make sure she was safe. Ohh, I went to see Ellie, but Cremisius was full of hurts, old and closed but festering inside, infected. He thought he just wanted to forget, but what he needed was to be heard, believed, understood.”

The Iron Bull seemed concerned at that, but unwilling to risk Cole chattering away something terribly painful or personal about the Lieutenant in front of those who had no business knowing such things. “You were in Haven?” Cassandra asked, she was genuinely curious.

“You saw me as I was leaving, but you forgot. That’s alight, you’re supposed to. An assassin? We are supposed to keep her safe! I promised to do so, Marehis must trust we can do so in her absence. Cremisius kept her safe but I should have been with her. I keep failing her, how many times must she come to harm before this is over? you worry too much, hold too much responsibility for things out of your control. You wanted to check on her, but you were so tired, hurting, you needed to stop, refocus and rest. Checking on Ellie would have worried you and her, but talking with the Advisors reassured you she was safe, told you that Marehis was alright and would be back soon, and seeing the Commander makes you lighter,” Well. Cassandra’s face felt enflamed at that. “Prepare for tomorrow and get some rest. Interrogations are arduous affairs, you’ve been at it for two days, if you go now she will see, and she’ll worry.”

That was...her exact motivation for not seeking out Eleanor when she was through with interrogating their Venatori infiltrators in Haven, when she heard an assassination attempt had been
made against the girl. If she thought hard enough, focused to the point it nearly brought about a headache yes she could vaguely recall…she’d…she had been about to leave the Chantry, lay eyes on the girl when she saw…someone. Someone in the Chantry hall that certainly was not permitted there, an intruder. Maker she could look at the boy now but in her mind, for the life of her she could not picture who she’d spoken to,

“Name yourself, state your business!”

“I’m Cole. You’re Cassandra—Seeking, saving soothing. Ellie is fine, safe, sleeping soundly—”

Maker!

Cassandra wasn’t certain what to say to any of that, it sounded…equal parts malicious and benevolent. Her mind had been manipulated by outside influence, the designs of a spiritual being and that sounded so dangerously close to Demon influence, possession, but it had been to her benefit, not for her harm.

The sun had well set, it got dark enough that it wouldn’t do to travel much more, they did still need to eat, rest. Rainier assisted the Iron Bull—the Human man reaching up to take Eleanor from the saddle, getting her secure in his hold, one arm under the back of her knees, while the other was wrapped around her shoulders, and then the Qunari was free to unseat himself with ease.

“Ellie-girl? We’re setting up camp now, you best get some dinner before we head to bed,” Rainier prompted gently, shifting on his feet to jostle the girl a bit to wake her.

What resulted was a piercing scream and the Mercenary ending up with a bloody nose when Eleanor elbowed him in the face, scrambling out of his hold—he let her go, as carefully as he could manage in the midst of the bit of chaos ensuing, and the girl fell straight onto her bottom, scrambling back, eyes wide as she took in her surroundings, gasping for breath.

And then she was so very apologetic, worrying over the man’s injury—he assured her it was fine, his nose didn’t feel broken, it merely stung.

“I really didn’t mean to it’s just—it’s so dark and I couldn’t remember where I was for a second, and I panicked. I’m so so sorry!”

“Oh don’t fuss so girl, I’m sorry for startling you, there wasn’t really anywhere to put you down,” the man apologized, his voice sounding off as he was seated in the grass, his head tilted back holding a handkerchief over his nose.

The Iron Bull, Solas, Sera and Marehis were working on getting a campfire going, and dinner preparations underway while Cassandra worked on reports for today. Madam de Fer seemed to be testing Cole after a fashion, she had the Spirit assist her with her tent, and she called upon Sir Fletcher for his aid as well.

"Ellie," Varric spoke for the first time in nearly seven hours, softly, waited for her to look at him, the girl smiling as she addressed him,

"Yeah Varric? Whats up?"

"Nothing bad," as if to assure her she weren't in some form of trouble with him, it was rather the opposite, as he said, "just, can we talk?"

"Sure!"
The Dwarf held a distance as he and the girl went to walk to the riverside, and while Cassandra could not be certain just what transpired, she heard the Iron Bull rumble his approval. He did appear sincere, speaking without jest it... wasn't that he could not be serious it was more that he often sought to deflect the seriousness of their situation, cushion its blow around Eleanor. He certainly had no qualms telling Cassandra or the Advisors the several ways they were 'fucked' when issues arose, but he never seemed to wish to be too serious around the girl. It was sort of like how Sera sought to make play so often with her, Cassandra thought.

Whatever promises he gave her, he knelt to do so, and did indeed seal it with an offered pinkie and a bracing hug from the girl, like she was seeking to physically assure him she knew he meant her no such harm.

When Eleanor and Varric rejoined them, the girl looked about in search of something before she took a deep breath and then she went to face the group of Templar’s that seemed to be gathering dry wood for starting a fire of their own, and she tentatively approached them again, the action caught Cassandra’s attention and she watched as the girl interacted with their conscripts she was still so wary of.

“You guys can just call me Ellie, really. I wouldn’t want to impose, but maybe you’d like to sit with us?” Eleanor offered. “The Iron Bull can make a mean bonfire. And I haven’t gotten all of your names yet. I’d like to, if that’s alright.”

Sir Fletcher was returning from helping Madam de Fer, though he did look to where Cassandra sat, and waited for her to nod her assent before saying to the girl, “We’d be honored.”

“Neat!”

So, they made room for their Templar numbers to spread out around their shared campfire, Eleanor chose to sit next to Cassandra, and Sera came to sit on Eleanor’s other side, eyeing the Templars, her arm laying over the younger girl’s shoulders. Maker, the Elf was worried over Eleanor’s discomfort with members of the Order, that they might seek to hurt or judge her for her Apostacy.

But Magic was not the topic of their campfire discussion.

“...you like mystery stories Sir Fletcher? That’s really cool!” Eleanor enthused, “What’s your favorite?” she asked as she took a bite of roasted radish.
“Hmm… *Message in the Broken Clock* by Pierce is one I can reread over and over, never get bored with it even though I know it by heart.”

“Wow, really? Is it a scary mystery or is it tricky?”

“Mostly tricky—gets a bit suspenseful toward the end, but it turns out alright.”

“That’s good,” Eleanor said, “What about you, Sir Bailey? Oh! Sir in relation to Knights is gender neutral, right?”

“It is,” the female Templar assured. “I like scarier stories, horror fics. Something that sort of startles you out of your skin that isn’t actually dangerous. Don’t really have a favorite though, it’s sort of a one and done deal, once I’ve got my kicks I’m good.” Sera snorted at her wording.

“A rush of adrenaline without the harm? I can respect that,” Eleanor giggled. “Sir Barris? What about you?”

“Oh, Maker, I haven’t read for pleasure in forever…my mother’d want me to say ‘the Chant’ is my favorite thing to read, but honestly?” he leaned forward in his seat, sharing as if in conspiracy with the girl, "I’m a sucker for Wintersend romance serials.”

"Really?!" Eleanor asked in surprise.

“No, come on, seriously?” Varric complained, “Those things are—”

“Total garbage, and I know it,” Barris laughed, “but I’ll be damned if I don’t sit there stressing over if they’re going to end up together or not, even though they do, every time, without fail.”

“Bit of a romantic streak never killed anyone,” Rainier offered.

“Kills my damn numbers Sarge, and my spirit,” Varric groused, "Publisher’s always on me to write Wintersend crap.”

“Gosh, I didn’t realize there were so many different kinds of books,” Eleanor said, resting her head against Cassandra’s shoulder then, as the Templars started a debate over the pitfalls of the sort of tripe that floods the literary world around Wintersend.

Sera did at last submit herself to Marehis’s hairdressing once she conceded that yes, her hair was in such a state that it kept on getting in her ‘friggin eyes!’ and needed a trim, Marehis could save her the trouble of finding scissors or a knife again, and just handle it for the girl.

Marehis was given instruction to do, ‘whatever’.

She cropped the sides and back of Sera’s hair—scalp wasn’t visible, she left a solid layer of hair that, after the initial reticence over how exposed her ears were, the younger Elf delighted in rubbing ‘scratchy, soft, scratchy! Soft! Inky! ’saaaaaaaaaandra! Come feel!’”—and she left a great deal of the length of what was atop her head, save for trimming so no hair hang down very far over her forehead. It was simplistic enough the girl wouldn’t have to do much to maintain it—keep clean or comb—but…she could do more with it, leave it be or style it after a fashion, curling, or slicking it back. And it would take much longer for her bangs to grow back to such a state that they impeded her line of sight while shooting.

Overall, it was declared ‘friggin boss!’
“Scout Harding should certainly find it becoming,” Cassandra offered, remembering their impending ‘drinks date’, “it is very ‘you’ Sera, an excellent fit.”

“I don’t need it to look pretty or nothin…” Sera said, though she seemed pleased and then, “…but it’s…she’ll like it cuz it’s ‘me’?”

“Certainly,” Cassandra said, and then…well, the girl seemed in need of some clarification, “Sera, I do mean ‘you’ to be synonymous with pretty.”

“Oh gosh, yeah Ser’!” Eleanor enthused, “it is you! You’re pretty!”

“I dare say my dear, your new do’ does accentuate your cheekbones, your jawline, you’ve a striking profile…” Madam de Fer actually took Sera’s chin in hand to turn the girl’s head side to side, “and when you’ve properly bathed, you’ve not got a bad angle on you.”

“…an’ if I’m not properly bathed?”

“You’ve no good angles when you reek, my dear.”

Marehis did finally get her sleep shirt back once they settled in their tent for the evening, Eleanor curling up in her pajamas between Marehis, and Sera with the albeit unwelcome addition of Cole.

“Sleep?” he asked when Eleanor proposed he join them.

“Uh-huh, you know, laying down, closing your eyes. Think happy thoughts, quiet your mind, and relax until sunup,” Eleanor explained.

“I…can try.”

So he ended up laying almost directly on top of the girl holding him, a little on Marehis as the woman held the girl close, stripped of his jacket, hat, and boots. For some reason it startled him that such objects could be removed from his person, but he trusted Eleanor's assurances that they could be put back on.

Cassandra felt restless, lying on the other side of Sera. She did try for sleep, but she wasn’t as bone-wearily exhausted as she’d been the other night—in Therinfal everything had struck her such that she was asleep the moment she was afforded the opportunity to lay down. Now her unanswered questions, her worries, her plans, rattled around in her mind.

Though she did find some semblance of sleep, only to waken due to Sera shifting, elbowing the Seeker in the cheek as she turned to sleep facing Cassandra, snuggling into her side which was not wholly unwelcome, she didn’t much care for the elbowing but neither did she mind it.

It had, however, woken her, and in the low light, a hazy pale blue glow just barely emanating from the light fixture overhead, she realized Sera had shifted because she’d lost the person she’d been holding captive when she first fell asleep. Eleanor wasn’t in her bedroll and Cole was nowhere to be seen.

Cassandra rose from her bedroll, stepping carefully over Varric, and then the Iron Bull’s legs, Maker the Qunari could really sprawl out…oh. Cole was there, he’d moved to lay albeit awkwardly between the Iron Bull and Rainier…huh the young man did appear asleep she thought.

“Oh. Good,” the boy breathed with quiet relief, “I thought I was doing it wrong.”
The Seeker moved to find Eleanor and…well, hopefully distance would keep the Spirit from hearing her mind before he was discouraged to find he was, in fact, 'doing it wrong' if he was conscious.

Eleanor was seated in the grass near the river that ran along the path they’d chosen to return to Haven, staring out across the water, humming softly to herself, wrapped up in a blanket. Maker, it was frigid out.

“Eleanor?”

The girl startled a bit but she looked up at Cassandra, eyes fearful for an instant before she whispered, “Hi…are you cold?” and motioned for Cassandra to join her, and when the Seeker sat alongside the girl, she shared her blanket, spread it so it rested over Cassandra’s shoulders, so the woman pulled her to sit in her lap, the blanket could be wrapped more securely around them both seated so close, and the action seemed to give Eleanor some relief, proof positive that…no matter what that horrible demon had made her bear witness to in the Fade, Cassandra was real, meant her no harm.

“What are you doing out here, dear girl? You’ll catch chill,” she gently reprimanded.

“I’m okay. I drank the rest of the sleep potion from earlier, sent me off but I woke up and it…it sort of felt like there wasn’t enough air in the tent, if that makes sense—don’t get me wrong its…it helps being around everyone…I feel badly everyone still—.”

“Eleonor, no one dislikes our current arrangement, it is warm, and comfortable, and I’ll admit to some pettiness in knowing now that Madam de Fer has such an arduous nighttime ritual that makes her look so very fresh every morning even after long riding days,” Cassandra felt a smile tugging at her lips when the girl giggled despite herself.

“Vivienne likes her lotions and things, and they’re relaxing,” she saw fit to defend lightly, “You’re pretty too, even if you wake up kind of grumpy after long riding days.”

“Me? Grumpy? Never,” Cassandra chuckled lightly, pressing a kiss to the girl’s temple. “Is something on your mind, Eleanor? Ah, it is my understanding you had a heart to heart with Varric?”

"...understanding? Oh! Yeah it was kind of random, he wanted to talk about our fight from like almost an entire month ago, but um...it was actually really good. I didn't realize I needed the talk until we did." Ahh. It was not what drove her to take the night air but still, it would do no harm to make certain all was well.

"I saw you garner permission to cut off his pinkie finger in future should he break faith with you on some matter of importance.”

"Oh groady," Ellie's nose scrunched up at the prospect. "Yeah he apologized for not seeing reason in the moment and blowing up, promised to keep his cool and hear me out if we do ever, you know, need to have another shouting match. Shouting and arguing doesn't bother me so much its just, yeah I guess it gets scary when you say things to explain and diffuse the situation that just go ignored and it looks like everything just blown out of proportion."

"Varric behaved poorly, but he did not intend to act to your detriment. While none of us were quite so vocal, neither were any of us wholly comfortable with you resuming your former candor with Rainier," Cassandra saw fit to offer, the man had not intentionally blundered into a trauma of the girl's, neither was he blameless, but still, there was redemption to be found. But, she
wished to make very clear, "Eleanor... I do promise, truly and sincerely, you are safe among your allies, and... it is not like how you described circumstances of abuse working in Circles. Eleanor, if anything were to happen, with anyone, be they a stranger or even those we trust most, if anyone makes you to feel unsafe or Maker surely forbid, lay hands on you in anger, or abuse, you can come to me. You will always be believed and I will always defend you. There is nothing in this world I would not strive to protect you from. Are we of an understanding?"

Eleanor nodded, seeming bewildered as she said, "G-gosh, yeah. Thanks, Cassandra."

"You needn't thank me, child," and then, "Does anything else trouble you?"

Eleanor was quiet, thoughtful for a moment before she sighed in frustration, "Fighting Envy just... I mean I didn’t—it just happened! " oh yes, this was the primary angst pressing the girl, she was railing at... Cassandra wasn't sure if Eleanor was upset with herself or with circumstance, "I mean there wasn’t any stopping it from getting so far in my mind, just boom! It was happening, and I don’t know how! I have to do better than that! You guys have to be able to trust me, that I won’t let a demon in!"

“Eleanor, you’ve not broken any such faith with us, we can, and do still trust you to resist demon temptation,” Cassandra sought to assure her, “To our minds, one second it was the Lord Seeker and the next it was revealed as a demon, it happened far too quickly for you to shield yourself further,” she reasoned, “It held a physical form that could lay hands on you, and you were not prepared to be attacked in such a way.”

"But I- usually- there's never just been—" she struggled for her words.

*I’ve only ever had a hard time against demons when I’ve been really hurt,* Eleanor had once said.

"You are concerned that a demon was so swiftly able to break into your mind when you were not seriously injured," Cassandra offered. "For one, it happened so suddenly from somewhere you were not expecting to have to steel your mind. And you should not be so very hard on yourself, Eleanor there is some measure of... well while there was no physical injury to speak of, debilitating you from fighting off a demon from taking your mind, the issue there is that physical aches and pains pick away at your mental focus, yes?" and when the girl nodded, Cassandra said, "Eleanor, the sort of depression you struggle with, your anxieties, these are aches that deteriorate your mental focus, perhaps even more so than a physical injury would. It is not a matter of your failure to defend yourself Eleanor, if anything, you were at such disadvantage. That you still managed to persevere and survive speaks to your capability, not your inability."

"Oh! That... I hadn't thought about it like that, it only makes sense, mental and physical sort of roll into each other all the time, I don't know why I didn't consider mental illness hurting my mental focus. Which yeah, only makes sense, its no wonder someone gets an infection when they've got an open wound."

"Often when we are closest to the problem the solution is not easily seen, it is why we must rely on each other, to see the forest for the trees so to speak."

"Thanks Cassandra." the girl snuggled against her, arms wrapped around Cassandra's middle as she squeezed. Then, "I love you."

“As I do you,” the Seeker assured, pressing a kiss to the top of her head. "Is your mind less troubled now, sweet girl?" she asked, and when the girl sighed contentedly and nodded, “Do you
feel like returning to bed?”

The girl let out a little groan even as she smiled and said, extending a reaching hand toward their tent like she could bid it come to them, “Instant travel’d be nice right about now.”

Maker help her, she may regret it once she laid down, but she felt it might be a bit of well needed fun, indulgence. The girl was secure in her lap, her hold. She merely held on to her and pushed off of her knees onto her feet and up, Eleanor letting out a surprised squeal followed by Cassandra—the Seeker was not giggling, but as close to such as she dared as she shushed the girl for fear they’d wake their camp. Heavens forbid the Templars see her. She moved as quickly as she could bearing the girl’s weight, only setting her down once they reached the tent, and it was so, so good to see her smiling so easily.

And ultimately, she did not regret it in the least, her joints protested but once in the security and warmth of their tent with Eleanor lying between she and Sera—bearing the brunt of the Elf girl’s sleeping habits in the Seeker’s stead—all felt truly well.

As they traveled, Eleanor became more secure in her sense that she was truly free of any trick of the Fade, that the world around her and her friends were all their true selves. Especially after there was some sort of Qunari ritual meant to master fear the Iron Bull apparently adapted for the girl. Cassandra had vaguely heard of it in passing as one of their more barbaric practices, having someone beat against you with a length of wood while you shout some form of...she wasn’t sure, a chant perhaps or something meant to refocus you.

What ensued was the Iron Bull getting in a decent workout by squatting where he stood behind the girl, wrapping his arms around Eleanor’s waist, and rising to hoist her into a tight, bracing hug while he asked, she answered, received a big squeeze for her efforts, and then he’d squat to put her on her feet before starting all over again,

“Who’s deader than a door-nail?!” he asked as he raised her high.

“Envy!”

“Who kicked their stupid demon ass?!”

“Me! And Cole! And Cassandra!”

“Who is the biggest, baddest, demon fighter this side of the veil?!”

“Um you? And Cassandra?”

“Annnnd?” he asked, keeping her held to his chest feet dangling off the ground.

“Me!”

“Hell yeah!” he roared squeezing her tight.

She did not startle quite so easily after a few solid days of travel, the more time spent with her true allies on the road to Haven reassured her she wasn't still trapped in some demon's mind tricks. She did not risk sleeping without the assistance of potion for fear that would change, and no one was going to push her to do so until she felt ready. Too, she became more reliant on headache potion, it was not something she took for minor discomfort, their onset of these headaches were swift and intense, more than once the girl stopped breathing momentarily and looked as if she might be ill from the pain, like someone had taken a fire poker to her brain, she described it once. Cole was of comfort, he was able to ascertain that it was after affects of her mind being so
violently infiltrated, it would get better with time, and that much was true. As they traveled, the occurrence happened less and less, much to Cassandra's and, most certainly, Eleanor's relief.

Sera actually lost some measure of reticence with their new ally in Cole, as the young man...he was capable of sensing the downturns in Eleanor’s spirits, when her panic or stress might send her low, Cole would tell Sera, and the Elf girl knew precisely when to strike, get Eleanor joking or playing, or cuddling merely being a comforting presence when Eleanor was tired or in pain. He did as such with everyone to some extent, letting them know when and how they were needed, though he could stand to raise his voice as opposed to that disconcerting 'poofing' Sera called it, to rush and tell them whatever was the matter when they were in ear shot and not separated by any substantial distance. The boy nearly gave Rainier and Marehis both heart attacks when he vanished from Rainier's saddle and materialized, sitting on the rump of Solas's horse, voicing the announcement that Eleanor was in need of headache potion.

Though she was markedly grateful for the young man's ability to teleport then, he'd not been exaggerating when he warned of her impending headache, it sent Eleanor losing her grasp of Russel's reigns, Sera screamed out when the girl, seated behind her Elf friend, reeled forward with such momentum she nearly fell from her saddle, but Russel came to an abrupt halt and Cole appeared in place to help steady her, keep her safely in the saddle, before he helped her down and then looked to Sera,

"If you hold her hair it will help."

It took little more than that to have Sera sliding out of the saddle to follow after Eleanor who'd stumbled off their path and when Cassandra and Marehis joined them, Sera and Eleanor were kneeling, the older girl was holding her friend's hair back, murmuring comfort to the Human girl as she retched, heaving the contents of her stomach.

"Oh, da'vehnan," Marehis said sympathetically, potion in hand as she joined her.

"Thanks," Eleanor croaked out breathlessly, and when Cassandra offered her water afterward it earned her a tired smile and a hug, the girl wrapping her arms around Cassandra neck as she leaned against the Seeker.

"Would you perhaps care for more instant travel, Eleanor?" Cassandra proposed quietly. And when the girl nodded, the Seeker gladly obliged, carrying her to the amusement of most of their party. Sera took Russel's reigns and Eleanor spent the rest of that day's riding sharing the rather snug fit in a saddle between Solas and Marehis, resting, her head laying between Solas's shoulder blades and Marehis curled around her, humming softly in her ear.

The following morning, Eleanor was still lying in her bedroll, even after most had risen to see to breakfast or start their days. Cassandra came to get her for their morning meal and the girl was not asleep, just laying, staring into space, she did not even percieve it when the Seeker knelt before her until she rested a hand on her shoulder,

"Eleanor?"

She startled, flinching under Cassandra's hand before raising her own to lay over it, "Gosh, sorry. Hi."

"Breakfast will be ready soon. Are you well?"

The girl nodded slowly but then, "Um...I...I'm so tired, and sore all over from riding I swear my hair hurts, and I'm just sad and dunno. I know we need to keep moving...I understand if we
can't b-but um-... You offered once, that I could ask for a break if I needed it?"

"I believe a day of rest would be suitable for everyone, it would hardly derail our schedule. Haven will still be there no matter when we arrive."

"I'm really so-"

"Hush, Eleanor, everyone needs a break now and again. Take the day, whatever you need. Would you care to sleep in more? I will bring you breakfast, you needn't ready yourself for the day, and it has been sprinkling on and off this morning," Cassandra reasoned, smoothing back the girl's hair as she pulled her blanket more securely over her shoulder.

The Iron Bull was already assembling a plate of food for the girl when Cassandra emerged from the tent. Sera's hands held her head between them like a vise, groaning disparagingly.

"You can't spare her from bad days," Cole told her, "You do enough, you help."

That had Sera looking up at him, "Thanks! Stay out of my mind stuff!"

"Is something the matter with Ellie?" Dorian questioned, concerned, that got Rainier's attention.

"Is she sick?" Thom asked.

"She is weary, heartsick," Cassandra allowed, "This has been a daunting journey, we are taking a day to allow for rest, perhaps more if she needs it."

"I'm gonna go eat with Inky," Sera decided, looking to Cassandra, "I'll be quiet, promise, let her sleep and stuff, I just wanna keep her company."

Cassandra nodded in agreement, offering a small smile of thanks to the girl as she laid her utensils atop her plate and took it and Eleanor's into the tent.

After establishing their break of pace with their Templars who vowed to hold down their camp, secure it, Cassandra found everyone had followed Sera's lead, their party joining Eleanor, sitting in quiet contentment as they took their meal together, and once their empty plates were gathered, Sera wrapped the Human girl up in a hug and laid down with her, insisting it was 'nap time' and everyone could either join in or 'piss off'. All said it was indeed a lazy day, much needed and appreciated, and Eleanor was back in higher spirits, more ready to face the day when it was time to rise for breakfast once more.

Although...Eleanor did act out, after a fashion, some nights later. It was unsettling but it had been handled rather well, by the Iron Bull. They'd settled around their campfire after dinner one evening after a long day of riding. Eleanor had been subdued, and stricken with another headache, and it had rained terribly all day, beating down on them as they road though thankfully it had let up as the evening wore on. One moment they were making light chat among their numbers, the Templars were on patrol while the whole of their party was seated around the fire, save Eleanor who had gone to the river to refill her canteen shaken her head when Sera asked if she wanted her to tag along. She did not immediately return when Cassandra had estimated she would.

"I believe I'll check on Eleanor," Cassandra said, rising from her seat.

"Imekari just took a detour to check on the horses it sounds like," the Iron Bull said. Ahh. She did tend to dote on their steeds after long riding days.
But then Cole materialized in the Iron Bull's lap, seated with his bottom on the Qunari's knees, legs crisscrossed before him, the brim of his hat pressing into Bull's chin.

"Kid, you really gotta stop doing that," from the slightly startled Qunari was met with Cole's insistence,

"You have to stop her. You have everything you need, you've dealt with this before, she'll listen to you. She's tired and she just wants her mind to be quiet but this will make it too quiet. You don't have to forget memories your mind doesn't take record of."

"Shit, I thought—Tethras, where the fuck do you keep your booze?"

The Dwarf looked as confused as Cassandra felt as he said, "Uh...Bourbon's in my saddlebag, wh-"

What resulted was the Iron Bull bounding away and returning shortly thereafter with a loudly protesting Eleanor slung over his shoulder, fists pounding against his back as she demanded he give it back and put her down!

It being a bottle of Varric's bourbon she'd 'borrowed without asking', which the Qunari had confiscated and tossed to be caught deftly by its rightful owner.

"Put! me! down! Eep!" she squeaked in surprise when the Iron Bull pulled her from his shoulder and got on his knees in the same motion, setting her down on her own knees before him, keeping his hand on her shoulder so the girl wouldn't flee.

"Ellie," the Iron Bull said, "you're not thinking straight right now, what you were about to do was foolish."

"It's not like I was gonna chug it, I was just going to drink a little!"

Reprimanding, "Da'vehnan!" and "Eleanor!" came in unison from Marehis and Cassandra Maker how could she be so reckless?! Varric's bourbon was far stronger than the wine Lady Montilyet mistakenly offered Eleanor, then it had been an act done in innocence she'd merely forgotten she should not drink for fear it would interact with her potion regime, and drinking a little had caused her to blackout, act unawares from one afternoon until early the next morning! That...that seemed to apparently be her objective.

"Imekari, I know things have been rough, you're having a shit time, and yeah, maybe that's your goal—knock back a little something that will keep your brain from acknowledging existence for a while, good or bad, you can't make more bad memories for a while if you can't remember what you did. But you start doing that, there's a good chance you're going to keep doing that. That's not fair to yourself or to the people who depend on you."

"Bite me!"

And so he did, the Iron Bull bent down and gently nipped at the tip of her nose, leaving Eleanor wide eyed and shock struck.

"You...bit me?" she sounded confused, like she was confirming such a thing had, in fact, just happened.

The Iron Bull leveled her an amused grin. "You told me to boss-girl," he replied simply, then, "Feel like telling me what's eating you?"
She gave a miserable sounding laugh, pressing the heels of her hands against her eyes in a motion that felt like she were rubbing the sleep from them. "I dunno," she shrugged, hands falling into her lap, "a little bit of everything. I'm tired and even though I know there isn't always something going wrong it still feels that way, you know? And I hate that I feel like that when I know I shouldn't. I mean Maker, we've got everything we need to seal the Breach, and we've gotten so many amazing new allies and I'm glad we're all together and safe and heading for Haven, I shouldn't be so sad and angry but I am and my brain won't shut up about it!"

"It's been pretty rough going here lately. Yeah, there are things to be grateful for but that doesn't mean you don't have the right to feel sad and angry over the things that make you feel that way. It's a good thing, to try and keep a positive attitude about life, but it's wrong when you make it toxic—holding yourself to the standard that it's only okay to present happiness in the face of total hell. Imekaris—children—love playing, its fun and exciting but sometimes they fall and get hurt. Crying over a scraped knee doesn't mean they're disrespecting or undeserving of the fun they had, it means 'ouch I scraped my fucking knee and the damn Tamassrans want me to rub dirt in it and walk it off!',' he explained albeit comically, getting a little smile a huff of near-giggling from the girl and he used that to say, "You see? Funny. So you reacted, and in a healthy way. Works the same way with sad and angry Imekari. It's okay, normal to act out when things are hitting you bad, you've got that part down. But babe, throw a tantrum or something okay? Scream, cry, yell. Hell, I'd rather you come try to beat up on me before you do something to hurt yourself. You can even pop me in the face for biting you. Swings not swigs, got it?"

Eleanor's chin quivered as she shook her head, crying seemed to be the release of choice as she spoke, looking utterly shamefaced, "I'm sad that I yelled at you, I'm really sorry."

"Bring it in Imekari," the Iron Bull said as he enveloped her in a hug, arms swallowing her up to hold her tight against his chest. "It's okay."

"I'm sorry I tried to steal your bourbon, Varric," she mumbled to the Dwarf, "and that um, that I almost did something really dumb. Gosh its so dumb! I just..." she sighed, frustrated with herself.

"Da'vehnan," Solas spoke up, "have you tried sleeping at all without the use of potion?"

That got him a one eye'd glare from the Iron Bull as the girl endeavored to bury herself more against the Qunari who tightened his hold protectively as she whimpered out, "N-no I...I don't want to dream in the Fade again!"

"You needn't da'len, I do not mean to distress you, I merely ask, to diagnose," Solas assured her gently, "We've not taken the time to meditate in the evenings, we've all been so tired, but you must do something to sort and process through what has happened. If you cannot do that in your sleep, we must endeavor to do so when you aren't."

"Ellie," Maker! Cole appeared again, kneeling beside Bull and Eleanor, "don't be afraid. I'll sit with you while you meditate, if you fall asleep, into the Fade, I'll follow and wake you up."

Oh. Cassandra realized then, yes they hadn't taken time for meditation, and Eleanor usually prompted the practice, but she had not so much as mentioned it once, since their time in Therinfal. They'd been traveling so much and everything had been catching up with them, with Eleanor, she was often exhausted, weary throughout the day and completely spent by the time they could finally rest. Sera'd earned a bone weary, "I love you, you're so amazing" from the girl for helping unstop her sleeping potion the night before when Eleanor struggled with the cork, she'd barely downed it before she was falling face forward into Cassandra's shoulder, in every sense of the words: fast asleep. The girl feared if she sat down at the end of the day, still and silent, doing something meant
to soothe that she would accidentally fall asleep without the security of potion to keep her mind from slipping into the Fade. But she did so with guarantees from Cole, and Solas, that she would not come to harm, and Sera joined them as well, fingers laced with Eleanor’s, an offer of support.

"I really am sorry," Eleanor said later as they wound down for the evening, there was a chain of sorts, Eleanor offering to brush Cassandra's hair, while Marehis braided hers. "I really wasn't thinking...or I was thinking too much just not the right way."

"It disappoints me that you would seek to handle your troubles in such a way, Eleanor," Cassandra admitted.

"It was reckless da'vehnan," Marehis breathed worriedly, "you must promise us if you ever get so overwhelmed you'll come to someone, before you act on impulse."

"Promise," Eleanor said.

"Good, you're minder is right, Ellie," Dorian called lazily from where he reclined in his bedroll, "impulse is why I spent three days getting the most horrendous tattoo magically removed from my...er...well, details aren't necessary."

"Sparkler," Varric interjected, "I need every damn detail right now."

That...that resulted in a rather horrible, thankfully short tale of how the Tevinter Mage once had a tattoo...of the reigning Black Divine's face...on his buttocks.

"Left or right cheek?" the Iron Bull asked.

"It took three days to remove for a reason. I'm not a *complete* heathen, it was a proper mural to His greatness."

As they continued their journey Haven-bound, Cole also proved to know when Eleanor's mind was about to make her perceive her Mark falsely spreading, that earned Sera's gratitude as he'd give her warning to start holding Eleanor's hand and distract her—working together, Cole and Sera found that causing a whiplash of sorts in Eleanor's focus would confuse whatever misfirings were making her believe her Mark was spreading, cancel it out after a fashion through usually Cole asking some benign question about something basic like did she think if he ate he could taste the food or would it be different because he is a Spirit, and then Sera would make some startling sound or ask some wild or lewd question, or say just about anything she could think of to make the girl laugh. And Maker, the boy was discovered to be able to predict, sometimes wholly prevent the onset of panic attacks in the girl. Before she even became breathless he’d appear, take a hold of her hand or initiate the hugging ritual he was growing increasingly familiar with, and address whatever threat her mind had found focus in, assuring her she was safe, or that whatever it was weighing on her, it was something she was capable of facing whenever the time came.

More and more, that ‘something’ was the Elder One. Wretched *thing*. Thus far Leliana had little lead as to the man’s true identity, a name or a face they could track and hunt down, apprehend, Dorian and Felix were in contact endeavoring to parcel out something s to the Venatori’s plans in relation to what the Elder One wanted with them, how he could be discovered. The Iron Bull was wholly frustrated with his Ben Hessrath contacts, they knew precious little. They’d only struck an interest in the Venatori because of their rumored, now painfully confirmed several times over, vendetta against the Inquisition, had sent the Iron Bull to dismantle their efforts on the Coast in a bid to attract the Inquisition’s attention. Beyond that, the Ben Hessrath hadn’t
thought the Venatori any more of a threat than the bumbling Marquis Sera’d brought to their attention when they first met in Val Royeaux, they’d not investigated their organization further. Now of course, that investigation was delegated to their agent in the field...Hissrad.

"Have you had trouble working with this Hissrad in the past?" Cassandra asked when the Qunari aired his grievances with consulting the man. He grumbled and then, "I am Hissrad. So yeah, all the damn time."

It sent Marehis making a sympathetic sound wrapped in a bit of laughter she tried to suppress by pressing a hand to her mouth, hiding her smile even as her eyes were alight with amusement at his predicament. Cassandra thought he might bust a blood vessel when the Qunari received a missive from his contacts referring him—\textit{in all sincerity}—to himself, if he wished to be in contact with their agent responsible for learning about the Venatori.

Sera had overheard his qualm and immediately informed Eleanor, the pair found some amusement in it—as their numbers meant more hands had to help prepare meals, and the Iron Bull was accustomed to making food for large groups, he was officially in charge of meal preparation, what they were going to eat, who was going to help him make it and the like. Any time someone voiced an inquiry surrounding their meals, Sera and Eleanor would race to be the one to suggest, "Gosh, I dunno, I’ll have to refer you to our agent in the field!!".

The epitome of this jest was met when the Iron Bull himself gave into their fun and asked when dinner would be ready, Eleanor gasped, shared an excited look with Sera and just barely got out the whole of, “Well the Iron Bull, I’m afraid I’ll have to refer you to our agent in the field. The Iron Bull,” with a straight face before dissolving into a fit of giggles, that ended, rather eloquently, in a snort.

“Imekari. You’re lucky that was just about the cutest damn thing.”

What was admittedly cute, was Eleanor taking on the role of designated bedtime story reader. On the way to Therinfal she and Cassandra had fallen into the habit of a nighttime ritual, Eleanor laying against the Seeker to have a bedtime story read to her. But on their return to Haven, as they drew nearer and the girl was more recovered, able to stay conscious past the moment they settled into their tent for the evening, Cassandra entered their tent to find Eleanor seated on the Seeker’s bedroll.

“Come on! Bed time, my turn to read,” Eleanor insisted, patting the space before her, looking to Cassandra expectantly. Oh it was so good to see the girl more like herself, more and more as they neared Haven, got closer to putting this whole horrendous endeavor behind them to move on to better victories. She was more at peace, lighter, and Cassandra was grateful she was feeling better, coping.

So the Seeker ended up being, what Varric was more than amused to call, ‘little spoon’. Eleanor sat with the Nevarran woman lying against her, and the girl held the little blue storybook before them, her chin resting on Cassandra’s shoulder so she could see, and the girl read aloud while everyone settled in, prepared for sleep, laying and listening.

They made the final stretch into Haven, blessedly so, just before noon, Haring 31\textsuperscript{st}, 9:41. The last half, of the last day, of the last month of the year.

First-Day \textit{Eve}. 
A scarce twelve hours, before Eleanor’s birthday.

Eleanor was dressed in the nicer clothing Lady Josephine had insisted she pack in case she felt the need to wear it to one of her meetings, scarf wrapped securely around her neck, clearly visible peeking up under her cloak, and she rode into Haven with the whole of her party, and their Templar conscripts marching in tow.

The Advisors were standing in wait as they reached the Forge, Eleanor slipping out of her saddle, dropping to her feet before Russel had even drawn to a full stop, let out what sounded like a relieved, happy squeak of sorts before she descended upon them.

“My Lad—oof,” Leliana was saying, though the girl had collided with her in a fierce hug. “hello Eleanor,” the Spymaster gave in to the fact there would be no formal greeting had here. The Herald of Andraste was home and she was going to squeeze every last one of their numbers in a hug before the day was out, Cassandra was most certain.

“I missed you!” Eleanor declared as she hugged the woman tighter.

“Likewise. I appreciated the little note you sent me, I apologize my own reply wasn’t very informative,” the Spymaster said.

“…Leliana, you said you were doing well—that’s all the ‘informative’ I needed!” the girl giggled, before moving on the Lady Josephine, “And I missed you! Did you get my poem?”

“You were so missed, and I did, my lady, Ellie,” the Antivan woman…oh Maker she had really missed the girl it seemed, she looked misty eyed as she held the girl tight, “it was very sweet. I keep it on my clipboard—it cheers me to see it when I’ve reached the end of the day’s paperwork.”

Out of the corner of her eye Cassandra could see Varric motioning to Lady Josephine that he wanted to lay eyes on Eleanor’s efforts at ‘poetry’.

Eleanor was teary eyed when she turned her attention to their Commander, and for a moment Cassandra worried the girl was afraid but Cullen’s cheerful expression softened and he knelt to be more level with the girl, the action making her just a bit taller than the man on his knees and it allowed her easier ability to wrap her arms around his neck, hugging him fiercely as she said, “I m-missed you s-so much!”

“Oh Eleanor, I missed you so very much indeed.”

“I headbutted a demon! Just like you taught me!”

“That’s our girl!” the former Templar cheered, even as they ceased their hugging he still rested his hands on her shoulders, and hers on his.

“You’re wearing your hat!” the girl was pleased to note.

“Of course I am,” the man insisted, “I told you it’s the most amazing hat. Would fake me wear this hat?”

“No he wouldn’t! He’d probably be a big jerk about not wearing it!”

“Exactly! More fool him, this is the greatest hat, in the world, bar none,” he assured her, kissing her on the forehead before he rose to his feet. “I’m so glad you’ve returned safely to us, Eleanor.”
“Truly,” Lady Montilyet agreed, “and you did so well securing us our Mage and Templar assistance, my lady.”

“We’ve made great strides toward our goals, Eleanor,” Leliana said, “we’ll discuss it at length of course…after the holiday. Your schedule is clear for its duration.”

“Oh, yeah! Happy First-Day Eve!” Eleanor wished them.

“To you as well, my lady,” Lady Josephine said, “there will be festivities tonight, I do hope you’re well enough to attend? You are not too weary from your travels?” she asked as she raised a hand to smooth against Eleanor's hair.

“Oh, First Day things sound fun! I'm totally in!”

“Excellent,” Cullen said, “Now, I’ve some duties to attend before festivities are underway,” Cullen announced, “I should confer with the lady Seeker on a matter of great importance.”

“Concerning the recklessness of the Templars?” Cassandra proposed, albeit humorously.

“Concerning the recklessness of a Templar, most assuredly.”

“Try not to let the Lord Seeker business ruin First-Day Eve for you guys, okay?” Eleanor cautioned.

He certainly wouldn’t.

Cassandra was one hundred percent positive the reckless Templar, was a former Templar.

The man had written to inform her earlier in the week that his present for Eleanor was ready but would need safekeeping, someplace warm, he did not feel he could do so in his tent on the soldiers field and he wondered if she would allow him to keep it in her chambers in the Chantry.

However, his morning missive to her cautioned, *As you’ll be returning today I feel I should give you fair warning, I may have gone overboard with Eleanor’s birthday present, please advise.*

And as a follow up, sent shortly after—it arrived with the first.

*Correction. In over my head. Send help.*

“You’ve no need of me?” Cassandra made certain with Eleanor.

She shook her head, “Thanks though, I appreciate you. I think I’ll go um,” she bit her lip, cheeks pinking as her she laid eyes on a certain Charger Lieutenant waiting in the wings beside the practice fields, “Unless anyone needs help settling in? Oh—Cole’s…” Cole had vanished, “Dorian?” she checked.

“I’ve got it well in h—” the Tevinter Mage was more longwinded than that but,

“Cool! Have fun! Bye!”

Her abrupt farewell left Dorian’s mouth hanging open as if in insult and then, “I believe I’ve been ditched.”

Oh it was incredibly just…lovely, something Cassandra was glad to see happening for the girl, a budding romance offered in such a gentle manner, this young man had proven himself
reliable, careful in his care for Eleanor. The girl ran to meet the Lieutenant who greeted her with outstretched arms, hoisted her into a spinning hug, holding her close before setting her on her feet.

Marehis brushed passed the Seeker to see Leliana, assuring Cassandra quietly she would be following the young couple at a ‘respectful distance’. The Iron Bull, for all his tact, wolf whistled.

And Cullen, for all of his, now that Eleanor was otherwise occupied, he grasped hold of Cassandra’s hand, though he pulled it so their clasped hands were behind his cloak shielded from view of the Templar conscripts and Cassandra intoned, “Report to the soldiers tents, your assignments await you, move out,” receiving a unified,

“Yes ma’am.”

And then she was walking briskly with Commander Cullen smile tugging at her lips unbidden as he looked about as if looking for spies that might see their joint hands as they moved through Haven and up to the Chantry.

The hall was bare when they entered, void of occupants and…furnishing, in preparation for the back to back celebrations soon to take place in its Great Hall, Cullen removed his hat respectfully as they entered, tucking it securely into his cloak.

And then Cassandra found herself engulfed after a fashion, the Commander had taken the opportunity to wrap her up in a bracing hug, his hand on the crown of her head in what was an admittedly bold but…certainly not unwelcome intrusion. After a moment the Seeker realized her arms were still hanging at her sides and she brought them up to hug the man back.

“I am glad you’ve returned safely,” Cullen said, asking quietly, “Are you alright?”

That…well he certainly should not have asked if he didn’t wish to know because it had been a long, wretched month and she had little tolerance for withholding the worries ever pressing, not where…not where she felt at ease to relinquish them.

“I have always respected your decision to leave the Templars but I never thought it would be this way. The Order has fallen into devastation through its corruption.”

“I am sorry it has fallen further still, but you will set it to rights, I know it,” he encouraged, “and I’ll help you however I can, however you need me to, you have my word.”

“We almost lost her, Cullen. Twice—she disappeared through a portal and I believed her truly dead, then tormented by a demon and I…it happened so quickly, one second she was well and the next such devastation had occurred in the blink of an eye, and she was so-,” Cassandra had to stop to take in a trembling breath, “I thought she died in my very arms, and then that horrible creature tried impersonating her to some degree, took on a twisted version of her shape I laid slain.”

“Cassandra, I…Maker I am so sorry,” he breathed. He seemed hoping to reassure, “You did much, and so well to protect her. Eleanor is safe, now. I wish she hadn’t endured such danger, or you for that matter, but she is surviving, despite everything. We will do all we can to help her. You have done your best and it truly has been enough. She’s alive, safe, and tomorrow we celebrate her birthday.”

Cassandra breathed a sigh of relief. “That is true. I can scarcely believe it.” Somehow it had felt like time was stretched and pulled taut, that surely First day would never be upon them and then their line was snapped back into place, suddenly the day was upon them in the blink of an eye.
“Why is it the fact that a girl I’ve known for all of four months is turning sixteen tomorrow makes me feel so terribly old?”

“I suppose because you’re a terribly old man. Ancient, really,” Cassandra offered up like a statement of fact, the barest bit of smile tugging at her lips when Cullen pulled back, looking to her with mock indignancy,

“Ancient?!”

“Most assuredly,” she said, picking a long white hair off of one of his feather pauldrons, was he truly graying? It was rather short and fine to belong to him, perhaps he picked it up elsewhere. In an endeavor to move forward with happier things, she asked, “You wrote you’ve trouble with the present you got Eleanor?”

“I'll admit I…went a little overboard perhaps,” he confessed as he took her hand and led her up the hall,

“You mentioned as much.”

“It is…out of the box, one might say.”

“I gathered.”

“No…truly…I can’t put her present in a box, I don't think,” he informed her, "There was this farmer traveling to the Hinterlands stopping along the road from Haven, you see and er, well one thing led to another..."

"You acquired Eleanor livestock?” Cassandra offered in jest.

"Not exactly," he said, his hand on the door to her quarters. “Try not to hate me?”

“I make no such promise.”

“Fair enough,” and then he opened the door.

Her room did look markedly different, her collection of books had apparently been moved for safe keeping against the room’s more recent occupant. Cassandra’s eyes went wide in her head.

“Oh. Oh I do hate you.”

“I know.”

“She will love it.”

“I know!”

“I’m not cleaning up after it, I swear to Andraste.”

Cullen sighed, “I know.”

"Oh!” she complained, swatting him on the shoulder. Maker bless and curse this man! "I hate you!"
Haven had been wild while Herald of Andraste was gone on her mission. It had somehow felt like the longest and shortest time of Krem’s life. There’d been so many changes.

First and foremost, their newest recruits. Rainier’s men arrived just a few days after the Charger’s Chief and Sargent left the scene, it’d been just a bit nerve wracking. Krem wanted to do Bull proud, right by Rainier, so he was feeling the pressure. It was one thing to have new recruits coming in when the Iron Bull was there to put it down, pass out the introductions, take charge and set the tone, leave a clear cut space for Krem to fill. It was another to take charge himself and hope for the best, prepare for the worst. And then there was the whole, ‘most of these men have been in prison for the better part of the last decade’ thing, there were likely to be some issues they were dealing with.

It uh, didn’t go too bad though. No misunderstandings, their biggest qualm with Krem was his age, they didn’t necessarily like taking orders from someone they could have sired themselves. Didn’t give him too much flack though, they were mostly just glad to have a sense of purpose again, that’d been the major thing for him when he joined on with the Chargers so there was a bit of common ground there, something he could put a focus on to help them fall in line.

Might have helped he ended one of their more successful training days by buying rounds in the Tavern, letting them cut loose while taking the opportunity to figure out whether or not Chief’d need to set a ‘no drinking’ rule or not when they were finally able to be sent out on their own. And they were less tetchy about having a toddler telling them what to do once they saw how well he could hold his drink especially when they ended up falling down drunk. Flissa was a real champ, swapping out most of his shots with water, silver tequila tasted like shit and uh, he got giggly if he got too loose, it wasn’t exactly the image he was going for.

And he was real glad he wasn’t thinking through the fog of a hangover when Bull’s report came in from their first meeting with the Mages. Fucking. Tevinter.

Krem’d been saving stories—things that happened while Ellie was gone so he’d have something to tell her all when she got back that he was sure she’d get a kick out of—but he decided she could use something that might make her laugh after time-garbage. Skinner scaring the living daylights out of their new recruits was a sure thing. Took a few days, in his down time he worked on drawing the event up the best he could, took a few tries but he got it done, sent off to the Hinterlands, and uh, he found his rough draft in Skinner’s things. He hadn’t been snooping or anything, she’d been passing along a report to him on progress she saw in their recruits, kept her paperwork in a folder, and he’d caught a glimpse of the formerly crumbled up parchment smoothed out and pasted to the inside cover. Kind of sweet, she’d liked his rendering of her menacing expression. He finished it in good time too.

Time Magic. Of course, only a Tevinter Mage would have the gall to play fuck-around with the fabric of time and space. Oh man it was bad, what was worse was ultimately it got used on Ellie. Some Magister bastard tried to erase her from time completely, and she ended up a year in the damn future, just in time to see the end of the world as they know it.

So, he made sure his next report to Bull after he said Ellie was alright, safe but sad and not talking, he sent off his drawing in his next report to Bull hoping the stupid thing would cheer her up a bit. He was relieved Stitches went along with Adan on his run to the Hinterlands to check in on Ellie—there was no way in hell he was going to oppose of course, shit, he was glad there were such qualified healers heading her way to make sure she came out of it alright, though Krem wished he could go out, check on her. And Stitches going also meant…well, he’d gotten the idea
from time spent working alongside Bull, that maybe being able to be sure of the date would help Ellie feel more secure in case time travel left her with time-related trust issues, seemed like she knew her numbers by sight, so, Stitches gave him a reliable carrier for Father’s pocket watch. He trusted Ellie to take good care of it, and he wasn’t going to begrudge some scuffs or dents or scratches if it meant she had something that would help her. At least he hoped it would.

When Bull struggled, mind casting him back to something that sent him pained and panicked, it helped to ground him in things that affirmed for the Qunari that he wasn’t in Seheron. That night in Haven, after that Orlesian assassin attempted to poison Ellie, the potential that Krem had almost been poisoned, something about it set off something for Bull, ticked away in the back of his brain until about an hour after Krem’d gotten back from eating dinner with Ellie. Bull started hollering in Qunlat, gasping for breath like he wasn’t getting enough air in the world, and Krem yelled for Rocky and Grim to back him while he pulled Bull out of the Charger’s tent. Bull threw himself into the snow, Krem ending up half under, half beside him since he’d still been attached at the arm, and Rocky and Grim piled on top of the Qunari, giving him anything that might contradict whatever was happening in his head, helped weigh him down so he was more easily swayed to lay there ‘til he was damn sure the bone chilling snow and the non-Qunari faces around him meant he wasn’t in the humid, Tal-Vashoth haunted jungles of Seheron.

Bull’s reports were priority, and their Inquisition birds were trained to drop them with the Lieutenant directly, so he’d been apprehensive when Rocky came through with mail call and there was something meant for Krem. After Ellie’s birthday present arrived, there was nothing else he was expecting, so. Mail meant Mother, or at least his cousin writing in regard to Mother wanting or needing something.

But what came for him was a slip of parchment with his name Cremisius shakily but carefully written out, definitely not in his cousin’s hand, and Hi! <3 –Ellie on the back. The note was attached to a longer letter penned with the most pretentious handwriting he’d ever seen, lots of unnecessary loops and lines—that Mage bloke Bull told him about, Dorian, writing on Ellie’s behalf, letting Krem know she was learning how to read and write from the Tevinter Mage, and she was okay, and she wanted to hear from him, how was he? She appreciated the watch, thought it was thoughtful of him and she promised to take really good care of it, he’d have it back safe, and gosh the little picture-story he sent her was just the funniest thing! Hell yeah!

So that began the little note sending thing between them. Wasn’t a daily endeavor or anything, but a handful of times he’d get littler things from Ellie writing on her own and it was just great. Little embarrassing, but that was only due to the resident peanut gallery. Rocky got a big kick out of announcing to the Chargers that Krem had love letters from his little girlfriend when her messages came, and they loved being total freaks about it, Skinner, Grim, Stitches once he was back—Dalish cooed. Every. Damn. Time ‘awwwwww!’—making kissy noises and total asses of themselves, mocking him while he grinned like a loon over the little missives. They were from Ellie! It was sweet, and those bastards could just fight him!

And Maker, he’d been damn relieved when he got, I’m okay. Coming home. Miss you. – Ellie after reports came in on the Templar business. Crew didn’t act like asses when that one came, lots of condoling hands on the shoulder, questioning if she’d said if she as alright or not. Reports that came out of Therinfal had been bad.

He made sure Bull didn’t pull any kind of crap on him—he got all his paperwork done, reports written up on each and every one of their new recruits with full detail of how they were coming along in their training in Charger tactics, their attitude in regard to taking orders from Rainier when he got back—things had been a little caustic at the get go, but he’d done his best to work them down, they were grateful for their freedom, wanted to move forward and do better, and
that opportunity only came to them, because of Thom Rainier and ultimately the Herald of Andraste. He took notes for Bull on their work, how they did on the job he took them out on, little local thing for the Lord that claimed ownership of Haven’s estate, all the noble purses coming through to see the Inquisition had lured bandits, they set up camp in the woods outside Haven estate with plans to play highwaymen. What they did was rough up couriers bringing supplies to Haven, didn’t kill them so they came and reported to the Inquisition, and Lady Josie contacted the Lord, informed him of what was going on, told them she knew a reliable crew that could take them out, and that’s how the Chargers landed the job. Could have just ordered the Chargers to do so herself but the ambassador was smart, thoughtful, saved the Inquisition money—no bonus paid for the job—but the Lord hiring them meant he paid, getting the Chargers a higher price, a new client, and a sparkling new addition to their resume all in one fell swoop, as well as a grateful Lord putting their name out there. And thankfully they recovered most of what had been stolen too, they were in the middle of nowhere and the bandits didn’t have a way to move the goods themselves, Krem took their new ground troops out, brought down the bandits, brought back supplies that now wouldn’t need replacing. All in all a damn decent gig, and Krem was able to get Bull and Rainier all the info they needed to swoop in, take over for him when they got back.

They cut it real close, he’d been worried something happened, delayed their party from getting in in time for Ellie’s birthday, but right around noon on the 31st, Advisors came and lined up out front of Haven. If that wasn’t clue enough, Spymaster swung by where Krem stood with Skinner and Stitches flanking him as their ground troops ran drills with the rest of the Core people. There was a little amused smile on Leliana’s lips as she cleared her throat and politely informed him the Lady Herald and her party would be in soon.

“Go, see the small one,” Skinner said, “I will tor—*train*. The new Shems.”

“I’ll make sure they’re still breathing for Bull,” Stitches assured him, “go on, just try not to get too carried away with your little girlfriend in front of her Party though, huh?”

He’d hardly a groping session in mind, ass. Thankfully Bull’d provided him something of leverage. “Adan calls Stitches Liam,” he announced before turning on his heel to leave their Healer to get hassled for his own romantic entanglement. Rocky high-fived him as he passed—he could hear the clopping of horse hooves echoing down the way and he decided to take the long way, Ellie’d need to touch base with her advisors and if he just stepped out into the road he might give into the temptation to greet her on sight, so he took a lap, walking by their training session, down the slope to the riverside to walk along the bank until he could turn and walk by the practice dummies lining the soldier tents—more of those now, more tents out in the woods by the old Healer’s cabin…though maybe someone took up residence there now, he wasn’t sure. Haven had made a few changes in the last month, and if Ellie was up for it, he’d give her the rundown. He was nervous, nervous-excited, it’d been a month, and some days, and he’d missed her. Missed Bull a little too, stupid ass. He’d eat gravel before he’d ever admit it though.

She was hugging the Commander when he came out to wait ‘til she was done, he could just see her arms but it looked like she’d gotten a bit dressed up, it was First-Day Eve after all, oh man he was excited for tomorrow. Sure there would be celebrations tonight to look forward to, but the main event was tomorrow, operation: Ellie’s First Birthday party. Oh, when she pulled away, moved to address the others he could see she was wearing the scarf, and damn him he shouldn’t be so excited over it, but he’d been nervous giving it to her in the first place.

Yup, he was pretty sure he was dying of the overflow of relief and excitement and out in out happiness, was he drunk? He almost felt like giggling when Ellie smiled at him, running full speed to meet him with her own excited squeal. She was back, and he had to put the energy somewhere and he wasn’t planning on kissing her just yet, but he’d damn sure settle for sweeping
her up and spinning her around as they hugged, just, she was back! She survived time travel and
demon torment and now she was back and alive and here!

“Hi!” she whispered giddily as she caught her breath, squeezing him tight.

“Hi,” he whispered back before as he let her go, set on her feet.

“Here!” she reached in the inner pocket of her cloak and withdrew his Father’s watch,
“Back safe and sound, thank you so much. Gosh, it was so sweet and it really really helped, and
just…” she popped up on her toes to kiss him on the cheek, “thanks.”

He took the pocket watch in hand, he ran a thumb across the cover, more relief to have it
back too, though really, “I’m just glad you’re back safe,” and then, “How are you?”

She nodded. “I’m okay. Lots of scary things but lots of fun and good things too—I have
new friends! Dorian, and Cole, I’ll introduce you! And I’m just…glad to be back. I missed
everyone. The Chargers are alright? How’ve you been?”

“Busy, but everything’s going well here,” Krem said, “Charger’s are all good, they’re
running drills right now. Rainier’s crew’s settled, they definitely want to meet you sometime, if
you’re comfortable with that—don’t sweat it.”

Ellie nodded, seemed to be considering it before saying, “I’ll think about it, thanks—so
much, for all that. Um, do you need to get back then?”

“Actually, I was wondering what you were up to. Just going on noon now, are you hungry,
or have you eaten?”

“Well,” she looked over her shoulder to where she’d been conversing with the Advisors, “I
thought for sure I’d have to be locked away in the War Room for the next Age going over
everything and talking about what to do next, but in the spirit of the holiday, I’m off the hook for
now. I’m pretty hungry though, you?”

“Great!—not that its great you’re hungry, just. um,” he was botching this up pretty nicely,
but she just smiled, was patient and he finally got out, “We could grab a bite to eat. Haven’s
changed up a bit, if you’d like I could give you the official tour.” There we go, he knew how to use
words.

“That does sound great,” she agreed humorously. Oh, that was nice. “Lead the way, Mister
official tour guide!” she enthused, taking his offered arm, hugging it a bit as he lead her.

“First stop—the Chargers tents, just a sec,” he motioned with the hand he held his Father’s
watch in and she nodded as he pulled open the tent flap, hooked it to stay open just in case…he felt
eyes and spotted Marehis shadowing them, he was decently sure she was anyway, otherwise he’d
have greeted her, he didn’t want her to get the wrong idea, or Ellie to for that matter. Ellie waited,
standing in the entrance while he went to his bunk, unlocked the trunk at the foot of his cot, and
pulled his Father’s shaving kit out, the box was smallish, but big enough to hold everything he still
had from Tevinter though he’d hidden Ellie’s Birthday present in it too for safe keeping. But it was
in the little cloth bag it came in so that sorted well, if she could see over his shoulder. Pocket watch
back safe and sound indeed—there wasn’t a single scratch or dent on it, damn well looked like it’d
been polished—and he slipped the box back into place.

“Father’s shaving kit,” he explained when he turned and found Ellie leaning to see around
him, she blushed begin caught being curious.
“That’s sweet,” she said, “I’m glad you keep after some of his things, I really am grateful you trusted me with his watch. Tonio, huh? The Aclassi men have handsome names.”

“Why thank you, my lady,” he offered, pleased it made her blush. It was sweet of her to say, stung and soothed at the same time somehow, hurt not having him around, not knowing how he was, or ultimately if he was even still alive, but talking about him so casually helped solidify that sometimes wavering security he held that his father was alright—even if it wasn’t actual confirmation, talking about him in the present tense was nice.

They decided on the first, so, they walked arm in arm along the path out front of Haven’s gate. Haven was expanding in all sorts of ways with their new recruits coming, their Mages arrived and there were new trainers, healers, staff. Recruits lived in the tents filling the wooded area all the way to the gate that marked the edge of Haven’s estate. There was a mess hall of sorts—big tented area where their new Cook in charge of feeding their growing masses, would serve up breakfast lunch and dinner in the clearing between the soldiers tents and the old healer’s cabin. It was mad crowded right now, but they had other places to see, other places they could eat, he had a feeling she’d be more interested in something familiar than diving into something new and uh…cook was a decent bloke, but he was loud, gruff, sharp with his staff, might rub Ellie the wrong way if she introduces herself and catches him in the throes of his ire during lunch rush.

Biggest change was Flissa’s in that, it was no longer the go-to for meal rations anymore, now the place served as a proper Tavern, an option—Fliss made up a permanent menu and everything now that she didn’t have to cook based on a meal plan that could serve their numbers quick and easy. You went in, sat down, got your order taken, the whole thing, had a bard now too.

“Has that sign always been there?” Ellie asked as he led her to the Tavern.

“Sign?” he couldn’t help himself he sort of wanted to see,

Ellie pointed to the newish sign over the Tavern door, “The…Singing…Maiden,” she read.

Oh shit, he’d wanted to see how well she was coming along with reading and everything but now he wasn’t sure if giving her praise would embarrass her or not, or if she’d be discouraged if he didn’t say—he was mad overthinking things again.

“Very good,” he murmured to her and she hugged his arm tighter in thanks, smiling shyly like she were proud with herself. “Fliss wanted a more ‘place of business’ vibe, you know? She has to represent now that she’s got competition.”

“There’s no competition, Flissa’s the best!” Ellie enthused as they entered the Tavern.

Barmaid gasped in excitement dropping her dishrag on the counter, “Oh! My Lady! You’ve returned!” she squealed rushing around the bar to come hug the girl with all her might, “You’re safe, are you well my lady? I’ve heard such troublesome things! Oh you look so pretty, blue really suits you, and your scarf is just lovely! Did Marehis braid your hair this morning? Have you gotten taller?”

Ellie was giggly over the woman’s barrage of questions, “I’m great, Flissa, glad to be back. Thanks—Lady Josie picked it out and I figured I should dress up for First-Day Eve, and Cremisius made my scarf! Marehis did braid my hair, and unfortunately no, I haven’t gotten taller…” she looked down as if to check just to make sure, “nope, not taller yet. Yet!”

“It will happen I am sure of it! Are you two hungry?” Flissa asked. and then she gasped, “Oh! Oh gosh I’ve been babbling away while you two are—” she giggled and whirled about to
look across the Tavern seating, “Oh I really should get a table for two in here—”

“We aren’t on a date!” they spoke in unison, oh, good, no confusion there. He’d said they’d talk when they got back but that was just expressing interest to see if he should back off or move forward with the intent to ask her on a proper date once she was back. He wanted to do that in person, it just felt right.

“Oh! Poo…Oh!” she gasped, “Not-! I meant-! Platonic-! Friendships are impo-”

“Cremisius and I like each other, we’re just not on a date right this very minute,” Ellie offered gently.

“Oh yay! You’re just-! Oh I think you’re just the cutest! Go ahead and seat yourselves anywhere you like, look over the menu and I’ll be around to take your orders whenever you’re ready!” she said as she retreated to her place behind the bar. Huh, he was pretty glad she was so enthusiastic about them though, might want to borrow her cooking setup sometime if uh, the whole dating thing got rolling.

“I love Flissa,” Ellie breathed, pulling the strap of her staff holster over head and hanging it, staff and all, on the hook by the door.

“I think its safe to say she loves you too,” Krem jested quietly as he helped her out of her cloak, hung it on the same hook before they moved to sit at the usual table, out front of the fireplace. People only occasionally came in for lunch, sometimes breakfast was busy, dinner too—any time shift change was on, people coming off work wanting a drink, they still had to hit up Flissa’s since the ‘mess hall’ was a dry set up. The place was pretty empty now, save Flissa and a waitress who was seated at the bar, the bard lady who wasn’t playing just now, she was leaning against the wall chatting with som—

“Cole!” Ellie addressed the young man in the very large hat, he turned to face her with a serene smile on his face, “There you are!” Oh. Cole. Bull’d mentioned him, good guy, a Spirit or something which was beyond weird, but he’d saved Ellie big time, was able to be there with her when that demon…Maker if he thought about it too much he couldn’t damn breathe, he’d read the reports, it’d been bad, close call to some horrible clone of Ellie running around or Ellie being tortured to dea—yup. Bring it back. Point was, he’d kiss the guy on the damn mouth if he wanted, helping Ellie like that, being there for her.

“Oh. You don’t have to do that,” Cole said, getting a confused look from Ellie since that wasn’t really a response to ‘there you are’, shit! Then, “I heard hurts healing and came to see, there was a very sad man at the bar, missing his wife, and a young woman, angry at herself for not impressing her supervisor with her work, and then there was the Mage boy worried about the Templars arriving. But they all feel better now, went about their days.”

“Oh, I’m so proud of you Cole! Golly, we’ve only been in for like what? Five minutes and you’ve already helped three people? Thank you so much!”

“Oh. I didn’t explain right. I heard the hurts healing, I didn’t heal them myself, so I wanted to see who was—your name is Maryden, you sing songs that make people lighter,” he said, looking to the singer.

The woman blushed at that, “Thank you, Cole is it?” she asked, and then to Krem, “You’re that Charger leader fellow I’ve seen around, and you…hmm,” she looked at Ellie, thinking hard, “…I don’t believe we’ve met.”
“Krem, second in command, Bull’s Chargers—you’ll know our leader when you see him,” he assured her. She nodded and looked to El.

“I’m Ellie! Maryden’s such a pretty name, and your lute is beautiful! You’re a bard?”

“Thank you,” she replied warmly, “A minstrel—bards are more an Orleisan thing. Are you new to Haven?”

Ellie giggled at that, “Not exactly. I’m a resident agent of the Inquisition.”

“An agent? I apologize, I haven’t seen you around. are you one of Leliana’s people, or Lady Josephine’s?”

Ellie gave it a second of thought, “Technically both, Cullen’s too. Ellie—Eleanor for long, Herald of Andraste,” pulling off her gloves and wriggling the fingers of her Marked hand.

“Oh my goodness! You’re the Lady Herald? Oh, it’s an honor to meet you,” she looked around the bar and then quietly said, “Lady Josephine hired me on to help with crafting the Inquisition’s reputation—keep an ear out for any rumors, write songs to spread our acclaim, that sort of thing.”

“Oh wow, really? That’s so cool, thank you for signing on! Lady Josie’s just the sweetest. Flissa too—you like working here?”

“I do, very much,” Maryden said sincerely. “I get shifts here, collect new material to write on, try them out around Haven and then I get to travel to Orlais, tour a bit, performing in different key places to spread stories and the Inquisition’s mission through song.”

“Oh gosh that sounds fun—Orlais is nice, pretty, I’ve only really been to Val Royeaux. I look forward to hearing you! Are you hungry? You could join us if you’d like,” Ellie offered.

“I just had lunch—but thank you for the offer. I should get back to work, my lady.”

“Oh gosh, yeah, um, break a leg! That’s…that’s polite to say for performing, right?” Ellie asked, worried, “It sounds mean.”

“It is nice to say,” the minstrel assured her, “—more of an actor’s superstition but all sorts of things can go amiss in performances, and the idea is that that encouragement jinxes performers, so offering up something that sounds like a wish for misfortune…” she shrugged.

“Oh! Opposite effect, anti-jinxing it, cool!” Ellie supposed, and then, “Cole? Cremisius and I are here to eat, you can sit with us if you like?” It’d be a little awkward if they were going to talk, it would be weird enough with the music maker so close, but…that was twice now she’d asked someone to join them, maybe Ellie was nervous to talk about things or maybe she didn’t want to? Though maybe she didn’t feel they needed to? Or—

“No thank you,” Cole said, and then suddenly the boy was right up in Krem’s space, whispering directly into his ear as softly as possible, he would have worried it was a voice in his head if he couldn’t feel Cole’s mouth moving which was disconcerting in and of itself, but it didn’t bother him so much when, “she’s only being polite, kind. She likes being with just you. You should ask her, she’ll say yes.” Oh. Yeah overthinking again. He was nervous…kind of weird-nice to have someone around that could know people’s minds like that.

And then it swung over to just straight weird because the guy vanished into thin air.
“He does that, oh! You know who I’m talking about, right?” Ellie asked him.

Uhh, “…Cole?”

She smiled, nodding. “Just checking, sometimes people forget talking to him, but it seems to not be happening so much, I guess, with people he wants to be familiar to. He’s a spirit,” she explained.

Ahh, “Bull filled me in, I’m glad I finally got to meet him, he seems nice.”

“The nicest! Look out for him if you see him around, would you? He’s kind of…” Ellie bopped her head side to side as she thought it over. “He doesn’t know lots of things. I had to teach him hugging. He doesn’t always realize when he’s overstepping boundaries, he’s very blunt when he speaks, not in a mean way but I think that’s just because he isn’t mean, you know?”

“Yeah, I’ll make sure no one gives him trouble,” he promised as he pulled out a chair for her, “Lady Herald.”

Her smile grew, and she bit her lip. “Why thank you, Lieutenant Aclassi,” she returned, taking the offered seat.

“There’re menus now,” he said as he sat, there was always a stack at the end of the tables so he picked some up looking to her, and she upturned a hand to take one so he passed it along, though he did still offer, “Let me know if um, you need any help.”

She actually gave a little sigh of relief, “Thanks. I do alright, Dorian and I are going to have lessons while I’m in Haven—oh! Sera’s going to be teaching me maths and science things!”

Really? “Wow, that’s so great, I hope you enjoy it. Science can be interesting, the interactive parts at least. I personally never cared much for the harder maths, though homework was kind of funny. My parents would try helping—proof read papers and things, let me practice presentations—but they’d take one look at the math worksheets I brought home and Mother’d just quit on the spot, offer to make juice or snacks, and Father, bless him, he’d try so hard, always ended up with his hair all crazy from raking his hands through it so much, start swearing in Tevene.”

Ellie laughed at that, “Oh gosh! It sounds like fun, and Sera usually means fun, so I think it’ll sort out well. If not…I sure I can always get Dorian to swear in Tevene at my math homework,” and then she gasped. “I didn’t write you this because I wanted to save it for seeing you again, and I didn’t want to risk the Iron Bull or Dorian seeing but,” she looked around and then leaned across the table, whispering, “Dorian. The Iron Bull.”

No, fucking—really? Oh Maker please. Krem would never ever ever let the bastard live it down if he ended up committed to a Tevinter Mage of all things, not even a red head at that—wasn’t hard to pick the Vint out of their group when they rode in. “Are you serious? Are they…”

“Not yet I don’t think, but good golly! You should see them together! You’ll flip, I swear, they’re just so so into each other—Cremisius. You have no idea how hard its been to save this but,” she reached out and grasped his forearm as if to brace herself and him, “Dorian had an Iron deficiency. It’s literally a sign from the universe. And being malnourished. But like how ‘funny now that he’s better’ is that? If the Iron Bull hasn’t used that in a line for him, I…I might have to disown him as my twin.”

Big lug would totally use that as a line but, “Twin?”
“Muscles, a love for puns—I can’t drink but I’m a whisky girl and he respects that—we like a lot of the same food, we don’t like broccoli, we’re multilingual. Basically bisexual though we’ve talked about it and we’re more like Pan really but B fits better for B-Quad—that’s the official organization for me, and the Iron Bull, and our marvelous friendship! And his name was a number under the Qun, and Ellie comes from the number eleven.”

Oh yeah, she’d told him about her name just being Ellie. Bull’d mentioned the uh…that Ellie’d said as much, gender not mattering to her, outing herself in a way to avoid Thom accidentally outing Krem. He wouldn’t’ve held it against the guy too bad, making an honest mistake, so long as Rainier was prepared to back Krem up if things went south. Seemed like some of her party outright knew and were cool, like Varric obviously, Sera too he thought, Marehis, Madam de Fer’d given him this look when they first met, looked him up and down and then hard for a second, it was usually the sort of look he got from someone trying to decide ‘what’ he was before getting offended over his identity but she’d never misgendered him, seemed to respect it, at least a lot more than she did his Tevinter upbringing. Lady Seeker seemed…she’d been told he was a man and didn’t question that status so…yeah, nice. He didn’t much care what Solas knew or what he thought, that bastard. Bull was more suspicious of him now than ever. Motherfucker knew something, was about something he wasn’t sharing with the rest of the class. He’d known the innerworkings of that freaky Amulet that sent Ellie into time. Banished it like he knew what he was doing, without breaking a sweat, like the master of a magical artifact and not someone going in blind, desperately trying to destroy something they couldn't hope to understand, like the others. If Krem wasn’t supposed to keep it on the down low unless he or Bull had proof…he’d beat that asshole’s face in. Fucker knew how to take care of that Amulet—he could have banished it before that Magister bastard could use it to cast Ellie into the future, but he didn’t do a damn thing to stop him!

“Cremisius?” Ellie asked softly, oh shit. He’d been staring into space, now that he refocused Ellie was looking at him, concerned, thumb rubbing against his forearm.

“Sorry, I uh, I just got caught up in my thoughts—started with thinking maybe we could troll people a bit with a gag, you and Chief actually being twins, you know?” he did think that now that his mind worked its way back around to what they’d actually been talking about, “Dramatic backstory and everything, how you were separated at birth or some such nonsense. My brain just detoured from there big time, my bad.”

Ellie looked relieved at that, smiling she said, “Oh gosh, that’d be hilarious! Just commit to it no matter what obvious facts contradict our act,” she agreed laughingly.

They turned their attention to their menus then, no changes to it or anything so it wasn’t hard to pick from his favorites. Took his time though, made sure to look over the thing carefully so Ellie wouldn’t feel rushed, she was humming quietly to herself to the tune Maryden was playing, it was kind of sweet. Nice, getting to sit with her so relaxed and alive and safe.

“Gosh everything looks good, but I think I know what I want. What about you, Cremisius? It’s no hurry, I’m not in a rush—I’m actually totally clear, no work until after the holiday, Leliana said.”

That sounded perfect, good opening too. He gave it a beat then said, “Hmm yeah, I think I’m ready,” gave Fliss a little wave and the barmaid who clapped her hands once in excitement it seemed before scurrying over, Maker she really was ecstatic. She took their orders and told them it’d be just a little while, but she’d have them out as soon as it was ready.

“Thanks Flissa!” Ellie chirped overlapping Krems, “Thanks.” It sort of made them laugh,
having spoken in unison again.

“So…you’re free?” Krem latched on to what she’d said just a moment ago, and Ellie nodded. “There’s First-Day Eve celebrations tonight.”

“Oh gosh, yeah Lady Josie said as much, it should be fun!”

“I’d be honored if you’d attend, uh, with me,” Krem said. Ouch, yikes, got a bit clunky at the end but he’d gotten it out, Cole’s assurances aside he was still nervous to ask her.

Ellie blushed, nodding, “I’d love to.”

“Cool,” oh man his face felt warm, and Ellie giggled, took his hands in hers, so his hands laid upturned on the table top while she traced her fingers lightly over his palms, that sort of ticklish, soothing way.

“So…”

“So,” he chuckled nervously.

“I like you, Cremisius. Very much,” she confessed shyly.

“I like you too, Ellie. Very much,” he grinned, he’d uh, already been pretty obvious about it.

“So…we’re…dating?” she checked with him.

“Not on a date in this current moment,” damn near felt like it, “but yeah, I’d say ‘dating’.”

“Cool,” she said, smiling as she held his hands. “Um, not just a flavor of the week thing right?”

Maker! “Definitely not,” Krem assured her, “at least now for me, you?”

Ellie sighed. “Well, I did meet the most beautiful Lord when I was in the Hinterlands…” she had a mischievous smile on her face as she met his eye, “Lord Woolsly. He’s a Ram. But a very pretty Ram—his fur’s pink and gold and reddish, like a sunset!”

Well damn, that was some rough competition. “Guess I’ll have to duel this Lord Woolsly then,” he made to stand, laughing when Ellie giggled at him, holding his hands more tightly as he sat back down, scooting closer to the table.

Another damn wolf whistle, Bull was getting junk-punched if he didn't watch himself.

“Oh, look what we have here,” a smooth, haughty voice sounded, oh Maker, that horrible sort of Tevinter accent considered ‘upper crust’, for a moment it startled him, but it was just that Dorian guy, “little lovebirds canoodling by the fire.”

“What’re you two up to?” Ellie asked conversationally.

“Ambassador needed someone to lug another bed frame and mattress into Madam de Fer’s cabin, get it put together so Sparky has a place to lay his head,” Bull said, “Checked in with everyone, Rainier’s taking point before everyone breaks for the holiday, so I figured I’d help out.”

Yeah. Bull barely washed up his own dinner plate without bitching about it never mind going out of his way to do something heavy lifting unless he were trying to show off for someone,
usually someone he was into. Maybe Ambassador though. Nah, nope, never mind that, Lady Josie
definitely did not want to 'ride the Bull', she might hold some interest but not in something so
casual, and oaf wouldn't dare pursue her if she wasn't on. So yeah that did leave Dorian...but uh, he
wasn't too sure it was a commitment thing like Ellie usually had designed for in her matches. Of
course the girl could mend tears in the veil with the wave of a hand so. Clearly more impossible
things had happened.

“That was sweet of you,” Ellie thanked him, oh she was excited to see the two still hanging
around each other even after settling into Haven. ”It was nice of Vivienne to let you bunk with
her.”

“Certainly, though I'm not sure if it's convenient being next door neighbors with that Adan
fellow or my worst nightmare. The man caught me outside and took my temperature! Not so much
as a hello or by-your-leave just, pop! Thermometer in my mouth! I finished those damn
supplements of his and that's the poor reward I get!” the Tevinter Mage complained, though when
it got Ellie and Bull laughing at his expense, he smiled despite himself. Then gesturing to their
table, “Now, can we get in on the warmth, or would we be interrupting something beautiful and
nauseating?”

Catching Ellie’s eye he said, “I’m game if you are.”

“Absolutely! We already ordered but not like super long ago,” Ellie informed them, Bull
took the chair next to Ellie, let her sit in his blindspot while he kept one door in his peripheral.
Krem was already facing the other so that made sense. Dorian came and sat next to Krem, offering
him a nod as he did.

“Nice to meet you, Cremisius Aclassi. Krem,”

“Dorian Pavus,” he introduced himself in return. “Amazing to find another Tevinter so far
from the Imperium...that isn't a Venatori mind. Hmm, I say, have you ever been to Minrathous?”
the Mage asked.

Bloke sounded like the sort that’d be all about Minrathous. Krem'd only been twice. After
he’d joined the military, graduation from basic took place in Tevinter’s capital. First time was
when he was eleven, a last-ditch effort, his parents attempting one final good solid check to make
sure of his magical status. Circle of Magi there would have a few days a year where they’d open
their doors to the public, and Mages from all over the Imperium would volunteer to test seemingly
non-magical citizens or their untested young for magic. Bit dangrous, it involved ingesting Lyrium
and being lullled into sleep through hypnosis, which allowed for swift testing, if you did turn out to
be a Mage and found yourself in the Fade, you could be made to say as much, be drawn out and
back into the safety of the real world without the risk of falling prey to demons, and if you didn't,
you waited a bit to make certain, then called you back to consciousness. A kindly old mage…an
Altus, or something, though he might’ve been a Magister…Ath-something. Athanir? He’d been…
real decent. Kind. Compassionate about Krem’s lack of magic, was patient with his parents
requests for double and triple, quadruple checking, carefully lulling Krem in and out of
consciousness, and politely but effectively curtailing his mothers attempts to persuade him into
trying again with more Lyrium. Just seeing the damn stuff made his skin crawl sometimes, he only
had ghosts of memory from when he was five, being tested and mother bribed the Healer just
enough to sway the woman into agreement that Krem would be fine being made, mind-tricked, into
draining the whole bottle. It was the closest thing he'd ever seen to his parents divorcing, Father
had been livid, Mother had gone behind his back for that round of testing and apparently it was
because she thought his father wasn't taking it seriously enough, that they should be stopping at
nothing to light the spark of Krem's non-existent magic she so badly wanted him to have. Krem
barely remembered anything after being made to take so much, but when he did finally come to hours later, his brain felt like it was slowly inflating after it'd been flattened by a rolling pin, and his insides felt like they'd been wrung out, throat raw and burning, and he was hellishly sick for days after. But last time being tested, nothing like that had happened, he'd only been prompted to drink a spoonful of the stuff before the Mage put him under hypnosis, making it clear cut Krem's choice to take it. When it did turn out he had no magic, the man was gentle in how he broke the news each time like he understood they'd a lot riding on the possibility and…dunno, it'd been an interaction that stuck with Krem. There was this sort of look that ghosted across the old man's face when his Mother asked him to examine her 'daughter', seemed like he made a point to call Krem 'child' or 'young Aclassi'. Knowing Ellie now, it made him sort of wonder if the guy had known someone like Krem, and his magic made him aware the young Aclassi wasn't a 'daughter', and he'd been respecting that. All said and done, Mother had gone off in a tizzy, storming away from the Circle, shouting about how weak willed father was or whatever, and as they were able to splurge a bit since it was just the two of them for lunch before they had to make the trek home, Tonio Aclassi and his brave 'bello mimo', went for pizza and split a scoop of orange gelato.

"Once or twice," Krem offered politely, "Good food."

"Oh, good everything," Dorian sounded mournful almost, "and it was so warm—Ellie, you’re from the north, well…northier," he amended since she wasn’t from Tevinter or anything, "—Free Marches are tolerable, oh and Antiva, lovely place, warmer than some parts of the Imperium! Don’t you miss how warm it was up there? In civility? Away from the snow?"

"I don’t miss Antiva much, but yeah, warm, I miss warm," Ellie allowed, though, "but snow is really nice, lots of fun!"

"I suppose it does have a charm of its own," Dorian allowed, though, "Cold as kaffas." Bull chuckled at that.

"What the hell happened to Haven?" Varric wanted to know as he entered the Tavern, "There’s some kind of mess hall bullshit now, Mages and Templars move in and now the whole neighborhood’s gone to shit! You’re still getting good business, right Fliss?"

"Oh don’t you fuss, this is the sort of set up I’m used to, much better for me than having to be responsible for everyone eating," Flissa assured him breezily from behind the bar, wiping out the inside of a mug before setting it on the counter, filling it with beer, sliding it to the other side of the bar for the Dwarf to take. "Welcome back, Master Tethras."

"Flissa. I love you, really I do. Seggrit treating you right? Cause I’ll kick his ass."

"Oh!" Flissa went bright red at that, "We’re…he’s…" she giggled, "I’m very happy."

"Good," Varric said, taking up the mug, his attention turned to the bars other occupants, "oh come on you assholes, kids are getting their groove thing on, leave them be—they bothering you two?"

"Varric, you’re very fighty today," Ellie noted, looked a little worried as she promised, "no one’s bothering us, you can join if you’d like."

"Sorry Tumbles," the Dwarf sighed as he took a seat next to Dorian, and then he rapped his knuckles against the table top, looking to Ellie, "Forms came after all, they were on my desk when I got in, no problems so far, no worries. I’m just a grumpy old bastard, I don’t do change well. Line in the mess’ is long as shit and I’m hungry." Ahh, angry from his hunger then.
"You're hangry," Ellie and Krem offered in unison, smiling at being on the same page.

And so were Dorian and Bull it seemed. Mage offered up a disgusted groan as Bull said, "Get a room you two." The Herald of Andraste, beauty and grace personified, stuck her tongue out at them.

“I’ll have rolls out to you soon!” Flissa assured cheerily.

“Flissa. Seggrit better watch his back, you’re making me consider holy matrimony,” and then he looked to Krem. “How the hell you doin’ kid?”

“Pretty great actually,” Krem had to admit, “Glad to see you’re all back.”

“Uh-huh, yeah. You’re glad we’re all back,” Varric drawled as he looked between him, and his hands joint with Ellie’s. “Just yanking your chain a bit, Krem. Huh. Krem, short for Cremisius? The hell kind of middle name even goes with that?” though he blanched and amended, “Sorry, you don’t have to answer that if you don’t want, don’t mean to put you on the spot—my middle name’s embarrassing as shit and I’m taking it to the grave.”

“Gistin,” Krem deadpanned with a reassuring grin. Kind of him to think about it, but it was gender neutral enough, Tevinter name for ‘Just’ or something, old family name they’d been dead-set on using.

“Wow, really?” Ellie asked, pulling out a little…huh she had a little notepad of sorts from her back pocket, had a pencil tucked away in her tunic pocket, she blushed a bit, seemed nervous to ask him, “Would you mind spelling that for me? I’m kind of keeping note of new words, names, reinforcing how different letters can go together.”

“That’s really great, El. Gistin, G-i-s, t-i-n. Between Cremisius and Aclassi, I was glad it’s easy enough to remember how to spell,” he chuckled.

“You’ve just the one middle name?” Dorian asked, “Consider yourself lucky.” Then, “Hmm…Aclassi…your father’s last name? What about your mother? Oh. Do forgive my nosiness, I’m just trying to garner just how small the world truly is. Ellie and I had the most interesting revelation: the Pavus family has Free Marcher relatives—I’m the distant cousin of the Trevelyan line, I end up working alongside little Ellie here, and lo and behold, she attended the Conclave with a Trevelyan, posing as a distant cousin. Strange bit of coincidence isn’t it?” he babbled.

…Krem wasn’t sure about all that, or how that made the world small exactly, but he shrugged. “Mother’s maiden name was Fabius,” Ellie opened her mouth to speak and she smiled when he went ahead and offered, “F-a-b, i-u-s.”

“Thanks,” she said sweetly.

“Fabius…hmm…you know I think I know a Fabius,” Dorian said, “—first name Marcellus, Sopporati that runs a little hole in the wall in a town on the way to Minrathus.”

Huh. Well damn, maybe the world was small. “Uncle, my mother’s brother. He retired a while back, my cousin Remus runs it now.”

“Good on them.”

"Oh!" Ellie chirped, interested, "Remus is..."

"Cousin that writes me, yeah. Good guy." They'd never been super close, but Marcellus and
mother were definitely brother and sister. Same eyes, same nose, same beliefs, and Remus had taken up for Krem as best he could, at least he hadn't wholly written him off when everything went sideways with his engagement to Cornelius. Hell, First Day didn't usually prompt anything from his cousin, but Wintersend and Krem's birthday, he got letters wishing him well.

"Good. I like him!" She didn't even know the guy but...huh, he supposed it must be true enough, probably wasn't even exaggeration, and it was nice she felt that way just because she knew his cousin was one of the few that hadn't totally disowned him. Probably all you needed to know to get the idea he was a good guy.

"Does everyone have a middle name?" Ellie asked then. "I don't. Dorian's got like fifty though so I'm pretty sure he broke the balance, its why I don't have one so the universe can maintain order. But his are all crazy, Gistin's handsome, he's got like Balbazaramuel or something and Catamereblahblah," she teased.

"Bartholomew, and Catolino," Dorian said, "are yes, two, of my five, middle names. Peasant."

Ellie giggled, "Tevinter middle names are crazy and I like them."

"Guess there is a bit of a wild range," Krem supposed.

"I fear my parents middle names are even worse than mine, I can't even pronounce them," Dorian complained.

Huh. His parents weren't quite that bad, not terribly difficult to remember, "Quintus and uh, Marilla, aren't bad I suppose," and Ellie smiled like he'd just offered up something astounding, Maker she was excited to learn new words. So....yeah, didn't feel bad to indulge her, "Q-u-i, n, t-u-s. And M-a-r, i-l-l-a."

"So, so many cool spellings," Ellie enthused as she carefully wrote down the letters he'd given her, "Q-u is one of my favorites, cause they stick together, like they love each other!!"

Maker help him, that was just adorable. Where did all these people crop up from that wanted to fight her so badly all the time? How did the Venatori sell the idea of hunting down a five-foot ray of sunshine that had favorite spellings because the letters were in love?

“So, Imekari, you excited?” Bull asked once she tucked her notebook away. “First-Day Eve, should be a blowout tonight, you ready to party?” His hand went to rest on Ellie’s back, thumb, index, and middle finger gripping and massaging her neck.

“Uh-huh!” she said brightly, “I’m going with Cremisius! I’m his date!” she was excited to inform them, bouncing a bit in her seat. Maker, she was excited to go on a date with him. And it was strange, a scary-good sort of different for him to actually be excited about going on a date.

“Shit, seriously? Oh man, beating us all to the damn punch, huh Krem?” Qunari gave him a little wink.

“Yup,” Krem replied, “find your own date, you oaf.”

“Ha!” Dorian belted out, pointing in Bull’s face.

“Cold Krem,” Bull complained, “that’s just ice cold.”

Oh man it was great to have that sorted. He’d been so nervous about asking her and now he
could just be excited as all get out.

When lunch was through, Ellie asked if Krem’d mind helping her find Marehis—there’d been a deal struck earlier among Ellie and some of her party members to get ready together for any party tonight.

The woman had kept a good distance, he’d been sure she’d follow them into the Tavern but she hadn’t though he suspected she was somewhere nearby. Money went on keeping herself inconspicuous and they were pretty close to Solas’s cabin—she could probably hear any major calamity from there, keep track of when they left, things like that, so they headed that way first. Ellie laughed as they approached, rapping her fist against the door and calling,

“Marehis? Solas? Are you in? The door’s unlocked and innocent eyes are about to enter the cabin—I love you, you're so cute, but I don’t need to see all that!”

Marehis was laughing almost uncontrollably, when they entered the cabin she was seated in a chair by the fire holding her sides as she carried on, and Solas was seated opposite her, ears burning red, hand splayed over his mouth as he struggled to hide his smile as he murmured, “Da’vehenan, heavens.”

“Ohhh, da’len, come here sweet girl,” Marehis wiped at her eyes with one hand, waving Ellie over with the other, Ellie’d been carrying her staff in hand after she re-bundled on their way out of the Tavern, so she set it against the wall and went to climb into Marehis’s lap, the Elf woman humming as she kissed her head and then she looked to Krem, “Lieutenant Aclassi, it’s good to see you again, I trust you’re well?”

“I am, its good to see you too, I’m glad you’re back safe,” he replied. Maker was he relieved, he’d been worried sick when Marehis didn’t turn up in Haven like she should have after Ellie left for the Hinterlands, if something had happened to her, Ellie’d be devastated.

Yeah. Solas was getting a beat down if he broke Marehis’s heart, he’d break Ellie’s in the process and yup. Nu uh. Not in this Inquisition.

“Just here to drop Ellie off,” he decided he should excuse himself, “there’s apparently going to be a glam session before the party tonight, though I don’t see why that’s necessary,” Krem couldn’t help but offer with a wink to Ellie who giggled, burying her face more against Marehis’s hair.

“I believe I must concur with the Lieutenant,” Solas agreed warmly. Concur with your damn self, egg-head.

“I like him,” Marehis sang quietly against Ellie’s ear and then she looked to Krem, “Thank you, Lieutenant, I appreciate you—I read the copies you sent, of reports you made while substituting my role as bodyguard. I’m grateful, truly.”

Oh, damn, yeah. Hell yeah, that was you know, cool, having Marehis’s approval. It was a weird sort of set up, Ellie had no parents to impress and yet there were at least a dozen or more adults he felt like he was going to have to work for it with, every bit of approval felt scarce and vital. “It was an honor to serve,” and when Marehis nodded, he caught Ellie’s eye, “I’ll swing by your cabin, eight o’clock?”

Ellie nodded. “It’s a date!”

“It is,” he was glad to say, nodding to the Elves as he took his leave, though he heard
Marehis squealing a little when he closed the door behind him, the muffled sound of Ellie giggling.

So he had huh, damn. Good thing Bull’d given him the all-clear this morning to be relieved of duty until after the holiday. He’d lost track of time, chatted away a little over three solid hours in the Tavern, just barely four hours left before he’d pick her up. He wasn’t sure if he had time to kill or if the time was killing him.

Time was killing him. Or maybe it was just the assholes he had to spend it with.

Brilliant bunch of assholes, loved ‘em. But damn.

The second—the very second—Krem set foot outside Haven’s gate, Bull was there with a breath stealing pound on the back before the lug pulled him into a headlock, dragging him forward toward the Charger’s clearing.

“You beautiful Vint bastard, you wooed the hell out of that girl. Fucking illustration? Where’d you learn how to draw like that? Sent her a watch that tells you the date—that was a damn lifesaver by the way you have no idea,” and when they made it to the clearing he finally let up, sending Krem stumbling but he caught himself, got upright again, bonfire was going and it looked like their ground troops had been sent off, done training till the holiday was over. Core group was gathered, some already drinking even though it was…well it was going on five now so, eh. They all stared at Krem while he caught his breath and then,

“Well? You ask her or what?” Rocky was impatient to know.

“Picking her up at eight.” Krem shrugged.

“He’s picking her up at eight!” Rocky shouted jovially, met with a chorus of cheers from the rest of the group, Grim throwing his hands in the air, two swift shifts of his hands made a good cheering motion and the Sign for ‘Amazing!’.

Thom came and slung his arm over Krem’s shoulders, “Thank you. Work you put in with my old crew, help you’ve been. You’re a fine young man,” the Mercenary commended him, then, “But you need a damn bath,” he laughed as he pulled away, shoving at his shoulder. Yup. Month bunking with Bull, Thom was officially a proper Charger—follow orders, fight hard, fuck with Krem.

“I was just neck deep in Bull’s armpit.” Krem defended himself, though he did tuck his head down to sniff. Ugh…he didn’t reek or anything but uh, yeah, no way was he going anywhere near Ellie, smelling like this.

“Hey!” Bull objected, “You’re welcome, Qunari musk drives the ladies crazy! You know how much Orlesians pay to use my sweat in their fancy colognes?” and then on second thought, “Don’t worry about it its none of your business,” like he didn’t want them stealing his side hustle. He could keep it for himself as far as Krem was concerned.

“Leave the boy alone,” Dalish chided, swatting Bull on the shoulder as she came to stand with Krem, oh Maker someone stop her, she licked her damn thumb and ahh! Nope! Wet, nope! Wiping at his cheek! He hadn’t had food on his face, what the fuck— “It isn’t coming off—oh! You’re definitely due a wash, but maybe clean up,” Wash and cle—oh. Yeah. He’d been taking a few minutes more rest every morning just trying to keep up with everything, he’d skipped out on his usual shaving ritual. Wasn’t ‘coming off’ ‘cause it was attached, sometimes a few darker hairs cropped up along the sides of his face.
Bull was looking at him then, eye squinting as he stared hard, the way he does that makes you feel like he’s trying to dissect your damn soul or something, shit.

And then he did that thing where he gives orders like suggestions, that soft-serious tone, clapping Krem on the shoulder, squeezing the back of his neck, “Wash up, relax a bit. Don’t stress nothin’, I’ll make sure you’re bright eyed and lookin’ your best for your date. Gotta represent, make sure everyone knows how the Chargers roll.”

Translation: I wanna check up on you behind your back. Bathe, nap, whatever. We’ll have a little chat later.

Little chats with Bull were…ugh. Alright. Felt two inches tall going into them but they usually turned out okay and yeah, he’d been pretty amped up all day, but he wasn’t going to turn his nose up at catching a few winks before livening it up until midnight, watching the new year roll in.

So he trudged it on over to their tent, stripped bare ass naked, washed up, shaved, pulled on his sleep bottoms and prayed to the Maker Bull didn’t suddenly decide to pick today of all days to be the sort of person not make good on his word, because damn, the tent could be on fire and he wouldn’t wake up, he was out almost as soon as he fell into his cot, covers pulled up over his head to hold off lingering chill and block out the sunlight filtering in.

Felt like he slept for ages—capital A, he almost wondered if it was possible to go to sleep and wake up in another century—when he woke up, something…cold air on his back, kind of chilly to be sleeping without a shirt, but there was a burning warm hand, Bull’s massaging his neck, shoulders, jostling him awake.

“Come on, sit it on down unless you want hair all over your cot. Or are you growing it out?”

Oh. Yeah, his hair was thicker now, not bad but he usually kept it up better, but it wasn’t like Bull’d been around. He could cut his hair fine on his own, back of his head wasn’t easy but he could manage, and Dalish or Stitches, Grim—everyone helped everyone, usually worked as a trade, he’d help with their hair, they’d help him with his. Was nice when Bull did it though. “Nah, just didn’t think about it. Thanks,” he mumbled, stretching before scooting to drop on the ground, Bull was standing right there, Krem snickered a he turned about so he sat on the oaf’s foot, bare back against his shin for all of a second before the Qunari grunted, pulling his foot free before dropping to sit on his ass behind the Tevinter. Quiet while he wet Krem’s hair, he’d set everything out already before waking him.

“Been busy it sounds like,” Bull rumbled out, Krem felt the cold blunt side of the razor against his ear before the Qunari dragged the sharp edge up the side of his head, “keep your damn head straight kid, jeesh,” he griped, hand on the other side of his head, pushing him upright.

Krem huffed, amused, offering, “Always busy Chief,” to his statement. Interrogatory statement he as sure.

“According to the guys—” yup. Snitches. “you’ve been first one up, last one to call it a night since I left.”

“Had shit to do.”

“Running drills with the core team and the new ground troops,” Bull began listing.
“Just had them practice near each other. Same field so I could keep an eye on both, help out where needed,” Krem interjected.

“Taking the new guys out yourself on that job, Lord what’s-his-dick was impressed. You only took Stitches along?”

“Cryil—new guy—he’s working on getting up to speed, so he can act as their Healer in the field, didn’t want to risk it so I had Stitches wait in the wings for us to be done, patch us up. Everyone gets paid the same no matter who goes where, unless it’s a whole tour or something. Wanted to make sure they were really up to task—wasn’t so far away the others couldn’t come back us up. Best way to test them out, I figured, against a decent challenge with a safety net. Practice is just that—practice. I wouldn’t want to just send them out later on their own without seeing for myself how they handle actual battle after so much time off.”

“Not knocking the process, just running through it,” Bull chuckled, wiping the blade off on his thigh before bringing it along the back of his neck. Huh. Alright. “Anyone give you trouble?”

“Didn’t care for someone my age bossing them around at first, but it was nothing I couldn’t handle,” Krem was quick to assure, didn’t want the guy getting the wrong idea and think they’d been dicks about him being him. When Bull handled it, heads got put through walls. ‘least, that’s what happened the last time someone they’d just hired on slapped Krem on the ass when they were all unwinding in a tavern, called him ‘little lady’, barked an order for him to go get more drinks. Needless to say the guy wasn’t in the mercenary game anymore. Might not be in any game anymore, Bull literally had his head through a wall faster than Krem could even get insulted over the slight, and threw him out. Promised to let Krem have the opportunity to stick up for himself in future, just, first time seeing something stupid play out pissed the oaf right off, he'd acted on reflex, but yeah, he didn't want to overstep where Krem could handle himself.

“Uh-huh. Like you handled 22 shots of Tequila?”

Huh? Oh yeah. “More like three and a boatload of water shots to keep up with everyone,” and when he heard something like a sigh of relief from the Qunari he snorted. “We wouldn’t be having this conversation if I actually knocked back 22 shots of any kind of decent alcohol.”

“True,” Bull supposed. Oh. Little chat—he’d been worried Krem was onto something dangerous with his drinking. Used to…he wasn’t an alcoholic, not in a dependency sense, but when he first signed on…yeah, he’d rather drink and forget shit than talk it out. No crazy amount of shots just, kept everything aching him in until they were settled for the day, he’d drink a little more than he should, enough to shut his brain up, fall into his cot and go to sleep. One of their first little chats had been ‘do you wanna be an alcoholic? ‘cause you’re gonna be an alcoholic’ followed by ‘real men talk about their feelings’.

“So. You kept everything goin’ on your own, wrote a damn novel to keep Rainier’n me up to speed, adapted our training to balance your responsibilities between our guys and the ground troops, but you didn’t think to maybe delegate a little?” oh, non-soul wrenching talk, a twofer. Not bad.

“It was my responsibility,” Krem shrugged.

“Koslun’s ass you’re a brat. Maybe establish a hierarchy of your own in the future, alright? No one’d begrudge picking up some slack, Charger’s has never been a one-man operation even when it was just me in sole command. Not complaining just correcting, constructive criticism,” Bull assured, and then his hand was on the back of his neck again, squeezing gently. “You did a damn good job. I’m proud of you, Cremisius.”
Well shit. Face felt like it was on fire, Bull only first named him when he was going for maximum sincerity—which was hell when he got 'I'm disappointed in you', but proud? Okay, that was...made him proud of himself. Jeeze. “Just doing my job.”

Bull was laughing as he dropped a towel on Krem’s head, rubbing at his wet hair for a second before letting Krem handle it. “Alright I’ll lay off, don’t want you blazing like a beacon when you meet up with your little girlfriend.” Then he was quiet for a moment before clearing his throat, "You uh...you nervous? Need any advice or er dunno, anything? You haven't really done the whole uh, dating thing really out here cept, well, you know." Yeah Krem was pretty sure he'd been around somewhere the few times the Qunari got him set up with the occasional lay. Being on the road meant one time things, he didn't like the idea of playing like it was the start of an actual relationship when he was just going to be off to another city, hell sometimes another country come morning, so: as non-complicated as possible, mutually satisfying fumble in the dark with some pretty stranger. Some of the Chargers either helped each other out when uh, tensions needed paid attention to. Though Grim's silent mysterious thing worked well for him when they passed through towns, and Rocky had a trail of 'girlfriends' in his wake, and a bloke from Markham, it'd been this whole thing where the Dwarf paced around their camp stressing over if it meant he was actually only into men this whole time, Bull, ass that he was, had dropped his britches and sashayed bare assed around their campfire saying if that didn't do anything for Rocky, he was fine, just some random dude got his dick up, these things happened. Maker.

But tonight wasn't anything like that. It was an actual date, he was going to pick the girl he liked up, dining, dancing, the whole thing. Krem shrugged. "Little nervous. It's uh...

"Wait. Shit, is this uh," lots of uhs when they got into uncomfortable shit the two of them, "your first date?" and when he got a derisive snort from that, "Krem."

He sighed, lumbering to his feet, slung the towel to lay over the back of his neck before he sat on his cot to face Bull. Did a good job of looking just about anywhere else than the massive space the Qunari occupied. "First date was with my fiance, back in Tevinter, took me to this stupid cafe where they serve tiny cakes and tea at ridiculous prices to celebrate our engagement. Waitress thought it was real sweet my 'father' was taking me out for a tea party." He met Bull's gaze then, Qunari's eyebrows were raised at that. "I was ten."

Bull was a caustic sort of quiet for a moment, like he was processing something that sent him right on to defense. He took a deep breath and then cleared his throat as he blew it out, then, "Hope that bastard's dead."

"Dunno, I don't necessarily check in on him. I didn't actually go through with the whole marriage thing. It was complicated. He was a Laetan, it would've given my family security, but uh, it was bad. Not something I could go through with. In the end I ranted like a crazy person, broke a plate over his head at the rehearsal dinner."  

"Good. Proud of you for sticking up for yourself," Bull said, in all seriousness that he softened with, "and I'm always a fan of dinnerware violence."

That...yeah, sort of felt like a load off, always figured Bull'd be decent about his history, but it was still something of a relief to know yeah, Bull was on his side. "Thanks."

"You uh...you need to talk about it any?"

"Nah, it's a whole thing, long. But if I ever do, I know I can go to you." Embarrassing as shit to say it out loud but the guy wanted to make sure he knew, so Krem wasn't going to leave him hanging either.
"Okay," Bull said, nodding. Then, "Um. I...you...dating. Dates. Date...ing, Let's see. Don't...uh. Try to...you should..." the guy seemed to be working to find some kind of brilliant knowledge to share on how to tackle a date, not just how to pick someone up for a round of fun before going separate ways. He snapped his fingers, "Make sure to you know, get a little head tilt on, when you're going in for a kiss. Less chance of bumping noses."

"I think I got that."

"Right, yeah. uh. Be a uh, gentleman. Tell her she smells nice. Do Humans do ear stuff? Don't do ear stuff with Boss-girl I don't think she'd like it. Pull her chair out if there's uh, chairs. Compliment her and involve the moon somehow, chicks dig the moon."

"Bull."

"Yeah, sorry, I'm thinking through my dating arsenal and it's mostly shit I don't wanna think about you doing with Imekari."

Maker help them all. "Okay, I think I'm good. Thanks."

"Wait-" oh man he really wanted to help with this.

"Chief. It's sweet, and I really do appreciate it, but uh, I'm just nervous cuz I like her. Didn't date after the whole engagement debacle, joined the military pretty soon after that." Lots of people messed around in the military but uh, he definitely hadn't been inviting anyone into his pants. "But my father, he did well to impart with me all his advice on how a man should treat the person they uh," love, his father'd said but he didn't want to get too ahead of himself, "like."

"Better than the no ear stuff suggestion?"

"You know, he didn't warn me about ear stuff, so, I'm glad we had this talk I was really running blind with that, could've made a total ass of myself. And uh, I mean its not like your advice hasn't helped me with other big things."

Bull chuckled warmly. "Well then, I think you're ready to have a damn good night. Your hair's set. Cleaned up your boots for you. You goin' all armored up? Got a uh, shirt you can borrow if you prefer."

Krem raised a brow at that. "You don't own shirts."

Bull made a non-committal noise, “Ehh I don’t know about that. Just check it out, no pressure,” he checked his timepiece "Got about fifteen minutes before you should head that way. Unless you wanna play a little hard to get? No?” he chuckled at the glare Krem gave him, throwing his towel at the oaf. “Okay okay, you want help lacing up? Save you some time,” Bull offered, and when Krem nodded, the Qunari grunted and lumbered to his feet, picked his binder up off where he’d left it laying on top of his trunk, Krem stood and raised his arms out, Bull had him laced up real quick, took Krem a few times tightening and re-tightening to get it right on his own, but the Qunari could just kneel and give the laces a solid smooth pull, holding them taut for Krem to take and tie them in place while turning to offer his other side for Bull to lace. “Feel okay? Not too tight?” he checked.

Krem took in a few deep breaths, stretched properly, “It’s perfect, thanks,” he said, dropping his sleep pants and moving to dig trousers out of his trunk.

“I’ll leave you to finish getting ready,” Bull said. Though he did find pause in the entry way, turned back to look at Krem, “And uh. You know, if you wanted, that bullshit, back in
Tevinter. That ain't right, wasn't a real relationship. Doesn't have to count for anything if you don't want it to. You've got a new life now. You could always consider this you're first date."

Oh. Huh. There it was. Bull usually landed some sort of sage advice at the end of the day, shit. That was...yeah, starting fresh sounded good to him and no matter how things ended with Ellie, he didn't think he'd look back on tonight with regret. Krem turned to look at him. "Thanks Chief."

"Anytime. Shirt's on my cot. See you out there."

Shirt for Krem to borrow huh? Of Bull’s? Bullshit. Ass. Sweet ass though...damn him. Tunic was nice, fit Krem great, high collar, inside was wool lined so it was toasty, a warm red color—nice choice for First-Day Eve, people wore red to symbolize letting love into their lives in the coming year which was...yeah he could roll with that. He breathed a sigh of relief when he felt the buttons—they were lacquered to look like gold but were made out of wood, thank the actual Maker. He could...allow the subtle-not-subtle way of presenting him a gift, consider it a bonus or something, a reward for holding things down while Bull was away, but nothing that damn extravagant. Wood worked though.

Cleaned up, haircut, Bull’s handiwork on his binder, new shirt to literally top it all off...he felt as ready as he could be. Shouldn’t be so nervous, it was Ellie she was...she wasn’t trepidation. She was light, and always left Krem feeling lighter for it, nerves always died off once he actually got to being with her. Things should learn not to show up in the first place.

He was pretty sure his nerves learned their damn lesson though. As he approached Ellie’s cabin he could hear the lively chatter—Sera laughing, Cassandra’s voice, Marehis’s, Madam de Fer’s voice too. When he knocked though Sera was the one that opened the door, still cackling about something as she leaned from the doorframe. Oh, she’d gotten her haircut too at some point, styled to curl up atop her head tonight, she was wearing her armor still...new he thought, or at least it was something she’d gotten since she was last in Haven, looked dressed up for the rough Elf Rogue, especially sans weaponry, red for love, yellow for wealth, both good things to wish for in the new year.

"Lookin’ good Sera," Krem complimented, earning him a toothy grin.

"Not too bad yerself Kremmy-boy," and then she reeled back in the entryway, shouting over her shoulder, "Innnnnnnnnky! Your friend-boy’s here!"

He could hear Ellie giggling and Marehis’s, “Go ahead, da’len. Have fun, we’ll see you in a bit.”

“Thanks,” Ellie giggling and Marehis’s, “Go ahead, da’len. Have fun, we’ll see you in a bit.”

“Thanks,” Ellie’s voice and then Sera moved, laughing to herself or maybe at Krem, as Ellie came into view, approaching the doorway just. Yup. Nerves sort of boosted all the way up and then disappeared. Warm woolen leggings tucked into her boots, pale blue dress that fell to her knees—oh he prayed it worked, Maker he did, blue was meant to call peace and rest in the coming year to the wearer. Her scarf was looped in an oval around her neck, green was a good color too, represented hope and faith, braid hanging over her shoulder, a vine of Elf Root woven into it. “Hi,” she greeted shyly, cheeks pinking.

He wasn’t sure what she had to be shy about, Maker. “You look amazing,” he breathed.

“So do you, gosh,” she replied. Oh...oh was she...was she shy because of him? “You look very handsome.”
Bull. Was. Krem’d just. He loved that damn Qunari.

“Bull’s doing mostly,” he said. "Haircut, letting me borrow his shirt," he said with a doubtful look.

She giggled at that. “Marehis did my hair, and the dress is Lady Josie’s doing, though Varric actually painted my nails,” Ellie told him, oh, yeah, he’d noticed earlier her fingernails were a glossy pale pink color—

“Oi! Harrit made my armor, Marehis cut my hair, and I pulled my knickers up all on my own—make with the date you two!” Sweet Sera.

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“Oi! Harrit made my armor, Marehis cut my hair, and I pulled my knickers up all on my own—make with the date you two!” Sweet Sera.

“Sera! Let them be, child,” Cassandra’s voice reproached in quiet warning. "If you come and sit still I will indeed share my eyeliner wisdom with you.”

"Bitchin’!" yelped in excitement.

“Your’re simply precious, darlings, but you are letting the chill in,” called Madam de Fer.

“Sorry!” Ellie giggled out as Krem reached for her hand, and she smiled warm when he pulled her closer as she pulled the door closed behind her. “Hi,” she murmured.

"Hi," he squeezed the hand he held and then linked arms with her, as they began making their way down the path, “So. I’m thinking, we pregame at Flissa’s real quick before joining the party.”

“Pregame?” she asked, little concerned. Oh!

“Hot chocolate,” he was quick to assure, and she held his arm more tightly, hugging it to herself, smiling her approval. Varric’d written to let him know it’d be in, apparently Madam de Fer had introduced Ellie to the beverage and she like it almost as much as she enjoyed her morning coffee. Figured since she couldn’t exactly go for drinks, it’d be a nice treat.

“Ooooh!” Flissa squeaked when they entered the busy Tavern, Maker, the place was packed, the barmaid only saw them because she was standing on a chair so she could reach over someone’s shoulder to refill their drink loads of people were standing, packed tight together. Flissa dropped down and scurried, shuffling as she wove through the crowd to get behind the bar, pulling up two mugs and waving them over, so Krem put his arm over Ellie’s shoulder, holding her close so he could shoulder them through to the bar without detriment. “You look just lovely, lady Ellie. And you clean up so very nicely Mister Aclassi—oh! A-classy-guy, I just got that, the Iron Bull is so very clever!”

Uh huh. Using that around everyone huh? Ellie was amused by it though so, that sorted. She smiled into her mug as she sipped at her cocoa. Oh man, hot chocolate was good.

“Oi!” Flissa snapped, picking up a wooden spoon and smacking it hard against the counter top with a crack that made Krem almost choke on his drink and Ellie gasp, her free hand reaching for him even though she was still tucked up under his arm, she grabbed a fistful of his shirt.

“Herald of Andraste at the bar—back, you brutes! I’ll come refill your drinks in a minute, don’t crowd the girl!” Flissa was zipping around the bar again, armed with a pitcher as she warded the crowd off, huh, yeah things were getting pretty tight. There’d been all kinds of checks to make sure no one unauthroized was in Haven but still, probably shouldn’t have Ellie so boxed in in a sea of only semi-familiar faces as far as Krem was concerned. If they left with their drinks it wasn’t like Flissa didn’t know where they lived. Still,
“Your drink too warm?” he asked her quietly as she released hold of his shirt, smoothing it out in apology, made his face feel warm.

“Hmm,” she held out her free hand and he entrusted his beverage to her, “you wanna knock these back and get going?”

“If you’re cool with it.”

“I actually am,” she seemed amused with the notion and then…Maker. she did love her puns, she took a deep breath and blew on his drink, then hers in quick succession, just the barest bit of frost visible in her breath. “Vivienne taught me.” and then she gasped, "Oh gosh, sorry, jokes are fun but I should have asked first-"

“Cheers,” he cut her off, it was nice she did, even after the fact, consider he mightn't be comfortable drinking something magic-touched but he trusted her, was pretty sure it wasn't something malicious that would freeze his insides if he drank it or something. She handed him back his mug, and they clinked their cups together before chugging their cooler cocoa, leaving the empty mugs on the counter. He raised his arm to wave Flissa down.

“Oh, you’re leaving? Have fun you two,” the woman wished them well as she ducked behind the bar and rose with a canteen, handing it to Krem, “enjoy your evening.”

“Flissa, you’re amazing,” he assured her as he took the canteen in hand, it felt warm to the touch and Ellie waved to the barmaid offering,

“Happy First-Day Eve!”

“Have a Happy First-Day Eve as well, my lady!”

The night felt quieter and the cool of wintry air was actually refreshing after the overcrowded warmth of the Tavern, the two of them heaving sighs of relief as the door shut behind them.

“Sorry, I didn’t realize how crazy it’d be," the plan had been to warm up, maybe eat a little something before heading to the party but, "suppose I should’ve known considering it’s a holiday huh?”

“That was fun, and hot chocolate’s definitely worth it,” Ellie assured. “And I don’t mind that it led to, you know,” her hand reached to pat his forearm hanging over her shoulder.

He certainly didn’t mind it either, Maker bless a crowded Tavern then. Shaking the canteen, he said, “I asked ahead if Fliss’d ready us something for the road. Warm apple cider, isn't fermented promise, since uh…well Lady Josie swears up and down there’ll be juice and things but…”

“Its not a proper party unless someone spikes the punch,” Ellie said in agreement. “Gosh you really put a lot of thought into everything, I mean a canteen of hot cider just in case there’s nothing I can drin- just- are you sure you want to date just me? I wasn’t feeling the flavor of the week thing earlier, but you’ve got a solid pattern of being considerate enough I think it’s cruel to not share you with the rest of person-kind.”

“Too bad for them then, I think I’ll stick with you if its all the same,” he said, whispering in conspiracy, “I don’t know if you’ve heard, but you’re pretty amazing.”

“You’re literally banned from flirting for like, ten minutes, it isn’t fair, and I need time to
catch up.”

He unwound the strap from the canteen to sling over his head so it stayed secure at his hip while freeing his hand, then pulled his pocket watch from his trouser pocket, to peek at the time, “Alright, its 8:19…now. But the second 8:29 rolls around, I’m sorry Lady Herald, its back on.”

“Cremisius!” she complained laughingly. Though she stopped in her tracks as they approached the Chantry, sounds of liveliness breaking out against the night sky even through its doors, and when he looked to her she seemed grave.

“Everything alright?” he asked quietly. She swallowed, he wasn’t sure if she was anxious or if the cocoa hadn’t set with her right or…didn't look like she was in pain but Bull’d mention those Maker-awful headaches she'd been having.

“I um…yeah—” uh huh, ‘yeah’.

“You wanna take a lap?” he offered, “There’s no rush.” There really wasn’t.

“Are you sure?” she asked worriedly.

“El, not to be romantic, just a statement of fact—but the only place I’m pressed to be right now is with you. You’re out here, then I wanna be out here. Party doesn’t hold interest for me unless you’re in it.”

She blushed, snuggling into his side more as he led her along path, away from the Chantry, toward Haven’s gate.

“Are you feeling ill,” he asked, "or is it something else?"

“Oh I’m fine just,” she took a deep breath. “I’m sorry it’s- it’s not so much that I’m afraid, it’s like I’m afraid I’ll be afraid, if that makes sense?”

“Worrying you’ll feel fear is reasonable,” he said. “You don’t want to go in because you’re worried you’ll end up having to leave, panic in front of the others?”

He felt her nodding. “Envy…demon in Therinfal?” she checked to make sure he knew what she was talking about and he gave her a little squeeze like an affirmation. “It um, made me see all sorts of things in some horrible alternate version of Haven’s Chantry. Mostly the dungeons and War Room, I don’t think there’ll be partying going on there but…I dunno seeing the Chantry again it just struck me, made my stomach turn and I’m so so sorry I don’t mean to ruin this with—”

He pulled away just to stop, standing to face her, taking her hands in his. “Ellie…hush,” seemed to make her relax and he assured her, “You’re not ruining anything. Nothing to ruin. You have nothing but demands on your time, going into this, I can promise you right now, I’m not going to be one of them. There’s enough pulling on you. You can’t drink—we’ll have cider. Dread demon puts you off the Chantry, well, you certainly don’t have to go there on my account. We can do whatever you need. You need me? I’m there. I get to be too much, just say the word.”

“No pressure?” she asked gently.

“No pressure,” he promised. Oh. shit, he meant to help her feel better, but she sniffled and oh crap, tears, just a few but still, “El-”

“I’m okay, just…thank you, Cremisius.” She smiled, explaining, "You really know how to overwhelm a girl with…how much you’re not going to overwhelm her,” she huffed a laugh, raising
the back of her hand wipe at her eyes. “I’m not sad promise. Just the opposite I think. Um, thanks. Same thing goes for you, all of it. Life is complicated enough, if I ever make things difficult for you or get to be too much, just say the word, okay?”

He'd gotten a pretty good idea of what he was in for going into this, hadn't put him off, but “Alright,” he said, nodding. “So. What do you wanna do? We’ve got options all over the place, we could walk along the river, go see Russel, check in on how the Druffalos are having a pleasant First-Day Eve—babies are even bigger now.”

"You checked on the baby Druffalos for me?"

"Maybe," he allowed, though Maker that had her looking proud, like he'd just admitted to saving the things from a burning building or something uh...yeah, liked that, definitely. But they'd gotten off track, "You wanna go on a walk or go somewhere and read or knit, whatever. We can call it a night even if you're feeling done in.” It didn't seem like she'd gotten to rest very much and she'd only gotten back from a trip that was exhausting to read the reports on, he was honestly surprised that she hadn't gotten in and gone directly to her cabin to sleep for a week.

She shook her head. “I...that all sounds fun and um, great future date material if um, you know,” she smiled shyly like she didn't want to just assume he might ask her out again. But yeah, he was glad that sounded like good date material because that was about all he had to work with out here. "But I think I want to try, with the party if you're still interested. It wasn’t like my relationship with Haven’s Chantry started off on the right foot but…I made some good memories there. Maybe we can try making even better ones, replace the bad fake-ones. Sort of like seeing real Cullen and Josie and Leliana helped.”

“They were in the Fade?” he asked carefully.

Ellie nodded. “Yeah Envy…Cole called it ‘putting me in my hurts’. Made me see things and people related to that like being a suspect of the Conclave, things that could go wrong with the Inquisition or the world because of the Elder One and the Breach.” oh Maker. “I actually…you…” no, oh no had he- “I couldn’t even remember your name. I heard you when...sometimes I’d hear memories, real ones, of things that helped keep me going, they mostly refuted the fake things I saw. But in the moment I couldn’t for the life of me put a name or a face to the voice speaking encouragement until I broke out,” she smiled softly at that, Maker, he never thought he'd be glad to hear she'd forgotten all about him but he sure as hell was. “You aren’t in my hurts.”

Oh. Oh thank everything that...hurts didn’t sound like a place he wanted to be at all.

“I’m grateful for that,” he said. “You want to try the party?” she’d said as much but still, he wanted to double check, and when she nodded. “You’re in, I’m in. You change your mind or things get too much—”

She smiled, squeezing his hands three times. “I know.”

She leaned into him as they made their way back around to the Chantry, and his arm wound back around her shoulders, taking her Marked hand in his left.

Chantry doors swung open and the place was packed, bubbling over with excitement and energy, everyone’s good time felt palpable and Ellie didn’t shy away from it.

“There you are! Innkyyyy!” Sera called as she wove through the crowd to join them, and when she broke through Krem saw the date she dragged behind her, pretty Dwarf woman. Huh, Sera wasn't super made-up but she did have eyeliner on now, courtesy of Seeker's infinite wisdom
with the stuff he supposed, not bad. “Lacy’n me was wonderin’ when you two’d show up. We wanna dance!”

The Dwarf at her side giggled at that, “Its great to see you again, Ellie.”

Ellie stepped out of his hold to hug the woman, “Scout Harding! It’s so great to see you, I’m so glad you could make it back here for the holiday!”

“Of course, I wouldn’t miss yo—the holiday, the day that’s almost today, that’s a holiday,” she rambled, quick to cover, oh, yeah, she was on the guest list he remembered. Ellie didn’t find her fumbling strange so that sorted. Seemed to be going okay, being in the Chantry, he’d have to keep an eye out, let Lady Josie know if her plans needed some adjustment.

“Come on!” Sera called, “You down, Ink? Krem? Don’t just stand there, let’s party!”

Ellie took a hold of Krem’s hand and a smile tugged at his lips as she tugged him along, following after Sera and Harding, getting into the mix of the other party goers, lively tune, lots of bass pounded through the hall and Ellie almost collided with Sera when the Elf stopped and just claimed a piece of dance floor for herself and Scout Harding. Ellie smiled and turned to face him, taking both his hands as she cautioned,

“You might want to mind your toes, I’m sorry in advance.”

“Hmm…” he pondered, holding her hand as he slipped an arm around her waist, she grinned and squeaked in surprise when he pulled her up and set her so she was standing on top of his boots with a squealed,

“Cremisius!”

“Just minding my toes, they’re safe as it stands,” he said, “that okay with you?”

She blushed, nodding. “Yup,” she assured him as they swayed.

“So far so good?” he asked quietly after a while.

“This is definitely going in the ‘better memory’ column,” she was sure.

It was...yup. Better memory, maybe he was replacing memories of his own. This was a far cry better than anything he’d had of dating or dancing in Tevinter. Especially when...well. Music had picked up then and Ellie stepped down off the top of his boots, he wasn’t a big fan of the distance but the resulting dance? She held his hands in hers, smiling and laughing, singing along occasionally as she shifted side to side on the balls of her feet, swinging her hips to the music, the push and pull of their clasped hands made it easy to dance along with her without looking like an ass or anything.

“Eleanor, Lieutenant!” Cassandra’s voice sounded halfway through the next slower one, the distance closed between Ellie and Krem again and he moved his hand higher, above where it’d been resting—respectfully but it might not be enough for the Seeker—on the small of Ellie’s back. Seeker Pentaghast wove her…no danced her way through the crowd, she was dancing with,

“Cullen! Cassandra, hi!” Ellie’s hand squeezed his once in her excitement.

“Seeker, Commander,” Krem offered in greeting.

“I was able to talk the Seeker into dancing,” Cullen said jovially. “Might I have a dance
with the Lady Herald this evening?”

“Hmm… how’s your Orlesian Waltz?” Ellie asked the Commander.

“…horrible, I assure you.”

“I don’t know a single step! I think we’re set!” Ellie enthused.

The Commander chuckled, smiling warmly at that. “Excellent!”

“You’ll be okay?” Ellie checked with Krem.

“Of course,” he was pretty sure he saw Bull around—

“If it wouldn’t trouble the Lieutenant, I would endure the next dance in his company,” Seeker Pentaghast said.

Oh wow, really? That was… well nerve wracking but, “It’d be my pleasure,” he said.

Song ended and Ellie was swept away, literally the Commander wrapped an arm around her waist and whisked her from Krem’s feet to place her feet atop his metal boots saying, “I’m more afraid I’ll step on you in these things, and that simply wouldn’t do,” as he led her into the next dance.

“Lieutenant,” Cassandra nodded to him, offering her hand.

Maker, please don’t let him die right yet, at least give him ‘til midnight, “Seeker,” Krem offered back, very carefully placing his hand high on the Seeker’s armored back as he took her gauntleted hand.

“You look very handsome this evening,” the Seeker offered politely.

“Thank you. You’re erm, lovely, your hair looks nice like that—not that it isn’t always nice, just, different nice.” It’d been braided differently, hanging down and over her shoulder similar to Ellie’s.

“Eleanor is to thank for the change,” Cassandra said, letting Krem lead, her gaze went to Ellie and the Commander, expression warming as she watched the two chatting and dancing and… he didn’t have Bull’s hearing, but they were close enough that just over the din of the party he could hear what vaguely sounded like the duo singing made up words to the lyric-less music echoing through the hall. “She seems well. Are you having a pleasant evening?”

“I am. You are as well?”

“I am.” Then, “I would not wish to put you in an uncomfortable position, I do understand pursuing a relationship with the young lady might make it to your discomfort to answer for fear of breaking some confidence with her, so you needn’t but… Eleanor expressed some discomfort when I informed her festivities would take place in the Chantry, she did not say… have you noticed anything of import?”

“Things keep going like they are, I think we’re set for tomorrow. She was worried, seeing the real Chantry again, but so far so good.”

“Thank you, Cremisius. Eleanor is precious to me and I do appreciate the regard you hold for her, truly.”
“Thank you. Between Chief and Ellie, I hear a lot about everything you do for her, I’m glad she has you. You had to deal with a lot of hard things this last stint out, and you still put Ellie first. I’m grateful, really. Just uh...make sure you’re still taking care of yourself too.”

Seeker seemed bemused that he’d presume to tell her to remember she take care herself. "You are making this terribly difficult. My words were meant as a build up to deliver some measure of warning against unjustly, abhorrently hurting Eleanor—while heartbreak is an unfortunately close friend to romantic ventures, there are of course lines that, if crossed, would invoke my wrath."

Yeah, but he got that well before heading into this. "I ever hurt Ellie I trust you'd probably burn my cot with me in it or feed me to a dragon or something. Talked Ellie into seeing Adan after the uh, Tavern incident, by saying you’d kick my ass if I let her get sick."

Seeker looked all kinds of pleased to hear that. The music slowed and they came to a stop and Cassandra raised the hand he’d released to pat him on the cheek as she smiled warmly, “Sweet man,” she declared him before turning to meet Ellie, weaving her way back to them, Cullen in tow, the girl seemed breathless, wide smile on her face as she said,

“That was fun, but I’d like my date back please!”

“As I would mine,” Cassandra agreed, the sentence sending Ellie gasping in delight as she broke out into a bit of a victory dance before she released Cullen’s hand to grasp both of the Seeker’s.

“Really?! Cassandra! You! Cullen-! Cremerius!” he wasn’t sure why she said his name, took all of two seconds to piece together that in Excited Ellie language that probably meant,

“I believe the next dance with the Lady Herald is yours now, Seeker Pentaghast,” he translated, which sorted since, “I think I’ll go hit the refreshment table.”

“Ahh yes, I believe I’ll join you,” Cullen offered, and to the Seeker and Ellie, “try not to have too much fun without us,” Cullen offered with a wink that made Seeker look murderous and somehow shy, the woman went pink but she was not happy he’d only encouraged Ellie's excitement, seeing them flirtatious. Ellie pulled Cassandra along to start dancing with her. Music was pretty upbeat, so Ellie held the Seeker’s hands, bouncing about on her feet and she was already firing off questions it looked like before Krem started making his way to the refreshments, Cullen in tow.

Bull greeted him, Qunari was bombarding the refreshment table, set up to block anyone from slipping down to the lower level of the Chantry. Carefully holding a dessert plate that was almost comically small in his hand, balancing in his palm as he piled it with goods. “Krem-cheese! There you are, lookin’ sharp, out here lookin’ good enough to spread on a damn cracker—"

"Maker gave us cream cheese for bagels you lout, and it's a very mild cheese thank you very much. Gotta know your cheese facts if you're gonna be cheesy."

“Bite me, brat,” Bull shot back with a laugh. Then to Cullen who was looking over the offered refreshments, "Commander, making your moves on the Seeker? Nice."

“Leave’em alone, oaf,” Krem cautioned with levity when Cullen looked outright bashful at Bull’s observation. “You here stag or did you trick someone into coming along with you?”

“You know how the drill. I’m scoping out the prospects, weighing my options for
midnight. You havin’ a good time?” Krem nodded and Bull said, "Boss girl’s all dressed up, damn cute. You mind if I see about getting on her dance card?"

“Not for me to mind, she’s the one you’ll be dancing with—ask her. Maybe wait a beat though," Krem cautioned, "I haven’t eaten since lunch, I don’t know if she has either, so, snack duty."

“Good thinking,” Bull sniffed, “supposed to just be juice in those pitchers but uh, someone’s already been through. Wasn’t me I swear.”

“I figured as much, I got Ellie covered—apple cider from Flissa’s,” he said running a thumb under the canteen strap across his chest, earned him a clap on the shoulder from Bull, though he did gesture in offering and Krem figured it was better to be safe than sorry, so he handed the Qunari his canteen and let him take a whiff, just to verify it hadn’t fermented since Flissa made it, but Bull nodded that it was all good.

Commander sighed with relief. “Excellent forethought. I was just about to run out to the pump to get water for her. We’ll have to be vigilant with refreshment tomorrow, though it’ll be a much more contained gathering—do you think all of Haven is packed in here?”

“Here and Flissa’s,” Krem said. Huh, guy seemed kind of anxious, there uh, there’d been a few times, when Krem’d been up late working or woken up and went to get some air he’d see the Commander getting in on the night air, exhausted but not eager to venture back into the confines of his tent for rest. Krem’d started building up the bonfire in the clearing the Chargers used every night when there was enough wood around or Krem felt up to getting more, and he’d invite the Commander to join him and the guys for drinks, winding down. It worked to...he’d found the Commander sleeping out in the open when he needed to, Charger's dying fire good for keeping him warm enough to do so safely. Now, everything getting so packed in inside the Chantry hall, it would be easy for anyone to get claustrophobic. “Everyone gathering to party makes it real nice outside, quiet. Cold air was great when Ellie and I left Fliss’s.”

“Ohh yeah, Krem’s got the right idea,” Bull picked up on what he was putting down, “you could take the Lady Seeker out on a romantic stroll in the moonlight.”

Bull had loads of moon-oriented dating advice. Made Krem feel like returning the favor though he certainly wasn't going to refer to the Lady Seeker as a 'chick'...Ellie either really. So he opted for, "Ladies dig the moon,” he drawled in agreement.

That got him a rumble of Bull's laughter as the Qunari turned to look out over the crowd, “Imekari’s with her right? Yup. They're breaking it down still—much as Seeker loves that girl she’ll be damn grateful if you get her out of the trifecta of youthful enthusiasm she’s caught in, dancing with the kid and Sera and huh, damn, hot Dwarf lady, redhead, maybe I’ll intro—”

Krem cleared his throat, warning, “Scout Harding, Sera’s date.”

“Never mind then.”

“I think I will cut in,” Cullen said, though he did pick up a dessert plate, “vanilla or blueberry, do you think?”

“Ellie says Cassandra’s a fan of vanilla,” Krem said, elbowing Bull in the ribs when he snorted at that.

Commander smiled his thanks, “Enjoy your evening, Lieutenant, Bull.”
Krem piled up a plate with huh, little Orlesian cookie things—two halves with crème sandwiched between them—and grapes, and the servant minding the table, Krem recognized him from around Haven, he was decent enough to give him two empty flutes he held crisscross in his free hand as he worked his way back to where Ellie was dancing with Sera and Harding.

“Cremisius!” she greeted cheerily, and he had to hold his arms out to the side as she descended on him, hugging him around his middle before pulling back and excitedly informing him, “Cassandra and Cullen are dating! Well, Cassandra won’t call it that outright, he’s her date but they’re ‘seeing where things go, it is merely an avenue we are exploring’,,” she rolled her eyes at the Seeker’s roundabout way of basically saying they’re dating while simultaneously refusing to admit as much. “Cullen’s taking her on a walk, gosh, I hope they have fun.”

Sera snorted, “Can’t have too much fun, the way those lot are always goin’ ‘round in their layers of armor, betcha it takes a solid hour just to get undressed, doubt their foreplay game is that strong.”

“Sera, leave them be, come on,” Scout Harding giggled, pulling the Elf girl closer, whispering something that made Sera’s ears and neck burn red before letting out a nervous-excited cackle of sorts before the two disappeared into the crowd.

Ellie was grateful he’d brought back something to eat…he was too actually. Might have had something to do with the fact that once their champagne flutes were full of cider, he held his drink and the dessert plate for her and she repaid him with a kiss on the cheek and by feeding him bites of cookie and grapes. Bull was good enough to wait until they’d finished, gave them a moment before he swooped in for a dance with Ellie. He hoisted her up to swing her around the dance floor, sort of anyway, he did these tight turns that had to make the Human girl feel like she were flying a bit, but he was being very very careful, bit more open with his...well he seemed damn tender to Krem. Bull'd not talked to him about their trip yet but he'd uh, read...Seeker was pretty detailed in her reports and when bigger things like Time Magic and Envy struck, he'd already been privy to the events existence through Bull, so Spymaster would let Krem lay eyes on Inquisition reports coming in from the field. Bull'd guarded Ellie when she went down in Therinfal, she'd been comatose and there'd been something wrong with her heart. And Bull'd outright shared in his own reports that he thought she'd been blasted when she disappeared through that time portal with Dorian. Sure as hell scared Krem hearing about those things, it had to have just about killed the Qunari. Big bastard had an even bigger heart. The guy wanted with everything to have been able to protect Ellie better, he'd written up all these...sometimes he wrote up corrections after fights, constructive criticism on how to handle things better next time, but what he sent in reports to Krem had sounded like him venting, beating himself up, he should have stayed closer, been faster, done more he felt like which was just, natural but unnecessary. Bull'd sure as hell done his best, this shit just happened, all they could do was be glad it hadn't turned out worse, and move forward. When he thought about it, Chantry stone and concrete were used to make all affiliated buildings, like Circles, Templar fortresses and bases. The Great Hall of Therinfal had to have some ghost of presence here, so, Krem hung back and let the oaf have a good solid few dances with Ellie, part of moving forward, sort of replace the memory of Bull brought to his knees feeling like a failure for not having done enough to protect her, holding her and hoping she'd live, and reinforcing the reality that they were back and safe and now he was with Ellie giggly and lively in his arms.

There was a sort of switch off from then on, Krem and Ellie dancing before someone else approached to get a moment with her, Marehis, and then the Elf woman danced with Krem while Solas had his turn.

“You’re having a pleasant time I hope? I feel badly we've all been monopolizing Ellie’s dances, I hope we haven’t been too imposing,” Marehis apologized as they swayed.
“I don’t mind—don’t get me wrong, we’re having a blast, but it’s nice, seeing her have fun with everyone, she deserves it,” Krem assured her. Didn’t like Solas, but he didn’t dislike the way Ellie was smiling, rapt attention being paid to some pleasant story dropping from the Elf Apostate’s lips. “Plus now I’ve gotten to dance with the Lady Seeker, you, who knows who’ll end up on my dance card.”

In a strange turn of events, Thom Rainier. After Varric claimed a dance with Ellie, lines of communication got mixed up when Thom and Dorian both showed up for their chance to dance with Ellie, and the Mercenary bowed out, let the Tevinter Mage have the honor first. Since Krem’d just be standing around waiting for two songs, Rainier decided to occupy one of them, offering his hand to Krem. Wasn’t sure how that was gonna pan out but once Krem took his hand, the older man’s other hand rested on Krem’s shoulder, letting the Tevinter lead.

“You mind your hand on my backside, keep it gentlemanly now,” Thom jested.

“I will try, can’t make any promises though.”

Didn’t turn out too bad. Dorian returned with Ellie, and when she was done dancing with Rainier, she was Krem’s for the rest of the evening, looping her arms around his neck, while he held her around the waist.

“Gosh this is so fun,” she breathed, happy, a nice kind of worn out, the sort when you’d had so much excitement and levity and you know you’re so tired you won’t be able to help but top it off with good night’s sleep.

“I’m glad you think so too,” he said. “You still good?”

“Yup! Unless you're tired?” she asked, and when he shook his head ‘no' she smiled, burying her face against his neck, sighing contently, "Good, I like dancing with you."

It was more like him holding her while he took a few obligatory swaying steps to the music, but he certainly wasn’t complaining. “Huh. What a coincidence,” he said, whispering, “I like dancing with you.”

Almost felt too soon when the music died down and Lady Josephine, getting a helpful hand up from Bull, stood on a chair, speaking loud enough to be heard across the hall, “Ladies and gentlemen, I hope you’ve had a lovely time this evening! If you’ll join me outside before Haven’s gates, we’ve arrangements to ring in First Day in appropriate fashion.”

Bit of hesitancy from all around, she was sweet but talking to a Chantry full of mostly drunken partygoers still looking to dance and have fun—her very polite way of saying there would be more fun outside didn’t quite translate.

Luckily Bull was a good translator, “Lady said get outside—move it!”

“If you would do so kindly, please!” Lady Josephine tacked on as the crowd started filtering outside, Maker bless her heart.

Ellie dropped to her feet, taking Krem’s hand and he trailed after her through the Chantry though she pulled his arm back around her shoulder as they stepped out into the cold evening, following the crowd out until they stood in a mass before Haven estate.

Commander Cullen stood before them with Seeker Pentaghast, the two comparing the time on their respective timepieces before the Commander called out,
“Ladies and gentlemen, we’re down to the final minutes of the year 9:41 Dragon, Seeker Pentaghast, if you’d do the honors.”

“We have endured much in this past year, suffered great loss, and many trials,” Cassandra spoke loud and clear to be heard by the crowd. “But we have also dealt in great victories, seen the fruition of miraculous things. We have been so blessed—while the Conclave left us with devastation, the Breach, we have been so blessed. We have the Herald of Andraste, and her Mark to cast against the Breach, and we stand here now, an Inquisition, Mages and Templars with a united purpose under our lead. 9:42 holds nothing but possibility, many of them great—we will work to mend the bonds broken within our numbers, see that Mages and Templars can work in peace, toward prosper. We will be an example to Thedas, to our allies and our enemies alike, that no matter what, we cannot ever truly be divided, we will always come together, and be made better for our differences. We will find unity, and we will seal the Breach!”

Their gathering broke out in roaring cheers, Ellie smiling wide, proud as she cheered for the Seeker.

“Now,” Cullen said as their din died down, “by my watch…ten! Nine!”

“Eight!” everyone joined in, “Seven!...Six!...Five!...Four!...Three!...Two!...One!”

Across the lake, along the road from Haven to the Hinterlands, fireworks shot off into the sky, Ellie gasping in surprise when they burst into brilliant displays of red and gold, silver and blue.

And then Krem took a deep breath, looked to her, and brought a hand up under her chin, and she smiled wide, eyes alight with excitement before she closed them and tilted her head back.

First Day, 9:42, under the glow of the Breach, and blaze of brilliant fireworks, Krem and Ellie shared their first kiss.

Chapter End Notes

*Dorian and Sera totally have that sweet, sweet LGBT+ solidarity. Canon fact.

*University of Markham isn’t mentioned in game, I don’t know that I’ve heard of it in any of the other Dragon Age installments except it might be somewhere in a codex entry? It just came up when I was looking up education in Thedas. The University of Markham is like *the* University. Orlesians like to talk like they have the best of the best but nah. The only other major University in canon is U of Ferelden, and that’s only a thing if you work it so Anora is the sole ruler of Ferelden in Dragon Age Origins.

*For those who haven’t played the Templar Route for DA:I, what I laid out in the last chapter is basically the mission, with a few variations from the plot because, here be fanfiction. What is laid out in this chapter follows along too like—after Envy messes with Inquisitor’s mind, you have to fight Red Templars in the Great Hall, go through Therinfal and save good-guy Templars so you have back up, the whole thing, blah blah. The whole time this is going on, there’s basically a health bar on the screen ticking down that represents the Templar’s you leave fighting in the Great Hall while you play rescue. If that health bar goes down too far, Barris dies, and his role is taken
over by another Templar, Fletcher. Bailey isn't canon except for the fact that, when you complete this mission, Barris/Fletcher address their fellow Templars as "Brothers and Sisters" asking if they're down for following the Inquisition. So, lady Templar. Also, for those unfamiliar with my bby Barris, or his buddy Fletcher who I’ve never met because I refuse to let my child die, here:

http://dragonage.wikia.com/wiki/Delrin_Barris

http://dragonage.wikia.com/wiki/Fletcher
Happy Birthday!

Chapter Summary

Just your average day in Haven...except it isn't, not really...Ellie's got the day off but there's still a schedule? It's kind of rhymey, are they always like that? Everyone's so happy but kind of acting weird, excited but secretive and gosh its so confusing but there's so much fun!

Chapter Notes

WOW I'm so sorry, I haven't posted since last year!
Happy New Years! ;-)

Big shout out to Secret_Life_of_Fireflies for an idea marked and elaborated on in the End Notes!

Enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Ellie’d missed her bed in Haven, when she was just waking up after First-Day Eve she found herself appreciating it all the more. It was so soft, warm, even when the fire died her covers kept the night chill off her, but this morning there was the added warmth, the weight of someone laying against her.

Someones.

Cole and Sera. Ellie had wanted to try sleeping without potion for the first time since Therinfal, so Cole came to offer spiritual support—he could sort of join her in the Fade they thought, if he reached out like he did when he helped people while she slept—and Sera, for moral support—she wanted to be there if things did go sideways and Ellie needed comforting from her time in the Fade. Plus the Tavern had still been wild and packed to the brim—it was an actual group mission between Ellie and Sera to get into the Tavern to extract the Elf girl’s sleep clothing—Flissa staying open until either the booze ran out or the money, and while Sera could sleep through just about anything, there hadn’t been a place for her to sleep, her cot couldn’t be set up with everyone in the way. And she hadn’t been majorly fond of the idea of it just being Cole and Ellie anyway, so, Cole slept between Ellie and the wall, and Sera curled up on her other side, all in all, very cozy, and it’d been nice, she kind of worried it’d feel lonely sleeping by herself after so long with everyone always piling in together, so having company was sort of like a baby step of sorts.

First-Day Eve had been so, so much fun. So much dancing! Gosh, it’d been a blast, literally—Lady Josie arranged fireworks! Though…

Ahh!
Cremisius kissed her! *Ellie!* Like, *yeah,* they’d been on a date but still she had a hard time believing he’d asked her in the first place just— it was hands down the actual most amazing first date she’d ever been on.

“For him too,” Cole said softly. Oh, he was awake! Wait, right, he didn’t…he didn’t quite have the hang of sleeping, Ellie wasn’t sure he could sleep really. He was playing with one of her curls, gently but like a toy of sorts—he held it with some slack between pinching fingers and the root, and the tip of that curl pinched between the fingers of his other hand, he pulled ‘til what was between his hands was taut, then released to watch it spring back into shape. She’s pretty sure it fascinates him so much because it changes and goes back, she found it wild how very much and how often people could change their appearances, he’d been startled by the realization clothing and hairstyles weren’t permanently fixed—they were things that could be altered, removed entirely, and swapped out for something totally different. It took a very patient discussion to help him become comfortable enough with the idea that it was indeed safe to remove all of his clothes, so he could be taught bathing. The Iron Bull’d taken charge of that endeavor—in Varric’s stead, the Dwarf had been going to do so because he hadn’t liked the idea at all, that Ellie might, even for something wholly innocent and totally non-sexual, be in a situation where she would see Cole naked, let alone potentially have to touch naked Cole to help with the bathing process, though he didn’t much care for doing that himself either, he worried at just how much guidance Cole would need. But Bull didn’t have any hang ups, so, he worked out as a happy medium. “I like bathing, the Iron Bull makes it fun.”

Oh yeah, thoughts. Ellie smiled, “I’m glad,” she whispered back, “Thanks Cole, for staying with me.”

“Oh! You’re awake now though, I’m supposed to tell them—it’s my job!” Cole sounded excited about that.

“Your job?” Ellie asked, confused.

Cole smiled, nodding as he vanished from the bed, reappearing by her desk to collect his hat and things, he hadn’t wanted sleep clothes, he wasn’t comfortable swapping the clothes he came in out for something altogether new, even just for sleeping. Then he was gone to…tell someone she was awake? Huh. The light was rosy and golden, she’d gotten to sleep in a bit, Cassandra hadn’t come to wake her for prayer or anything, huh. Oh! Maybe she was um…occupied this morning. Gosh she and Cullen were so cute! She’d been blushing when dancing with the Commander! It was sweet! Sera stirred, hugging Ellie tighter as she mumbled nonsensically before words became a thing for her,

“Inky? You okay?” Sera mumbled sleepily, “Er, Cole kept you safe?”

“Mm-hmm,” she nodded, she thought she had, anyway, she couldn’t really remember her time in the Fade much with Cole, she didn’t feel like she’d gotten scared or anything, her mind felt rested.

“Good!” Sera said, squeezing Ellie tight as she nuzzled her head against Ellie’s face, gosh! Her new haircut was tickly! Ellie giggling got Sera started too.

There was a knock on her door before it opened and Marehis’s head poked through, “Good morning sweet girls, you sound happy, did you sleep well?”

“You bet!” Sera said as Ellie sat up and stretched yawning a bit as she nodded in agreement.
“Good morning Marehis! Oh!” Ellie gasped as the Elf woman threw the door open and entered the cabin, followed closely by Cassandra and Solas and Madam de Fer and Varric and gosh! Everyone! Dorian, Cole again, Thom! Her whole party, at least, not everyone in Haven, that’d be a bit much to fit in her cabin, it was going to be very cozy as it stood. “Good morning everyone!” she amended happily.

Cassandra came to sit on the edge of the bed, Sera tucked her legs up under her as she sat up to make room, and the Seeker reached out to tuck the curls hanging by Ellie’s face back behind her ear, “How are you feeling, Eleanor? No headaches still?” Ellie was beyond relieved to nod ‘yes’ hopefully those headaches were done full stop! "Good. And you slept pleasantly?"

"Uh-huh! I didn't need potion, and I didn't have any bad dreams at all!"

"I'm pleased to hear it," Cassandra said, taking Ellie's unmarked hand and squeezing it gently, "We thought perhaps you would enjoy worship and breakfast as a group. Does that suit?"

Ellie smiled, nodding.

The Iron Bull got the fireplace roaring, and everyone sat in a big kind-of circle on the floor, lining her bed, more circley in the more open space, Ellie sat with her back to the fire, between Bull and Marehis once the Qunari was seated.

And then every one of her party members joined hands with one another, Marehis and Bull offering theirs to Ellie.

“We thought perhaps, given it is the First of the year, we should start the year off with a focus on the future,” Cassandra explained. “We’ve discussed it as a group, Eleanor, and we wish to impart blessings, pray as a group with a unified focus.”

Ellie nodded, slipping her hands into Marehis’s and the Iron Bull’s gosh it was warm.

Cassandra bowed her head and closed her eyes, everyone following suit before the Seeker said, “Maker m-“ usually when Ellie heard her pray out loud she said ‘Maker most high’ but given it was a shared prayer with so many other beliefs in the mix, she nixed saying her god was the biggest one, “may we humbly beseech you. We thank you for all that has been given to us in this past year, and all that awaits us in the new. There are many in our numbers, with differing opinions and goals, but there is one, singular thing, we can agree upon, that we would ask of you in the coming year.” awe, yeah, didn’t matter what race or class or magical status her friends held—they all wanted to seal the Breach!, “Guard and protect Ellie, steel her in your hand, anoint her in the bounty of your love and wisdom, and spare her hardship and tribulation as only you can. May this coming year bring her many joys and triumphs. We ask that you bless her, in equal measure to the ways that you have blessed us by bringing her into our lives.”

Wh-…why were…this was…

“So let it be,” Andrasten’s in their midst said, while Solas and Marehis offered up “Agreed,” and Bull, a very serious, sincere, “Hell yeah.” Over the sound of Cole humming in agreement.

“You…gosh that’s,” Ellie’s throat felt tight, and her eyes were watery. She wasn’t sad and she wasn’t going to cry she didn’t think, but Maker that was an overload of kindness, she wasn’t sure why they were getting so very…openly affectionate in such a way, it was…everyone showed they cared and things, in loads of different ways, and it could be startling just on its own when she had one on one interactions with her friends, even her magic was reeling.
“Oh, da’vehnan,” Marehis pulled Ellie into her side in a sort of hug, before pressing a kiss to her hair.

“We’ve left her speechless,” Dorian announced, “and we’re only getting started—oof! I didn’t say anything you mongrel!” he snapped when Bull elbowed him.

“I will get the sewing kit, Sparky. Watch yourself,” the Qunari warned.

“Oh if only I could,” Dorian lamented, “What great fortune it must be to not be me, that you may gaze upon my splendor in all its glory. I, sadly, require a mirror to do so.”

"You’re a fan of using mirror-" the Iron Bull was cut off by,

“Don’t go making word sex in front of Inky! She’s sixteen but she’s still Inky!” Sera gasped and slapped her hands over her mouth like she’d said something she shouldn’t have.

Oh! “Yeah, I am sixteen now, huh. Cool!”

Everyone was sort of staring at her like they were waiting to see something that might blow up in their faces, and then there was a mixture of relief and something like…pity? Dunno, it was very quick and a little confusing but—

“Sixteen-year-olds still require breakfast, so,” Marehis said, squeezing Ellie tight before she released her and rose to her feet, “Who wants to help me bring it in?”

“Me!” Ellie volunteered.

Marehis laughed at that, something rich and warm as she offered a hand up to Ellie asking, “Would that make you happy, da’len? Very well, come along.”

There was a cart waiting just out front under the watch of guards Ellie wished a happy First Day to, the ones that were on schedule to stand post while she slept, so Marehis freed them of their post and pushed the cart into the cabin and let Ellie help play waitress, passing out warm plates of food, it was very déjà vu-y to actual waitressing days as Ellie piled plates on her forearms so she could carry four at a time, and handing them off with the caution that “this plate is hot” so they’d let her set it before them instead of trying to take it in their own hands...though she wasn't going to have to face the choice between of having either a roof overhead or a full belly when they didn't tip her for her service, so it was even more fun than waitressing! She'd liked that job whenever she had it, got to meet so many different kinds of people, and gigs like that usually gave at least one meal a day...Inquisition was definitely her favorite thing on her resume though. All the meals, all the roofs, all the friends and interesting people she could ever hope to meet.

When she sat down to her own meal there was coffee! And pancakes, little bits of warm apple in them, gosh it was good, it was her favorite, even more than chocolate chips! They all chatted, talking about how fun the party had been last night, everyone felt...dunno, it was so much fun, everyone seemed really happy and excited for the day, though she supposed that made sense, it was First Day! A fresh start to an entire, brand new year! So far, it was going great!

“You and Krem have fun last night, Boss?” the Iron Bull asked.

Before she could even answer, Dorian was poking fun, “Why Eleanor that is a delightful shade of red.”

Oh! That made her blush more! Blah! “We had fun,” she said shyly, “it was really great. We went to Flissa’s and had hot chocolate, and then you saw us at the party—dancing was so
much fun, thanks everyone! Lady Josie did an amazing job with everything, and gosh the fireworks were so pretty.” And then, “Cole, I didn’t see you any at the party last night, did you not want to come?”

“Holidays and hurts go hand in hand, you only hurt once—I came but you didn’t need me, so I left to find others who did. The Chantry scared you, Cremisius kind calm, he saw your hurt and helped you leave it healed. You don’t think the Chantry is going to swallow you up and lead you back to hurt, you think of your friends and fun and fireworks.”

Ellie nodded. “Thanks everyone, for last night. It was really really great. Is Lady Josie busy today? I’d like to thank her, gosh that must have been so much work!”

“She’ll be available later today, I’m sure,” Cassandra said as she put her breakfast plate on the steadily growing stack whoever finished last would put on the cart and return to Flissa’s. “I’ve something I need to see to now, Eleanor,” awe, ‘something I need to see to’ sounded like work, it was too bad she had to on First Day, “but I will see you shortly,” she rose up from her place in their circle to come over to Ellie, crouching to kiss her on the forehead, the Seeker’s eyes were alight with excitement and she was smiling which was just so pretty, gosh it was nice when Cassandra smiled, and said, “I hope you have a most pleasant day.”

“Thanks! You too!” Ellie said as the Seeker made to leave, “Try not to work too hard, okay? It’s First Day!”

Oh, that made Cassandra smile even more as she turned to look at Ellie from the door way, “I will try.”

Everyone began filtering out after that as they finished their breakfasts, and even though Thom did finish last…oh! She just barely thought it, and she wondered if thinking of holding it back would help hide it or not…hold…hold…how far away did he need to be?

Cole volunteered to take the cart back to Flissa’s. He hadn’t eaten but he’d sat with everyone still, waiting and waiting, and the moment Thom was putting the stack of plates on the cart—poof! Cole was where the handle was to push it, and he was off!

She was pretty sure, pretty super sure, he wanted to go see Maryden. She didn’t know if he had a crush on her exactly, Cole was…strange in that he was so much a Spirit, but he had a body that had things that conflicted with his basic design. He didn’t need to eat or sleep to keep functioning, but he could get hurt, bruise, bleed, and he felt pain from that sort of thing. And he was very calm, didn’t let his own emotions about things interfere with meeting the needs of others, it wasn’t a struggle for him to do so, it was what he was meant to do. So, he had a Human body, and his own range of emotions, he might not realize it but…well…

‘Cole and Maryden’ was officially on the relationship list. She had a list now! She’d always had a list like, mentally, but since Varric made her a little flippy parchment pad—wham! Lists! Lots of them! Oh! Speaking of.

“Varrie!” she caught him just as he was getting ready to leave,

“Yeah, Tumbles?” he asked, stretching like he were still waking up for the day as he came to stand where she sat by the fire, just her and Marehis—she’d been sitting in the Iron Bull’s blind spot, she could have done this while he was still here but that just felt mean, wrong to use against him, even if it wasn’t meant in meanness or for something bad even.

“Here, in case you need it for reference,” she tore out the little sheet of parchment she’d
written up their findings from their investigation yesterday. It wasn’t lying—it was sneaky, secret, she didn’t want anyone really knowing until things were settled, and they had sure solid guarantees. Maker it would be awful to dangle the possibility out there, only to have their efforts derailed and everything snatched away again.

“Thanks. I still need, uh—you know what,” he shook his head to negate that line of thought, instead, “let me get things rolling. This is big help, I’ll let you know when there’s more you can do. We got this, I have a good feeling, don’t worry about it,” he said, tucking the slip of paper away in his coat pocket before he kissed her on the forehead. So many of those today! Cassandra, now Varric, those just made her heart feel warm and toasty! And um…well Cremisius, when they went their separate ways, she’d kissed him goodbye and he kissed her forehead and that just! She’d been warm head to toe!

Anyway, so far the new year brought her all kinds of affection and there were no complaints from her…as long as people didn’t get like, sick or something, sharing their mouth germs…she was going to wash her forehead.

She did! Washed her face, brushed her teeth, it was just her and Marehis and that was so nice, it felt like a return to routine that she’d missed so so much!

“Are you excited for First Day, sweet girl?” Marehis asked as she…mostly played with Ellie’s hair it felt like, deciding what she wanted to do with it.

Big parties were the night before really but that didn’t mean the day couldn’t be fun, “Uh-huh! What’s on my schedule? Leliana made it sound like I don’t have anything to do when we came in yesterday?”

“True, you don’t have any work, but we do have a loose schedule to adhere to, if you’re up for it,” Marehis said, pulling at the curls just at her temples, and pulling them back, sectioning them off to braid.

Oh! No nodding, Marehis was working! Ellie had to stop herself and then, “Sure thing! No work is easy enough…um…I know you’re supposed to protect me and things, but, well I mean it’s a holiday and you never get a day off, do you thi—”

Marehis had worked to make two braids that met at the back of her hair, and she bound them there with a hair tie, stopping Ellie by putting her hands on her shoulders and squeezing, not painfully or anything but Ellie got the idea to shush it, and then, “Ellie, da’vehnan, this is my job, yes, but I do not wake up in the morning and lament having to set to task—I look forward to spending time with you, I love being so involved with your day-to-day. I got more than my fill of day’s off when Venatori infiltration kept me from returning to Haven and it…I do not long for another day off anytime soon, da’len. And what we’ve planned for today will be as fun and relaxing for me as it is for you, so cast off any worry and enjoy our day off. Alright?”

Well…yeah, she understood enjoying something all the more because the person you were with was having fun so, “Okay. Deal! What’s on first?”

“Dress first, warmly, very warmly!” Marehis insisted, pulling out some of Ellie’s practice clothing, and one of the wool-lined tunics and leggings—practice clothing on first, then her thicker clothes, then her overcoat, and her hat, and scarf and socks—three pairs! And her gloves! She had to get used to moving around in multiple layers, gosh she already felt super super warm, she sat on her bed while Marehis was helping her lace up her boots when someone knocked on her cabin door.
“Ahh,” Marchis said as she tied the last knot in her boots, “that would be your schedule bearer arriving.”

Schedule bearer?

“Good morning Maerhis, Ellie, I trust you’re having a pleasant First Day?”

“Cremisius!” Ellie greeted, popping up off the mattress to meet him as he came inside. Oh gosh, it made her blushy, but it was just Marehis…she was pretty sure the woman had eyes on her no matter where she went yesterday, it wasn’t like that was going to stop any time soon so…she got on tip toes to peck a quick kiss to the Tevinter man’s lips, his hands coming up to brace her elbows and he looked happy and that was definitely, definitely the makings of a good First Day—so far 9:42 was amazing. One for the books. Literally if Varric or somebody was ever going to write this down.

“The day has been lovely, though it is only beginning, something tells me it only gets better from here…” Marehis said like she were excited about some great secret. Everyone had seemed that sort of excited today, what was happening?

“Indeed it should,” Cremisius agreed, going to the hook by the door and getting Ellie’s cloak off of it before he came back to wrap it around her shoulders, pulling the hood over her hat covered head.

“I have like five layers on now,” Ellie said, mildly exasperated, she never bundled this much to go out!

“Well, Haven is quite the sight right now my lady,” Cremisius said as he made certain her cloak clasp was secure, “the temperature keeps dropping, nearing single digits, and it wouldn’t do for you to have to cut things short due to the chill. The chill, should in fact, be fun.”

…quite a sight? “What’s wrong with Haven?”

“Nothing at all,” he assured, “in fact it’s more of a case of something being right for Haven, at least for today.” And then he offered her a slip of parchment, “your schedule, Lady Herald.”

Huh, her days in Haven were always so full, she thought her schedules would look bigger than this, it was really a small piece of parchment with two…interesting sentences.

Morning has come, you’ve opened your eyes,

go outside for your first surprise!

Stay in the gate, don’t stray too far,

if you need a break, stop by the bar!

What was even happening?! Gosh she was excited!

Cremisius offered her his arm, and when she accepted, he offered the other to Marehis, and that was just sweet, she didn’t have to keep a distance or try to be aloof or whatever and that was… nice. Yeah, there were probably…definitely going to be times she would want at least the illusion of total privacy with Cremisius, but she didn’t want Marehis to feel like now that things were going along like this, Ellie dating someone, that she didn’t want the woman around any longer. She would still get to be just as much a part of Ellie’s day as usual, for the most part. And it was sort of
something that seemed like it would help make Ellie all the more safer, give Marehis some relief, to have her ward walking around with not just one, but basically two body guards on hand…or…arm.

Oh, but that did little to stop the assault waiting just beyond her cabin door.

They did little more than close the door, feet crunching in the snow underfoot because…huh, Haven wasn’t clear-pathed like it usually was, no one had shoveled up the nights snowfall, everything was covered in footprint-dotted white. Anyway, they were a bare half foot away from the safety of her cabin walls, when something hit Ellie right in the stomach.

And then two more, her chest, one at her knees, in her peripheral she saw similar could be said of Cremisius, Marehis—

Snowballs.

Seeker Cassandra Pentaghast, Commander Cullen Rutherford, Lady Josephine Montilyet, and Spymaster Leliana…huh, good spymaster, secretive, Ellie didn’t even know her last name…they stood, lined up to block the path forward from Ellie’s cabin, armed with snowballs.

“Good morning, Eleanor,” Leliana greeted, smiling brightly as she worked a snowball in her hands, packing it tight,

“Having a pleasant First Day?” Cullen asked.

Ellie’s mouth was hanging open, corners of her mouth straining with her surprise and the urge to smile like a total loon as she brushed snow off her chest, “I am.”

“I do hope you’ll forgive us our bit of fun but…well, there only more where that came from, my lady,” Lady Josephine said, awe, gosh she was so excited, like it were some great mischief! Cute!

And now no one was on anyone’s arm because everyone was arming themselves! Snowball fight? More like snowball war!

“Reinforcements!” Cassandra called out—wasn’t sure why she needed more people, she had a pile of snowballs—proper pile of them clustered together until they reached her hips!

‘Something I must see to’, huh? Oh, Cassandra was going down!

Ahh! No she wasn’t! No she wasn’t!

Because more snowball fighters appeared that demanded attention—everyone hurling snow at each other with wild abandon, she didn’t think there were teams? Were there teams? She was throwing at whoever she could hit!

The Iron Bull! Oh he got a snow ball to the stomach, and it melted almost as soon as it made contact! And then Madam de Fer was out in the midst of it all and—

Every single one of her party, everyone she knew in Haven—Flissa, Seg, Healer Adan—the Chargers! And the countless people Ellie…lots of them she knew their faces from always being around Haven, and their Templars, the rebel Mages—ahh! This was the only sort of war they should be fighting!

The Inquisition was having a snowball fight*!
There was a solid team of sorts—Ellie, Cremisius, Marehis, and Lady Josie, she got pulled in because Ellie just wasn’t leaving sweet Josie to fend for herself. Though Ellie’d never really seen Josie outside the Chantry much, maybe two or three times the entire time she’d been in the Inquisition, she was really glad the Antivan woman had a proper coat, it was pretty—a thick, purple coat with a fur lined hood. Anyway, solid team! They ran the paths of Haven dodging snowballs and hurling them at everyone they could, as fast as they could. Ultimately they had a goal, or at least Ellie did—lots of fun, so so much fun, but so much of it and yeah, her little schedule note offering a place to catch a break was yes, needed, so they worked their way to Flissa’s, and Ellie was pretty sure she’d been knocked head to toe with snowballs, her arms needed a little break from throwing and she was still warm from being so bundled up but that didn’t exactly make the air any less chilled or dry, so, breathing break!

They stumbled into Flissa’s, though the moment Ellie laid a hand on the door she heard several calls for ceasefire—everyone around their team started focusing on each other instead since the Tavern was apparently like a base or a safe zone—Flissa rushed in after them, stomping her feet to clear her shoes of snow, shivering as she rushed to the fire place to stoke the flames just a bit more. They could still hear everyone’s snow fight still raging on outside, but Maker it was so toasty and nice in the Tavern, the whole room smelled like cinnamon!

“Are you having fun, my lady?” Flissa asked through chattering teeth.

Took a sec to catch her breath enough then, “I am!...It’s…great!...You?” oh, Cremisius put a hand on her back, rubbing between her shoulder blades, that was nice.

“Oh yes, it’s all so very exciting! Now, lady Ellie, would you like something warm to drink? Solas came in just before the fight, brewed a pot of milk tea himself that I’ve been keeping warm, he said you like it?”

Milk tea…oh! The super yummy cinnamon tasting tea he made when she was so sad about Varric, and Marehis being gone! “Gosh yeah that’s so, so good!”

“I would appreciate a cup,” Lady Josie said through chattering teeth, hugging herself as she shivered.

Ellie went and hugged the Antivan woman tight, rubbing her arm the way Cassandra or Marehis sometimes did when she was cold. Lady Josie blushed, smiling as she wrapped an arm around Ellie’s shoulders to hug her back, saying, “Gracias, Ellie. Pelear con bolas de nieve es divertido—pero hace tanto frio!” Snowball fighting is fun, but it’s so cold!

“Muy frio,” Ellie agreed. Then she remembered she’d wanted to say, “Oh! I wanted to thank you, so much, for the party!”

Lady Josie looked startled, mouth working to find words, had...had no one else thanked her? Had she not been expecting to be thanked? But Cremisius said,

"Last night was a total blast," he agreed. Oh! Blast like fireworks! Gosh that was a good one, and he smiled when it made Ellie laugh.

And Marehis said, “Yes, thank you Lady Montilyet, your First-Day Eve bash was delightful.”

“Oh!” Lady Josie said as if they’d explained something. She smiled and said, “Yes! I mean, you’re so very welcome, it was a pleasure to arrange!”
Flissa got them toasty inside and out with tea and a warm fire, and then it was back out!

Gosh it was so much fun! Everyone was in high spirits, the levity from their game was contagious, big time, all of Haven was catching…and throwing!

Especially once Ellie found the Iron Bull.

"Imekari!" he called out in greeting before he knelt before her, "B-Quad?" he asked.

Oh gosh...did he mean? "B-Quad!" Ellie agreed.

He did mean! B-Quad was taking over this snowball fight, Ellie getting to ride astride the Qunari's shoulders, and Cremisius, Marehis and Lady Josie took cover behind him, making snowballs to be passed up to Ellie to throw as hard and as fast as she could, raining powdery terror down on the unsuspecting victims...citizens...of Haven!

"Shit, shit! Tumbles teamed up with Tiny! This is not a drill!" Varric shouted in warning so his little team of Sera and Dorian.

"Shite!" Sera squeaked.

"The fool!" Dorian declared him, "He'll make Andraste's Herald mad with power!"

Ellie was held on to the Iron Bull's horns as she threw her head back and gave off her best, most evil, "Mwahahahaha!"

"Bow before your snow gods!" The Iron Bull commanded.

She might be just mildly going mad with the power, but it was just snowball power.

Until a few minutes later when Cassandra whistled sharply, holding up her arms to get everyone’s attention, and the Iron Bull knelt so Ellie could get down—they'd practiced! If the Iron Bull got low enough, Ellie could just lean all the way back and hang off his shoulders, back to back with him for a moment and stretch out her arms, find firm footing...on...her hands haha, and sort of somersault off of him. There was a sort of ripple effect across Haven as everyone threw what they had left in their hands and came to a breathless stop. Ellie was down near Haven gate, but the Iron Bull bound off to go inform anyone who couldn't hear Cassandra near the Chantry, signal them that they were done, and there was a shout that sounded like Solas somewhere behind her, maybe near the Tavern?

“Thank you, everyone, for participating,” Cassandra called out, holding out her hand toward Ellie, gesturing for her to join her, so Ellie came close and took the offered hand, ending up pulled into the Seeker holding her, arm around her shoulders, “Did you enjoy our fun, Eleanor?”

Oh gosh, it felt like lots of eyes were on her, and she nodded, sort of shrinking into the Seeker’s hold as she assured her, “Oh, golly, yeah...it was really great!” she looked out across the faces of those surrounding them, “Thanks everyone!”

There was a chorus of pleasant wishes and insistence that it’d been no trouble to have some fun on the holiday directed at her, and Cassandra called that there would be warm drink in the mess hall for all to enjoy.

“Except,” Cassandra said to Ellie, “for you. Are you well, Eleanor? You’ve more to your schedule today if you’re up for it.”
“I’m great!” Seriously, there was more? This was already just! like! The actual best day ever!

“Excellent,” Cassandra said, looking to Cremisius as he approached, “Lieutenant.”

The Tevinter man handed Ellie a second slip of paper,

_Happy new year, your first battle’s won!_

_But your day has only just begun.

It’s time to eat, so here’s a clue,

_the Charger’s camp would be glad to see you!_

“Really?!” Ellie asked excitedly, grasping Cremisius’s forearm.

“If you’d do us the honor of joining us for an afternoon repast,” he offered smoothly with a bow, and he smiled when Ellie started laughing, he turned the forearm in her grasp so he was holding her arm in hand and pulled her closer, pressed up against his chest plate.

“Hmm…” she pondered the offer, “I dunno, see, I really only wanna go if a certain Charger’s going to be there. You might know him—tall, funny, and gosh he’s just so handsome?”

Krem nodded, as if thinking it over, before confirming, “Oh he’ll definitely be there.”

It almost felt mean, but she meant it in good humor, “Awe yay, The Iron Bull’s coming!”

“Maker help me, you are twins,” Cremisius lamented laughingly, hugging her tighter before they started heading for the Charger’s camp.

“Oh, did you think I meant you? Gosh, that’s silly. I mean tall and funny fit perfect, but I would’ve said ‘the handsomest’.”

“You would’ve huh?” he chuckled, kissing her hair.

They went to the clearing that the Chargers usually gathered in for meals, most were gathered already, some still brushing snow off of themselves,

“Small one,” Skinner came bounding up to them, “the snow fighting pleased you? You are having a happy day?”

Everyone seemed to be very concerned with Ellie having a nice time. “It did and I am! Did you have fun?” she hoped so.

“It was satisfying,” the Elf woman agreed. So. She guessed that meant ‘fun’ for Skinner.

“Good!”

“Hell yeah it was good boss, that was a great fight,” the Iron Bull enthused as he arrived, “glad you could join us. What’s this I hear about Krem being the handsomest Charger?” Gosh his ears were good!

“Hey!” Rocky called out from where he was working with Dalish to get their bonfire going, “What about me?”
“You’re still very handsome, promise. Cremisius is my favorite though,” oh gosh she couldn’t help laughing when Grim planted a fist against the center of his chest and toppled backwards to play dead, like her words had so badly wounded the Human man.

“You know, I’m just going to accept it,” Stitches said, from where he was crouched near the fire, nodding, “it’s time to pass the torch on to the new generation. Now I can be valued by my accomplishments rather than my godlike physique. Won’t have to spend so much time keeping it fit, maybe I can focus on needlepoint again—” and then at the looks he was getting, “you think Bull called me Stitches because I stitch you bastards up? No. It has nothing to do with my amazing Healing abilities. Orlesian knot, feather stitch, seed stitch, I can stitch it all! I could make you a damn flower in your wounds if you lot weren’t such crybabies.”

“Oh quit your own bellyaching,” Dalish said, then, “Ellie!” she greeted warmly, coming in for a hug, “It is so wonderful to see you again! Come, have a seat you two,” she let out a little giggling sound as she looked between Ellie and Cremisius, then gestured for them to find a place around the fire.

Lunch with the Chargers was a total blast! She’d missed them when she was away—she was a little nervous for some reason, she…well the Chargers were the closest thing Cremisius had to family, at least right here, so she really hoped they approved of her for him, didn’t dislike that he was dating the Herald of Andraste. But everyone seemed happy, they were poking enough fun to leave them both red faced. But Ellie was just going to blame that on Dalish’s cooking than the Iron Bull’s making fun—had she gotten around to kissing Cremisius’s entire face, gosh! That wasn’t any of his business!—the ‘Archer’ made this mix of rice and chicken and some kind of nuts, cashews the Iron Bull said, and it was all in this great, super spicy sauce! It was so good! Even better when,

“Elgar’nan, leave them alone you vultures,” Dalish reprimanded the Iron Bull and Mister Stitches after so much of their teasing.

“Sorry, Boss,” Bull and Stitches chorused to Ellie.

When they were all finished with lunch, the Chargers had something to do, a mission of some sort? But Cremisius was given leave of whatever it was, the Iron Bull waved them off, and the Tevinter man walked Ellie back to her cabin in case she wanted to freshen up—brush her teeth—before he handed her another slip of paper.

Now you’ve recharged, it’s time to relax,
You’ve got a few options—to bathe or to nap!
If it's the first you would prefer
report to the Cabin of Madam de Fer!
Maker!

They meant a bath, like an actual bath in a tub and everything! Madam de Fer had a metal tub that, while it required a great deal of time to heat and fill, could be soaked in. She was really going to share it with Ellie today?

“Okay, what…what’s going on with everyone?” Ellie asked as Cremisius pushed open Haven’s gate and they began up the now shoveled path, “I mean…this…everyone’s being like, super extra nice? I mean is there something about First Day I don’t know?”
“Everyone just wants to make sure you have a great start to your year, you know, there’s all sorts of superstitions about the first things you do in the new year dictate what the year holds for you. Kissing on the first, for introducing affection into your life, winning your first battle will bring you victory, I think who you eat your first meal with is important too, because it means your relationship with who you eat with will be strong or something, first person to cross your threshold will influence the year you’re about to have—”

“Cremisius Aclassi you total sneak!” Ellie laughingly accused, as she turned to face him, walking backward as they passed Varric's tent, “Our first kiss being the first kiss of the new year—that’s gotta like double that superstition! And crossing the threshold—’I just gotta do a security sweep’ my butt!”

Yikes! Her actual butt! Cremisius had wrapped his arms around her to sort of guide her so she didn’t walk into anything or fall, and he swatted her butt playfully as he chuckled, “I did need to do a security sweep miss Smarty Pants, but yeah, kind of worked in my favor I hope.”

She stopped and popped up on tip toe to press a kiss to his lips. “Hmm…you know, I have a feeling it might have. Maybe, possibly.”

That made him smile then his hand were in hers he whirled her around so she was facing forward, holding her close as they walked up the stairway to the triangle of Solas, Adan, and Madam de Fer’s cabins.

Dorian’s as well now, he was just leaving, carrying...something, Ellie wasn’t sure what, it seemed like he heard them laughing and she just caught the glimpse of something he quickly hid behind his back, big smile plastered on his face as he greeted,

“Ahh, if it isn’t the lovely Ellie and her dashing Lieutenant. I was just making leave so you might bathe in peace.”

“Oh thanks—” she was saying, gosh he was off in a hurry, nodding and backing away, keeping his hands behind his back, nearly stumbling over his own feet, chuckling nervously as he disappeared around the corner, heading on the path toward the Chantry.

That...she...she was steadily giving up on finding out just what was up with everyone today. First kiss, first meal, first battle made sense as superstitions, but first ‘strange evasive maneuver witnessed’ didn’t seem like a thing.

“I’ll be back around to pick you up after. Relax and enjoy okay?” Cremisius left her with as he knocked on the door to announce their arrival.

Oh! There Marehis was! She was with Madam de Fer! Ellie’d wondered where she got off to when they went their separate ways for lunch...had she eaten? Oh good, she had lunch with Solas since Ellie was ‘well in hand’—she trusted Cremisius not to let anything happen to her for the most part, and with the Iron Bull watching over her, Marehis could get a bite to eat and leave Ellie to her time with the Chargers. Now, she was pouring some kind of oil—lavender!—into the tub, using a hand to stir the water up.

Maker. The tub was full of steaming warm water, and she got to strip out of all those layers—she’d been bundled so tight there were impressions on her skin, it felt good to get everything off and Madam de Fer helped keep her hair from dipping into the water, holding it while Ellie climbed in and sat back, hair hanging safely over the back of the tub and gosh, the water was so relaxing and she...
“You fell asleep. That isn’t always safe in water, but the watcher watches, wakes. She’ll make sure you’re ready in time.”

Cole? That…her mind felt kind of fuzzy, but in a pleasant way, like nothing at all pressed or worried her thoughts, everything calm and quiet and soothing…

“Da’vehnan? It’s time to wake up sweet girl.”

What had she just been doing? Oh, bath, bathing…had she fallen asleep?

Time…something about being on time for something?

Something fancy, Ellie guessed. She wasn’t supposed to put her other things back on, Madam de Fer…gosh, she’d gotten Ellie clothing to wear, like, herself! Vivienne would hear absolutely no argument, whatsoever! It was…a little embarrassing, the woman had gotten her underthings, lacy and white underpants and matching breast band that was different from what she usually wore to keep everything decent and comfortable, it had straps for her shoulders and the front was more um, there were cups? A brassiere, Madam de Fer called it as Marehis helped with clasping it closed in the back. But it was apparently necessary that her underthings be white so they didn't show through her clothing. Madam de Fer helped her into a long-sleeved white linen dress that fell past her knees, it went on over her head and closed up the back with little pearl buttons, and it was cinched at the waist with a bow, and where Marehis had bound two braids where they met at the back of Ellie’s hair, Madam de Fer tied another white bow to cover the hair tie already in place. And then there were shoes, gosh she really hoped she didn’t get this all dirty! They were white too, with just a little bit of thick heel on them.

“My dear girl, I believe you’re ready, you look simply breathtaking,” Madam de Fer said.

“You really really didn’t have to do this, Vivienne—”

“Nonsense! Hush child, or I’ll be wildly insulted—what you mean in humility I will take as insult, that you dislike the clothing I’ve secured for you. It is a gift, Eleanor, accept it and think nothing more. It is only traditional as you're of age, it is custom for young people to wear white on such a day.”

Really? That was nice, and so sweet of her to think of. “Thanks, it's all so beautiful,” Ellie assured her.

Cremisius returned, knocking on the cabin door, and when Ellie went to meet him, he smiled warm,

“You look amazing, Ellie. Are you ready for the main event?” he asked, holding out what she supposed was the final slip of her schedule.

All dressed up and nowhere to go?
Your escort certainly won’t let it be so!
Take his lead, he knows the way,
the path to where you’ll end your sweet day!

So she linked arms with her 'escort' and asked, “Alright, Cremisius, where are we going?”

“Oh no El, that’s not how this works—you’ll just have to wait ’til we get there,” he said,
leading her down the path toward Flissa’s Tavern.

And then to Haven’s gate, where he walked them right up to the doors before U-ing them back around to head back up the stairs.

Only to turn left at Varric’s tent and follow the path up to the Chantry.

They…that…what? They’d gone such a crazy route, much longer than the itty bitty path between Madam de Fer’s cabin and the Chantry.

And then Cremisius said something…she wasn’t sure. She’d been getting well wishes all day. “Happy First Day!” from everyone around Haven, and for a second, she thought that’s what he meant, that he’d gotten his words somehow confused and mixed up when trying to say them as he drew her close and whispered,

“Happy Birthday, Ellie.”

And then the Chantry doors swung open like his words had cast a spell.

Words that were painted on a banner hanging high, in the center of the Chantry’s great hall, words called out by every occupant therein—Marehis, her advisors, her party, the Chargers, Scout Harding, Flissa, Seggrit, Harritt and Dennet, and Healer Adan!

Happy Birthday Ellie!

“Happy…what?” she asked, equal parts excited and confused.

“Happy Birthday, sweet girl!” Marehis repeated, coming forward out of the mass gathered just inside the Chantry, reaching to take Ellie’s unmarked hand since Cremisius held the other.

“You’re sixteen today, yes?”

“Y-yeah I guess, but—”

“Then, it is your birthday, da’vehn! The day that marks when you came to exist in the world, the anniversary of which, is of course, a matter of celebration!” she explained.

… “Oh gosh, that’s so sweet but…well I mean, what about everyone else? I’m so grateful all of you were born, shouldn’t we celebrate those days too?” oh Maker, that’d be so much fun! People should do that! Celebrate the date of birth of those they loved!

“El,” Cremisius gently explained, “everyone celebrates their birthdays—” oh, someone had already thought of that then? Good!

Oh. Oh gosh she…she hadn’t realized—

Oh!

Oh she was so glad this dress had pockets. Parchment pad time!

“I want every single one of you to tell me your birthdays! Right now! Cremisius! Then Marehis! Then I’m turning on you lot left to right—mine, so just! Stay put!”

“You heard the Birthday girl,” the Iron Bull called out.

Cremisius told her that his birthday was in Justinian!* Awe! He was a sweet summer baby! The 31st, that was the last day of the month so, that would be easy enough to remember!
Varric gave her a significant look, oh! Did he need—‘seventeen’ she mouthed when she was certain Cremisius wasn’t looking and the Dwarf gave her an exasperated look that said ‘Shit, I can’t do age math!’ well! Gosh! Okay…in 9:42 he’d be 18 so…42 take away 18 is 24, so he was born Justinian 31st, 9:24! She held up her two fingers, clinched her hand, and then four and Varric nodded.

Marehis next—gosh hers was in Guardian! That! That was so soon! Just next month! The 12th!

Cassandra was a winter baby too! Drakonis 5th! And she did not find it nearly as funny as everyone else that the Pentaghast had been born in the month literally named ‘Dragon’.

“It is…tradition, after a fashion. A great deal of my family hold Drakonis birthdays. If I were one to take such things as great import, you would not see me the whole of the month, I would be locked away writing Birthday well wishes.”

Varric got a horrible glare shot his way when he slapped Cullen on the back, "Damn, tough break—I thought that was gonna turn into Seeker announcing nonstop,” he winked twice, "the entire month of Justinian.”

Nonstop…Justinian—oh groady! He couldn't count back years in his head but he could count backward nine months just fine for his sex jokes!

"Varric...please do not drive me to murder you on Eleanor's birthday," the Seeker seethed.

"I'll kill him for you if it suits," Cullen offered.

That did seem to tempt the Nevarran woman, "Once she sees 'hey you', I cannot think of a thing you could do that Eleanor would not forgive you for, so..." she smirked, "Watch yourself, Varric.”

...'hey you'?

Huh. Okay, birthdays! Dwarves didn’t celebrate the day of their birth, but the day that could be a week or more later, when they were officially named. So Rocky and Varric had Naming days! Scout Harding though, her family celebrated her birth the day of, that was cool!

Solas was the weirdest about it, he got this blank look on his face and then had to think really really really hard because it’d apparently been a long time since he took notice of the day. Solace! Maybe that was why he was named Solas? Though it was spelled different and 'Solas' was Dalish for Pride so…probably not?

Getting everyone's birthdays written down helped her kind of...she wasn’t sure what to do with all this. It’d been overwhelming to have everyone come together to pray over her—this? Having a big party with everyone she loved just because she was born? Having…Maker, everything they’d done today, from the moment she woke up until Cremisius led her to the Chantry…that! That was all part of it! Everyone had come together and worked so hard to make the entire day special and fun and!

Cole…he didn’t have a birthday, he thought—they’d get him one! If she could pick her birthday, so could he! He came and hugged her then, oh, yeah, she kind of needed it,

“They’re overwhelmed too,” he murmured quietly to her, ”—more and more all the time, they love you so much and this lets them express it, it’s a release. Let them. Enjoy it, it’s as much
for them as it is for you.”

“We’re getting you a birthday mister! Because I love you too and you being around should be celebrated!”

Maker, everybody getting together to wish her well wasn’t the half of it!

There were games! The rug that lined the entire great hall was gone, at first she thought maybe it needed cleaned after last nights festivities, and maybe it did but in the center of the hall, chalk had been used to draw a huge, long hopscotch grid that ended in 16—everyone played or at least took a turn, even Madam de Fer! And she somehow managed to make it seem elegant! And then there was ‘Pin the tail on the Fennec’! A large drawing of a Fennec hang on one of the pillars lining the hall and Cassandra blindfolded Ellie, handed her the ‘tail’ and took her by the shoulders to spin her ‘round and ‘round till she was a thrilling sort of dizzy, pushing her in the direction of the picture.

Tails, anatomically, were not meant to go on the Fennec’s cheek. Face cheeks, anyway, the Iron Bull called out,

“Wong cheeks, Boss!”

Oh har! He didn’t do much better, his ended up in the top right-hand corner of the parchment nowhere near the Fennec! Poor thing didn’t have a tail full stop!

Then there was tag! A team of ‘It’ and ‘Not it’ to be chased! Ellie started out on the ‘not it’ team—

And by the time they were done, she was breathless and happy and not…gosh they’d had the run of the Chantry save for the War Room, slipped down into the basement, in the dungeons—not to where the cells were, just in the hall, and she’d been so busy chasing Cremisius after Leliana tagged her ‘It’, she hadn’t…she hadn’t been scared at all! It’d been so much fun and somehow it helped, she wasn’t scared anymore, that if she had to go down there ever again, it wouldn’t petrify her.

And then they went into the War Room.

It was time for ‘cake and presents’ Lady Josie said when she rejoined them after disappearing for a moment.

She’d been lighting these little white candles. Sixteen of them, planted in a large rectangular cake that spelled out another wish of Happy Birthday Ellie! in the frosting, the cake-candle light was the only thing that illuminated the War Room just now and,

“In a moment, you’re to make a wish, Eleanor,” Cassandra said, taking Ellie’s hand in hers and squeezing, “and then you’ll blow out the candles. Doing so will carry your wishes to fruition, it is believed.”

In a moment, the moment occupied by singing, a crazy mix of those who were genuinely succeeding at staying in key, Madam de Fer, Lady Josie, Leliana, Sera, Marehis—those who were trying their absolute best, and those who were really hamming it up, playing air instruments to accompany their off-key levity like Rocky and Grim (sans vocals).

“Happy Birthday to you, Happy Birthday to you! Happy Birthday dear Elllieeee! Happy Birthday tooooo yooooooou!”
“Close your eyes and make a wish, Inky!” Sera enthused.

"For yourself, Tumbles," Varric was quick to intone, "its your birthday."

So she did,

_I wish…I wish we could always be like this—happy and safe and together!_

And then she took the deepest breath she could and blew at her candles, it took two extra little puffs to get them all, but she did it!

While Commander Cullen set about getting the lamps lit in the room again, Marehis helped Lady Josie get all the candles out of the cake and then it was sliced up and divided among them and it was so, so good! Chocolate with sweet, creamy icing and it was just the best kind of cake she’d ever had she was pretty sure!

And then, it was time for presents. Piles that were stacked on either side of where the now empty cake platter sat.

That…it was all so much already! She didn’t need—

“El, everyone gets presents, this is all standard stuff,” Cremisius assured her, oh, There’d been this sort of rising and falling wave of just pure overwhelming…being overwhelmed. Like being cast into the ocean without a single clue how to swim! She knew how to swim but that was beside the point! She sort of shrank back, toward the door, and she hadn’t realized it but she’d gotten just a little teary, Cremisius wiping under her eye with his thumb.

“Think of it as your due, Ellie,” Dorian offered haughtily, “it is your coming of age after all. Go with it.”

So…okay. She supposed maybe that was alright then. But she was so, so getting everyone back! She’d have to figure out how to get presents! Maybe Madam de Fer would help, she knew a lot of shopping things…

So…so did everyone else. Oh Maker. They sat Ellie down in a chair before the War Table and there was a great deal of shoving involved to take up their gifts and bring them to her, though Flissa and Seggrit didn’t need caught up in the mix—they’d made her birthday cake as her present from them, gosh that was sweet…literally! Neither did the Chargers, their contribution had been their mysterious ‘mission’. They’d all pitched in to help clean up from last night’s party, and then helped Lady Josie prepare the Chantry for Ellie’s Birthday bash! Gosh that was so nice of them!

Cassandra (after elbowing Varric out of the way to get to Ellie) offered her a small, rectangular package first, wrapped in brown parchment paper Ellie carefully pulled away to reveal, oh wow! A book! It…there…there wasn’t a title or anything, it was bound in unnamed, purplish leather with a pretty sigil, it sort of like a lotus flower on its cover,

“It will only open to your hand,” Cassandra assured her quietly.

Cool! It did sort of zip something secure across her magic as she lifted the cover to peek inside and…huh. It…it was blank. Nothing was written inside the pages of parchment at all. And then, “It is a journal, Eleanor. Made to be written in by you, filled with whatever you see fit. Journaling might offer you a way of documenting things you’d like to look back on and remember fresh, or to process through thoughts and feelings in a tangible fashion.”

Oh gosh, for her to write in? Journaling sounded great. “Oh wow, this is so cool! Thank
you, so so much Cassandra, I love it!” she said as she hugged the woman in thanks. Cassandra looked so incredibly relieved to hear that. “I’m pleased, Eleanor.”

Varric was next, offering her a package that looked similar to Cassandra’s, just a bit thinner, and there was no zip of magic to ward it shut, it was bound in brown leather with a title emblazon across the cover in gold lettering.

*The Amazing Adventures of Russel the Horse*

*by Varric Tethras*

Ahh! Ellie couldn’t help her excited squeak, “Varric! You wrote me a book about Russel!”

“Started on it a while back, uh, after our first stint in the Hinterlands,” he admitted, “But I made sure er…its your reading level Tumbles, Sparkler helped me with making sure of that before I sent it off for binding.”

“I love it so much, I can’t wait to read it!” oh she really couldn’t! She was so bundling up to go visit Russel and read it to him when she had the chance! She set the book down carefully on the War table and gave Varric a hug.

Sera made her a sweet little bracelet of braided thread—she wore a matching one! Scout Harding too! Friendship bracelets Sera said! Oh that was so great—gosh, she seemed shy about her present too, and Ellie was pleased to tell her she absolutely loved the idea of friendship bracelets!

“Lacey’n’ me made more of these for…well,” Sera explained. “Spymaster vetted some people for me on the down low, all they know is I picked ‘em for the Friends of Red Jenny, servant staff and people like that—” she looked to Scout Harding, “And I’ll be handing them out to a trusted few in your different camps,” the Dwarf woman assured.

“—so, you’ll always know it’s a trusted Friend handlin’ your things, or you can ask for help from if you see them wearing one of these,” Sera finished, tapping the friendship bracelet on her own wrist.

Oh that…that was so much peace of mind! Sera! Lace! “You two are brilliant!” Ellie enthused as she hugged the Elf girl and then Scout Harding tight, “You’re just the best, thanks!”

And the Iron Bull took that as a lead in for his present. They would match as well.

After the dragon was slain in the Hinterlands, he’d taken the tip of one of it’s teeth, halved it, and had the halves set into rings—one for her pinkie, and one for his! The bit of curved, pointed half tooth cast in obsidian rested with the flat of the cut portion laying against and set into the silvery metal, and there were little pink stones on either side of the tooth.

“Qunari don’t do strong commitments to anything outside of our roles, our work, in the Qun,” the Iron Bull explained as he knelt to be level with her, offering her ring, “But when we want to signify commitment to another person—you wanna say you’re dedicated to someone—you share half a dragon’s tooth. Sort of creates a physical connection, no matter what happens, you’ve got something that says I’ve always got your back.”

Oh! Big hug! Ellie wrapped her arms around his neck, squeezing tight as he hugged her back, hand carefully running along her hair, and when they pulled away from one another, “I’ve
always got your back too!” she promised, wrapping her new ring clad pinkie finger around his ringed pinkie finger. “Thanks so much, the Iron Bull. I really really love it.”

“Glad to hear it, Imekari…hmm,” he was looking at her dress, “I guess sixteen is your coming of age, you still okay with Imekari?” he seemed to consider it a moment… “You’re more like Ashkaari now, if uh, you know, take magic out of account.”

Huh. “Ashkaari?”

“‘One who thinks’, you’d either be on your way to joining some branch of the Ben-Hessrath, or the priesthood, a philospher. Things like that.”

“Oh gosh, that’s so sweet,” she said, her face felt warm as she admitted shyly, “…but um, yeah, if you wanted to keep calling me Imekari…that’d be okay with me.”

The Iron Bull chuckled as he rested his hand on her head, “Be okay with me too, Imekari.”

She thought the clothing Madam de Fer had given her to wear for her party was the woman’s offer of a Birthday present, but nope, apparently not.

Vivienne handed Ellie a flatish rectangular velvet box, which was enough to make her nervous, but oh gosh, she popped open the box to find two silvery decorative combs, pretty blue gemstones set between leaves engraved along the spines.

“I saw them in this charming little shop in Val Royeaux, and I knew you just had to have them my dear,” Vivienne said, raising a hand to smooth against Ellie’s hair. “They’ll be very fetching I think.”

“They’re so beautiful Madam de Fer, thank you so much!”

Vivienne patted Ellie’s back when she hugged her. “It was my pleasure, darling.”

Marehis was warm with excitement as she came and gave Ellie a hug, awe! That was a present in and of itself, everyone really could have just hugged her and called it a day! But when the Elf woman pulled away, she reached her hands behind her neck to fiddle with something before…huh Ellie’d noticed the thin silver chain tucked down under her clothing, but she removed it now to reveal it held a charm, a tree like the great Oaks that Ellie saw in the middle of Alienages.

“My family did not live in a city until my great-great Grandmother was sent from her clan—they’d a Keeper already, and she, an apprentice, so when my ancestor was revealed to have magic, she had to leave, find another clan. What she found, was a handsome City Elf, kind and compassionate to a stranger passing through an unfamiliar place. She found herself coming back more and more often, and he gifted this to her, so that she could take a piece of the city with her when she was away, and eventually she decided to stay, permanently. They married, and while they had a son, she passed the necklace on to his wife, and she to her eldest daughter, then she to her daughter, my mother, and when I left home, my mother gave it to me,” she raised a hand to cup Ellie’s cheek, thumb smoothing along Ellie’s cheek, “Now, my sweet, sweet girl, I would like to pass it on to you.”

But! But she wasn’t— “Marehis that’s so incredibly kind of you but—gosh I mean don’t you, you know… I mean you’re awful young and you might still…you know, have a daughter someday you’ll want to give this to, I couldn’t possibly—!”

“You are my Da’len-Da’vehnan—child of my heart, there is no ‘might still’ about it. Would you see me break my own family tradition and not pass this along to my first daughter just on the off chance I might have a child of my blood someday? No matter what is to come, da’len, I will
always consider you as such. This is yours, to keep and pass along as you see fit.”

That! But! She really…Ellie threw her arms around Marehis’s neck, hugging her as tightly as she could, and she was so not crying! Okay she was! But she wasn’t sad, just, Maker, overwhelmed, everything about today was, overwhelming in a great, fantastic, amazing way. Marehis sighed contentedly, hugging Ellie back, she had to slip her arms out from between their chests and Ellie could feel the woman’s hands and the cool metal of the chain against the back of her neck as she clasped it securely to stay there before wrapping her arms around Ellie’s shoulders.

“I love you so much,” Ellie whispered.

“I love you too, sweet girl.”

Marehis stayed at Ellie’s side as Solas came to kneel before her. “With Marehis’s permission, I offer something of an addition,” he said, offering up a little silver charm that he clasped in place, linking in to the loop at the top of the Vhenadahl charm that the necklace’s chain was threaded through. The charm, as it laid in Solas’s hand, looked like an owl in flight, it’s wings crossed before its body, oh! Owls were used to represent Andruil, the Dalish goddess of the hunt, Marehis sometimes told her stories about her, she was the goddess the Dalish praised as a symbol of the survival of their people, a protector. “Just as the Vhenadahl connects you to Marehis, this would remind you I am always guarding you as well, da’len.”

Ellie hugged him in thanks, “It’s so pretty, thank you Solas,” she said.

Huh that was…maybe a trick of the light or maybe unintentional in its design, but when she looked down at the charm around her neck, upside down the owl looked like the face of a wolf looking up at her.

Dorian was next. “Maker, that’s certainly a hard act to follow. Precious as you are to me, dear Ellie, I’m afraid I’d make a terrible parental influence,” he said, “I’m more of the fun family friend that day drinks and travels a lot and tells you interesting stories of my less lewd misadventures.”

“That’s okay, I like hearing your stories…I’d appreciate less day drinking though, it just isn’t very healthy yeah?” She shrugged, "Between Maerhis and Solas and the Iron Bull and Varric and Cullen and Cassandra I’m good on parental influences.”

Oh gosh, the Iron Bull choked on his drink and Varric didn't look very certain about everyone being listed in pairs and he'd gotten slotted in with the large Qunari fellow but she hadn't meant it like that, golly he was silly! And Cassandra went pink but she looked pleased! Cullen…huh, he wasn’t in the room anymore she didn’t think, where’d he go?

Dorian chuckled at that before handing Ellie his present, “Here, Ellie, happy birthday,” he wished her.

It was a wooden, checkered box that when she opened it held little figures…oh wow! A proper chess set! If you took out all the pieces and opened the box all the way back on its hinge, and turned it so the outside faced up, it worked as the board! Dorian had taught her some, when they’d been in their camp in the Hinterlands, it’d gotten pretty silly but they had fun and she did want to play him again! “Dorian! This is so cool, thank you so much!” she enthused as she carefully closed up the box and pulled him in to a hug.

“You’re certainly welcome,” he said, and when he pulled back he placed a biggish, velvety cloth bag on top of the box. “a backup set of sorts,” he supposed casually with a shrug.
Ellie peeked inside the bag—oh gosh oh gosh oh gosh—they weren’t just a backup set—they were a bigger set! They’d still sit nicely in the board squares but they were much taller than the set inside the box, perfect for the grip of someone like, “The Iron Bull, you’ll play with me sometime, yeah?”

“Sure thing Imekari,” he agreed sounding somewhere between sincere and confused as to what prompted her to ask him outright first.

They were going to be! so! adorable! Wait, no! Adoribul! Gosh she loved spelling, she could make so many written word puns! They just needed smooshed together already!

Healer Adan was next though his present wasn’t wrapped. He handed her a book, seeming grumpy because he was so shy over the offer of affection as he said, “You uh. Ever want to cook something in here up, maybe come find me,” and then he walked away! Just ‘noped’ out of hugging distance, and the room entirely!

“Thank you Healer Adan, I love you!” she called a little teasingly in his wake.

His voice was muffled as the door closed but, “Oh you know how I feel, you whelp!”

Ellie giggled at that, running hand along the cover of the book he’d given her, a thick book of Healing instruction, and when she peeked at the table of contents, there were all sorts of cool potions recipes listed.

Horse Master Dennet gave her a wooden box too, there was a tiny crank on the back of it and he told her to twist it a few times before opening the box up and…oh gosh that was so pretty, it was full of this metal cylinder that rotated within the width of the box, these divots poking outward in different places and as it turned, they pulled down these small tines along the back of the box, each playing a different note to hmm…it sounded like a Chantry hymn, gosh it was pretty!

“Made one like this when my Serena was about your age, figured it’d suit. She and the missus send their happy birthday wishes along,” he told her.

“I love it, thank you so much, it’s so beautiful—please tell them thanks and I hope they’re doing well?”

“I certainly will,” the horse master promised.

Harritt made her new boots! Her old ones were getting just a little bit pinchy lately and these ones had more of a heel on them! She was going to be taller!

“Try them on later and let me know how they fit.”

“I’m sure they’re perfect, thanks so much!”

Awe, he was so bashful, he was blushing as he waved her off and went to rejoin the gathered crowd.

Thom came up, looking nervous as he knelt before her, “I um…here. Happy Birthday.” He pulled his hand out from behind his back and held out,

“Its Russel!” she enthused as she took the wooden figurine in hand—he’d made a carving of Russel out of wood and around its neck hang a bracelet made of wooden beads and charms he’d carved, the sun, a small horse, the moon, a star, a snowflake, a flower—like a lily—and a heart with an ‘E’ carved into it! “Thom, this is beautiful! You made these yourself?”
Thom nodded, “You uh, you like ‘em, Ellie-girl?”

Ellie nodded, smiling as she held out the wrist Sera’d put her friendship bracelet on since her Marked hand was currently holding mini-Russel—gosh that was so cute!—and asked, “I really do! Would you please help me put it on?”

Thom took the bracelet in hand and clasped it around Ellie’s wrist, it fit great, it wasn’t super tight, but it wasn’t so loose she’d have to worry about it falling off while moving around.

“Thank you,” she said, as she hugged him tight.

When Thom was done, Cole sort of appeared, sitting on the War table, Cremisius had technically been next in line but he politely gestured for Cole to go ahead.

“Happy birthday,” Cole recited serenely, “Here—I wasn’t sure what to get you, so I looked. Varric thought you’d like them once, but he didn’t get them for you, I don’t know why. I thought you should have them still.”

He…he handed her a few round stones, she had to use both hands to hold them all.

Varric looked indignant and a little confused, “Kid, I…I one time had the passing thought if I gave Tumbles rocks she’d—”

“They’re so great, Cole!” Ellie was quick to assure, “Gosh, I love them all, thanks so much for thinking of me!”

“What are you going to name them?” Cole asked, enthusiastic in his curiosity.

Varric had funny thoughts. “Hmm…well this one looks like a Tina, and this one I think is a Henry…Stewart, Angie, and Leah,” she rattled off the names at random. Gosh it was really sweet, she loved that he’d made such an effort to participate, and they were pretty, gray stones, maybe she’d put them on one her shelves—

Cole yelped in delight, “That’s where he thought you’d keep them! I did it right!” he declared happily before he disappeared.

“Gosh he’s sweet,” Ellie giggled as she placed the stones with the rest of her presents for safe keeping.

“Guess it’s my turn now,” Cremisius said as he came to kneel before Ellie.

“Don’t do it man, marriage is a trap!”

“Bite me Bull,” oh Cremisius should be careful, ’cause he will! “everyone else kne—you’re the one offering up rings! Just, don’t make me come over there!” Cremisius warned, earning the laughter of their audience before returning his attention to Ellie, “Sorry about him.”

“Its okay, I knew about the Iron Bull going into this, we all have our baggage,” Ellie assured him jovially, giggling over the Iron Bull’s little wounded, ‘Hey!’

Cremisius grinned and offered a pretty blue cloth bag she might have seen the other day. “Happy Birthday, Ellie.”

“You’ve said that already—oh! Another first, of the new year and life, you were the first person to ever give me a present, and you are officially the first person to ever tell me Happy
Birthday!” she was excited to inform him.

“How come he got to do that? I thought we were sharing her first birthday wish!” Varric complained only to receive a smack on the back of the head from Cassandra before she said,

“We would not know we could plan such a surprise party if it were not for the Lieutenant, and a great portion of it's planning was influence of his input, Varric.”

“Really?” Ellie asked.

Oh, Cremisius was blushing. “I…I might have told the Advisors that I didn't think you knew about birthday celebrations, and Lady Montilyet just asked me a few questions about what to do, she did all the planning and orchestrating everything, wrote your poem schedule, and everyone pitched in to make the day special—”

Oh it was fun, he was sort of rambling like how she did sometimes, “Cremisius, hush,” she told him, and then she returned her attention to the bag, there was a tag on one of the drawstrings that read How would you like to go on another date? that’s all it said so she looked to him, “I would really love that,” she said as she uncinched the bag and then…

Oh she nearly dropped it, but gosh she was glad she didn't! Inside was a beautiful wrist watch, a small round timepiece on a thin silver chain, the pin was pulled out but it’d been dialed to read 6 o’clock and, oh, it had a smaller pin on the opposite side that would control the little double panel between the 6 and the center of the watch that read 04. Friday was the fourth!

“The date works mechanically, so as the clock passes twelve twice after being set, it changes on its own at midnight but uh, it has to be manually reset to one at the beginning of each month,” he said, sounding…was he nervous? Did he think she wouldn’t like it as well as—oh gosh something enchanted to keep the full date and the time magically like his father’s pocket watch had to be expensive, this was expensive enough as it was and she- she didn’t need-

“Cremisius it’s so beautiful, I love it! It’s perfect! I always have to be places at different times and it’ll help me keep track of the days, and gosh its so, so, so incredibly thoughtful of you! Thank you.” She hugged him tight, and gosh she wanted to kiss him again but there were so many eyes on them, and even the kiss she pressed to his cheek after he carefully helped secure the watch around her left wrist, got a hoot from Bull, oh he was a- a- a butt! Like Cremisius calls him!

“It is a very lovely timepiece, the young man did well,” Madam de Fer complimented.

“And now perhaps our Lady will keep better track of the time,” Leliana said humorously as she came to Ellie’s side once Cremisius went to stand by—and elbow—the Iron Bull. “From me,” she said, offering her a small rectangular present wrapped in pretty white paper, Ellie was very careful unwrapping it to find a small worn copy of the Chant. “Justinia gifted it to me when I first came in service as her Left Hand. I would like you to have it now.”

That made her throat a little tight. “Oh gosh, Leliana, I can’t take something Justinia gave you that’s…you love her so much,” she didn’t really have anything of Ava’s except the staff they’d made together, and she missed it something terribly.

“I do. You have grown on me in some respect, Ellie, and I think Justinia would like very much that I pass it on to you, a copy of the Chant of your very own. I knew Justinia a long time, believe me I have others, but this one being given to me in my role that led me to the Inquisition...I think it's befitting you keepsake it now.”
Ellie hugged the book to her chest, “I’ll take super good care of it, I promise,” she said before reaching out an arm to pull the Spymaster into a hug.

Lady Josie was next, handing Ellie a tall rectangular present with a wish of, “Cumpleaños feliz*, my lady,” huh, she was pretty sure Lady Josie had wrapped Leliana’s Chant book for her, this had matching wrapping paper and she didn’t see that working the other way around. Ellie unwrapped it to find a box made out of rigid, sturdy brown paper, she pulled it open to reveal a small, porcelain doll in a pretty, frilly green dress, a matching hat pinned into her hair huh, she had dusky skin but wild re—oh! “She looks like me!”

“Indeed she does,” Lady Josie said warmly, seeming shy as she asked, “Do you like her?”

Ellie nodded, “She’s so pretty, gosh, thanks Lady Josie!”

“It is Antivan tradition. At our coming of age, young ladies are presented with several presents that mark the occasion—the exchange between flat shoes and heels for instance—and this…well it is a tradition called ‘the last doll’, one last doll* to note the end of childhood.”

Huh…that…she didn’t necessarily…she didn’t very much care for Antiva but that was just bad experience. Lady Josie was the nicest person from Antiva she’d ever met, and it was sweet, connecting to something pleasant from her sort-of roots, sort of like how she liked speaking in Antivan with the woman. It was…kind of like Envy making the Chantry a scary place, maybe she just needed positive associations to make up for the negative—Lady Josie wasn’t just the nicest Antivan, she was the nicest person Ellie’d ever met full stop. Gosh, her present really was very sweet.

Ellie smiled. “I’ve never had a doll before, so I guess it’s a first doll too, huh? Gracias, Lady Josie.”

“De nada,” the Ambassador welcomed her thanks, “Perhaps…I could have my own dolls sent here*—” Leliana barked a laugh at that, slapping her hand over her mouth, and she received what looked like the closest thing to a reproachful glare Ellie’d ever seen from Lady Josie before the Antivan returned her attention to Ellie, clearing her throat nervously as she continued, “and we could play together, it is an experience you should have if you wish it.”

“Yeah, that sounds like fun!” Ellie agreed, and she gently placed the doll on the War table.

And then, then Cullen returned, holding a bundled blanket, and the Iron Bull whispered, ‘Fuck.’ What was wrong? The blanket looked soft! She liked blankets! Oh, was he worried she might like Cullen’s present best?...well...if she did it was because blankets were warm! It wasn't any offense to anyone else! She's a simple girl, she likes being toasty!

The Commander chuckled and knelt on the floor some distance away from Ellie, looking to her and nodding toward the ground in a gesture for her to sit, so she scooted out of her chair and onto her knees to sit on the floor across from him, not entirely certain why they needed to be so low for blanket gifting.

“This will be your responsibility, Ellie, you must do your very best to take care of her,” he said, and Ellie nodded, gosh he was serious about his blankets. But she understood it might be something like an heirloom and she’d take super good care of it! "Happy Birthday, Ellie,” he said, speaking quietly and then he set the bundle on the floor, something wriggling around underneath it until its little head poked out, and the Commander carefully pulled the blanket to lay flat, freeing its captive.
“Yip!”

Her actual jaw might fall off, Ellie thought as her eyes went wide and she was absolutely certain she was hallucinating or…oh gosh…

It was a little, brown and white furred *Mabari pup!*

“She's so little,” she breathed in a whisper almost afraid to reach out and touch her, but the puppy was already coming up to her, climbing into her lap, back paws high up on her thighs while it rested its front paws on her chest, “Yip!” right in her face, “Awe! She's so cute! What's her name?”

"Whatever you’d like to name her—for reference, she does not respond to ‘hey you’ by any means. She was the runt of her litter, but she survived well enough, healthy and full of energy—so I take it as a good sign she’ll grow to be a strong companion for you.”

Oh she was so little now! But Ellie’d take good care of her, keep her safe, make sure she grew big and strong! Oh gosh now she had an actual puppy to feed! What did puppies eat? “She’s so precious! I really get to keep her?”

“You do,” Cullen was pleased to say, looking to Cassandra like he’d won some sort of argument or something.

“Yes, as she is *now* fully housebroken, she can, indeed, stay,” Cassandra drawled like she’d had some hand in helping the Commander rear the pup.

“Oh, thank you so much! I love her!” Ellie promised, oh she was so warm and snuggly, nuzzling her face against Ellie’s as the girl hugged her carefully, petting the pup’s head…hmm…what to name her?

Varric growled. “Damn it, Curly! You really raised the damn bar for next year!”

…next…next year?

“We…we’re doing this again next year?” Ellie asked bewildered, that…that was only a year away!

“Well yeah, Inky,” Sera giggled, “You have a birthday every year, so, you’re supposed to celebrate it every year!”

*Every-?!*

“What?!”

Chapter End Notes

*This snowball fight, and Ellie's evil laughter, was suggested in a comment on Chapter 4 by Secret_Life_of_Fireflies*

*White is customarily worn in Thedas to denote coming of age according to the info offered on festivals usually held in Spring where basically everyone who has come of age so far that year dress in all white and do a whole ‘look at us, we survived the*
plague and dragons and crazy magic, watch us dance, we might get married’ thing that I think happens in Bloomingtide.

*Justinian is the month of June. Guardian is February, Drakonis is March, and Solace is July

*Changing of the shoe and The Last Doll are both Quinces traditions. Quinceañeras are, of course, for when you turn fifteen, but coming of age in Thedas, theoretically, is sixteen—Antiva might celebrate Quinces, if they do this is more of an adaptation for circumstance.

*‘Feliz cumpleaños’ is more of a Mexican/Peruvian way of saying/singing ‘Happy Birthday’—Feliz ‘Happy’ and Cumpleaños ‘Birthday’ but Mexican Spanish dialect has several differences from Spain’s Spanish and that’s more so what Antivan is based on, and Cumpleaños Feliz is their thing, to my understanding.

*Lady Josie totally has her dolls with her. No doubt.
Names and Dates

Chapter Summary

Unexpected visits lead to unexpected outcomes, the new year has all sorts of things in store for the Inquisition. Thom's old crew is back, Sera's got new responsibilities, and quadruple dates are a thing, right?

Chapter Notes

Hi! Back at it again! Cleaning up some character archs, lead up to our time in the Oasis and the Fallow Mire—full playouts of how those areas and their missions go down coming next chapter! Then we're off to seal the Breach!

So...one or two, chapters left of dear, sweet Haven.

Also, thanks Secret_Life_of_Fire_Flies—for some reason I have zero problem slapping names on horses, but I couldn't for the life of me think of what to call the Inquisition's new puppy, 'Anya' was a suggestion by Secret that blipped in my brain because I immediately thought of how exactly that name could come about in this story and I rolled with it because I dig how I thought Ellie might get the name, and it's cute!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The new year held things old and new for Thom Rainier.

His old crew in his new life…Maker, he never thought to see any of them again, and yet somehow he’d imagined a thousand times, and thousand different ways for how he’d handle it if he ever did get the chance. Of course, most of those scenarios played out as him being apprehended for his crime and finding himself in prison alongside them, or upon their release, them hunting him down like the dog he is and beating him senseless, perhaps to death…most scenarios ended in them killing him, worst case scenarios and all that.

But for reasons he would never understand, the Maker continued blessing him with thing after thing he didn’t deserve. Mercy and grace beyond his comprehension.

Returning to Haven was relief, getting Ellie back in one piece, safe and alive after that horrible…he was just glad to see her recovered, moving forward after being knocked down so many times. He was excited to be back, with the prospect of Ellie’s birthday just around the corner, and absolutely terrified. Nerve wracked, to face the men he’d so sorely wronged after all these years. He didn’t deserve their forgiveness and selfishly he craved it more than anything, because he liked…he loved his new life. The Iron Bull was the epitome of what a leader should be, someone he was honored to follow, he found comradery among Ellie and her allies, loved that girl so much if he thought about it, it could wind him, it was overwhelming to care about someone so much again. He had a job that made him proud, a cause that was honorable, and people he loved and allies he respected. He wanted…he wanted that for his men as well, wanted to share that with
them, but there was the fear that they would see him and be unable to reconcile the wrongs of their pasts with the possibilities of their futures, that they would ultimately take this life from him. He deserved nothing less.

And he got so much more. When Krem swept Ellie away upon their return to Haven, Bull clapped Thom on the back of the neck, and walked with him to the clearing where they could hear the Chargers training.

The Chargers…and Cyril, Damon, Andrew, Jacob, Jamieson, Charles, and goddamn Klaus*. They were there, armed and armored, looking…Maker. It was strange to see them again after all this time, they’d visibly aged, but there was something about it that made it feel like no time had passed at all, there was this…

There was a fire in them, he could see in them what he’d grown to see in himself whenever his old mug happened to cross paths with the mirror again. Purpose. A worthy cause to fight for, a banner under which they could stand proud. And Maker, they looked well, Stitches reported to Bull, Thom, of their recovery from their time in prison—they’d all been malnourished, pallid, even Klaus and Jamieson, dark as they were, had lost some of their color from lack of sun, though that certainly couldn’t be said now, everyone was rosy cheeked, they looked right healthy, and Krem had kept the pattern of reclaiming personage through the freedom to do with your hair what you will. To look at them, you’d never assume the sort of place they’d been little more than a month ago.

“Horns up!”

The words from the Iron Bull cast a silence across the practice field, the clang of sword against shield ceased and everyone, turned their attention to their leader.

“Horns up!” his numbers returned. Seven pairs of eyes went wide in their heads and Thom wasn’t certain if it was from the fact that yes, the Iron Bull was indeed a Qunari the size of a small house—if they threw tenting over his head and tacked the ends out around him, Thom was decently sure he could recreate the exact dimensions of his childhood home—or if it was seeing that Qunari with a massive hand resting on the back of the neck they’d likely like to wring.

“As I’m sure you can guess, I’m The Iron Bull. Nice to see new faces, my Lieutenant informs me you’re coming along well, did a damn good job cleaning up that mess of bandits fucking with Haven resources.”

Their ‘new faces’ all looked to Cyril who cleared his throat, sheathing his sword as he stepped forward, “Honor to serve, glad to finally meet you, sir. We appreciate the opportunity.”

“Good to hear. I’ll want to get better acquainted in a bit but I gotta touch base with the Spymaster on a few things now that I’m back. Guys, Ambassador needs help setting up for tonight and uh, wants to go over some things for tomorrow. I appreciate you volunteering.”

“We want the small one to have a pleasant birthday,” Skinner said as she slipped by them, moving to head for Haven’s gate, rest of the core team at trailing after her.

“Blacksmith says he’s all done with your present,” Stitches informed the Qunari as he passed, “picked it up for you and put it in your trunk, along with the er, new shirt? Kept it out of sight.”

“Sweet,” Bull rumbled out appreciatively. “Sarge, you good here? Leaving you to take point, you know how to reach me.” Yell like mad? Nah. He had a proper war horn, a way to signal
“Gosh it’s going to be so good to be back,” Ellie sighed as she flopped onto her back by the fire. “We’ll really be back in Haven tomorrow.”

“I’m certain,” he hoped so, anyway, Maker her birthday was practically within reach, it’d be disappointing to not be back in Haven in time to celebrate properly. But he was pretty sure, “we’re near the path we take out to the Hinterlands—” he stopped when she giggled, looking up at him seeming amused.

“I know,” she said, raising an arm to point straight up, skyward. “Judex* is just there, anmd if we were sitting on the river I bet we’d see hmm…First Day soon, so Peraquiallis should be more west now than when we could see it in the Hinterlands,” she squinted like she could make herself see through the mass of evergreens blocking their view pointing past them, “just over there. Probably. I don’t control the stars.”

“Huh,” he looked up from the pot of stew he’d been stirring, pulled his glasses out to get a better look-see overhead. Yeah he could make out the hilt of Judex in the sky above. “You really like the stars, Ellie-girl?”

“They’re pretty, and reliable. I used to always travel at night, safest for me you know? And the stars were always easier for me to understand and follow,” she said, voice wistful as she shared, “There’s this place…just north of Markham, this enormous field, empty in the warmer months, gets too hot for Druffalo. If you catch it on the right night mid-summer, it’s just big and open and it’s like the Maker opened up the heavens for you, pouring out beautiful, beautiful light. There’s so many stars its unreal, and there’s this sort of glow, kind of like the Breach but natural, something about the sun shining for so long so directly, that it makes the air there shine at night. It happens all the time way up north or way down south I hear but moving into the summer solstice, longest day of the year, Maker. The sky over this field glows all these different colors, and its breathtaking.”

Huh. He…he was pretty sure he knew the field she spoke of. He’d never…it stank to high heaven in the winter months, full of livestock, he’d never paid it more mind than that, never thought it was anything quite so spectacular, but he almost wondered if he should have paid better attention. And Maker, he hadn’t been anywhere near Markham in decades, but it was strange to hear her speak of being so very close to the place, felt like they’d just narrowly missed meeting each other. He almost wondered what might have happened if he’d returned home after his time in the Orlesian Military, like his mother asked of him, instead of listening to Klaus and pursuing mercenary work with his own company. In another life would he have just walked by that field, or would he have seen such glorious light, gone to appreciate it, set a totally different course?*

“Are you nervous?” she asked him then.

“All the time,” he assured her jovially. “About anything in particular?”

“About seeing them tomorrow. Um. You know, everyone? Are you afraid? You…you don’t think they’ll hurt you, do you?” she asked. Sounded scared for him.

“Ahh,” he was almost certain he’d get a proper punch to the face, maybe worse, but, “No, I’ll be quite alright Ellie-girl. I’m nervous yes. Thought on it loads of times, what I’d say to them if we ever met again and yet, I can’t think of a damn thing of what I might say tomorrow.”

“Don’t be. You’ve done a pretty good job once you’re in the moment, apologizing and working to move forward. You know what you did was wrong. Would you try to force them to
“You can’t force forgiveness. You do your best to earn it and accept whatever you get.”

“Then you’re set!” she encouraged, “All you can do tomorrow is be open, honest. There’s nothing to hide that’s worth hiding you know? Admit your fault, and see how you can move forward. Do… I….” she sat up, legs crossing up before her and she was very quiet for a moment before she said, “I don’t know how I feel exactly um. About your men? I mean they…there’s obviously a conflict with what they did, and the kind of people you say they are. But um, i-if you’re scared, or nervous or anything…do you want me to come with you? Introduce myself, pull a little ‘Hiya, Herald of Andraste, I bailed your butts out of prison so play nice with my friend?’ thing?”

Oh, he was most certain if he approached his men with the Herald as his guard, she’d have them wrapped around her little fadelit fingers in a heartbeat, they’d never so much as look at him sideways if she bid it but, “I appreciate the advice, and the offer, Ellie. But you’ve done more than enough. This is something I should do.”

“Go on ahead, I’ll see you later,” Thom assured the Iron Bull who nodded, leveling his newest recruits a parting wave before he turned about to seek out the Herald’s advisors.

He took a deep breath before he dared look to the men gathered before him, watching and waiting and he wondered perhaps if it was a similar thing for them—if they’d imagined how this would go down, the way he had.

“I’m,” he had to clear his throat, Maker, it was suddenly tight, dry…open honesty. Well. His knees protested but he dropped to them. If they wanted penance paid in some sort of violence he wasn’t going to stop them, there wasn’t a point in standing his ground, there was nothing for him to stand on. “I can never apologize enough, there isn’t anything I can do to fix the mistakes I’ve made. I… I swear to you I did not know, and if I had, I would have called off the assault. It was foolish, petty politics I should never have gotten us involved in, what happened was my fault, the blame lies with me. What’s more I should have…if I’d been any sort of real man I would have turned myself in, the moment it happened, given myself to the authorities, kept your names out of it, instead I ran, left those of you who had the decency to do what I should have, to sort for yourselves. That was wrong, damn wrong, and there isn’t a thing I can do or say that will ever make up for it—” a blow landed on his shoulder.

Not…not a blow. Just…just a hand. Resting on his shoulder and squeezing. Klaus was kneeling before him.

“You stupid old bastard. We were the ones that acted blindly. We were your eyes on the field, in the moment… we didn’t realize what had happened until it was over. We turned ourselves in because it was us on us, our responsibility. Chapuis is the only reason the authorities learned we acted on your behalf.”

“Yeah, I gave the orders, I’m the reason you were even there in the first place, you didn’t act blindly, you acted on orders from a man you trusted. It was just as much my-”

Actual blow, Klaus’s fist popped him right in the jaw.

“You think you get to play woe-is-me over something we did? Get over yourself. You don’t have to live with just. Shut your goddamn mouth, alright?”

Well damn. “’m I supposed to shut my mouth, or respond?” Rainier asked.
“Just listen. We can’t change what happened. And we all know we don’t deserve whatever the hell this is, Inquisition, Andraste’s Herald bargaining mercy for us from Orlais. We barely knew a thing about the Breach and suddenly, we have our freedom and contracts from the people working to seal it, offers to join some Qunari bloke’s crew because his newest hire is our old commander who confessed his crime to the Herald of Andraste. All we can do, is better, serve the Inquisition, the Chargers, do what we can to help,” Klaus said as he rose to his feet, offering Thom a hand up. “Same as you.”

His men gathered around, standing in solidarity with Klaus.

And just like that, Thom Rainier was leading his old crew again…or, more like they were leading him. It’d been a while since breakfast and they were all damn hungry, and Haven had a mess hall now. Nice little set up, a large tented area with a row of tables laden with hot trays full of food serving staff slopped out portions from, and there were tables and benches. Crowded as could be but,

“Lieutenant’s running around playing tour guide now is he?” Klaus noted as they filed into line. Then, “Maker, is that…?”

Oh, Krem was out on the path that ran by the tented area, showing Ellie around, Maker that was nice, he looked relaxed, relieved and excited as he escorted the girl, and she looked more carefree than she had in weeks, rosy cheeked, arm in arm with the Lieutenant. They took one look at the crowd and Krem grinned as he bent to say something in quiet conspiracy to Ellie who giggled and nodded, squeezing his arm as he led her away.


“That Skinner lady calls her small but…shit. The Inquisition wants her to face the Breach?”

Scared him senseless too, if he thought about it enough, Ellie having to face the Breach again. But she wouldn’t be facing it alone. “Don’t know if you’ll get the chance to see it in action but her Mark is truly something. She can seal the Breach, we’ve all the allies we need now to make it so.”

“We…we’d like to meet her, thank her at some point, if she’d be willing to speak with us,” Cyril spoke up, looking to Thom, something hopeful in his gaze.

“She’s…we just got in, last stint out was hard, and this whole situation…it caused a lot of trouble for her personally. But after the holiday, once she’s had time to settle in and recover, yes, I’ll certainly ask,” Thom promised. Klaus snorted, whispering something to Charlie that made him snicker. Maker, it’s been years they were hardly—it wasn’t he- He was hardly being soft, it was a perfectly reasonable request to fulfill, it might take a load off of Ellie’s mind to put faces and names to her impressions, to see them and know they will not squander the opportunity she’s given them, that her deal with the Empress wasn’t a mistake.

It felt strange being around everyone after everything. It’d been more than five years since he last saw these men, a majority of that time they’d spent in prison, but they seemed to be acclimating well, something like gratitude in their numbers toward the Lieutenant for that—he’d been bloody detailed in his reports to Thom and Bull about how well they were adjusting, but he truly had done the work. Sat them all down made sure they had everything they needed gear wise and uh, well he’d apparently made it clear if they ever needed to, they could come to him to talk, something wasn’t setting with them right, all they had to do was say so. Kept them structured, worked them hard, but he made sure they had down time, put in requests for books or materials that allowed them to pursue old interests, keep their minds and hands busy, taught some of them how to
knit when they showed interest. Hooked Cyril up with instructional manuals, supplies and
ingredients, helped get him back in the swing of playing healer, he’d always been good about
taking up after everyone when people were hurt back in the day.

Cyril…that was…he was probably who Thom was most nervous seeing after everything.
He hadn’t been certain they would all accept the offer of work from the Inquisition, but they had,
every one of them save…Everette wasn’t among them, though Thom hadn’t heard of him being
apprehended. Still, it’d been startling to see Cyril’s face in that bit of drawing the Lieutenant had
sent off to Ellie. Thom couldn’t much find it in himself to strike up conversation with the man, not
as he did with the others it felt…he felt…he was ashamed.

And then he was avoiding. Lunch had gone well enough, but he needed…he wasn’t sure
what he needed. To thank Krem certainly, yes, that would sort. And he should touch base with
Bull.

Ellie’d accepted Krem’s invitation to attend the evening festivities with him and it was
heartening to see the young man so excited, he damn well deserved it. Thom was of a mind to see
if Bull’d maybe give the lad some time off, he was due a reward. And Maker, he was excited but
exhausted, it looked like. Bull must have seen as much himself because he sent the boy off to rest.

And then he questioned the Chargers six ways to Sunday, wanting every last detail of what
had gone on in their absence. Krem’d basically been supervising their newest recruits round the
clock making sure they kept their noses clean and to the grindstone, woke up, saw to their rising
and breakfast, drills, training, getting them used to working the job again, made sure they and the
Core team ran smoothly, and there’d been more group meals apparently. He’d started some nightly
ritual of having them all gather around the bonfire to winddown for the evening, made a point of
including Commander Cullen, he’d apparently an open invitation to their camp.

Thom spent the rest of the evening, not-hiding, in the stables. Their horses were well cared
for, and it wasn’t like he needed Russel’s mug for reference any longer, he’d finished that bit of
carpentry before they set out for the Hinterlands. But there was one more charm to craft to wrap up
Ellie’s gift, a few more beads to make sure it looked nice and wasn’t too tight…he wasn’t sure
she’d even wear it, it was hardly fine jewelry. But he knew for certain she’d appreciate the little
miniature of her horse, worried that alone would seem like he were offering her a child’s gift, so he
thought the bracelet would balance things out, a more presentable thing for a teen girl. So he sat on
a stool in the horses’ company and finished his crafting, Sera’d been good enough to lend him
strong thread she had left over, and he strung the beads carefully, fuss a bit over their order, and
finally secured the wooden clasp he’d made for either end, glad to see it worked. That was good.
Maybe he should just test it a few more times… fiddling with a damn clasp open-closed, open-
closed for five straight minutes. He was hiding.

And the Iron Bull came and found him.

“Hey Sarge. Krem’s just getting ready to go pick up Boss girl. Party’s on soon, already a bit
of a get together going on in the clearing, your guys are sticking to that they said. You feel like
joining them or you wanna hit up the Chantry digs with me?” Bull was offering though he stopped
and asked, “You uh, you okay?”

Thom stopped his fiddling with his more than finished bracelet, tucking it away in his coat
pocket for safe keeping as he said, “Fine, just fine.”

“That uh…okay,” Bull sighed, coming to stand before Thom, crossing his arms over his
chest as he leaned back against a barrel. “Come on man, spill. Somethings up.” He gave it just a
moments thought and, “You just about jumped out of your skin when you saw that Cyril guy in
that picture Krem sent. He asked about you when I went to check in on everyone before heading out, real worried about you missing dinner.”

Had he?...huh. “It’s complicated, I’d rather not get into it.”

“Alright. Well you need to, lemme know,” he offered sincerely before clapping Thom’s shoulder in a great warm hand, “Come on then. We’re going stag.”

Stag suited just fine. Food was good, company even better, he got to hang around with Bull a bit but mostly left the Qunari to his own devices, he was ‘looking to score’, and Thom was just... well he certainly wasn’t looking for any such thing. He mostly enjoyed the music, refreshments, and the few dances he indulged in, it was nice to hear from the both of them, Krem and Ellie how their date was going. Good to see Ellie-girl having so much fun after their journey and Maker he was right excited for her birthday.

And he thought he was in the clear, at least for the evening, after the fireworks display died down and everyone started wandering off to either seek more dance or drink, or head for bed for… sleep but mostly sex it looked like, the Iron Bull left his knickers out front of the Chargers tent and that was uh…pretty good indication he was, er, entertaining. Thom had made it this long without bearing witness to whatever ‘Riding the Bull’ was and he was going to keep it that way…which lead to the mistake, stumbling out of the clear so to speak.

He ended up drawing near the low bonfire going in the Charger’s clearing, and he’d already been seen approaching by the time he realized the fire hadn’t been left wholly unattended, it’d be more than awkward, cowardly, to turn tail and run…well he was certainly through, with being a coward. Trying to be, anyway.

“Really know how to ring in the new year, this Inquisition,” Cyril said as Thom came to stand by the fire.

Thom had to clear his throat. “Yep.”...yep?

“They uh…they’re good people, running everything. Lady Montilyet was in charge of the festivities.”

“Ambassador. Nice woman. There’s something on tomorrow—we’ve the day off but we’re also on standby for a…snowball fight?” he asked as if making certain he weren’t crazy and misheard their orders.

“After midnight so it’s today actually,” Thom offered lightly. “Ellie-girl’s birthday. She uh…she’s never celebrated the day before, doesn’t know about birthday parties and the like so we’re trying to make it special.”

“Huh. Well then, I hope it helps make the day special for her,” Cyril offered sincerely, huffing a bit of a wry laugh, “Maker, this is all so strange isn’t it? Two months ago I was a year away from hanging, but here I am, I just…saw a fireworks display, drank some damn good mead with my friends out in the open air, celebrated the coming year.”

Maker, the thought nearly winded him. “You…you were going to hang?

“I didn’t…I hadn’t heard. I thought you’d gotten er, life sentences.”

“Kids died, Thom. Klaus was looking at early release, maybe two years from now? Good behavior, and uh, he was more of an accessory. He took point watching the road, killed the carriage driver, but turning himself in and pleading guilty all worked in his favor. Rest of us were looking at a few more decades of time, but someone had to take the brunt of responsibility. We were all there, it was all our faults, doesn’t much matter who’s blade…dunno. I was just done with it all. Figured
it was the right thing to do even if I didn’t…it was a real mess. I should’ve done more, and I didn’t.”

“Wh- who-?” he shuddered, retracting the question, “No, sorry I-”

“Everette,” Cyril answered anyway. “He’s dead. Kids weren’t part of the deal, most of us had the damn sense to know that. But maybe it was the confusion of battle, or just, how ingrained in us it was to follow order without question, it’s not like we did enough to stop him until after it was too late. Lots of should’ve’s about the whole thing.”

“If…if I’d known, heard you were going to hang I would’ve come*.”

“To watch?” wry, but a touch too macabre for Thom’s liking.

“To do whatever I could to stop it.”

“Hmm. All good now, innit? We’re grateful, all of us, for this new life. We aren’t going to mess it up.” Cyril said, nodding as he stared into the fire. “Others headed to the mess, serving something warm to send everyone off, I think I’ll join them. You coming, or are you good here?”

He…he certainly had a lot to think about. He’d turned tail, abandoned everything, everyone so fast. He hadn’t even…Maker, he thought Everette had been in prison or on the run like him, he didn’t realize, he hadn’t seen who did what, let alone his men turning on each other after the fight, cutting down their numbers that took things too far.

“I’m good here. Enjoy your day off tomorrow…er, today. We’ll get a fresh start on the 2nd.”

Cyril nodded and as he passed, he rested a hand on Thom’s forearm, squeezing before he pressed a kiss to his cheek. “Happy new year, Thom.”

It really was. Maker, everything about Ellie-girl’s birthday was fun, and he was glad to have the luck to be a member of her party, and the Chargers core ranks, it meant being part of almost the entire day, breakfast, snowball fight—great many snowballs hurled at him from his men, far fairer punishment than he’d ever expected—and then lunch. Nervous as hell to give her his present but she’d been so grateful, loved the miniature of Russel and the bracelet fit her well, she seemed truly delighted with it. Dinner as a group, Advisors and all packing into Flissa’s tavern, was how they decided to end the day. Little yipper Cullen outshone them with was resting soundly in Ellie’s lap, mirroring her mistress, once they’d eaten and were all just chatting, Ellie was worn from excitement, fell asleep, head resting on Krem’s shoulder. Cole went quiet where he sat across from Ellie, next to Thom, and bowed his head to focus on keeping her from…well he wasn’t sure how it worked exactly, but the girl reported sleeping soundly last night, so bless him.

“I think we did a damn good job,” Bull commended quietly, raising his mug in a bit of a toast them before sipping at his drink.

“Thank you, everyone, for helping with the day,” Marehis said sincerely.

“We will get back into the swing of things, as it were, tomorrow,” Cassandra said.

“I’ve added you to her schedule, as requested, Sera,” Lady Montilyet confirmed, met with the Elf’s quiet, but enthusiastic ‘yes!’.

“You good taking on ground troop drills tomorrow Sarge?” Bull asked,
Thom nodded. “Of course.”

“Cool. Thinkin’ I’ll give Krem-pie a few days off. On the downlow, guy doesn’t know how to take a damn break, so I’ll need your help making it seem like he’s still being taken to task, or he won’t let me pay him. Lots of ‘oh no, Bull asked you to do that? Well I already did so… whoops’.”

He was more than happy to provide a break for the Lieutenant, but he wasn’t too sure about how ‘on the downlow’ it would be considering…oh. Lad certainly did deserve a rest. Krem’s head was slumped forward, out like a light.

“I’m never letting him live down sleeping with Boss-girl before the second date,” the Qunari decided.

“You leave him be,” Thom reprimanded. “It’s not like you have room to talk. Grim drew the short stick, had to get them back with your things since you never did pick your britches up after you were done entertaining company last night.”

Dorian suddenly choked on his drink, coughing so hard Thom almost wondered if someone should do something to help, Maker.

Wait…had…had Dorian-?

Nope, didn’t want to know, staying way out of that!

“Hmm, Dorian? You okay?” Ellie asked sleepily, roused from her impromptu nap.

“Wrong hole,” the Tevinter Mage croaked out.

Sera screamed with laughter, having to rise up from her seat and walk away, doubling over with her amusement, Ellie staring at her like she were half concerned the girl’d gone mad. Bull, Maker the Qunari was a particularly astonishing shade of purple.

Krem startled awake, his arm had been resting on the back of Ellie’s chair and he pulled her more against him, while his other hand went to the hilt of his sword—he certainly couldn’t draw it without striking the table top and it’d be clumsy going, but his hand just rested there as he blinked, looking about trying to discern if Sera was in danger from all the ruckus she was making, “Ser’, you good?”

“She’s…she’s okay I think,” Ellie assured, though she did feel the need to clarify, “…I think,” uncertain that her friend was truly ‘okay’.

Following day Thom woke to the missive that he was part of Ellie’s schedule for the day, horseback riding session. He left the Charger’s camp to navigate the growing number of tents outside Haven in search of where his men were staying, figured they should take breakfast together as a group. They were all making their way to the mess, Jamieson, ever the morning person, flipped Thom off as he approached them.

“Morning to you too,” Thom chuckled, “thank you all, for participating yesterday.”

“Kid have a good party?” Cyril asked.

“She did, good fun,” Thom said. “We’ve got drills to run this morning and then uh, Klaus I’d appreciate you taking point. I’ve lessons with Ellie at ten, I’ll be back for lunch.”
“You got it,” Klaus agreed.

“The hell they have you teaching her?” Charles asked as Thom passed back trays for them.

“Horseback riding, it takes about an hour or so. I’ll um…I’ll ask if she’d feel up to meeting everyone.”

Earned him nods and a few claps to his shoulders in gratitude.

When they headed to the practice field, Ellie-girl was out with Seeker and Commander…not entirely sure how productive they were starting out, it looked like the girl was trying to teach her pup how to do pushups, Cullen was nothing but amused encouragement, and Cassandra was looking skyward as if to question her Maker just why He put her in such a blessed but ridiculous situation.

“Twenty-five, twenty-six- Come on Anya, you can do it-seven, twenty-eight!” Ellie counted through her own pushups, though she stopped to sit on her knees and cheer when the pup remained standing on her back paws but stretched out her front before her, chest dipping low to touch the ground, the closest thing a puppy could do to imitate a pushup, “oh yay! Anya, good job! Good girl! She’s so smart!” she enthused to Cullen, then the pup in question, “You’re so smart!” she saw Thom leading his men to the Charger’s clearing and raised her arm over head to wave, and he threw up a little wave back.

Clearing was empty when they arrived, Bull was taking the core group out on rounds outside Haven estate to verify there wasn’t any bandit presence re-establishing itself after their last encounter.

Ultimately, he hadn’t needed to ask Ellie, if she’d come to meet his men. Little more than an hour after they started their drills Thom was just getting ready to pass off things to Klaus, he’d have to meet Ellie in just a few minutes, but, Cyril blocked a blow from Jamieson and caught Thom’s eye before nodding for him to look behind him.

“Oh, Ellie-girl,” Thom greeted, she stood with some distance between them like she’d not wished to disturb their training or perhaps…well it would be reasonable for her to be shy or nervous too approach, even as she was arm in arm with Marehis, “I’m sorry I thought I was keeping track of the time-”

Ellie shook her head, smiling a bit as she said, “Oh, gosh, you’re fine,” she looked to her own wristwatch to confirm, “I’m just a little early. Lady Josie needed to see Cullen and Cassandra for something. It didn’t take long to get Anya settled back in at the cabin and grab my cloak. I didn’t mean to interrupt, but I thought maybe I should say hi to everyone?”

“Of course,” Thom assured holding out his hand for Ellie to take if she wished, and she gave Marehis’s arm a squeeze before she slipped from her hold and took Thom’s hand, her minder giving him a fearsome glare over Ellie’s head that spoke of his doom if this went badly, Marehis had become less antagonized by his betrayal but still, he wasn’t on the steadiest footing with the Herald’s bodyguard, understandably. He led her to his men as they sheathed their weapons and gathered together.

“Hi, I’m Ellie! Can I ask your names?”

What that resulted in was the men kneeling before her and offering up their names in turn.

“Gosh, Nicolaus is a fancy name—how d’you spell it?” she asked.
“N-i-c-o-l-a-u-s. Klaus for short.”

“Ni-co-laus, Nicolaus. Cool! It’s so long but there aren’t any secret letters in it!” she was pleased to find. Silent letters, she meant, but the girl held a grudge against the damned things—they did seemingly unnecessarily complicate spelling—so she accused them of being some great secret.

“Oh, you’re Cyril…I’m sorry Skinner scared you guys but if it makes you feel any better, it was pretty funny, Cremisius told me about it when I needed cheering up,” Ellie said when they finished introducing themselves.

“Glad to hear that then, “ Cyril said. “My lady, we are grateful, for what you’ve done for us. Hearing Thom’s confession, allowing us to pay penance in this way. We’re honored to serve and hope to do so well.”

Ellie nodded, smiling. “I’m sure you’ll do great. It really is nice to meet you all, sorry it took me a while to get around to it—I think I saw you all yesterday during the snowball fight?”

“We were in it, yes. Did you have a nice birthday?” Cyril asked.

“Uh-huh! Thanks! For asking, and for being part, gosh playing in the snow was fun! And Thom made me—I have the best horse in the world, his name’s Russel and Thom carved me a little Russel! And this bracelet, it’s so pretty, see?” she thrust out her unmarked hand, to, Maker, show the bracelet like it was something to show.

The man smiled warmly as he examined his work, “It is, very pretty,” he agreed, “We’re glad you had such a nice day.”

That was met with the girl’s interest in when their birthdays were, and did Thom know them? He should keep track, so they can all do nice things for their birthdays! She was writing them down and she’d remind him! Maker.

She put away her little flipping notebook and checked her watch, “9…o’2 gosh, I have lessons with Thom now, and Russel! But I’ll see you later! Have a great day.”

“You as well, my Lady,” Klaus wished her and she smiled her thanks, linking arms with Thom.

The girl heaved a sort of sigh of relief as they made their way to the stables. “They seem nice,” she said. Thom nodded his agreement, and then, “Cole and I talked a lot about it last night, while I slept? They still hurt, over what happened. Did they say anything about their talk? Cole said he spent most of First-Day Eve talking with them around the Charger’s fire, but um, I don’t know if they remember it. But Cole saw that they killed the man that actually um…well, you know.”

“I do. Now, at least. We’ve talked about it to some degree.” Cole had spoken with them? They hadn’t mentioned as much but…the boy did have the tendency to leave his messier dealings unmemorable, and Thom could see how such a conversation would be incredibly messy.

“They’ve been nice to you right?” she made certain.

“Yes, Ellie-girl, they have been.”

“Good!”
Their lesson was pleasant, it was a good chance to practice emergency maneuvers...but it was more the mere opportunity for the girl to spend time with Russel. Marehis rode along with Ellie to their practice set up, the Elf woman taking the reins, arms around Ellie as the girl took their leisurely ride out as a chance to dig in to Varric’s latest publication, Maker that was clever of the Dwarf. Ellie read aloud, for the horse’s benefit apparently since the book was about him after all.

Him, and the lead antagonist. Russel apparently spent a great deal of time outsmarting a ‘Great Bumbling Oaf’ to protect his beloved rider from the Oaf’s clumsy influence.

But it was all in good humor and it was wonderful hearing her increasing confidence with reading out loud. She tucked the book back into her cloak and it was nice to return to routine, calling out instruction and advice as the girl rode.

“I do appreciate your care and encouragement while helping her practice,” Marehis spoke up to his surprise as they stood together watching over Ellie’s lesson. Her lessons, he thought she meant, but then, “We have you to thank, for her comfort with reading out loud.”

Ahh. “It was the least I could do.”

As they made their return trip, Ellie asked, “You’ve got more training things to do after our lesson, yeah?” and when Thom nodded, she smiled, “I’ve got lessons with Dorian next but then I’m free for lunch. You’ll break for that right?”

“Of course,” he said, believing the inquiry to be on the basis of...well Ellie didn’t like the idea of anyone going hungry. But, when they returned from their lesson and had their horses squared away, she walked with him back to the clearing where Klaus was running the others through their drills.

“Ahh, our esteemed instructor returns,” Jamieson called out jovially, bringing attention to Klaus who signaled for everyone to halt their practice fighting.

“Did you have a pleasant lesson, lady Herald?” Cyril asked.

“I did! It’s always fun, lots of work though, I’m already hungry, but I’ve got another lesson next hour, before the noon meal. Thom says you’ll be on break around the same time I am, and I’d really love it if we could all eat together,” she said. “You can meet Anya! She’s a puppy and she’s just the sweetest!”

“We...” Cyril looked to the others, Thom, for confirmation, “we would be honored.”

“Great! Have fun practicing, be safe!” she wished them well, as she left with Marehis pulling the girl close and he heard the woman question if Ellie was in need of something to tide her over.

They broke a little early for lunch, not wanting to keep the girl waiting and too, they’d wanted to clean up a bit, before entertaining their young guest. And Anya, as promised. The pup was in tow, eagerly following Ellie out to meet them, under watch of Marehis though the woman drew near one hand gripping his forearm while the other pressed her bag of Ellie’s potions into his hand. She quietly intoned, speaking directly into Thom’s ear, “There has been a situation, Ellie isn’t to be made aware, but I need to meet with Leliana. You watch her, do not let her out of your sight, if I am not returned before her next lesson, the Iron Bull will be here.” And when he nodded, gripping the bag of potion securely before moving to tie it onto a belt loop, Marehis turned to the girl and was open warmth as she took Ellie’s face in hand, “Da’vehnan, you’re sure you’re alright with this?”
“Of course!” Ellie assured, “I hope you have a nice time on your lunch date with Solas!”
ahh, as it turned out instead of endangering the girl, Marehis’s dating life offered a nice bit of
cover.

“I hope you have a pleasant time as well,” Marehis kissed the girl on the cheek before
smoothing back her hair with just the barest bit of tremble in her hand. Maker, whatever had
happened frightened her something awful.

“Hi! Thanks for meeting me for lunch,” Ellie came to address their group, introducing
them, “this is Anya! Can you say ‘hi’ Anya?”

The little pup looked up at her, then Thom and his men, then back and offered a little happy
sounding huff, tail wagging a mile a minute, Maker she was an energetic little thing.

“It’s an honor to meet the brave little warrior pup—we saw her training this morning, very
impressive,” Cyril complimented warmly, crouching to pet Anya as she approached him, sniffing
curiously at his hands before nuzzling against them.

“Uh-huh,” Ellie agreed, “Anya’s going to be the toughest warrior mage ever!”

…“Warrior mage?” Thom asked, uncertain. Puppies couldn't be mages...no...could they?

Apparently they could, after a fashion. “Yup! She saw me cast this morning—I woke up
super early and it was cold, so I cheated and used my pyro spell and she wanted to try to, now she
does this little thing, it’s like a trick—Anya, cast!”

The pup yipped in response and then looked up at Cyril, stomped a paw to the snow and let
loose her loudest attempt at barking.

So the man did the only thing he could. “I’ve been hit!” Cyril declared, falling onto his
back and Anya went in for the kill, climbing onto his chest and licking at his face, and Ellie was
delighted with the act, laughing up a little storm along with Thom and his men.

Though Thom just about drew his sword when he saw fast movement in his peripheral, but
he relaxed in the same instant, it was just Sera bounding out the gate, heading for Ellie. The girl
might not be aware of whatever the ‘situation’ was, but Sera, apparently, was in the know. The Elf
girl and collided with Ellie, taking her up, literally hoisted her so her feet were off the ground as
she hugged her Human friend fiercely, “Inky! ’m joining you for lunch, ‘kay?”

Though Ellie might not be so very safe in the Elf girl’s hold, “Gosh, yeah- Ser- squeezing-
air-!”

“Shite, shite, sorry!” Sera quickly set her on her feet, pulling back to rub at Ellie’s arms,
“Didn’t mean to squish you.”

“Are you feeling okay, Sera?” Ellie asked worriedly, raising a finger to carefully touch the
purplish-dark skin just under the Elf’s eye, she’d matching dark circles and the poor girl looked
like she hadn’t slept a wink. Maker, she did look rather bedraggled, had she been involved
somehow with the threat to Ellie? Had she been injured?

“I’m okay, just sleepy, Ink,” Sera assured.

They filed into line for the mess, with Sera physically attached to Ellie, Thom hung back to
quietly relay to his men to be alert, some sort of security breach had happened, and the girl may
well be in some danger, and received several affirmative nods that they’d be on the lookout, guard
her. Ellie and Sera were at the head of their group while the Elf befell questioning, Ellie eager to help her friend if she was feeling unwell—was she sick? She said she wanted to come to lunch but was her stomach upset any? Did she need a nap? Had she gotten enough sleep last night? Apparently the Tavern was packed rather late into the evening the other night, well into the early hours of morning, and the Elf had needed to rise early. Noise wasn’t so much an issue it was merely space—the Tavern had been full to bursting, and when there was finally a break in pace that allowed her to lie down, she’d woken shortly after to someone sitting on her cot, on the Elf herself having not seen her.

“We’ll get your sleeping clothes and you can wash up and nap in my cabin after lunch, Ser’, I have lessons all afternoon—no one’ll be around to bother you, Anya might follow me, but she’ll probably snuggle you if you’re okay with that, I’ll make sure the cabin’s all toasty for you!”

“You sure, Ink?”

“Uh-huh! Yup! Just rest and relax, and if you’re feeling better later we can go get dinner together. We could even order in if you want, it’ll be fun!”

Sera looked a little out of depth—overwhelmed, tired, and stressed over whatever threat had been posed to the friend offering her so much kindness, she looked like she might cry—so Thom stepped up to take some of the girl’s attention off her, “What looks good to you, Ellie-girl?”

“Gosh there’s so much to choose from, everything smells great,” Ellie said as she took a tray and passed it back, starting a chain of take-and-pass and then she stepped up and introduced herself to everyone working the serving line, thanking them for their work.

Cook was…a large, loud, no nonsense fellow, and in high dudgeon this afternoon. “Oi! You watch that flame! And mind your damn fingers, that’s a knife not a plaything! If I see even a bit of pink in that chicken—don’t make me come over there!” he cracked a spatula against the table top before he used it to point in the direction of a serving girl cooking up a large pan of chicken in warning.

“Hi! I’m Ellie!” she greeted as she came stand before the serving dish the Cook was manning.

“Andraste’s sagging tits, who the hell’s letting their brat run loose? You expect me to feed it too?” the man called out at his staff, receiving blank stares as he returned his attention to the girl, “You want biscuits put your damn plate up here, keep the line moving, I got mouths to feed.”

“I’m lots of people’s brat I suppose—Eleanor, Herald of Andraste,” she raised her Marked hand to him as she held out her tray, it was a bit difficult to perceive the glow of her Mark in the light of day unless you were looking right at the palm of her hand, “I haven’t gotten a chance to meet you—thanks so much for all the hard work, keeping everything safe and running smoothly, you’re doing a wonderful job.”

The man leveled her a hard look and then, “Huh. Fine. Double biscuits since you’re supposedly going to seal the Breach,” he said, dropping four biscuits onto her plate, “Keep it moving.”

“He’s a right prick,” Sera muttered to the girl as they finished up getting their food and started heading for a table.

“Oh, gosh, I’m sure he’s nice enough in his off time,” Ellie said as she looked around for a place they could all sit, reasoning, “It’s a lot of hard work, and it’s so dangerous—everyone eats
here, depends on it, you could take down almost all of Haven with one tiny little accident, everyone has to be sharp, no room for coddling because there’s no margin for error.”

They all managed to squeeze in on an empty bench lined table, Thom could feel Anya shuffling around under the table, brushing by, sniffing and searching. Ellie was already putting some of her chicken and sweet potato and peas onto a handkerchief she bundled up and then slipped down under the table and he heard, “Here Anya, yeah good girl! Mwah!” before she popped back up brushing off her hands as she resumed her seat. “Cullen says she needs meat and veggies and carbs. She isn’t allowed to eat chocolate, it makes puppies sick, isn’t that awful?”

Oh, that was certainly unfortunate but,

“I suppose you’ll have to be all the sweetness she needs then, lovely.”

Sera started laughing as Ellie’s face went red, twisting about to look up at, “Cremisius! You- gosh! Hi!” she greeted, scooting over so he could sit beside her on the end of the bench, the Tevinter setting his tray down and pressing a kiss to the side of her head as he said,

“Hi, how’s your day going?” There was a little ‘yip’ from below and he smiled, leaning forward, arm under the table and Thom could feel the thump thump thump of Anya’s tail beating against his shin, as Krem pet the pup in greeting.

“Great!” Ellie said, “What about you?”

“It’s been nice, we went out of Haven for a quick patrol—Bull spooked his own horse with uh, something loud and deadly,” the Lieutenant reported waving a hand before his face as if to banish the smell, “ended up tossed in a snow bank.”

“Oh gosh,” Ellie laughed despite herself, worrying, “is he okay?”

“Lug’s fine, soft landing. We helped him up,” Krem assured her all too innocently.

“They buried me in snow first,” the Iron Bull informed her as the Qunari took a seat at the table behind theirs, sitting himself down behind Ellie. Ahh. That table’d been mostly empty, there were spaces before the Qunari but he sat with Ellie at his back, and Stitches in his blind spot, Grim on his seeing side. The rest of the Chargers took seats at the table beside the one Thom and Ellie had claimed, surrounding the girl on all sides with people they could trust, securing her unaware while Bull shared, “And then dogpiled on me. I stood up with my *ine*subordinates hanging off of me like damn monkeys.”

“Oh!” Ellie chirped excitedly, “Monkeys are so cute! Dorian and I just read about them, in this little book that has pictures, they’re native to Par Vollen*, Seheron, the Arbor Wilds—tropical places! They can eat bananas with their little feet!”

“At least they have talent, I should just trade you bastards in for monkeys!” the Iron Bull decided.

“Monkeys are probably no good at paperwork,” Krem reasoned for his job security, “I’ll be by to help you with that after lunch,” he said to Thom, “Things we gotta file for your team, due by the end of the week—”

“Oh,” needed to get a start on that, yeah, but, he had his orders. “I already finished that up.”

“Oh, cool. Good work. Uh…need help with anything else then? Chief?”
“Can’t think of anything,” Thom offered.

“Shit, me neither,” the Qunari said. “Got lessons with Imekari after lunch, actually.”

Ellie looked surprised to hear that, “Really? I thought I had lessons with Solas next?”

Sera bit down harshly on her lip and Thom suddenly wasn’t very hungry anymore oh Maker, she looked devastated had—

Krem stretched casually, reaching out behind Ellie to tap Sera on the shoulder in the same motion he rested his arm around the Human girl, the action made Ellie smile and lean into him, gave Sera a clear view of Krem when she looked his way, mouthing ‘he’s okay’. Sera looked as relieved as Thom felt at that, oh, thank everything. Maker just…just what had happened?

“Something came up,” Bull offered to Ellie, “—some kind of Fade thing he wants to try observing this afternoon, you know he’s always talking about that crap, some kind of celestial bullshit lined up and it’s a good time to see the glimmer of an ancient whatever’s asscrack,” Ellie giggled at his crude simplification of Solas’s work in the Fade. Bull was making it all sound just a touch too okay, warm and open in that way he did when he was deflecting, amusing to distract. “All good, he just had to reschedule—figured you’d understand him wanting to pursue his Fade stuff. I said I’d be down to swap timeslots with him today. That cool with you, Imekari? We don’t gotta work even, we can shoot the shit, just me and my Boss-girl.”

“Gosh, yeah, that’d be fun! Learning or shooting, I always have fun with you, the Iron Bull!”

“Glad to hear it. Guys are all squared away doin’ their own thing this afternoon, potions, experimental crap Rocky’s getting into I don’t even what to know. Guess you’re off the hook Krem-pop.”

“…huh,” Krem said, “Alright…well, think of anything, holler at me. Might be crashing a psychology lecture/shit shooting session, though. You know, if it’s cool with the star pupil,” giving said student a little wink as he gave her a little squeeze before unwinding his arm from around her shoulders.

Ellie seemed to give it a measure of consideration. “That depends entirely on if you’re sharing your gravy—I got double biscuits and totally spaced on gravy and it’s basically the worst mistake of my entire life, I regret every decision that has led me to this point.”

“Well we can’t have that, can we?” he agreed earning him a kiss on the cheek and a share of Ellie’s biscuits. Thom leveled his men a glare to knock off their snickering.

Lunch was pleasant, they chatted amicably, Ellie asking Thom’s men all sorts of questions—how were they settling into Haven? Wonderfully. Did they need anything? Nothing, Lieutenant had them settled. Did they like working for the Chargers? How long had they known Thom? She gasped with excitement when Cyril could attest to having lived just down the street from him in Markham, she was absolutely elated with the prospect that,

“You knew Thom when he was just tiny?! I need details! How cute was he? And has he always been so spectacularly hairy? He’s the fluffiest human being I’ve ever met, and I’ve met a werewolf.” She giggled at the startled stares the claim got her, “Not a real one…I don’t think—it was an act, I mean he was really super hairy, but the werewolf claim was for working in a traveling circus.”
“Oi, nice to know you’ve got career options Thom,” Jamieson jested, the bastard.

Cyril huffed a laugh, nodding, before he answered Ellie’s inquiries, “Oh he was a real heartbreaker in his youth despite the fact you could never get him to sit still long enough for a proper haircut. Used to run around with hair down to his a- er, behind,” he censored himself for his current audience, “Worked as a reliable way to catch him, just reach out and yank.”

Maker his scalp almost stung from the memory, “You just about ripped my bloody scalp off that time when Guardsman Rodgers—”

“You were headed right for the Guardsman!”

“I got turned around,” Thom defended, “couldn’t see—

’cause you were like a walking wig!” Cyril teased.

“You got in trouble with the guard when you were just little?” Ellie asked, sounding amused.

“Got caught pinching food,” Thom explained. Been right good of Cyril to help, there’d been loads of times he’d come around and shared his own food with Thom and Liddy when he knew their mother was struggling to make ends meet, and whenever Thom needed to take matters into his own hands, he’d insisted he not do so alone.

“Oooh,” she sympathized offering, “in Markham? Big city, fancy bakeries. You should’ve waited ‘til closing—most big-name places toss anything they don’t sell, gosh it’s good eating. Well, as long as they don’t mess with it?” she supposed, warning, “Got horrible sick once when someone poured kerosene all over everything before throwing it out. I’d been ill for a while, nose was still stopped up, so I didn’t realize anything was wrong with it ‘til I was puking my guts up—always sniff before you scarf!”

“Wh- why the hell would they do that?” Krem asked, appalled. “It’s—they were the ones throwing away perfectly good food, it shouldn’t matter what happens with it afterward.”

Ellie shrugged. “Owner didn’t want ‘vagrants’ hanging about and the like.”

Sera made a frustrated little sound at that. “Friggin! Friggin’ shite that is.”

“To be fair, this particular vagrant avoided his rubbish bins after that.”

“Oooohhh you should—you can write now Ink, you should send a review or something to Markham’s newspaper thingamajig, bet their next headline would be ‘Herald of Andraste says Baker bastard’s crappy pastries made her sick!’ it’s the truth! But him right out of business!”

Ellie did seem to think it over, and then she smiled like she’d thought of something important. “People know to avoid his bins so it’s not like anyone’s in danger if he still practices that. And it’s been a while, I mean gosh like three or more years ago, things might be different now,” she looked to Thom, “People change, learn, do better. He hurt me, and it could have been bad, but I’d hate to punish the man he is now, if he’s no longer the man he was then.”

It…it bloody well clicked then. Thom’d wondered at Ellie’s sudden interest in meeting his men, spending time with them. Cole’s attempts at talking his men through their Hurt hadn’t gone exactly as planned, otherwise he was certain, if they were able to, someone would have mentioned the strange boy approaching them. When Ellie said Cole came to her to talk about what he learned from his time with them, Thom thought it was meant to quell any problems she might have with
them. It had, it seemed, but just like the Spirit boy told their party how to help the girl, he’d done something along that line here. Recruited her to help him here.

“It wouldn’t hurt you to be a little vengeful once in a while,” Sera complained.

“Oh really?” Ellie asked, mischievous as she thrust a hand skyward and declared, “Vengeance shall be—” and proceeded to make a few dramatic choking sounds as she leaned to lay in the Elf girl’s lap, legs laying over Krem’s thighs as the Lieutenant smiled, shaking his head.

“Inky! You’re a total nut!”

Friggin yes! Inky’s birthday went off without a hitch, and shite it’d been so much fun! Sera’d been all nerves and excitement waiting all day, she could keep a secret and it was important for the whole ‘surprise’ thing but still, she had to keep checking herself she was just so excited for the damn surprise she was constantly on the verge of blurting it out! And Ellie’d liked the little bracelet Sera’d made for her, like actual ‘thankful’ liked it, thought it was pretty! It’d been friggin wild when Sandra’s boyfriend broke out a puppy of all things, topped them all, but Inky’d asked if Sera thought she could make the little thing a collar that looked like their bracelets—she’d be a Friend too! And Ellie wore her Friend bracelet all day until it was time for bathing or bed, then she kept it in her the little jewelry box thing she had with all her nice things, and the things she wanted to keep safe! She’d just had things from Kremmy-boy in it, those flower things and the tag with her name on it and pish, now she kept the little Val Royeaux ring and the necklace Mare gave her, Not-Beardy’s bracelet, those fancy hair comb things Viv got her, and the watch from her Friend-boy. Oh shite she and Krem were cute. Dating, Inky said. She’d get all blushy when Sera teased her at the end of the day when they was settling in for sleep, day after her Birthday…

That was a regular thing now. See things was getting’ right uncomfortable in the Tavern—she spent their first night back in Haven in Ellie’s cabin, but the second she’d tried to get a sleep in in her own cot in the Tavern but uh, that’d turned out right miserable. For one thing Fliss’s had all kinds of different hours that was hoppin, but like, real hoppin, people not just in there for their meals but straight coming in to drink and have fun, which was great except for when it got so crowded there was no where for Sera to sleep when she needed some shut eye. Noise wasn’t so much a problem just, no room, she’d woken up to people crowding her cot and some bloke friggin’ sat on her! And then there was that weirdy bard bitch. She’d taken it into her head to write a song about Sera, and that just wasn’t on, blah! Nope. Didn’t like it. It was just creepy! Inky thought it was cute but nope, not Sera’s jam, at all, ‘cept for all of two seconds she might not have hated it when Ellie got all giggly and started singin’ bout how ‘Sera was never an agreeable girl’ when they was arguin’. Shite she didn’t like arguin’ with Ellie, and it didn’t last long, thank friggin’ tits, but Inky got all fixy about Sera’s sleeping situation, and that wasn’t on either! Sera could handle her own business! It wasn’t…she didn’t want Ellie going out of her way to fix things for her!

It started with the napping, friggin proper nap—Ellie’d helped her wash up, the Iron Bull waited outside the cabin and Ellie scrubbed Sera’s hair real nice, washed it for her while Sera cleaned up, put some kind of sweet smelling oil she massaged into Sera’s scalp, right soothing and it left her hair so friggin soft! Then she changed into her sleeping things, and Inky fussed with the fireplace a bit, and came and made sure Sera was tucked in comfy in her blankets, kissed her on the forehead, and then she told her little pup to be good if she was going to stay in the cabin, ‘cause Sera was going to be sleeping, it was snuggle time, not play time. Anya curled right up against Sera and let her rest. Oh shite, she still couldn’t believe Ink’d taken the suggestion, Sera’d been kidding!
What should I name her? Lady’d been a real bitch, so Sera snorted and said ‘Anya’d be perfect’ but yeah, context, it didn’t land like something funny cause Ink didn’t know Lady ‘Anya’ Emmauld… but little Puppy Anya was sweetness enough so Sera guessed the name fit in an ironic way, and Ellie’d gotten all excited, thought it was cute so. Eh. Old bitch is dead, long live the sweet little bitch. Hmm, she was the snuggliest little thing!

When Sera woke up, Maker she felt better. About everything, she wasn’t exhausted anymore, and it was nice, waking up and being able to see Inky was alright, Ellie and Marehis were seated at the desk, Marehis in the chair with Ellie in her lap, using the dying light from the fire place, and Ellie’s Mark to see whatever they were working on, some kind of practice sheet Dorian had given her, matching words to definitions or something.

“Hey you,” Sera said as she sat up, stretching.

“Ser’!” Ellie said, pleased to see her awake, dropped her pencil and got up to come sit on the bed with her, though she stopped just before the fireplace and said, “Anya, ready? Cast!”

Awe that was cute, little pup was before the fire place and did her little ‘casting’ trick as Ellie dropped her pyro spell from her hand and into the fireplace, flared it right back up to make the room brighter, warmer and Anya gave a happy sounding ‘wuff!’ at her success, friggin’ precious.

“Oh da’len, how are you feeling?” Marehis asked as she joined them, raising a hand to feel at Sera’s forehead, friggin- she wasn’t sick, cripes! Made her feel a bit squirmy, Marehis’s fussing. “Ellie said you did not sleep well last night?”

“’m okay, all good now, um, everything all good here?”

Marehis nodded. “Da’vehnan, sweet girl, would you like to help?”

“Sure Mare’!” Ellie agreed, “What’cha need?”

“Would you mind putting in an order for dinner from Flissa’s? There’s a clean menu in the top of your desk drawer, just circle what we’d like and ask the guards if one of them would take it to her.”

Oh, “Yeah Ink, you know what we like to eat, you got it?” Sera asked.

“Yup!” Ellie agreed, bouncing off the bed to go do as she was asked. Marehis climbed into bed, sitting behind Sera and pulling her to sit in her lap while Inky finished circling menu things and headed for the door.

Frick. Some…some bastard had a delivery earlier, for Ellie. Sera’d been sittin’, chugging her fourth cup of coffee and trying to wake up enough for training with ‘sandra once she was through with Ellie’s lesson. But the Seeker didn’t show—she got an apologetic note from the woman saying there was an emergency meeting of the Advisors she had to attend, nothing dangerous but it was important and time-sensitive, and cripes, yeah, Sera understood that. She’d been about to try catching a few winks since her plans was cancelled when one of the Chantry cleaning ladies she’d invited into the Friends came running as fast as she could, bursting into Flissa’s. She’d been done with her shift, heading to go see some bloke she fancied that worked in the stables before getting something to eat and heading to bed, but she’d passed Inky’s cabin on her way to Haven’s gate, and seen some man leaving her room. She’d poked in to investigate cause he didn’t seem familiar, and he’d left this weird looking bouquet of flowers and an envelope that said Happy Birthday, Lady Herald. They was all dark purply-red, almost black, shaped like roses but there…there wasn’t really any difference between the top of the flower and its stem, and it
looked freakin familiar. Adan had been grumpy, waiting at the bar for Flissa to get him more coffee when he caught sight of the ‘flowers’ and yelled for the servant girl to get those things out of here—it shouldn’t be in a communal eating area and ‘fucks sake don’t touch them with your bare hands, who taught you to handle potions ingredients?! Wash your hands this instant!’

Blood lotus. Someone sent Inky a fucking bouquet of blood lotus*. Unsafe exposure could lead to hallucinations, send people comatose Adan had rattled off. Servant lady got real dizzy, pale and shaky and mumbling incoherently. Sera’d had to help her to Adan’s! And then they opened the letter to see who might claim the attempt, if they’d offered any kind of paper threat.

‘Ccept it wasn’t a letter. Second they got the envelope open, Adan’s hand was over Sera’s mouth and nose, and he stopped breathing, reaching around for a rag, pressed it to his face and used the air he had left in his lungs to tell Sera not to breathe, before he went and got masks, cloth things healers sometimes wore, putting one over Sera’s mouth and nose, and then the now unconscious servant girl, before dropping the rag and putting one on himself. They’d opened the envelope and poof, this friggin cloud of powder burst into the air, leaving these thick floating blobs of pollen it looked like, and it was, Adan confirmed bitingly. Blood lotus pollen. Healer went to the door, opening it a crack to holler for guards to come stand, and make sure ruddy no one comes to his cabin, and to get a mage, fast.

Solas heard, came, and shite he was a big help. Put on a mask Adan handed him through the crack in the door before he opened it wide enough for Solas to slip inside.

Elf bloke looked scared, concerned. “Sera, you’re alright? Do you feel feverish or weak? Did you breathe any of this in at all?” Sera shook her head ‘no’ hating that she was too scared to speak, shite. “I want you to very carefully hand the envelope to me, da’len.” She did as she was asked, Solas taking the envelope and trying to keep whatever was left inside contained. “Very good, Sera. Now, please, I implore you, I will be as noninvasive as possible, but I ask your permission—if there is any pollen on your person, I can remove it the same way I can collect what is in the air, I would like to decontaminate you and let you leave safely before I move forward.” Sera nodded, resisting the urge to take a deep breath to brace herself, shite shite shite, but it wasn’t like before, Solas’s magic didn’t feel yicky, there was something careful and warm and protective about what coasted down her head to toe across her skin, and over her clothing, something like Barrier that collected all the pollen off of her clothes and pulled it away to float, contained in a ball of purple light. “Thank you, da’len, you’ve been very brave.” And then he cast into the open air to contain the rest of the pollen. “Please step carefully around and leave, close the door behind you, do not return. Get word to Marehis, she and Ellie will be arriving at Dorian’s soon for her lessons, inform her what has happened here, I will report to Leliana as soon as this is handled.”

“Y-y-you’ll be alright, right?”

“I will be fine, da’assan,” oh cripes, dumb, dumb, dumb brain said little arrow nope! Big nope! He didn’t get to say shite that made Sera’s throat feel tight, eyes ache and itch. What the frick! “Go.”

She’d…well she’d listened sort of. She went to Leliana herself ‘cause she had ways of communicating quietly to her agents in Haven, she could get word to Marehis, everything the Elf woman could possibly need to know without tipping off Ellie and…shite, fuck, Sera didn’t want Ellie to know a thing about this! Fucking asshole used her birthday! And that was right terrifying because they couldn’t…shite, Ellie’s birthday wasn’t public knowledge, it wasn’t even recorded anywhere—it was a day she picked herself, shared with her friends in the Inquisition, and they’d kept it in house, only Inquisition people knew, specifically those who worked and lived in Haven because yeah, someone might want to use that information for something nasty and somehow
someone still managed to do so! They’d been ruddy careful! Lady Josie had ordered everything they needed for Ink’s party along with First Day Eve things, so it all looked like it was just for that, and Kremmy-Boy was responsible for things like the ‘pin the tail on the Fennec’ poster and he and the Chargers had made the big banner they hung in the Chantry. Wasn’t anyone’s business what presents was being bought for—no one let it slip in their shopping that they were purchasing things for the Herald of Andraste. But someone, somewhere, knew, and they’d tried to trick her with some twisted birthday present to bring her harm—who friggin knows what sort of horrible thing Inky’d hallucinate, and that crap could have sent her comatose—

Pollen, thick, and poisonous, and in the air, meant to be breathed in, Inky was smart, knew potions ingredients, but she might not have perceived a bouquet of blood lotus as a threat, but a genuine gift of ingredients and when she checked the card, Maker, she could have…would have had an asthma attack, gotten that crap way into her system she- what if- shite she could have died!

But she didn’t. It hadn’t gotten anywhere near her. She was alive and well and out of earshot as Marehis spoke very quietly against Sera’s ear. “Your Friend is alright, safe, and still willing to help, proud to have been of service in such a way. We apprehended the delivery man. Cole found him and was able to find just where the order came from, and we traced its initiation back to Duke Gaspard. Leliana will handle how we proceed with that information. Thank you, da’assan, thank you so much if…if your Friend had not intercepted—” she cleared her throat when her voice sounded tight and she pressed a kiss to the side of Sera’s head. “You did well today, you did everything right, and we are all so incredibly proud of you.”

“My…Solas is okay, right?” Krem’d said as much, and she trusted that, he was Bull’s guy and the Qunari was usually in the loop about security pish but…ugh that crap had been everywhere! She’d…shite! She’d been scared for that baldy git!

“Yes, sweet girl, he’s perfectly fine.”

“Order’s out!” Inky was happy to tell them as she came bounding back, the door closing behind her, “Gosh it should be good—” Ellie stopped in place as she joined them again, concerned, “oh, Sera, what’s wrong?”

Sera wiped at her eyes real quick, “Just got something in my eye Ink, it’s all good innit?” receiving a soft, sympathetic, ‘oh, ouch’, and Ellie came to the bed and crawled to sit on her knees before Sera, taking the older girl’s face in her hands and asking her to tilt her head back so she could look.

“Your eyes watering up cleared whatever it was away, nothing left but your pretty pretty baby blues! Mwah!” big kiss on the cheek and Inky thumbed away the tear tracks.

“Ink! Quit fussing, cripes you’re silly. Dinner’ll be here soon, we’re supposed to be being lazy right? You should clean up and get changed in to jammies.”

Ellie smiled at that, “That, is like, the smartest suggestion in life! Pajama party!”

And then Inky had tricks and traps of her own. She was clean and in soft pjs, curling up next to Sera, talking about her day. Then food came, and once they were finished eating, all warm, full bellies, Ink made her big play, got them all cuddling together on her bed, Sera laying between Marehis and Ellie, Anya curled up at their feet, all of them just snuggly and safe, content, and then,

“Hm…you know Ser’, my cabin’s nice, roomy, and you’re comfortable here, right?”

“Shite ink, anymore comfy and you’ll put me right back to sleep,” Sera mumbled as she
lazily played with a lock of Ellie’s hair.

Inky’s arms were wrapped around Sera’s middle and now they hugged tighter, the head against Sera’s neck nuzzling as she snuggled against the older girl before she said, “Maybe you should just sleep here instead of in the Tavern. There’s room to hang your things in my clothing cabinet thing, and you could share beds with me or we could get one just for you—proper bed, mattress, lots of pillows, and soft blankets and everything.”

Shite! She meant! Sera could sleepover in her cabin but like, for permanent! Move in! She’d just update Marehis and Spymaster and Lady Josie that Sera was gonna be sharing and she’d help if Sera had stuff to move! Friggin- no! It was…that was Ellie’s! Her home! Yeah, sharing tents on the road was one thing, but her cabin was the only place in the world that Ellie could be completely and totally alone if she needed to be, no one bugging her with problems or needing her attention or whatever, she could just go to her cabin, close the door and boom, take an actual complete and total break from all the Inquisition shite. That’d been Sera’s only reprieve in Lady Emmauld’s house was having spaces Lady either wouldn’t or couldn’t come in cause of stairs and being an old creaky bitch. It was important to have space for yourself! And Ellie was datin’ now! What if she wanted those alone time breaks to involve, just, dating stuff! She shouldn’t have to worry about Sera bein’ all up in her business. She tried explaining that to Inky, and the Human girl listened, but had…ugh, reasonable arguments for Sera’s complaints which was just! Gah! Then Sera got all yelly about it, tryin’ to convince Ellie otherwise but then she whipped out that stupid song giggly as she sang, ‘Sera was never an agreeable girl!’ and—well it worked to deflate Sera and…

Well shite! She didn’t want to be someone that yelled at Ellie! What if it got in her hurt things Cole talked about?! But it seemed like it was fine…and later after everything was settled Sera found Cole later and made him check. Things only got to settled though, cause,

“You don’t have to if you don’t want to, honest, just…I think it’d be really nice to share with you, I like bunking with you when we’re on the road! It isn’t stressful or anything, and it’s nice to come back together at the end of the day. I understand alone time being important but it’s not like you’re getting any in the Tavern, I’d totally leave you be, you could even have Lace around um, you know, just, little warning and I’ll stay out of your hair! Warm cabin, proper um, you know. Privacy and beds and stuff. Just, you know, clean up your mess and whatnot.”

Sera’d meant Ellie needing time to herself and- and- whatever! But…well that sounded nice, she’d get more time with Inky if they was sharing the same roof, and a cabin…well getting things off in Josie’s office had been right exciting and fun during First-Day Eve…mention of mess made her brain jump to worry for a hot second trying to remember if they’d cleaned up after themselves, it wasn’t like they’d gotten full starkers and got everything everywhere, but they’d abruptly cleared off Josie’s desk, papers and pish all over the floor. Oh. Nope, yeah, they’d put it back to rights, Lacy’d been friggin cute, turning almost as red as her hair while she started frettin’ with getting everything back on the desk in the order it’d been in. Friggin punch packed a punch and tipsy Sera memories weren’t always crystal clear…in or out of the moment, she vaguely remembered being piss poor help cleaning up, but she’d tried. Anyway, point was, there’d be perks to a change in sleeping arrangement and Ellie wasn’t bullshitting about her offer—offering just to look like a good person in the hopes Sera’d say no so she got all the benefit of ‘I did a nice thing’ without the consequences of doing said nice thing. So,

“Alright Ink. Same goes for you though—you change your mind, just say the word, and in the mean time you need me to piss off, just say so.”

Oh cripes, that’d made Inky so happy. They got Sera moved in and everyone that needed to
know someone was going to be sharing quarters with the Herald of Andraste, was updated.

“I don’t live in no friggin Tavern anymore you stalkery tit!” Sera called to Maryden as she slung her pack over her shoulder to finish moving in with Ink, put that in a lyric! Right *weirdo!*

And Mare’ and ‘sandra had been pleased with the change, someone they trusted spending nights in Ellie’s place, who could help if something happened, like an attack or Ellie having a nightmare or something. Though Cassandra made certain Sera understood it was a matter of responsibility, not play. She wasn’t to keep Ellie up at all hours for fun, and have her tired as she went about her scheduled day.

It was dumb! But Sera *liked* the idea of being responsible for Ellie. Someone she could rely on and who could be there for her. It was right fun getting to wake up and do the whole breakfast thing together, and now that Ellie knew how to read good, Marehis always let her read over her schedule for the day herself, she’d read it out loud as they wound down breakfast and that was boss! Cause Sera never knew when she’d get to see Ellie when they was in Haven other times, it was just sheer luck or a real hunt to find Ellie for playing or meals. But shite she hadn’t really realized just how much her schedule was. Like, Big! She had to be all over the place every single day, only coming back to the cabin to maybe change clothes or grab her staff or books—Ink stayed up late studying and her things got left all over the place, so Sera gathered them up and left her books and notes and things neat in a pile on the desk so Ellie could just swoop in and snatch up everything without having to forget something. It’d been silly for Ellie to think Sera’d ever need to ask for alone time—she was out almost all the time! It was…cripes! Normal day in Haven she woke up before sunrise to do the praying thing with Cassandra and Marehis, and then breakfast, and then she had her fightin lessons or etiquette lessons, then Russel time with Rainier, then either reading with Dorian or psychology with Bull, which the subtle Qunari had been turning into lunch with the Chargers, totally not so Kremmy-boy and Ellie got to see each other, shite the big Qunari was a softy. Then she’d be off to her slot magic training with Viv and Solas and then she was off with Varric runnin’ around doing his Street Smarts pish which wasn’t that bad, the way Ellie talked about it, it seemed like he tried to keep things fun. Sera decided to meet up with her after her lessons was over to see if she wanted fun before dinner if there was time, or after if magic training things went late. It was nice cause sometimes they’d get to play but Inky also popped around into Adan’s to see if he needed help with potion things or ingredients collected, and then she let Sera tag along to go see the Inquisition’s blacksmith since he was teaching her little things about weapons crafting—like with hammers and fire and everything! Made Sera nervous, but it was more exciting than ingredients picking, though that was easier to turn into tag or something. Tag was not allowed in the smith.

Sera also had something like a schedule this time around in Haven. Before it was just sort of hanging around, looking for fun, trying to catch Inky when she was free, and waiting for the next tour out of Haven. But now…ugh! She wanted to do more! Help more! So, she woke up early did the stretching and the prayer and saw Ellie off. Then she sat down in front of the fire and meditated the way ‘sandra said she should, until the Seeker came to get her. First thing after breakfast Cassandra either had to teach Ellie fighting, or she had Inquisition things to do while Ink was learning fanciness from Josie, but once that was done, Cassandra would stop back by the cabin and sometimes she was there meditating too when Sera came out of it, or she was just arriving and ready to start their lessons. Wednesday morning though, Ink was back to change from her fancy ‘Josie lesson’ clothes into her rougher things. That’d been kind of nice, she was nervous to tell her that Cassandra was teaching her magic defense things but,

“Awe Sera!” she doled out a squeezy hug and a big kiss on the cheek! “I’m so proud of you for facing your fears! If there’s anything I can do to help, let me know, yeah?”
There were…magey bits, parts of her training that involved mage assistance but uh, she definitely wasn’t asking Ink to help with that, nope!

They’d go to the stables and gear up Cassandra’s horse—good old Lexi. Alexandria, ‘sandra said, but that was too friggin long!

First morning after moving in with Ink, as they began riding out of Haven Cassandra said, “I do apologize for cancelling our lessons yesterday, Sera, truly. I would not have you believe I find your training unimportant.”

“Pfft, I wasn’t thinkin’ that ‘sandra, honest. I understand emergencies come up. Everything okay?”

“It was twofold. Firstly, the parents of Trevelyan, the mage man Eleanor journeyed to the Conclave with, reached out to the Inquisition to inform us of their impending arrival. Apparently they wish to meet Eleanor, and they’ll be arriving before the week is out.”

Oh. “That might make Ink sad, to see them yeah, but maybe it’ll help her feel better? Give her the chance to give them her condolences and pish.”

“I certainly hope so. I’m not displeased that the Trevelyans are coming, it is…well, we also received a rather unwelcome guest. He insists upon staying,” ‘sandra grunted the way she does when something chaps her, but she wasn’t makin’ it at Sera, didn’t do that quite so much anymore, “You know of Chancellor Roderick?”

Yeah, she heard of him, friggin’ prick. “Big hat bastard that wants Inky executed for the Conclave?”

“As we have garnered allegiance of both the Mages and the Templars*, he believes our cause may have merit. He wishes to lend his service to the Inquisition, reside in Haven and assist Mother Giselle in her work.”

“But, he was an asshole to Ellie! He got all up in her Hurt stuff—friggin’, Envy made her see-!” Oh, but bringing it up too hard might hurt ‘sandra too, she hated that she’d been part of what Inky saw in the Fade, “well, you know.”

“My qualms exactly.”

“Then tell ‘im to hit the bricks!”

“I would very much like to hit him with bricks, but unfortunately, he is still a powerful figurehead in the Chantry. His allegiance, no matter how after the fact or belligerent it is, is a blessing, will help with the Inquisition’s credibility and standing with the Chantry. Eleanor was given forewarning during our training this morning, that he is here to stay and she is ‘cool’ with that,” she sounded disappointed.

Oooohhh, “You wanted Inky to kick up a fuss! Cry to the advisors that she doesn’t want that asshole around!” Sera was ecstatic to accuse the Seeker.

“If she had I’m certain nothing would stall Cullen from casting that man out on his ear, he cannot abide Eleanor being upset. Lady Montilyet, tenderhearted as she is, would of course be understanding of the move if Roderick’s presence truly distressed the girl, and Leliana would not object once Josephine was of such a mindset.” Yeah, Sera could see that happening.

They’d ride out of Haven, down the road and across a bridge that was still under repair, it’d
collapsed or something—Cassandra told her she and Ellie’d been crossing it on the way to the Breach when friggin a bolt of Fade fire shot out of the Breach and blew it up! Shite! It wasn’t super far, where they rode, it was on one of the paths to where the Temple of Sacred Ashes used to be. There was this drop of sorts, that sent them down to the place Ellie’d first ever closed a Rift, and they’d sit in the rubble and meditate until Sera could…blah it was creepy, but it was like she could feel the Fade, she guessed, like her brain pressing something cold but pliable. Focusing on that, Seeker helped her learn how to thin and strengthen the veil, manipulate it to stop it from influencing the world full stop in this place, and then backing off, allowing it to touch reality again. One morning Viv went out with them, meditating with them and then letting Sera try um…shite, actually suppress her ability to cast.

“It um…it won’t hurt you or nothin’ right?” Sera asked nervously. She definitely didn’t want to be hardcore on Viv’s bad side. Woman seemed to tolerate her for the most part, even nice sometimes, but she didn’t think she’d be super forgiving if Sera did something weird to her magic.

“It is not the most pleasant sensation,” Vivienne allowed, “but I quite assure you I have no qualms with it. Such practices have their place, obviously.”

Ugh. She was glad Cassandra was teaching her this shite, she’d…she’d be more help against baddie mages in fights and she was more comfortable with their allies casting on her now that Cassandra and Solas had set her down a few times and practiced, Cassandra demonstrating that she could tell what Solas was about to cast before his spell was in full fling, from things like body language, or how he was using his hands or staff, the glow of the magic used, and if you focused on the Fade like you meant to suppress it, there were other things, when Sera tried it she found it right, but it scared her, that she might accidentally suppress Inky’s magic, what if she hurt her? Or made her scared, make her think that Sera would do something like that on purpose—oh. That…somehow that made her understand it more, having Magic, a power you had to develop and control, that might hurt people you care about even if you’d never mean to ever. It wasn’t…it wasn’t people’s fault they was born with magic, if anything this, choosing to learn how to suppress magic, developing the ability, it was a choice, she had a lot more say in learning to do this, than the…er…Maker? she guessed? Going ‘Poof! Guess what! You’re a Mage now, and it’s gonna fuck with every facet of your life for forever, deal with it!’

But she could do this now, suppress magic, so she needed to practice, make sure she knew exactly what she was doing, and who she was doing it at, so she’d never ever ever use it on one of her friends on accident.

Though their lessons did get a chunk taken out of them, but Sera wasn’t gonna complain, shite. Another…she wasn’t sure if it was a benefit or not just, it was another reason she was glad she could be around to help was all. Thursday morning while she was meditating, waitin’ on ‘sandra, she’d snapped back to attention because she heard Marehis and Cassandra talking with someone and a quiet male voice answered her, she heard raspy, rattling breathing and Anya whining. When she got up from her place by the fire she saw Cullen coming into the cabin backed by Cassandra, Marehis, and Anya, the Commander carrying an unconscious Inky in his arms. Shite, shite. She was okay but frick, Cullen—he hadn’t been anywhere near Ellie, but he’d been demonstrating a move with his boot knife and after her ordeal with the advisors and knives in the Fade with Envy, she’d had an out in out panic attack. She calmed down, was fine in the sense she knew she was safe, but she was exhausted.

“She insisted she was not tired, and fell asleep not a minute later,” Cassandra reported quietly, little amused, yeah, that sounded like Inky.

They got her boots off and Marehis sat with her back against the headboard and Ellie
resting against her, Sera laid down with her, Cassandra too, sorta, she sat at the foot of the bed and Cullen brought over Ellie’s desk chair to sit and wait, awe, poor Commander Dreamy, he looked absolutely wrecked over the whole thing. Anya pawed at the bed post so Cassandra reached down and hoisted her up, the puppy just wanted to be up with everyone, Sera worried she might wake Inky, but the Human girl slept through Anya crawling over her legs, sniffing like she were looking for something, and then ultimately ended up, oof, laying on her belly right in the curve between Sera’s ribcage and hip, arms and legs hanging and, letting out the occasional little wuff she did when she was sleepin’. Silly pup.

There was still almost two hours before lunch when Ink came to, her chest sounded clear, thank tits. Sera hadn’t meant to fall asleep exactly but she had, which was eh, a little nap never killed anyone…except maybe Cullen, he’d probably have a nasty crick in his neck from falling asleep slumped over in the chair,

“Hey,” Ellie said softly, reaching out and Cullen jerked awake, hastily took hold of her offered hand.

“Ellie, how’re you feeling?” he asked, leaning forward in his seat, bringing Inky’s hand to his lips and pressing a kiss to the back of it before rubbing circles with his thumb.

“I’m okay, honest, I’m really sorry—”

“Eleanor, hush. It is I who should,” Cassandra sighed, hand resting over the blanket covering Ellie’s shin, “I am sorry, I did not consider you might be put ill at ease to see—”

“I didn’t think about it either—I’m not scared of Cullen, my brain just…isn’t always on the same page.”

“What do you feel up to now, da’len?” Marehis asked. “You’ve a War Room meeting this afternoon—of course if you’re unwell we can cancel, but the rest of your day is much more flexible. None of your friends would begrudge cancelling lessons, we sent word to Rainier already, he sends his regards, hopes you feel better.”

“Gosh that’s sweet of him. I do feel better, thanks for letting me rest—” she took in a sleepy sigh as she shifted to get her arm out from under her pillow and look at her watch, “next hour is with Dorian, reading, I’d just be studying if I stayed in my room so, I think I’ll go ahead and get back to schedule.”

“You sure Ink?” Sera asked, squeezing her a bit, her hair was soft when Sera pressed her face against the back of her head, “’sandra and me’ll probably still head out—we’re still on right?”

“Certainly,” Cassandra said, “I do apologize—you fell asleep and I did not wish to disturb you, but we’ve still time.”

“So you’d have the cabin all to yourself to rest an’ stuff.”

They compromised sort of—Ellie agreed to stay in, but Dorian was gonna come and they’d work here instead of him and Viv’s cabin.

When Sera was done with training things Cassandra usually had lunch with her, sometimes it was just the two of them, and sometimes they tracked down Ink and ate together as a group, but ‘sandra felt badly that their lesson had been cut into, so she treated Sera to lunch at Fliss’s.

“You’re coming along very nicely,” Cassandra said as they waited on their food, “you’ve made incredible strides in your training, in point of fact, I feel most confident you could be of
assistance in suppressing the Breach.”


“I would not have said as much if I weren’t, it is truth, every word, you’ve done well, Sera,” Cassandra assured, friggin…blah! She sounded proud. Of her! “I would actually recommend you gauge your ability for yourself, this next stint out to the Oasis, that you attempt to assist with the Rifts when you’re of a mind to, I understand starting out it can be tiring.”

“You got it!”

“You’ve plans for the rest of your day?”

“Lace is gonna come help me prepare some more for first lessons with Ink—Josie let me have Fridays cause it’s…well, it’s not like readin’, Ink needs that, but this is more learning for interest. Give Ellie an idea of what she’d be learning—it can be a once a week thing or more just depending on if she likes it and how much. Plus it’ll give me at least the weekend for sure to fix any hinks in my teachin’. S’not somethin’ I’ve done before.”

“I beg to differ, Sera. You’ve done well enough already, teaching Eleanor a great many things—what you have taught her of play is no less important than her other lessons, and neither will your lessons in math and science be any less important than what she learns with any of us,” then, “it is good of you to prepare, but…well, you’ll be working with Lace Harding? If you’re pressed for time you needn’t multitask if that is what this is, an endeavor to balance your work with romantic interest—Eleanor will be in a meeting for a great deal of the afternoon, and I’m certain we could occupy her evening if you wish for privacy.”

“Nah—I mean, if you wanna spend the evening with Ink that’s fine but you don’t have to make special arrangements or nothin’—Lace is helpin’ cause yeah, she uh…wants to spend time with me, but she really does wanna help, her grand-ma was a school teacher, so she’s sort of always helped with things like that.”

“Her family is safe where they are?” Cassandra asked.

“Yeah, her ma and da live near the Horse master’s so, they were out of the way of all the magey templar bullshit.”

“And…things are going well, with your young lady?”

Sera nodded. “Yeah,” she smiled elbows on the table, burying her face in her hands, “I really like her, ‘sandra! She’s so! Just friggin cute! And the freckles!”

Cassandra grinned, “You and Miss Lace make a striking pair. You had a pleasant time at our First Day Eve party? It was a date, yes?”

"Yeah," she sighed happily, resting her arms on the tabletop, "we was just gonna go for drinks whenever we got back in, but it worked out to just go to First Day things together, drinkin' and dancing, it was great! Lacey's real sweet and fun, I like 'er a lot."

"I am pleased to hear you’re happy," the Seeker rested a hand on her forearm, “However, Maker forbid Miss Harding should ever make you otherwise, you may always have my ear, my aid if you needed it.”

That…frick that wasn’t- Sera was grateful their drinks were already there, that wasn’t supposed to make her throat clog up she didn’t think, but Maker. No one…no one ever took up for
Sera before, not before she met Ellie anyway. She’d joined up with the Friends because that’s what it’d sounded like—little people taking up for other little people but there was something different about having friends you could put a face to, call on in an instant and they’d be there. And Sera… knew all too well how sideways things could get, how deep in it you could be with someone and it turns out they’re a shite person, that they’ve been using you or just, playin’ nice until you feel like you’ve put too much into the relationship to leave, learnt shite like that the hard way and had to rely on herself to get out and away, ‘sandra…being all protecty was…

Sera took a few sips of orange juice, before clearing her throat, “Thanks…same goes for you and Commander Dreamy.”

“I assure you I don’t know what you mean,” Cassandra said, fighting a smile.

Sera snorted, “Yeah you do, but you guys wanna be all cutesy quiet about it, whatever, just, know your offer goes both ways.”

Afternoons was spent like usual, the way she had been spending them all week, reading up on things, planning for her lessons with Ellie. Lace, just comin’ ‘round expressing interest, helped with Sera’s lesson planning. She was actually a big help, she and Sera’d talk through where Sera thought Ellie might be education wise, like what were things she’d be able to pick up quick or possibly already know from life experience, where to start with her, and how best to present new information.

“So…if I were your student, I’d automatically get an ‘A’ right, for sleeping with teacher?” Lacey asked Thursday afternoon when they had the place to themselves while Ellie was in a fancy-pants Chantry meeting. Well, mostly to themselves, Anya was snoozing away at the foot of the bed. Sera was sittin’ with her back against the headboard of Inky’s bed…hers too now, and Lace had been sitting facing her though now she was reclined back, foot crossed over knee, Sera’d been using her own legs to prop up her book against and Lace kept dragging her foot up and down Sera’s shin as she read over a rough draft for a worksheet Sera’d come up with to help Ink learn the table of…what was it? Elements! She knew things, Lace was just! Distracting—helpful but distracting how did that work?

“Nope, you get a B, for having A+ Bits,” ha! Friggin eat it! Technically Sera ate it in Josie’s office but…

“Now see, I think I deserve an A for my amazing—is what I call the Maker’s love!” Lace squeaked out, switching it way on around when she heard the door open, she shot up to sit upright, Anya shivered and gave out a little ‘wuff’ before she shook again and woke up, stretching back before rising up to look around. Lace was still winging, “We are all truly and wonderfully blessed by Him most high- oh hi Ellie! Oh…” she went quiet when she turned about to actually look at Ellie. Anya whined, dropping off the bed to go and paw at the girl’s feet.

Sera sat up, and her stomach turned, “Inky?”

She’d just sort of burst in, hadn’t closed the door behind her and she was trying to catch her breath like she’d been running, and crying, cripes, her eyes were all red and puffy, tears still streaming down her face and she was shaking, sniffling as she said, “I-I’m sorry, I didn’t mean…I was looking for Sera I didn’t mean to interrupt.”

“Oh, no, honey you aren’t interrupting,” Lace promised sincerely, “we’re just reading. I can go-”

Marehis came rushing into the room like she’d been chasing after Ellie, stopping just in the
doorway to catch her breath, voice tearing from her throat in panic, “Da’vehnan! You cannot run off like that—never ever, do you hear me?!?” Trailed immediately by Cassandra catching up with her, shouting,

“Eleanor what were you thinking?!”

There was a window just next to Inky’s bed, Lace looked to it, then Sera, and she nodded, pushing against the window…huh, didn’t budge—oh yeah it could only be opened if Ink put magic on it…but that meant there was some kind of magic on it already so Sera tried focusing on the Fade, and on the window—that what was real, was that this window wasn’t physically barred and in reality it could swing open on its hinges, there was nothing real stopping it from doing so—and friggin boom! Not literally boom, it was quiet, not even a squeak of the hinges as the window panels opened outward and Lace pecked a quick, grateful kiss to Sera’s lips before she made quick escape to stay out of whatever was going on just now.

Which was not good since Ellie was whirling about to face Marehis and ‘sandra, shouting, “I don’t want to talk to you! I told you all to leave me alone!”

“And I had every intention of doing so once I escorted you back to your quarters, Ellie,” Marehis reasoned levelly, “Your safety comes first, even before your feelings, I understand needing to leave but you can. not. run. off. Not alone! And you know that!”

“Get out!” Frick that was loud!

“Eleanor!” Cassandra reprimanded, sounding right pissed, “You will not take that tone with Marehis!”

“I’m taking that tone with both of you! Leave me alone!”

Sera almost sprang off the bed, the air sort of whooshed out of her lungs because…well shite, she thought Cassandra had lost her limit with Ellie, the Seeker had surged forward, hand raised, and Sera was terrified Inky’d been in for a slap. She…no one was allowed to hit Ellie, not even if she was being a total brat but ‘sandra didn’t hurt her, just took Ellie’s face between her hands and pressed her forehead against hers, and spoke very quietly, tones firm and unwavering in her conviction,

“Eleanor. We work tirelessly to keep you safe, from harm of every sort, you cannot ever risk that even when you are faced with something difficult and overwhelming. To your mind, you were running to the safety and security of your home. But the very moment you step foot out of reach, running to flee further, the only thing we can possibly think of, the only thing we feel is absolute terror at the countless things that could befall you. If anything, anything had happened, we would never be able to forgive ourselves. You will cease this senseless shouting, and you will apologize to Marehis for scaring her so, for disrespecting her authority and the work she does to keep you from harm.”

Ellie took in a shuddering breath, “I’m sorry,” she promised.

“You have behaved abhorrently tonight Eleanor, and we will discuss this later. We will leave you be, to think. Ambassador Montilyet will smooth things over with our guests—who traveled very far to speak with you of…Eleanor you will apologize to them, and Lady Josephine, so help me. They were rude, but they are hurting, you…it’s more considerate of such things, I’m ashamed you’ve put our Ambassador in an incredibly difficult position to clean up after. They were brash but they are grieving, a loss you both share but it is more so theirs, you understand that yes?” and when Ellie nodded it sort of rocked Cassandra’s right along with it,
“Good. You have behaved badly, Eleanor, but you have not lost our regard. We love you, I love you, and when you have had time to gather your thoughts, we will handle this together.”

“I love you guys too…I really am sorry. For running. And all the yelling.”

Cassandra took a deep breath and sighed, pressing a kiss to Ellie’s forehead before letting her go and moving to the door to stand with Marehis.

“Feel better, da’vehn,” the Elf woman said before she and Cassandra took their leave.

That…shite, Sera didn’t have a single clue what was happening. And she almost screamed for those two to get back in here when Inky fell to her knees, but she wasn’t hurt or sick, not physically, though she was gripping her head between her hands like a vise and whispering,

“I messed up, I messed up, I messed up, I messed up, crap!” and she whimpered when Anya whined at her. The puppy came to sit up with her front paws on Ellie’s knees licking at her face, awe, sad puppy, sad Inky, sad Sera.

“Ink?” Sera asked gently. Ellie wiped at her eyes and took Anya up in her arms before standing and coming to sit on the bed with Sera.

“Where…where did Lace go?”

“She jumped right out the window,” Sera told her hoping it sounded funny…kind of was, little Lace ejecting herself out of the situation as fast as possible.

“Oh gosh, she was okay right? Crap, I’m so sorry Ser’ I- I shouldn’t- this is your home now too, I shouldn’t have run away like that, and I should have knocked or…or gone somewhere else, but I really was looking for you-”

“Shh, Ink, it happens, it’s okay—you were looking for me and you found me, this…I’m not mad or upset, you didn’t interrupt me and Lace, not really we wasn’t up to nothin’. Even if you came busting up in here while I’m blowing her freaking mind, I’d still forgive you…might need you to forgive me since little yippy here would’ve been witnessing- I mean she’s a dog, sex things wouldn’t freak her out right? Do you think she’d know what was happening or be scared or whatever?”

Oh, good, got a little smile at that and Inky chuckled, hugging Anya more, “She’s just a baby Ser’ no having sex in front of the puppy! Put her outside or…dunno, give me a heads up that you want to do your thing, and I’ll make sure she’s with me.”

“Sounds like a plan,” Sera said, and there was a knock on the door then.

And then Commander Cullen came stalking in, holding a tray of…huh, smelled like warm milk and cinnamon coming from the teapot, a few mugs, and there were little cookies on a plate. What was even more bizarre than the Commander playing serving boy was his stilted speech, “Eleanor! That was abhorrent! I am oh so very displeased with you, young lady! Oh the outrage I feel could fuel a thousand fires!” he declared, everything sounding put on like he were acting for the benefit of someone who might be listening in, before he kicked the door closed behind him and brought over the tray to set it on the end of the bed, speaking softly, and actually meaning his warmness as he grinned at Ellie, “Tea and a snack, are you hungry Ellie? Dinner’s not for a while now. Oh sweetheart,” he sighed sympathetically, reaching out to cup Ellie’s cheek, thumb wiping at tears, “Everything’s going to be alright. Lord Trevelyan is an old troglodytic fool,” cripes that was fancy, “and Lady Trevelyan is—no offense to present company, womankind, or precious
Anya—but she is a major bitch.” He smiled when Ellie huffed a little laugh, “They came here in hurt, to deliver something unkindly. But...I can honestly say, despite our obvious differences, Maxwell* Trevelyan and I are in rather the same boat. I do not doubt, not even in the slightest, that he meant every bit of what he wrote to them. You traveled together for some time to get to the Conclave and Eleanor, I can quite assure you—it took all of two weeks of interacting with you on the daily basis for me to know, without a doubt, I could not possibly love you more if you were my own flesh and blood. In fact if you weren’t half my age and I’d ever spent time in the company of a lovely Antivan before Lady Montilyet just this past year, I’d be seriously questioning your paternity,” oh yuck, Inky was smiley though even as her nose scrunched up at the thought. “He meant this for your good. He loved you and he wanted to do what was best for you. His family is resentful, but that’s on them. Their own selfish pride. Just, don’t entirely disregard his wishes because of their behavior. You do what is best for you, what you think is right, and forget about them.”

“Thanks, I love you lots. And I’ll think about it,” Ellie promised. “’s why I wanted Sera.”

“Then I’ll leave you to it. Guards will come take post soon,” he assured, dropping a kiss to her hair before heading for the door, and when he opened it, “That’s right! You just think about what you’ve done, young lady!” and then he sighed, satisfied, “I think I really set her straight—”

“You are reprehensible and imbecilic, and I hate that I am not wholly annoyed by your behavior,” Cassandra drawled out as Cullen closed the door behind him.

“Of course you aren’t, being reprehensible and imbecilic is all part of the Rutherford allure, according to my father, and he’s been ‘not wholly annoying’ my mother, forty years strong.”

“I despise you.” Ha! Yeah right, ‘sandra.

“Seeker Pentaghast, that sounds like a confession of your undying love—”

“You are horrible!” Seeker insisted belligerently.

Shite, Sera could hear his smile in his voice as he declared, “My longing for you could fuel a thousand fires!”

“Oh do shut up!” Cassandra said as she started walking away from the cabin.

“It is too late, you’ve inspired poetry!” he insisted laughingly, oh friggin Elf ears stop! Cassandra friggin, she giggled! Like! For real, as it sounded like the Commander picked her up, carryin’ her up the steps toward the Chantry. Were they being all open with their business all of a sudden? Nah, it didn’t sound like much of anyone was really out and about right now. Hoped not, cause she was pretty sure there was some PDA happening. Human hearing was shite, right? Inky hadn’t heard all that?

Didn’t seem like it, sappy stuff usually made her all smiles, but she flopped back onto the bed, petting Anya, chest rising and falling in a weary sigh, and there was this low sort of rattle in her breathing, so quiet it was just barely perceivable to Sera’s ears, she heard it sometimes after hard fights on the road or when Ellie trained hard or played a whole lot. Ugh, nope nope nope!

“Come on Inky, sit up, why don’t you wash your face, get comfy, and we’ll get snacky, drink something warm and you can tell me everything, alright?”

“Kay,” Ellie agreed. Yeah! Right on! She could do this! She could help! She stoked the fire good and went to check and make sure the door was closed up so it wasn’t letting cold air in,
double checked the window by Ellie’s bed...good, it was shut, and the magic had snapped back into place, Sera was sort of worried she might have accidentally undone whatever enchantment kept it sealed, but nope! All good!

Ellie carefully took off her new boots the Blacksmith made her for her birthday, washed her face and changed out of her fancy pants—literally she’d been wearing the fancy kind of tunic and leggings—got into pj’s before leaning all the way forward so her hair swung down over her head and she worked to gather it all up in a bun she bound tight in a hair tie before she rose up and sighed hands resting on her hips as she decided, “If anyone wants to talk to the Herald of Andraste tonight, they can just deal with it.”

“Come on,” Sera said, holding out her arms to Ellie who came back to the bed and got right up on in there, big hug! Squeezes for sad Inky!

Sera got her a cup of the tea that Cullen brought, and they munched on cookies, Anya got a little jealous of their snacking, whining when they wouldn’t share but Sera and Ink weren’t sure if the cookies would be safe for her to eat, they was super sweet and vanilla-y, and she wasn’t allowed to have things like chocolate...they wasn’t sure why it made puppies sick and weren’t sure if vanilla* would do something similar. So, Sera popped up off the bed and got a few of those little cookies Cullen had ordered for Anya, they was shaped like little bones which Sera thought was kind of creepy, but they tasted alright—they were cookies so she tried ‘em! Friggin savory, like crispy crunchy meat cookies, just weird! So. Everyone had a little something to make them feel better, let Ellie sort of collect her thoughts before they set everything aside and the Human girl curled up against Sera, Anya in her lap, and filled in the details.

She’d had her meeting with the Trevelyans, Lord and Lady arrived in Haven and wanted to see Ellie immediately. They’d waited for months for their son’s will to be able to be read—it’d been sealed with some sort of Blood Magic, wouldn’t open until anyone he left anything to came of age, they thought they’d be waiting a few years, his eldest little cousin was only ten. But nope. Half way through Haring, they got a visit from their lawyer, the seal was broken and burning like a Phylactery. His will was read and meant to be used to find his beneficiary and execute his wishes.

Maxwell Trevelyan, only son of Lord and Lady Trevelyan, despite the whole ‘Circle’ thing, he was still nobility. He was expected to pick some Lady to be his wife, she’d live in Ostwick so they could be close, have ‘conjugal visits’ and uh, eventually pop out a little heir to Max’s pish. Except, there was just one tiny, tiny issue. If by some strange twist of fate, Maxell Trevelyan had ended up being Herald of Andraste, Ellie was pretty sure he’d have had a major crush on Cullen, swiftly forgotten once the Iron Bull came into the picture. A ‘wife’ definitely wouldn’t suit him, and neither did family either really, from the way he talked. He’d had loads of cousins, with kids he loved to pieces but he’d never imagined ever wanting one he had to take care of, be responsible for, himself—liked swooping in a handful of times a year to soak up all the fun and giggles and good times, the pride of seeing them meet milestones like seeing how much better they was walking or talking since the last time he saw them, he just didn’t ever feel like ‘Oi, I want to do all the hard work of constantly watching and caring for a little brat of my own, be there for all the ugly bits, the crying and tantrums and pitfalls of parenthood’. He liked picking them up and having fun, then passing them back when they were done.

Then he meets this little apostate brat, who doesn’t have anyone else in the world he can pass her back to, and apparently, he hadn’t hated it, according to what he wrote his parents. It wasn’t like Ellie thought he’d claim responsibility over her, they had a common goal, were working toward it, and she figured after the Conclave they’d go their separate ways, yeah it’d be sad, and she really hoped they’d see each other again. But apparently good old Maxy had other plans.
He hadn’t wanted to propose the idea to Ellie until after the Conclave was settled and he knew what their prospects would be, freedom wise, but he’d written his parents to inform them he’d come to a solution for their situation. There was a young lady he held interest in, just, not romantically of course—but why not cut out the middle woman? It was stupid to fuss with having a wife for zero reason other than straight up putting a bun in her oven, when he had a fully cooked, walking talking, living breathing kid he already loved, wanted to provide for and take care of, enjoyed the hell out of the good times with, wanted to be there for to face any bad that might come. Depending on how things went down at the Conclave, he said he thought either Ellie might like to return to Ostwick with him, come up in a Circle, get a proper education, have him around to guide and protect her, or, if she didn’t want to be Circed, at the very least he could provide her a place to stay, live nearby, she could come see him on a regular basis, family visits, they’d keep her apostacy on the down low and he’d take care of anything she needed, take the brunt of any backlash if her mage status got discovered. Coming up in a Circle was all he knew, and it admittedly terrified him, but he thought if things really didn’t go their way at the Conclave, yeah, he could go on the run, travel and live on the road, like Ellie just…better funding. She wouldn’t have to worry about where she was going to lay her head or where her next meal was coming from. He informed his parents of all this, that he was claiming Ellie as his dependent, put in for all sorts of paper work—get her proper documentation, she’d be considered a citizen of the Free Marches, ‘Eleanor Trevelyan’, and he already made it clear in his last will and testament, updated just barely a week before the events of the Conclave, that if anything happened to him, ’Ellie’ would be his sole heir, sealed the will with just a little bit of minimally-demon-involved Blood Magic—same sort of ritual used to make Phylacteries—it wasn’t like there weren’t loads of opportunities Ellie supposed, it’d been kind of a rough trip, he’d used some blood from an injury of hers.

So. Lord and Lady Trevelyan came to settle things, they had to legally inform Ellie what she was due, their lawyer even came along with them, arranged the trip for them in the first place because they were coming up on the deadline of when they absolutely had to execute their son’s will. Except the noble couple didn’t say shite about any of the legal nonsense, they just told the advisors that their son had written them so much about Ellie, and they’d wanted to meet her. When they showed up, their lawyer informed Ellie and the advisors about the will business, and then Lord and Lady Trevelyan turned their ‘pressing need to get to know Max’s sweet young friend’ into ‘plot twist! we’re here to rail at a little girl for things she has no control over’, things she didn’t even know about! Shite, shite, Sera held Ellie tight when the younger girl started crying—it was like losing him all over again somehow, if that made sense, it was hard enough not having him around anymore so suddenly but…on a small scale she’d been prepared for that—when they entered the Temple of Sacred Ashes, she thought the next time they passed through those doors, it would be to go their separate ways. But now it turned out that was never supposed to be the case, Max had wanted her, wanted to keep her and be in her life, they would have been family! And now she knew that’d been taken away, the full scope of what she lost that day and it was crushing her. It’d already been a major blow, the Trevelyans delivered in informing her of this, but then they topped it off with their distain for a future she was mourning the loss of—they accused her of manipulating their son! They talked down about his foolish life choices, disrespected him, disrespected Ellie, all while playing the politeness game—same way Viv did sometimes—so when Ellie couldn’t take any more, popped off at them, she looked like trash. An angry kid, showing her lowborn roots. Cassandra and everyone had expected Ellie to be able to keep her cool enough, let Lady Josie handle things diplomatically. But Ellie’d completely lost her chill, yelled at the Trevelyans in defense of their own son, and that turned into them saying how very rude and horribly she was behaving toward them, they were still mourning his loss after all, and he’d been their son, he’d been nothing to her—which wasn’t ruddy true! Yeah, Sera got that they was still hurting over Max’s death, the loss of relatives that had been at the Conclave, that…shite that had to be awful, that wasn’t the way things were supposed to be. Kids was supposed to bury their parents
not the other way around, and frick, it wasn’t even like there’d been anything to bury. That’d been…shite, the first thought she’d had when Inky got blasted by that Alexius asshole was ‘Frick frick frick this isn’t happening, it isn’t it isn’t!’ followed by the decision that she was going to kill basically every single person in that fucking place and then this hollow thought: There wasn’t a body to bury. If…if there was it’d be…there’d be at least one more chance to take care of Inky. Something to do, some way to help. Clean her up, make her body pretty, comfy, tuck her in for a long sleep.

Ugh! Nope, anyway, she got that what they’d gone through was hard, and horrible. But shite, they’d not been willing to accept their son’s decision when he was alive, and they hated that they had to respect it now that he was dead. The last thing they ever sent to their son was ridicule for his ridiculous decision, that he was being foolish and fooled, that some little apostate witch was taking their son for a ride, endearing herself to him for his things. They’d fought the decision tooth and nail, but they couldn’t touch any of their son’s assets. It was—it was just money! They had plenty of their own, what the fuck did they care, their son is dead, his money wasn’t going to bring him back! And when he was alive, they stuffed him in a Circle, resented him because he wouldn’t make a family. Then he does find family, gets a taste of what that life could be like and loving it, thinks he can make something great and special without any of the hurt or falseness that would come with forcing a family out of his situation, and they hate that for him. Then he dies. So they came here, hoping to scare Ellie off, convince her their son had made a mistake, that she didn’t want any part of his decision. Ink couldn’t stand being in the same room with them anymore, and she hated that she’d let her advisors down, that she’d started yelling and embarrassed herself and only escalated a crappy situation. But at the same time, she felt like…like Lady Josie and Leliana and Cullen and Cassandra weren’t on her side when they pulled her out of the War Room and tried to talk her down, she threw a fit, said rude things she felt bad about now, and bolted.

Sera was glad she had one of those, ugh, friggin nice little hankies Solas made her, tucked away in her pocket. She handed one off to Ellie, so she could wipe at her eyes, blow her nose if she needed to, frick, her nose was all stuffy. If she got sick, Josie sweetness could just deal with it, she’d be cleaning up after Sera murdering nobility! Might murder them anyway, friggin! Pricks!

“What should I do?” Ellie croaked out as she hugged Sera tighter.

Oh. Yeah, she’d wanted to talk to Sera specifically but…she thought like, it was a ‘Ugh I just had an awful experience and I wanted to vent about it to my friend who I know will be on my side and everyone else can just eat it!’ deal.

“Shite Ink, I…I dunno. Why would you ask me?”

“Well you…you sort of have experience with this. Signing away an estate or whatever. I’m not sure what that means? Max didn’t own property or anything.”

Oh…oh yeah. Alright. This was…huh. Yeah, first few days after Lady bit the big one Sera’d been mad trying to figure out just what the fuck she was supposed to do with everything, manage an estate, how to move forward, wished someone had been there that knew anything worth knowing, to help and advise her. She’d had to figure everything out all on her own. She hadn’t wanted all that, being in charge of people and a place, power through wealth with little to no accountability. Zero accountability, Sera didn’t answer to anyone. And that was dangerous, Lady didn’t have anyone she was accountable to, and she’d been just about the worst sort of person Sera could imagine being.

But…well frick, should Inky do the same? Just cause that was what was best for Sera, and it really had been, she didn’t regret her decision, it came with all sorts of strings attached, she
would have had to play into the societal bullshit Lady was involved in, to have any sort of peace in her life if she’d stayed and kept everything, but that didn’t mean that was what was best for Ellie.

Okay. Facts. Facts were good, real things, they needed to put all the pieces together and figure things out from there—“Did they give you any papers, Ink? Documents or whatever?”

Ellie nodded. “I don’t have them but yeah, there’s a whole stack of stuff they brought along for me.”

Hmm, there was all sorts of spooky stories about looking into a mirror or lighting a candle and saying a name three times to summon some horrible thing. Sera closed her eyes and, “Cole! Cole! Cole!”

“And Ellie was hurt so I came. I was listening—you’re doing great,” Cole assured her, “but you think you need my help?”

Frick! Sera nearly jumped all the way out of her skin! Cole just! Friggin appeared on Inky’s desk! Why did he like sitting up on tables and bedframes?

“I like to be up high. I can see everything better.”

“Stop! Stop being in my brain business! I need your creepy poofing abilities! Go-“

“Oh! I can do that!” Cole enthused before vanishing.

And then poof, before Inky could even question what Sera was having him do, he was back, center of the room, standing like a semi-normal person, arms full of parchment. He set everything on the desk and then whirled around to come over to the bed.

“You won’t like it, you might want to move,” Cole gave her some warning, and she had just enough time to let go of Inky so Cole could wrap the Human girl up in a hug. Huh, he was getting better at it she guessed, and he only did it when Ink wanted one so…it was okay.

“They want to talk with you, the advisors, Cassandra, Marehis, to understand why you yelled,” Cole said, “I sent them Dorian. They would hear you, if you told them, but he can speak from a place of experience you don’t have. He will help them understand why you heard hurt and hate where they heard…not kindness, but indifference, something they did not think you would react to the way you did. It isn’t that they wouldn’t support you sticking up for Trevelyan, it is that they do not know they should. They will need you to talk with them later like you did Sera—they didn’t know you felt that way, loved Trevelyan as much as he’s shown he loved you. They thought he was just a friend, an ally, not someone you’d come to depend upon, who you were dreading saying goodbye to, that you loved him just as much as you love them now. You have context they don’t.”

Ellie’s chin quivered at that. “I wasn’t very fair to them, I was so mad they didn’t take my side, I didn’t stop to think about why they wouldn’t. They didn’t know Max so…yeah, I guess they didn’t realize all those backhanded comments his parents were making were backhanded to begin with. And I…yeah, I haven’t talked about it much, missing him. Oh gosh I must have looked crazy!”

Cole pulled back and looked at her hard, raising a hand to poke at her cheek as if to make certain, “No you…you look the same as usual. At least you did, in the War Room,” he said looking at the big, fluffy bun atop her head, he pat it a few times to see what it would do.

Ellie smiled at that, that hadn’t been what she meant but still, “Thanks, Cole.”
Anya yipped at the Spirit boy and Cole crouched so his face was level with the edge of the bed and he let the puppy sniff at his face and lick his cheek. “You are a very good girl,” he said, the uncertain but sincere way he said things when he wasn’t sure why but he knew it was something that would make someone happy to hear, and then he scratched behind her left ear, her little tail thumping against Ellie’s knee.

Cole beat it then, and Anya yipped at the empty space, yeah! Poofing was weird! Sera was glad it was just them again…hopefully. He didn’t have to watch everything all the time! Jeeze! She didn’t totally dislike the guy but it was creepy! Spirit shite! He was always in everyone’s heads and Sera didn’t like dealing with herself in her own head half the time, she definitely didn’t want someone else mucking around in it!

They ended up using the floor, sitting with their backs to the fire so they could be toasty and spread all the papers out. although paper on the floor gave Inky pause and she looked to her puppy sniffing at one of the pieces of parchment.

“…Anya, precious baby pup, I love you, but you cannot go potty on important papers.”

Anya’s little ‘wuff’ wasn’t very assuring to Inky, so she got up and tugged on her boots and took her pup outside to do her business if she needed to. Sera splayed her hands against papers she was worried might fly when the door opened but it wasn’t super drafty, so everything stayed put. Alright. Focus. What’s what here.

There was documents for identification purposes, Trevelyan used blood magic, everything had seals at the bottom made from Ellie’s blood, they were hot to the touch, glowing red but as Ellie got further away, they cooled and dimmed. Weird, but it would work. Chantry officials would have to watch Ink sign them, but that wouldn’t be difficult to work out, Sera could step outside and toss a rock, hit someone that’d work. Advisors had been working on trying to get Ellie documentation, everything she’d need now that she was of age, so she could have things like bank accounts and legal identification and do businessy things, sign an actual contract with the Inquisition, but they were struggling to get the ball rolling since Ellie didn’t have anything to verify her identity on paper, no birth certificate, nothing. Trevelyan had already done all the work. He got it set up, was giving her a name, proper last name. And then there was his will, shite! Sera’d picked it up while it was folded, and Ellie’d been right there, and her hand just glanced off the seal, it had been burning real warm, the paper sort of thrummed like energy was moving through it. Ink wasn’t the only one he left pish to—Trevelyan hadn’t owned any property, but he had a great deal of inheritance from grandparents and aunts and uncles. He’d portioned everything out, Ellie was entitled to a large chunk of change, but so were his cousins kids, little ones he considered ‘nieces and nephews’, they’d have access to it whenever they got old enough. Oh. Oh frick.

Sera knew why those assholes were so upset over this. Friggin—bullshit!

Kay so there’s this concept of old money blah blah blah, basically nobility, royalty, they like to keep their titles and more importantly, their wealth, in the family. Literally, Sera’d met so many. inbred pricks coming up, she swears Lady Emmauld’s cousins, husband and wife, are ruddy brother and sister! Might be friggin twins—it wasn’t a racist ‘all Humans look the same’ deal, it was straight up they looked exactly the same! Like one another in a wig! That’s how bad some families worked to keep their wealth and titles to themselves. Sera’d had to make the choice she did because it was either be ‘Lady…not important…Emmauld’ and wealthy or be ‘Sera’ and not. But Trevelyan, Sera couldn’t speak for the guy but shite, it seemed like he knew Ink wouldn’t be about that, being nobility, or whatever, he…he was giving her the name but none of the title. She could just be ‘Ellie Trevelyan—no relation’. His parents were pissed because they were considering it a loss—a chunk of their precious family fortune would be in the hands of someone who didn’t have
to work inside their family unit, Ink wouldn’t owe them *spit*, didn’t have to marry someone they approved of or pop out a baby for their name, or anything! Just, run around with all the benefit of having a proper name, and having some financial stability from what they considered their money.

And that…that’s what this would be, some stability, it wasn’t a lifetime of gold, but it wasn’t anything to sneeze at. A safety net. Sure things could go sideways but…this wasn’t the same situation Sera’d been in. Ink…not even an hour ago, there was three different adults making her accountable for her actions…alright two, Cullen was a ruddy enabler, Sera was pretty sure Ellie could burn Haven to the ground and Cullen would be cheering her on and fanning the flames, ‘You’re doing amazing sweetheart! I’m sure Haven deserves it! Whoo!’ Okay maybe not that extreme but basically, he’d been the only one automatically on Ellie’s side of things with the Trevelyans it sounded like, like he hadn’t gotten exactly why Ellie was mad—he was confused but he had the right spirit Sera guessed. There were people around who didn’t let Ellie just get away with shite, when she did wrong by herself or others, she got called out, by the Iron Bull—he friggin bit her!—Cassandra, Marehis, everyone. She had loads of guidance wherever she could possibly need it. And this was…shite Trevelyans had done this out of love, not obligation, Cullen was right about that, had a point that Ellie shouldn’t disregard his wishes. It wasn’t mere circumstance, bland resignation. It was something he chose to do because he wanted to make sure Ellie was taken care of.

“Good girl, Anya, good job!” Sera’s head snapped up, shite she meant to be listening in case Ink got into trouble outside! Oh but there was guards posted now so, eh. Ellie was back, safe and sound, Anya at her feet, sniffin’ at her boots.

“Hey Ink, come sit,” Sera said. Ellie came and sat beside her, tucking little baby curls behind her ears as she looked curiously over the spread of papers and then to Sera. “I think…I think you should do it. Respect Max’s wishes. I think he’d like it, um, you know? He really did want to take care of you, help you come up and have a hand in your future. This is the only way he can do that now. You don’t have to make any big *big* decisions just yet. Though the name thing…shite Ink, it’d take so much work off Leliana and Josie, they’ve been working on getting you proper set up, you know? They was struggling, but Trevelyans got it all put together, you literally just have to sign in front of like, Mother Gisselle, have Josie notarize it. If you feel nervous about the money, you don’t have to touch it. Don’t sign it all away out the gate, but maybe put it away, for later. For when you’re older and need to make big money decisions, like if you wanna do some sort of big schooling or start a business or get place of your own. You might have enough scratch on your own to do things like that, but this would just, you know, be sitting there, security, or flexibility, it could give you options like for donating to things that matter to you, financing charities or initiatives you want to help out with. But only do that once you know for sure what you wanna do, can move forward informed and certain of your decisions.”

“Oh…gosh…” Ellie seemed to think about it a minute and then she looked to Sera and raised a hand to feel at Sera’s forehead like she was checking for a fever. “You’re feeling alright, Ser’? That was…that was really adult sounding.”

“Oh you little brat,” Sera smiled as she wrapped Ellie up in a hug, squeezing her tight, “I’m not the best at being an adult but I’m growed up! So you gotta listen to me! Got it?” big kiss to the side of her head, for her precious little growing-up brain!

“Got it!” Ellie promised, hugging her back.

“…and Ink, if the name thing bothers you, like you want something of your own, or if you don’t want to associate it too much with Lord and Lady Trevelyans, accepting the name now means you got one you can just legally change later,” Sera said as she let Ellie go, sitting back as she
promised, “I could walk you through that real easy. People do it all the time when they get married, but you can do it just…’cause. Takes a few months*, least it did when I did it, but it’s worth it if it gives you…dunno, it’s just a good feeling having a name you can be proud of.”

“You changed your name?” Ellie asked, curious.

Sera nodded. “You and Anya can keep a secret?” and when Ellie nodded, “Seda*.”

Inky’s brow creased as she looked up at her, confused. “Silk?”

“Se-da-”

Ellie giggled, “Seda’s Antivan for silk,” she explained.

Oh yeah. Wasn’t much to remember, from Clan-time. Sometimes there was these little fleeting things like the vague memory of being carried, tiny and small, secured to someone’s back as they traveled on foot, tip of an ear that tickled her forehead when it wriggled. Mare singing that old Elf lullaby to Ink had just about made Sera bolt, first time she heard it in the Hinterlands, right…right familiar, and she hated that. What came before didn’t matter a bit when it came to the now. Seda being…yeah. They…they’d migrated from those parts. Annnd it didn’t matter. Some bullshit happened, followed by more bullshit, and just a little more, then some fun stuff and now she was here. That’s what mattered. “Well, I used to be Seda Emmauld. First girl I was ever uh…in it with, misheard me when we met, called me ‘Sera’ and I was too shy to correct her.”

“Gosh, I can’t imagine you ever being shy.”

“I was… I had a lot of anxieties, pressures. Things that made me second guess every decision, every word I said, everything I did. I was too embarrassed to correct her, worried she’d be insulted or something. But then it…it just sort of became a name that meant me, people who knew me by that name were the sort I could just be myself around with none of the stress or obligations I had in my life. When Lady was finally gone, I just wanted a total break, so. Sera Jones—most regular sounding last name I could think of, not like I use it much anyway.”

“I’m really happy you’re you, you’re amazing and I’m so proud of you!” Inky said, sincerely, taking Sera’s hand in her unmarked one, “You’re my absolute best friend, you know that right?”

She’s amazing, someone to be proud of, does she know she’s perfect as she is? Old hate should have no hold on her. Shite! Cole friggin… it felt weird enough when he was talkin’ from Ellie’s head, and, ugh!

Sera’s throat, eyes ached, “You’re my best friend too Ink. Best friend I’ve ever had.”

She got a big hug, Ink tackled her, knocking her on her side, “Thanks Sera. For talking me through everything, I feel a lot better. I mean my brain is still catching up with everything, today was crazy. I really really appreciate you helping me! Mwah!” Anya yipped and Inky squeaked when the pup climbed on top of her, their little Friend pile—lil Anya was officially a Friend, decked out in a soft woven collar to match their Friendship bracelets.

She friggin helped the crap out of that! Yeah! “Anytime, Ink!”

“We should probably get all these back to the Chantry,” Ellie said as she wrapped an arm around Anya to keep her from falling when Ellie sat up. Sera got up too and started gathering all the papers as Ellie offered, “I can call Cole if you want, I know he still makes you uncomfortable.”
…Cole was the least of her concerns just now as she stared at the seven little numbers scratched out on Ellie’s identification document. 01-01-9:26. *Fuck.*

“Actually Ink, would you be okay here by yourself if I went and returned these? I’m uh, all Cole’d out for the day, and I can sneak these back fine. It’ll be fun, like a secret mission.”

“I’d be fine here, Anya’s guarding me after all,” Ellie said, snuggling the pup in her arms. “You’d be okay though? Do you want me to come with you?”

“Nah Inky. You just stay here and relax a bit. I’ll stop on the way back and get dinner things rolling.”

“If you ask Fliss for extra rolls, I will love you so so much. Like a billion times more than I already do—it feels impossible but I’m pretty sure I can do it!”

“Don’t hurt yourself Ink, ‘s’just bread,” Sera laughed as she gathered up everything in a neat stack.

Cripes it was friggin cold out. Kay. Chantry, Adan’s, Flissa’s. *Go!*

There wasn’t much sneaking about it, didn’t need there to be anyway, so it sorted that the Advisors and everyone—’sandra, Marehis, Dorian—was in Lady Josie’s office, Sera could hear them talking as she approached, sounded like they was chattin’. Oh. Nope. Whoops—

“I swear I put them right here,” Lady Josie was saying.

“You’re certain they’re not in the War Room?” Cullen asked.

“Yes! I took them from the Trevelyan’s lawyer myself, spoke to him momentarily in the hall…”

Sera rapped her knuckles against the door before coming in, “Lookin’ for these?”

“Sera,” Cassandra greeted, rising from where she’d been leaning against Josie’s desk, “What…how did you?”

“Sorry Josie sweetness, Ink wanted my advice but didn’t have all the details. Cole swiped the papers for me, but you know, he doesn’t know any better. I asked him so, it’s on me if you’re pissed,” Sera said, handing the stack over to Josie.

Josie breathed a sigh of relief as she took everything in hand, laid it on her desk. “Thank the Maker, and you, Sera. I am not…displeased.”

“Lord and Lady still hanging around?” Sera asked, she hadn’t seen anyone fancy looking in the Chantry, present company excluded.

“The Trevelyans have been sent on their way,” Cassandra said. “Given the circumstances, and a bit more thought on the matter, their behavior was abhorrent, their mourning gives some excuse for how brashly they treated Eleanor. She certainly needn’t apologize to them and they, no interest in speaking to her further.”

“Good riddance,” Cullen muttered, rubbed him the wrong damn way people being mean to Ink huh?

But they might not want to let those assholes get too far away. “Cool, but maybe you
should get them back, apprehend them or whatever the frig.” Sera informed them, “Ellie told Max when she ups her age. Member how we was tryin’ to figure out who blabbed about her birthday to Gaspard? Check it. Paperwork, stuff Max filed to get Ink documentation. He got her papers that list her date of birth as 01-01-9:26”

Lady Josie nodded that she’d seen as much, “Yes, wh-” clicked for her then.

“Papers the Trevelyans have been in possession of since his will unsealed upon Eleanor’s true coming of age some weeks past,” Cassandra ground out.

Cullen was already in motion, heading for the door, “They only just left, if I go now I can cat-“

“Wait!” Leliana called to halt him. “We…Cullen we do not have proof, evidence. The pollen filled envelope was destroyed to keep it from spreading, the whole of the immediate threat was eradicated, and the only thing we have is a Spirit who claims to have tracked down the person that paid for the order…we traced everything back to Duke Gaspard and that evidence is, our Spirit friend, who we know we can trust, said so.”

“But I friggin saw the bouquet and the pollen and everything!” Sera argued! Don’t! Don’t stop the man—let Cullen loose! Hunt those arseholes down, make them eat his feather pauldrons! Sera’d help! “And so did my Friend, and Adan and Solas! And they friggin! I mean they had it perfect! Their motive is friggin not wanting Ink to have what Max left her—but they was coming to execute the will like they got to, and oh it’s just too bad she friggin died before they could reach her! Oh well!”

“We could possibly get a court to believe such a thing occurred, I don’t doubt that,” Leliana agreed, “what I am saying is: Duke Gaspard orchestrated the hit, we have no evidence that the Trevelyans offered him information on just when to strike. While the timing is certainly convenient for their motives, they did not hold their ground and expose themselves, they delivered what they were required to, attempted some very benign looking methods of scaring Eleanor off from accepting her inheritance, and took their leave. At most it is conspiracy and it would take a terrible stretch to prove as much. Her birthday is such a small detail that could have easily been offered in ‘innocence’ or at least made to appear as such.”

“That’s! That’s friggin—ugh!” Sera wanted to punch something! People! Lots of them!

“Although,” Cassandra said, sounding like perhaps she were onto something, “Maxwell Trevelyan knew of Eleanor’s asthma. She mentioned as such when we were on the Storm Coast, Varric was concerned we had not done enough to assist her, and she told us the tale of how she’d had an attack on the way to the Conclave that caused Trevelyan to, quote, ‘totally freak out’, she’d had to more so help him handle it than he was of aid to her.” she held up a hand to halt Leliana when the Spymaster looked like she were about to refute that mattering, “Lord Trevelyan said he was pleased to see Eleanor in such fine health, seeing as Haven’s weather cannot possibly be suitable for her constitution. Is it not possible Maxwell informed his parents of Eleanor’s condition? They said his letter to them was extremely detailed, he’d told them all about her.”

“It is,” Leliana agreed, “Meaning it’s entirely possible the Trevelyans not only offered up the opportunity of her birthday, but the method with which to strike. I’ll see what my agents can dig up, perhaps there is some sort of paper trial. Letters and the like, between the two conspiring.”

“My god this is good drama,” Dori spoke up. Dummy. But he breaking the tension so, eh. “My head is spinning from it—and here I thought the south would be boring.”

“She was rude, and we did not realize why she would be so very upset over their lamenting their son not marrying. Nor their hand in Gaspard’s attempt against her,” Josie reminded her, yeah, they had reason to misunderstand and think Ink needed correction.

“What was it she said that made you decide to excuse her from the room? …Vite la a chingwada?” Cullen asked Lady Josie.

“Vete a la chingada,” she rattled off the correction, “When our lady shouted at our esteemed guests that they could ‘go to hell’, I thought perhaps she should take a moment to cool off. Now, I appreciate the sentiment.” Ohh cool, now Lady Josie was displeased, friggin’ cute seein’ her pissed!

“Thank you Sera, for bringing this to our attention,” Marehis said, holding out a hand to Sera, pulling the younger Elf to her side when she accepted it, wrapped her arms around her shoulders, “That was such a good catch.”

“Just…tryin to help Ink,” Sera said, oh shite! “She’s gonna accept it, sign everything is that…I mean I told her to, but if it en’t safe, I can tell her I thought about it some more and think she should just drop it.”

Spymaster considered it a second, “We will think on it but as it stands…I think it would be rather fitting, Eleanor ending up with what they sought to keep from her. Too, leaving it unclaimed could only encourage them to strike again, kill her before she can change her mind,” Leliana reasoned out.

“And we have not been able to secure documentation for Eleanor, it…well obviously in order to do so, it requires a measure of blood magic, to verify her identity,” Josephine said, “That is not a step we’re willing to take, neither do we believe Eleanor would be comfortable with it. However there is no going back and stopping Maxwell Trevelyan for using her blood in such a way.”

Cullen nodded in agreement, and then, “How…how is Ellie? Is she still upset?”

“She’s okay,” Sera said, “You should come see for yourself you tits—Dori too, if you like. I’m getting ready to go put in an order for dinner, you can come have a good talk with Ink and eat together. Her place, she’s done Heraldig today, she’s in fully jammy mode. Her cloak here? She wasn’t wearing it when she uh, got home.”

Cassandra looked to everyone and nodded. “Yes—to both dinner, and her cloak and things,” she said, and Marehis let go of Sera to go gather Ellie’s things, oh, they was draped over the back of the chair in front of Josie’s desk, her cloak and scarf. Cool.

“Alright! Let’s go. How do you wanna do this?” Sera asked, as she led them out of Josie’s office, “You lot can tell me what you want from Fliss’s and head on over to see Ink. Or you can go put in our orders, while I do something real quick—either way, I’m stopping at Adan’s first.”

Cripes! Friggin squeezy grip on her arm, ouch, and she had to stop ‘cause miss grabby stopped, oh. But maybe she deserved it, ‘sandra looked pretty well gut punched with concern as she looked Sera over, “I thought Healer Adan cleared you from your brush with blood lotus, are you feeling unwell?” Shite!
“‘m fine, ‘sandra. It’s a stop for Inky-”

Wasn’t much better, “Our argument has made Eleanor physically ill?”

“Fenedhis!” Marehis swore, hand reaching at her hip where Inky’s potion bag was, “I did not-! Elgarn’nann I cannot believe I forgot to leave her potions-!”

“People don’t make people sick…’cept with germs or whatever,” Sera said to ‘sandra, and then to Marehis, “and calm your tits Mare, you think of about fifty bajillion ways to keep Ink safe every second of the day, don’t beat yourself up forgetting her potions in the middle of all that mess. Besides I asked Adan about backups in case of emergency—I have a little stash on me of potion for her tummy, panic attacks, asthma shite.”

“Oh, All-Father bless you,” Marehis breathed.

Blah, alright, if he has to. “Ink’s not ill, not really. But her breathin’s still rattley, you know, the way it gets?” that got her blank stares from the Human population but Marehis nodded, “Just, hasn’t gone away yet, and she’s been sleeping with that Embrium salve stuff on her chest all week, s’used up. I figure she should probably go ahead and put some on, and I’m gonna see if Adan has blossoms to spare, get some steamy stuff goin’, dry air’s gotta be ki- er, it’s gotta hurt, you know?”

“You’ve been keeping your cabin warm, making tea and embrium steam to help with he-” Marehis looked sort of teary, eyes glossing over, “Sera.”

Cassandra released her hold on Sera’s arm, patting it a bit in apology, “Yes, thank you for thinking of such things. We can handle dinner while you see Adan.”

“Sera, da’len, we saw er, you were in the middle of entertaining Miss Lace,” Marehis said, “I apologize you were interrupted, if you wish, I could make arrangement for your privacy—Solas wouldn’t object to lending you use of his cabin-“

“No offense but that’s bit weird, he’s always Fade dreamin’ and he goes to sleep places so he can see shite that happened there.” Marehis nodded that that was understandable. “We was just getting things ready for my slot with Ink tomorrow—I get plenty of privacy in our set up, but thanks.”

‘sandra wrapped an arm around her shoulders as they left the Chantry, walked the path to Adan’s. “I’m glad your new living arrangement suits you but I agree with Marehis, you are due some reward…” Cassandra pondered. And then, “Sera,” she cleared her throat, “you…wish to pull one of your ‘Friend’ pranks, upon Haven’s cook, to cheer his stressed staff?”

Wait. Wait. Wait, frick, really?! “Sandra…do you mean for re-?”

“There are some rules.”

She’d already thought about it loads especially after Ink explained his harshness—she got it but if he kept everyone wound so tight, eventually…well everyone needed knocked back a peg every now and again, and those beneath them could use a good laugh. “Nothing that’ll mess with Haven’s food schedule, or make him contaminate the whatever—cause everyone can get sick ‘n pish.”

“I would recommend striking at the end of day—his most weary staff members will surely bear witness, and it won’t run the risk of interfering with anything you shouldn’t,” Cassandra advised. “And if you are caught…well I believe I’ve gotten the gist of disingenuous reprimand.”
Holy shite! “Make ‘em think I’m in trouble but I wouldn’t really be?”

“Indeed. Especially if your prank of choice involves ‘pies’. Disingenuous or not, a bribe of vanilla pie filling would not be amiss.”

“Can Inky be my partner in crime?”

“It is not very Heraldly behavior…” Lady Josie said, “but, she’s only a girl, acting her age after all.”

“Yes! Thanks Josie! And ‘sandra! Pudding all around when we pull it off!” Sera promised. Cripes it was gonna be good fun! Friggin eat it Cook! Literally! “Ink wants extra bread,” Sera sent them off with as they went their separate ways, dropping her off at Adan’s.

Adan had salve whipped up already and blossoms too friggin, boss! And that hadn’t taken long so…she took a minute to pop by Solas’s cabin, cause…well it was on the way an’ shite. And. He usually came to see Ink in the evening’s anyway, for meditation shite and Ellie liked spending time with him, Marehis did too, obviously. And it wouldn’t be a big deal to holler in an additional order. And. Frick! She invited him along cause it wasn’t horrible, having him hanging around. Blah! Worked out well enough, she and Sola’s ran into the others as they left Flissa’s, and he just popped his head into the Tavern and waved to Flissa calling that he was joining them, so, she’d just send his usual.

Marehis was all smiles as Solas wrapped an arm around her shoulders as they made their way to Ink’s cabin, and she quietly assured him they had more information now, about the blood lotus attack.

Though Marehis stopped in her tracks as they approached the cabin, eyes wide as she motioned for everyone to halt, looking equal parts horrified and conflicted, and Solas’s face went bright red, tips of his ears flaming.

Cause, to be fair, they was hearing Ellie gasping in excitement, and a very exuberant, “-yes!” she giggled breathlessly, bed squeakin underneath her as she bounced, demanding, “faster, Cremisius!”

“Oh, you want faster, Lady Herald?”

Friggin third time this week, that Sera knew about anyway.

Ha! She couldn’t help but just about pop a lung laughing, oh shite! Maker! The look on Marehis’s face! Solas looked like he was turning purply, had he stopped breathing? Yup!

“Sera!” Marehis made to stop her as she went ahead to the door.

Oh, it wasn’t nice, but too funny! “What? They don’t mind me watching or joining in,” Sera offered innocently as she threw open the door.

Ellie was giggly as they came in, offering a shy wave to everyone, Krem was grinning like mad, looked real comfy in their position.

Ellie and Kremmy-boy were in bed, but there wasn’t anything super fun going on. Well, not by Sera’s definition. Probably because of the definitions. They wasn’t even under the covers or nothin, Krem was seated with his back against the headboard, arms around Ellie tucked up against his chest. She had her little flippy notebook out, and he had hold of a dictionary he was just turning the page in, pages had stuck together a bit.
“Da’vehnan?” Solas asked sounding relieved and confused.

“Hi, we’re looking up ‘Q’ words!” Ellie reported cheerily, “The kind that start with Q-u ‘cause they’re my favorites!”

“You was still working your way through A’s the other day,” Sera said as she came and sat on the foot of the bed.

Krem shrugged. “Cole said Ellie had a rough day, so, I figured we could jump to Q-u.”

“I just learned Qua…” Ellie squinted at her parchment pad, “Quadring… Quadringentenary! It means a span of 400 years! Or like, the 400th anniversary of something,” Ellie gasped, looking to Kremmy-boy, real excited to say, “400 years from now, will be the 400th anniversary of when I learned Quadringentenary!”

Marehis had to laugh, smiling as she shook her head, oh, frig, she came and wrapped Sera up in a hug, “Oh, da’assan, you are horrible, and I love you.”

“What’cha dooooin’?” Ellie asked as she started kicking rhythmically at the heel of Trevelyan’s boot. They were seated at the bar of some pub, nice little place they found in a sleepy town, north of the Temple of Sacred Ashes. Maker, just like maybe a week or so until they were there! Gosh Ellie was stuffed. They’d been there a while now, Trevelyan ordered her a meal…and then seconds. And then dessert that was meant to be shared but she was working on it by herself! Max’d had this stack of parchment he’d been writing away at, scratch scratch scratch of quill to parchment the whole time! He’d been doing a lot of that when they stopped, lately.

A smile tugged at his lips even as he tried to sound annoyed, “Writing a letter, brat, eat your supper.”

“I did!” she insisted as she ceased her boot kicking, “You need to eat too, you know! Lemme see,” Ellie waved for him to pass her the menu at his side and he handed it off to her seeming bemused, she pointed to a box and squinted at the word-shapes, “hmm…Fish ‘n chips.”

“Hmm…that says honeyed ham on rye. Fish and chips isn’t even on the menu babe, but nice try.”

What?! “It’s a pub! There’s always fish and chips at pubs! If it’s that way in the Marches, it should definitely be that way in Ferelden!” It was Ferelden*!

Trevelyan laughed at her indignancy, “Hmm…maybe back home, but Ferelden takes it more serious. We’ll see about cutting through Harpers Ford* or something, proper Fish and Chips are bought from a stand, wrapped in newsletter.”

News…newsletter? “But why?”

“I dunno kid, Fereldens are weird,” Trevelyan smiled at that, tousling her hair, seemed to give him pause, “Getting longer now, that oil stuff working good? You like it?”

Ellie nodded, blushing. “Yeah, thanks,” her hair was nearly down to her shoulders now! She hadn’t been able to let it grow in forever! “You didn’t have to-“
“Can it. I asked you to come with me, remember? You’re going out of your way to travel with me, navigating, pulling your own weight. We’re a team. And teams have leaders—I’m the leader.

“How come?”

“I’m tallest,” he offered simply.

“Oi! That’s heightist! I can be leader! I can actually follow the map!”

“Well, I’m older, wiser, devastatingly handsome,” he insisted comically. “Plus it’s just the way of things. Yeah, you point the way and help with directions, but you’re following me, right? That makes me leader—someday if anyone’s following you, you can be leader then, Maker help whoever those poor sods are. Leader means you’re my responsibility, it’s my job to make sure you have everything you need, warm clothes, medicine, food, sleep. Crap to take care of your crazy hair so you don’t stab yourself trying to cut it with my boot knife.”

“I wasn’t going to get stabbed, I’ve used knives on my hair loads of times! I couldn’t find scissors!” she defended.

“You don’t need scissors…unless you want a haircut—don’t know where we’d get you one, not too sure I could cut it myself, but I can keep an eye out for a barb—”

No! No more spending! “I don’t need a haircut!”

“I said ‘want’ kid, good leaders indulge in wants too from time to time. You know, within reason.”

“Well I want you to eat something, is that reasonable enough?”

“Hmm…can’t right now kid, but maybe when I’m done. I’m not really hungry. Honestly?” he looked around as if he didn’t want to be overheard but the pub was pretty dead, their gracious host/chef was snoozing in a chair behind the bar. “Kind of nervous,” he admitted, tapping the letter he’d been working on, Maker it was long! Front and back it was like, one, two, three, four—almost five sheets now!

Wait, “Nervous enough to make your stomach upset?” she worried, that didn’t sound fun, “I still have ginger root in my pack—”

“Slow your roll, it’s fine kid. I’ll feel better once I’m done I think.”

But! “If I wasn’t feeling good you’d make me take med- we! We literally only have ginger root because you got it for me—”

“I’m a total lunatic who just grabbed every possible thing I could remember getting plied with when I got sick as a kid, trying to make up for almost killing you. In my defense, Rashvine and Embrium are both red.”

Yeah…breathing in steam made with Elf Root and Rashvine would have uh…well Elf root would have helped negate some of the effects of Rashvine but, yeah, bleeding blisterly sores inside her lungs would have been just a bit counter intuitive to the whole ‘not dying’ thing. She asked him to keep an eye out for ingredients as they traveled, they were always burning through Elf root, and she made sure to pick up Embrium when they came across it. Trevelyan had seen Rashvine hanging about and mistaken it for Embrium, tossed some into a pocket on the bag they kept their potion things in. Then…gosh it’d been Ellie’s fault, she wasn’t paying close enough attention when
getting their campfire started and basically ended up with a big painful lungful of smoke. Que, asthma attack. Poor Trevelyan, there was a difference knowing she might have an attack, and actually trying to help her through one, it scared him something awful, and he’d tried to help her himself, grabbed ingredients to make the remedy he’d asked her about, but he’d picked up the first red plant he saw in their stores. Thankfully he stepped back and let her do her thing, she’d sorted enough times before, fought to focus and gotten Elf Root tonic and Embrium into the pot they’d been about to make tea in over their fire and took one of the unused Embrium blossoms pressed it over her mouth and nose and strained to breathe as deeply as she could, sometimes that had been the only thing she could do and it worked out alright, if she could get the pollen in her lungs, Maker it helped—hurt, made it worse for a few seconds but then it really, really helped. Max had knelt to rub circles on her back, that…huh, sort of helped too, she wasn’t sure why, but it had made her feel a little better, been comforting. She’d said she’d be okay, just needed to rest a bit. She’d laid down almost instantly been out, attacks just left her wiped. Trevelyan’d felt so badly, but he’d been such a big help, gosh, he’d picked her up and carried her ‘til he reached the nearest town, found a place to stay the night, got a proper healer to come and check her over. Everything was a little hazy but the next time she was actually awake and aware, Max was holding her hand, thumb rubbing circles as he read out loud, from this sheet of parchment with sloppy scrawling all over it, something the healer had written up for him for future reference, and the second he realized she was awake he’d launched into this sort of presentation of all the things he’d gotten while she was sleeping, like ginger for if her stomach was upset, broth, bread, apples, and he’d commandeered blankets from possibly every empty room he could find in the inn he’d gotten them set up in! She’d been bundled like mad, gosh he had sort of been a total lunatic!

A total lunatic that didn’t want anything to take anything to settle his stomach. But…it was upset because he was stressed? So maybe, “You wanna talk about it?” she asked.

“Nah kid, just writing my parents,” oh. They sounded…Max hadn’t talked a whole lot about them, outside of them being good parents. And wanting him to marry a woman already and give them grandchildren. Which was fine if that was what they wanted for their life, but putting that on your kid? Trying to force it? That…well, maybe Ellie didn’t know any better ‘cause she didn’t have parents but that didn’t sound very ‘good’ to her. He said they would write him all the time about different women they wanted him to meet with, had they done so while he was on the road to the Conclave? He was sort of in the middle of something! And! He didn’t want a wife!

“Another marriage thing?” she asked.

He snorted at that, “No, thank the Maker. They haven’t written me in a while, I just…I have some things I need to write them about, that’s all,” he shrugged. “Just grown up stuff.”

Oh. “What kind of grown up stuff?”

“Nothing you need to worry about. You’re just a kid—good kid, for all you are an insufferable brat.”

Rude! “Just for that I’m finishing this slice of pie—you’ll have to get your own!” Ellie informed him, sticking her tongue out before spearing another forkful of crust and baked apple, gosh it was super good.

Trevelyan grinned, pleased like that’s what he’d wanted in the first place. “Guess I will. Eat up, Ellie.”

Someone was shaking her a bit, “Inky? Ellie? Shite, ‘sandra wake up.”

“Hmm?”
“Ellie’s cryin’ in her sleep and she’s not waking u-”

“I’m awake,” Ellie mumbled sleepily, sitting straight up, sort of startled and trying to quell Sera’s panic, oh gosh! Too fast, dizzy, but she could lean against her friend, Sera wrapped an arm around her back, rubbing at her arm. Cassandra was here? Oh…huh, Cassandra was in her sleep clothes, and her hair was loose what…what was going on?

“You okay Ink?” Sera asked.

“Eleanor, did you have a bad dream?” Cassandra questioned, concerned, taking Ellie’s face in her hands and wiping oh, Sera’d said she was crying, must have been, at first she’d thought her nose feeling a little stuffy meant the salve on her chest—a little rubbed between her shoulder blades, Sera rubbed there for her—wasn’t working so well, but it had, she’d just yeah, been a little heartsick, seeing Max again in…gosh the Fade made everything feel so real, like she was really back there with him alive.

“No, not really, not a nightmare. I’m okay just, I guess everything yesterday sort of made me think so much about Max that I relived a memory in the Fade,” yesterday was the most she’d ever talked about her time with him, sort of filling in blanks for the advisors and her friends when they had dinner together. They’d known she was sad at his passing, felt badly about everyone who’d been lost at the Conclave but she’d never really talked about how much…loosing Max had been like if something were to happen to any of her friends—Maker forbid, forbid, forbid! Nothing was allowed to happen to them, none! She’d avoided talking about Trevelyan a lot before because focusing on something enough when you were awake could influence what you saw in the Fade as you slept. She’d been trying not to…it hurt, seeing Max again only to wake up to a world where he was gone, but yeah, after everything last night, “…it was nice, seeing him again. I miss him, you know?”

“I do,” Cassandra said sympathetically, brushing Ellie’s hair back, “Cole did not join you?”

“I’m sure he was watching but unless um, unless it’s something real bad he stays out of it, lets me remember.” Then, “Are you okay?” She wasn’t complaining, it was a nice surprise to wake up to, but Cassandra didn’t usually run around in her sleep clothes, and she was seated like she’d been laying between Ellie and the edge of the bed, her legs were tangled in their blankets.

“I…admittedly had trouble sleeping, myself,” Cassandra said, “I woke in the night and came to check on you and Sera, she woke and invited me to stay.”

“Awe, you’re always welcome for a sleepover,” Ellie assured, taking hold of her hands squeezing them because she wanted to check, “Did you have a bad dream, Cassandra? Are you okay? I tell you when I have bad dreams.”

Cassandra seemed to consider it. “I did suffer unpleasant dreams, but I cannot recall the details now. I’m well, Eleanor, our impromptu sleepover brought me peaceful rest.”

Ellie leaned her head against Sera’s shoulder, humming her appreciation, “Thanks for inviting Cassandra to stay. Gosh, it was a nice surprise to wake up to.”

Cassandra smiled warmly, wrapping her arms around Ellie as she pressed a kiss to her cheek and laid back down, taking Ellie with her, Sera following after to snuggle against Ellie’s back, it was warm, and nice. Was Anya okay? Oh, she was awake, Ellie could feel the dip and rise in the mattress as Anya got up and started walking alongside the row of feet near the end of the bed. Gosh it was early, the sun wasn’t even beginning to rise. Ellie was still pretty sleepy, and then there was something…humming, really pretty humming, right near her ear, awe. Sera, gosh her
singing voice was just beautiful, she very rarely sang though, didn’t seem to care for it but it was nice, soothing, it made Ellie fall asleep again.

You’re okay, I’ll make it quiet, you should rest more. Cole…

Friday, Wintermarch 4th, 9:42 was a pretty big day. Felt like it, anyway, to Ellie. Big breakfast, big War Room meeting, big date.

It was fun getting to brush Cassandra’s hair! She let her! Braided it too, Marehis helped, so Ellie could learn how to get the braid to wrap like a crown around Cassandra’s head. And then they ate like, the biggest breakfast—they basically had two breakfasts. They’d eaten together like usual, but Ellie was still hungry after finishing everything on her plate and Sera wasn’t going to turn down a chance at seconds, so they’d went to Flissa’s and had…was second breakfast a thing? It should be a thing! And Cremisius was there, talking with Flissa and she overheard the barmaid saying something to him about ‘dough rising splendidly’, and then she’d greeted Ellie very loudly, gosh! So…Ellie supposed dough had something ‘top secret’ to do with their date, which sounded promising, dough made so much great stuff! When she greeted him he came and kissed her on the forehead, wished her a good morning, and good luck in her War Room meeting, before he was off on an errand for the Iron Bull.

And then, it was time for her War Room meeting. She was nervous. She felt a lot better after talking with Sera, and she was glad everyone came and ate with her last night, but she’d—gosh she’d yelled! At Lady Josie! And- and Marehis! Everyone! That wasn’t okay, she shouldn’t have lost her cool, handled the Trevelyans with more compassion, because yeah losing Max was hard on her, it had to be so much harder for them, they were his parents! She’d been really, really, really sorry, apologized to everyone during dinner and she asked if she could maybe invite the Trevelyans to have breakfast with her or something—she’d apologize profusely, and they’d eat, and she could show them around Haven—but Cullen…gosh he’d almost sounded angry about it, and he’d been quick to assure her he wasn’t mad at her, he just said the Advisors had come to see why she’d been so upset, had found them pretty rude to begin with and they knew more now than they had when Ellie’d stormed off like a total brat—her words, not his, gosh that’d been so thoughtless, she could kick herself, she’d scared Marehis and Cassandra something awful!—but anyway, when Ellie said as much at dinner, Cullen informed her they’d sent the Trevelyans away!

“Oh! Gosh um…well I guess I should write them then-” she’d said, but,

“Eleanor,” Cassandra cut her off, “If the Trevelyans were in this very room demanding your apology, you would not need give it.” Cullen was nodding in agreement.

“But I really was rude-”

“My lady,” Josie spoke up, “if you would, allow me to handle further contact with the Trevelyans. Tempers are so caustic, I can express anything needed, in the way that suits best.”

That made sense, and Ellie’d already really put her foot in it, she should have let Josie handle it entirely, to begin with, let her talk for her when she’d gotten upset with them in the first place, so she nodded, “Thanks Josie. I really am sorry for yelling at you.”

Josie shook her head. “Think no more of it, mija*, you’re forgiven.”

“I beg to differ!” Dorian had interjected, “I’m wildly displeased. Outraged. Incensed!” but he…he hadn’t even been there? Oh, but that was what he was getting at she guessed, “How dare such a spectacular argument take place without me there to witness it. I could have made an evening of it—there are so few opportunities in Haven to take in dinner and a show.”
She entered the War Room alongside Cassandra, Marehis waiting with Anya out in the hall. Cullen looked up from where he’d been placing a few more pieces low on the map, gosh super south, nearing ‘the Fallow Mire’ oh! They’d sent people there to investigate claims of Rifts, she supposed they were getting closer, that was good.

What was even better was Cullen saying, “Ahh, good morning Ellie, Cassandra. At last, our quincunx is complete,” he offered warmly, with a little wink.

Oh gosh! “It is!” Ellie enthused, it was one of her Q-u words, she only remembered it because she liked it so much, because it was Q-u word that meant ‘five things arranged to form a square or a rectangle’ like them! Four corners, with one standing in the middle on one side—Cullen was their middle!

“Eleanor,” Cassandra said, taking Ellie’s hand, “Chancellor Roderick will be here momentarily, to bear witness to your signing.”

Ellie nodded. Gosh, she was scared to see him again. She’d had great luck not running into him around Haven…oh but maybe that was mean. It wasn’t like she greeted every last person that joined the Inquisition—Maker, she’d do nothing but greet new people all day long!…that might be fun though- that wasn’t the point! But she greeted most important people, and Chancellor Roderick was a prominent figurehead. A mean one, but she’d just have to deal with it. Cassandra explained over breakfast that, since Ellie’d be signing papers that would make her a citizen of the Free Marches, their signing had to be overlooked by a Chantry official from the Free Marches. Mother Gisselle, like many of their Chantry allies, was from Orlais. They had loads of Chantry workers from Ferelden of course, but um. Well. Good old Roderick, was from the Free Marches, had worked his way up through the Chantry starting in a little worship hall near Ostwick, apparently.

“I swear to you, if you are of discomfort, if it is too much to see the man in the War Room again with…I understand that both our presence may be difficult to see—if you feel panic, you need only say the word and we will send him away, we can make other arrangements this…we merely wish to have you sign as soon as possible.”

“It will be alright, Ellie,” Cullen promised, “the Chancellor was…agreeable, last we spoke. When he came to us he was genuinely contrite, he had to swallow a lot of pride to come back here and offer his aid after speaking against us—you—so openly. And,” the women around the table looked entirely bemused, exasperated with him as he pulled his hat out of his cloak pocket and onto his head, “we’re right here with you.” Oh! Fake Cullen wouldn’t wear his hat! It was sweet, trying to make sure she had things immediately around her in case she did get scared, worried she was trapped again. It was dumb, Envy was dead, and she knew that but still, some part of her sometimes felt like it’d be back any second now—or maybe this was all some sort of trick, that she hadn’t escaped and was merely playing into some sort of trap it was laying out for her. She was pretty sure that was why Marehis and Anya were waiting in the wings, to send in the puppy cavalry if she did become overwhelmed. Gosh, it really did help whenever she’d been practicing with Cullen and Cassandra yesterday, with her panic attack, she ended up falling right onto her bottom and the pup climbed into her lap, and it helped to hold someone comforting and warm and soft.

And now, being back in the War Room, about to be joined by someone that scared Ellie in and out of the Fade, there was a third thing more the Advisors had set up for her, to avoid panic.

“We may have requested some assistance from a Friend, to perhaps give you a more positive association between Roderick and the War Room,” Cassandra said, pulling Ellie along before she sent Ellie forward to walk around the War Table—Leliana moved to stand on the other side of Lady Josie, and Cullen made way for Ellie to slip past him, so they all stood across the War
Table from the door, Ellie between the four adults.

And then there were five. Five adults. But one very distinct difference between the ones at her side, and the one blindly staggering into the room as the door swung open before him.

Chancellor Roderick had been pied.

Chancellor Roderick had been pied, directly in the face, and Sera could be heard screaming with laughter as she fled the scene of the crime.

Ellie slapped her hands over her mouth too hard, it stung! But! Oh gosh she was going to laugh otherwise! Could she have an asthma attack from suppressing laughter? That felt like that might be a thing. It was purely to avoid a potential medical emergency that she started giggling into her hands, leaning into Cullen, trying to sort of hide her face against the former Templar who was holding back laughter of his own.

“What in heaven’s name-!” Roderick was bellowing.

“Oh dear, Chancellor, how simply awful,” Lady Josephine offered up with levity laced sympathy, “would you care for a handkerchief?”

The man wiped at an eye with his hand slopping some of the pie filling onto the War Table yikes! But it didn’t get on anything, just the edge on Ellie’s right. He cracked his now cleaner eye open and accept the offered handkerchief. “Some menace just attacked me with- with some sort of horrible dessert!”

Cassandra reached out and swiped a finger through the bit of filling on the War Table, bringing it to her lips to taste it, “Hmm, we have differing opinions Chancellor, I believe its rather delicious.”

“You should- I’ve been attacked! You should wrangle that Elf—tall girl, tallest Elf I’ve ever seen—”

“Ahh, that would be Sera. I will most certainly give her a stern talking to at her earliest convenience,” Cassandra assured him, Leliana and Cullen had to quiet their snickering at Cassandra’s chosen phrasing. “If you are well? You can see well enough now I trust, to bear witness to the Herald of Andraste’s signing?”

She was…well she certainly wasn’t afraid anymore that she was back under Envy’s influence, Maker, Roderick just got pied! So, Ellie stepped back to scoot behind Cullen and Cassandra, went to join the Chancellor still wiping at his face with Lady Josie’s offered hankie. Ellie had her own she pulled from a pocket and, “Here, if you bend down a little,” she said and when he hesitantly obliged, she heled get some of the filling he missed at the corners of his eyes, that’d sting something awful if it got in them, and there was some more on his chin, “I’m sorry Sera pranked you, you aren’t terribly mad I hope? I’m really sorry on her behalf—I’m kind of nervous, meeting you again seeing as we didn’t necessarily get off on the right foot, and um, I think you’re sort of scary, no offense. She only pranked you, so I wouldn’t be afraid, meeting you again, no one’s very scary when they’ve got pie all over their face.”

“Ahh. I do…apologize, lady Herald. I am sorry,” he allowed almost belligerently like he disliked saying as much but then he sort of stopped, looking at Ellie, “You are…you’re a child, and I demanded your execution for a crime now, I am most certain you did not commit.”

“Thanks,” Ellie gave it a little thought, “If you can forgive Sera for pieing you, I’m pretty
He huffed a disbelieving sound at that like he thought perhaps she were joking but she wasn’t grinning like a loon or anything just, a small reassuring smile and he said, “That is certainly gracious of you. it would only be right for me to act in kind. Your ‘Sera’ is forgiven.”

“Thanks! And thanks for coming to witness my signing, I appreciate it.”

“Come, my lady,” Josie said, stepping nearer and offering her hand to Ellie, “let us proceed, shall we?”

Josie spread out all of the papers on the War Table, gosh they took up the entire length! She put them in the order they were meant to be signed in, starting with the one that would give her her name. like. For real. It felt…kind of weird. Exciting and…she wasn’t sure what else. Sad, her heart still hurt, she wanted Max more than she wanted his name. Maker, all of this...she was more certain in her decision now than ever before, to make sure securing Mister Aclassi was a certainty before making Cremisius aware. Knowing now what Max had wanted for them, that the possibility they could have had some kind of life together had almost been real and had been taken at the Conclave hurt, badly, the actual definition of heart breaking it felt like. She was going to keep his name, she thought, it’d been really sweet of Sera to talk her through everything, offer to help her change it later if she wanted but she liked…she liked having some of what could have been, being family with him as much as she could be now that he was gone.

“Now, before you sign, you’re certain you’re pleased with your legal name, Eleanor? We cannot make much change to what has been dictated here—at least not this very moment,” Cassandra said, “but Maxwell did leave room for you to choose your own secondary name, if you wished for one.”

“Oh four,” Cullen muttered jovially, and earning a backhanded swat to his side.

Ellie nodded. “Sera talked about it with me some more last night, that I could pick a middle name, and I talked it over with Marehis—I hope you don’t mind,” she looked to Cassandra, “Max might have made it so I got labeled ‘Eleanor’ to begin with, but you’re the one who really made it my name, you know? So in a way you had a hand in picking my first name. I thought it might be nice if Marehis got to have a say in my middle name.”

Cassandra nodded, clearing her throat, and there was a bit of a smile at her lips, “I suppose I did. Marehis helped you pick a middle name to your liking?”

“Uh huh,” Ellie said, “Liana*—it’s the Human variant of a Dalish name Liara. It sounds pretty with Eleanor and she said it was fitting?”

Oh gosh, Cassandra got that kind of quiet she did when she was overwhelmed by something, she was silent just a second before saying, “That is markedly fitting, I believe.”

“It is,” Cullen agreed, “although I must warn you Eleanor, you’re entering a whole other level of fresh terror—there is no fear quite like that which strikes you, when you hear someone middle name you. Whenever I hear Cullen Stanton, I know I am in trouble…if I hear Cullen Stanton Rutherford, I run.”

“I wouldn’t run away,” she promised, gosh, not after last night, Maker! She hadn’t meant to scare Marehis, but meant to didn’t take away from the fact that she had, Cassandra too. “But it does sound like a good system to know just how much trouble I’m in!”
Lady Josie wrote ‘Liana’ in the space left for her middle name, under the watch of Chancellor Roderick, and then Ellie had to sign, she was a little nervous, she’d never signed anything before! Not really—‘Ellie’ at the end of notes and letters. But there was something special about carefully spelling out ‘Eleanor Liana Trevelyan’ at the bottom of the parchment that would make her so.

And then she signed another, and another—Chancellor Roderick and Lady Josie did too, and Josie had this little ink stamp she had to use to put a seal at the bottom next to her signature.

“There is one thing more, left to sign,” Lady Josie said as she stacked all the documents together.

Gosh, “Really?” Ellie asked she…she was pretty sure that’d been everything she saw last night.

She gasped when the door to the War Room swung open behind her, she whirled around oh, Varric.

“Shit, this place is depressing without all the birthday crap in here. Get a nice plant or something, damn.”

“You’re alright, my lady?” Josie asked her quietly, oh! Ellie patted her arm apologetically, she’d heard the door bang against the wall, and it’d startled her, she’d taken hold of Josie’s wrist and pulled the Ambassador behind her, and the hum of barrier was over Ellie’s own skin, clothing. She hadn’t cast on Josie accidentally had she? Nope, she was all good it looked like.

“Sorry,” Ellie whispered to Josie, she hadn’t meant to manhandle…Herald-handle, the Antivan woman like that.

“Varric, conduct yourself appropriately!” Cassandra snapped.

“Sorry Tumbles, didn’t mean to startle you, just asked Cole to clue me in so I could make an entrance to represent my client—that’s you,” Varric offered her a wink as he came to stand at her side, “here, read this over best you can, I’ll be right here to explain anything you need—but it’s no worries, I’ve been negotiating on your behalf all week since I learned the Advisors wanted to offer you as much once you were of age, I feel this deal is pretty solid.”

Oh. There was something else—her contract with the Inquisition.

It was…the actual most difficult thing she’d ever read gosh, so many big words, but practicing so much sounding out ridiculous words from the dictionary helped her tackle the larger things…she ultimately had to ask Varric what most of them meant, but it mostly just sounded like a bunch of fancy words that said what the Advisors had laid out to her in her first War Room meeting after facing the Breach, still it was nice that they let her look over everything, made sure she was informed before signing an agreement with them.

Everything signed and sealed, Ellie was officially an agent of the Inquisition…would it be professional to happy dance? She…she’d hold off. Sera was always down for dancing, she’d save it for later.

“Congratulations, young lady,” Chancellor Roderick wished her politely before taking his leave of the War Room.

“You did good, Tumbles,” Varric said.
“Thanks for helping me.”

“Anytime kid,” he assured her, “Unless it’s in the next eight hours, shit, I need my beauty sleep.”

“Gosh! Varric, it’s almost nine in the morning, you haven’t been to bed since yesterday?”

“Haven hours kid, when we’re not on the road my sleep is dictated to me by the gods, my muse, and whenever my body feels like collapsing into my cot.”

“Go get some rest, have sweet dreams,” she wished him, pressing a kiss to his forehead.

“Thanks Tumbles,” Varric waved them off, she heard the sound of Anya greeting the Dwarf, barking and the pads of her paws scraping against his boots as the door closed behind him.

“So, what else is on today?” Ellie asked the Advisors as they settled back into their usual routine.

“Well, actually, we’d like to discuss your next journey from Haven—nothing quite so sudden as last time,” Lady Josephine assured, “but sometime next week, if you are feeling up to it, now might be the most opportune time for you to investigate the Oasis yourself, seal the Rifts reported there and see if these Shards you’ve discovered truly will open the temple.”

“The door Alexius used in the future, to seal his throne room, worked similarly, Madam de Fer said. So, I think it should, it’ll be cool to find out what’s inside.”

Cassandra’s hands clinched tight at her sides, and she cleared her throat, “Please do be careful, Eleanor, we do not know what the Temple may hold. Madam de Fer speculates it could be some great benefit, to the Inquisition, that it is responsible for such a discovery should there be anything of note within, but if it is dangerous… rely on your allies, be safe.”

Oh yeah, “I will be,” Ellie promised her, “and I’ll have lots of people with me,” gosh, she had to think on it, “—Sera’s going for sure, and Dorian and Solas, and the Iron Bull, and gosh, who else? Thom might go, annnnd… oh! Varric, duh… Cole too maybe? Everyone will look after each other.”

The Seeker nodded. “I do regret not being able to join you this venture out, Eleanor, truly.”

“The Templars need training and careful moderation, so we know how they and the Mages will work together when we go to seal the Breach,” Ellie said, assuring her she understood, “I’m really proud of you for working with them!”

“Thank you, Eleanor.”

All said and done, next week, they’d head out for the Oasis. Ellie… wasn’t looking forward to leaving so much behind. She wanted to seal more Rifts, and she was excited to see the Oasis and investigate the temple, but she’d miss Cassandra and Cullen, and Josie and Leliana and Marehis and Vivienne and gosh—Anya! She’d miss her so much! She might be able to go out with Ellie in the future, but she was just a puppy, and Ellie was pretty sure she’d die if anything happened to her that could have been prevented if she’d just stayed behind, so she would be staying in Haven, she’d have lots of people around who would love her and make sure she ate—Cremisius! She’d miss him too! But she was grateful that he double pinkie promised her he’d watch after Anya while she was gone. Marehis had some sort of mission—she’d be there for the start of their journey to the Oasis, and they might be able to meet up on the way back, but Leliana needed her somewhere in Orlais for… something. Ellie wasn’t sure, some sort of top-secret spying stuff. And then Madam de
Fer was going to be doing courtly things for them in Orlais, working in Val Royeaux and the like, visiting with the different nobles who came to their aid in Therinfal, and she wanted to see Bastien, too, and Ellie understood that gosh, he wasn’t her husband, but they loved each other very much, Vivienne talked rarely of him, but when she did it sounded like she thought he hung the moon.

But for now, it was the fourth! That meant…well, they hadn’t been very sure when she’d be done with everything this morning, so they were on a bit of a flexible schedule—whenever they were done, Ellie’d go back to her cabin and change for a lesson with Cassandra and Cullen, until lunch time and then! Sera! She was going to teach Ellie—

“Eleanor?” Cassandra asked, concerned when Ellie’s eyes clenched shut and she raised a hand to rub at her forehead. They’d been leaving the War Room, Lady Josie and Leliana had returned to work and Cullen and Cassandra were going to walk she and Marehis back to her cabin to change but gosh yikes, ouch.

“Sorry, I’m okay, just a headache—not bad like they have been just, a dull- I would rank it as a mild stabbing in the front of my brain.”

“The stabbing system, I know it well,” Cullen offered gently, speaking softly like he was worried she might be sensitive to sound…but maybe she was, her ears were sort of ringing. “I’ll go get you some water, you’ve potion?”

“I do, thank you lethallin,” Marehis replied, and Ellie smiled when Anya yipped, and when she opened her eyes the pup was on the mission to escort Cullen to get water while Cassandra wrapped an arm around Ellie’s shoulders, and Marehis came to feel at her forehead.

“I’m okay, just kind of tired—dunno why, I slept really well,” she’d felt fully rested when she woke up for the day, she’d been a little sleepy this week, maybe she just needed to be totally lazy for a day to catch up after all the traveling and wildness of the last time they left Haven. Maybe she’d ask for another day off? She didn’t want to get into the habit of it though, she really did have things to do.

“There have been many sudden changes in the last few hours,” Cassandra said, “would you care to rest for a while, Eleanor? If you wish, you could lie down in my quarters—it is warm and comfortable, and there are no windows and the walls are thick, there would be precious little light or sound that could bother you it is an ideal place to find refuge from a headache.”

…oh gosh she needed to stop hanging out with Bull quite so much because the first thought that came to mind was the fact that Cullen suffered an awful lot of headaches. She worried about him sometimes, but he said he was alright…some sort of chronic thing she guessed? Cassandra had assured her the Inquisition supplied everyone that needed lyrium with the stuff, so…huh, she hoped whatever it was, wasn’t super serious.

She didn’t really hear what she said in response to Cassandra’s offer, the next thing she knew, she was in Cassandra’s sleep clothes, and Cullen brought her some water to drink before Marehis gave her potion, and then she was under the covers of the Seeker’s bed with Marehis laying between her and the wall, and Anya curled up at her side. Sleepy puppy, but she was just a baby! She was growing and learning all sorts of new things all the time, of course she needed a nap. Maybe Ellie did too, she’d been feeling a little tired toward the end of their meeting, and it all was a little overwhelming, not even twenty-four hours ago she’d been just Ellie, expecting a pleasantish, somewhat sad visit from the Trevelyans, a chance to finally offer her condolences in person only to have…well, everything that happened, happen. Maker. Definitely nap time.

The light didn’t bother her quite so much, though she swore Cassandra said something
about there not being any, there was still pale light streaming in...oh, when she sleepily cracked an eye open she could see path of light from the open door, two silhouettes on the floor of Cassandra’s room. She wasn’t sure what for but she didn’t’ mind, it was just Cullen and Cassandra and gosh blankets were soft, she relaxed and waited for sleep to make its way to her, it was just a bit hazy as the adults in the doorway spoke,

“Maker, she has a name now,” Cullen breathed.

“She has always had a name, but yes, I know what you mean,” Cassandra allowed, quietly, “I’m pleased such could finally be arranged for her.”

“Eleanor Liana,” Cullen murmured thoughtfully.

“The Light of the Maker, my god has answered.”

“-Trevelyan,” Cullen spoke as if he were finishing her sentence humorously.

“Well, we do have him to thank, for everything.”

“Nervous?” Max asked as they ascended the stairs to the Temple of Sacred Ashes. “Don’t be. Just stick with me, kid, and you’ll be fine.”

When she woke...she wasn’t startled like maybe she would have been once upon a time, it was now a usual occurrence, except lately the face had been horizontal along side hers. Sera’s face —the Elf girl was crouched pressed up against the side of the bed so her face rested right before Ellie’s noses sort of squished.

“I’m glad you’ve been brushing your teeth Ser’,” Ellie teased quietly.

“Yeah yeah,” Sera laughed lightly, “you okay Ink? ‘sandra said you was havin’ headaches again. It’s almost lunch now, you wanna sleep some more or come eat?”

Mmmm, “Gosh, yeah, lunch sounds great.”

Marehis hummed in her ear, squeezing her a bit, “You’re feeling better, da’vehnan?”

“I am,” she promised, she really was—Cassandra had been right, everything that morning was super crazy, she felt loads better now.

Lunch apparently meant Ellie, gosh, she got to stay in sleep clothes, or at least, that’s what happened, the second she sat up in bed, Sera was pulling her forward and out, to pad barefoot through the halls of the Chantry to Josie’s office with Marehis in tow...where was Anya?

“I brought Inky!” Sera announced as she pushed open the door to Josie’s office, her desk was positioned the way they moved it so they could all sit around it to eat, Ellie and the Advisors, and Sera, Cassandra, Marehis oh! Anya was in Josie’s lap, being a spoilt little thing getting lots of pets from the Antivan woman. Awe, but she gave a happy little bark and dropped down to come make her way back to Ellie, that was sweet.

“Hey girl,” Ellie greeted, kneeling to pet her, “did you have a nice nap? Did you have sweet dreams?” she gasped, that gave her a thought! “Oh! Cole!”

The adults in the room startled slightly when Cole appeared on the table, thankfully it was clear for the moment since lunch hadn’t arrived yet.
“Eleanor, honestly,” whoops, Cassandra sounded a bit exasperated, “need you summon Cole without warning to answer your every question?”

“He can find out so much stuff!” Ellie defended, “Everyone’d use instant Cole to find out stuff if they could! They’d just ‘Cole’ it!”

“That sounds very silly, but I like it, Ellie,” Cole offered sweetly, “You want to know if puppies have dreams?”

Ellie gasped, “He even knows what I want to ask before I ask it!” she enthused, “Do puppies dream?”

“They do,” Cole said, “Anya dreams a lot about running and playing in the snow, she dreams about you and Cullen and Cassandra and Sera and Marehis and Cremisius. Dogs dream nice things, they’re always happy dreams.”

“Awe! That’s so cute! Thanks Cole! Do you want to stay for lunch?”

“No thank you,” Cole answered serenely, vanishing from the tabletop.

When lunch was through, Marehis had a meeting with Leliana since Ellie’d be staying in the Chantry for her lesson with Sera. Sera was just the best! She’d brought along Ellie’s pack for when they were on the road, she’d already put the nicer clothing Ellie’d been wearing to the War Room that morning inside, and she’d packed some of Ellie’s rougher clothes, the sort she wore for practice because they were more comfortable and could stand to get messy. Ellie changed in Cassandra’s room, folding the Seeker’s sleep clothes neatly and leaving them on the bed with a torn-out sheet from her parchment pad left laying with a Thank You note on it—she had a new one now the other was all filled up! Madam de Fer had graciously left her desk cleared off for Sera and Ellie so they could sit in the warmth of the Chantry and work. Their work was mostly parchment based—Sera had made up some worksheets, with different kinds of math problems, addition, subtraction she explained the ones with + and -, and then the x ones and the ones in the little houses were multiplication and division. Sera let her work on them, Anya sat in Ellie’s lap, panting excitedly as she looked the problems over, sweet pup—Ellie was half tempted to call Cole to ask if puppies knew math, but she should probably focus on the task at hand.

Addition and subtraction she had down good already, multiplication and division were a little newer—she’d sort of known how to multiply? By twos, and with some numbers multiplying by 3 wasn’t super hard. Sera showed her how 10 was easy like 1 was, even though it was such a big number, and the idea that any number multiplied by a number made of 1 and several zeros just meant tacking those zeros onto the number you were multiplying and boom! Answer! Division was harder for some reason, her brain just didn’t want to do it unless, for some reason, dividing things in half—by 2—was easy enough. But that was alright, she’d learn! Sera’d just wanted to get a feel for where Ellie was math wise.

Sciencey stuff, Sera wasn’t sure where she’d take her with that, but it seemed like she had mostly a mind for fun—although Sera…Sera had been reading like, a lot, all week, all these different books trying to find one she might like Ellie to read as a starter, she just hadn’t found one yet. She made her this little worksheet that explained the ‘Scientific Method’. Observation—you see something happen and you want to find out why, Hypothesis—you have an idea of why it’s happening, Prediction—if your Hypothesis is correct, what you believe it’ll mean, Experiment—recreating your observation in a controlled setting to see if your hypothesis is correct, and then Conclusion—what you learned from your experiment.

Then, to start her off down the path of higher scientific pursuits, Sera brought two glass
beakers she’d borrowed from Adan’s with two matching glass stirring rods, a knife, a lemon, a bottle of vinegar, a box of baking soda, one of Flissa’s little bowls of sugar she sent out with tea, two tea spoons, two drinking glasses, a dropper, and loads of wash rags ‘just in case’.

“We aren’t going to blow the chantry up are we?” Ellie asked quietly.

“Hmmm…no, but it might get a little sploady, that’s the whole point for the first one we’re doing. Don’t sweat it,” she pulled out one of the books she’d been looking over that week, using a picture on the inside of its back cover, a big grid thing, “This is the table of elements—chemicals everything in the world is made up of. Today we’re going to be mostly dealing with these,” she circled Na, C, and O. “Sodium, carbon, and oxygen.”

Oh! Ellie knew those, “Sodium’s like salt, right? I’ve heard of carbon before, and oxygen is what we breathe.”

“Yup! Sodium isn’t quite the salt you’re thinking of though—but it’s in it. Table salt is Na—sodium Cl—chloride. Come on, Ink, let’s have some learny fun,” Sera said, rising and asking Ellie to bring the beaker and stirring rod while Sera grabbed the baking soda and vinegar. Sera set her things down on the floor off to the side of the rug down the center of the Great Hall, and then she started rolling the rug up so it was out of the way a good bit. She laid down a few wash rags flat in a stack in the center of their cleared section of hall and asked Ellie to place the glass beaker down in the middle of the cloth, and then they sat criss-cross applesauce

“Anya, sweets, you can’t munch on anything here,” Sera said, whistling to get the puppies attention as she sniffed at the baking soda, Anya looked to her and Sera withdrew a little doggy biscuit from her pocket and pitched it down the hall toward the War Room and Anya bolted to chase after it.

“Alright,” Sera cleared her throat and picked up the baking soda, “Baking soda is a chemical called sodium bicarbonate.” She had a bit of chalk in hand and wrote down NaCO3 on the ground. “Na is sodium. C is carbon, O stands for Oxygen—what this means is it’s made of one sodium molecule bonded with something that’s a mix of carbon, and three oxygen molecules. There’s…we’ll get into it in depth sometime, but basically there’s things we categorize as bases and things we categorize as acids, decided by how they deal with hydrogen ions when you put them in pure water. Acids go crazy giving away hydrogen molecules, while bases are all about accepting hydrogen molecules—it’s a whole blah blah blah thing, I promise I’ll get lecturey about it some time. Point is, you mix an acid and a base together, they can cancel each other out, but sometimes they have a little fun first. Baking soda is a base while the vinegar is an acid. Wanna see what they do?”

“…you’re sure we’re allowed to do this?” Ellie asked.

“Already ran it by Josie, did the experiment with her in her office earlier, she’s on board as long as we do it like this, out here in the open on the stone so any mess can be easily contained and cleaned. She thought it was great fun.”

“Kay, what do we do first?”

“All you Ink,” Sera handed her a tea spoon, “put a spoonful of baking soda into the beaker.” Ellie nodded, doing as she was told, and then Sera handed her the bottle of vinegar with the little dropper, “Fill the dropper up and squirt it all in…”

Oh gosh oh gosh oh gosh! Ellie squealed—it went everywhere! Not *everywhere*, but before she even finished squirting all the vinegar in, boom! The mixture shot up all foamy and fast!
Poured up right out and over the edge of the beaker, but thankfully the washrags soaked everything up pretty good though there was a thick layer of foam left on top of the mess, wow!

“When they react together they form carbonic acid which is crazy unstable, it instantly breaks apart into water and carbon dioxide, which creates all the fizzing as it escapes the solution,” Sera offered explanation.

“That’s so cool!”

“Yeah it is!”

Flissa had lent them use of a tray so they could load up their mess onto it and take it to be cleaned when they were done. Next, was one more experiment, something yummy, Sera said.

“Allright Ink, we got a lemon, you know what lemon juice is?”

“Oh! Citrus fruit is acidic right? Like the vinegar!”

“Oh-huh, so, watered down, with some baking soda, what’d’you hypothesize will happen?”

Well, she said watered down so… “It’ll bubble up, just not quite so crazily?”

Sera grinned and hastily led her back to Vivienne’s desk. She let Ellie halve the lemon, and then squeeze all the juice out into the beaker, as much as she could! And then she was supposed to fill it up with just as much water as there was juice, so from the first big notch on the beaker to the second, and then add in a little sugar annnnd one teaspoon of baking soda—

Oh gosh! They basically made fizzy lemonade! Sera poured the mixture into the two glasses she had set aside for them,

“It looks great, Ink!” Sera encouraged as they clinked their glasses together wow! It was so good! Sweet and tangy and the bubbles were tickly! Though, gosh it was a mean sort of funny—it was so cute though, she couldn’t help but laugh!—Any came back around and one of the lemon halves had fallen onto the floor, and being the curious pup she was, she’d given it a few sniffs and licked at the wrung-out fruit, and yipped, running around in circles as she worked to shake off the sour taste.

“Awe sorry Anya,” Ellie giggled out, as the pup whined and pawed at her boots, she crouched and took the puppy up in her arms, “Lemons aren’t very yummy all on their own, huh?” Probably a good thing it wouldn’t be something Anya would want to try again, Cullen said citrus wasn’t super great for dogs—they could eat it but sometimes it made their stomachs upset if they had a whole bunch.

“Wuff.”

"Excuse me, my lady?" a servant girl approached them, after, oh! Shoot! Ellie'd meant to roll the rug back into place but she'd gotten caught up in the fun and forgotten all about it, but this girl had gone ahead and done it for her. She seemed about Sera's age, Human though, but blonde and blue eyed like her Elf friend—oh! She was wearing a Friendship bracelet like them too!

"Oh cripes, hey Mol's!" Sera greeted, sounding relieved, "Haven't seen you, you're feelin' better yeah?"

She nodded, "I am, thank you."
"Good, thanks, you know, for all your help. Oh! Inky, this is Molly."

"Hi Molly, I'm Ellie, it's very nice to meet you! I'm sorry you were sick, but I'm glad you're feeling better."

"It was nothing serious, thank you," she said, "I'm just finishing up in the Chantry, and I was going to stop by Flissa's anyway, would you care for me to take your tray along?" she asked, gesturing to the tray that held their earlier experiments mess.

"That's so sweet of you, but we can get it, you should enjoy your break!" Ellie said, "Thanks so much for keeping the Chantry clean, gosh you do an amazing job! The Chantry's always spotless, I really appreciate it!" It had to be a whole lot of work, the Chantry was huge! Hopefully she wasn't the only person in charge of keeping it all clean!

Molly blushed. "Thank you, my lady, I'm pleased to work for the Inquisition. And it really is no trouble, I insist," she said, laying hands on the tray handles.

"Go ahead Mol's thanks," Sera nodded.

"Yeah, thanks, have a wonderful rest of your day," Ellie wished her with a little wave as Molly left them. She was sweet!

"I think that's it for today Ink, did you like it?...was I good?" Sera snickered to herself, "Bit gross that."

"You were great! It was lots of fun, and I feel like I learned a lot," Ellie promised.

"Good," Sera said with some measure of relief like she'd been nervous. And then she was quiet a moment, listening, "I think Mare and Leliana are done. Here Inky, bundle good, friggin freezing, it's been snowin' like a bitch all day," oh! Sera had kept track of her cloak, she'd worn it to her meeting, but Josie had taken it when she got to the Chantry.

"Thanks Ser'! You're still okay right? Do you need a coat or anything?"

"Armor's warm enough," Sera assured her but...well too late anyway, she as on the list! Before she had to leave Haven again, Ellie had a list of people...lots of Elves...to make warm things for! Solas was getting a hat! And Marehis! Sera too...scarves, gosh! Seg helped her put in an order for yarn that should be here soon, and Cremisius was going to help her when he could! He'd been particularly enthusiastic about her idea for horn-cozies.

"Eleanor, Sera," Leliana greeted, as Ellie and Sera approached her little set up out front of the Chantry, she'd been standing and chatting with Marehis. Then, "Ahh, and I mustn't forget little Anya, of course."

"My favorite girls!" Marehis enthused as she turned to greet them, "How was your lesson? I heard, what I believe sounded like happy squealing?"

Ellie nodded, gosh they'd been a bit loud huh? The baking soda vinegar thing had startled her! "Sera taught me all sorts of cool stuff! We did an experiment! Two of them! Sera taught me about chemical reactions and how bases and acids can react together! And I learned about the scientific method! And division and multiplication!"

"How wonderful, I'm so proud of you da'len! I'm pleased you had fun," Marehis said, then to Sera, "Thank you, da'assan, I truly appreciate you."
"No problem Mare’ it was fun," Sera said, "I’ll see you later Ink, have fun in your magic lessons."

Ellie and Marehis met with Vivienne and Solas in Solas’s cabin, the three Mages sitting on the floor by the fire and Marehis taking post in her usual spot in a chair by the door. Ellie tried to be present minded during her lesson but Maker, she was excited for when her watch would say 6:00, 01/04 again! She was half tempted to just turn it to that time, like somehow her little mechanical watch could control the flow of actual time. She kept checking it, Solas chuckling when he caught her peeking at her watch again when they were supposed to be meditating—he was supposed to be meditating too!

“Da’vehnan,” Solas said, Ellie looked to him as he sat with eyes closed, in lotus position, “your excitement is such I can feel it without pressing our bond, I assure you if you do not calm yourself, I may begin giggling of all things.”

“Oh, then do keep it up darling, I believe that would be worth while to see,” Vivienne said from where she sat ‘meditating’ as well. Gosh they were bad at this today!

“Sorry,” Ellie offered shyly.

Vivienne sighed as she opened her eyes, “You needn’t be my dear. You’re excited for your little date tonight with the Lieutenant?”

Ellie nodded, “I really am.”

“Solas, you’re confident Eleanor can cast well enough to preserve her life in the field?” Vivienne questioned.

“…Certainly?” Solas assured albeit uncertain why she would ask.

“Then one lesson derailed will not bring her to harm. Go fetch us…no never mind, I’ll do it, as I have hair to speak of, I know what I’m looking for,” Vivienne said, rising from her seat, “Marehis darling, do you mind terribly if I work some magic of my own on Eleanor’s hair?”

“Certainly not, as long as Ellie doesn’t mind it of course,” Marehis said.

“Do you mind my dear?” Vivienne asked Ellie, “I’ve something splendid in mind I assure you.”

“Go for it!”

She really really did! Maker! She left Solas’s cabin and came back armed with a silky blue scarf, coconut oil and a comb, water and this little box that had a bunch of tiny, thin, golden looking stretchy things, miniatures of the hairties Ellie was used to and they sort of seemed like… had Vivienne gotten them, gone out and purchased things to do her hair with? Madam de Fer kept her own hair short but it seemed rather a lot like hers, just, maybe a tighter curl pattern, it could be a lot to take care of. But she’d obviously worked a lot with hair like hers, wow. Vivienne had her sit in a chair before Solas’s fireplace, chatting about what Ellie had in mind to wear tonight, if Cremisius had let her know what he was planning, dinner was all she knew for certain. Solas, bless his heart, he did manage to slip in some magical theory as Vivienne worked with Ellie’s hair. She started by wetting and conditioning it all before parting Ellie’s hair straight down the middle, then she made two smooth braids that went from the front of Ellie’s head all the way to the tip of her longest hair conditioned and brushed and pulled taught by working with it with fingers she magically called gentle heat into to allow her to dictate its shape.
“Solas, do be a dear and put the kettle on, just water mind,” Madam de Fer instructed as she worked. Wow it was even longer when it wasn’t so curled up, the two braids went all the way to her hips! And when she was all done tying them off, she took the silk scarf she’d brought and wrapped it around Ellie’s hair line to make sure her edges lay flat,

“Eleanor, what sort of pillowcase does the Inquisition have you using?” Vivienne asked as she finished securing the scarf and moved on to wetting a cloth with the water Solas warmed up for her, taking a braid in hand and ‘sealing it’ Vivienne called it when Marehis asked after the practice, with the warm water.

Ellie’s mind drew a blank at what she meant, “A um…rectangular one? It’s very soft!”

There was amusement in her voice as Vivienne elaborated, “The material, I meant, my dear.”

“It is cotton,” Marehis offered up.

Madam de Fer made a sound that spoke to offense and somehow gave the very distinct impression that the Inquisition had provided Ellie a pillowcase made of nug dung. Her pillows were nice!

“Darling, do you like the scarf I’ve used to wrap your edges?” Vivienne asked before Ellie could defend her beloved pillows,

“It’s very pretty,” Ellie assured her.

“It is, you shall keep it then. It is silk, and it can be unfolded several times over, it would wrap your hair nicely, you should wear it when you sleep, you’ll notice a marked improvement in your hair, believe me. It would assist in smoothness, and less tearing, cleanliness, condition—cotton dries hair out as you sleep, but with silk, it helps to retain your hair’s moisture.”

“Oh! Gosh, Vivienne you don’t have to give me your scarf, I didn’t know about silk being good for hair, but maybe I’ll get—”

“Nonsense, I’ve no need for it, I’ve plenty of others to accessorize with—you’ve not seen me wrap my head as we travel, my pillowcase is proper silk.”

Ellie blushed, gosh it was sweet of her. “Thanks.”

“I’m pleased to provide as such my dear, now, what do you think?” she asked as she finished her work, she came around to stand before Ellie and brought the braids to hang over the front of her shoulders so she could see.

“Wow, Vivienne! I love it!” Ellie enthused.

Vivienne leveled her a warm smile, “I’m pleased to hear it, darling.”

Ellie gasped when she looked at the time, “Oh! Sorry Solas, we really did take up a bunch of time huh?”

“I’ve learned an unfathomable wealth of knowledge about hair care, I’ll be certain to put to good use,” Solas offered jovially.

“Your scalp might appreciate a silk pillowcase,” Ellie teased, patting him on his poor bald head—it would have a hat soon! It couldn’t be good to live somewhere so very cold with a head so
very naked! Ellie still got cold outside and she had massive amounts of hair to keep her warm and a hat!...if Vivienne asked, it was made of silk, she didn’t care if whatever was supposed to dry out hair, she liked her hat!

Wasn’t sure about wearing it tonight out of respect for the hair though, gosh Vivienne had done such a good job. She’d take it along in her cloak pocket though, just in case, and she would wear her scarf...the one Cremisius made her, she’d definitely sleep with the one Vivienne gave her though. She wasn’t entirely sure what all Cremisius had in mind, if they’d be outside a lot or not, granted she did have stockings to keep her warm but she just wasn’t feeling wearing a dress again. Plus she only had a few and she sort of wanted to save them, like it’d been nice for wearing on their first date, maybe when she got back from the Oasis she’d pull out another. Tonight she was going for warmth and ‘pretty’, she’d gotten so many compliments when she’d worn purple so, nicer purple outfit—reserved for nobility and dates with Cremisius!

Ellie whirled around when she heard a sort of angry, “Oi! Who the frig—oh! Inky! Shite,” Sera said as she entered their cabin, stomping snow off her boots, “Sorry, I didn’t see Mare around, and thought the guards let some rando red head slip in, your hair’s so different! It’s gonna throw Cole for a right loop if he sees it. Wow it’s real pretty though, you look great!”

“Thanks,” Ellie smiled as she finished buttoning up her tunic. “I let Marehis go ahead, I think she and Solas have plans tonight. What’re you up to?”

“Mmm, little datin’ things of my own, me ‘n Lacey are uh...well since I figure you and Krem'll be out for a little while, Fliss is sending a tray here soon before she closes up—she and Seg have something on tonight too I guess, a break from the Tavern.”

“Oh! You wanna have a nice night in? That’s so sweet! Do you need help? I could help you get ready, set up. Anya's coming along with Cremisius and me so you'll have the place to yourself. We could move the desk so you and Lace can sit at it like, you know, an actual dining set up, set the table, candles—there’s some in the clothing blaahhh,” she searched for the word, it wasn’t a ‘clothing cabinet’ but it was! She didn’t know why she couldn’t just call it that!

“Armoire? Yeah, that, there’s candles….we don’t have like flowers or anything just laying around or growing all over the place, but um...would it be offensive to offer maybe sprinkling Elf root petals on the bed? Oh! Or Embrium, that’s a proper blossom.”

Sera started laughing, “Maker, Ink, we’re not waistin’ potions ingredients like that, cripes, we’re good, honest!” and when she calmed down, “We can set the mood well enough on our own, but I wouldn’t knock your desk idea, yeah, if it en’t too heavy, we can move it more centered or whatever, need another chair though.”

Ellie was already at the door, popping her head out to smile up at one of the guards Marehis arranged for her, “Hiya Bruce! You’re looking exceptionally handsome tonight!”

“Uh-huh, what does the Lady Herald require?” he asked as if put upon, knowing full well Ellie was full of it, blatantly buttering him up.

“Marehis thinks if I step out without escort for two seconds I’ll die—very bold of her to assume that I can die, but she’s a worry wart like that. I could use a second chair in here, would you mind terribly, getting one for me? I tip in undying love. Marehis said I’m not allowed to tip with money...or that it would be rude to tip period, but you’ve got to have something for your trouble.”

The other guardsman, oh! Dave! He was always nice, he snorted into his hand, chuckling while Bruce assured her, mirthful, “Our reward is our service, and the nice little paycheck we get at
the end of the week. I’ll see to getting you a second chair my lady, you just hang here, I’ll be back.”

He was! He found them a spare chair they could use and he even helped Ellie and Sera move the desk, it wasn’t terribly heavy but it was nice of him to do so before heading back out to keep watch.

They got the table set up, there was this big knitted shawl Ellie never used…weird to have clothing she never used, she was using it now though! As a table cloth, sort of made it a bit fancier, and they got candles lit, three big round ones they set on a square candle tray in the middle of the table and then Sera asked Ellie for help with her own hair. Ellie wet the top of it, scrunching it in hand and spraying it lightly with…dunno, fancy label in Ciriane and she was tackling one language at a time reading wise, gosh, no thank you, Trade was hard enough on its own! She called it scrunchy spray, cause that’s what it did! Helped hair with curling up nicely when prompted, and staying that way, without making it feel heavy or oily or anything, then she took just a bit of coconut oil, let it melt in the palms of her hands before running her fingers through Sera's hair and following after with a comb, so her hair laid wavy but slicked back.

“You look beautiful as always, Ser’! Lace’s gonna flip!”

Sera's ears were tinged in red, "Thanks Ink."

She was all ready, and they had everything set up for Sera's date, when her watch finally said 6:00, 01/04 and a polite knock sounded at their cabin door.

"Come on Anya," Ellie snapped her fingers gently to prompt the pup's attention, she'd been supervising their work from the foot of Ellie's bed, but she yipped excitedly and followed Ellie to the door.

“Hello, Cremisius!” Ellie greeted cheerily. The guardsmen had been dismissed, which yeah, she guessed made sense, Sera and Lace would probably be more comfortable without people right outside the door and it might even be safer, if anyone did want to start trouble they wouldn’t look there—no guards probably meant no lone Herald. The Lieutenant stood leaning in the doorway, grinning warmly. Huh, they’d had similar ideas she thought, he was wearing the same normal tunic he wore under his armor, just, running around sans chest plate and gauntlets, though he did have an over coat, similar to Thom’s….it’d be sweet if the older man lent his coat to Cremisius but it looked like it’d been cut to fit him, he had mentioned wishing to invest in warmer clothing since it seemed they would be here for the long haul..

“Good evening,” Cremisius greeted, ‘I’m sorry, but I’m here for a Miss Eleanor Trevelyan? Have you seen her? Yea high?” he held a hand level with the center of his chest, “crazy gorgeous curls for days, of course, this,” he said, as he ceased his teasing, taking a braid in hand and smoothing a thumb along a few knots, “is rather striking.”

“Do you like it? Vivienne did it for me,”

“El, it’s beautiful, you look amazing,” he said.

“Well, you do too,” Ellie repayed the compliment, “so,” she giggled, “Miss Trevelyan is accounted for, where is Mister Aclassi taking her?”

“New place, just opened up in Haven,” Cremisius said as she took his arm, “we’re rather in luck actually, it’s only open for a limited time and they do, just so happen, to welcome pups as esteemed guests,” he assured her and Anya.
As he proceeded to lead them right up to Flissa’s which was…closed, Sera’d said. And even if she hadn’t, Ellie could read now, there was a sign that said as much…oh, ‘Closed for a Private Party’.

“We’re the private party?” Ellie asked.

“…part of it, you’ll see, come on, first things first,” Cremisius said as he unlocked the door and led Ellie and Anya inside. “I hope you don’t mind but I thought, maybe, you’d like to help me put dinner together. Tevinter dish, a favorite I think you’ll like.”

“Tevinter?” Ellie asked.

“Uh-huh, pizza, you in?” he asked as he pulled an apron off the hook by Flissa’s bar, offering it to Ellie.

Oh gosh, “We’re making pizza?” she asked excitedly as she accepted the apron, pulling it overhead and tying it secure around her waist.

“As long as you really don’t mind—I promise you won’t be doing all the work, we’ll work together just, I dunno, its kind of fun to cook when it’s not just you on your own.”

Ellie washed her hands in the basin, before going to assess the ingredients laid out on the bar top, Cremisius was just finishing up securing an apron around his hips.

Cooking together was...gosh, lots of fun...of a somewhat flirtatious sort. She'd never made pizza before, that much was true, but she knew very well how to knead and roll out dough, but she accepted the offered help, it was more than welcome, Cremisius standing close arms around her helping just, it was practical, that they work together after all. Many hands make light work and all that. Gosh, but they were making an awful lot, they ended up with three large smooth circles of what would be pizza crust.

"One for each of us?” she asked, "These are awfully big, I mean, if you want an eating contest I'm game, but little Anya probably shouldn't eat quite so much pizza." Anya sort of 'wuffed' at mention of her name and Ellie played like the pup was indignant, "What? One slice of this pizza will be like! Almost as big as you you, silly girl!"

"I've got something whipped up for Anya already,” he said, pulling over a covered dish he lifted the lid off for Ellie to take a peek, "ram meat, peas, carrots, brown rice, should still be warm when we all sit down to eat...pizza isn't just for us."

Awe! He made dinner for Anya! That made her heart happy! "Thanks, it looks great! So, we're having a pizza party then?"

"Uh-huh, you'll see," Cremisius assured her as he twisted open a jar full of red sauce. "Made this up yesterday, takes a little bit more prep time and it's nice to let it set a while on its own."

They each took charge of a pizza and split the difference with the third, spreading sauce before Ellie helped Cremisius pull over the bowls of cheese he had setting out. "We've got Mozzarella, Parmesan, Fontina and...Ellie, whatcha doin' with the Feta?"

“What Feta?” Ellie asked—she was innocent! He looked between her, and the bowl of Feta in her Marked hand, popping another little chunk of it into her mouth with the other.

“The uh, Feta you’re currently snacking on, you’ll ruin your supper that way you know,”
Cremisius cautioned.

“Well, it’s just that, no offense of course, but Feta is just…so disgusting, the worst you know?”

Cremisius seemed to be fighting a grin as he crossed his arms over his chest, “Uh-huh.”

“I’m doing everyone a favor by eating it all myself—I’m sparing you.”

“Sparing us?”

“Yep, just the Herald of Andraste saving the day, my greatest victories will rank—defeating the evil that is Feta cheese and sealing the Breach.”

“Is it? Well, I suppose much like the Venatori…it’s my goal to stop you from defeating Feta.”

Ellie gasped, accusing, “The Krematori!” she squealed when he reached for the bowl, she turned to keep it out of reach and his arms wrapped around her waist, hoisting her up and spinning about as Ellie laughed. Anya started barking but—was the little traitor barking at her? She was supposed to come to her rescue! Blaspheme!

“Surrender the Feta!” he demanded laughingly negotiating against her ear he offered, “We’ll make sure you get a slice with a concentration of this horrible cheese, you know, brunt of the work, but everyone’s helping out, like the Breach.”

“Hmm…well, I’m always about peaceful resolutions.”

“Good to hear,” Cremisius chuckled, pressing a kiss to her hair before setting her down and she returned her hostage cheese. Feta was just, so good!

“Anya! You’re supposed to be on my side!” she reprimanded the pup who just stood panting happily as she looked up at her, tail wagging, “Stop being so cute!” She was too adorable to be mad at!

Okay! Focusing, pizza! Gosh, four different kinds of cheese! One pizza was dedicated to sausage and ram meat, and then one was all peppers, onions, garlic, and then the third was coated in olives and jalapeños, “We can’t eat whole pizzas on our own but uh, Bull has a thing for olives.”

“The Iron Bull is coming?” oh! Was it going to be like a Chargers dinner? That’d be fun!

“He’s on the guest list, with a few others. Let’s get one of these cooking up, and I’ll clue you in on the surprise.” Fliss didn’t have one of those big pizza spatulas—the official name, Ellie was sure—that she’d seen in use in Hasmal, but they made do using a cutting board, to slide the pizza into the stone shelf in Flissa’s fireplace and Cremisius snorted, laughing into his hand as Anya ‘cast’ to make the fire burn warmer, then they sat, Ellie taking the pup into her lap while Cremisius got on with his surprise.

The surprise, was a ‘q-u’ word.

“A quadruple date?” Ellie asked.

“Those are things right? A double date is two couples, so four, makes it a quadruple date.”

“Me and you is one, so the Iron Bull has a date?”
“Uh-huh, seeing as I don’t think he bought his First Day Eve date dinner, I figured he could make up for it tonight…but uh, they just…might not exactly know it’s a date.”

“Woah woah wait! First Day Eve, the Iron Bull had a date?”

“Ended the night with one. So, I invited Bull along under the premise that you know, we like hanging out with him and it’s sort of a group get together, and uh…well I figure Dorian misses Tevinter cooking, so, that’s what I proposed when I asked him to join us.”

Ellie gasped, and then she held Anya close, taking her up with a hand under her belly to hold her to her chest because she needed up! Pacing before the fire excitedly, “They! What?! Oh my gosh oh my gosh oh my gosh!”

“Thom’s pretty certain—more on that too, but first, Bull, Dorian. He had someone with him in the Chargers tent First Day Eve, and the two of them have been coming up with the lamest excuses to seek each other out all week. To talk—no that’s not a euphemism, I’ve seen them off and on and all it seems like they do is talk.”

“Secret date! I love it! Ahh!” she squeaked. Then, “Wait, what about Thom?”

“Dunno, just seen a few things lately, made me think Thom might have a little something going on—with Cyril.”

“Really?!“ Ellie asked as she plopped back down into the seat next to his.

“Apparently, according to group gossip, they used to be a thing back in the day.”

“I love it! Are they coming tonight too?”

Cremisius shook his head, “Nah, doesn’t seem so much like something that needs meddling. Our other couples are established favorites—Marehis and Solas, Cassandra and Cullen.”

Oh gosh! That was such a great idea! Marehis could enjoy herself, be on a date while having the peace of mind that Ellie was safe at hand, and! Ellie loved seeing everyone together and happy and—!

“Quadruple is my new favorite q-u word!” Anya voiced her approval.

One pizza out, another in the oven, and Cremisius checked his watch, “Should be arriving any—”

The Iron Bull arrived first, knuckles rapping against the Tavern door as he opened it, announcing “Party’s here, what’s up boss girl? Hope you don’t mind me crashing, Krem-puff said there’d be,” the Qunari took in the sight of their rather empty Tavern, “…people, and pizza.”

“We’re people!” Ellie defended, “We’re people aren’t we Anya? Say hi to the Iron Bull!” she said, taking one of Anya’s paws in hand to help her wave. The Qunari shook his head and offered a little wave back, bemused.

“We’ve got people comin’ Chief,” Cremisius reasoned, “pizza’ll be ready soon, we just put yours in.”

Bull sniffed as he sat across from them, “Olives and jalapeños? Nice,” he growled appreciatively.
Oh, Cremisius really had set up a secret date of sorts—he’d given everyone different times, playing like he’d just forgotten and misspoken, Dorian arrived just a few minutes later, since again ‘group’ thing and pizza was rather a major draw for the Tevinter Mage.

“Maker—it’s strange, I haven’t had proper Tevene meal since Umbrallis, but then Time Travel makes that…nearly half a year ago, in personal time,” Dorian worked it over in his mind as he took a seat next to Bull.

Umbrallis…oh! Firstfall—the month before Harring.

“Time magic does complicate things,” Ellie supposed, “I heard from Felix yesterday, funnily enough he told me to make sure you eat.” She’d written him once she knew how to write, just…wanted to check up on him, gosh it had to be hard to leave his father behind in Inquisition care, to have gone through all that horrible Venatori stuff, she was worried he’d be feeling alone, blaming himself for his father’s decisions, so she reached out, so he knew…well, despite the major mess, he’d made a new friend!

“He’s always been a horrible mother hen, I should write him back. He’s still on his way back to the Imperium?” Ellie nodded.

“You gonna take him up on his offer?” Bull asked Dorian quietly.

“No. He’s kind but misguided. I’ve nothing to say to them, and he doesn’t exactly have time to dally making pointless social visits to my parents, if he plans to be in Minrathus as soon as the Magisterium is in session…besides, father will be there.”

Oh…yeah, Dorian had mentioned to Ellie, she supposed he’d talked it over with Bull as well, that Felix wanted to know if Dorian had anything he wanted passed along to his parents. Dorian didn’t say very much about his troubles with them aside from them not ‘approving’ of his life choices, to a point he had to separate himself from them.

“Shitty Tevinter expectations?” Cremisius asked.

“Indeed, my parents were rather dead set on me marrying a girl.”

“Mine were pretty dead set on me being one,” he offered jovially, eliciting a snort from the Iron Bull, as he offered a fist to the Tevinter Mage.

“Righto,” Dorian nodded, bumping fists with Cremisius. “I’ve a friend who lives as a woman despite the mark on her birth certificate—she’s an Altus and the Magisterium still wouldn’t deign to allow her legal marriage to her husband because, well…”

“Legally she’s considered a man, total bullshit!”

“Of the foulest sort, she’s planning to start up a movement of sorts, we discussed it at some length, kicked the idea around—the Lucerni* we called it, in the peak of a drunken stupor,” Dorian smiled when Cremisius snorted at the name, “Well it’s somewhat fitting, there’s a need to shed some light to our lesser born brothers and sisters. Same sex marriage is only not recognized in Tevinter because it is not recognized even among its highest members, and that simply cannot stand, Laetans, Soporati, they shouldn’t have to adhere to the same standard.”

“I wouldn’t want to speak out of turn, I’m not Tevinter, but I don’t think it should be standard for Altus’s either really,” Ellie offered, “I mean, Max was nobility, he thought he had a pretty good solution, you know? The only reason people in power emphasize relationships that can bring about children is because heirs are important for passing power down and keeping it in the
Dorian nodded. “I’d never necessarily considered it before, but even—living with Madam de Fer, she was patroned when she wasn’t much older than you, by Lord Bastien, granted that was more of a…consort situation, but yes, I would argue that something of the sort could work in Tevinter, Altus’s adopting unclaimed Laetans in the Circle of Magi or becoming paternal patrons for those that show promise. I proposed as much to Maevaris, she’s uncertain when she’ll take such argument to the Magisterium but she plans to make moves in the coming years.” He looked to Ellie, “She wishes to meet with you, actually, has Varric mentioned?”

“I…we’re heading out to the Oasis next um…gosh I don’t know—I’ll make it work,” she would! “Tevinter? When does she need to meet me by?” how fast could Russel ride? He’d need breaks...depending on when she needed to be there, she could be leaving from Orlais, that would be a bit closer to Tevinter than Ferelden—

Dorian busted up laughing, “Oh you precious thing, you’re—Eleanor, my goodness. No, Maker, you’re a little force of nature aren’t you? You’d storm your War Room and demand to be let leash so you could trek all the way out to Tevinter for—? No, there’s no need, it is Verimensis—Wintersmarch my dear girl, which means we are neigh some four months out from Bloomingtide—Summerday*, wedding season. Maevaris will be conducting her annual shopping spree, she can hardly be seen in the same thing twice, and most of her favorite shops lie in Val Royeaux.”

Oh! “Gosh, that works,” Ellie giggled, a little relieved, that sounded more easily done. “She wants to meet me?”

“Indeed. Just a formality, Varric assured me.”

“Varric?” Cremisius asked.

“Maevaris is Varric’s cousin, through as-close-to-marriage as possible with his cousin, the Dwarven Ambassador from Orzammar, like I said, it’s rather a small world, Lieutenant Aclassi.”

It was 7:30 by Ellie’s watch when Cassandra and Cullen, Marehis and Solas arrived, the last pizza was nearly finished baking and they had enough for everyone to go ahead and start, Cremisius had water and apple juice for everyone though the Iron Bull offered his flask up—Dorian took him up on that.

The finished pizzas had been sitting on the bartop and Cremisius divided them into slices before bringing them over to sit in the middle of the table as Ellie got plates for everyone, passing them out before taking her seat and the Lieutenant clapped his hands together, announcing, "Thanks everyone, for joining us. We've got just a few more minutes to wait for pizza with meat on it but if you're a fan of veggies," Bull blew raspberry and gave the notion a thumbs down, earning him a table-full of laughs and a gentle swat on the thigh from Cassandra for interrupting Cremisius, "feel free to dig in."

Although he did spin the veggie pizza’s platter around before Cassandra could lay hands on the slice she’d been reaching for, “I mean absolutely no disrespect, Lady Seeker, but I’m afraid it’s either this, or dueling you for that slice—it’s Ellie’s,” and at Ellie’s inquisitive look he offered, “It’s the part I put the most Feta on. Marked it with a little ‘E’ made out of peppers, see?” Oh! He had!

The Seeker looked wholly amused at the idea Cremisius would challenge her to a duel over a slice of pizza, “By all means, I would not keep Eleanor from her beloved cheese—Feta is a
favorite?” Ellie nodded, smiling as Cremisius handed her back her plate.

“Boss girl, you’re killing me,” the Iron Bull groaned, “you can’t like something that—I want to make so many horrible puns and I can’t—”

“Oi, we don’t kinkshame in this Inquisition!” Ellie snapped giddily, “Feta is my fetish—leave me to my cheese!”

“Da’vehnan!” Marehis laughingly reprimanded as the Iron Bull roared with laughter, awe, she felt a little bad, poor Cullen had been taking a drink of water he choked on.

Ellie grabbed a few slices for Cremisius as the Lieutenant went and grabbed the covered dish he’d had set aside for Anya, the pup barked her gratitude when he knelt to leave the dish out for her on the floor, and she eagerly dug in at her food, it was sweet! Oh, and making him a plate earned her a kiss on the cheek, that was nice!

“Your hair looks beautiful, Eleanor,” Cullen said.

“Thanks!”

“Yes, it is lovely, Marehis did an excellent job,” Cassandra agreed.

“Madam de Fer is responsible,” Marehis said, “I feel like I’ve been doing your hair wrong all this time, I really should pick her brain for how to treat it.”

“Marehis, I love the way you braid my hair! It’s always really cute and my hair is complicated—it never dries the same way twice! And it’s a lot to mess with, I really appreciate you always helping me with it, this is like, the longest my hair has ever been in life! I haven’t been able to let it grow out since I was just tiny.”

“You are still ‘just tiny’ Eleanor,” Solas teased.

“Packin’ away that pizza like a champ though,” the Iron Bull said.

“You’re literally eating an entire pizza by yourself,” Ellie giggled.

“I got a lot on me to feed!” he said flexing a bicep, “But uh, you’re on like slice five and Seeker tapped out at two, you did eat lunch right? Your stomach hasn’t been bothering you again has it?”

“Eleanor ate well at lunch,” Cassandra assured him.

“I thought we were going to have to invent second lunch to match breakfast, you’d think we had the girl running laps around Haven all morning instead of napping,” Marehis teased.

“You can all fight me, I was hungry!” Ellie defended, “And sleepy! Plus I had a headache—not a bad one like I got before, just mildly brain stabby,” she was quick to assure the Qunari.

The Iron Bull started laughing…like really really hard.

“Koslun’s ass, it’s starting,” he wheezed as he wiped at his eye.

“What…what’s starting?” Ellie asked.

“Imekari—hungry, sleepy, brain stabbing—I think you might be coming up on a growth spurt.”
What?! “Really?!” Ellie enthused, standing as she slapped her palms onto the table top, “You’re serious now, you promise, I’m going to get taller?”

“Bet you anything hell yeah you are boss-girl,” the Qunari swore, “Shaving-Krem here—yeah puberty-based pun, it’s a theme, I’m festive—wasn’t a whole lot taller than you when we met, then about a month in he just about ate us out of business, slept so much and got so many headaches I made him see Stitches about it, just before he shot up like a damn weed.”

“He’s not wrong,” Cremisius supposed. “Though I blame the headaches on you, not the growth spurt.”

“The Iron Bull! You’re my favorite person! In life! For forever!”

“Hell yeah I am!” he encouraged her enthusiasm, offering a hand across the table to high five before Ellie sat back down.

“If I eat like, an entire pizza and sleep for three days, how tall do you think I’ll be when I wake up?”

“Unfortunately, I do not think it works that way, da’len,” Solas said, chuckling.

“I would not recommend sleeping for three entire days, Eleanor, but you may certainly rest to your hearts content this weekend,” Cassandra offered.

“Oh, gosh, I was just kidding,” Ellie promised, “I wasn’t asking for a day off or anything —”

“Eleanor, you’ve no need to ask for weekends off, at least not while in Haven,” Cullen said.

…that sounded fake, so she checked, “…I…don’t?”

“I understand it was rather a lot of ground to cover this morning, reading over your contract,” Cassandra supplied, “An issue upon which Varric negotiated with us was securing that, so long as there is not an emergency, when you are not in the field, you are guaranteed Saturdays and Sundays to be spent at your leisure. Cole will inform Marehis when you are about to wake, and it is at your discretion however you wish to proceed on those days, given that you coordinate when necessary so we can be mindful of your security.”

Varric was the best!

They ate and chatted, and gosh it was going on ten by the time Marehis came around the table to drop a kiss to the top of Ellie’s head, then Cremisius’s before she wrapped her arms around his shoulders to hug him from behind, saying, “Thank you, lethallin, very much, for inviting us.”

“Thank you all for coming, it’s been a great night.”

“Why don’t you two go enjoy the rest of your evening while we clean up?” Cullen offered, “You did cook after all, we should do the dishes.”

That seemed agreeable to all the adults, except of course, Dorian—“I will do absolutely no dishes, but if there are suds involved, I will watch.”

“Dorian, honestly,” Cassandra reprimanded lightheartedly.
They did take them up on the offer, it was kind and...yeah, nice for it to be just the two of them—three of them, Anya trailed alongside them once Ellie and Cremisius donned their cloak and coat, strolling arm in arm through Haven.

“How’re you feeling? Still hanging in there, or would you rather call it a night?” Cremisius asked as they descended the steps toward her cabin.

“I’m great!” Ellie assured. Plus, she really did want to spend time with him—and too, the longer they stayed out the less chance they ran of accidentally disrupting Sera and Lace’s date, Maker she felt just awful disrupting them the other night! Lace jumped out a window! So, trying to make sure she could use the door this time.

They walked through Haven’s gate and along the path to the frozen lake, Ellie had to use her serious, stern voice with Anya to warn her not to stray out onto the ice, and the pup was obedient, sniffing at the water’s edge curiously and deciding it was nothing to ‘woof’ home about.

“That went well, right?” Cremisius asked her as they walked.

“Of course! That was such a great idea, and it was loads of fun!” she assured him, “Actually—and absolutely no pressure, I know its short notice and you might be busy, and it might be just, too much—but if you’re free tomorrow, maybe you could come over and we could knit! Seg says the yarn I ordered should be in tomorrow.”

“Hmm...hang out with Bull and his horrible puns like any old Saturday...or spend a lazy day knitting with you...oh man, dang it El, this is such a tough decision,” he smiled when she rolled her eyes at him, wrapping an arm around her shoulders to draw her closer as they walked, “I think, I’d absolutely love to join you,” he said, smiling against her hair before pressing a kiss there.

“Then it’s a date! We’ll just get comfy and knit and we can order in and things—I’ve got a pretty big list I want to tackle before I leave again.”

“Sometime next week, yeah?” he asked and when Ellie nodded, “We’ll hit that list good, working together we can do it!” he was certain, and then he looked about and asked, “Ellie, have you ever made a snow angel?”

She didn’t know what that was so, she was going to guess, “Nope!”

She stopped when Cremisius did and turned with him as he faced the ice, and then he took a few steps away from her and fell back against the snowy slope, moving his arms and legs like she did whenever jumping-jacks were a thing in her warm ups, it was silly! But fun so she fell back and joined him, gosh! Cold! But fun!

She stilled when Cremisius did and he said,

“You’re going to have fun, in the Oasis—yeah, there’ll be Rifts and things and that sucks—but you’ll close them up, and it’s supposed to be warm and sunny and the reports I read say you can’t even seen the breach all the way out there. You’ll be with your friends, exploring something cool. You deserve it, El, have as much fun as you can, be as safe as you can, and I’ll see you when you get back.”

“I’ll miss you,” she offered quietly.

“I’ll miss you too. But that’ll make you coming back all the better won’t it?”

“True.”
“Don’t worry about any of that—we’ll pick right back up whenever you’re back. Everyone here will look out for each other, and we’ll all look after Anya,” he chuckled when Anya took that as call to come sniff at his hair before rapid fire licking at his cheek, “precious little menace that she is!”

Ellie smiled as she rolled over and kissed his free cheek, “I think she’s just respecting that I have good taste in men.”

The weekend was amazing! She got to sleep in and Marehis checked in on her when she woke up. She, Sera, and Ellie chatted about their dates, Ellie was so glad she and Lace had such a nice time! And Sera didn't much care for knitting so she went to go hit up whatever Lace was into since she'd be leaving Monday, to scout ahead of them for their journey into the Oasis. Marehis sat in Ellie's desk chair, settling in with a book to read, and Cremisius came, armed with loads of yarn —she wasn't exactly sure how you buy just 'a scarf worth of this color' and 'a hat size amount in another' so, lots of yarn! He was free to use any for his own projects too. All the yarn! All the knitting needles! They sat on Ellie's bed, their backs against the wall as they knit. Cremisius worked at top speed once he got sight of her list. He'd! He'd been knitting slower before, Maker! Because she'd just been learning and so he'd been keeping a slower pace so she wouldn't feel discouraged, and it was a bit intimidating to interrupt him when he was really in the zone with it but he always smiled and stilled his hands to address either a dropped stitch of Ellie's or answer a question—Anya came over and chuffed in his direction and he'd stopped and had an entire conversation with her, 'why yes, I am having a marvelous day, what about you miss Anya? good? Great to hear, your coat is looking particularly shiny today, did your momma give you a bath?'

“Elgar'nan,” Maerhis groaned, “please, Ellie is too young to be referred to as ‘momma’ of anyone.”

“What?! I’m a puppy mom! That makes you a puppy grandma!”

“Gods preserve me, I’m a grandmother.”

They worked Saturday, and Sunday too! With Cremisius helping, Lace was sent off with a new hat and scarf Monday morning—brown because they thought about it and it would be the most discrete color with her armor, while she was out scouting ahead, it wouldn't draw unwanted attention. Cremisius helped her deliver everything, taking a little bit of time out of her morning training with Cassandra and Cullen—though they were repaid in a scarf for Cullen and a hat and scarf for Cassandra, purple to match the leather of her armor! Hat and scarves for everyone! More purple, for Leliana and Lady Josie! White for Madam de Fer, brown for Thom, because 'Chargers' and for Dorian too because his one armed outfit was brown and white, and blue for Solas, yellow for Marehis because that was her favorite color! Red for Sera who insisted Ellie ‘didn't friggin have to do that' in the same breath she excitedly pulled her hat on. Cole already had a big hat and Ellie wasn't sure how well he’d like receiving clothing but he gasped in delight when she offered him a light blue scarf that matched his eyes.

“It does match!” he enthused before letting Ellie wrap it around his neck in a way she was decently sure would stay put and keep him warm.

The Iron Bull was just as enthusiastic about his horn cozies—a proper hat wouldn’t stay on his head so, he got a warm brown scarf he immediately wrapped around his neck with a flourish, and then after leveling a snickering Cremisius a one-eyed glare, he slipped the matching brown yarn, pom-pom tipped covers over his horns.

“Little pom poms should help keeping you from poking people’s eyes out,” Cremisius said.
Ellie giggled, “They’re cute and I thought it might help keep your horns from catching on things cause sometimes they poke through and tear tenting, but we put little clay…they look like thimbles, that are just under, kind of in the pom poms, that the tips of your horns are in now, they won’t hurt your horns but, you know, should help them not be so pokey when you’re in tents—you’ll push the tenting up but you wont tear into it, so your horns will just sort of slide under the tenting instead of tearing it. No more crawling!”

He’d knelt to accept everything so he wrapped one arm around her shoulders in a warm hug, “Thank you Imekari,” and then, “You too, brat,” and in her peripheral she saw his arm shoot out and heard Cremisius make a startled sound and a thump followed by Cremisius laughing.

And then Wednesday morning rolled around. Everyone was gathered out front of Haven’s gate, they were leaving, again, for the Oasis. Gosh she was so excited, but she hated leaving! She’d miss everyone! She…she wasn’t sure she’d actually be leaving though—she’d been hugging everyone goodbye, Leliana and Josie, and then Cullen, she hugged him around the neck and the Commander wrapped his arms around her and hoisted her up, holding her tight for…well, she was wearing her watch so,

“Cullen?”

“Yes, sweetheart?”

“I love love love hugging you, like, this holds serious rank in my top hugs in life, but um, it’s been five minutes…six minutes now?” Granted it wasn’t like she was much better…she might have spent a solid half hour saying goodbye to Anya, just carrying her around everywhere and giving her lots of kisses. All the kisses! She was going to miss her so much and she was scared Anya wouldn’t understand that! She was just a puppy, she didn’t know about the Breach or Mage-Templar wars or the Oasis! Ellie was just going to be gone, and she prayed Anya didn’t feel abandoned!

Cullen sighed, “I suppose if you don’t want to attempt a ten-minute hug?”

“I mean we can, but I’m starting to lose the feeling in my legs, and I kind of need those.”

He set her on her feet, bracing her by the elbows, “I will miss you,” he said miserably, “be safe, have fun.”

“I will! I’ll miss you too, but I’ll write! And you can write me back!” she assured him, then she looked about, Cassandra was waiting near by so she whispered, “You have all the…?”

“I do. We’ve practiced well enough, I believe little Anya know what to do.”

“Thanks!” she said before going to the Seeker, holding out her arms.

Cassandra cleared her throat and pulled Ellie close.

“I’ll miss you,” Ellie said, her throat felt tight she…she didn’t want to leave Cassandra! It was Cassandra! This whole thing, everything she’d ever done in the Inquisition, she’d done with her, from the moment she woke up after the Conclave!

“Oh dear girl, I will miss you too,” Cassandra rasped out, arms squeezing tighter, oh! Her voice sounded kind of like she’d been crying, awe, “please be safe, Eleanor. Rely on your allies and enjoy yourself.”

“I’ll be super safe! Everyone will work together and have each other’s backs! And Solas
and Dorian will all be there to help me with Rifts—Sera says she wants to try helping suppress them! I’ll have lots of help, and I’ll write whenever I can!”

“I look forward to it,” Cassandra assured as she pulled away, raising a hand to wipe at the inside corners of her eyes, “I will see you when you return.”

“You will,” Ellie promised.

Cassandra nodded and when she pulled away she got an armful of Sera, the Elf girl rushing to hug the Seeker tight, grunting with her effort, “’Sandra!”

“Sera, take care of yourself dear girl, be safe.”

“I will! I’ll watch out for Inky!”

Ellie went to Cremisius so he could say his own goodbyes, though it was “Hi,” he started out with.

“Hi,” Ellie replied softly, and then, reaching into her cloak, she pulled out the last of her knitting mission—a name she’d kept off the list because it wasn’t super hard to keep track of, she reached up to pull a warm brown woolen hat over Cremisius’s head before wrapping the matching scarf around the back of his neck, gently tugging it so he leaned down a bit as she stepped up onto the toes of his boots and pulled him in for a kiss, “This, is exactly where we’re picking up when I get back, kay?”

Cremisius looked a bit dazed as he grinned. “Uh, yeah, I can work with that.” He rested his forehead against hers, “Have fun, be safe.”

“I will—you too.”

“Oh good heavens they are nauseating aren’t they?” Dorian’s voice asked, he was standing with the Iron Bull next to Bitsy, Ellie and Cremisius turned to look at them—they were the ones watching!

“That was some damn smooth moves boss girl was puttin’ down though,” the Iron Bull said—thank you!

“I warned you about scarves and Tevinter lovers.”

Ellie looked to the Tevinter at her side, “Cremisius!”

He was one step ahead of her, he’d ducked down and was now rearing back with tightly packed ammunition, “I’m on it.”

Ellie snatched up a fistful of snow for herself and her snowball striking Dorian in the chest just a second after Cremisius’s caught Bull in the chin.

“Mind your beeswax!”

Thom was just finishing up securing his pack to his horse’s saddle, his men heading to the practice field, and Cremisius pressed a kiss to the top of Ellie’s head, giving her arm a squeeze before he went to catch up with them as they offered waves to Thom who waved back. Though Cyril broke away from their group with a nod to Cremisius, went to join Thom.

“You’re heading out?”
Thom nodded, “Yeah.”

Cyril clapped him on the shoulder and pecked a kiss to Thom’s lips, “Be safe out there.”

“Always am, love.”

Ellie’s jaw dropped open—love?!—and the Iron Bull chuckled,

“You minding your beeswax, Imekari?”

It was heartbreak, to watch Eleanor leave. Cassandra could hardly stand it, she wanted nothing more than to join her in the Oasis. But she was duty bound, to stay and train the Templars she’d taken on, make them suitable and ready to work with their Mage allies, to suppress and seal the Breach, ultimately, Eleanor needed her more in Haven, fulfilling her role as Seeker, than she did in the field just now. The Oasis would hold some danger, but nothing she could not handle with the allies that joined her, and hopefully it would provide lighter travel for the girl, nothing so arduous as their last journey from Haven.

Oh, but she missed her, horribly, terribly. She ached with the loss the first morning waking after Eleanor and her party set out. The first thought that slipped through the slight haze that lingered momentarily when she rose imbibing Sleeping potion, was that she should stretch and breathe and see about getting breakfast, go join Eleanor and Sera in their cabin for prayer and morning repast. And then realization struck home, that neither girl were home. Oh Maker, home.

“Cassandra?” Cullen asked, a warm hand rubbing along her bicep as the former Templar held her tighter against his side, her head resting on his chest.

“I did not realize you were awake,” she offered quietly, wiping at her eyes before looking up at him, “You slept well?”

“I did, thank you, for ah, leaving the door open.”

“Of course,” it was…she did find comfort, in the times he spent the night in her bed, her quarters, while a bit less confined than his tent among those on the soldiers field, was windowless, she did not hesitate to leave the door open for his comfort.

Although the door staying open provided another benefit of sorts. No one had to answer the door for their incoming guest.

Cassandra heard faintly, the patter of paw against Chantry stone, eager panting drawing nearer and then a ‘wuff!’ and the door creaked ever so as Anya entered the room, yipping as she pawed at the bedpost, and Cullen smiled as he grunted, shifting to let his free arm hang over the side of the bed and allowed him to hoist the pup up to join them, and Cassandra was just a breath away from reprimanding that he should not allow the dog on the bed—

but her words died in her throat, and she sat up straight when she saw a slip of parchment with all too familiar handwriting under the pup’s collar. Cassandra <3

Cassandra raised a trembling hand to her lips as she read, what was apparently titled, an ‘Ellie-gram’.
Good morning, Cassandra! I hope you had sweet dreams! This is Ellie-gram number 1. Dorian taught me about prefixes and suffixes—gram is a suffix that means something written or recorded, something meant to surprise the recipient! You’re the recipient and I bet you’re surprised! I know things get crazy and busy and I might not be able to write every day, so I thought this would be a nice way to still be in touch with you! I love you lots, and I miss you so much! You’ve got this! You’re doing so so so great with the Templars, and I’m so proud of you for staying and training them, and when I get home, we’ll kick major Breach butt!

Yesterday we finished Transfigurations 11, I promise to try and keep up with our Chant studies with Sera! So, today, we should be starting Transfigurations 12, I think its super sweet, if you wake up the same time as usual, we’ll probably be reading at the same time!

“Would you hand me my Chant, please Cullen?” Cassandra sniffled.

He did as asked, offering her the worn book before he settled back against the headboard with her, oh blessed pup, Cassandra sat holding Anya close as she read aloud from Transfigurations 12, there was something in fact soothing, the idea that she and Eleanor and Sera may well be reading together even as they were apart.

And so the days passed, her mornings were opened with Anya presenting her yet another Ellie-gram—it took the entirety of a week to realize it was the Lieutenant rising early each morning to see to Anya’s breakfast, and then on the walk so that the pup might do her business, the young man escorted her to the Chantry, tucked a pre-written note under Anya’s collar and opened the heavy Chantry door for the pup so she could patter her way to Cassandra’s quarters, Maker bless him.

Cassandra received the occasional missive from Eleanor—she enjoyed the weather in the Oasis immensely, and the Rifts were being cleared, though Sera penned a rather panicked missive that almost sent Cassandra riding out to join them, that Eleanor had fallen into a mine that held a Rift in its depths. Sera was writing to apologize, she was so freaking sorry she hadn’t been keeping close enough, been able to keep the girl from harm. But the Iron Bull was steadfast in his reports, they came in daily of their progress, and he reported that Eleanor was well, not seriously harmed, and Cassandra wrote Eleanor to check in on her, and replied to Sera—she was not at fault, it was an incredibly dangerous fight, there were two Rifts close together in the Oasis, one high in the desert range past the scaffolding built around the mine, and one within the mine proper. Eleanor had taken high ground on the scaffolding to cast against the demons pouring from the high Rift—Demons of Despair, multiple of them, had come from it and their icy reach was far, she attempted to stay out of range of them. However, she’d been too far to cast against the Rift proper, and when she made to right that, she’d been rushed by a Greater Terror, and knocked off the scaffolding, rolled and rolled grasping hold of the railing that was meant to safe guard those who drew close to the mine opening, hanging there. She’d gotten her staff up and was about to pull herself up but she’d been holding on with her Marked hand and the Rift below crackled and boomed to life, pouring out demons and she lost her grip, falling into their midst unarmed—if Sera had not been so quick to follow after, been present enough to realize Eleanor’s staff was still up on the platform and grabbed it before descending into the mine after her friend as she called for their allies to shift focus to the Rift below, Cassandra shuddered to think what might have happened. Sera had done well, by all accounts, save her own—she was being too hard on herself, and Cassandra sought to right that, I am proud of you, the Iron Bull reported that you did well, and I believe that. Thank you, Sera.

Cassandra was beyond relieved when she received the missive from Eleanor that they had concluded their business in the Oasis, her wealth of pre-written Ellie-grams had dried up, understandably, the girl had taken the time to pen over a dozen of the things, and they were
precious every one of them. They would be returning home—did Cassandra need anything from Val Royeaux? Their party was going to pass through on their way back, Varric, Dorian, and Eleanor were to meet some relative of Varric’s for lunch, and perhaps do a bit of shopping. She wasn’t asking for money!—she insisted upon that for some reason. Ahh. Apparently she’d written Cullen, who had responded before Eleanor sent word to Cassandra—when the Commander heard of her side trip to Val Royeaux involving a spot of shopping, he frantically passed along several coin notes, and insisted Eleanor treat herself.

“Cullen!” Cassandra swatted the man with Eleanor’s letter, they’d been sitting on her bed reading over reports and correspondence.

“She’s! She’s a girl, Cassandra, and shopping, and I know she has money but,” he sighed, “—Mia and Rosie are well and grown, and still to this day, any time they mention taking on a spree in passing to my father, he doles out a little something. I was just…following example I suppose, do you think I insulted her?” he worried.

“No, sweet man,” Cassandra assured him, rocking forward where she sat with her legs crossed up underneath her to press a kiss to his jaw, “she merely worries that she had somehow made it seem like she wanted you to send funds when she had nothing of the sort in mind.”

Though Eleanor’s return to Haven was ultimately derailed. Reports came in from the Fallow Mire.

Maker. Their soldiers, Lord Berand and his men, had gone missing. Scout Harding was working tirelessly to get further information out to them—there were Rifts in the Mire, and, apparently, a tribe of Avvar had taken refuge in that abandoned land, more than that she was not certain, Cullen sent out fellow soldiers to search for their missing numbers and Eleanor and her party, having just crossed the border between Orlais and Ferelden, they were heading for the Mire.

Cassandra was riding to join them—the Templars were well at hand, and something…she felt in the core of her being, she needed to be there, to lend Eleanor her immediate aid. Something was wrong, in the Fallow Mire, their disappearing soldiers was beyond unsettling, and too she missed Eleanor horrendously, had admittedly…it was horrible of her, but admittedly her immediate distress as these reports was the realization that they meant Eleanor would not be returning to Haven as planned, that their separation would be longer still, it was unbearable. And selfish to an extent, Maker, missing soldiers was serious, they could be hurt or captured or…please, please do not let them be dead—Berand was a good man, his men as well, and despite the actions that put those soldiers so low on the totem pole they’d been sent out to handle what they thought would be pointless, rainy muddy business in the Fallow Mire as punishment for their slander of Eleanor, Cassandra prayed they did not pay the ultimate price, it had been meant as a lesson, penance paid for their petty cruelty, not something life threatening.

She encountered Marehis, on her own journey to the Mire. The women found themselves arriving in the Fallow Mire just short of Eleanor—the Iron Bull touched base in writing, that the girl feared for their soldiers and had gone as fast as possible to reach the Mire.

Though…well Maker, Cassandra almost did not recognize the girl.

When they arrived at their infiltration camp in the Mire, Scout Harding greeted them, and then Cassandra caught sight of a girl, bandaging wrapped around what would be the exposed flesh of her ankles given her armored leggings fell short by a few inches, shod in thick soled ankle boots that seemed to be being steadily broken into. There was a bandage taped just behind her right ear, easily seen because…well the most striking difference in Eleanor’s appearance, it was in fact Eleanor Cassandra realized, was her hair. A great portion of it was missing. Gone were her long
curly locks, replaced instead by a scalp of short, fluffy hair, just beginning to be long enough for its tips to curl up.

“Eleanor?”

“Uh-huh?” Eleanor asked absentmindedly as she turned to face them, reading a missive under the glow of her Fadelit palm. Oh Maker, it had been so long, Eleanor, she’d grown, her features more defined, there was a new scar, a slice on the left of her top lip, and she had not shot up like a damn weed but she was certainly taller, “Hi,” she greeted breathlessly, coming to hug Marehis close.

“Hello sweet girl,” Marehis said, her voice tight in her throat as she held the girl tightly before releasing her so Cassandra could claim a hug of her own.

Oh it was pure relief to have the girl at hand again. "Eleanor."

The girl hummed happily as she hugged Cassandra back, "Thank you so much for coming."

"Of course."

“Ellie? Another report just came in,” Scout Harding sounded like she was regretful to disturb them, Eleanor stayed in Cassandra's hold, the Seeker’s arm over her shoulder as the girl turned to face the Scout.

Eleanor’s party gathered around as Scout Harding announced, “So, the Avvar tribe here has taken our missing members captive. Hostage. Their leader, the ‘Hand of Koth’ is holding them, until he gets his chance at a fight.”

“This hand of Koth wishes warfare with the Inquisition?” Cassandra questioned.

“Nooot exactly,” Scout Harding ruefully intoned, “he wants to fight the Herald of Andraste.”

There was one change more, aside from Eleanor's hair and height, that had come to pass in their time apart. At the news of her latest challenge, Eleanor sighed and said,

“Well, shit.”

Chapter End Notes

Dalish
Da'assan= Dalish term of endearment, means 'little arrow'

Lethallan/Lethallin='my friend', lan is female, while lin is male.

End Notes:

*This conversation spawned "Under the Changing Stars" a fic where Thom doesn’t pursue mercenary work, and meets Ellie at age 8

*Klaus—Nicolaus Lorey is a canon member of Thom's old crew, in Trespasser, Thom tries to find his former men to apologize, ends up finding Klaus restarting his life in
Kirkwall, they have a drink at the Hanged Man and go their separate ways on good terms.

*Judex and Peraqualis are Thedas constellations seen in the Hinterlands, assumed to be seen when you're between there and Haven.

*Cyrl is the member of Thom's crew that faced execution for the Callier massacre, the announcement of his hanging is what prompts Thom to come out of hiding, go to Val Royeaux and confess his crimes in the in-game mission, 'Revelations' in order to stop the proceedings.

*Par Vollen is supposed to be pretty tropical, and Seheron definitely is, and we've all seen the Arbor Wilds. Give us monkeys you cowards!

*Blood Lotus is poisonous, the idea for a bouquet of them comes from a canon story about how an Orlsian noble wanted roses for this huge party, but the florist couldn't get them roses, so, they opted for substituting with Blood Lotus because they could get a hand on a crap ton of that, the party ended with loads of party goers passing out and hallucinating, someone broke their teeth biting into a statue they swore was made of cheese, lots of fun things!

*Roderick pops up during the destruction of Haven, coming to warn the Inquisition of whichever faction the Herald didn't side with, since we sided with both in this story, I needed to tie things up with him.

*When you make your character in DA:I they come preset with a name, the first name you can change, but they auto give Male Trevelyan, the name Maxwell, and so, Max!

*Be careful with Vanilla and your fur babies! Vanilla extract can have similar affects that chocolate can—I hear all the time about chocolate making dogs sick and nothing about vanilla, and when I researched this chapter, I found out it can be a no no so, helpful tip in case I wasn't the only one unaware of that!

*When changing your last name for anything other than marriage purposes, it takes at least 6 months, sometimes longer.

*Seda—Spanish for silk, if you travel with Cole and Sera in your party, eventually the conversation comes up where Cole says 'Seeeerea' testing her name and saying that his mouth wants to form the word 'Seda, da da da' and 'Sera Sera Sera, if you say it enough it almost doesn't sound like a name'. There's some conflict in Sera's backstory where it sounds like she was living in an Alienage before Lady Emmauld took her in, but when she talks about getting caught stealing as a child, "most people get Alienage or worse for that!" Sera says, so. I'm interpreting it that her birth family are Dalish that migrated down from Antiva, (because if her name was formerly Seda in canon, I'm assuming there's an Antivan connection there? Some of our favorite Dalish are from Antiva like good old Zevran! Several clans move through there) either her family was integrating into a Free Marcher city, or passing through and Sera got caught stealing, and was either going to serve time or be sent live in the Alienage, when Lady Emmauld stepped in.

*Ferelden is based off of Great Britain—old timey GB, but the 1860's is old timey right?

*Harpers Ford is an city in Highever in north Ferelden
*mjia means daughter in Spanish but its used as a term of endearment for any young girl you care for!

*Liana is an old English name that means 'My god has answered'. Liara is a variation of it, that comes up if you try to generate Dalish names so, I picked a Dalish name, connected it to a ‘Human’ one and went with that. Plus it sort of went with the theme of Eleanor 'Light of god (or in Thedas, the Maker)' Ellie, on its own, just means Light which I thought was kind of cool, I picked the name at random it was actually just a place holder until I found something I liked, and I ended up keeping it.

*Vivienne totally rocks 4b hair if she lets it grow out! In comparison, Ellie's living the 3c life.

*The Lucerni is a political party in Tevinter that Maevaris and Dorian found and operate to create change and reform in their government by the time Tresspasser rolls around. ‘Luce’ in Latin means ‘Light’ so I figure it means something along the lines of a overly fancy Tevinter way of saying ‘illumination’.

*Theda's calendar system is from Tevinter, the names change as the times did but Tevinter uses the old names—Verimensis / Wintersmarch=January, Molioris / Bloomingtide=May, holds the holiday Summerday on the 1st—which is a holiday where lots of people get married, it's a big marriage month. Umbralis / Firstfall=November
The Forbidden Oasis/The Fallow Mire

Chapter Summary

Adventures in the Forbidden Oasis, meeting Maevaris, getting back the Magister's Birthright, and settling our troubles in the Fallow Mire. Next stop...Sealing the Breach!
End of the game/Trespasser-adjacent spoilers in Solas PoV

Chapter Notes

Hi! Back with our chapter covering our group's Oasis findings and the Fallow Mire!
Thanks so much for all the Kudos and feedback and just reading this in general! <3

Wonders never did cease. Solas had never considered Thom Rainier to be a romantic sort, let alone of the masculine variety, but then again matters of the heart were complex. As it stood, there had been some concern Ellie would be heartsick leaving her loved ones behind in Haven, but she was more than pleased with her most recent match made, her exuberance was so great it spilled into their bond, left the Elf smiling, taking very controlled breaths to ground himself in his own cool calm. He was certainly happy for the Human man, but not so much that he cared to make note of it through more than his offer of congratulations with something like giggling. Ellie hadn't taken claim of pairing the two, but to his mind, and Thom's it seemed, the credit mostly resided with her. Without things playing out as they had, the men's paths may not have crossed full stop, let alone in such a way where they could work together again, forgive each other and themselves, regain the good of what was lost and move forward to better things. Although he did take quarrel with,

“I am a grown man,” Thom assured Ellie and Sera as they simultaneously congratulated and teased his coupling, “I do not have a boyfriend.”

“You just have a friend who’s a boy?” Sera offered jovially, she’d taken Russel’s reins, Ellie seated in the saddle before her.

Ellie gasped, “A friend who’s a man! A manfriend!” she giggled, then, “I’m sorry, I shouldn’t tease too much, just… I think it’s sweet and I’m really happy, you know? If you have someone that makes you happy.”

“He’s more of a consistent pain in the—”

Sera shrieked, “Inky! Close your ears!”

“—neck!” Rainier was getting at, he’d already been rather rosy cheeked but now his face blazed in embarrassment as Ellie giggled.

“If he’s a consistent pain in the ass, then someone’s not doing something right,” Bull joked quietly to Dorian, who shorted. While the Tevinter man had certainly been afforded the
opportunity to be assigned a horse of his own while they were in Haven, he was apparently
nervous to endeavor mastering a steed himself, did not care to take up the practice, and he would
be grateful to any who allowed him passage on their own horse. The Iron Bull had, albeit put-
upon, decided that, despite the great displeasure he took from the man’s in general existence, he
already had one annoying Vint in his life he hardly needed another, he was welcome to ride with
him.

“But yes,” Thom allowed as he addressed Ellie, “I’m happy, Ellie-girl.”

“Good!”

Marehis hummed contentedly from where she sat before Solas in the saddle—he held the
reins while his vehnan read over reports he occasionally took his eyes off the road to skim for
himself. She knew well of the intrusion, allowed it so long as it remained an unspoken thing
between them—she wasn’t to talk of the assignments Leliana gave her, but if the occasional hint
gleaned from his peeking could put him at ease, Marehis was glad of it, that much had been
carried away, perhaps. From what he could gather it seemed Marehis would be
infiltrating the staff of a Marquis, allied with Gaspard. This Marquis often entertained the Grand
Duke, the men often dined, drank—working as a household servant, Marehis was to observe the
Duke and his allies and report back to Leliana.

Solas had no doubt of Marehis’s abilities, her professionalism, but still, the question
persisted just at the tip of his tongue—he dare not voice it—but he was curious just how Marehis
would fare, with merely observing. To serve and watch and not rend the Grand Duke limb from
limb for his persistent attacks on Eleanor. Or at least poisoning his drink or, well, she was certainly
creative with her concealment of weaponry, one of their first dalliances, Solas had been startled
when sliding his hand along the curve of her side to rest a hand on her hip only to find there were
small daggers, one on either side of her ribcage bound in a thin leather band, and it had been almost
amusing once she stripped herself in her entirety—at first Solas had been too distracted to take note
of what all had been removed, but later he saw a pile of what made it seem like the woman
somehow wore more things to kill a man with than actual clothing. Needless to say he was
surprised the mission delivered to her was not one for assassination. But ultimately from what he
read, it wasn’t. A pity. Solas’s vengeance felt fresh when he was reminded just how close they’d
come to devastation, if not for Sera’s Friend intercepting the Blood Lotus. Even then, Sera herself
had been put to harm! She could have been poisoned just as easily as Ellie, while she certainly held
greater chances of survival, Blood Lotus poisoning was hardly a pleasurable experience! He was
most glad, the young Elf had been spared such a trial, it is not something he would wish upon any,
though he certainly was…fond, of the girl. He’d found her irredeemably rude, while he himself did
not adhere to Dalish standards, their bastardization of their people’s ways, he’d found Sera’s
attitudes toward Elves appalling. He had, however, come to realize to his own horror that her
hatred did not necessarily lie with their people, but with herself. It couldn't stand, even Solas
agreed when Marehis brought it to his attention, made him promise he would hold solidarity with
her in being mindful of Sera's self-esteem in regard to her being an Elf—that her race was not a
character flaw she should seek to rid herself of. Ellie was always an encouragement to the older
girl, and it would seem the young Elf had found some measure of mentorship from Seeker
Pentaghast, which brought her a newfound level of confidence, it was heartening to see.

It also led to Sera seeking Solas’s guidance more often, and he found some pleasure in
providing as much, seeing as the girl came genuinely determined to learn. He assisted her in
finding her footing with the Fade, but…well. He did not wish to press his luck…it was not an
experiment—it was serious, and he was careful but her latest request for guidance provided
something of an opportunity.
Solas, when given enough time around a member of his people, was usually able to sense some semblance of a connection to the Fade within them, magic laying dormant even in the least magical of their numbers. Marehis, he found, had a moderate measure of dormant magic, he’d been able to sense it after some weeks in her company. In Sera? One afternoon when he was meeting Marehis for lunch, an attempt to cheer the woman because it was during that period of time when Eleanor’s days were occupied with non-stop War Room sessions, where they deliberated over who to reach out to, Mages or Templars. When he arrived at the Tavern he’d been wholly startled, felt as if he’d stepped into the Fade while still in waking form, its presence was so very strong, like it was being called for some great deal of casting. The Tavern had been rather empty, void entirely of other mages, but he’d found Sera working on…something, some sort of semi-mechanical contraption she was attempting to fashion out of wire and forks and a spatula he still wasn’t certain, it was meant as a prototype of a device she wished to use to launch pies. She was working rather blindly, no schematics just, putting pieces of things together as she sat at the table by the fire, focusing so very intensely she did not realize Solas’s arrival, much less that he’d stopped the very moment he entered the Tavern to stare, bewildered. The girl had not a single clue, but it was her magic, guiding her hands as she worked. It was an occurrence he’d seen multiple times sense, Sera pulling off some prank or strange feat that should be something improbable, and when asked, she cannot explain—not even when she’d claimed to have filled a practice dummy with bees, and somehow managed to do so without incident, no stings, she reported it was rather easy all told, but she could not say how she did it*. He would be inclined to write that off as Sera’s flightiness but… she admittedly had something of an analytical mind, an eye for cause and effect, curiosity that drove her to make things work. It was a manifestation of her magic, he was certain, her ability to unknowingly reach out for the Fade and unconsciously allow it to guide her.

Now, she offered a chance to…broach the subject as carefully as possible, without alerting the girl just yet, not entirely, to her potential. Later that evening, their first day heading toward the Oasis, Solas and Sera sat before their campfire, awaiting Ellie to join them for their nightly meditation. The Human girl was with Varric, he said he wished to speak with her, but after she and the Dwarf disappeared into the tent, and all Solas had heard since was the scratch of quill against parchment. Sera informed him, “’sandra says maybe I can help Inky by suppressing Rifts, make ‘em easier to fight, but…” Sera sighed, looking worried as she wrench a hand at the back of her neck like the tendons there were tense, “I’m scared, suppressing anything near Ellie. Viv let me practice on her and it didn’t seem like I hurt her, but she hasn’t been super chatty about what it feels like, just that it isn’t pleasant or whatever the frig. If…if I accidentally suppressed Inky’s magic, I’d feel just awful, what if it hurts or scares her or gets her hurt?” Sera slumped in her seat hands falling into her lap.

Solas carefully placed a hand at the back of her neck, massaging gently, and Sera did not seem displeased, he’d asked permission to do so before, offered it to assist her in relaxing enough to attempt meditation in the past and it seemed to soothe as intended. “Sera, have you considered attempting to seek the conduit that is Ellie’s Mark, when you meditate alongside her? Feel its connection to the Breach?”

Sera regarded him critically for a moment like the question was bizarre, but then she pondered it and, “Sometimes, when we meditate like this, yeah. I feel like…okay, I dunno if you’ve felt this but when you reach for the weirdy Fade from the outside, and don’t go in, touch the outside of it, it’s like when a waterskin is full? If there was a ginormous wall made of something pliable that sort of moves the way a waterskin would if you squeezed it, it’d be the same feeling.”

“Yes, I understand,” Solas offered.

“When I reach for the Fade, it feels like I’m walking alongside a ginormous wall, in the dark
using my...brain? Like a hand? Dunno, brain-hand feels along the wall to find my way, and sometimes it feels like it slips through, and I’ve got it in something splashy, makes me feel clammy,” she shuddered.

Ahh, “As if you’ve inadvertently reached into the Fade?”

Sera seemed very reticent to agree as such, but she nodded timidly.

“It isn’t a bad thing, Sera, aside from any discomfort it gives you. It merely means you know Ellie’s Mark...you can find it when you reach against the Fade. Cassandra has done well to teach you how to focus on the realness of our world to suppress the Fade’s hold on it, but perhaps you could be taught something of a reversal of that?”

“...why would I do that?” she asked.

He took a beat, as if considering it as he rested his elbows on his knees, and steepled his hands. “Well, it is merely theory, but if you were to reach out to Ellie’s Mark and focus on the Fade, it’s power, pour will into its grasp on our world, the way it can be given foothold to manipulate and change it, you could power it, strengthen her casting against the Fade. You would be aiding her without running the risk of reaching out to Suppress a Rift and inadvertently suppressing Eleanor’s ability to cast against it.”

“...but...but that sounds like Magey shite, the stuff you and Viv and Dori do,” she sounded startled, but she was placated with Solas’s explanation,

“It is, but ah, you do not necessarily have to have magic to do so, just hold the ability to sense the Fade and work with it.” ...which required at least some small measure of magic, but he was not about to divulge as much, Sera was not...she was not yet ready to know such things. Dormant magic could be nurtured and matured, such as was how non-mages like Cassandra, Cullen, their Templars were able to suppress magic after all. Sera held it in such measures that Solas almost wondered if perhaps she might one day be capable of casting—all Elves once had the ability, and to this day they all held magic potential, if they were made aware of that, taught to focus on it and build upon it, he felt certain any of his people could develop the ability to cast given time, orr ultimately, the reinstatement of their lost world.

“Then how come ‘sandra doesn’t power Ink’s Mark?”

“Her training. Suppressing magic is just as important as encouraging it, especially among Humans. It is of benefit, that you train the way you do—while a Templar’s goal is to suppress magic, your goal is to help with Rifts, with the Breach, you have options for doing just that.”

“Dunno...I wanna help, just...I like the idea of just purely helping Inky, making her stronger instead of something else weaker, but...shite that just sounds,” she shuddered.

“I would not pressure you, da’len. You needn’t attempt it if it upsets you, I merely offered it as a suggestion in the stead of suppression that you may be more comfortable with where Ellie is involved. Seeker Pentaghast is confident in your abilities, as am I—we all trust you are capable of suppressing Rifts without bringing harm to Eleanor.”

“...thanks,” Sera said after some consideration, “I dunno, I’ll think about it.” She sighed, though she perked up considerably, ears twitching when she heard the sound of tenting being pushed aside and, “Inky! There you are!”

“Hi! Sorry, I didn’t mean to leave you guys for so long,” Ellie offered as she dropped to sit
next to her friend.

“’s all good,” Sera waved her worry off, “Let’s get our meditation on!”

“Yeah!”

They fell into comfortable routine—rising, travel, and the bit of chaos that was their meals. The Iron Bull and Rainier cooked most of their meals, the men seemed to hold some shared venture of encouraging Eleanor’s growth spurt that they were certain was just around the metaphorical corner. Solas had found it felt like her magic was just on the brink of maturing further—when he proposed as much to Cassandra, the night before leaving Haven, that her body was preparing not only to grow physically but also magically, it prompted the Seeker to call a meeting of the adults and Healer Adan. The girl was just barely five feet tall and that was in her old boots, and there was some shared horror in their group when the Healer announced that at she’d weighed little over 80lbs when she came in for her first official checkup after their assault on the Breach. She was much healthier now of course, had gained almost twenty pounds since then, but after the Iron Bull and Rainier heard the Healer explain Eleanor being so very small was likely due to malnourishment during important stages of growth, they apparently took the words very much to heart. They cooked like mad, bickering over nutritional value and the like, and ultimately leaving Eleanor in something of a food coma at the end of the day, more than once the girl fell asleep directly after dinner.

Sleep was, admittedly, a pleasurable part of their travels. Even as they continued on without her once they crossed the border into Orlais, Madam de Fer left them her tent, assuring that as they moved into warmer climates its enchantment would adjust accordingly—they would need it, once they were in the Oasis for reprieve from the heat during the day. Marehis slept curled up against Solas’s side and he found himself wandering less often so deep into the Fade, he liked to maintain some semblance of basking in the comfort of having her close, in the waking world. Ellie as well, the night before Marehis was to go her own way, leave their party to pursue her mission in a city just south of Val Royeaux. She was hesitant to leave Ellie, they would miss each other horribly, Ellie’s magic had conveyed when she needed comfort, for her homesickness—she missed Cassandra to such a degree it almost set her to tears—and it thrummed in a way that could be considered painful, carrying the ache Ellie felt at Marehis’s leaving. So, Solas had not hesitated in the slightest when they’d been preparing for bed, to offer that the girl could sleep with he and Marehis.

“Thank you,” Marehis whispered to him when Eleanor was fast asleep between them, her head on Solas’s chest—though her proximity did make his nose itch, a curl of hair tickled it, he had to take in a breath and blow quietly through his mouth to banish the lock from being so directly in his face. Marehis’s arms were around her, the woman curled up against the girl’s back.

“Have sweet dreams, vehnan,” he replied quietly, he may well lose his arm, it was pinned under Ellie and Marehis, wrapped around them, but he supposed it was well worth it.

His arm survived, he couldn’t feel it when he woke but it was back in working form when it was time to hug Marehis goodbye.

“So shiral, ma vehnan,” he bid her.

“Bellanaris,” she offered playfully, he supposed it served him right, as she pressed a warm kiss to his lips.

He’d heard Ellie find qualm with Cullen’s ten-minute hug but the moment he released Marehis, the girl was on her Elf woman, hugging her fiercely, seeming like she was hoping to
break that record.

“I’m going to miss you! So much! And I have to convey that through—Sera, what’s that thing you were talking about Monday, ossismoses?”

“Osmosis,” Sera offered.

“Osmosis! I’m pretty sure if we hug long enough it’ll work! My cells are making sure your cells know I love them—you so much! And I’ll miss you! And I’ll think about you every day! And it’s warm! Sometimes it might be cold? And I’m safe! And um, I’m sealing all the Rifts, oh! And I’m getting taller! Huh…um…” she seemed to be thinking.

“Are we visualizing the future da’vehnan?” Marehis asked.

Ellie pouted as hugged the woman tighter, “I’m not dumb—I know that when Leliana says I’m supposed to address everything to her, that I want sent to you and she’ll ‘facilitate as she can’, is grown up spy talk that means you’ll get everything once you’re done with your job! Which sort of defeats the ‘keeping you updated’ purpose of writing, I’ll still write so you’ll have nice things waiting for you when you finish, just, osmosis transferring all the reassurance and predictions, so you aren’t worried and can focus on your job! Have fun spying, be safe!”

“Thank you, sweet girl,” Marehis said, rubbing Ellie’s shoulders as she pulled away, “I will be in touch as soon as I possibly can, and the moment my work is done I will rejoin you, I promise.”

She got a rather exuberant hug from Sera who squeezed the older Elf woman tight, “Dareth, n’pish, kay?”

Marehis’s eyes widened and her hand cradled the crown of Sera’s head to keep the girl held fast against her while Marehis caught Solas’s eye, like some milestone had just been met, he supposed it had? Adult-ish child’s first genuine attempt at Dalish? “Ma seranas, da’assan, take care of yourself, yes? Have fun in the Oasis.”

Sera nodded, speaking quietly, “Remember my Friend’s name—never met him in person but Friends of Friends say he’s decent, helped ‘em out of tight spots. Works in the kitchens.”

“Thank you, Sera,” Marehis said warmly. “Ohhh, my girls!” she reached out and pulled Ellie in to hug them both for just a moment more and then, she pulled away, taking Sera’s chin in hand to guide the girl to stoop slightly so Marehis could kiss her on the forehead, before the Elf woman lowered herself to kiss Ellie’s forehead, it was a domino effect of sorts, and then, she was off.

“You okay, Tumbles?” Varric asked after they’d ridden along for nearly an hour in silence.

“…Sera, Solas, do you think we’re far enough away, she can’t still hear?” Ellie asked.

Ahh, “No, da’len, impressive as Marehis is, even her hearing cannot span the several miles we’ve traversed.”

Ellie nodded and then lamented, head tilted back against Sera’s shoulder as she complained to the sky, “I miss Marehis! My heart is sad! I miss Cassandra, and Cullen, and Lady Josie, and Leliana, and Vivienne, and Cremisius! And Anya! My puppy has left my heart an empty void of despair!”

“Awe Inky!”
“Shit, Tumbles, don’t have an empty void of despair,” Varric pled.

“Too late! I’m having one! I’ll be okay, just, feelings, ya know?”

“Have your feelings Imekari, you need anything just let us know—we’re all here for you kid,” the Iron Bull promised.

That…oh. Panic of a sort struck Solas. The other men in their party as well, not that any of them voiced it just then but later, there was an emergency meeting of sorts because the Iron Bull made, ironically, rather the point—they were all there for young Ellie…and they alone. This was their first venture without Seeker Pentaghast in their ranks, Marehis was away, as was Madam de Fer.


“I’m not the only one freaking out right?” the Iron Bull asked as he called their meeting to order—they’d made camp for the evening, Ellie was of a mind to wash up, bathe, so she and Sera were off down the bank from their camp, at the river. Their tent was settled and Rainier had set to task with a campfire.

“I passed freaking out when Marehis left,” Varric said, from where he’d decided to lay down, flat on his back by “went right into…pretty sure I’m going through the stages of grief? Deep in the depression stage right now.”

"You need help getting through 'horny'," the Iron Bull said, "let me know."

"That...horny isn't—the fifth stage is acceptance."

"Yeah, horny. Basra don't know how to do grief."

Varric waved his hands in frustrated dismissal. "Okay whatever- What are we supposed to do exactly? What if she gets bored? How much does she need to sleep? I think I’m having a stroke, I can’t remember what you feed a kid.”

“It’s intimidating,” Dorian agreed, “I’ve not the slightest idea how to rear a child, I’m decidedly not in charge, just to make that clear. If we royally mess up, it’s on you lot.”

“We’ve all offered guidance and council,” Solas offered hopefully, he…yes, it was admittedly strange to feel almost solely responsible.

Especially given, “But Cassandra, Marehis, they’ve always taken the lead, set the tone for how to care for Ellie—” Thom was saying.

“What if that period crap happens again? She takes potion for that right?” Varric shot up, panicked, “Fuck! Who has her potions? Does she have her potions?” That was rather alarming, Solas had entirely forgotten, hadn’t thought twice about Marehis leaving without entrusting…well he supposed she would entrust him he thought, given the nature of her potions, if Ellie had a panic or asthma attack she may not be capable of administering potion to herself-

“You lop-heads are worrying over nothin’,” Sera startled them, both in that they hadn’t realized she was approaching, and her state of undress. She sauntered up, naked, boots in one hand, her armor and leggings hanging over her arm, as she said, “Just do what you normally do. Be a bunch of dummies that Inky and I can laugh at, help keep her safe—Mare left her potions with me, thank you very much, I know all the instructions and I’m usually closest to Ink. She knows I got
"Wait, shit, where’s Imekari?" the Iron Bull whipped about to looked around, the girl wasn’t with Sera, Solas opened the bond, she was safe, not very far, still at the river it seemed, verified by,

"Calm your dicks, she’s finishing up, she takes longer’n me. Cole’s with her—not peepin’ just guarding."

"…Cole?" Varric asked.

Ahh, their Spirit friend hadn’t declared that he was joining them before they left, but Solas had sensed Cole’s presence. The boy mostly made himself scarce around Madam de Fer and Sera, though the girl was more comfortable with him it seemed…of course she was rather comfortable with all of them apparently. Sera finally disappeared into the tent for sleepwear.

They decided on dinner after a rather marvelous and compelling debate between Varric and the Iron Bull, it’d been rather a long day, and the Iron Bull was set on sandwiches all around and Varric insisted you do no such thing for dinner—it was dinner damn it! ‘Kid needs to eat!’ and apparently, despite the balance of carbs, vegetables, and protein sandwiches could involve, they had zero nutritional value in the Dwarf’s mind.

"You two’re real cute—let me know when the wedding is will you, Chief?" Thom saw fit to tease, getting their attention. The mercenary had already had stew Flissa had sent them off with in their frozen stores, thawing nicely—deciding for them, while they quarreled.

The Iron Bull raised his hand in a crude gesture that he quickly dropped. Ellie rejoined them, Cole in visible form trailing after her, at least she’d thought to take her sleeping clothes down with her to bathe. She yawned as she stretched before deciding the Iron Bull was the most appealing place to sit, climbing into his lap.

"How’s your empty void of despair feeling, Imekari?"

"Better," she assured contentedly, "feet are kind of despairy though, would you mind massaging them like you do, the Iron Bull? I’ll return the favor," she promised.

There it was. The Iron Bull had seemed more worse for wear than usual, tightness in his features, he was exhausted, and while Ellie was not in pain when Solas gently pressed the bond out of curiosity and a measure of concern, it seemed she knew the Iron Bull was hurting...had Cole informed her?

"No," Cole's voice sounded at Solas's ear, the boy crouching next to where Solas was seated by the fire, speaking quietly, "She worries for him, watches, waits. Presses without pressing pride—offering alone won't get her what requesting will."

That made sense, Solas supposed, her bit of fibbing got her a foot massage, and the opportunity to deliver as much to the Iron Bull in return, when Ellie worked on the Qunari's bare feet, she did so carefully and used it as excuse to work her way up to his ankles—she insisted his feet were cracked and dry and that wouldn't do, disappearing into the tent to fetch something to right that.

"She worries about you too," Cole informed him, "she's going to accept your offer—trying to join one another in the Fade while you sleep? She's scared, exploring the Fade is dangerous and has always been frightening for her, but you enjoy it and it might make you happy, be fun if you're
together, she trusts you. And she doesn't want you to be sad, sleeping without Marehis."

That...well she certainly did not have to do such a thing if she was frightened, but Solas would indeed keep her from harm, and the experience would be one of hopefully, fun, and education. "Thank you, for forewarning me, Cole, I will be diligent. You may join us, if you wish."

He made a noncommittal sound, the Spirit was rather worried he may fall victim to tricks in the Fade—Demons often wished to inflict their fate upon their former peers, force Spirits to become like them. "I will watch, if Ellie needs me, I will come."

Ellie returned, sat on the ground before the Iron Bull again, armed with lotion and what Solas suspected was a jar of numbing ointment, bandaging, tucked under her arm, along with an applicator. She massaged lotion into the soles of his feet before quietly using the thin wooden applicator to administer clear, sticky ointment to his ankle—quietly as in she made no direct comment that would bring attention to her actions, she chattered away, talking to Dorian who lounged nearby, reclining on his side as he watched Rainier work to get dinner settled.

It certainly was a distracting conversation. Although Solas was not immediately alarmed,

"I talked to Gereon—he says it's okay to call him that, he's 'done his family name dishonor' or whatever," she said.

Dorian's breath caught in his throat and he sat up, eyes wide, mouth working and it looked like, goodness, like the man might start yelling at her. He did certainly raise his voice, panicked, "Why the bloody hell were you permitted to speak with Alexius?! Who-you-your childminder."

Alexius. "Da'vehn, does Marehis know of this?" Solas worried.

Ellie nodded, "She went with me, waited outside because she wasn't super in a forgiving place with him, I worried she'd fight him or something and she could hear fine if I needed help. I didn't, it was nice."

"Imekari, you can't just go- " the Iron Bull started.

"Hold still or I'll get- just, hold still, kay? I'm almost done," she insisted, she was currently oh, using a cloth to protect her hand as she gently rubbed the ointment in before she started securely wrapping the ankle in bandaging to stabilize it with something soft, "It's not a super big deal. I talked to Leliana, we have lunch dates every Monday when I'm in Haven. Anyway, Felix hasn't written his father since Redcliffe, and...that's for him to do in his own time, but he doesn't exactly have loads of that to burn through. I wouldn't want him to think about it, in his final moments and regret not reaching out at all. And Gereon is his father, he's about to...no matter what happens, Felix will be gone, pass while Gereon is still paying for his crimes, and it's," she swallowed, taking a second to collect herself, "it's horrible to have to say goodbye when you lose someone you love, but it's even worse, not getting to at all. So. I just went to have a chat. I went mentioned I'd heard from Felix, that he's well and having a safe journey back to Tevinter," she said, "and when I wrote Felix I just casually mentioned I'd popped in to see his father for myself, maybe make some sense of things."

"Ahh," Dorian sighed with some relief, "And what did he say—Felix?"

"He thanked me for checking on his father. When I was hugging Leliana goodbye she let me know he wrote his father himself."

Dorian was quiet contemplation before he sighed, saying, "That was...very big of you, Ellie.
I certainly wasn't of a mind to do the same, not...not just yet."

Ellie shrugged, "You've got all the time you need to, Maker willing." Ellie rapped a fist against the fallen log the Iron Bull was seated on, "you shouldn't try to hash things out unless and until you're ready to."

Dinner was pleasant, when it came time to eat, Ellie sat with Solas, talking over what he thought they might discover in the Oasis—had he heard of the area before, even in the Fade? Admittedly he wasn't certain what the Oasis or its temple would hold, it was a true bit of adventure.

Ellie did endeavor to join Solas in the Fade, the Human girl seeking sleep without potion—the first night she tried as much, knowing she would willingly be entering the Fade for exploratory purposes set such anxiety in her she could not sleep, ended up needing potion to sleep and that kept her from the Fade and fast asleep well into the morning. Her second attempt though, she curled up next to Solas, taking deep, even breaths, and he focused on sending her soothing calm through the bond until she was fast asleep. Joining him in the Fade was a success all around, though Ellie was very quiet the whole of their time together, not daring speak even to him for fear he was a demon in disguise. He supposed she was not far off the mark, given Spirit origins. Why the Fade was so very full of Demons to begin with. Ellie did take hold of his hand, kept close, listened to him when he spoke, discussed the things they saw when they were in the waking world once more with enthusiasm.

"It's kind of cool," she commented one morning, "getting to see what everything looks like on the other side of the veil, little things in the past. Is it boring in Haven, or can you go back super far?"

It was far from boring, was all he said on the matter. Most days, evenings more like it, he found himself relishing in the present day, soaking up all he could of their time together as it was. Someday, there would be no going back, no veil to peer into to view the past. And there was an element of security that came from it as well. When he was returned from long ventures from Haven, he could slip into the Fade and scroll back through the past, just to ensure all was well—sometimes old friends sought him out in the Fade, his practicing magic and traveling into the Fade in one place so very often left an impression of him behind, Spirits seeking him would come to his domicile even if he wasn't present, believing they would find him. So he always made certain to review his current homestead in the Fade in case he needed to reach out to someone he'd missed...upon their return to Haven after their time on the Storm Coast, it was not a Spirit, but a Human, that entered his cabin in his absence. True, staff occasionally came and went, dusting and making certain the place was to rights while he was gone, but Lieutenant Aclassi was no manservant. He was uncertain just what the young man was looking for, or why, though he suspected he had orders from the Iron Bull for some such reason. The young man had carefully, painstakingly searched the entirety of his cabin, putting every single thing back exactly as he'd found it. The Qunari had no way of knowing the truth of things, but that he suspected Solas of something...well he could hardly blame him. He was admittedly surprised no one much questioned his miraculous appearance—the Seeker had, when he first approached. Ellie had not appeared yet, the Inquisition was scrambling to assess the situation and he came...well admittedly he got caught trying to explore the devastation, search for confirmation that Corypheus had perished and find the Orb, but the beast clearly escaped unscathed, and the Orb certainly wasn't in the ashes of the Sacred Temple. Seeker Pentaghast had questioned him endlessly, how had he avoided the blast? What had he seen? Who had he seen? He complied, with a great deal of falsehood but gods, no matter how fallen, or false, held no fear in spreading falsehood to mortals for greater purpose. The truths she sought were not hers to have. And then his magic shook, sparked with life in exhilaration because the ghost of the Orb, its presence, for a second he thought it was off in the distance, drawing nearer, perhaps he could track it and get it back if he escaped, he was just about to execute
evasive maneuvers, when the Spymaster entered the War Room, flanked by soldiers bearing the unconscious weight of a young Human girl between them. The Orb was not in the distance, nor was it here, its signature, some of its magic, a portion of its power—one of its many abilities—had been stripped, and latched onto the hand of a little Human girl whose magic was woefully incompatible with it, fighting it off, killing her. He wanted to study it, understand what happened, he did not...he thought it a lie, when he told Cassandra he could help, that he could keep the girl alive until she could be properly questioned. But...she lived. Night after night, as he worked with her Mark, studied it, manipulated it with his own magic, let it focus on him, attempt to merge with his magic, separate itself from this mortal girl, even as it failed to do that, it allowed the girl to recover and heal, and wake. After that, Ellie filled in blanks and created more for the Seeker, the woman moved on from her suspicion of him it seemed.

Now the Qunari suspected him, of something, but he wasn't making any moves so, neither did Solas. Now, he focused when he could, on the present. If the Iron Bull wanted to play friendly, he could play friendly. If he wanted trouble, he would certainly find no end of that.

Another part of their routine on the road, in their waking hours, was reading. Reading provided Ellie with several new opportunities, one of which, was being able to enjoy Varric's work. He'd been rather insistent she dare not endeavor to attempt reading his tawdry romance serials. Marehis had entrusted her with her copy of the Champion of Kirkwall, a tale Ellie worked through steadily enough, reading out loud in the evenings when dinner was through, everyone gathered. Solas sat on the ground near their fire, with Ellie tucked up against his side, Sera sat beside Ellie, her head resting on the Human girl’s shoulder as she read. She'd grown rather good at sounding out difficult words, reading steadily enough, though as she neared the climax of the Dwarf's bestseller, she sat up, quiet and she visibly paled, heart thumping painfully fast for a few beats as she read silently to herself.

"Inky?" Sera asked, resting a hand on the Human girl’s back.

Ellie shook her head, eyes trained on the words on the page,

"Shit, Imekari? Hey, it's okay—everyone struggles with unfamiliar words, Ser' do you see-" the Iron Bull thought Ellie had been driven to startled silence, from stumbling along a difficult passage, but it wasn't her inability to read...more so it was her ability to understand exactly what was written.

"He...Hawke was in the middle Kirkwall's Mage Rebellion? He sided with the Mages? With that Anders fellow that started it all?" Ellie asked Varric.

"Yeah kid, of course," Varric assured, like the fact would cheer the girl, "—granted Anders is a grey area, it's not like Hawke liked what he did, but it wasn’t like he could do anything about it. And he didn't hesitate to join the Mage Rebellion-"

"Uh-huh, and you're...you were okay with that? Just, followed along? Did you think it was right?"

"Wait, Tumbles are you pissed-?"

"Don't 'Tumbles' me. Answer the question."

"It was a complicated situation, why- he took your side, why are you upset?"

“My side? Pen-" she aborted whatever she’d been about to shout at him as she slapped the book closed, casting it aside as she rose to her feet, "My side?! He definitely didn't take my side! I
didn't have a side until Kirkwall happened! I was just living my life, I had friends, and Ava, and work! He just! He helped Anders murder the-

"Hawke didn't know what Anders was up to! The guy was his friend, Hawke trusted him, if he'd known, he never would have stood by-

"But he did stand by, let Anders get away with something horrible—and now you can't say where Hawke is, he just watched what happened in Kirkwall and disappeared!"

"He secured the city the best he could and got a hell of a lot of people out, he's tried to be an ally voice for Mages-

“What mages?” Ellie insisted angrily, her voice thick as she railed, “He helped start a rebellion he's had no hand in ending! Stuck his nose into things he had no business being part of! Kirkwall sent all the other Circle’s spiraling into ruin, and does he even know the horror that caused for Apostates?! We were hunted like animals after Kirkwall! People might not have necessarily liked Apostates before the Rebellion broke out, but after one blew up at Chantry? Nowhere was safe, we lost so many! It was like a sport, people capturing and killing us because they were afraid of us! Places we once turned to for safety turned us away! My best friend had to totally disappear, we had to get him to Antiva* to get him a new identity, new life where he could start over and hope no one found out where he came from, that he was magical! And that- I wasn’t-

Solas rose and reached out, pulling Ellie close, bringing a hand to the back of her head to hold her to his chest as she started to sob, “Shh, shh, shh, shh da’vehnan.”

“Ellie,” Cole breathed as he appeared, joining Solas’s embrace by hugging the Human girl from behind, “Ava wasn’t your fault. It wasn’t Varric’s either—you know that, but it hurts, you didn’t know what happened exactly in Kirkwall, heard little of the Champion and his companions roles, you weren’t expecting to find answers to questions you’d forgotten waiting in Varric’s book.”

“Dude. You realize there’s only so many times you can make her cry before I have to kill you, right?” the Iron Bull groused quietly before speaking so Ellie could hear, “Imekari, come on, talk us through this.”

Ellie took the Iron Bull’s offered hand, went and sat with him. Ahh, there was a great deal to get off her chest it seemed—he need only make glancing exploration of their bond to feel raw grief renewed in her magic as she spoke. Solas…it had been disheartening for him, to wake to a world where Mages were so sorely oppressed, though admittedly he’d found Kirkwall’s destruction conflicting—while violence was not often the answer, it was unfortunately the loudest wakeup call to those in power. It was a crude, but effective way of getting the Chantry’s attention, enforce the idea that reform was desperately needed…though it was albeit counter intuitive to teaching them that Circling was not the answer for their ‘mage problem’ when an apostate caused such devastation.

Ellie, apostates like her, suffered greatly, in the wake of Kirkwall’s Circle rebellion. Not only did an apostate mage blowing up a Chantry strike fear into the hears of non-mages, it sparked rebellion across all Circles. White Spire’s downfall was treacherous and even Solas had heard horrific tales of it’s demise, and that was before Cole offered up some of his own past, confiding in the Elf man to some degree. Apostates were feared and with Templar forces stretching thin and faltering, many sought to take matters into their own hands. Ellie’d an apostate friend, a young man named Sam, though she was uncertain if he kept that name still—she hadn’t set foot in Antiva since being cast from the orphanage there, but this Sam had needed her, the journey was far and
too, there was the occasional language barrier when traversing through areas Antivan was commonplace. So she joined him on his travels from the Southern Free Marches, to the little bar in Antiva where it’s keeper gave Apostates anonymity and a chance at a new life, for the right price of course.

And it was while she was in Antiva, tragedy struck closer to home than she realized. Ellie had never...she always offered up the fact that Ava had been an old woman when she passed, lived a long, full life, so much so that Solas had assumed the woman perished due to age. He realized now it was coping, the idea that the woman had lived so very long, was likely so close to a natural death, it lessened the harshness of her loss. After Sam was secured, she’d sought Ava, to ensure the elder woman was alright, safe in her home village. A village that turned on the Healer that ridded them of plague, fought to defend from Darkspawn during the last Blight, had a hand in seeing to it not a single villager in her care died in childbirth. Men and women she’d held when they took their first breaths in life, watched her draw her last at their hands. Ellie returned to find a warning to Apostates defacing Ava’s home, the place itself ransacked, and the woman beaten to death. Ellie hadn’t known what to do, she was alone and she couldn’t carry Ava on her own. As she despaired and grieved, her magic lulled her into sleep, holding her fallen friend, an act that allowed Ava to meet her in the Fade. There was some degree of tearing in the veil, when mages passed, the Hinterlands by far had had the most Rifts they’d encountered to date, a great deal of magical energy had been used there, and a great many mages lost their lives—Ellie had been a little worried she’d somewhat hallucinated the whole thing because she’d not any access to Lyrium. Before being Marked, she’d dreamed normally, never in the Fade since her magic first wakened—but Solas offered explanation that Ava’s passing, her soul clinging to the Fade, created an access point that any Mage could have slipped into the Fade through in their sleep, it was likely why her magic had prompted her to in such a way, it could sense what she could not—Ava waiting to pass on to her Maker in the hopes she might be of guidance to Ellie a final time.

“Be good, don’t let this make you hard, Ellie. This wasn’t your fault, don’t become like them. You’re not like them, Ellie,” Cole spoke as if seeking to convince the girl.

“I know, like, on an intellectual level there’s a difference between hateful cold-blooded murder, and self-defense, defending my friends. Just...I dunno, I’m scared she’d be disappointed in me, that I’m breaking my word.”

“Babe, you knit me horn cozies. You’re a tough kid, but you’re the exact opposite of hard,” the Iron Bull assured her.

“Cremisius knitted your horn cozies,” Ellie said, “he really wanted to.”

“Course he did, he’s a bastard. Point is, you think about shit like that—those aren’t exactly dark, dastardly thoughts. I mean the fact you’re genuinely worried about being morally bankrupt is the biggest indication you aren’t. Bad guys don’t lay up at night and worry about their life choices.”

Rainier leaned forward to rest a hand on the young girl’s shoulder, “There is grace in you, Ellie. You always look for light in people, but not everyone...not everyone can be saved. I know you might think if you could get the people we face to stop and talk things through, fighting wouldn’t be necessary, but the thing is this—you go into fights and you see people, these people, they see you as a job. They aren’t considering you or any of us for our worth or value, outside the realm of the price they get paid if we’re killed or captured, they can’t think otherwise, or they wouldn’t be able to do their jobs.”

The Iron Bull nodded. “Can’t exactly speak for Ava but I know for certain, I don’t give a
fuck who you’re fighting—someone comes at you, and you’re the one that walks away? That’s not a bad day in my book.”

It seemed they’d given her rather a lot to think about, and she was still…not entirely at peace with Hawke’s hand in the rebellion, Varric’s association being so interwoven with the events that caused such upheaval in her life, in the lives of many, and eventually led to the Conclave.

Sera was supportive of course, the only thing that kept her from tossing the book she blamed for making ‘Inky’ sad into their campfire was that it was on loan from Marehis, and the Elf girl was dead set on being mad at anyone Ellie was upset with, and right now, that was Varric. It made the Dwarf nothing short of miserable—she’d been quiet toward him for all of an evening, the whole of the following day. A day and a half of it, and it seemed he could hardly stand it. Varric actually rose early, to take charge of breakfast, seeking Rainier’s help, the duo whipping up something of a feast, the dwarf setting an offering of thick, syrupy pancakes, and when Ellie emerged from the tent,

“Morning Tumbles, you uh, you’re looking real cute, did you do something new with your hair?” she hadn’t, “S’nice. You hungry? I made you pancakes.”

The offer seemed to give her pause. “Can I be mad and have pancakes? Cause I’ll choose mad.”

Varric nodded. “You can be mad and have pancakes—you want milk or water? We made bacon and eggs and toast, and I love you and I’m sorry,” he listed off, “and just—be mad, but promise you won’t stay that way? Kind of killing me here kid, I really…I didn’t realize you didn’t know in advance about everything, Hawke was pretty much the talk of Ferelden for forever, book made mad sales all over the place—”

“I was in the Free Marches, was a bit too busy surviving the aftermath to gossip about the cause, and I just learned how to read.”

“Real fast, cause you’re so smart,” Varric sought to further butter her up, both with compliments and snatching up their butter dish from the Iron Bull while the Qunari was still using it so he could offer it to Ellie, “Look, I would’ve…I wouldn’t have kept the truth from you, but I would have given you some forewarning, sat you down, talked it out if I’d known it was going to be some harsh reveal for you. I never…all this mage, templar shit, it’s never been something I’ve sat down and thought out farther than what’s immediately affecting my life. Things happened that shouldn’t’ve and if I could go back, I would, and punch Anders in the face, tell him where he could stick his maps, Deep Roads just led to bullshit anyway.”

“I’m glad Bethany got out okay, with the Wardens. And I’m sorry about your brother.”

“I’m…fuck, kid, I’m so sorry about everything.”

“It wasn’t your fault, Hawke’s either really, just. Dunno, I’m always sort of low-key mad about everything, I don’t think about it a lot but when I do—”

“Mad, and you’ve got new facts that let you put faces to your pissed off-ed-ness,” the Iron Bull said, “normal Imekari, you be mad, let that Antivan temper fly, girl.”

“The concept of Antivan tempers is a rude stereotype and you can fight me!” Ellie snapped, though, “I did almost call Varric a bad word in Antivan,” she conceded.

“Pen something?” Sera asked.
Ellie nodded, “Pendejo,” she said, “it means, um…” she was still hesitant to offer further explanation—the girl had something of a lecture from the Iron Bull, it struck the Qunari that the girl was overcompensating to an extent, trying to hold herself to unnecessary standards to make up for what she felt like was failure, to ‘be good’. She felt better, was able to consolidate the idea that she wasn’t breaking her word, living the life she did now, and the Qunari wanted to make certain she understood that being a good person meant strength of character, and morality—the occasional swear, or ‘hell, swear all the fuck you want, there's a damn hole in the sky’ didn’t make or break being a good person. She worked around the idea, agreed that it was unnecessary to keep herself from speaking her mind among her friends. Though in this instance,

“Dumbass!” Cole offered up cheerfully when he materialized to sit alongside Ellie.

Varric’s mouth dropped open, “Tumbles! You were going to call me a dumbass?”

Ellie blushed fiercely. “I’m sorry-“

The Dwarf cackled, apparently enjoying the idea, “Don’t be, I love it!”

“Soooo…can I still eat your I'm sorry' pancakes even if you’re already forgiven?”

“Wait really? We’re all good again?” Varric asked, looking relieved.

“I’m always a sucker for heart to hearts and sugary carbs.”

“Then knock yourself out Tumbles, you want anything to drink?”

"Do we have coffee?" she asked, hopefully.

Marehis had had a discussion with them, that they were to ‘forget’ to make the beverage in the mornings now, but, "If you truly want some, I can put the kettle on, da'vehnan,” Solas offered, tempted to indulge the girl. Caffeine*, like all stimulants often dampened a Mage’s connection to the Fade, it likely helped to some degree, with managing troubles her Mark gave her, but Marehis’s gentle coffee ban derived from, “though I would advise you that caffeine may stunt growth,” he informed the girl—according to Healer Adan, anyway. Though his warnings were met with,

"I might be short but so is life! We should drink coffee while we can!"

“Thank the sweet, merciful Maker,” Dorian groaned appreciatively, “I need coffee. Just, be a lamb, dear Ellie, pour yourself a cup and then empty the kettle directly into my mouth, I’m dying,” the Tevinter man decided as he sat next to Ellie and proceeded to lay flat on his back.

“He isn’t really dying,” Cole offered up as if genuinely seeking to quell concern despite the fact his companions knew well, the man’s flair for the dramatic, “but he is tired. The Iron Bull is warm to sleep next to, safe, but he snores.”

Dorian’s face blazed red at Cole’s observation that the man felt safe, of all things, in the Iron Bull’s presence, and the Qunari coughed uncomfortably, though Ellie offered a bit of reprieve,

“Do you need more rest, Dorian?” she asked, addressing the concern and not indulging in teasing the man—there was some sort of candor between he and the Qunari that stood unestablished and uncertain, they did nothing more than the occasional flirtatious standoff, at least, openly. “We’re making good progress to the Oasis, we could stand a lazy day if you need one.”

The Tevinter man didn’t request as much, they ate and continued their travels, riding through increasingly warmer forest that would eventually transition into desert—Marehis
forewarned them to keep course and trust the direction they set off in once they reached the desert, the sand could make it seem like their trail was endless, but the Oasis was out there. There was a river that was a last source of water until their destination, so they made certain to hydrate, fill up their stores accordingly. The weather was markedly a great deal more pleasant than that of Haven, the Hinterlands, it had Ellie stretching and breathing deep as they waited for Rainier and the Iron Bull to finish their work filling extra canteens they’d brought in case of emergency—if they were delayed somehow, water was certainly the last thing they wanted to be without. She clearly enjoyed the weather, her pleasure was so great it bubbled in their connection in a way…it was a sensation rather like being tickled, while he certainly wasn’t going to start laughing, it did make Solas smile.

Although they may not go to the Oasis full stop since Ellie, mischievous smile at her lips, decided, “Actually, I think I’ll just stay here, for like, ever? Holler at me when you need the Breach closed!”

“How unfortunate, Marehis is looking forward to seeing you in Haven again,” Solas teased.

“She can come live here with me! I vote the Inquisition moves! We have water, and its so nice out, warm, tents would work for everyone! And it’s got the air trifecta!”

“Air trifecta?” Rainier asked Ellie, amused at her enthusiasm.

“Yup! It’s warm, the humidity actually exists here so the air doesn’t hurt when I breathe, all while still being mild enough humidity that it doesn’t mess with my hair. I can have a good air day and a good hair day! That’s like, the ultimate day!"

“The air hurts to breathe in Haven?” Dorian asked, appalled.

“Yup! Asthma’s a bitch,” Ellie giggled out.

“Hell yeah it is, Boss,” the Iron Bull encouraged.

Sera had been diligent, apparently, to keep the cabin pleasant, making humidity of her own with steam from tea and Embrium, though she’d enlisted the help of Solas, with consultation from Healer Adan for an out of doors solution. A few nights as they traveled, before meditation, Ellie was usually occupied handling any mail she received or her own letter writing, and the Elves had time to conspire. Sera wanted to fashion something, that might possibly need to be enchanted—she wasn’t entirely certain how to make the idea work otherwise, thus, Solas was asked for his assistance. She had an idea for something, like a necklace Ellie could wear, that could be filled with water, and warm up enough to cause it to steam, it would be something that hung around her neck, it would make the immediate air around her more tolerable. The trick of it was design—how big to make such a device, what sort of enchantment would be involved, there was an element of heat but there was also the need to make something safe, it wouldn’t do to make something that would burn Ellie.

They would be in the Oasis come morning, the desert was rather vast and seemingly endless, but they were close—on the horizon there was the glow of a dormant Fade Rift, the one reported not even a half mile away from their infiltration camp. They would close it, come morning, and join Scout Harding. For now, Sera and Solas sat by the fire—it was a bit of whiplash, how very hot it could be under the sun’s blaze but after sunset, the desert grew chilled, Sera was chewing at the end of her pencil as she looked over their potential schematics.

“Perhaps it could be two-fold—a charm enchanted to produce cool that would be worn between her skin and the bowl?” Solas proposed.
Sera gave it a moment consideration, “Maybe, kind of worried it’d end up making her cold—would it be safe, havin’ two enchanty things touchin’ when they’re doing opposite things?”

“That…is a good point, I’ve not tried it,” Solas admitted.

“…could always do a closed experiment—get runes and clack ‘em together but like, from a safe distance somehow cause I feel like it’d be an ‘ouch’ sort of exploding if they react bad.”

Huh. “I am intrigued,” he admitted, and such an experiment could render beneficial information, and too, so long as no one got hurt, setting a small, experimental explosion may be a bit of fun—Sera would certainly enjoy it and he was inclined to indulge in mischief with scientific intent. "I’ll see if we can get materials for curiosity sake—if nothing else it will be educational.”

Sera beamed at his agreement, bouncing a bit in her sat, “Sweet!” then, “Hmm...I was kickin’ ‘round the idea about electromagnetic induction?”

He wasn’t wholly certain how such a thing worked but, “What do you propose?”

Sera flipped through their gathered parchment and found a drawing she’d made up as example, “We could make a leather pouch, and a little tiny, tiny copper bowl* you’d put the water in. Inside the leather, under the bottom of the bowl, you’d need two magnets polarized to spin off one another while touching the bottom of the copper—it’ll heat it, make the water steam, without making anything touching Inky hot. She could touch the outside of it just fine cause it won’t heat the leather, or anything around, maybe put a thin layer of table salt between the sides of the bowl and the leather, cause ions. Just to be safe? Ions in the salt’ll cancel out the current from getting anywhere we don’t want it. And um, well it would need a little enchanting, I think—cold, if you can localize it to the sides of the bowl, it wouldn't touch Ink, and it would keep the copper from getting so hot that it melts. It’d be corked shut but with like, a lil’ hole drilled in—something that’ll let steam pass through without it being spilly.”

Ahh. A balance of science and magic. That would certainly do. "We'd have to construct it to know if it would work or not, but your reasoning is sound, I'll make arrangements with the blacksmith for materials," he assured.

"Really? It's er, you think it's a good idea?"

"Certainly, Sera. I don't have enough knowledge on the subject to fully understand just how it will work but I trust your grasp of it."

"I only remembered it cause 'sandra got me this newsletter thing they put out from the different universities, since I'm teaching Ink science stuff she thought it'd be a good teaching material or whatever. They just did this really cool study in at the University of Val Royeaux, playing around with what we know of electricity. They might be able to use it to power lights 'n things, instead of using oil or candles or wood for light-" she stopped in her enthusiasm, seeming almost shy as she scratched behind her ear, "Sorry um, borin' pish, just- cool, we'll make a prototype and see if it works."

It should not bother him so very much, that someone had taught this girl her interests were meaningless, but it spiked outrage in him on her behalf, he had to clear his throat before he calmly said, "I assure you I'm far from bored. In fact, if you've anything you'd recommend I read before we move forward with our project, I'd be glad to learn more."

"I brought the newsletter along for fun, you can have it, I'm done with it. And um, well shite I mean there's a few texts that'd be helpful if you wanna know more."
"I look forward to having more to contribute to scientific discussion with you then, once I've brushed up on the subject."

"Might be fun," Sera supposed. "Thanks. Oh!" she twisted around to reach for the stack of letters she'd received in the last drop off via Inquisition bird. "Here, shite, sorry. You can read this if you want, it's from my Friend," she said, handing him an unsealed letter.

"Your friend?" Solas asked, confused until he started to read.

Sera,

How've you been? Long time no see huh? Well certainly, considering they'd never met. Solas realized it was the 'Friend' from the estate Marehis was assigned to. Everything's been going well here, no complaints, just rosy. Tell everyone I say hi, and I'll do the same. Your Friend, Thegan.

"Thegan is your Friend you told Marehis she should look for?"

"Uh-huh, I set it up beforehand—sneaky-like, it won't compromise her job, but he'll pass along verification that Mare's still okay, let me know if something goes wrong, and he uh, can pass along things if you want. He won't be creepin' on Marehis or nothin', just, if you wanted to let her know mushy stuff, it'd just look like he'd taken a liking to her or somethin'. She says something back he'll tell me, like he's just sharing news with his friend that the girl he likes talked to him, in case his boss or someone reads his letters. It'll just look like normal shite. 'Just rosey' means everyone's safe, when I write it back, it's code to Marehis that you and Inky are safe an- oi!" she startled a bit when Solas pulled her into a hug but relaxed, hugged him back after a moment.

"Ma seranas, da'assan."

She made a dismissive sound and then mumbled a tentative,

"In'garas, ya baldy git."

Sera was stupid excited to finally get to the Oasis. She was scared-excited to have the opportunity to test how well she’d be able to help Inky with Rifts—those things were just scary and she was worried, a little, that she’d fail or mess it up somehow. If she could…she was gonna try it both ways—suppressing a Rift and then trying to power Ellie’s Mark when they faced another, and ask her which way helped more she wasn’t…she still wasn’t sure about powering her Mark, but if that was the best way to help, that’s what she wanted to do. Sucked big ones that there was four Rifts sighted in the ruddy area but she’d get four shots at practice at least, before the Breach. So—excited to help seal Rifts, excited to figure out what the frig all those weird skully things are on about, and to top it all off, they’d get to see Lace! Friggin’, that was just the best!

Ugh, Sera hated the little crackle zap that sounded from Inky’s Mark when Rifts was nearby, but they got it closed soon enough—friggin’ Rage demon popped out of it! It was huge! Almost bigger than Bull, it looked like, when the Qunari shouted for everyone to stay back while he rushed the thing! The Rift was in this weird little shrine looking area, fallen pillars and one upright stone hedge. Like maybe once upon a time the weirdy temple they was heading for had been spread all across the area, not just tucked away like it was now. Solas’d probably spend a night out here, to do his Fade-sleep thing.
Ellie stopped to look to Dorian and Solas before looking to Sera for confirmation that they were set, before she cast against the Rift. Sera felt the splashy, clammy cold of the tear in the veil, cripes, it felt like just a big, blown up version of Ink’s Mark, and there was something satisfying about suppressing it.

“All good Ink?” Sera asked as Ellie shook out her hand once the Rift crackled closed.

“All good! Thanks, you guys really helped!” Ellie assured with a smile.

Friggin' boss that was! The Fade could eat it!

Horses were good sports about it all, Russel ‘n them stayed put where they dropped their reins, just stood and watched from a safe distance while everyone went to fight the Fade tits, like it was something you see every day! Well, she supposed it was a more regular sight for them, but still.

They was close enough to camp, they just hoofed it, themselves, leading their horses, though Ink was off in a flash once they reached base.

"Hiya Lace! Gosh it’s good to see you!” Ellie greeted cheerfully as they approached their infiltration camp. The dwarf woman, frick she was cute! All blushy and happy as she hugged Inky tight.

"It's great to see you too! I'm so glad you got here safe," Lace said, before pulling away, "Gosh, it's- I've never seen a Rift closing before but I caught the tail end of you guys taking care of that one, Maker."

Ellie smiled, bouncing on the balls of her feet, "This camp should be even safer now, you've been alright?"

Lace nodded. "I came in the long way to avoid them, they haven't given us any trouble. I feel bad for the occasional Fennec that runs through, they'd get the attention of the Rifts and demons would chase after them. Other than Rifts there really isn't anything out here except for the temple. There's hyenas around too, be careful, um, they aren't friendly like dogs Ellie, they'll fight you on sight."

"Thanks for the warning, I really appreciate all the work you've done here."

"I'm glad to serve. All of the Shards are in storage here, they're a little heavy but we got them into a satchel for lugging up to the Temple. Marehis and Vivienne were amazing, they took a unit out and found all the Shards the Oasis had hidden. They found a Dalish artifact too, Master Solas, they took note of where it is on the map, but left it for you to handle as you see fit. Be careful, its really really up there."

"That sounds great," Ellie said, "we'll check it out! If everyone else is up for it, I think— Marehis and Vivienne said there's a great spot to set up camp near the temple—so I think we could get rid of at least the eastern Rift and the one just down near their proposed campsite and settle in there."

"We're ready whenever you are boss," Bull spoke up, "just, pace yourself Imekari. You need to rest or call it a day, say the word."
“I think we can do it, but yeah—same goes for everyone, Rift fights are hard.”

Sera was just glad Inky wasn’t pushin’ to get all the Rifts closed day one. Still, friggin three out of four was a lot! But the ones she wanted closed today were pretty nearby. She’d slept curled up against Sera last night, took potion to sleep but it seemed like she still had some trouble resting, she’d been clutching Sera’s hand with her Marked one all night. So many Rifts around couldn’t be fun, so yeah—get em closed! Then get some good rest, maybe Sera and everyone could convince her to take a few days for fun before sealing the fourth Rift—it was way way off, out in this area past the top of the high-up mine entrance. Super far north, past the temple, it shouldn’t bother Ink’s Mark.

“I’ll stick around for a little while, I’ve reports to send out and I want to make sure you’re settled here before I move on to the Fallow Mire,” Lace said, “Lord Berand confirmed there’s Rifts in the area—no rush, it’s a pretty nasty area, wet and murky and abandoned, and they’ve only spotted one so far, in the distance from their infiltration camp. I’ll join them and report to Leliana what we find, scout out the area to see if its somewhere you really need to worry about. A Rift or two in an area that’s been abandoned for decades isn’t exactly an emergency.”

“Gosh,” Ellie breathed, “that’s such a far way—be careful, and take your time, you’re amazing Lace, seriously, you deserve a major vacation after this trek out.”

“It’s not bad, traveling on my own there’s lots of shortcuts, my horse does most of the legwork,” Lace insisted.

Ellie nodded, then she stretched, “Actually if you guys don’t mind, I think I’m gonna lay down for a little while before we tackle anymore Rifts today.”

“You want me to lay down with you, Ink?” Sera asked, for a second she worried she was babying her or something, cause she got this look that bordered on reprimand and then-

Oh. oh duh! That was sweet, she really didn’t have to.

But she did. “I’m gonna cuddle with Cole actually, if he doesn’t mind. Just a quick nap, do you mind me using a tent?”

“Oh of course not, Ellie, go on ahead,” Lace said, “I’ve been using the one on the right, you can use my bedroll even, I haven’t packed yet.”

Everyone else seemed to get the hint, Varric went to go chat up the scouts, Solas, Bull, and Thom went to the requisition table to look over updated maps and any orders that needed put in or taken care of, Dori shrugged and trailed after them.

So Sera and Lace could have a moment, some time while Ellie was resting—they couldn’t go fight Rifts without their designated Rift Sealer so, they might as well occupy the time right? Friggin, sweet!

“Glad you made it in safe,” Lace stepped up to greet Sera who ducked down to hug her little…huh, girlfriend? Closest thing to a girlfriend she’d had in a long time.

“Me too—glad that you’re here and safe, missed you Lace,” oh shite that was sort of- well she had missed the Dwarf woman, loads, but saying it out loud sounded clingy-

But Lace just smiled, poppin up on her toes to press a warm, slow kiss that friggin…shite, maybe Inky miscalculated, should’ve left Lace’s bedroll free. Dwarf was just, wowza! “I missed you too.”
Oh shite! Cool! Friggin’-friggin’ boss, that was!

“Kay, catch me up, anything cool happen since Haven?” Sera asked, sitting down by the empty firepit, way too hot to keep a flame going during the day. Lace sat with her, both of ‘em sort of sitting the way Solas had them sit for meditation, facing each other, knees touchin’ and their hands…it was the equivalent of footsies with hands. Just holdin’ but not holding still, tracing patterns on each other’s palms, chattin’ away.

Sera’s ears twitched when she picked up noise from the tent Ellie’d laid down in,

“Sera’s having fun, yeah?” she was asking quietly.

She knew she was, didn’t need to hear Cole’s response, and she really didn’t notice it really, cause Lace giggled. She raised a hand to cup Sera’s face, rubbing a thumb along the side of her cheek, “Your ears are just the cutest—I didn’t really notice them before, with your hair.” Then, “I’m sorry, is that…disrespectful or anything?”

Made her ears burn is what it was! But uh, “Nah, not to me anyway. Cute…cute’s fine.”

Bull snorted. He could fuck off! Sera’d ruddy heard him and Dori’s sexcapades in the wilderness, right up against a tree! Way off out of the way, one night when they’d gone to ‘collect wood’, collected all kinds of wood while they were gone! Yuck!

Ink just laid awake, chattin’ with Cole the whole time she was ‘napping’, and when she came out of the tent and made a big, yawn-and-stretch show of ‘waking up’, it was time for lunch, so Lace stayed and ate with them. Bit silly but Sera felt a sort of pride, or whatever, when Lace complimented her chopping skills when she helped Solas and Thom and Ink prepare their noon meal. Even more when she liked the stew they whipped up, sandwiches too.

Mail came while they ate, and Ellie smiled, and then gasped and,

“Someone look at this, it’s amazing, and I love it, and I might cry, and- I need to get taller!” she decided as she passed the sheet of parchment she’d been looking at, holdin’ it horizontal, she passed it off to the Iron Bull.

“Krem-corn sent you another picture huh? Awe, that’s cute, Imekari. Why’s it inspiring you to get taller?” he asked as he passed it to Sera, awe! Kremmy-boy! He drew Inky a pretty picture of little Anya playing in the snow out front of Haven’s gate, friggin’ cute! Shite, he was good.

“Otherwise I’m going to have to climb that man like a tree. I’ve got things to reach, like Cremisius’s face!” Might be nice for the Tevinter if he didn’t have to get so crouchy to kiss her.

“I’m out,” Varric announced as he stood up out of his seat and high tailed it on over to the requisitions table with his half-eaten sandwich in hand. Solas was red faced, ears blazing.

“Artisanship’s a big thing for you, Ellie?” Dorian asked, amused.

“It’s not that—I mean, gosh, he’s really talented, everything he draws is amazing—but it’s just-! It’s so nice of him!”

“You hear that, Tethras? Imekari’s thing is kindness,” Bull sniped. Kink, he meant. Dwarf had figured out Bull and Dori was bumpin’ bits, tried to drag them into a conversation one night while Ellie was asleep with Cole keepin’ guard, and everyone else was gathered around the fire. Varric claimed he could guess just about anyone’s kink, and when he danced too close to the subject with Dorian, Bull shut him right up by asking if he could guess Ink’s kinks. Ha! Inky’s kink
is kindness—say that shite five times fast.

“That- that doesn’t help!” Dwarf was all kinds of torn between Ellie being a ‘strong, independent young lady with autonomy over her body and can choose to share it with whoever whenever she pleases’ and ‘no, Maker, please, let’s just lock her away in the Chantry till she’s thirty, she and Krem can slip notes under the door or something’.

“Cremisius is one of the kindest people I know,” Ellie said, confused at just what was upsetting Varric. More confused when Varric groaned at the idea of Kremmy-boy being the 'kindest' while the Iron Bull started laughing.

Lace had to scoot after lunch, got packed up and hugged Ellie goodbye, Sera got in on a hug and a quick kiss goodbye before she let Sera give her a hand up into the saddle of the sweet mare the Horse Master assigned Lace.

“See you, Ser’. Be safe.”

“You too. Later, Teetness*.”

“Tart, sweet. Tiny, between. Candy that makes you sick, but you can’t stop eating,” Cole spouted out, friggin!

"Shite! What I say about 'nouncin' my by brain stuff?!” Sera asked.

Cole looked chagrined, frowning as he sighed in defeat, "I tried to just say it inside," he swore, "did I do it wrong?"

Ugh. Creepy Cole did try. He stayed out of her brain business the best he could it seemed, and he'd been sincere when he promised he'd only try to listen to her thoughts if there was some kind of emergency. Or if Ink asked him, cause Sera didn't much mind...Ellie wouldn't judge something she thought, and she wouldn't ask unless she thought there was a reason to, like checking in to make sure Sera was having a nice time with Lace, and Sera wasn't gonna be a hypocrite about it, she asked Cole about Ellie from time to time just, making sure she was actually helping her, or making sure she hadn't accidentally made a hurt thing. Anyway, he really was trying to stay out of Sera's business it seemed, just, sometimes he heard things cause they was 'loud'...when she actually sat down and had a semi-understandable conversation with the Spirit shite, it sounded sort of like being in a crowded restaurant—you can't help but overhear someone's business, their 'private conversation' when it broke out loud enough to be heard over the din of everyone's garbled talking. Everyone thought all the time, it all washes together for Cole unless it's hurt, or loud.

Lace thoughts were loud, Sera supposed.

"They are, Sera thoughts too."

Sera thoughts...wait- "Lace has thinkings about me?"

"All the time, but if I say them you'll want Ellie to shut her ears...but um, Sera, Human ears don't shut. I...I can't think of anything that has ears that can shut, did you know that? It's okay if you didn't."

Friggin' he was a little dummy, but...sincere, and even though Spirit shite was weird, he was ultimately just...kind. Spirit of Compassion, Solas said, and Sera guessed that fit.

Agh! Was she thinking too loud or something? Cole beamed like her thinking his spirit crap
fit made him happy!

"It does! You aren't being loud, I'm just listening...you'll miss Lace, but you aren't upset over her leaving, so I'll stop. I listened because I thought there might be hurt, should I not do that? I'm sorry if it was weirdy, I just wanted to stop you from hurt."

Oh. That was...creepy sweet? She appreciated it, that he was tryin' to keep her from 'hurt' or whatever but, "Maybe uh, hold off next time. If I need you, I'll call you, sound good?"

"Yes! If you call me, I will come," he promised serenely, and then he looked confused, turning to look up at Bull, "no...not like that, the Iron Bull. Sera wouldn't like that at all."

Cripes! Yick!

Bull chuckled. "My bad."

Kind of funny, Ellie having to clear her throat and cheerfully remind the adults there was work to do, though Sera felt bad, shite. She hadn't thought about...frick! She thought about it too much when it was totally pointless, didn't serve much purpose, but they finally get into Rift-ville and suddenly, ugh! She shouldn't've let Ink give her time to chat up Lace. Those friggin' Rifts were like, right there, she had to be feeling them. If they'd been real bad though Ellie would've spoken up, Sera supposed. Still!

Thankfully they weren't too bad. Worst thing that came out of 'em were dumb Rage demons, mostly little Shade things, which was sweet. Made for quick, not quite as dangerous work. Sera was more worried about Ink biting it when they started to make the trek up to where Solas's Elf thing was. They didn't exactly make it there—they got side tracked, which lead to something just a bit more dangerous, than the Rifts. There was this rando woman, they hadn't seen her when they arrived, Lace hadn't reported a scavenger, and they was just happening to cross paths, literally approaching each other—them going uphill as she was coming down—and she asked Ink why she was 'following her'. Friggin' barmy.

She gave Ellie some sob story about before their mining company disbanded, she'd had some fight with her man and taken off her wedding ring, left it behind in the cave they'd been excavating just before abandoning the Oasis. She wanted to get it back, but the cave was fully of baddies. It was just at the top of the hill so, Ink told her to stay right where she was, they'd be right back with her ring 'promise!'.

Spiders. Friggin'. The cave was full of Spiders. Full. All the way. Wall to wall Spiders, it was an actual nightmare for Inky and just...anyone really cuz shite! Who the fuck wanted that many Spiders around? Did the Maker drink? She was pretty sure He got drunk and said 'watch this! Bet how many spiders I can fit into one cave!' damn!

But it was pretty funny that Inky led them headlong into the cave only to stop and shriek, "Holy shit!"

"You okay Ink?" Sera asked once the coast was clear. Damn messy though, shite. So. much. Spider sludge.

Ink was pretty well covered in sweat and dirt and sludge. "I...don't know what okay is. Not anymore, I've seen too much now...don't see any signs of a ring though, hopefully the Spiders didn't eat it."

They hadn't, it was tucked away in a box, and the lady actually came back up to the cave
opening once she realized the dirty work was done, thanked them and offered up a key to this gated off area in the back of the cave as reward.

"Thanks," Ellie said as she took the key in hand, "you're all set right? I mean you have water and food and shelter?"

She had water and had been staying in one of the abandoned tents left by the run away mining company. She still wanted to look around the area some more before heading back to civilization, so Ink reached into her armor's overcoat pocket to get her flippy notebook out and wrote up a quick little note saying the miner chick was a guest of Ellie's, and was invited to stay at their infiltration camp once she was done looking around—she would be fed and her water stores refilled, could rest up and stay the night before making her return trip.

Solas suggested they go ahead and make camp—they were all due a wash up after friggin' Spider central. They could go look for his Elf thing later.

"We'll find it, honest," Ellie said, "if we all weren't so yuck, I'd hug you—group bath! To the Oasis!"

Ellie took off running down the hill, taking the loop to the actual water source in the Oasis and shite it looked amazing!

It was so freaking warm out here and everyone was covered in grime so no one batted an eye when Ink got to the edge of the water and started shucking off her boots and leggings, she meant it when she said 'group bath', everyone followed suit, getting mostly starkers—Ink, Solas, Varric, and Thom kept their under things on, but Dori wasn't shy about what he had goin' on, and Inky squealed with giggles when Varric grabbed her arm and pulled her down so he could cover her eyes with his hand the moment Bull got all full frontal on them before the Qunari flopped into the water face first, flipping onto his back once he got where he could just float. Cole appeared, butt naked 'cept for his hat, sitting criss cross applesauce on the Iron Bull's chest in that weightless way he did.

Ink...might not be that much taller yet but uh, she gained a few inches of height just by taking her hair out of the braid not-beardy put it in the other day. Wowza, she hadn't been lying about humidity sending her hair bonkers, it just poofed right up! Sera chased after her as she raced into the water, splashing up a storm, turning and splashing at Sera! Friggin, Ink wanted a water war, and she was so getting it!

Solas cheated! He did some kind of! Magic shite! Got a whole bunch of water into the air, floating over Sera and Ellie before he dropped it on them! They was officially drenched and Ellie's hair instantly deflated once it was soaked.

"Get 'im Imekari!" Bull cheered when Sera and Ellie turned on the Elf Apostate, splashing at him together! Friggin! Eat it baldy!

They had their fun and cleaned up, washing their armor off, and Thom set about getting a fire going up on the little high spot they would set up camp, signaled to their infiltration camp that the area was clear and they could claim the spot now, get set up proper. Ink and Cole played in the water some more while the others got dressed and conspired while they got dinner goin'.

They was takin' a little vacation, a few days of splashy fun before they got back to business, they'd talked it over as a group on the way—Sera and the guys, and they was pretty sure they could get Ink to take a break seeing as they all deserved one, they would resort to guilt tripping seeing as it was for her own good and all.
"Ellie will like it, she will feel badly at first but she already thinks everyone deserves a break, she'll say yes."

Frick! For a second Sera thought Cole was back with Ellie already but the Human girl was still down by the water, talking to someone...the nugs. Inky was talkin' to the nugs, asking them how they liked the Oasis and promising them no more demons would come chasing after them in their own home. Cole had done his poofing thing to join the others around the campfire, though uh, just for a quick second. He dug around in one of their supply packs before letting off a happy, "These will work!" before disappearing, she heard Ink thanking him just a moment later, huh.

"Well then, perks of having a resident Spirit," Dorian supposed, "taking a few days off will be wondrous, ugh, this heat is just atrocious, thank the Maker's sculpted buttocks the water is so very pleasant."

"Hell yeah, sun, swim, we'll just sit back, relax, have some fun," Bull said.

"Sounds good to me—Cole says everyone's hankering for a vacation right? Lets do it!" Inky's voice sounded as she joined them, plopping down to sit next to Sera, wet hair wrapped up in a towel atop her head, Sera wasn't sure how the frig she got it all in there.

And then she found out how it all fit. Cause Ink took the towel off, rubbing at her hair a bit more before setting it aside.

"Inky?!!"

"Da'vehn, what did you-?"

"Tumbles, how the hell-?"

The Iron Bull let out a little whistle, "Lookin’ good, Imekari."

"It is rather fetching," Dorian agreed.

Her hair was! Just! It was friggin gone! Cropped until her hair was just little fluffy baby curls on her scalp! It was cute but like half of Ink's entire body was missing! Ellie giggled at the shocked reactions and said, "Thanks, gosh, my hair is just too crazy in this weather, and it's so thick, and just way way way too hot for that, you know?"

"I think its very cute Ellie-girl," Thom assured her.

"It came off!" Cole announced, sounding like he was still riding his own wave of surprise as he appeared at Ellie's side. "She used the scissors I got her, and clipped clipped clipped it all gone! The nugs took it away to put in their nests! Will you always look like this now?"

"Hair grows back, Cole, you see yours?" Ellie asked reaching out carefully to take some of the length of his hair between her fingers. He was gettin' a bit shaggy. "It's grown since we met."

"If I cut it, it will grow back?" he asked with some uncertainty.

"It'll keep growing if you don't cut it, you can have your hair be as long or short as you like."

"Ohh," Cole nodded in understanding and then he took the lock of hair Inky had been holding, and he still had the scissors and snip went a chunk of his hair. Just the one snip, because he just 'wanted to see', he'd let them know when it grew back, he promised.
Dinner was good, warm and filling, and Sera was almost tempted to call it a night. Ellie was playing chess with Bull while Dori watched, she'd packed the little chess set the Tevinter Mage had gotten her for her birthday. Solas was reading report things, sitting next to Sera by the fire, Thom and Varric was talkin' tourney—it was just around the corner and Varric was working on putting in bets, Thom helping him pick and choose.

But mail came, and Sera had letters from Thegan and 'sandra, and a few of the Friends in Haven, they reported to Sera from time to time. Not a whole lot of letters this time but there was something for,

"Me?" Cole asked, surprised. Cripes he looked ecstatic as Thom passed around what the messenger bird delivered, and offered a sealed letter with Cole's name on the back to him. Spirit boy took the letter and the moment he had it in hand, he announced, "It is from Krem!"

Oh Inky got so smiley over that, especially since Cole seemed touched by the idea someone thought to write to him of all people. He read it out loud, it was just a nice little note asking after him, how he was enjoying the Oasis, if he was having fun, telling him to be safe. That was, shite that was sweet. Everyone got mail every once in a while, Thom never used to get mail cause of the whole 'Blackwall' thing, but now he got things from Krem and his men, Cyril. Mail call usually produced a little something for everyone, but yeah, Cole hadn't ever gotten anything—hadn't bothered the guy but it was nice, made him feel good that someone thought to reach out and check in on him.

"Come on," Sera said, patting the empty space next to her, "you can share inkwells with me if you wanna write Kremmy-boy back."

Marehis was safe and sound still, according to Sera's mail, and 'sandra dropped her a note asking after her, checking in to make sure Sera was having fun, was safe, asking if she needed anything. Friends just touched base that everything was cool in Haven. Sera got everyone written back to.

They settled in for sleep not super long after dark, Viv's tent was just the best, cool during the heat of the day, kept them toasty at night. Though it was...frick, it wasn't even midnight yet, when Solas shook Sera awake, motioning for her to follow him.

"What's on?" Sera asked around a yawn as she joined him outside the tent.

"I do apologize, da'assan, for disturbing you but I've decided to go ahead and handle the Elvish Artifact. I'd prefer it be dealt with as soon as possible, and it is up so very high I do have concerns dragging Ellie along, I thought perhaps you could assist me, in case there is trouble. Too, I believe it could be of some benefit to you."

Oh. "Sure, your wish is something something," Sera mumbled, stretching, trying to wake up. "Lead the way."

He said he was bringing her along in case there was trouble, but it was about halfway up the ladder to the high rise where the artifact was supposed to be, that she realized neither of them had weapons. She was still rockin' her sleep clothes, the night was quiet and cold and there wasn't a thing around, nothing dangerous at least. But Sera didn't mind tagging along—it was dark out, and even the light of the moon wasn't super comforting, you was still walking around in the dark, she wouldn't want to make the trek up here all by herself either, so she got Solas wanting company. Buddy system n' pish.

Though it seemed like he had a bit of a lesson in mind or something. He didn't activate the
artifact at first, just sat down criss-cross, made the hairs on the back of her neck stand on end cause he was sittin' with his back to the drop off, she was kind of worried he'd tip backward and fall. Solas gestured for her to be seated across from him so, she popped a squat and waited.

"These artifacts were once of the upmost importance to Elves, of the past," Solas said. "They allow us to measure veil strength, to know just how wan the barrier between the Fade and the world as we know it today, is, in this place. It is not unlike physical measurement—imagine there is a wall before you, closing you off from the next room. You desire to know just how thick that wall is, and you find you are capable of punching through it, measure the distance across the length of the hole you make."

"So you...tear into the veil to see how far you have to go to reach the Fade? Why do we want to know the distance?"

"Places where the veil is thin indicate that there will be multiple Rifts—why I seek these artifacts is to find thin places, where one could make substantial opening in the veil. The Inquisition could one day use their measurements to pinpoint places that Rifts might currently exist, but lie dormant, hidden but needing dealt with."

Oh. Hidden Rifts did sound like a bad thing.

"Sera, I would like to propose something. A test of sorts, if you'd care to try. It would be like a trial, practice for when you endeavor to power the Mark."

"On your artifact thing?"

He smiled almost like there was something funny about that. "Yes, Sera. Activating my artifact would offer you experience in reaching into the Fade with power. I understand if you would be hesitant, but I thought it a disservice not to offer."

Huh. She'd...she had meant to try powering Ink's Mark, for real, but she'd only suppressed Rifts today. She'd had three shots, but still, she was nervous to do anything like send power to the freaky Fade. But uh, huh. Maybe a baby step was in order. Help her get over it so she could see if powering the Mark would be more helpful than suppressing the Rifts.

"Alright, what do I do?"

It was...a lot like what he said, 'bout punching through walls, though it was more like pressing into taut fabric, a literal veil, until you tore into it but it...there was a thickness to it, like a wall. It felt...really friggin weird, like she was balancing on a thin edge over a steep drop, scared, hyperaware, and alive with...not excitement, but something, it made her feel...could blood feel scratchy in your veins? Not like it was scraping her insides but like her blood itched she felt it head to toe when she pulled from the Fade, opened her eyes to see Solas's face illuminated by Fade light, eyes shining with something like pride.

"Well done, da'len. How do you feel?"

Sera, frick, she had to swallow to keep from- "I feel sick."

Solas came around and sat at her side, rubbing circles on her back. Took a minute but her stomach stopped doing somersaults and the sort of head rush she'd been feeling went away, itch-blood too, frick that was weird! "Ir abelas, da'assan. I do apologize, first endeavors with the Fade without full access to magic can be tenuous, I have not trained someone to do so in quite a long time, Sera, I had forgotten, I would have warned you. Are you poorly? Do you need potion? I
could...if you needed I could help you back to camp, carry you."

No friggin' way, "I'm good, thanks. Uh, s'not your fault. M'okay, just give me a sec."

They made it back to camp all good, Solas keeping close behind her, a hand hovering just
at her elbow as he braced to help if she needed it, which was dumb, she was fine. Though she just
about had a heart attack when,

"You all good, Ser'?" Bull's voice rumbled out quietly in the dark as they entered the tent.

Frick she...she almost felt dizzy, how tired she was, and she was cold, freezing, like...had
it been this cold earlier? The tent was warm wasn’t it, why was she so cold?

“All good,” she whispered back, and the Qunari reached out a hand in her direction, huh,
she was shiverin’. She took it and the last thing she remembered was Bull letting her curl up
against his chest, his arm wrapped around her to hold her close, mmmm warm.

She felt a hundred percent when she woke the next morning, like, almost better than that,
more pep in her step and that was on, right? Friggin’ day off! Vacation! Hell yes!

They pigged out and played, spent loads of time splashing around in the Oasis, little bit of
napping in the warm sand come afternoon, Ink tucked up against Sera. And when they woke up,
Ellie was excited, cause she remembered something they planned on making in the Oasis since it’d
be so warm there. Ice cold, sweet and tangy fizzy lemonade! It was stupid satisfying, just yum and
it always felt refreshing to drink something cool in the heat, and bubbles were tickly.

Only took a day off though, wasn’t like it wasn’t loads of fun, just, their work could be fun
too. And they wanted to explore! Fun job first!

Supposed to be fun, anyway, exploring the Temple. Felt sort of creepy, made Sera break
out in gooseflesh, when they got close enough to the door. Some kind of weird, old looking...her
brain wanted to process it like Dalish but it was old, and she didn’t have a clue what any of it
meant, the weirdy carved message by the door. Only word she understood was Solas but uh, she
didn’t think they meant the person. Pride or somethin’ wasn’t it?

“It is a warning against entering the temple, da’len,” Solas offered to Ellie while she dug
into the satchel Bull was lugging for them, carrying all the shards.

“Ha! Their signs mean nothing to me—I can’t read!” she offered jovially, sliding a shard
into one of the slots on the door, it clicked into place. “At least not Dalish, not yet anyway.”

"Right on boss, rules can't apply to you if you can't read 'em...them's the rules," Bull
chuckled.

Creepy feeling vanished when the door unsealed and swung open so. Kay. Cool. Maybe
they should take another splashy day? Save the Temple for never?

It wasn’t too bad inside, just old and mossy and...just felt like the sort of place you wasn’t
just allowed to walk into without an invitation. Guess the Shards were an invitation though.

She was a little nervous when one of those Elf things was there, on a stone table across
from three...weirdy doors.

Nervous and she didn’t want to mess with those things ever again...and she did? Like?
Really bad, her blood felt itchy again and there was something...she just, felt more awake, aware—
Solas activated the artifact though, once he saw it. Good! She didn’t want- she didn’t want whatever the frig was going on! Maybe she was sick or something- oh piss, Humans couldn’t catch Elf disease, right?

Wasn’t sure about that, and it didn’t much matter once Ink did catch something.

They went with the middle door, first, it was cold as shite! And full of corpses! Like! The walking kind! Friggin’ undead! And when they was all re-dead, Ink went to the big stone…looked like a coffin almost but Sera was gonna go with ‘chest’ because the place was creepy enough and she really hoped Ellie didn’t find herself face to face with a stiffy.

It was a little relieving though, that Ellie grunted with effort, trying to push the top aside and couldn’t. “The Iron Bull? Would you mind? Sorry, I can’t quite get it to budge.”

“No sweat, boss girl, its what I’m here for,” the Qunari said, and Ellie stepped aside, coming to stand by Sera, linking arms with the older girl and smiling with excitement at what they might find, it was really cool. Both…cause it was cold in the chamber, and like, cool adventurer stuff. Treasure!

Bull pushed the lid right off the thing, sending it crashing to the floor, ruddy loud but that wasn’t why Sera jumped.

“What the frig was that?!” Sera shrieked she pulled her arm out of Ellie’s to face the younger girl, hands on her shoulders, shit shit shit, was she okay? “Ellie? Are you hurt?”

Fucking! Ice things, glowing balls of white had shot up out of the chest and flown right over to Inky, hitting her square in the top of her head!

“I’m okay, I…I don’t know what that was, but it didn’t hurt.”

“You sure, Tumbles? How many fingers am I holding up?” Varric asked, holding up a splayed hand in Ellie’s face.

“A thousand.”

“I’m serious!”

“These Shards, the temple, it is all set up rather like a test,” Solas said, “perhaps it was some reward. Whatever it was, was attracted to your Mark, da’len, it was not malevolent,” he assured as he came and looked her over. “Huh. Dorian, would you care to observe?”

Tevinter mage came closer, “Ahh. How strange and delightful. It seems you’ve been given some resistance to Cold.”

“…I still feel pretty cold, it’s freezing in here.”

“I mean magically, Ellie, cold spells. They will not hurt you, at least, not quite so intensely.”

Oh wait, frick, really?

“Lets go kick down some more doors!” Sera said.

Lots of corpses! And a friggin’ Reverent! Bloke was huge, had a horrible grabby hand he could cast out to full-body snatch you up and pull you to him, but Ellie and Sera stayed back,
shooting and casting from just inside the doorway* to the final room while the others rushed inside.

“Are you okay, the Iron Bull?” Ellie was quick to check on the Qunari that got pulled in by the Reverent, once the fight was over.

“Saved me some legwork, I’m all good, Imekari. Last one.”

All in all, they had enough shards to get them through the Cold rooms, and one of the Fire ones, so, there was four rooms, twelve orby things—nine that made Ink more resistant to Cold magic, three that helped resist Fire—and an ass ton of gold. It wasn’t all for keeps—they gathered it up, some of it would get split between them all ‘cause they was the ones hoofin’ it out here and finding everything, and the rest would go back to Haven.

Inky’s breath hitched when they walked by the unopened door, and she shook out her Marked hand. Oh, they was sort of closeish to the last Rift.

“You okay, Ink?”

She nodded. “Last Rift feels big, like, really big. We should probably rest up and tackle it tomorrow.”

That’s what they did. Rested, fueled up good at breakfast, and made the trek out to the farthest northwest corner of the Oasis.

The Rift was nasty on its own, Ellie got up high—Solas was even higher than her, standing at the top tier of the scaffolding near the Rift, Ellie followed suit and took the second tier, Sera stuck with her, popping off baddies with her bow, but shite! There was Despair demons like crazy, two, maybe three of them all at once! And those Shade fuckers, and friggin’ Terror shits. Ink was gonna try to help the guys on the ground, manipulate the Rift like she could mid-battle, to stun their enemies but when she raised her Marked hand to do just that,

“Crap, I have to get closer, there’s no way I’ll close it from here, I thought…shit I thought I was close enough, it feels that way,” she said sounding confused as she stared between her Mark and then the Rift. She went forward, like she meant to drop down off the tier, it wasn’t a far drop.

But what she did was step in range of a Terror’s portaling. It sensed her and bam! Diving into the ground, popping up in the air, right on Ellie. Sera was startled, reared back and almost toppled off the damn scaffolding herself, but she managed to catch herself on the railing.

Railing that Ellie, shite. She screamed when the Terror swatted her, a great claw against her face, her body, tossing her backward, over the railing and crashing against the wood slats and tumbling. Rolling, and rolling until-

“Inky! Sera screamed. Solas was already casting against the Terror and Sera, shit she wasn’t sure how she got down, felt like she flew just, next thing she knew she was down and-

Too late, too late, too fucking late, Ellie had tumbled under the railing and had been hanging on by her Marked hand and then she was dropping, her staff was left up by the railing and she was plummeting into darkness—

Fadelit darkness. Inky had been close to a Rift. The second one. Fucking Rifts, high and low in this place*. Shite!

Sera had Ellie’s staff in hand and raced down after her, screaming for the others as she ran
down the ramp to the ladder she slid down as fast as possible, *don’t be dead, don’t be dead, don’t be dead, oh Maker please help! Gods, Elgar’nan, whoever the fuck, just help!*

Ellie was surrounded by wraiths and a Rage demon was reared to strike down on the girl laying limp, her bleeding face in the dirt.

Sera…she wasn’t sure what happened. Frick frick frick, just. she was too close, had her bow on her back, Ink’s staff in her hand, and…her blood felt like it was on fire, fear and panic and anger welling up in her chest, and all she wanted to do was protect Ellie, there had to be some way, she couldn’t…she couldn’t just-

Something cold and powerful broke out of her, sent Sera to her knees and for a moment she thought she might black out she…what had…oh piss what just- the- the Rage demon was frozen solid, fists just an inch over Ellie’s head.

And then it shattered into a million pieces under the weight of the Iron Bull, dropping down on top of it, landing with his back to Ellie, his boots in Rage rubble, Solas and Dorian casting against the wraiths.

“Imekari? Shit, shit, babe come on,” Bull growled, the sound ending in something like a whine as he knelt and gently placed a hand on her back, making to roll her over so he could lift and carry her.

“Do not move her, she could be injured-“ Solas started.

“We got fifteen seconds before that motherfucker pops out more demons, so what do you suggest, Elf? I know what’s at stake, I fucking- I’ll- it’ll be on me, but right now, in this moment, we need to get her out of here. Sera too, shit, Ser’, you with us? Fuck.”

They escaped through the side tunnel that led out to the sort of balcony you could see the waterfall from, look down into the Oasis, Sera…everything was hazy and it took a moment to realize she wasn’t running with her friends she as being carried, laying against someone’s back, her head on their shoulder, their hands under her thighs. Solas.

Next thing she knew they were coming up on their camp, her ears were ringing, and she felt dazed but-

“Put me down.”

“Sera? Da’veh- da’len, you should rest, are you hurt? What do you need?”

“I need down! Help Ellie, I’m…I’m okay.”

He did, catching her against his side when she stumbled, frick. Bull was already kneeling on the ground, laying Ellie down like she was made of glass and he…shite, he looked wrecked, scared, had to rise up and walk away hands gripping at his horns in frustration.

“Twice torn he wants to help you both—Sera, I can help Ellie, let Solas help you,” Cole said. Just where the frick had he been?! Ugh, that wasn’t fair, he’d been down with his daggers, helping the others fight the Rift. Still! “I wish I would have portaled to save her, too, I am sorry I wasn’t fast enough, did not see until it was too late.”

“Help Ink, Cole,” Sera rasped out as Solas helped her sit on the ground.

“What hurts, da’len? How can I help?”
“Head’s pounding,” oh, oh shite, she groaned, “my hands-“ 

She…she almost threw up just, she was scared, and confused, and what the fuck. Her hands were burned, blazed red and blistering from the tips of every finger to the heel of her palms like…like they’d been ice burned. She heard a sickening pop too, like a joint being popped back into place was that…that wasn’t her? What was happening-

“I-I-I I don’t kn-know-“ 

“Shh shh shh, da’vehnan, shh, hold them still,” Solas instructed. She tried but they was shaking, agony pouring up from the blistery burn, shite shite shite, the pain cut into her lungs, left her winded but Solas got balm out of his pack, thick, heavy Elf root salve he quickly uncapped and then he very gently took her left hand, holding the back of it as he delicately applied treatment, “I am sorry, I am so so sorry, da’len, I know it hurts, please bear with me emma’asha.”

Hurt like hell but he got her hands slathered in ointment, and he got out with that numbing stuff Ink and Bull sometimes used—he’d wrap the bandage around the back of her hand and when he brought it up to wrap over her palm he’d brush the numbing cream onto the bandage before laying it over the injured flesh, stung for all of a second before going blissfully numb. Did that for both hands and when he was done he asked to make sure they weren’t hurting her before he took her hands in his and raised them to press a kiss to her knuckles.

“Here is potion for headache, da’len,” Solas said, bringing the uncorked potion to her lips and tipping it back, helping her take it, and she downed it in a swallow. “You should rest, lie down, sleep if you can.”

Sera shook her head, her throat felt tight, eyes stinging, “I-I wanna stay with Inky,” she insisted, shaking her head. She- she couldn’t just- she wasn’t sleeping until Ellie woke up.

Solas and Sera sat in the wings while Cole worked on Ellie, frick. He’d had to get her out of her boots and socks and armor, laying in her breast band and her leggings, one pantleg rolled up to the knee, her shin was turning black. There was slashes in her armor, gashes in her left shoulder, a cut around her side just under her ribs where talons had struck to knock her off the scaffolding. Ground under her was bloody, but the wounds had stopped bleeding now, Cole was just finishing applying salve to the cut in her side. Solas gave Sera’s shoulder a squeeze before he went and knelt at Ellie’s side, down by her legs, and Cole offered approval before the Elf man began rubbing Elf Root salve into the bruising on Ellie’s shin while Cole moved on to her face, frick, her head was bleeding, he treated the cut to her temple first, worked on all the more serious dermal injuries before,

“This one will scar,” he said as he finished dabbing just a bit of salve to a deep, black split in her lip.

Bruising was cropping up all over her arms and shoulders and chest, Marked hand scrapped from catching the railing and hanging by that hand alone. Her left shoulder was turning black and Solas helped Cole stabilize that arm because apparently, the Spirit had started his treatment of Ellie by popping her dislocated shoulder back into place.

“I…I can’t tell while she is unconscious. She isn’t deep in, I could bring her out—we need to make certain, I am sorry, the Iron Bull,” Cole said.

Bull shuddered where he stood with his back to everything and then he came and knelt at Ellie’s feet, everyone gathering still, silent, watching.
“Do it,” Bull rasped out.

Cole closed his eyes, and after a second, Ellie opened hers, slowly, lids fluttering, breathing picking up, and she winced, tears forming in the corners of her eyes, shite shite shite, why was they waking her up-

Oh frick. Oh no no no no no no no, fuck. Please no. The Iron Bull looked haggard, and he was…tears was already falling from his good eye as he gently rested a hand on one of Ellie’s feet.

“Imekari?”

The girl moaned, and then, “B-Bull?” she gasped, face scrunching like everything hurt, friggin everything probably did, and Sera really really hoped it was everything please please please please please please please please please.

“Imekari, tell me what you feel—outside, not inside,” Bull asked, his voice sounded hollow as he started rubbing circles on the bottom of Ellie’s foot with his thumb.

“E-everything hurts, I- I- what happened? Where- where is Sera? She w-was up there wi-with me did she fall? Is,” she gasped in a sharp breath of air, groaning before she could ask, “is she hurt? I- wh-why are you rubbing my feet?”

Oh thank everything, shite. Sera was almost lightheaded, she was pretty sure she stopped breathing, frick.

“Sera’s here, Solas got her patched up. What about your hands, Imekari? All good there?” Bull asked. Dori was sittin’ near and he took Ellie’s right hand in his, and she gave it a good squeeze, the Mage’s face lighting up as he squeezed her hand gently back,

“Good show, sweetheart. You’re alright, both hands working?” Dorian asked.

Cole’s head snapped back as he jolted like he was waking up, “It is all fine—bruising, and sore, there are breaks, cracks in bone but they will heal. She needs to recover, but there’s no tingling, no disconnects, everything stayed where it should.”

It was stupid, so so so stupid but Sera started crying, full blown, snotty nose, clumsily raising a half-numb hand to her mouth to keep her quiet as she sobbed she’d just—she was so relieved, she’d been so scared. Bull looked like hell, relieved, but shite he— it’ll be on me he’d said when he moved Ink away from the danger. He’d been ready to take the blame if Ink, shite, if she’d been hurt bad, if moving her made it so she would never walk again, lose use of one or both of her hands.

Inky was in so much pain. Her poor body ached agony from head to toe, tears slipping down the sides of her face as she did her best to answer Solas’s questions, before he offered sleepy potion, and Elf root tonic—pain relief and sleep. She nearly choked as she tried to quiet her groan as Solas carefully helped her sit up, supporting her because she couldn’t raise her head, but she got all the potion down and Cole helped, doing some kind of Spirit shite to help her knock out faster.

“Maker’s breath we can’t- we can’t expect her to try facing those things again,” Thom spoke up, “No one lives out here, the place is abandoned, we should just leave the damn things, can we…should we move her back to Haven?”

“No, she needs to stay, rest—we have everything we need here,” Cole said. “Let her sleep. We should help her and Sera get comfortable, let them lay down—I’m sorry, Sera you…you can’t
hold her, you will hurt more than you comfort, but you can lay near her, hold her hand if you are
gentle.”

Solas helped her clean up, her hands was just useless. He wasn’t weirdy about it, just,
helped, got her washed up good in the pool, and helped her dress in her sleeping clothes. Bull
helped Ink, got her clean and as comfortable as possible, laid her down in the tent, Sera laid down
beside her, stayed a good foot or so away so she wouldn’t risk reaching out and clinging to her in
her sleep. It…she almost started crying again, it was dumb, she was being a baby but she was so
tired, arms felt like lead and her hands was clumsy and she didn’t want to accidentally paw Inky too
roughly, she wanted-

Cole knew. He carefully lifted Sera’s hand and laid it on top of Ellie’s Marked one. She
couldn’t ruddy feel it but it mattered, even made Sera feel better, comforted that she could see she
had a hand on Ellie as she slipped off to sleep.

She felt something like a scream building in her throat, she nearly choked on it as she
cought herself, stopped the cry before it started, shite. Her heart was pounding in her chest and she
had to catch her breath as she pushed herself up—oh hands. They was back, feeling better, feeling
period. It- she’d dreamed- Ellie wouldn’t wake up, and it wasn’t anything Cole could get her from
either, she’d just been dead dead dead-

But she was fine! Alive at least, Sera tried to focus on that.

Oasis wasn’t quite so fun anymore. Solas and Bull consulted with Adan and Stitches via
messenger bird, and they advised as they could—wasn’t anything to do, the best thing…the least
painful thing was to let her sleep it off. Administering broth and her regular potions, and
consistently dosing her to keep her asleep, ‘medically induced coma’ or whatever. Everyone was
sort of cycling between checking on her and coming to try and cheer Sera up which…it was sweet,
almost did cheer her up but…ugh this was horrible. Once Sera had enough feeling in her
hands she sent off her own letter, to ‘sandra cause—frick! They needed a mom! Marehis, oh man,
Sera wasn’t sure what to do about that. Mare’ needed to focus, if she found out Ellie was so badly
hurt, it’d do the exact opposite of that…she’d let Solas make the call. So! Cassandra!

She expected the Seeker to…to hate her fucking guts, blame her, say she was coming to
ensure Ellie’s safety but…she got ‘I’m proud of you’ and ‘you did well’ and-

She hadn’t said his name out loud. She only barely thought it, it was dumb. But he was
there. She was sitting on a stool in front of the Requisition table, laying her head down in her arms
over the letter Cassandra sent her, and Cole was at her back, arms wrapped around her middle as he
hugged her. “It isn’t your fault. No one could move fast enough to help, she is alive, and she will
feel better soon—when she wakes up, she’ll be recovered, and she’ll want lots of hugs and playing,
and she will not blame you. She loves you, Sera. She’ll always love you, always always. Cassandra
does too, and Marehis and Solas, and all of your friends, and Teetness.”

Sera sniffled, huffing a laugh, “Don’t call her Teetness. S’my thing.” Wait frick, “She
love-“

“It isn’t the kind that scares you. It’s like the beginning of love, before you realize you
have it. She’ll tell you when she knows. You’ll tell her when you know too. Everything happens in
its time, you’ll move together, work together, it will not demand or condemn.”

“…kay.”

“You should tell Solas, about the blast. He will help,” Cole said before he vanished.
Oh frig. Everyone...everyone had just assumed Ellie cast against the demon before passing out, Solas was the only one that saw how bad her hands had been, they thought she'd scrapped them bad trying to get down to Ellie, that she'd fallen a little and been attacked and in shock, and Sera...Sera wasn't gonna say otherwise. She didn’t want to talk about it. But she needed to, it almost...she as on the verge of just, having total breakdowns over it- shite, what the fuck had she done?! She...that’d been like—she froze something! Made of fire! Not in a freezy chest! And she just about blew off her hands to do it!

Sometimes she could pretend it hadn’t happened, but it had, and she couldn’t handle it, not...not without help so she and Solas went away. Took him to the shitty ‘garden’ area, some dumb bitch named Elizabeth couldn’t grow shit, it was just dusty desert, with a nice little look out you could drop off of if you weren’t careful.

“You believe you cast against the demon of Rage?” Solas asked when she was finished recapping the crazy. Sera nodded. “Have you...have you been dreaming in the Fade?” he questioned. “You...your nightmares-”

Shite, that was embarrassing. She had a few...three nights in a row, bad dreams. Bull always woke up, held her, let her cry, and Solas would come and hold her hand just...sitting and being there. They didn’t say a ruddy word about it though. Because gross! Feelings!

“Just nightmares, nothing that feels like the Fade.”

He looked...was he disappointed to hear that? Oh, maybe it was just that he felt bad she was havin’ bad dreams, he reached out and patted her hands condolingly, and then, “The Fade and magic are tricky things. Elves...there are theories that we were once all mages of some level. You were near a Rift, an open portal to the Fade, holding a conduit of magic, a staff, meant to amplify power. Under the right conditions, anyone could cast as such, it was extraordinary circumstances. Your body picked up residual magic and you used it to save Eleanor. There is no magic fully waken in you, da’len.”

So...she wasn’t suddenly turning into a mage or some bullshite. That...she felt a lot better about it, hearing him explain. Shite.

She felt even better when Ink was able to come to. Just a little bit, she was tired, but she wasn’t hurting quite so terribly, and she was thanky to everyone for helping her so much, and she was able to sleep with people again—Inky slept on top of Bull, and he was a big 'un so, Sera could squeeze in too. Big warm cuddlefest, Inky was safe, Sera was safe, and everything was going to be alright.

And the following morning, when they was all sitting out at breakfast, it sounded- Ellie’d been asleep, but she woke up and she squeaked and then after a minute she came swaggering, full blown pep in her step, out to join them.

“What’s up?” she asked, but then she motioned for them to stop, as she stood in the middle of their circle and, ‘I’m up! Check it!’ and then she gestured down which...frick it would've been hilarious if she was a dude, 'What's up? I'm up!’ but she wasn't pointin’ at her junk, but her feet!

Oh frick! Her night clothes! Leggings had come to the tops of her feet and now they was tight around her shins, just above her ankles! Friggin!

“Well hot damn, Imekari!” Bull cheered, “I barely recognize you—fresh haircut, you’re out here trying to be twice as tall as Tethras. We’ll have to reintroduce you to everyone in Haven.”
“Dunno how my armor will fit, but I’ll make it work. Hmm,” she looked at her wrist watch, she must have put it on when she woke up—she didn’t wear it during fights or sleep time, “we’re still good day-wise. How’s everyone feeling?”

“All good, boss-girl, you ready to head out or something?”

Ellie nodded. “Right after we’re done sealing the Rifts.”

Friggin! What the-

Everyone was chattering over one another telling her no fucking way that was happening! There were two, huge ass Rifts, right up on each other! She- she almost-

“I understand if you guys don’t want to, but they need dealt with. Who knows what could come of the temple—we found so much stuff there, more people might get sent out to investigate and explore the area and we can’t leave Rifts around terrorizing our people, or anyone else. I have a plan.”

Her boots were super pinchy but she managed to squeeze her feet into them, and they covered the bit of exposed skin where her armor leggings rode up too high, her sleeves fell a little short at the wrists but gloves, while super hot, helped. Plan…worked out pretty good. Shite, she’d really thought about it. They hit the low one first, they could get to it and handle it without triggering the upper Rift, get it sealed and settled, even rest if they needed to before going and handling the last one.

Didn’t need to—rest that is—first Rift Sealed, the last one was toast! They went back up and faced the final Rift the Oasis had to offer them.

And when Inky raised her Marked hand to cast against it and seal it shut, Sera closed her eyes and followed, finding her Mark in the Fade and pouring will into it as hard as she could.

“Wow! Holy crap Ser’ was that you?” Inky asked when the Rift crackled closed.

Sera blinked open her eyes and looked to the younger girl, “Was I…was I any help?”

“Are you serious? That was amazing!” Ellie enthused, “Pack it in guys, let’s go home! We’ve got a Breach to seal—you can all take naps with the Mages and Templars, Sera and I got it!”

Frick yeah!

Bull was relieved they were going to be leaving the Oasis behind soon. It'd been real, it'd been fun, but uh, it hadn't been real fun. Couple days of splashing around and lazing waterside didn’t super make up for the fact that they almost broke Krem’s girlfriend. His Imekari. Shit.

Kid was up, moving around okay and they took out those Rifts like pros. She was still hurting, sore, and Bull was worried—cold could sink right into his damn ankle, like it was finding old cracks and digging in, breaking it again. Heading home…she was a kid, young and resilient, he just hoped she didn’t end up with bones that ached and pained in the chill because shit, it’d been bad. She’d had…he could hear the cracking, grinding of bone in her spine, her ribcage, her arm had
come clean out of its socket-

“Excuse you, my wondrous form is right here, thank you very much.”

Oh. Heh it wasn’t…it was a little wondrous. Dude pushed his luck too much but something about that was endearing in itself. Dorian had asked him to follow him—everyone was getting ready for the big push out of the desert. They’d already packed up, he and Bull, so the Vint fancied one last look-around. Led Bull up to the temple, didn’t feel weird anymore it was just…a nice place, secluded, high up over the waterfall. Huh…no one’d hear them up here he didn’t think…

“Sorry, distracted-“

“Ellie is fine, safe. Cole assures me she’s healing well. You…shouldn’t be so very hard on yourself, Bull. You made the best choice in the moment, and it worked out swimmingly enough. You should refocus, you’re always encouraging others not to dwell on the past, let old fear corrupt the truth of what is in the now or some such Qunari rot,“ Dorian came close, arms up over Bull’s shoulders, hands hanging behind his neck. “Perhaps I need to Reeducate you?”

A low growl rumbled up from his chest, “Watch yourself Sparky, I might take you up on that.”

“Does the Iron Bull have teacher fantasies?” he asked with put on appalment.

The Iron Bull had a little bit of everything fantasies…more and more concerning the Vint-it- this was fun. Just. Fun. They’d been talking, since Bull offered to be a good listener after all that Time Travel bullshit. Light stuff, heavy personal stuff, everything. And it…it was something that worked both ways, somehow. As much as Dorian joked and made light, could claim the center of attention he…listened. Accepted, when Bull felt compelled to share the heavy things. And then First Day Eve rolled around and there was ache, and loneliness. Dorian was mid existential crisis, being so far from everything he knew, feeling the fear of the future, and somehow—he knew how, he was the Iron Fucking Bull, gift of Koslun—that turned into ‘you’re not alone’ fucking. Just…giving the guy something familiar. That uh. They kept coming back around to. Just. Because Human brains are bad at the whole ‘memory’ thing, they need lots of reinforcement, reminders.

“I’m afraid this isn’t the time for exploration…I must admit, I’ve actually lured you here under false pretenses. It wouldn’t do to get carried away when we’re expecting company.”

False pretenses, huh? “If this is the part you reveal you’re a Venatori sleeper agent, I would like to point out, I have had my suspicions and totally regret not listening to my gut instinct and crushing your head between my thighs.”

“You could do that?” Dorian asked sounding more impressed than petrified, “Why do I like this? That sounds horrendous, horrible, terrible way to die-“

“At least you’d die doing what you love:“

“Sucking cock or hearing you beg?”

“Mouthy,” Bull accused him, chuckling at his own pun. But then he heard something that had him pushing the Vint back and away from him, oh whoops, at least the sand wasn’t very hard? Shit, knocked him right on his butt, but in Bull’s defense,

“-rian and the Iron Bull should be waiting for us,” Imekari’s voice echoed through the passage way, the cavern that led up to the Temple.
“Don’t be nervous kid, it’s gonna be all good. Bull’s a reasonable guy and you’re right, to want to bring him in on this.”

…Tethras. Huh.

Bull wasn’t blind—not totally anyway, there was something up. Some conspiracy between Tethras and the kid. Dorian was involved? What the fuck was up?

He guessed he was about to find out. Location made sense—Dorian hadn’t led him up here for sexy fun times with the cover of the falls keeping their more sensitive hearing members from overhearing them. They were getting privacy for a top secret, private conversation.

Imekari was nervous? Scared she might upset him. He helped Dorian up, brush himself off, and apologized, rolling his shoulders and trying to relax. There were fallen pillars out front of the Temple just sitting at the edge near the falls, so he took a seat, kept his posture open, tried to make himself smaller and approachable. Even if she pissed him off, if she’d done something she shouldn’t’ve, he wasn’t…shit, he wasn’t going to hurt her.

“Imekari,” he greeted warmly waving her over as she and Tethras emerged from the cavern. She smiled and waved, still armored up and ready to hit the road though she was hoofin’ it barefoot, she needed new things bad. He could get her reoutfitted, the way he did his guys, just, bill the Inquisition though…he might just let it go, she was technically… He wasn’t sure what was next, after Sealing the Breach. Inquisition’s purpose was stopping the guy behind it now, the Elder One, and his existence was enough to secure Bull staying on the job, working with them. But uh…he didn’t see returning the Par Vollen anytime soon, he was out for the long haul, next few years at least, rolling with the Chargers. And uh. Well. Stitches did a damn good job, but he could always use help. An assistant. A co-healer. Imekari could hold her own in a fight, knew her stuff healing wise, could keep her cool under pressure. Depending on what the future held, when all of this was over, maybe she’d roll with them.

Ellie and Tethras joined them, sitting across from Dorian and Bull on the other pillar, kid’s knee was bouncing like mad, wringing her hands and she swallowed and said,

“There’s something…I’m not sure how you’ll like that we haven’t included you, I’m sorry I haven’t been up front with you about it, but it’s important this stay secret. The Iron Bull. What I’m about to tell you, you have to promise me, right now, that you will not breathe so much as a word of this, to Cremisius.”

…well that was…definitely the most difficult promise she’d asked him to make. Depended on why she was making him promise…though he’d have to promise to find out he supposed though at his hesitance she said, “It isn’t bad or to hurt him, just the opposite. Keeping him out of this…he’ll reap all the benefits of the good that might come from it and be completely protected from any bad if this falls through. Please, I-I don’t want to hurt him.”

Well fuck, neither did Bull so he said, “Alright Imekari, you have my word. Whatever this is, I’ll keep him out of it.”

She heaved a sigh of relief. “Thanks. Has he…has Cremisius ever talked to you about his father?”

“He says things, anecdotes, advice his old man gave him. And uh, I know he’s not around or whatever, back in Tevinter, but Krem uh, it doesn’t sound like he’s dead or anything.”

Ellie took a deep breath. “Okay. The least ‘betraying his confidence’ version I can give
you is this—Cremisius’s father is a slave currently indentured to the Magister House Tilani. I’m… kind of trying to get him freed? Dorian and Varric have been helping me, and now, we need you.

Fuck. Krem…he’d been more open, Bull just about lost his shit when the little Vint admitted he’d almost been married off to some bastard two, maybe three times his damn age. Fucking, engaged at ten. He’d talked about it bumping his family status up, keeping them from slavery, shit. He…kid had to be blaming himself, hadn’t he? Bull wasn’t sure how he felt, what sort of person, what kind of parent foists that on a kid? Live a lie, play wife and mother for some old fuck to keep the family from slavery. But it spoke volumes—his father called the engagement off and…took the fall himself. Kept Krem out of it, oh man, being aqun-athlock and Sopporati had been shit enough, being a slave?

“What do I need to do?”

Ellie gave him the rundown—turned out, the head of Magister House Tilani, was Maevaris, Varric’s goddamn cousin through marriage-

“Wait, your Maevaris?” Bull asked Dorian.

“She’d spit on me for saying as much, but yes. My Maevaris.”

Alright. She’d been damn good to Dorian. Sounded like a good woman. Hopefully she was good to her slaves. Varric petitioned Maevaris, as her cousin, to forgive the debts of Tonio Aclassi. They’d filled out petitions and forms to verify Krem’s identity as Tonio Acclassi’s son, Cremisius Aclassi was a citizen in good standing, and he had a stable, disposable income. Bull’d wondered why Ellie had asked about Krem’s legal problems—back when they were in the Hinterlands, when they had a beat by themselves, she checked with him to make certain all that garbage had been cleaned up, that there was no longer a price on his head. Kid worked his ass off, pinched every copper he could and still scrape by to send half his pay to his mother, and as much as possible of the rest to the Imperium to settle his fines so they wouldn’t try coming after his mother, and would stop pursuing him.

Maevaris had paid off the Aclassi family’s debts, and Tonio was working to repay her through his service. Varric’s petition would be a forgiveness of upkeep—that she’d forget the cost of feeding and clothing and caring for Mister Aclassi, let his work count entirely toward paying off the debt she paid off for him.

“Cremisius was fifteen when his father was enslaved so…it’s only been around two or so years now. But she’s taking our petition seriously,” Ellie said. “She wants to meet me, you, Varric, and Dorian in Val Royeaux—we need to leave today if we want to make it in time.”

“Why does she want to meet me?”

“You’re Cremisius’s employer—she needs to know for certain that if something happened with the Inquisition, Cremisius can take up payments to her for his father’s service. It’s an exchange of sorts—he’d work for the Inquisition, his wages would go to Maevaris until his debts all paid off.”

Alright. Cool. Everything settled, laid out, they agreed to be ready and presentable when they got to Val Royeaux. Ellie enlisted Cole as a bit of help—there was no hiding what was going on from the Spirit so, he was tasked to make sure Sera and Solas and Thom were distracted—keep this all in-house until everything was official, and Tonio Aclassi was safe and sound and in Inquisition headquarters a fully fledged member of their banner. Shit, he really understood keeping Krem in the dark. It’d wreck him if he got the hope of his father’s freedom dangled in front of his
face, only to have it lost in the eleventh hour. Bull did not like a wrecked Krem, nu-uh. He’d be there to pick up the pieces, just didn’t like them being broken in the first place.

So they set out. Dorian got pretty well acquainted with Russel though, since the Vint rode along with Sera most of the way. Imekari joined Bull on good old Bitsy after they left the heat of the desert, the warmth of the western woods. It was cold as shit as they neared Val Royeaux, it was full blown snowing in mid-Orlais. They had a set time and date to meet this Maevaris and they’d be damned it they missed it, but getting put down for almost a week hadn’t been in the game plan— they had been meaning to leave the Oasis either the day they first made an attempt at the last Rift, or the day after, give them time to get to Val Royeaux at a nice pace, give them a few buffer days. But uh, that was definitely gone. Long riding days, hard ones, horses being run through their paces, and with the jostling and the cold, it was damn painful, but it helped, sitting in the saddle before Bull. Warn, and braced, he had her relax against him, kept her secure in his hold trying to keep her from getting knocked around so hard.

They arrived in Val Royeaux, in the dead ass of night…well, early morning. Four in the morning, the day they were supposed to meet Maevaris. The Marchands were kind enough—they still hadn’t managed to sell off their Val Royeaux apartment and they were considering keeping it, since they reestablished their alliance with the Inquisition and they would have business here from time to time. Place was sweet.

“It’s very big, so be careful not to get lost—buddy system it up, call for Cole if you get really lost okay?” Ellie said as she gingerly pulled off her cloak. “Get some rest everyone.” Kid was stiff as fuck as she headed down the main hall, Sera tentatively trailing after her.

Thom was out like a damn light the second he was horizontal—picked the room he stayed in last time, told Bull he was free to share or uh, he’d winked and said, ‘do whatever you want’.

What he wanted was sleep. And for 1pm to come already Koslun’s balls he was antsy. Shit. He’s a fucking huge ass Qunari! What if he scared this Vint woman senseless and she called the whole thing off!

What he got was Dorian…what the fuck, was this some kind of mage bullshit? How? He meant to go to bed! Ended up ass naked in a marble bath with Dorian in his lap just…not even fucking, what was this? They were just bathing. Soaking, more like it and-

“Are you feeling better? Stress wise and uh…do you need potion or anything, for your ankle?” Dorian questioned gently.

Huh. Getting what he needed, he supposed. Yeah, it’d been a pretty bad leg day but, “All good now, thanks.”

“Maevaris is a harridan. A battle axe really, I assure you, she’ll be more enchanted with the broadness of your chest than fearing the horns on your head. We’ll have a pleasant chat, lovely lunch, and get this settled.”

“…quit being so unabsorbed with yourself and go preen in a mirror or something.”

“With pleasure. I assure you I’m only able to be quite so selfless because I can see my reflection in the water fixture nicely. Although it does make my nose look big.”

“Your nose is big.”

“Lies from the very pits of the Fade!” Dorian declared it, “My nose is proportionate and
stately, it compliments my miraculously symmetrical, deliciously handsome face with perfection.”

Cole was…fucking a weird ass anomaly, but a lifesaver. Only reason anyone woke up in time was him appearing. Startled the shit out of Dorian. Bull’d been out, way out, hadn’t heard the Spirit’s arrival but Dorian’s arms around him tightened and he heard, “Vasta Fass!” panicked, it had Bull holding the Vint Mage closer, tighter against his chest as he cracked open an eye, brain already processing just how to flip the guy over to get him behind Bull while the Qunari attacked whatever was intruding but, nope. Just Cole. Perched on the bedpost like a big ass bird.

“Oh! I like birds! You should check on Ellie. She is awake but sore, warmth will help.”

Bull sighed. “You people just use me for my body.”

“You’re just now catching on?” Dorian asked, “You think I share a bed with you for your personality? You come up with the most atrocious puns.”

“Bite me.”

“Maybe later, if you’re good.”

Fuck. Okay, focus, up, out of bed, where the hell was Imekari’s room?

End of the hall, huh. Nice set up, and he could hear the hollow echo under foot, there was a secret passage way to get the hell out of this joint if shit hit the fan. Ellie was still…half asleep, dozing in the bed, laying in her sleep shirt on top of the covers like she hadn’t climbed under them to begin with, Sera was under the covers at her side, snoring away. Bull crouched on Ellie’s side of the bed.

“Hey Imekari,” he rumbled out softly, “Rough morning?”

She cracked an eye open to look at him. “Don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Cole says you’re sore.”

“Ha. If I were sore, could I do this?”

… “Uh…do what, babe?”

“Somersaults. Am I not doing them? I’m pretty sure I am. Feels like I am.”

“Sorry Imekari, you’re still laying down. Cole says your cold? Why didn’t you snuggle up?”

“The air hurts my body, but my clothes hurt my body more. Blankets are my enemy. My dearest allies have betrayed me, and I am so alone.”

Ahh. Hence the no pants policy. “Okay Imekari. I’ll run you a warm bath, no more clothes until it’s time to get dressed. Half past eleven now.”

“I love you so much, the somersaults I’m doing are dedicated to you, the Iron Bull, actual love of my life.”

Hell yeah! “Cole,” he said quietly as he went to get the bath going, nice sunken tub in the floor of her room. Spirit showed up and- oh, cool. Didn’t care for how in people’s heads the guy was but it was helpful. Cole appeared holding a plate with a few slices of warm, buttered bread from…somewhere, maybe the kitchens? Was anyone up?
“Thom, he made breakfast when Solas woke up. Thom had me try a pancake, it was very good. Varric is awake and getting ready. Do you want me to wake Sera? I know where she keeps Ellie’s potions.”

“Go ahead and grab ‘em, thanks.”

Kid held her breath as Bull helped her sit up, ate a slice of bread and downed her potions, pushed the other slice in Bull’s direction in case he was hungry. He helped her over to the tub, seated on the edge and she held up her arms so he could pull her sleep top off before she slid into the water, wincing before sighing in relief.

“Thanks, the Iron Bull, really.”

“Don’t sweat it, Imekari.”

“Wasson?” Sera mumbled before she flinched and sat up, hair flopping as she looked around, “Ink? Huh, toast. Inky, did you leave me bed-toast?”

“You can have it if you want, I think there’s more in the Kitchen if you’re hungry.”

“Sweet! What’re we doin’?” Sera asked as she climbed out of bed, bread in hand, munching as she came and sat next to Bull by the edge of the tub.

“Just cleaning up, chatting with Bull, we have a meeting here in a bit. What’ll you be up to today?”

“Solas says this place has a big library, we was gonna check it out.”

“Cool! Have lots of fun, I’ll come find you whenever I get back.”

“Good luck with your meetin’ things, Ink. I’m gonna go get more breakfast, you want any? No? Kay, I hung up your clothes ’cause wrinkles or whatever. They’re on the door.”

Bull cleaned up, Dorian and Varric were lookin’ sharp, shit, Dwarf actually brushed his hair before pulling it back, and Imekari had brought along one of her nicer outfits for meeting with Maevaris but uh…they definitely fit weird. Solas had taken her measurements for her and she sent her clothing and measurements off to Haven, and they returned adjusted. Someone had taken silvery fabric that Bull supposed complimented the green-blue tunic and leggings, sewn a panel in the back of her tunic that started at the hem, and tapered up at the small of her back, helped it fit better. Sleeves and pant legs had been cut so they fit, didn’t vice themselves around her forearms and legs, and silvery material had been sewn to the end of her sleeves and the bottoms of her leggings, so her wrists and ankles were covered. She checked her face in the mirror by the door, took a deep breath and then turned to face them.

“Okay. We got this,” she encouraged, “Let’s go scare-seduce some Orlesians with our cultural diversity and our astounding good looks.”

Varric offered her his arm and Dorian and Bull followed after them. They did make a bit of a sight. Yes world. Hello. Qunari are running the streets of Val Royeaux, quiver in fear you tiny bastards. He thought it might be hard to look tough with Imekari holding his hand as he trailed close behind her but nope, even with 5’2” of smiley enthusiasm attached to him didn’t stop the Orlesian couple that was coming up the stairs as they were going down from screaming and turning tail to run away in their dumb, clacky shoes. Funny as shit.

They were set to meet in the open-air café just down the way, he was expecting a bit of
chaos to ensue, a dwarf, a Vint, and a Qunari walk into a bar with a kid with a glowing hand. But the maître’d just bowed and said, “Ahh, welcome Lady Herald, Master Tethras, Master Pavus, Master the Iron Bull. Magister Tilani awaits.”

Damn, they thought they’d get there early and claim a spot but uh, Magister Maevaris Tilani had apparently beaten them to it in grand style. Place was empty save the host, a waiter and-

Holy shit. Holy fucking shit. Imekari stopped in her tracks the moment she laid eyes on them.

“You must be Ellie,” Maevaris spoke, before looking to her cousin, “Varric.”

“Mae Mae,” the Dwarf greeted warmly, going to where she sat to kiss her on the cheek, “causing trouble?”

“Always,” she assured, “Dorian, it’s good to see you again. You seem to be doing well for yourself.”

“Certainly,” Dorian nodded. “You look well, Maevaris, fetching as always.”

“And you,” she looked Bull up and down appreciatively, though what she said was, “my word you really are an oxman.”

Oh shit. Come on Imekari, “He’s a person,” Ellie said. Too late, she’s gonna fight her. “His name is the Iron Bull.”

“My apologies, I did not mean offense—it is merely what they are called in Tevinter.”

“Racism’s not a lovely thing to be known for, is it?”

“Is it a racist sentiment? They have horns and they are strong, both positive qualities found in Ox. He walks around calling himself a Bull.”

“The Iron Bull is his name, his chosen mode of address. Calling people animal names is a way of talking down to them and comparing them to animals and stripping them of personage. Your hair is beautiful, just like the Iron Bull’s horse, Bitsy’s mane is beautiful—you’re both strong and regal ladies, but you’d be insulted if I called you a horse.” Huh, yeah, lady was blonde like Bitsy.

“My word you are a little spark, aren’t you?”

“Kid, she really doesn’t mean anything, she’s messing with you,” Varric promised, reprimanding, “Mae Mae, knock it off. Tumbles will actually fight you.”

“Dorian tells me she’s passionate about our mutual cause, I was merely testing her ability to argue her case, seeing if she would argue it in the first place.” and when Varric sighed and shook
his head, she defended, "Forgive me for being curious about the Herald of Andraste that’s got you
wound so tight around her adorable little fingers—you’re right, she’s like a little doll, I could just
eat her up,” the Tevinter woman enthused, and then she motioned to the empty seats around the
table, “Do please have a seat. I’ve ordered something to warm us up.”

Imekari sat in the seat across from Maevaris, looking to Bull before patting the seat at her
side, across from Mister Aclassi, Bull nodded to him as he sat. Varric sat alongside Maevaris.
Dorian, on Ellie’s other side across from the Dwarf.

A waiter came and dropped off mugs of…huh. Orange juice—warmed up, steaming hot
with…smelled like honey, little cinnamon stick Maevaris used hers to stir her drink before sipping.

“Oh gosh, that’s good,” Ellie said after taking a sip. Seemed like a weird combo but yeah,
it was pretty good, sweet, tangy, warm.

“Orlesian beverage, I can never remember the name of,” Maevaris said, “but it is
delightful in this weather isn’t it? Now, tell me about yourself, young lady. Varric is
complimentary of course but he has a way of telling you so much and nothing at all at the same
time.”

“I get paid by the letter,” Varric shrugged.

Imekari was nervous, shy because she wasn’t quite certain what sort of information
Maevaris would be interested to know about her, but she talked about her work with the
Inquisition, the different lessons she had in Haven, a twenty minute rundown on Anya, a little bit
about their time in the Oasis. The woman had question after question about their cause, Ellie's
opinions on the Mage-Templar conflict, how she would see them reform, kid was so busy talking
Bull was almost worried she wouldn’t get to eat when their food came. Decent meal, some kind of
white, fluffy fish in cream sauce, and sliced up potato reassembled with cheese baked onto each
slice, big helping of green beans, and Maevaris was all snark as she scooped her serving of green
beans onto Varric's plate.

“My, you’re leading a rather extraordinary life right now, aren’t you?” Maevaris said as
their dishes were cleared away.

Ellie nodded. "It's been pretty wild."

"Now. What interests you in this exchange?” Maevaris asked.

Imekari licked her lips as she finished a sip of her drink, setting the cup down before she
said, “Your dress is just beautiful, Magister Tilani.”

That...wait...was that an answer?

“…thank you. It is Jaques Brodeur. Your ensemble is lovely as well.”

“Thanks! It only fits so well because I had it tailored—you’re familiar with Aclassi?”

“…not as a brand name. You mean as in Tonio Aclassi?”

“His son, Cremisius, actually,” Ellie smiled as she leaned forward, extending an arm out to
ward the elder Aclassi who’d yet to speak a word, and now he sat staring wide eyed at the girl as
she smoothed back her sleeve to show him the inside of it, bit of a trick having to read upside down
since it was meant to be read by the person wearing it, but,
“You’ve got this,” Tonio Aclassi read softly, the little message stitched in blue thread before meeting Ellie’s gaze. “My Cremisius did this,” he breathed, “My son is here, in Orlais?”

Ellie laid her hand over his, “Cremisius is in Ferelden, actually, with the Inquisition. He’s safe, and healthy, and happy—he has a really great life, with friends and work and everything,” she assured him. “He always tells me I’ve ‘got this’ when I’m about to do something important I’m nervous about. I told him I needed this outfit for an important meeting,” she shrugged. “He said you always liked to sew little encouraging or personal messages into the sleeves of your customer’s clothing. Cremisius has told me lots about your career as a tailor—I’ve just had a bit of a growth spurt recently so I’m rather in need of one. No offense to Cremisius, he did wonderfully with this outfit but it’s not exactly his day job right now, I’d hate to make him busier. Adjustments are nice, but I really do need all new things tailor made. I would like for that tailor to be you, Mister Aclassi.”

Ellie looked to Maevaris as she sat back, “My former tailor’s no longer feeling ‘the Maker speak inspiration’ to her, and my advisor, Lady Josephine came up with suggestions but she’s leaving it up to me, who to hire. The Inquisition will pay well—a lot more than what Mister Aclassi’s current valuation of his services is. His pay will go to House Tilani until such a time that his debts are paid off.”

“You wish for me to forgive the debt he owes directly to me for his upkeep?” Maevaris asked.

“I would appreciate it, certainly.”

“And what will happen if the Inquisition disbands before I’m paid?” she looked to the Iron Bull.

“Krem, er, Cremisius Aclassi is my Lieutenant, second in command of my Mercenary crew—the Bull’s Chargers,” he said. He'd be damned if he let the kid start splitting his paychecks between both parents though, shit. If something happened and the Inquisition busted up before Tonio paid his debts…well, maybe it was time Bull got some damn shirts. Bull’d make sure there was a place for him with the Chargers.

Gob smacked was an interesting look on the Aclassi men. “Cremisius is a Mercenary?”

“It’s rather a long story,” Ellie said, “and it should be him, that tells it to you, Mister Aclassi. But yes, he works with the Chargers, that’s how we met. The Iron Bull signed his men on to work with the Inquisition to help stop the Breach. They’ve been an amazing help—the Iron Bull travels with me when I go to close Rifts, and Cremisius has served as temporary body guard for me when I was without one for a while,” she smiled and shared with Tonio, “he saved my life—someone tried to poison me and Cremisius caught them, totally kicked their butt. He’s very strong, and brave, and handsome—gosh, he looks just like you.”

“And he’s uh, fiscally responsible guy,” Bull assured. And he felt like he should ease any worry he could, not just of Maevaris but the elder Aclassi, “Half of his pay goes to supporting his mother back in Tevinter, the rest is disposable income he saves most of, doles a little money out for things like drinks with friends, dates…birthday present for his little girlfriend.”

“He…” maybe he laid it on too thick the guy looked overwhelmed. Proud, and so relieved after years of not knowing how his family was dealing in the aftermath of his enslavement, having confirmations that they were alright, and more than that, his son was thriving. “He has a girlfriend?”
Maevaris was staring at Ellie, little Imekari was blushing, “Varric informs me you’ve recently celebrated a birthday, haven’t you, Lady Herald?”

Ellie regarded her silently for a moment before holding out her left wrist toward the center of the table pulling her sleeve back, “Cremisius got me a wrist watch for my birthday…actually he got me my birthday for my birthday really—I’d never celebrated it before and he made sure everyone worked together and threw me a really great party.” Well, if that wasn’t confirmation enough, her left sleeve had *Hi, lovely.* stitched inside of it.

Yeah, time to let it all sink in for him, Krem’s out here living his best life, hair game’s never been more on point, he’s got a good gig, great friends, and he’s got the Herald of Andraste pretty crazy for him.

“I trust this isn’t the result of a passing fancy?” Maevaris asked cautiously.

…he actually hadn’t thought about that. the implications of what might happen with this if things went south with Krem and boss-girl. but uh, then he realized it was because there wasn’t anything to worry about-

“I’d plans to try and help however I could to get Cremisius his father back the moment I learned he was enslaved, and that was before I knew Cremisius was interested in me. This, is completely separate from my relationship with Cremisius. I owe him so much—”she looked to Tonio, “you, Mister Aclassi, I owe you. You made and raised the most amazing, incredible, kind, compassionate, brave man I’ve ever met, and you deserve to get to see that, see the amazing life he’s made for himself. I’m just repaying my own debts, really.”

"Very well. Have your Inquisition send a contract for the exchange, Tonio's transfer to Ferelden, and my payment schedule...and Mister Aclassi will be joining your cause, no later than the end of Nubulis."

Why the fuck couldn't Vint's just say- "Drakonis..." Ellie breathed. Shit, they were in Guardian now, less than two months somehow sounded like forever but, "Thank you, Magister Maevaris."

All said and done, they had the makings of a deal, and Maevaris was sweeping away with Tonio trailing after her, though Varric, fuck, he was a good guy, he caught up with Maevaris and drew out their goodbyes, gave Ellie the chance to talk to the guy a moment.

“I haven’t…Cremisius doesn’t know yet, about all this, I want to make sure everything works out okay, before he knows, you know? But um, I just…he loves you, so so much, and he misses you, and he’s really proud that you’re his father and just…thank you” she said, hugging the man tight, “thank you for putting Cremisius first, ending things with Cornelius, keeping your family from slavery. I can never thank you enough.”

“Thank you, for everything you are doing. Keep…make sure everything is settled before you tell him, please,” Mister Aclassi said, then, “he is happy?”

“He really is. Strong and capable and safe. Drakonis will be here soon, you’ll see him and he’ll be so excited to see you. He keeps some of your things—your pocket watch, and shaving kit,” Ellie told him, smiling as she brushed her thumb along the scruffy hair along his jaw.

“I’m grateful. Hug him for me, would you?” he asked, and Ellie nodded, before the man looked to Bull, “You have been in charge of my son?”
“More like he’s in charge of me. I’m a real handful,” Bull said.

“Thank you—you seem like an honorable man. Watch out for my bello mimo.”

“You got it.”

They saw them off, safely out the gates of Val Royeaux.

“Tumbles, that went great, you did good kid,” Varric said as they made the walk back toward the Marchand’s.

“Thanks,” Ellie breathed a sigh of relief. “Drakonis. Drakonis Drakonis. Gosh that feels like tomorrow and never at the same time.”

“I feel you, boss-girl,” Bull said, carefully wrapping an arm around her shoulders, didn’t seem to hurt her, she leaned into his side and hummed appreciatively, “But we’ll have plenty to keep us busy…I mean there’s still a hole in the sky.”

“True! First though…I hope you don’t mind, you don’t all have to stick around if you’d be bored, but I’d appreciate someone staying with me?” well they sure as hell weren’t leaving her all on her own in the middle of a Gaspard-Celene warzone. “I kind of need new shoes. I love Harritt, and I’ve been trying to make these work all week, but I can’t feel my toes half the time, and when I do they hurt.”

Yeah, she needed new shoes…new everything like she said but Drakonis was still a bit of a ways off, “You need anything else while we’re out here? Nothing back in Haven’s gonna fit you well babe.”

That got him a grin, something hinting on the mischievous. “Well…actually, yeah, I’ll have Mister Aclassi make me new things. But in the meantime, Cremisius is already making adjustments to all my clothes. Something he’s doing in his spare time, and while Lady Josie’s making sure the Inquisition covers materials, he’s refusing to charge for his time, labor…since technically Cremisius was once an employee of his father’s workshop, has the skills he does to adjust my clothes because of that, and considering the fact that he’s even using designs his father created, we’re putting labor payment on the books and it’ll go straight to Maevaris when she signs his father over. It’ll help knock a chunk out of his father's debt.” She said. “I don’t like the idea, that technically he’ll be indentured to the Inquisition, but his pay will be actually existent—what would take him a decade to work off in Tevinter should only take…math hurts my brain. Less than a year, I hope. Then he’ll be able to actually be paid, keep his job with the Inquisition if he likes it, or he can do whatever he wants. He’ll be really, for real, free!”

Well damn. Alright then, “Alright boss-girl, I’m down for shoe shopping.”

“Hell yeah, Tumbles, you know we’re all about shoe shopping. You picked the shoe shopping trifecta,” Varric was on board.

“Oh, most assuredly,” Dorian agreed, “there are no others in your arsenal of companions better equipped for such a task.”

Bull snorted. “Think they’ll have anything in my size?”

They did not, but, it was pretty slim pickings anyway for just walking out the store with a new pair of shoes. Everything was custom this and that, but Imekari found a model pair of ankle boots that fit her well enough, damn good, just, new shoes needed breaking in. They were cute, and Varric found no end of amusement in the Orlesian population’s reactions to Bull following after
the little Human girl running around their shops, showing him different shoes and asking him his opinion.

“-sta Fass! You insufferable charlatan, that’s ten times what you paid me for it!”

Okay…Dorian had slipped away—vendor caught his eye and he said he’d be right back, been gone for a beat though and Bull could hear him shouting. He looked to Varric and nodded in Imekari’s direction and the Dwarf stepped up and got swept up in her new mission—Operation: Marehis’s birthday present.

Some vendor across the way was hassling Dorian, Bull wasn’t sure what was up, but it sounded like he was refusing flat out, to sell him something.

“Perhaps if you introduce me to the young Herald of Andraste. She has the sort of influence I’m sure, she could get me entry to the Celestine League. Then of course I would reconsider my price point, since it is a family heirloom after all.”

“I’ll do nothing of the sort,” Dorian seethed, turning to storm away though he missed punk ass merchant’s jaw drop, and got stopped because he just ended up turning directly into Bull’s chest. This stupid mother fucker.

“You’ve got about ten seconds to fix whatever this is before I ruin your whole damn day.”

The guys mouth worked like he’d never used words before but when Dorian turned to face him again he cleared his throat and said, “D-d-double what I p-paid.”

Bull let out a growl. “Half it.”

“Deal!”

Dorian handed over…shit, just a silver, and what he got was defiantly worth more than that. He’d pawned it or something it sounded like, was getting it back—this asswipe gave him a fucking silver for this big ass gold medallion?

“I was handling that you know,” Dorian snapped at him as he stormed off, Bull following after, guy wasn’t walking back toward where they left the others though, just stomping across the bazaar, toward the café.

“You were walking away, I just gave you some backup, what’s the big deal? Where are you even going?”

“Away from you, you- horrible, nosy, insufferable lout!”

“Hey, what the fuck, why’re you pissed?” Bull caught up to him, grabbing his shoulder so he’d stop and turn to face him—whirled around real fast, huh, guy could use a cape for all his dramatic flair.

“I-! I don’t know,” he said, then frustrated with himself he shook his head, “No, no, I do know—I wanted to handle that on my own, it was my problem, not yours! I’m…I don’t need someone else coming in and fixing everything for me, I’ll not be some dependent, shrieking violet!”

“Pretty sure you mean ‘shrinking’, and you are shrieking, Sparky,” Bull said levelly, “Look, I didn’t mean to overstep. Guy was giving you a hard time, rubbed me the wrong damn way, and then he had to go try pulling Imekari into it. You did good, walking away when he made that
demand, you deserve whatever that is,” he looked to the medallion clutched in Dorian’s grasp, “just for looking out, not using your connections to the Herald for your own selfish shit.”

Dorian sighed. “It’s done…thank you. I do appreciate having this back.”

“Mind if I ask what it is?”

“It…is my heraldry. Proof of my claim as a member of House Pavus. I was not exactly flush with funds when I made my way to the Venatori base in Orlais, I had to pawn it off, to that lovely gentleman. I…I don’t even know why I want it, just-“

“Hey, it’s your name. It is what you make of it, whatever shit’s attached to it doesn’t matter when it comes to you and what you do while bearing that title. You want your claim to it? That’s not unreasonable,” Bull said. The guy huffed and then his arms were around Bull’s neck, pulling him into a very warm…very public kiss—he was pretty sure someone dropped their shopping bags, women shrieking, babies crying, they were causing all kinds of mayhem in Val Royeaux. Eh, whatever. “Dorian Pavus is out here doing some pretty great things.”

That got him a rich smile that…alright, he wasn’t mad he put it there. “And if you’re lucky, you’ll continue to be one of them.”

He was so fucked.

They regrouped, and Imekari was ecstatic over her shopping successes. They made it back in time for dinner, Sera and Solas had taken charge of the meal and-

Ellie gasped when they entered the kitchen, “Vivienne!”

Madam de Fer was sitting at the kitchen table, supervising the cooking underway but she rose immediately, eyes widening as she took in sight of the kid, “Eleanor, oh my dear girl look at you! You’ve grown so much, and your hair, I must say it’s rather inspired,” she complimented as she came and swept Imekari up in a hug.

“Thanks! I grew two and one-fourth inches!” she enthused, oh yeah, the 1/4th inch mattered, counted, she was damn proud of it, “And the Oasis was hot and humid, and I just couldn’t ‘hair’ there, you know?”

“Oh most certainly,” Vivienne said, pulling back, she raised a hand to cup the kid’s face, “darling, Sera and Solas tell me you were injured, are you quite recovered now?”

Imekari nodded. “Uh huh, everyone’s been such a great help, I’m feeling better all the time.”

Madam de Fer tsked, “Poor thing, I’m so grateful you’re alright. Well, come, sit my dear, you’re to tell me all about your adventures while I’ve been away, over dinner.”

Ellie smiled. “We’ll catch up! How’s Duke Bastien? Did you have a nice visit?”

“He is well. I caught him up on all our wonderful little adventures. Thank you, darling, for asking. Now, what was the Temple like?”

It was late when Bull knocked on Imekari’s door. Sera was off somewhere…real buddy buddy with Solas lately, always working on one thing or another. Ellie’s voice called him in and he found her sitting up in bed, setting aside the copy of the Chant Red’d given her for her Birthday.
“Hiya the Iron Bull, what’s up?”

“Nothing much uh just…” he really wasn’t sure he should do this, but damn if she didn’t deserve it, at least if she wanted. “Imekari, you’ve done great things, since you’ve joined the Inquisition. Accomplished a lot. You’ve proven your strength, pushed through a lot of pain, and you’ve had the back of every person in your camp all the way. Reminds me of me, when I was sent out from Par Vollen, traveling the Free Marches, building my crew. When I figured myself out, became the Iron Bull, I got a little blasphemous*, marked the occasion literally. Thought I might offer you the same,” he set the little kit he wrote Stitches to send his way, from his things in Haven, down onto the bed. “Open it. You don’t have to say yes—hell, you don’t even have to decide right now just, know the offer’s on the table, and you can holler at me anytime you feel like taking me up on it.”

“Oh my gosh…” Ellie breathed as she opened up the box, taking in the tools, and then she smiled, “Really?”

“Really.”

“…I’m totally taking you up on this but you do realize…I’m pretty sure Cassandra and Marehis will murder us.”

“Oh definitely. B-Quad?” Bull asked as he held out his ringed pinkie finger.

Worked even better since Imekari hadn’t taken her jewelry off for the day yet, still had her pinkie ring on, “B-Quad!”

Oh man he was so dead. But it turned out sweet, Imekari was pleased and excited though uh,

Madam de Fer came bursting into the room just as Bull was gathering up his things, a missive in her hand as she announced, “Eleanor, there is an emergency in the Fallow Mire, Commander Cullen’s men have gone missing, Lord Berand and his men haven’t reported in either and Scout Harding has sent for you—” she stopped as soon as she looked at the kid, “Eleanor what in heaven’s name is that, behind your ear?!”

“Oh! Viv tits, did you tell her Lace-“ Sera was saying as she slid into the room after Vivienne and she stopped to stare before grinning like mad and cackling up a storm, “Inky got inked!”

“Today’s the day right? You get to go home?”

Oh, Elgar’nan yes, she did indeed. Marehis had never felt quite so very excited while washing dishes before, but each dish washed was another moment passed that drew her closer and closer to her departure. She missed everyone so terribly—it was such a blessing, Sera’s scheme, using Thegans to pass along the steady confirmation that all was well.

“I do,” she replied quietly as she passed him a dish to dry.
“Are you excited to see your daughter again—Liana right?”

Marehis smiled, her heart felt full just thinking of it. Using Ellie’s middle name allowed her freedom to talk of the girl, like a separate person from the Herald of Andraste. Only Thegan knew Marehis was in the Inquisition, she found him trustworthy enough to divulge that much to. And the young man had been rather helpful, kept watch himself, passed along anything he saw that might be of interest to Marehis’s investigation. “Yes, she’s traveling right now but I hope to catch up with her soon enough.” She’d have things waiting for her at the dead drop, payment for her work, a debrief on Ellie’s current location and mission.

“She works with you, in the Inquisition?”

“She does.”

He nodded. “Badassery runs in the family I guess. You guys ever met the Herald of Andraste?”

“We work together occasionally,” Marehis allowed.

“Ellie or uh, dunno, Eleanor? I saw her at a party of Madam de Fers last year, filled in for Krissy down in housekeeping. Think you could tell her ‘hey you’ for me? It’s a Marcher thing, show of appreciation for her representing us and all.”

A strange request, but benign. And the Dalish man was from the Free Marches, a city Elf like Marehis. She couldn’t think of how it might be a threat or some mode of flirtation even, not with the way the young man was in constant pursuit of the gardener, William. “I’ll pass it along, if I get the chance.”

Though that chance was frustratingly out of reach. When she was safely away from the Marquis estate, reached the dead drop, she got the news of the situation in the Fallow Mire. Ellie and her party were already on their way, and so, Marehis followed after, hoping to catch up as soon as possible.

It was quite the wave of emotions, having so much mail waiting for her, Leliana passed it along now that Marehis was out, on the road. Ellie had sent her nearly a dozen precious little notes, reporting positive progress they’d made in their time apart—things such as Cremisius drew me a picture of Anya! It’s just the cutest! and, Marehis, the nugs are sooo adorable! We took a day off for vacation! Sera and I played in the water like, all day, it was just the best! We made fizzy lemonade again! I missed you lots though—maybe we can come back to the Oasis sometime together! Oh, that would be so much fun, perhaps they could take a proper vacation sometime. And then there was In Val Royeaux now! I miss you! I met Varric’s cousin today—we went to lunch and she introduced me to this drink, it’s super super good, it’s like, oranges and cinnamon and honey? Just yum! It’s served toasty warm! Have you ever tried that? I’ll make us some when we’re home! <3 And I got new shoes! The Iron Bull and Dorian and Varric took me shoe shopping! It sounded like quite the time.

And then there were missives from Solas. One wishing her well, a sort of ‘welcome back’ he had waiting for her to read when she was finished with her mission. The other, read more like a report that laid out some horrific accident Ellie had been in, Elgar’nan the girl had fallen off a story high scaffolding rig, and then plummeted into a mine.

They’d searched, scouted out the Oasis as thoroughly as they could but moving beyond the Temple, exploring the caverns, there were drops and turns and dark places. Finding Rifts topside had been easy enough they were in plain view and dangerous to get too close to, not when they
could not be closed—you ran the risk of being overpowered by the constant barrage of demons. It was...frustrating beyond belief and it felt like a failure on her part. And she wished more than anything she’d been there, in the Oasis, to help her girls.

But her work was necessary, spying upon Gaspard’s ally had given way to Leliana now knowing his next moves, in regard to how he would deal with Ellie and the Inquisition. Too, she’d found evidence—proof positive that the Trevelyans had conspired with Gaspard to end Ellie’s life, though the duke had perceived it as a plot to mildly poison the girl. He’d been under the impression she would suffer Blood Lotus hallucinations, be made ill for a day or so—the Trevelyans knew otherwise, that she could very well have perished from their ploy. Reckless, the Duke…was reconsidering his stance with the Inquisition. He’d been ramping down his threats—from his first attempt to flat out murder Ellie, to his most recent threat which was, to his mind, a harmless warning not to trifle with him. He was planning to offer some form of peace, a truce of sorts, try to gain Ellie’s confidence now that the Inquisition was becoming such a force to be reckoned with, given they had now the support of both Mages and Templars alike, backing from the Chantry. He saw her as an opportunity—if he could sway her to find favor with him, over Celene, there was no telling what influence she could bring to bear for him. An interesting development, Marehis thought—if nothing else, perhaps it was an opportunity they sorely needed. The Advisors were uncertain just how they would get members of the Inquisition into Empress Celene’s upcoming peacetalks, a ball thrown in her Winter Palace where Ellie’s adventures in the future confirmed Empress Celene would be killed. Perhaps Gaspard could be made aware of their interest and see it as his chance to garner Ellie’s favor.

Needless to say, she was relieved to read Solas’s report in full—by the time he wrote to her on the subject, it was after Ellie was recovered enough to face the Rifts properly and seal them with success. It had been bad, and Sera had been injured as well though he did not go into much detail—just assured Marehis that despite the danger, Ellie had not been alone, Sera had been diligent, brave, gone to Ellie’s aid immediately and been a miraculous help. All Father guard and bless that girl all the days of her life, may the Dread Wolf never cross her path or speak in her ear.

And bless Seeker Pentaghast. Oh, she’d missed the Nevarran woman—they crossed paths just south of Haven, both on their way to meet Ellie and her party.

“Marehis! Oh, thank the Maker you’re here, you’re well I trust? How was your work in Orlais?” Cassandra asked in greeting when Marehis joined her, riding alongside the Seeker along the path to the Fallow Mire. The Seeker looked to the steed Marehis was astride. “Is…that one of Master Dennet’s horses?”

“It is…a horse. That will be living with Master Dennet’s horses now. His name is Phillip and he was liberated from a work farm in the south of Orlais.”

“Marehis,” Cassandra laughed out in gentle reprimand.

“We’ve a need for speed,” Marehis offered. Oh Ellie would so love that turn of phrase-

“Very ‘rhyme-y’, Eleanor would certainly approve.”

“Have you heard from her? How is she? Solas informed me of her fall.”

“Sera wrote to me—do try to be an encouragement to her if she speaks of it, Maker, the girl was beside herself. Ellie is well, she wrote to me on her way to Val Royeaux.”

Ellie was well. Well and...goodness it felt like Ages since they last saw each other, pronounced even more so by just- she was taller! And her beautiful hair—it was still lovely but
heavens, her hair was gone! She bore bandaging just behind her ear, was she still recovering from some injury? Oh, there was a little scar across her lip, where it’d been split, lips that a sigh escaped from as news came in she was expected to fight some Avaar leader in exchange for the hostages they’d made of Lord Berand and his men, of Inquisition soldiers.

“Well, shit.” She shrugged. “Guess we’ll have to go kick Avaar butt. Varric—start the books, twenty coppers say he wipes the floor with me.”

“Woah woah woah boss girl,” the Iron Bull spoke up, Marehis thought he would reprimand her self-defeatist attitude but, “bet with silver or go home. Coppers? Please.”

“Fine, five silver!”

“Tumbles, if you win that bet you won’t exactly be able to cash in on the reward,” Varric said.

“Yeah but it’d be weird to bet on myself, like, ego much? And I’m just not as young and spry as I used to be. It’s okay—remember me as I was: Cold and distant in my final hours, not unlike the harsh embrace of death.”

“Da’vehnan…” Solas ventured, “are we perhaps suffering such dramatics because we’ve held off on lunch for so long it is now dinner hour?”

“Probably, my brains kind of swimmy right now. I’m either high on swamp fumes or hungry…possibly both.”

“Eleanor, come,” Cassandra intoned, reaching out and beckoning the girl, pulling her close to her side, “let us sit and regroup.”

“Come on old man,” the Iron Bull said, elbowing Rainier’s shoulder, “let’s get some grub worked up.”

Oh, the girl was finding some difficulty moving, stiff and sore as she moved to sit around the campfire with Cassandra, Marehis coming to sit at her side. “Are you in pain, da’vehnan?”

“Just getting stronger, soon I’ll be able to arm wrestle the Iron Bull with only my pinkie finger.”

“No more teaching Inky weirdy Qun sayings!” Sera snapped at Bull as she plopped down at Rainier’s side and took up the role of sous-chef.

“Pain is just weakness leaving the body,” the Iron Bull offered up with a shrug at Marehis’s questioning stare.

“Do you want potion, sweet gir-“ Marehis was offering but… “da’vehnan?” she raised a hand to rub circles on the girl’s back, her head was bowed, eyes closed like perhaps she’d fallen asleep?

“Eleanor?” Cassandra questioned.

“She’s in the Fade right now,” Cole announced as he appeared, materializing seated on the ground before Ellie, facing the girl. Elgar’nan! The boy needed a bell, “So many people think that, but no one has given me one. We should eat, prepare ourselves, but we need to move forward, get to the Avvar before they hurt our people—Ellie is looking, she didn’t mean to start without warning anyone, but she really is tired, her brain keeps skipping steps, forgetting she’s left things
“We get back to Haven, Imekari’s taking a damn break,” the Iron Bull said, “Seriously, let the kid just sleep and eat and veg for a few days—I see her set foot in the War Room or down on the practice field, I will start a mutiny. We’ve had nothing but long riding days since the Oasis and I think we’re passing burnt out with her.”

“She walked around our campsite for fifteen minutes yesterday morning looking for the shoes on her feet,” Dorian lamented. “—we let her, too. It was the closest thing to a break she’s taken since word came from the Mire. Dreadful place, this. The weather is horrific, and the neighbors are rude.”

“The Avvar are bastards,” Marehis agreed wholeheartedly.

“I believe he’s referring to the undead,” Vivienne said.

“Keep an eye out,” Varric cautioned, “a few come crawling up out of the swamp every few hours, assholes.”

“I’m never gonna be able to sleep here,” Sera complained, “what if swamp zombies sneak up on us and try to eat my brains?”

Solas rested a hand on her shoulder, “We will sleep in shifts, da’vehnan, do not worry, your brains are safe.”

“Kay…you’d let them eat your brains first right?”

“Oh most certainly—I’ve not even a strand of hair to defend myself, I’m likely the easiest target.”

“Wear your hat you baldy git! Din’an Heem!” given the context, you’ll catch your death, she assured him, shoving his shoulder gently, earning his laughter before he rose up onto his feet and came to sit at Marehis’s side, he offered her a little wink before whipping his hat out of his vest pocket and pulling it on over his head.

“How are you, vehnan?” he asked as he wrapped an arm around her shoulders, pulling him against his side, pressing a kiss to her hair.

“I’m well, you emma lath?”

“Pleased you’ve returned. You’ve been well missed,” he said.

“Missed the hell out of you too Seeker,” Varric called, “don’t get me wrong, we had lots of fun with the kid, but I invest in condoms for a reason. Varric Tetrhas was not made to parent.”

“Who the frig you need to use condoms for, Dwarfy, Bianca?” Sera teased

Varric winked, “Just don’ttell her husband.”

“Ruddy weird!”

Cassandra shook her head. “Eleanor is whole, you’ve done well to protect her. All of you.”

Ellie was quiet, contemplative when she roused, nodding her thanks to Marehis when the woman handed her a bowl of stew. Everyone seemed ravenous, ate eagerly until the pot was empty.
“There’s a path through the Mire,” Ellie spoke up. “A place we can make camp about half way through but…it’s going to be dangerous.”

“We got you, Imekari, just lay it down for us, what’s our play?” Bull asked.

This path through the Mire was marked with Beacons. Places where Veilfire could be lit but doing so summoned demons that called upon mass reinforcements of undead from the surrounding area…which was apparently the goal. Slay the demons, the undead fall fully-dead, and the area is secured. Working together, all their allies united, it was quick enough work, dangerous, but doable.

And the moment they were in an appropriate place to set up camp, they assembled their tent and gathered in the warm reprieve from the cold, soaking rain.

Their Mages worked together to help get everyone dried off and then it was very much so time for rest.

“I’ll take first watch,” Bull volunteered.

“I’m with you,” Thom agreed.

The Iron Bull nodded before making the half knee-walking, half crawl to Ellie, sitting before her where she sat in her bedroll and taking her hands in his. “Imekari. Deep breath in…deep breath out. Relax your mind, focus on good thoughts, and get some rest. We can only help if we’re able to help—part of that is being at our best.”

Ellie nodded. “Be safe during watch.”

It was pure relief to be back sleeping soundly in Solas’s arms, Ellie tucked up against her, Sera snoring softly against the younger girl’s ear. They were warm, and safe, and they would handle whatever came with the morning.

A ‘Skywatcher’ came with the morning. After breakfast, they journeyed onward down the path and came across a large Avvar man, Amund, who was studying the most bizarre Rift they’d seen. It…she could see it, feel the hairs on the back of her neck stand on end the way they did when such a thing was near, but it was like a thin crack in the sky as opposed to a full-blown tear that demons could pour out of.

Because it was dormant, but it may well not be so for long. Amund did not attack them, let them be about their business, and Solas encouraged Ellie to manipulate the Rift if she was of a mind to—go ahead and let it tear open so it could be dealt with and sealed entirely.

This Skywatcher was amicable enough, gruff, but he did confirm their soldiers wellbeing—that they fought well, were alive in their captivity. He was rather moved by Ellie’s sealing the Rift that marred the sky—he believed she was sent to heal his deity.

"I'm talking about the Lady of the Skies. Do you not know her?” he asked Ellie, “Can't you see the warnings she writes through the bird flocks in the air?"

"Preposterous superstition,” Madam de Fer huffed.

"Preposterous is what you wore to a bog, Orlesian.”

“Skywatchers serve their tea scalding.” Dorian commented quietly to the Iron Bull.

“He doesn’t have any tea,” Cole whispered to the Human man.
The Iron Bull patted the Spirit on the shoulder. “No he doesn’t buddy, ‘cause he just served it.”

When at last the final Beacon was lit and dealt with, they were pleased to say they had a clear shot back out of the bog—no more undead would come to shore.

At least—the way behind them, was clear.

“There are too many of them!” Cassandra called out, strong and clear, “To the gate, run!”

Elgar’nan their numbers seemed endless but their troupe managed to race their way past the gate, and with Sera’s agreement, the Iron Bull launched the Elf girl upward, to catch the railing of the highest most part of the ramp overhead that she could pull herself over while the others distracted any assailants on the wooden structure that led to the gate controls, keep them from targeting Sera as she got to the controls and slammed the gate shut behind them, cutting off their undead enemies access.

“Cripes,” Sera breathed a sigh of relief as she leaned against the control. Though she cackled at the declaration of,

“Son…of three…entire bitches!” Ellie rasped out as she caught her breath, “So many corpses!”

“Take a breather Imekari,” the Iron Bull said, carefully massaging at the back of Ellie’s neck, concerned. The Fallow Mire was horrible, and they’d found signs of plague, it was like some horrendous, cocktail of disease waiting to befall them all—rain and cold and deceased rising up from their watery graves, abandoned as they’d been inflicted with contagion. Ellie had to cough to clear her lungs and still there was the low rattle in her breathing that ticked at Marehis’s worries. “We should regroup. Sit tight a minute.”

Ellie nodded, and Sera had been working with the lock on the door near the gate controls—she pushed open the door. “Ink, come explore a bit, cover over here.”

It was nice to take a beat from the endless rain. And the room produced a tome that may be of interest to the Wardens, the Inquisition was still collecting and returning any such item to the Warden’s headquarters.

They took account for potions, hydrated and made certain everyone was still alright, uninjured before they made the final push into the heart of the Avaar fortress.

The Hand of Koth was the single most obnoxious person being Marehis ever had the pleasure of bringing to demise. He was larger than the Iron Bull, and sought a fight with the young Herald of Andraste, a Human girl the size of the ridiculous battle axe he fought with—and in the end he did so with the assistance of his syncophants! He’d challenged Ellie to a fight, one she had to fight just to get to, and while they certainly had no intention of having the girl face off on her own against the man, it…just seemed entirely incredulous that after all his boasting and bragging, he was a pathetic, little man, hiding behind the security his father’s army gave him.

Ultimately, he, and his men, lay dead. Cole was of use, knowing precisely where on the large man his key was hidden, and he handed it to Ellie.

Their soldiers and Lord Berand, his men, were all safe, and accounted for to Marehis’s eye as Ellie pushed open the door. The human Lord looked up from where he sat with his back to the wall, seeming in prayer, and he smiled gratefully,
“Lady Herald.”

“Is everyone alright? Is anyone injured or sick?”

“Few minor injuries—” the words no sooner left his mouth than Ellie was passing around Elf Root tonic from her stores, for any who might need it. “Thank you, my lady, we’ll head back on our own from here. The Avvar are dead?”

“Yup, coast should be clear…mostly, there was a bit of an undead situation by the gate. We’ll go check on it, and see where to move on from there,” she assured, addressing their numbers, “You’re all getting out of here, alright? Patch up, and go at your own pace, we’ve a camp established nearer by where you can rest and eat. Good work out here, everyone, you were all very brave, and I’m proud of you,” she told them, before nodding to Lord Berand and taking her leave—Rainier found another Warden Artifact he wanted her approval on to move, it would be rather the trick, they were large, abandoned banners.

“I can’t believe she came,” one of their Inquisition soldier’s breathed.

Lord Berand huffed lightly, amused. “Told you she would.”

Chapter End Notes

Dalish
Then—awake, alert
Bellanaris—always
In’Garas—mix of 'to dwell' and 'come', "welcome"
Ir abelas—I’m sorry
Emma’asha—my girl
Emma lath—my love
Basra=Non-Qunari

*This is a reference to an in game scenario where Sera claims to fill a practice dummy with bees and everyone is like "wtf how'd you do that?" and she's like "?!?!? dunno? piss off?" there's all kinds of implications that Solas believes Sera has untapped magic and a connection to the Fade, and implications of her Fade sensitivity in game so, here ya go.

*Then Shiral—as in the Dalish word "then" Solas is wishing her 'diligent travels'

*Reference to the Antivan bar mentioned way back in chapter one Ellie pov.

*While Solas’s disdain for tea is a tip of the hat to his writer, Patrick Weekes’s hatred of tea, it's also canon that stimulates like caffeine keep Mages out of the Fade when they sleep.

*Electromagnetic Induction—So so so not a scientist this is all just playing with what little I know and pretending it would work! The idea comes from induction cook tops—you metal pan heats up and can cook whatever's inside, but if you were to place your hand directly onto the cook top, it wouldn't burn you, it requires a conductive metal to create heat.
*Sera has a variety of nicknames she can give a romanced Inquisitor, Cole provides explanation for them, I felt Teetness was best fitting for Lace, and I figure she'd get a nickname since Dagna gets 'Widdle'*

*The Miner in the Oasis like, always asks why you're following her...when you literally just walk up on her and I think it's absolutely hilarious.*

*Playthrough tip, if you have a character with a staff or bow, you can stand outside the third room and fight, the Reverent and corpses can be hit from there, through the door and you'll usually be out of range of the Reverent's grabby hand.*

*this is inspired by my first time completing Rifts High and Low, I was doing a Rogue playthrough and up on the scaffolding shooting down to stay out of range of the Despair demons, and I accidentally hit my 'shooting and backflipping' button that launched my character backward, and her ass ended up falling right into the mine. Only she died because they're cowards who give us fall damage. Anyway, to recreate this with a Mage character I changed the configuration of what attacks you from the High Rift, hence shades and Terrors instead of just Despair demons with a few wraiths.*

*Drakonis is March...which *is* a bit of a pun, you'll see*

*According to canon lore, Qunari don't do tattoos—all of their markings are warpaint. However, my brain is dumb and got fanon and canon mixed up, I've seen so many edits of Bull with tats that I've already described him with tattoos under his harness, SO, I reason it with Bull being so 'worldly' as the Ben Hessrath are legit concerned he might be, which is ultimately why he has the assignment he does, he's good at blending in socially with the rest of the world once they get past the horns and the whole being the size of three Vints in a trenchcoat.*

UPDATE: Next chapter titled and mapped. "To the Breach" ETA 2/16
To the Breach

Chapter Summary

Coughs and colds, a little family drama. Returning to Haven and recuperating before at last, handling the Breach!

We are, at last, in our last Chapter of Haven. Sorry.

Chapter Notes

Thanks so much to everyone reading! I appreciate all the Kudos and comments! I hope you enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It was relief to have their people secure, hostage situations were tenuous and Cassandra disliked Eleanor having to take charge of such a thing. Cullen had been absolutely nerve wracked over the entire affair, and Cassandra was admittedly excited to share the news, send word that it was handled, their people safe, and their party would be returning to Haven forthwith. Too, another bit of fortune from the situation, was that they found yet another agent for their cause, in the Skywatcher.

The great bear of a man was waiting for them when they stepped foot out of the fallen Hand of Koth's throne chamber, and he had apparently cleared the throng of undead that bombarded them at the gate. He knelt before Eleanor and offered her his allegiance to their cause...he would be of some use to Lady Josephine, work as one of her many connections for peace talks, relations with the Avvar to keep from further conflict in future. Eleanor smiled, she did not shake his hand, but she did dip to bow respectfully in thanks, before they parted ways—his first act of service would be to assist with their soldiers and their making way from the Fallow Mire once they were recovered.

"Well done," Cassandra said, breathing a sigh of relief as she moved to wrap an arm around Eleanor as they descended the stairs from the Avvar fortress, and it...it shouldn't have felt so much like a slap when the girl ducked away, sped her pace down the steps to avoid Cassandra's hold. Had she done something? "Eleanor?"

The girl stopped at the bottom of the stairs and turned to face her party, "Sorry, sorry," she apologized unmarked hand raised to rub at her temple, "but um, I'm definitely not feeling too great, and I'm running a fever. I don't- if it's contagious, I'd hate to get you guys sick."

Cassandra's stomach plummeted and she nearly reached out to verify the girl's ailment but she did appear flushed, and weary, unsteady on her feet.

Cole was fast to Eleanor's side, "I can't get sick, Ellie, I can help, let me. Here," he said, turning his back to her and kneeling, and with some small hesitation he removed his hat. Eleanor's mouth opened to protest but, "I can do it, it's okay," the Spirit assured kindly, and the girl thanked
him as she climbed onto his back, arms around his neck and ducking her head to rest against his shoulder, he was able to put his hat back on and the massive bit of headgear did do well to shield Eleanor's head from the downpour. The boy hoisted her up with ease Cassandra hadn't been expecting of the slight Rogue, but carried her securely, there was no fear of him dropping the girl.

Sera groaned, distraught that Eleanor was poorly, "I'll cuddle-walk with you 'sandra," she said as she came and hugged the woman's arm to herself.

Cuddle-walking indeed...well, it certainly was a bit of comfort. Oh, she had missed Sera in her absence. And there was the added benefit that the girl could hear so well, speak against Cassandra's ear relaying Solas's quiet reporting as their group had a bit of a conference as they began their journey back across the Mire. It was best to get out of the horrid place as soon as possible, delaying here further, trying to have Eleanor recuperate in the very environment that made her ill was ill advised.

So they set a steady pace, Eleanor croaked out question as to where they were going as they passed their infiltration camp.

"Ink, shh, don't- just be sleepy okay?" Sera requested. "We'll be to Russel soon."

"Mmkay." Maker, she had to cough, a horrible hacking sound that tore at her throat.

Cole rode in the saddle with Eleanor, Sera riding with Cassandra as they made their way north, putting some distance between themselves and the Mire until they got out of bounds of the never-ending rainfall, found a suitable place to stop and make camp. Eleanor looked wholly miserable.

"What is it you feel, darling? We should consult Adan," Madam de Fer fretted.

Sera pulled the scarf Eleanor had made for her out of the safety of her pack and wrapped it so it looped around her neck and the lower half of her face, like a makeshift medical mask so the girl would not refuse her, going to Eleanor as soon as she was out of Russel's saddle, she'd practically fallen from it and Sera was quick to brace the girl. "Shh Ink, you're okay. Baldy, you do your bond thing and get Adan what he needs. Cole, make with the steamy stuff yeah? Ink's lungs is starting to get clogged up sounding." Oh, it was heartening to have a glimpse of the care they'd entrusted Eleanor to, Sera taking charge, supporting the girl's weight as she led her to sit where a fire was being constructed. Varric was already taking Eleanor's things into the tent to prepare her bedroll, Dorian was rifling through their supplies in search for extra blankets before he dug into his own pack and pulled out a clean pair of thick woolen socks for Eleanor to borrow if she liked, for extra comfort, warmth. Thom set about getting some warm tea brewing while the Iron Bull took a seat near Eleanor launching into a humorous anecdote from when he was 'Imekari' and misbehaved during a meal, got creative with his interpretation of the Tammassran’s orders to eat his vegetables—an offer of something Eleanor would find precious and fun while she sat holding a cloth steaming with Embrium tincture that Solas helped Cole produce for her to her face to breathe through.

Cassandra waited until the girl was finished with her tea before she spoke, "Do you wish to clean up, Eleanor? It would be best to do so before you lay down."

She nodded, oh the girl was exhausted, and Cassandra was grateful she seemed to have forgotten her resolve to keep at distance from her party members as she allowed Cassandra to help her, wrap an arm around her shoulders and walk with her to the stream. While yes, it would not be ideal to have contagion spread...oh Cassandra did not rightly care insofar as she herself was concerned. Solas had let Cassandra lay eyes on his report to Adan before sending it off, it sounded like a cold, if it were viral, it would not be so debilitating to the Seeker that she would regret being
of assistance to Eleanor.

Marehis joined them, the women helping Eleanor strip off her armor, Cassandra almost didn’t realize she’d reached out to touch the long line that slashed from just under the left portion of her collar bone to wrap around her shoulder, a shorter mark on her bicep, and a third low on her ribcage, all drawn there by the talon of a Terror’s hand.

“I think they’re healed up good,” Eleanor offered, sniffing with congestion, “they don’t hurt anymore.”

“I’m pleased to hear that,” Cassandra said, truly she was. and it seemed…Eleanor did not shy away, she did not seem ill at ease or discontented with the possibility these marks may linger still, perhaps be scars to stay.

“Let’s get you cleaned up, sweet girl,” Marehis said, her voice tight in her throat. They took the opportunity to wash up themselves, assisting Eleanor, though when it came to the bandaging behind her ear she did not wish to clean whatever was under it just yet—the Iron Bull had taken to changing it apparently. Some benefit to her hair being so much shorter came in that it was easier to clean, and Marehis did seem to delight in indulging the girl with a bit of a scalp massage as she took up the task. Though it did turn out to be some small manipulation—the Elf woman lulling Eleanor into relaxation before voicing Cassandra’s shared concern, gently probing to be certain Eleanor did not find her appearance wanting due to her latest additions. Cassandra was nervous when Eleanor heard the question and raised a hand to trace along the scar across her lip. But then she smiled and said,

“I think they make me look kind of like Cassandra, and she’s beautiful!”

And blushing, and entirely honored. Too…she’d quietly felt the pang of disdain for her facial scars, when she first acquired them. The symptom of shame that came from being taught they were a mark to her beauty, and while she’d never entirely adhered to such standards…there was some measure of something ingrained in her younger self that beauty and worth went hand in hand. She could still remember how absolutely mortified—to the extent she’d sought a good cry over the matter, hiding under the comfort of her bedding—one day in Chantry when one of her aunts took sight of her face during what was meant to be an encouraging moment of fellowship. The Chantry Mothers had instructed the congregation to greet one another and wish them well—her aunt had taken it as opportunity to inform her, very loudly for all around them to hear, that Cassandra looked ‘just dreadful’ and she was certain there must be a cream that would ‘fix that horrible thing’ on her face. Now…she was rather glad of it, it felt like vindication for young Cassandra, she might not have felt so ashamed if she knew one day there would be a young girl who found no fault in her appearance because she’d found a positive example in her.

She had also found positive example in the Iron Bull, apparently.

“Don’t uh…just remember, you’re the ones that left her with us-” Bull started when he let Eleanor into his lap so he could make with changing her bandaging.

“With you,” Madam de Fer seethed over Dorian’s chortling at the Qunari’s expense.

“With me. If you’re gonna be mad, be mad at me. Imekari was down with it, turned out damn sweet and she likes it.”

“She does!” Eleanor confirmed. “Don’t be mad at the Iron Bull either—he offered, and I accepted because I wanted to. I love it!”
And that was the only reason...well one of the reasons—the girl was ill they were hardly going to rail at her when she should be resting...that they did not begin shouting at the Iron Bull. Even though he’d-! The Qunari had marked her! Given her a tattoo! To commemorate her growth and strength or some such nonsense—!

Ugh. It was not nonsense, not entirely. And it was admittedly...fitting. The Iron Bull had tattooed the Inquisition’s sigil—the sword derived from the constellation Visus*, and the all-seeing eye, the symbols that split to represent the Seeker and Templar orders. All in all it was beautifully done.

After consulting with Adan, the healer was certain that the girl had in fact developed a cold, verging so very close to respiratory illness in the girl. After weeks of hard, tireless travel after being so seriously injured in the Oasis, she’d hardly been afforded opportunity to fully heal, and then the barrage of horrible cold and rain in the Fallow Mire, it worked together to wear her down and leave her bedridden by a cold. Most fortunately, it was not the viral sort. Though it did claim one victim more.

"Hanging in there Sparky?" The Iron Bull sounded somehow concerned and amused all at once. He was seated alongside their poorly party members in the warmth of Madam de Fer's tent. The Human man was making quite the spectacle of himself, sprawled out with Eleanor, complaining of his every angst with fervor. It was rather a stark contrast, Eleanor was quiet, insisted she would be alright when she was capable of speech, apologetic when her hacking, liquid clogged coughing startled or woke her companions, whereas,

"I hate you. I am dying, you brute," one would certainly think so. "And here you mock me! I can’t breathe!"

"Sure are talking an awful lot for someone who can’t breathe."

"I'm sorry you don't feel good," Eleanor consoled him sleepily as she turned in her bed roll and settled against the ailing Tevinter. "Get lots of rest, okay? I hope you feel better soon, being sick isn't fun."

The man nodded and he did seem to deflate, albeit chagrined that the girl sought to comfort him while she was ill as well, "I suppose we're due a nap. Are you comfortable, Ellie?" he asked as he held her closer, the girl's head resting on his chest, the girl hummed contentedly. And it turned out his demanding demeanor was beneficial to the girl—while she would not always ask for what she needed, he had no problem being a voice for them, for days the Tevinter could be heard complaining loudly whenever he or Eleanor needed tissues or soup or something to drink—it certainly saved the girl’s voice and allowed her to rest and focus on the next breath. His voice was soothing when he asked Eleanor quiet yes or no questions, and then he would bark orders at the rest of the party.

They held their camp as travel was out of the question. Marehis was beside herself, constantly the woman sought to be at Eleanor's side such to the point she did not sleep at all the first night in camp. The woman had training, she could remain fully operational without rest or sustenance, but neither was it necessary she do so now. She'd anxieties, the potent fear that while she sleeps, Eleanor may stop breathing.

The second night, when she seemed she might continue her vigil, Solas saw fit to assure, "Vehnan, Cole doesn't sleep, he can be of assistance—wake us if need be—and he is monitoring her constantly," Cassandra heard Solas speaking softly to Marehis as they settled in for the evening. "You must rest."
"I do appreciate Cole's abilities and diligence," was all Marehis offered in response.

"Emma lath, do you trust me?"

"Of course."

"I will be monitoring Eleanor myself in the Fade, my body will be here resting, but I will be seated at her side, keeping watch. If her body enters distress, I will wake."

That seemed to placate the Elf woman. All fell into restful sleep.

Though it was rather startling when Cassandra felt an intrusive presence, opened her eyes to find Cole’s face hovering just over her own.

"Ellie is having a nightmare in the Fade—Solas is observing her body, not her mind, they aren’t together and if I go to her it won’t help. She needs to wake up but it might be dangerous—she is so scared."

Cassandra sat up, she wasn’t certain just what might happen, but she wasn’t about to suppress Eleanor unless she were a danger to herself—"Solas," Cassandra reached and shook the Elf Mage’s shoulder, “Marehis—wake up, rouse the others. Bull—help Dorian from the tent.”

“What-?” Marehis asked, half asleep and confused.

“Eleanor is experiencing a fever dream in the Fade. You must all either be prepared and protected or get out before she wakes.”

None chose to wait outside, it was mutually decided that Madam de Fer, Solas, and Dorian would cast Barrier to defend from Eleanor lashing out in confusion or fear or just magic pouring from her unbidden. Everyone was up, seated in their bedrolls, Eleanor was sweating profusely, mumbling incoherently in Antivan.

Barrier coasted across her as she knelt at Eleanor’s side, and laid her hand on her shoulder, the girl whimpered as she shifted restlessly, and Cassandra spoke, “Eleanor. Sweetheart, wake up, you are safe, it’s alri—"

Oh, Maker, magic did flood their quarters as Eleanor gasped, sat bolt upright with a cry, but it was nothing malevolent. Their tent was filled with a burst of purple light, and for a moment Cassandra was concerned the tent might fall in on them, it shook but thankfully held.

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I’m so so sorry,” Eleanor rasped out what sounded like dream-struck rambling as she gasped in air to catch her breath, and Cassandra moved forward to hold the girl as she sobbed.

“Shh shh shh shh, Eleanor, you’re safe, everything is alright,” Cassandra sought to soothe, hand threading through her hair to massage at the back of her head, “you’re safe.”

Madam de Fer stepped out momentarily, returning once she had a mug of something warm in hand. The girl was just laying against Cassandra, finally catching her breath after being so upset. The Grand Enchanter came and knelt, pressing a kiss to Eleanor’s head as she placed a hand on her shoulder and informed her there was tea for her if she wished. Eleanor sniffled a sob as she sat back from Cassandra’s hold, wiping at her eyes.

“Here Ink,” Sera offered a handkerchief for the girl to blow her nose, and she had to cough up drainage from her lungs, “good job, you’re okay, all clear now?” she asked and when Eleanor
nodded the older girl took back the handkerchief, “lookout, coming through, lung gunk on the move!” she announced like it were some great hazard she half crawled through the tent with to take it out and dispose of in their communal laundry—towels, washing cloths, and the like all went together in a satchel they took turns emptying and cleaning…it was Cassandra’s turn next, but perhaps she could guilt the Iron Bull into taking her turn as he permanently marked Eleanor’s precious skin. Ahh, Sera was back, trampling over her fellow party members to get back to Eleanor and sweep the girl up in a hug, “squeezing the sad away!”

Eleanor let out a quiet hum, something that ghosted on giggling and then, “Thanks, Ser’.

They were silent as they gave her a moment to collect herself, wake up and become aware of her surroundings proper. Madam de Fer passed along a warm mug of tea, which Eleanor accepted before turning about so she could sit in Cassandra’s lap, oh it was sweet to be there for her. Marehis came to sit alongside them, placing a hand on Eleanor’s knee.

“What had you so distraught, sweet girl?” the Elf woman questioned.

“I got stuck reliving a memory in the Fade. I didn’t…it didn’t feel like something I could wake up from just, like it was happening all over again,” she sniffled. “And then it started seeming like I wasn’t stuck, but that I was just there, for permanent. That nothing since then had actually happened, it was all just a dream I’d made up. I was worried I was really just five and scared and fantasizing some life I could have lived.”

“You life now is very real, da’vehnan,” Marehis assured, gently pinching the girl’s thigh a bit as if to prove as much.

“Good! Cause I love it lots.”

“You wanna talk about it, Imekari?” the Iron Bull asked.

The girl was quiet, contemplative as she sipped at her tea. Then, “Um. It started when I first started Fade Dreaming. Just the worst time I had dealing with demons before Envy.”

_Just what was your closest encounter with demon possession, what exactly is the great standard set by the Herald of Andraste?_ Madam de Fer asked, during her first lesson with Eleanor, met with nothing but polite refusal. Cassandra had been admittedly curious, wishing the girl to speak of it if it would bring her comfort, and now that such a time was at hand…the Seeker was admittedly nervous.

“When your magic wakened?” Solas asked.

Eleanor nodded. “I didn’t know what was happening, the first time I dreamed in the Fade. I thought it was just a bad dream, and when I woke up I went to mi Tia,” her chin quivered and Cassandra pressed a kiss to her hair, listening as the girl spoke, “—I was cold and scared and she always knew what to do, whenever I had nightmares or got hurt or sick. Except when I told her what I’d seen, she uh…well I guess it scared her. One minute she was taking me to the kitchens for warm milk, but after I started talking about my dream she dropped me, started panicking and asking me questions and the next thing I knew, I was being dragged to the time out room. I wasn’t sure what I did, she’d never had a problem with me coming to her about nightmares before, waking her up. She woke up all the other caretakers it sounded like, they were just yelling for what felt like hours, just back and forth, arguing over what to do with me, how could this be happening to someone so young, I must be evil or meant to be demon possessed, how could they be sure I wasn’t already? How to protect the other children? And then they had to go about the day like normal, get everyone up, meals and lessons, but they kept me locked in all day. I wasn’t let out
until all the other kids were put to bed. They kicked me out...in a pretty literal sense. I was little and hurt and scared, and I didn’t know where to go, what to do. I was so tired and hungry, and I’d been bleeding pretty badly, I ended up unconscious, back in the Fade.”

“You must have been terrified,” Dorian breathed, eyes misting with tears.

“I didn’t know what was happening. There was all these strange, horrible voices, things—these scary monsters coming and offering me help, telling me they’d do horrible things so I could ‘be avenged’ and others just trying to trick me into letting them heal me, making themselves look nice and telling me they’d make me feel better. I didn’t understand anything—no one sat me down and explained I was a Mage or had magic, or that I’d even been Fade dreaming. Everyone was just suddenly scared of me, wanted to hurt me, wanted me gone. I thought I must have done something horrible, I was so sorry,” she said, wiping at her eyes.

“You,” Madam de Fer rasped out with conviction, “did nothing wrong, Eleanor.”

Eleanor nodded. “I know that now. But I really didn’t at the time. ‘s’where I got stuck, in my nightmare just—sad and scared and ashamed.”

“You’d nothing to be ashamed of, Ellie. Accepting a demon’s help in innocence—you didn’t know any better,” Dorian was quick to console.

But Eleanor shook her head, “I didn’t accept a demon deal. At least I don’t think I did? I didn’t know what demons or magic were, but I did know the Maker. I started praying for Him to forgive me for whatever I’d done, for His help and...there was this woman, an Elf she...she seemed nice. She made everyone else go away and...I couldn't understand what she was saying, but she made me feel safe. And when I woke up, I was in the street where I’d passed out, but I was fine. I wasn’t hungry or thirsty or hurt anymore.”

“Could she have been a Spirit perhaps?” Solas asked.

"That was Faith," Cole spoke with certainty, "you reached out to the Maker in the Fade, needed His help and He sent you a Spirit of Faith."

Cassandra was stricken with silence, holding the girl as tightly as she dared. All were quiet and...well there was quite a lot of avoiding eye contact as handkerchiefs were shared and passed around without comment.

“Thank you, Imekari, for telling us,” the Iron Bull rumbled out, “trusting us,”

Eleanor offered the Qunari a tired smile, "Thanks everyone. I'm sorry I woke you guys up."

“Nonsense, Eleanor. If anything I woke them, and it is hardly a matter of fault," Cassandra assured, once she was certain of her voice again. "Would you care for potion, before attempting sleep again?"

“I feel a lot better now...but I am kind of scared I might get stuck again,” she admitted.

“Da’vehnan,” Solas ventured, “have I ever told you the story of a benevolent Spirit I call ‘the Matchmaker’?” and when the girl shook her head, “There is a small village* blessed with the presence of a spirit that looks into the hearts of the villagers, pairs its occupants with gentle loves that suit them best. If you give me a moment, I could manifest my memory of this place in the Fade if it piques your interest.”

“Really?” she asked, smiling softly at the idea, “Gosh that does sound nice.”
“Excellent,” Solas said, nodding before he laid back down in his bedroll and closed his eyes to focus.

Oh, he had better ensure the girl’s safety, peaceful rest. “Have a pleasant time, sweet girl,” Cassandra said, pressing a kiss to her hair. “Get some rest.”

“Sweet dreams, okay Inky?” Sera wished her.

“If you’ve need of anything da’vehnan, please, don’t hesitate to wake me,” Marehis intoned.

The girl nodded. “Thanks everyone,” Eleanor said, tiredly, oh Cassandra did hope she got to rest undisturbed now.

The Iron Bull was the first to step out of their tent. There was a sort of party meeting…consoling session more like it. All but Solas and Cole, who remained with Eleanor, the Spirit assuring he’d watch over the girl and make certain she was well. The others gathered around the rekindled campfire, Madam de Fer and the Iron Bull working together to make something warm for everyone to partake of. Tea, with an offer of a ‘little something to take the edge off’ from the Iron Bull. When it seemed none would refuse as much, the Qunari poured rum into their pot of black tea…and it was admittedly complimentary. Admittedly, it was unadvisable, she would repremand Eleanor if she mixed drink and potion, but Cassandra was an adult who knew her limits and it was hardly a strong drunken-bent drink. Warm, and the ache in Cassandra’s head resigned as she sipped her beverage, oh but her heart hurt, ached as Sera sniffled quiet sobs—she was seated beside the Seeker and the Nevarran woman reached out and pulled the girl to her side, with a bit of crouching the Elf’s head could be tucked just under Cassandra’s chin, the woman rubbing Sera’s arm to comfort.

It was Varric who found words first, his voice sounded scrubbed raw, as it was he had to clear his throat before saying, “Well…it’s no fucking wonder the kid’s such a wreck when she thinks she’s pissed us off,” he sighed wearily, holding out his tea cup to be refilled—he’d downed his drink in two swallows. “She honest to the Maker thinks we’ll just cut her off, turn on her if she doesn’t toe the line."

No fucking wonder indeed. Eleanor had been apologetic—borderline terrified it had seemed to Cassandra—when the girl thought she’d accidentally disturbed the Seeker’s sleep the first time the woman ever roused the girl from a nightmare in the Hinterlands, wholly relieved when she realized Cassandra had merely already been awake for the day. It had baffled her at the time, the girl’s reticence to rely on her for comfort from bad dreams, how timid she had been to take Cassandra at her word that she was to always come to her for such, that it was in fact fine—good to do so.

“Inky was terrified when she came to talk to me after the Trevelyan bullshite,” Sera said, “just about had a panic attack, shaking and crying—*I messed up I messed up I messed up!* Like she thought she was going to get the boot for misbehaving.”

*Get the boot* made Cassandra’s stomach turn—she could vaguely remember Eleanor describing her departure from the orphanage as such when asked about her upbringing when they first met, in those first tumultuous days in Haven, and now she feared it was a pun of the most horrific sort. A way of offering truth without its fullness to the ears of people she was just getting to know.

“We have to do something,” Marehis breathed.

“About those bastards, or Ellie-girl?” Thom asked.
“Both,” Cassandra was certain. “We must resolve, here and now, no matter what comes of this Inquisition, Eleanor will never live in fear for having magic, not ever again. She will know that she has allies and friends who care for her unconditionally, that she will not wake up one day and find our regard for her gone. Too,” she said, “I believe I shall consult Lady Josephine. Eleanor is certain the orphanage was near the Antivan-Marches border. Perhaps it can be located. We will see if some reform can be wrought, make certain such a thing never happens in that orphanage again. Antiva’s Circle fell in the rebellion, if such a concept still exists in future, we should see to it their country has more than one institute for magical people, provides education for those lacking magic so that they know how to handle such a situation when someone is revealed a Mage.”

Madam de Fer had seemed rather beside herself, Cassandra had not witnessed the woman openly cry, but even she had a handkerchief in the hand she’d balled in the fist she had pressed to her lips as she stared into the fire, she looked such a way Cassandra saw fit to offer, “Vivienne, you did not know, when you first spoke to Eleanor of her aptitude against demon possession.”

She raised her head, “I was cruel—“ the woman stopped, clearing her throat, seeing fit to change the subject, “It is rather something to think of, as well…” Madam de Fer ventured thoughtfully, considering something as she took up her mug from where it sat before her, sipped at her tea. “The Chantry, Circles, they teach us well, not to call out to Demons in the Fade, condemn Blood Magic. But none can stop a demon from seeking you when blood is spilled, we’re taught precious little but resistance. Eleanor’s understanding of why you must never accept assistance from demons is commendable, but perhaps…I wonder if her earlier experience could be replicated. If Spirits are…truly benevolent things of the Fade…we could preach against intentional Blood Magic and teach to seek the Maker when demons are upon you without your call. It would be a powerful tool to implement in our order of Mages, I could see it putting a stop to abominations in our ranks, and if taught appropriately, perhaps lend to fewer new Mages falling victim to demon influence.”

Oh, that was…that was certainly a thought. And the idea of Faith—it had many forms. One did not necessarily need to seek out the Maker. There were Dalish mages, that perhaps could use their faith in their gods to attract a Spirit of Faith in the Fade, call on them for assistance against demons when they descended. The implications were many and Cassandra, Madam de Fer, Dorian discussed the possibility, it would be heartening if something that once spoke devastation into Eleanor’s life could be used for the betterment of others.

Though they did need to seek their beds again. By the time their conversation wound down it was only Madam de Fer and Cassandra speaking—Dorian was rather exhausted still, on the upturn from his illness but still, he’d fallen asleep, the Tevinter Mage snoring against the Iron Bull’s arm.

“Kadan?” the Qunari rumbled out, carefully shaking the Mage’s shoulder, and when he didn’t rouse, the Iron Bull took him up in an arm and lumbered back to their tent. His horn ornaments made for rather an amusing sight, but they did do well to allow the Qunari to pass through their tent without tearing it rather spectacularly.

In the pale, dim light of the tent, Cassandra saw movement as she lay in her bedroll, but when she looked, it was merely Cole. The young man had gone to Rainier, she could make out the Spirit apparently being of some comfort to the Mercenary. There was the quiet shuddering of someone suppressing being heard crying, and Cole spoke softly,

“You’re scared now, that they blamed themselves, that they thought they’d done something to deserve Everett’s blade. They didn’t think of blame, they just wanted not to die. Go to sleep. I’ll stay with you.”
The following morning saw Eleanor and her party gathered around their campfire discussing how and when it would be best to move forward. Dorian had been down for all of two days, and he seemed rather recovered this morning. Eleanor was steadily recovering, felt she would be well enough to resume their return to Haven with a few more days rest, was grateful for the care taken with her. Today was the first she was strong enough to join the others outside of the tent for a meal.

Word came for the Iron Bull as they ate, and the Qunari swore under his breath in what sounded like Qunlat, as it looked like…she did not wish to pry, but a passing glance at what he received merely looked like an envelope with his own handwriting on the back. Eleanor was resting against Marehis, practically asleep, though she did crack open an eye to look to the Iron Bull when he said,

“Imekari…uh, you talk to Krem recently?” and the girl nodded, they did send letters back and forth, and the girl had been excited to share with Cassandra and Marehis the beloved picture the young man had sent her of little Anya playing in Haven’s snowfall. “He say anything about his mother?”

Cassandra was not certain what kind of mother this young man had but Eleanor…Maker, the girl actually growled before she offered a tight, “Uh-huh.”

“Slow your roll babe, uh, I meant recently-“

“I mean recently too-“

“Kid, she’s…she might be…” the Iron Bull sighed, wrenching a hand at the back of his neck as he gently informed her, looking miserable as he held up the missive he’d just received, “I just got a return to sender on his last paycheck.”

Oh. Oh Maker how horrible, Cassandra’s heart hurt for the young man. Had the Lieutenant’s mother passed?

“Good riddance,” the girl snapped. But then, “Oh! Wait—okay, I promise I’m not being a total bitch—his mother’s just fine, honest. Cremisius was pretty sure she’d stop accepting his paycheck here soon. It’s his business, I’m sure he’ll talk with you about it whenever we get back to Haven.”

The Iron Bull breathed a sigh of relief, “Shit, seriously? Why- right. His business. I was checking with you to see…I thought it meant his mother was gone, wasn’t sure if he knew or not, so I wanted to check with you, to figure out if I’d need to break the news to him when uh…well. No worries now I guess. Imekari, maybe you should nap a bit, we’ll wake you when lunch is on.”

Though Cassandra wasn’t certain just how ‘on’ lunch would be. She’d assisted in preparing breakfast and while she hadn’t said anything that might alarm Eleanor, she’d been horrified to find that…well they had been on the road for longer than intended—the trip to the Fallow Mire had been an unexpected excursion, and having so many interruptions in their plans, while they’d been prepared…one could only prepare so much. Their food stores were wholly depleted now, and Cassandra was glad the girl took up the suggestion to nap, she may be unsettled to witness the uglier parts of food preparation when one must go out and hunt it for themselves as it seemed they might need to until Haven could send supplies—she already had plans to write Adan, she would-

Ahh. There was no need. When the Seeker voiced her concern once Eleanor was in the tent asleep, she was met with both results, and an explanation as to the Iron Bull’s necessity to know if he would need to be breaking heartrending news to his Lieutenant when next he saw him…and why he thought Eleanor should go ahead and find rest before their meal.
“Don’t sweat it Seeker—I’ve been keeping my good eye on our stores, saw they were getting low and already handled it. My guys are on it, we’ve got rations rolling in, special delivery.”

Special delivery indeed. When Eleanor rose from her nap, she joined the others around the fire and it was sweet to see her expression light up when their surprise guests appeared from the tree line, toting supplies for their camp.

“Horns up, Chief!”

“Horns up!” the Iron Bull greeted his lieutenant jovially. Cremisius Aclassi, backed by the whole of Rainier’s men, Cyril raising a hand in greeting to Thom.

Ahh, not Cremisius—it was the young man, certainly, but he’d permitted Cassandra call him Krem, if she liked. She had been addressing him mostly as Lieutenant before but…they’d bonded after a fashion, in their time in Haven. Between shared care of Anya, and his checking up on those Eleanor cared for—to report back to the girl, Cassandra was sure—they’d become more familiar and…there was a comradery between them, now.

_The young man had seemed poorly—features pale and wan—exhausted, one day when Cassandra caught sight of him pacing apprehensively at the top of the stairs, before Varric’s tent. Cassandra stopped to make certain he was alright, did he need Adan?_

“Uh…not really, just uh,” he swallowed, the young man sounded incredibly nervous, “…Stitches is out with the Chargers on rounds, and I need um…”

“Lieutenant?”

“I need bandaging…fr-from Threnn.”

_Bandaging from Thre_

Ahh. Threnn supplied- Well. That certainly cleared up a few things for the Seeker…oh it was no wonder the boy was fearful. Cassandra could understand his hesitancy going to an unfamiliar person in search of something that might bring scrutiny. She rested a hand on his shoulder. “You needn’t seek the Quartermaster. Come, follow me young man, we’ll get you sorted.” And he’d been wholly relieved to follow her into the Chantry, to her own quarters, and she knelt at her desk to fetch the basket she kept underneath it, showing him where she kept it, “My own monthlies are light enough, regular to a degree I needn’t rein it in with potion. This should suffice, I trust?” she asked handing him a portion of her supply.

He carefully took the bandaging in hand. “Yeah, just breakthrough bleeding*, potion keeps it away year-round but uh, sometimes it pops up out of the blue.”

“If you’ve ever need, I always have some on hand, you’re free to it, without question. If you prefer…Adan has interns in his quarters? If you’re experiencing any other symptoms and wish discretion I’ll send a note along with you—I do not usually request potion for cramping and the like, you could speak with Adan freely of what you need, request as much as if you’re seeking it on my behalf.”

“Th- thank you, Seeker.”

_She offered him a smile. “We’re hardly in a work setting just now, consider calling me Cassandra.”_
“Consider calling me Krem?”

“Certainly. Krem, you are to come to me, if you are ever discriminated against—if you’d gone to the Quartermaster and she treated you unjustly, I would see such things corrected.”

“So far so good, and Chief and I have a good understanding of our own.”

“Cremisius I assure you, you’re hardly alone. I’m certain there are members of the Inquisition in similar circumstance, it would not do for any to lack medicinal treatment or the like—it would stay between us, but if there is someone working in service to the Inquisition unwilling to serve or work with all of its members, it must be dealt with. The same would be done of any mistreatment of bigotry. Our cook is diligent and serves well but that means nothing if he refused to serve Elves or Dwarves.”

The young man nodded. “That uh…thanks, I appreciate it. I ever see something I’ll let you know.”

It was a pleasure to be there for the Lieutenant. Such that a part of Cassandra’s Haven routine, in Eleanor’s absence, now held sparring sessions with the young man, specialized training as he was in charge of his Charger’s instruction, gave demonstration and correction, but he usually sparred and practiced against the Iron Bull. As the Qunari was away, and Cassandra the time and interest, she and Commander Cullen worked with the young man, encouraging him. It was only fitting considering the encouragement he was with the Commander—Cullen was appreciative of the assistance the Lieutenant had been, seeing the man struggle with claustrophobia and providing him reprieve without question or embarrassment.

“Cremisius!” Eleanor greeted cheerfully, though her enthusiasm earned her a bit of coughing.

“Hey lovely, still feeling rough?” Krem asked sympathetically as he walked right past the Iron Bull who looked mildly offended his Lieutenant beelined straight for his girlfriend seated by the fire.

“My tits not perky enough or something?” the Iron Bull grumbled quietly to Dorian who assured him,

“I do have an affection for your lack of perky tits.”

Ugh. “They are young and in romance, do please desist with saying ‘tits’,” Cassandra chastised, met with the pair’s quiet laughter, Maker help them.

“I’m feeling better,” Eleanor promised, as the Lieutenant came to stand behind her, resting a hand on her back and she tilted her head back to look up at him. “This doesn’t count as picking up—not while I’m rocking an upper respiratory thing, it’s not supposed to be contagious, but I don’t wanna risk it, you know?”

He favored her a smile before bending to press a kiss to her hair, “Got it. Huh, brushing your hair different?” he asked.

Her…her hair was barely an inch thick from her scalp-?

“New shampoo,” the girl returned with certainty.

Oh. They were precious.
“Ahh, well it’s real cute,” he said, gently scratching at her scalp, “I like it.”

“Hmm thanks…it’s growing on me,” the girl informed him albeit giddily, and Cassandra heard the Iron Bull chuckling as Krem shook his head at her pun, though he did bend to look at Eleanor’s exposed tattoo, she must have written him because he was not surprised to find it there and merely offered a grin and a ‘thumbs up’ that it looked nice.

“Alright, Lieutenant, you’ve got a job—quit fraternizing and get to work. Lunch. No hanging with your little girlfriend until she’s got a meal in front of her.”

The young couple each had their own looks of mischief on their face as Eleanor tucked her feet up under her and leaned back to spin in her seat to face the Lieutenant, the announcement that she had ‘a meal’ in front of her now crossing her lips just as the young man—who was now blushing rather fiercely—pulled the satchel off his back and started withdrawing covered ceramic pot.

“Chicken noodle soup, and…” he carefully balanced the pot in the palm of his hand, using the other to pull a canteen off the back of the satchel, “Haven’s finest selection of orange juice.”

“Koslun’s ass I got too many smartass kids. Alright crew, bring it in, let’s get lunch on the table, Lieutenant’s abandoned us.”

Said Lieutenant waved absently from where he was now sitting with Eleanor, “Uh-huh, sounds good Chief.”

They’d brought an excellent resupply of food, and their party and guests opted for making sandwiches, though Eleanor and Dorian both apparently got to consume soup Krem had prepared for them ‘Tevinter style’ which meant, while there was indeed chicken, the noodles were round, hollow, and it was rather a bit more involved—carrots, celery, onion, garlic, bay leaves…overall something hearty for their recovering members. And apparently Eleanor had enjoyed some sort of beverage comprised of cinnamon, honey and orange juice the young man brought along as it would be a nice treat full of vitamins, too honey did have medicinal properties, and cinnamon was good for treating colds according to Cyril. The Mercenary healer asked after Eleanor and Dorian, providing fresh potion for them.

While the Spirit was not one for eating, he did materialize, seated in lotus position before Eleanor and the Lieutenant as they started in on their own meals.

"Hey Cole,” Krem greeted amicably, “good to see you, how've you been?"

The younger boy rocked back, hands gripping at his feet, and he beamed a smile to the Tevinter, "I've been well! I am not hurt or hungry or tired, and I am happy. You worry for those things for me, Ellie does too, it is nice. I'm glad you're feeling better about your mother. The Iron Bull was very worried when he got your paycheck returned to him, he likes getting things in the mail, but it scared him shit, shit, how the hell do I tell him? What do I tell him? If you explain, he'll feel better. And so will you."

“Return to...oh. Thanks for telling me Cole, you're a pal,” Krem offered a wink, taking the Spirit's spouting information in stride as he looked to his leader, "Sorry Chief, didn’t mean to worry you with the whole return to sender thing—didn’t know until after pay went out, but uh...I guess that’s mother’s way of saying she won’t be needing my support anymore. She's fine both health-wise and financially.”

“She get a job or something?” the Iron Bull asked...was...was the woman unemployed?
Allowing her son to solely—she should not be judgmental, she hardly knew the situation, but the young man had quite a lot of responsibility foisted upon him.

“Getting married, actually. My father’s…legally, my parents have been divorced for a few years now,” Krem explained. Dorian nodded to the Iron Bull as if to confirm that were the case? Were the Tevinter men so close the Lieutenant had already shared as much with him? “and apparently she’s moved on. Got the invitation last week. No worries, I'll not be requesting time off.”

“...married?”

“Uh-huh. To Cornelius.”

Cassandra was uncertain who this Cornelius was, but the Iron Bull looked rather aghast at the notion, a mix of shock and quiet outrage. “You’re shitting me.”

“Nope. He’s always come around checking in on her after everything, apparently, and quote ‘one thing led to another’. They’ve invited me to the wedding if I’m willing to behave appropriately.”

Eleanor took in a breath like she was preparing to yell and somehow restrain herself from doing so, burying her face against Krem’s shoulder, letting out a frustrated sound…Cassandra could now understand her earlier outrage at mention of the Lieutenant’s mother. Behave appropriately indeed, the absolute nerve.

“You wanna fill them in on the good part?” Krem offered the girl.

“The part where I get to meet your mother and thank her for making you and then slap the crap out of her? I thought that was just a dream—Sabes qué, I’ll do it!” the girl was hardly in any condition to go picking fights and yet Cassandra was mildly afraid she’d need to keep an eye on her, maybe hide the girl’s riding gear so she would struggle to prepare Russel for an impromptu journey across Thedas to assault a Tevinter woman.

Of course, Cassandra was also of a mind to join her. Where in Tevinter was Cremisius from?

“s’okay El,” he chuckled warmly, “eat your soup, go to your happy place—I’ll fill them in.”

Eleanor nodded, taking hold of the Lieutenant’s wrist to pull his arm around her shoulders and she settled against his side before she resumed eating.

“What’s the story, kid?” Varric asked.

“I get this invite—and I thought I’d just ignore it,” Krem obliged, “but it uh, well I mean it’s some bullshit on so many levels, and I thought about writing you about it,” he said to Bull, “but mail call also got me a letter from Ellie asking after me, and as mother says: one thing led to another. Told her all about it, and she asked if she could see the invitation…then she asks if I’d be okay with her sending a response on our behalf seeing as my mother said I could in fact, bring along a plus one—and in ‘crazy-world’ where I’d actually accept such an invitation, that’d be Ellie. So I said yes.”

“Shit, you wrote his mother?” the Iron Bull asked Eleanor who nodded.

“Sent her a SWACK,” the Lieutenant was delighted to inform them.
“Swack?” Sera asked, sounding excited for some reason, “You sent her a punch, Inky? In the mail?” ahh. Such a thing would delight the Elf girl, bless her.

“Sealed with a kiss—a letter with a lipstick stain on the envelope seal,” Cassandra informed her.

“Oh. I was wonderin’ why Inky was getting all dolled up for the Fallow Mire.”

“Take note—I was already feeling the cold coming on—thought it might be an act of biological warfare,” Eleanor informed them. “I was going to be nice, really, but then I actually read her letter and lost my cool, just a little bit.”

“And it was just a little bit amazing,” Krem assured, grinning with pride as he continued, “Mother got a lovely letter from the Herald of Andraste. Ellie even put an Inquisition seal at the bottom to notarize it so she knows it’s legit—saying she’s so very sorry but we’re terribly busy sealing the Breach and saving the world, it’d be impossible to attend her wedding, but she was honored for the invitation and wished them the best, hopes they enjoy the wedding present for many years to come…that Cornelius should have an appreciation for them. El ordered them something we’re going halfsies on—how much do I owe?”

“Oh,” Eleanor held up two fingers and the young man dug into the sack of money on his hip to hand her two silver coins, “thanks.”

“What’d you get them?” Krem asked.

Eleanor bit her lip seeming wholly amused as she informed them, very casually, “We got them a dinner set,” she looked up at him, “Shatterproof. porcelain. plates.”

The Lieutenant looked as though he were in awe of her before he burst into laughter, the Iron Bull letting out a low whistle. “Shit. Do not piss Imekari off.”

…Cassandra was uncertain just how vengeful dinnerware was, but it certainly seemed to lift the young man’s spirits about the entire situation. He held Eleanor more securely against him, pressing a kiss to the top of her head.

It was maddening, this young man certainly- how dare his mother- he was a fine young man! Honorable, and brave, and compassionate, and kind, and if that woman did not wish to be the sort of mother he deserved- she-

Maker most high, preserve her. She was hardly a substitute for a maternal figure, but she was a reliable woman who could be depended upon for guidance and care. The Iron Bull had lamented having too many ‘smartass kids’ underfoot, Cassandra was certainly glad of it.

Even more so when the Lieutenant pulled Cassandra aside under the premise that he needed her ‘eyes on something’ from Haven. They walked to the edge of their camp, and the young man handed off a bag marked from Adan’s. Oh Maker, she’d- she’d been of a mind to write Adan to verify he would send refills, Eleanor had taken the last of her potion supply this morning, while there was still stomach and calming draughts to spare, even potion for sleep, she was wholly out of the sort she took for depression, monthlies.

“I checked with Adan to see if there was anything I needed to pass along. Refills of Ellie’s potions, fresh jar of Embrium salve, and uh…this,” he said, extending a smaller bag from the
Healers to the Seeker, “I made sure they didn’t get mixed up.”

Ahh. When she realized he was merely offering resupply of Eleanor’s potions she wondered at his discretion but…

“Thank you, Krem.”

“No problem.”

“I appreciate your discretion in this matter…I hope it’s understood I prefer Eleanor not to know?”

“Know what?” he asked, smiling assurance her confidence would be kept. Then, “You’re uh…just, she’d understand, if you told her—you don’t want to put that on her and I respect that but…I mean you’re talking with someone, right? Cause I’m a Herald of Andraste certified ‘good listener’ if you ever need it.”

Cassandra raised a hand to rest on his shoulder, giving it a squeeze. “Sweet man. I have shared confidence with others on this matter, and I am indeed taking your advice to look after myself,” she assured…in point of fact, it was the Lieutenant’s cautioning her to do as much when they spoke on First Day Eve that gave Cassandra pause to take stock with herself, realize that she may need to resume medicinal treatment for her depression, a mild relaxant to halt the onset of panic attacks. She’d been struggling as of late, with the stresses of her station and having Eleanor so far out of reach. Cullen was of comfort, she’d found she could rely on him for accountability and council, as he had with her in his own struggles with Lyrium. And Marehis had been an ally in ensuring Eleanor was not made aware—she was not ashamed, she simply did not wish to worry the girl—the Elf woman made certain her attention was occupied when Cassandra stepped away to consume her own potion before joining the others for breakfast. She thought the Iron Bull might be aware, the Qunari smelled the familiar potion on Cassandra’s breath, but he’d made no comment, just given the Seeker a nod that spoke to his own discretion.

“I’m glad,” he said.

“I assure you, your offer goes both ways,” Cassandra said. “If you ever needed council outside that which the Iron Bull can provide…a woman’s perspective, you may certainly speak with me.”

“Thanks, I appreciate it.”

“Of course.”

Eleanor was dozing when they returned, Sera had taken up the task of letting the girl lay against her by the fire, when the Chargers prepared to take their leave, return to Haven.

“Imekari, your boyfriend’s getting ready to hit the road,” the Iron Bull offered amusedly, a gentle attempt to wake the girl—she needn’t if she were truly exhausted, but she would feel badly if she missed their departure.

The girl shifted, did not open her eyes but her Marked hand reached out, waving, “Oi, guapo—ven aquí,” and she smiled when the Lieutenant came and took hold of her hand. “Be safe.”

“You too. No more mine diving, alright?”

Eleanor sighed as if disappointed, “Well, there goes my whole afternoon,” and then she smiled, “Tell Anya I miss her, and I’ll be home soon.”
"You got it. Feel better."

She did. A few days of solid rest, and Eleanor was back in form, in rather festive style. Cassandra woke, their last day holding camp, to the smell of pancakes and the sound of Eleanor and Sera giggling, Solas’s voice muffled as it filtered through the tent from outside. Eleanor appeared in the entryway, peeking in and catching Cassandra’s eye as the Nevarran woman had sat up in her bedroll, the girl was mischievous as she raised an index finger to her lips as a sign for Cassandra’s silence before the girl carefully tip toed her way to where Marehis was sleeping before she essentially crawled into bed with the Elf woman, snuggling in close, arms around her minder who stirred at the welcome intrusion. The girl was quiet, allowing Marehis to rest more, have a lie-in, though the woman only took a moment to bask in the comfort of resting with her ward before prompting,

"Da’vehnan?"

"Mmm, good morning Marehis, did you sleep well?"

"I did," Marehis said, "How about you, da’len?"

"Good! Are you hungry? We made breakfast!"

"Already?" Marehis asked, and feeling the girl already had her wrist watch on, the Elf woman raised Eleanor's wrist to inspect the time. "Goodness, its nearly gone nine."

Ahh. Had it? Cassandra supposed they’d all been due a lie in then. Their party roused for the day, congregating around the fire, met with…well, quite the feast of pancakes. One stack, in particular, was adorned with a handful of little candles.

"For me?" Marehis asked when the stack was placed before her.

"Uh-huh!" Eleanor enthused, arms around the woman’s neck as she hugged her tight, humming with her enthusiasm before she said, “Happy Birthday, mamí!”

Oh, it was incredibly, almost heartbreakingly sweet, Marehis looked overwhelmed as she held the girl close, “Thank you, sweet girl.”

“Sera and Solas helped me make breakfast for everyone! I wasn’t sure how to wing a cake out here, but Cremisius brought lots of things for pancakes and thought it might be a good substitute. He says happy birthday! Anya too!”

“Oh, tell him I say thank you to them both. Pancakes are an excellent birthday treat,” Marehis assured.

“I got the light, Ink,” Sera said as she struck a match and lit the candles.

The whole of their company joined in to sing ‘Happy Birthday’ to the blushing Elf woman before she closed her eyes and blew out her candles. When they’d eaten their fill of pancakes, Eleanor handed her a cloth giftbag, bouncing excitedly in her seat as she watched Marehis open it.

“Oh da’vehnan, it is beautiful,” Marehis breathed, as she withdrew a silvery necklace—a delicate chain off of which hung what looked like…it was a constellation, not one Cassandra knew off the top of her head, but it looked like silver lines connecting sparkling stars made of small diamonds.

“Madam de Fer told me about it—this little shop in Val Royeaux that makes custom
jewelry? It took a little bit of figuring out, ‘cause of the Breach and all but,’ Eleanor explained, blushing fiercely, she seemed shy to explain, “Kingsway* 1st, 9:41, these stars were over Haven.”

“Kingsway…” the woman gasped, “the day you woke—the day we met after your assault on the Breach, oh!” Marehis cried out, hugging Eleanor as tightly as it seemed possible. “I love it, so very much.”

After giving them a moment, “Vehnan,” Solas extended his own gift to Marehis, wrapped in twine bound cloth. The Elf woman unwrapped it to reveal a woolen sweater coat, a cheery yellow that matched the scarf and hat Eleanor had fashioned for her. There was a patch of evergreen fabric cut into the shape of a heart and sewn into the breast of the coat, and when she lifted it to try it on,

"Oh, emma lath," the woman breathed, ghosting a hand along the second item of clothing she found hidden beneath her coat. It was admittedly precious—Solas had fashioned a similar coat of evergreen wool with a heart patch the yellow of Marehis's coat, presumably meant to be worn by Eleanor.

"Gosh, that's so sweet Solas, it's so pretty! But um, aren’t birthday presents supposed to be for the person whose birthday it is?” the girl asked, confused.

"Da'len it most assuredly is a gift for me," Marehis insisted as she helped the girl don the coat over her sleep top. It wasn’t so big on the girl that it would be awkward to wear, but it did leave room to keep her from growing out of it anytime soon. “Ma seranas vehnan, they are beautiful, and so warm,” she was pleased to report as she pulled her own coat on.

“Here Mare, got you spy stuff,” Sera handed off a leather folder holding a thick stack of parchment inside. Was it…had the young Elf compiled a dossier? “Friends is always watching now, in Haven, and they report to me all the time—no big red flags but reading everyone’s things together…I think there’s a few holes in um, security. So, I put together a little something you might wanna pass on to Spy-tits.”

“Oh da’assan, I certainly appreciate it, thank you so very much—for this and all of your ‘spy stuff’, your Friend was of excellent help to me in the field- oh!” the woman took pause, “I’d forgotten—da’len, Thegan, Sera’s Friend from the Marquis estate I worked last month, he’s from the Free Marches? He wished for me to pass along a ‘Hey you’ to you.”

“Hey you?” Eleanor asked, albeit confused.

“He said it was a Marcher thing.”

“Like…slang? That doesn’t…” Eleanor took in a surprised gasp of air and then, “Wait, Thegan—that’s a Dalish name, right? He’s an Elf?”

“Yes, a City Elf.”

“Did he say anything else to you? Talk about the Free Marches at all?”

“He did not speak of his past very much. He mostly helped me with my mission, gathering information, but we were amicable, I would speak of my family and he would occasionally have something to share of his boyfriend—“

“Elf, likes men,” Eleanor listed, “is he an apostate?”

“I don’t believe so…though he did express sympathy when I spoke of my daughter being a mage, that it must be scary, the uncertainty the rebellion and Conclave have caused. And he had a
magical artifact of some sort, a necklace—"

“Charmed to vibrate at the top of the hour? And then he’d stretch like this,” Eleanor said stretching her arms over head.

“Y-yes da’len, how did you…?”

Eleanor let out an excited shriek, it was piercing even to Cassandra’s ears, Maker, and then, “That’s Sam!” she cried with excitement, “Hey you—that’s what I always greeted him with when we first met!”

“It isn’t a Marcher thing?”

“Nope! It’s a gender-neutral thing! Ahh!” she squeaked.

“Well shit, Tumbles,” Varric breathed, sounding excited for the girl, “That’s great—the guy’s in Orlais?”

“You want his info, Ink? I can pass along anything you wanna write him,” Sera offered.

The prospect sent her gasping, “Holy crap! He’s gonna flip when he sees I can write! Sera! You're the best!”

Sera whooped at the prospect of being 'the best' in Eleanor's eyes. Varric was rather insistent the girl be given time to sit and write to her friend, offering up his own ink and parchment for her use, and he sat with her, ready to be of assistance if she wanted to use a word she knew how to say, but did not know how to spell exactly. The Iron Bull and Sera both had written Cassandra on the matter—Eleanor having divulged Ava’s demise, that it was met while the girl was away helping her friend go into hiding after rebellion broke out. It’d been a matter of turmoil between the girl and Tethras apparently, and the Dwarf was eager to encourage her now, and it earned him a hug and a kiss on the cheek when she was finished.

“T’he gan is ‘T-h-e-g-a-n’ right?” Eleanor made certain before the sent the missive off. “Even if he’s reaching out because he wants to be in touch, he’s still in hiding so I figure I should use his ‘now’ name.”

Sera nodded. “That’s smart, you did real good Inky. Now, you wanna hug or be hugged?”

She did not usually ask...ahh. She meant how would Eleanor prefer to ride. The girl insisted Sera get to be 'hugged' today with Eleanor seated in the saddle behind her, since she very well deserved it, and apparently Sera had been doing quite a lot of riding Russel on her own or taking the reins and having Eleanor ride before her. Maker, they'd held such a fierce riding schedule...even before word came from the Fallow Mire? Well it was a bit of fortune considering they would have been farther away when word came, otherwise. But still, had meeting Varric’s cousin been so very important? Eleanor had still been recovering! And it had to have been exhausting for them all...especially Sera. Cassandra and she had an understanding similar to that which she had with Eleanor. Sera still struggled with the occasional nightmare after the incident in the Oasis, and she was to wake Cassandra if she struggled as such. She woke twice so far since being reunited in the Fallow Mire, to comfort the girl. There was something...Cassandra was hoping to catch the Elf alone, resume their training in Haven, get her somewhere out of earshot of the others so they could sit and have a talk. Sera...there was something she wasn't saying, about the incident, she would begin to speak and then stop, seem panicked, scared to speak further, and if she could be made comfortable with disclosing whatever the matter was to Cassandra...well the Seeker would certainly be glad to help her however she could, but she would need words put to the issue
It was wonderful to be back on the road once more, heading…well, Haven certainly did feel synonymous with home now. Eleanor was practically overflowing with excitement, and it was admittedly catching—a day and a half of riding lay between them and Haven, and with each mile traversed, Eleanor only grew more excited to be returned to Haven.

“Eleanor, come now, settle—do you need potion? You’ll need rest if you wish to actually be lively come morning,” Cassandra chided, the girl had chosen to sleep alongside the Seeker…except sleep would not be the word for it, the girl was wide awake.

“I’m fine Fade Dreaming if that’s okay with you,” and when Cassandra nodded, she continued “—I’m just! So excited!”

“Da’vehnan,” Marehis offered, amusedly, “sleep, we will be in Haven tomorrow.”

“That’s why I’m so excited! I can’t wait!”

“Imekari,” the Iron Bull spoke from where he lay on the opposite side of the tent, “if you fall asleep, it’ll seem like time has passed very, very quickly—you’ll get to Haven even faster. You need your eight to ten hours babe, s’what all the healers manuals say.” Had the Qunari read as much to know how to care for a Human child? And had he read such for Eleanor, or was this knowledge from when he first found himself giving care for his young Lieutenant? The Qunari was terribly tender hearted.

Eleanor sighed, sounding exasperated, even as she settled more comfortably against Cassandra, snuggling into her side as she lightly complained, “Gosh you three, I’ve got so many bossy mommies.”

Well now. That—goodness. Cassandra now found herself feeling wide awake.

“The Iron Bull is the mom!” Cole offered up giddily.

One would have thought it was Wintersend*…oh Maker! They’d! Had anyone remembered Wintersend?! It was Guardian 16th, the 1st had long since passed! She doubted any in Eleanor’s party had taken note of the day—they’d been tirelessly traveling from Orlais to the Fallow Mire, too it would have been inappropriate for those in Haven to celebrate with forces missing, possibly dead. Perhaps a bit of celebration could be brought to bear, a small gathering of Eleanor’s party to commemorate the occasion so it did not pass them by, a first Wintersend with the girl.

Passed or no—one would have thought it was Wintersend morning, the way Eleanor was eager for all to rise, bouncing around their camp, helping with every last thing she could to speed their morning routine—could they pray on horseback? Cassandra assured her horseback prayers were reserved for emergencies, the Maker should be communed with reverence and focus whenever possible. But breakfast was another matter—they prepared things that could be eaten as they traveled, as it stood, Eleanor rode with apple in hand and slices of toast in her coat pockets…as Solas intended. Literally, the Elf had taken into account Eleanor’s snacking, and lined the pockets in leather that could be wiped clean if say, chocolate melted in them or there was juice from fruit, or mess from butter. From toast. How had this child not grown an entire foot? Likely all her energy went into her exuberance.

Exuberance that was somehow outmatched when they arrived in Haven. By one, Cullen Stanton Rutherford. Maker. Preserve. Them all.
“Stand aside!” Cullen…no one was impeding his path to Eleanor, but he still saw fit to warn off any who might dare get between the former Templar and the 5’2” ball of energy who leapt from her steed and was currently running at full speed to Haven’s gate to meet him. “Eleanor!” he declared as he swept the girl up into his arms, hoisting her high as he hugged her.

“I’m back!” the girl announced, arms around his neck squeezing tight.

“You are! Are you alright? Cassandra informs me you were ill, you’re feeling better? You fell into a mine! What happened to your hair—did it get hurt when you fell? You’re alright yes?” he knelt as he set her on her feet, splaying his hands before her, “How many fingers am I holding up?”

“Eight and two thumbs!”

And she was in his arms again, “Good girl! Oh, I’m so glad you’re back safe. Your hair is adorable. Is this a new coat? It’s very cute.”

“Solas made it for me! And look-it!” she said, pulling back and twisting her leg so he could see a side profile of her boots as she pointed to them, “You got me these ankle boots, they’re the best!”

“I did? Ahh yes,” it took Cassandra a moment as well to recall the man had sent the girl money when she wrote she would be in Val Royeaux. “They’re very fetching, I’m quite the savvy shopper.” And then he…Maker the man looked almost sad, “you want to say hello to everyone else now, yes?”

“Yes…no…I’m very conflicted, I missed you a bunch. Like so much! My heart was very sad.”

That…that got her a third hug and the Commander actually *whined* before deciding, “I’ll quit my job.”

Oh for heaven’s sake.

…Cassandra had admittedly considered the same when her most recent job description kept her from following the girl to the Oasis. But that was rather beside the point.

“Do it,” Eleanor encouraged him. “I’ll hire you to work with me. Traveling places and sealing Rifts and taking naps.”

“Ha! You hear that?” he asked over his shoulder to his fellow Advisors. “The Inquisition hasn’t once offered me nap benefits.”

“Eleanor,” Leliana said, bemused, “please do not poach the Commander of our Inquisition forces.”

“Me? No, I would never…” and then whispering to Cullen, “I’ll have Varric help me write up a contract.”

“And I will give that contract serious consideration,” he promised, finally releasing the girl, “Alright, I suppose the others can have their turn.”

“Okay! We’ll catch up more later, papí!”

That certainly did not help the man in his reticence to share in Eleanor’s return, Cullen
looked wholly dumbstruck—struck dumb while Eleanor hugged and greeted the rest of her Advisors before going in search of Anya and Cremisius, Marehis and Sera trailing after.

“Did she…was that…am I?” he rambled haplessly.

Lady Josephine did seem amused to inform him, “Papí is Antivan, an equivalent for papa or daddy.”

“No it isn’t-“ he insisted, as if the woman was out of her mind. “I- that- What just happened? What do I do? Do I call her something? Am I crying or am I having a stroke?”

“You…don’t appear to be crying, so I certainly hope you aren’t having a stroke,” Cassandra offered as she approached the former Templar.

“Ahh, hi, you’re back,” Cullen greeted her warmly, though in view of Haven’s practice fields he daren’t do more than that in such an out in the open, professional setting. They were technically on the clock, though he did look like he very much wished to be through with their business for the day, “good. We have a meeting and I’m possibly stroking out.”

Oh she rather understood the sensation, but it was only when they entered the Chantry she announced, “Eleanor has become increasingly affectionate insofar as…she has referenced Marehis and myself as her…mothers.” The Iron Bull as well come to think of it but- Maker. Certainly...certainly the emotions were there, but to actually hear the girl acknowledge as much was overwhelming.

“Oh Cassandra, your aunts would be appalled—you a mother, unwed to your child’s… papí,” Leliana, oh the woman was horrible! Lady Josephine was giggling!

“Well…” Cullen supposed, “we are in a Chantry, I’m sure mother Giselle is around here somewher-“

Maker! “Perish the thought! We have work to do, do we not?” Cassandra questioned as she led them toward the War Room.

“Oh certainly, there is much to be done” ahh, blessed Lady Josephine, “we’ll need a cake, and flowers, music, and would you prefer a gown, or ceremonial armor?”

She was surrounded by traitors. “I will disband this Inquisition, I swear to the Maker.”

“Would you care for the authority to do that?” Leliana proposed as they entered the War Room, closing shut the door behind them as they took their stations.

Ahh. The purpose of their meeting. “Certainly not. Have we any new candidates for Inquisitor?”

“Chancellor Roderick has put his ginormous hat in the ring, for our consideration,” Leliana drawled.

Ugh. “Absolutely not, I will not abide that man have any power over Eleanor. Or any of us, for that matter.”

“Agreed,” Cullen voiced.

“It certainly wouldn’t be appropriate,” Lady Montilyet agreed. “I cannot think of any of our Chantry allies that would fit the role.”
“It isn’t something our noble allies can take up without causing major backlash,” Leliana said.

“True…are there any in Haven?” Cassandra asked, “Eleanor’s party?”

“Ahh yes,” Leliana drawled, "who would you prefer—the false Warden, the drunken writer, or the Qunari Ben-Hessrath spy?"

“Madam de Fer?” Cassandra offered levelly.

“I had such an idea earlier before her last trip out of Haven,” Lady Montilyet said, “it…did not go over well, she wants no higher rank, not within the Inquisition—she sees that we can get things done but she doesn’t necessarily wish to go down with the ship should things break down between the Inquisition and world leaders. Too, Orlais would have a field day if we raised their Grand Enchanter so high.”

“Any,” Cullen suggested.

“…that puppy is precious, and she would be the most adorable Inquisitor—do not tempt me,” Lady Josephine warned.

"That is ridiculous," Cassandra assured, indulging in a rare bit of jesting but she could hardly resist,

"Eleanor would be the most adorable Inquisitor," the Seeker and Commander spoke in unison. Leliana, eloquent as always, snorted.

“She is rather the Inquisitive girl,” Leliana offered.

“She is a girl, full stop,” Cassandra insisted, then sighed. “We’ve still time. Our Templars and Mages still prepare to take on the Breach, Madam de Fer has new training to implement in our Mages, I’ve further work with our Templars, and Eleanor…well, she has worked hard, went above and beyond to secure our hostages from the Fallow Mire. She will be given time off. No schedule, lessons at her leisure if she wishes them, as few meetings as possible—and I do mean that, if we can handle it ourselves, we should. We’ve no need to announce an Inquisitor when we’re so very busy handling the Breach, once its sealed of course, we’ll have little excuse and be expected to produce a leader to truly be taken seriously as we pursue this Elder One, seek to rebuild after the Rebellion and get justice for the Conclave. Without the Breach looming overhead, it will be easier for bodies of power to turn a blind eye to the problems still at hand, it is then we shall truly need an Inquisitor at the helm.”

“Lady Josephine actually had a bit of inspiration about that—Sealing the Breach,” Leliana informed them.

“We’d love to hear it,” Cullen encouraged.

“It is just a thought, but perhaps…all holidays fall on the first of the month—yes?” Lady Montilyet asked.

“Certainly—in fact I believe we should do something for Wintersend even as it as passed, we have not celebrated with Eleanor.”

“Oh goodness, yes, certainly,” Lady Montilyet was quick to agree. “As for the Breach…well, there is no holiday in Drakonis.”
“Save the Lady Seeker’s birthday,” Cullen quipped.

“Of course,” Josephine said, smiling as she suggested, “the Breach is something that threatens the world, its closing will be celebrated in the Ages to come, I’m certain. So, perhaps we should promote that. I propose we seal the Breach Drakonis 1st, 9:42.”

“Well then,” Cullen said as they thought it over… “happy birthday to you.”

It was quiet, in Ellie’s cabin, save for Anya’s huffy snores. Krem was working on sewing an extension onto one of El’s leggings, the sort she’d need for practice. Alterations to her clothes had been a hell of a job without a proper sewing machine, but it uh…it was a damn good distraction, something that served a purpose, kept his mind and hands occupied. Had the fire going, keeping it warm, he’d spent all morning…not taking out his troubles on poor unsuspecting firewood. Maybe a little bit. He’d gotten enough wood split to keep Ellie’s cabin warm through winter—Wintersend his ass, more like winter will never end. 16th and still, cold as shit, snowing all to hell. Fucking. Wintersend blows.

It wasn’t like he celebrated the damn day, not much anyway, aside from drinks with friends or something, and yeah he sent and received nice little letters from Remus, put a little extra in the cut of his pay he sent to Mother, passing along a little note that he hopes she’s well—a little note she always ignored. But then this Wintersend rolls around, and after years of zero contact that wasn’t Remus mediated, he gets a letter direct from his mother. And yeah, to my beautiful daughter Cremisius had been a kick to his brain’s bullshit, but he’d been so damn…just…he’d been excited! Relieved! He’d been expecting a passive aggressive Wintersend well-wish, Maker forbid he have a bit of hope. He thought maybe she was trying in her own way. A start, even a bad one, was a start, you know? It was relief, like, he felt like…the way you do when you royally screw up and your parents finally calm down enough to come talk to you about it. Except he hadn’t done anything wrong! He hadn’t done anything wrong, had he? Fuck.

“Fuck!” he swore when Anya suddenly shot up from where she’d been sleeping at his feet and started barking like mad, startled him, made him jam the needle right into his index finger ouch. Hadn’t gone too deep though, caught mostly callous—still.

Though uh, finger didn’t take a lot of the focus once the door to Ellie’s cabin swung open and-

“Baby Anya hi! Mwah mwah mwah mwah!” Ellie, she was already kneeling and getting an armful of super excited puppy, peppering Anya’s face with kisses, “Oh my gosh you’ve gotten so! Big! You had a growth spurt too, huh?” and then she gasped, that…yeah, that was nice. He’d hoped she’d like it, “And you have a little green coat!” just a warm fleece thing she had to put her head through, help keep her warm and from getting too snowdrenched when she went out, covered her back…had a little hood on it that yup, Ellie saw, pulled it over Anya’s head, “Oh my gosh you’re so cute! Did Cremisius make this for you? Oh he’s just the best!”

“He certainly tries.”

That got another gasp out of her…didn’t sting that she hadn’t noticed him right out the gate, she was real excited when she did take note. He set his work aside on her desk in time for-
She’d been literal about picking up where they left off. Hands on his scarf, feet on his boots, except he didn’t have to crouch, just lean down a bit as she pulled herself up to kiss uh, okay, yeah. His brain went dead silent, arms coming up around her because that was his job right? To be supportive? He supported the hell out of this.

“Uhh…Ink? I’m gonna just set my pish down and go check in with Lace.”

Marehis was clearing her throat, “And uh, if Mister Aclassi is staying and you wish a moment alone…I will be posting guards and touching base with my handler.”

“We don’t need to know what you’re touching with baldy.”

“Da’assan my handler is-“ and when Sera chortled, “very funny. Have fun with Miss Lace. Send for me when you’ve need, Ellie. Good to see you Mister Aclassi.”

Were they talking? What was going on exactly? Did Ellie just nip at his bottom lip?!

She had! And then she was pulling back just enough to twist a bit to look at the Elf women still standing in the door way, offering cheerily, “Have fun! Tell Mister Butler and Lace I say hi!”

“Say hi to Kremmy-boy for me!” Sera cackled as the Elves took her leave, closing the door behind them.

Ellie giggly when she looked up at him again, warm and rosey cheeked and smiling, “Sera says hi.”

“I uh, say hi back, I-I know how words work, honest-“ nope, didn’t, they were gone again. More warmth, Ellie’s smile against his lips and she was kissing him again.

She was blushing when she pulled away again, “Sorry, gosh I missed you. Hi.”

“Hi,” he offered back with a laugh, bringing a hand up to the side of her face, she was here! Back, and safe, and there was kissing and that, yeah, he was pretty stoked about all of that. Maker’s breath it was relief times a thousand to have her back, here, warm and welcoming. She was…this was…

“Cremisius?”

“Sorry I uh…”

It wasn’t exactly his idea of getting her in bed but the next thing he knew, Ellie was pushing him back till he was sitting on the edge of her bed before she began pulling off her coat and gloves, laying them over her pillow, kicking off her boots.

Then she went to the door, popped her head out to say something to a guardsman before she was back, pushing him back further so he’d scoot to sit with his back to the wall, then she climbed in his lap and held him tight, tucking his head up under her chin.

Cremisius Aclassi, after over a month of basically not seeing this girl, and finally getting to kiss her—proper, damn good, going places kiss her—was currently a Maker damned sobbing mess.

And he didn’t fucking know why! And somehow the smell of coconut oil, like she’d used so me on her neck, helped as much as it hurt. Killed him and was soothing as hell he wanted-
“It’s okay,” Ellie promised, pressing a kiss to the top of his head, “you’re okay. Whatever you need, whenever you’re ready, I’m here.”

And that was the problem! Not- not really, he wasn’t mad at Ellie, shit. He was…he was pissed at his mother—hated her. Hated! And that wasn’t very good of him, was it? But this was…what he had, what was going on with Ellie, what he felt—this was everything his father had ever told him, taught him, was this what he’d felt with mother? And how the hell, after years of building a life together, helping each other through hardship and heartbreak, how could she just, snub that? Cast it aside, move on from it like Father hadn’t given over his livelihood, his personage to keep her safe, whole, taken care of? He was out there, and yeah Krem got not wanting to be alone he really fucking got that. Did she think he wasn’t alone? Not…not anymore, not with his life now, with Bull and the Chargers, and everything the Inquisition, Ellie, had given him. But he’d been damn alone when he joined the military—and that’d been her choice, she couldn’t stand him, couldn’t bear to look at or speak to him, wanted him out, wanted him gone. He had to manage not being homeless and keeping his mother from becoming so herself. It’d been brutal and isolating and after everything, it didn’t matter what he’d done, it didn’t matter his circumstance, or his intentions—it’d ended with rejection. And that was just the bitch of it, huh? Everything ended with rejection.

And the thing was, when he first understood what he had in his hands—a wedding invitation—he’d been scared shitless for her. Thought she’d fallen on hard times despite everything he’d done, he thought he hadn’t worked hard enough, that she was looking for a way out on her own and it was his fault. He was terrified she’d turned to Cornelius for help and he was taking advantage of her—the guy’d gotten a lot of flack for trying to marry beneath his station in the first place, and to have been ultimately turned down, been the rejected party in that situation? No Laetan woman would raise a finger for his attention after that. If he wanted marriage, yeah, Liviana Aclassi was a last surefire resort. He’d been terrified for that woman and then—

_There’s always been something there, between Cornelius and I, but I was married, a mother by the time we met and fucking, what? That was supposed to make this okay? It wasn’t supposed to sound totally messed up? ‘Hi honey, I’m marrying your ex fiancé—but don’t worry, that doesn’t imply I signed you up to marry him, expecting you to go through the hell of spreading your legs for a man twice your age, growing a kid you might not get to see reach age 10 if it doesn’t start casting right out of the womb, let you wake up one day to find he’s been fucking me on the down low this whole time.’ And the thing was, he’d seen it! Not…not really, but he’d seen things. Lingering hands and glances, laughing at that bastards every attempt at a joke, always making a fuss over her own looks whenever he was supposed to be coming around. He’d always just excused it as…well there was a level Mother was always trying to maneuver people, she was like that with almost everyone, trying to be charming and charismatic, and she’d never so much as set foot outside the bedroom without fussing with her hair, dressing, putting on makeup. Never caught them getting things off but…when he thought back, his Father had seen something, that was for sure. One day in particular when he was fourteen, they’d been coming home when his father was done with the day’s work and…Krem and his mother’d had a row that morning, so Father spotted him a few coppers to stop in the bakery on the corner, get something that might help with smoothing things over while Father went on ahead. Krem got home and Cornelius was leaving—said he’d stopped by to see his fiancée but he had somewhere else to be, sent Krem off with a pat on the head like the patronizing cock he was, and mother and father were in the kitchen having it out, his father was appalled about something being inappropriate and mother was insisting he’d gotten it wrong, hadn’t seen what he thought he had. Well guess what?!_

“What is he going to do? He—” damn it he was sniffling, real smooth, right? And it was stupid. Pointless almost, he wasn’t even sure where his father was, let alone…if he was ever getting out, would ever be in a position to find out his wife had moved on, his son was on the other
ass end of the world. They’d been in a hell of debt, hundreds of thousands in silver…somehow that
felt better to think of than the smaller number when converted to gold, shit. Gold. Scary fucking
currency. They’d put themselves in debt just to make Krem in the first place, they’d barely owned
the house, and had loan after loan to keep the business going. Slaves were lucky if they made
actual copper sized dents in their debt in a day, in a week if their masters were real bastards, and he
sure as hell had no clue what sort of master Magister Tilani was. But still the question just fell right
out of his stupid mouth, “What is he going to do?”

“Depends on who ‘he’ is,” Ellie said as she sat back to look at him. “Cornelius…be a
bastard. If you’re speaking in reference to yourself—be super, super loved, have a cry, talk it out,
and eat whatever sweets Flissa’s got around right now. Anya, come cuddle Cremisius, kay? Need
help baby girl? Good job!” Oh Maker bless that pup, she was big enough to paw her way up onto
the bed, jump off her back legs and up she went, sniffing around before climbing into Ellie’s lap,
front paws on Krem’s shoulder as she rose to lick his face. Hoarse laughter tore from his throat
when he had Anya licking at one cheek and Ellie rapid-fire peppering kisses to the other. When
they were through with their bombardment, pulled a smile out of him, Ellie shifted so she could sit
with her side, her head leaning against his chestplate, and Anya settled to lay in Ellie’s lap, letting
out an appreciative ‘wuff’ when Krem started petting her.

“I mean my father. It’s stupid, I know, just. I don’t know how he’s going to feel if he ever
gets out, you know? Mother just…packing it in like this, this whole thing.”

“When your father gets out,” Ellie insisted, “yeah. It kind of kills me that your mother’s
doing this to you guys but…if this is what she’s doing? Your father doesn’t need that, and neither
do you. She made it sound like this was a long time coming. If anything I almost wish she’d done it
sooner—it’s shitty, but if she really wanted Cornelius, wanted Laetan status, she should have just
divorced your father and been done with it, instead of pushing for you to marry him for his status. I
hate that she put you through that, and I hate that she’s putting you through this now. But…this is
all for the best. She gets what she wants, and you can live your own life without her.” and then she
raised a hand to his cheek, made certain he was looking at her, meeting her gaze as she looked up
and asked, “Do you trust me, Cremisius?”

“Absolutely.” There wasn’t a question about it, just, yeah. He did.

“Absolutely.” There wasn’t a question about it, just, yeah. He did.

“I know. I know your father is safe, and healthy, and alive. And I know that he is doing
everything he can, so you can be together again. And when that happens, yeah, he might be sad,
have some regrets about everything back in Tevinter, but he is going to be so, so so
so so incredibly proud of you. He is proud of you, and he loves you, and he wants you to be
happy.”

Hoped so. And Maker if she wasn’t convincing, and just- He wasn’t sure what sweets Fliss’
had coming their way but uh, he was good. Anya was…somewhere, no offense to her, he wasn’t
exactly focused on that, except insofar as she wasn’t in Ellie’s lap anymore so there wasn’t another
thing to take into account as he caught her lips with his own, Ellie steadily kissing him back as he
moved until Ellie was laying back, a contented hum against his lips before she pulled back oh—
yeah, breathing was a thing…nice thing, left her neck exposed, and he could verify that dry
weather had her moisturizing with coconut oil, which was a nice mix with the salt of her skin.
There was this sound though, just barely noticed it like…something being chomped at, the smack
of a mouth full of food…he definitely wasn’t making that noise.

Ellie’s hand on the back of his neck flexed three times, oh shit, okay, backing off- oh, it was
reassuring though, when she said, “Cremisius…love what you’re doing but uh, Anya’s looking me
in the eye right now.”
He looked up to find Anya staring at them, seated on Ellie’s coat, with, “Where’d she get toast?” pup had butter on her nose and everything.

“Pocket toast,” Ellie offered up simply.

…that checked out.

It was probably a good thing. He wasn’t sure what he was doing exactly, he was…a little all over the place right now, what was he even on? Hi, welcome back, how about I cry all over you, vent my parent-issues, and then suddenly get frisky while your dog watches, she’s got a snack and everything let’s give her a show? And he definitely didn’t want to push too far, too soon.

And there was a knock on the door that so wasn’t made by a little Human hand, had him shooting up and back, almost falling off the bed but Ellie’d sat up, letting out a surprised squeal as she took hold of his hands and pulled to keep him balanced on his knees on the edge of the bed, kept it so he didn’t fall and allowed him to stand up just as the door swung open.

“There you are, Cookies-and-Krem—not just a name pun. You’re the 'Cookies' part, Boss-girl.”

Ellie let out a little gasp, big smile as she announced, “I love that!”

Maker help him, Bull was chuckling, putting his eye on the situation and even if he hadn’t seen anything, there was hearing and…was there anything to smell? Damn that Qunari, what the hell did he want-

Guy had a tray in hand from Flissa’s and was setting it on the food of the bed in the same motion he used to pull Krem up and in for a hug. Not a headlock, just, a straight up, big, warm, long hug. Real long, by the time the guy let him go, Ellie was sitting, smiling at them as she held Anya in her lap, the pup still licking butter off her own nose.

“You invite Krem-dip to the blowout tonight?” Bull asked Ellie.

“Nope,” Ellie said, popping a bite of muffin in her mouth.

Kind of strange, someone else inviting him to a Charger party…but Bull usually planned the things, and he’d been out with El so, something they’d put together. “Of course, lovely, party sounds good.” Would any day, wasn’t quite in the mood but getting there. Between the three of them, plate of muffins didn’t stand a chance, though two cups of coffee didn’t stop Ellie from zonking out, asleep against his shoulder. Like puppy mother, like puppy daughter he supposed—
Anya was snoozing in Bull’s lap. Guy’d been damn nervous to touch her back before they left Haven last, she’d been so much smaller and he was obviously worried he might accidentally hurt the pup, but she was bigger, sturdier now so the Qunari indulged in petting her head.

“How you feeling, Cremisius?” Bull asked quietly.

Well damn.

“Better. Like shit—but better shit.”

“Always here if you need it, kid—shanedan.”

Didn’t know a hell of a lot of Qunlat—’cept the curse words, and Shanedan. Greeting usually. Meant I’ll hear you. And with them…yeah, either of them needed to step aside and hash out the heavy stuff, that was the call. Or in this case, the offer.

Yeah. Bad enough he’d already…how the hell was- she kissed him, and he cried—sobbed all over her—aired his angst, and she’d just, rolled with it, listened, held it down. Still, wasn’t his finest moment, and he wasn’t feeling like having a repeat session. “Thanks, I really appreciate it. Kind of talked out for right now.”

That got him a little smirk. “Talking, huh?”

“I swear—we were just-,” okay, that was a look, “we mostly just,” he amended, “talked.”

“Just, you know. Be safe, courteous…generous-“ wagging his- ugh, gonna shave those damn eyebrows!

“I’ll murder you in your sleep.”

“Be my guest. Got a clause in my will that says you get a nice chunk of gold if you ever do manage to get the best of me.”

Huh. “Could probably use a new binder,” he supposed.

“No probably about it, shit, would you stop growing? I’m filling you up on coffee from now on, brat. No more milk and veggies, you’re on a strict coffee-muffin diet,” Bull complained, raising a leg to kick at the bottom of Krem’s boot, his feet were hanging off the side of the bed. “Thought you were looking different, taller, got Skinner to get your measurements for me,” when…when the hell had Skinner taken his measurements?…nah, didn’t really wanna know.

He hadn’t shot up another foot or anything. It wasn’t even that he’d gotten taller, just…he’d gotten Cullen and Cassandra, really.

They’d been training him and uh, Seeker had an understanding of how different training, different exercises toned and shaped her own body. She sat him down and had a conversation in private one day and she just…Seeker of the damn truth’d him in the single most gentle definition of that title. Didn’t make him feel uncomfortable, and got him to open up, explain any aches he had about his body without shaming them or speaking like they needed changed—she made sure he knew he was exactly as the Maker intended, in a sense that didn’t sting. He used to resent that idea—like the Maker had wanted him to be miserable, that’d He’d made him wrong on purpose, but he hadn’t. Maker made him a man, it was society and rhetoric that said he had a body that didn’t match. So he laid out the things that got to him, ticked at his dysphoria, and she listened. Cullen had seen Krem in his sleep shirt sans-binder a handful of times since Krem usually made sure to go out and check to make sure the bonfire was still going warm, and not out of control nights when the
Commander was taking the unspoken invitation to sleep under the stars on the Charger’s field. Guy never commented, there was no sudden change in how he treated Krem, so he gave Cassandra the ‘okay’ when she asked if he’d be comfortable with her consulting Cullen. After a few days of brainstorming with the Commander, they introduced Krem to a routine that they were certain would give him some control over the things he couldn’t change. And it really had, Maker—binder had fit better after the first week of training, had to be bound tighter because working his shoulders, his chest, he’d dropped a little of the fatty tissue there. Was cutting it pretty close lengthwise now though, he’d bulked up in his shoulders and arms, filled his armor better now, and the…muscle was filling out where there had once been sloping along his sides between his ribcage and his hips, now it was a straight shot. Took his ab game to a whole new level.

“No way your ab game is better than mine.”

“You wanna bet?”

“You’re on, brat—ab-off later, you and me. New binders are waiting for you back on your cot, you good armor wise?”

“All good Chief, thanks.”

“Don’t sweat it. Hope you like ‘em.”

‘em? Like…like them? As in plural? Just how many had he gotten?

Answer was three. They were waiting for him on his cot when he left Ellie so she could get some proper rest, not just sitting up leaning against his shoulder. He’d woken her up just so she could clean up if she wanted, shown her the progress he’d made with her clothes, they were basically all done—sleep clothes would be more comfortable than the nicer set of clothing she’d been wearing. She’d liked it—what he stitched into her sleeves for her meeting in Val Royeaux, said it went great and his tailoring’d been a big help. She was sweet. Sweet, and currently napping with Sera, Lace, and Anya—Elf came back around with her girlfriend just before Krem and Bull split. When he got back to the Chargers tent he found his new binders and…uh…huh. There was a thin leather-bound parchment pad and a slender, rectangular leather box beside them with a little note, Happy Wintersend, asshole. For the next time you wanna send your girlfriend something. Or make me something nice—not opposed to posing for tasteful nudes. Bull’s handwriting, pushing at the bottom edge, the inside of the case slid upward to expose what was inside. Real nice…nice set of oil pastels. Sketching pad. Sweet.

Wait. He thought it over as he stored away the pad and pastels in his trunk. Was…was Ellie his girlfriend? Should he ask her? They’d laid it out they were dating, exclusively. Had that been that conversation? Bull’d called Krem her boyfriend, but did she call him that?

He was pretty sure he’d rather crack open Haven’s frozen lake and go for a swim than ask Bull.

But uh. Bull wasn’t the only member of Ellie’s party.

“He isn’t!” Cole- holy shit- enthused as he appeared on Krem’s cot. “You wanted to talk to me, I wanted to talk to you too. You were hurting when you brought us food but you didn’t want to hurt openly in front of everyone, it would have made it worse. You shouldn’t be embarrassed about crying. Men cry—all of them, even the Iron Bull, he cried when he was scared he’d broken his Imekari.”

Oh, shit, “Thanks, Cole but uh…I know that—crying being okay. And he probably
wouldn’t appreciate you talking to people about that.”

“He wouldn’t mind, he isn’t ashamed. You shouldn’t be either. Ellie did not see you as less than, did not think you were not a man. She comforted not to coddle but to console, it hurts her heart when you hurt. She liked when you were kissing her- oh, I’m sitting on your chests. Sorry. Here—I’m not heavy, not as I am, I didn’t hurt them I don’t think, is it okay to hand them to you?”

His chests? Oh, “Uh, sure, I was just about to put them away, thanks.”

Cole popped up off the cot and carefully gathered the binders into a neat stack, handing them off to Krem, “Ellie will think they are handsome—she always thinks you’re handsome—she will like these, but she will also like what they make feel right. It scares you sometimes, when you think that someday she might see—she wouldn’t see something that did not fit, she would want you in any way you would give yourself to her. Like with the Iron Bull, and the Chargers—your body isn’t wrong, and neither are you.”

Well. Uh. Damn, all he’d wanted to know…well yeah, he guessed in the back of his mind things like that were always ticking away at him, but he’d honestly just been wanting-

“Oh! If you asked her, she would like it, she would say yes, and it would make your heart warm. She has introduced herself to…others, as your girlfriend, when they’ve asked. She has also called you her man.”

“Really?”

Cole nodded earnestly. “Misgender my man? Not to-freaking-day! she was very angry when she read your mother’s letter.”

She really had been…shatterproof plates, damn, that…that almost made the whole thing feel worth it, honestly. “Thanks uh, for the info. I appreciate it. You ever need anything, I meant it when I said you could come to me.”

That…kind of got him a little more than he bargained for. Glad to help, just, he hadn’t expected Cole to take a seat and say,

“What do you do if someone is having thoughts about you…and you like those thoughts, have them yourself about them in return?”

…”Well,” Krem said, closing the trunk at the foot of his cot before he took a seat on the lid. “That depends on what kind of thoughts I guess.” Please don’t be weird sex or murder, please don’t be weird sex or murder…please don’t be weird sex and murder.

“She thinks I am very handsome—am I very handsome?” he wondered, sounding curious, not insecure.

“Yeah Cole, you’re very handsome,” Krem assured.

“Oh, good. Thank you. I think she is made of healing—she is light and kindness, and she makes people happy, and lighter for knowing her, hearing her. I want to know her and she wants to know me. Both in who I am and in…I…see what people do together, they need it—like you, and Ellie, or the Iron Bull and Dorian, or Cassandra or Cullen or Thom or-”

“Yeah, lots of people uh, like uh being together in all sorts of ways.”

“Sex.”
“Yup.”

“I do not need it. It is not something I want, not in the way a lot of people do. But I would not dislike having it with her. It would make me happy to make her pleased. It is like... I do not need to eat, so I do not want to eat, but I do not mind eating when it makes Thom or Ellie happy that I enjoy their cooking—and I do enjoy it, it tastes good but it is not to satisfied a hunger, fulfilled a need. Is it... is it okay that I do not need it?”

Huh. “Of course, Cole. Everyone’s a little different er, sexually. Just like the eating thing— it’s not wrong, as long as you’re not doing something against your will, you’re fine. Sex is more serious though, don’t do something if you aren’t okay with it, ever. If you don’t want to do it in the way like…” shit, how does Cole-brain work? “Like, you don’t want to hurt people, right?”

Guy looked real serious, “Yes. I do not want to hurt anyone ever again.”

“So—the way you feel about hurting people, if you ever feel like that in any situation, especially sexual Cole, speak up, make it clear, and if she—or whoever you’re with—can’t respect that, or if you ever feel uncomfortable, or unsafe, walk away. Or, you know.”

“Poof.”

“You got it.” And then… “You... you know how to be safe, right?”

“Oh yes, I have my knives, and I can teleport.”

“Not... not what I mean. You... sex is invasive, and you never know how many partners the person you’re with has had in the past—if they’ve picked up something that could spread to you, you want to avoid that-“

“There is the man from Starkhaven, she liked the way he-“

Okay, Cole could know exactly how many partners whoever this was had had, “Don’t need a list. Just, you want to be mindful of STD’s is all. I don’t know how this,” he gestured to Cole in general, “works uh... he might have had sex before you came into the picture, you know? So you might want to stop in at Adan’s or go to Stitches, get tested. I can go with you if you want. It’s not bad or scary, I’ve been tested before.”

“Because you’ve had sex?”

“Yeah buddy, I’ve had sex.”

“But if you haven’t, you do not need testing?”

“Not that I’m aware.”

“Okay then. Sera should test, and the Iron Bull, and Dorian and Lace and Thom and Cyril and-“

“Again, don’t need a list of people who need er, tested. I’m sure they’re handling their own business.”

“Oh. Ellie doesn’t need to be tested! She might be the only one in Haven... aside from Anya. And most of the horses. Should the nugs get tested do you think?”

Holy- she- wh- uh... what?
He cleared his throat. “My point is—you should get tested, make sure you’re clean and clear before pursuing uh, sex. Also I’m not sure how everything works for you but there’s a chance, since you do uh…” how technical did he need to get?

“I have a penis and testicles.”

That worked. “Yup, that’s great bud, you’ll want to make sure to use condoms—they’ll help protect from catching or spreading disease, and uh, keep from any accidental pregnancies.”

In full, serene sincerity, “If she wants my penis and I want to share it with her, I will bring a condom.”


“Yes. The Iron Bull uses them, I know how to now too.”

That’s some nightmare material right there. “You know he’s um-“

“Very big.”

“Yup, big. You’ll want to make sure you’re using the right size for you—use something too small, that’s just not gonna work, but neither is something too big. Uh. Why don’t we just go to a healer now, okay? Get this settled so you’re ready whenever whatever this is goes down.”

“That’s alright. Adan is busy brewing…Stitches is having fun right now, I wouldn’t want to disturb him. I can see enough—this body is not diseased, and I will make sure I’m prepared in the future. You did not answer the question—what do I do when someone is having thoughts-“

“Oh. shit. Yeah. Sorry. Needed more information, and got sidetracked—strike up a conversation with her. Get to know one another, maybe have a meal together? Be honest about your interest, without overwhelming her. We're uh...talking about Maryden, right?” Cole nodded. Yeah, lady seemed like she was interested in the Spirit...huh, ”Biggest thing I see that could be an issue is this...you have abilities she doesn’t. Remember she can't read your mind, so you have to be upfront about things, and make sure she's comfortable with you knowing what you know—it isn't like you can help it, so she needs to understand that, know what she's getting involved with. If she isn't comfortable, back off. Number one thing though, Cole—if you mess up, if you make a mistake, no matter big or small...you have to own up to it. It's different from dealing with hurts—if you mistreat her, or embarrass yourself, you better be prepared to make up for it, or roll with the punches. It isn't right, to do something that hurts someone, and just play with their memories, make them forget it so you can get away with it and move on like it never happened. Relationships can be hard, messy, but if you want one, those are risks you have to be willing to take.”

"I understand that, and I wouldn’t, but I am glad you would be honest and make sure that I knew,” Cole said. “You are a very good friend, Krem.”

Yeah, well. “You’re a good friend too,” he checked his watch, “got some time if you want an excuse to hang around the Tavern—I could use a drink.”

“I will pay for it, since you need it from being my friend-“

Well shit, that wasn’t- “Cole, being your friend isn’t driving anyone to drink. It was a joke, mostly, and if I’m a little uncomfortable working through a conversation like that with you—that’s on me, it’s got nothing to do with you and everything to do with some subjects just being awkward for some people;”
That got him a brilliant smile and, “Then I will buy you a drink because we are friends!” and then he was gone. Huh. Might wanna let the guy know part of being friends…and especially part of being more than friends meant less ‘poofing’ and more hoofing it with the person you’re going somewhere with.

Didn’t know if it was better or worse, that he left the tent alone. Damn. It.

Bull. Dorian. Thom…all the core Chargers—Stitches was having fun, huh? Assholes. Seated on the ground in lotus position looking like a fucking kindergarten class, smiling like idiots. Listening, or getting a whispered play-by-play, for their less sensitive-of-hearing members. The Iron Bull started a slow clap…clap…clap before they all offered up cheers and whistles,

“Good lesson teach’,” the Qunari chortled, “You should be a motivational speaker-“

Oh, “Fuck off.”

“Any suggestions how? Good position to start with? Foreplay tips?” Uh-huh. Leaving now, Krem ignored him and started heading for the gate. “Hey! Get back here and teach me how to wear a condom damn it, I’m out here riding blind!”

“Eat me!”

Least it got him a beer—two because Cole appreciated Krem intentionally thinking of the tip that if he did ever go out with Maryden, he should stay with her physically, walk alongside her everywhere. Except the bathroom. They sat and listened to the music, waited for Maryden to get a break and then Cole got her some tea—honey and lemon in it, seemed to impress the woman that he’d thought to do that for her, was good for her throat when she worked she said as the Spirit led her to sit by the fire, leaving Krem at the bar with his drinks. Offered them a wave when he took his leave—he’d done his part and he had to go get ready for dinner.

New binder fit sweet. So it was a tunic night, armor could take a break, and when he finished washing up and getting dressed, Bull was in the clearing by the bonfire and,

“Hey brat! Get over here, you and me, ab-off, no holds barred.”

Had a beat before he needed to swing by Ellie’s. “You sure you wanna do this old man?” Thom barked a laugh at that getting thrown at Bull for once.

Ass was flexing like mad, sucking in his gut, “I was born with abs of steel. Par Vollen rings with songs of their glory. An Orlesian Marquess once paid five gold just to lick their crevices.”

“Lick yourself,” Krem shot back, and uh…well, it was nice to feel confident in pulling up his shirt, just under his binder.

Bull relaxed and let out a whistle, “Damn ice-Krem,” he said, reaching out and patting Krem’s stomach, “out here getting your gains, gonna have Orlesian nobles lining up dropping ten gold just to look at ‘em.”

“Twenty if they wanna touch,” he said as he dropped his shirt.

“Stop teaching the boy to whore himself, you rotten bastard,” Thom snapped, lobbing a handful of snow at the Qunari. “Nice work, Krem—training hard?”

“Just different,” Krem shrugged.
“Seeker’s doin’ a good job. Uh…” Bull cleared his throat, “Said she and Cullen’d still train with you, if you want. Invited me to join, but uh, it’s up to you—don’t got to if you don’t want me to.”

Was the Qunari sick or something? Taken a blow to the head? “Why wouldn’t I want to train with you? Hell yeah, you wanna join us, that’d be sweet.”

He…looked like he was relieved to hear that? Something doubtful in his, “Really?”

Okay. “Shanedan,” Krem waved for him to follow, blacksmiths was empty now, so they went to the fence and, “What’s up?”

“Nothin’,” Bull assured, “just telling you what Seeker offered.”

“She say something to you? Try to make you think I don’t want to train with you, I’ll set things straight-“ did not want to actually fight Cassandra, but if she was putting some kind of random nonsense in Bull’s head- why would she do something like that?

“Slow your roll—she didn’t say anything Krem. Just me, I guess.”

“Well what the hell’s the matter with you then?”

“Noth-“

“Pretty sure I’m Cole’s best friend. I will tell him to haunt your every sexual encounter into the next decade if you don’t cut the crap.”

Bull sighed, leaning back to sit on the stone fence, shrugging. “Dunno. It’s stupid, just…I feel bad I didn’t think about uh, all the stuff Seeker did, when she took you on. Working with what you got.”

There wasn’t anything to feel bad about. “I only have most of what I got to work with because of your training. I can kick dudes two, three times my size’s ass because of you. Seeker just came at it a different angle because she’s got experience living in a body like mine, dedicated to training that body in the way that suits her best—made her capable of helping me do the same for mine.”

“Why don’t you want to talk to me about your family stuff?” that…what? “When did I stop being the guy you could come to when shit gets real?” oh he looked remorseful, stressed. What’s happening? “Is it because I’m on the road too much or whatever the fuck? I’ll…I have to report on progress to seal the Breach, but that’s right around the corner I swear Krem, no more road trips unless Imekari absolutely needs me—”

“Of course she needs you, what the hell are you talking about? Woah woah woah woah stop. Are you…worried I don’t need you or something? That I’m replacing you? Dude. Seeker training me just happened, I wasn’t getting in as good of workouts because I’m fighting Humans and Elves and a Dwarf instead of a Qunari big enough to require his own postal code. It took a Seeker of Truth and a former Templar to substitute for you—not replace. And I don’t resent you being on the road, are you serious about not going? Shit you want me to lose my fucking mind? I only sleep at night when I read things like ‘your girlfriend went through a time portal’ and ‘Ellie took up propelling without a rope into a fucking Rift-filled mine’ because you’re out there with her. And I didn’t want to talk earlier because yeah, I had a good talk with Ellie but that doesn’t replace talks with you. Because sure, there’ll be things I want to talk with her about but there’s always going to be things I can only talk about with you like…” Krem sighed. “I can’t go pick Ellie up and
vent about how Maker-damn embarrassed I am.”

“…what the fuck are you embarrassed about? Someone embarrass you? I’ll kick their ass.”

“Go ahead—you and me haven’t sparred in forever, you bastard, abandoning me for a life of travel,” Krem said. “I uh…Ellie and me were just, picking up where we left off, everything was cool—she was back, and safe, and we were kissing and I started uh…I cried. Specifically, like a baby. For a solid seven minutes.”

“You two seemed cozy when I broke up the party.”

“You only had an order from Flissa’s because Ellie was just throwing everything she could to comfort me together—I’m pretty sure I got snot on her, and she just let me. Sent for some comfort food, held me while I bawled, and parcel through my venting, brought it back around to making me feel better, lifting me up. Rolled with it even though it was just totally crazy, we were just greeting each other after her time away, kissing, it was so not mental breakdown material.”

“Making out with the Herald of Andraste give you a ‘come to the Maker’ moment?”

Krem heaved a sigh. “I just…I like her. A lot. So much and…nothing ever feels like it sticks for me, you know? I’m with this amazing girl and we’re feeling all these things and it just got me thinking—what if this is what my parents felt. And if that’s the case then what the fuck is this for? Twenty years. Twenty years my parents were married before uh…”

“Their divorce?”

Krem nodded. “They were married five years before having me. Took them that long to conceive. It was hell, for both of them, and they got through it together. And for as long as I can remember: My father woke up, every morning, got ready for work, helped make breakfast, told my mom she was beautiful, kissed her, told her he loved her, and then he’d leave. Go, work all day, hard, underappreciated work he always managed to find some shred of satisfaction in and she’d always find a way to dump on because she wanted more—better house, designer clothes, the ‘right’ friends. He’d come home and the first thing he did—ask mother how her day was, ask how he could help. And it wasn’t like she didn’t ever do anything—she kept the house clean, lunch was all her, and she looked after me, and you know how hard that is. But, he put so much more into everything, always giving and usually it was just her taking, spitting it back in his face whenever she felt like it, wanted her way with something. He put everything he had into their relationship, into his relationship with me, and she just- none of that matters to her. She was looking for something better the whole time, I’m about a thousand percent positive she cheated on him, and now she’s marrying someone else-,” he stopped, had to take a breather there, Maker he was ranting but Bull was someone he could do that with. He always listened, always understood. “You wanna know why my parents are divorced? Because slaves don’t have marital rights.”

“Oh man, Krem—I’m sorry,” Bull consoled, warm hand on his shoulder.

“Yeah well, you know how it is when you’re Sopporati. If you look around and everyone in your family is free—you’re the slave,” bad joke. Shitty one. “My father gave her everything, gave up everything, and she- she-“

“Isn’t Ellie,” Bull said. “And your mom’s doing you both a favor by getting the fuck out of your lives.”

“…wh…what? Ellie?”
“Imekari,” Bull rumbled out, laying a hand on his shoulder, “yeah, I mean you kid. That’s a lot of bullshit, and your mom’s throwing away a hell of a man for what she thinks is better—if all she’s gonna be is a drain on your lives, let her go. And don’t let her get in your head, make you get it twisted. Sounds to me like you only got so upset earlier because you’re waiting for this to blow up in your face, you’re afraid you’ll give it all away and get left in the dust. But dude, I had an existential crisis earlier because I thought Ellie was taking my big ass place in your life—that’s how much she puts into this. Trust me, you don’t even know the half of it. I’m not saying you guys are forever, but you got a damn good shot. And if it does end, it’s not going to be because you two didn’t try. You both give, and receive—not take, receive. You both bring something to the table, build each other up. No one’s slacking off around here. And if she does—if you wake up one morning and something’s changed, shitty as this situation is, now you know the signs, red flags. You know what you deserve, you ever find yourself not getting it? Make a change.”

Huh. Well then. “See?” Krem asked. “I need you.”

“Damn straight you do, fucking mess out here without me,” Bull said, tousling Krem’s hair, ass. “Might need you too, brat.”

“Who else is gonna teach you how to wear a condom?”

“Oh yeah, maybe you should demonstrate for the class, make sure everyone knows their stuff. Seriously,” Bull said, “I worry about Rocky sometimes.”

Worry? “Pretty sure that’s his kid we see, always waves at us when we pass through Ostwick?”

“Right? How many little Rocky’s does the world need really?”

“If you feel like getting my dick out of the trunk, we can make sure he gets some practice in before the entire population is just Rocky with different hairstyles.”

“Probably shouldn’t brandish your dick at dinner though. More of a dessert thing.”

“Sounds right.”

“You good to pick up boss-girl?”

Shit. He checked his watch and, “Yeah I’m late.”

“Good luck with that.”

Didn’t need it. Almost felt like he would but Sera was more snippy that he was late.

“Ugh! There you are! You worried Inky!” she complained, when she opened the door, hand on her hip. Though, “And me. You okay Kremmy-boy? I’m sorry about your mom’s marriage pish getting you down.”

“I’m okay, feeling better, thanks. I’m sorry I’m late.”

“Don’t be,” Ellie said as she came to the door, pulling her hat on, left her cloak unclasped and caught his eye before turning in a circle…oh, showing him they fit, nice. “I wasn’t worried in a bad way. Just, you’re always on time, I thought maybe something happened, I was getting ready to go down and check on you, you’re feeling okay? Up for getting together?” she checked as she secured her cloak.
“Got caught up with something, I’m actually pretty great,” he promised, offering his arm, and she smiled, accepting it and waving bye to Sera. Anya shuffled after them as they headed for the gate. “Had a good talk with Bull.”

She hugged his arm tighter, “Good, I’m glad.”

He nodded. “Sorry I’ve been so weird today.”

She snorted at that! “I feel like I’m weird most of our days, and you’re always down for that. Besides, you’re kind of dealing with a lot right now, I get feeling confused and sad and needing comfort.”

Yeah, comfort. “Ellie, I…shit, I hope you don’t think that earlier…that I was just using you to feel better. Uh. I got carried away, I shouldn’t’ve and I’m sorry—you don’t have to…just because I’m ‘dealing with a lot’ doesn’t give me license to do anything you don’t wanna do, you shouldn’t feel like you have to go along with anything you aren’t ready for because I’m having a bad day.”

“Don’t want to do-? Oh!” she sounded surprised, “I thought- we were just kissing, were… were you thinking about…?”

“No, no way! Well not no way. I mean I want to- I mean you- we-“

She stopped just outside the gate, let go of his arm and raised her unmarked index finger to his lips to shush him. “I only stopped you because I figured we were about to have company—not by the Iron Bull exactly, but Fliss’a’s pretty good at getting orders out as soon as possible. And I really wouldn’t want to get too crazy in front of Anya? That’s just kind of weird, but Mabari are sturdy pups—she could stand to play in the snow for a while, and there’s no end of people that would look out for and play with her. Hesitancy other than circumstance? None, not really. Except um…”

Ellie doesn’t need to be tested!

“…I’m feeling a lot better after everything, but my back still hurts when I lay on it, especially if someone’s with me, it was pretty ouch just lying back?” oh shit, he hadn’t meant to hurt her- “So…huh…I’d probably have to be on top.”

Sh…wh…top…

She just, said that, kept on walking like he was right there with her, “At least, if you want to anytime soon? Anyway, don’t worry about today. You didn’t do anything wrong…Cremisius?”

Him? Was she talking? What just happened?


And Qunari eat ass. Group was dead silent when they approached everyone was just staring at Bull, who was purple, had half his fist shoved in his mouth, pretty sure he wasn’t breathing.

“Uh…Chief?” Stitches asked, he’d been stoking logs in the fire with a long thin, broken off tree branch and he raised it to poke at the shoulder of Bull’s harness. “You with us?”

Sounded like he was choking on air, and then he pulled his fist out of his mouth, “Yup.”
Yup.

“How you feeling, Ellie-girl? Glad to be home?” Thom asked, and Ellie’s hand caught Krem’s, pulling him along to come sit by the old Mercenary and his…manfriend, Ellie called him, because Thom hadn’t been a fan of ‘boyfriend’.

“I am, gosh I missed everyone—all of you,” she said looking to the Charger’s gathered around, “What did I miss while I was gone?”

Skinner came and plopped herself down in the snow, Anya settled into her lap almost immediately and she said, “I have fought sixteen shem’len for their honor, while you were away.”

“All at once?” Ellie asked, concerned-mixed-awe.

“No. One at a time. The Lady Seeker lets me spar her shems. I have disgraced them all.”

“The Templars?”

Skinner was preening. “Yes.”

“Wow! You’re alright, yeah?” Skinner nodded. “Good! And you didn’t hurt them bad or anything, did you?”

She hadn’t, Skinner was just the best scrapper they had, could put them down fighting dirty, harsh and fast. Seeker thought it might teach them some humility or something. Might have just been more punishment for the whole ‘standing idle by and watching the Order descend into the hands of Red Lyrium crazies’ thing. She was still real pissed about that.

Dinner was good…big…everyone rolled out just about every single one of Krem’s favorites. And…was there some sort of need for Human sacrifice or something? He’d been slotted to take the fall? Cause everyone was talking like they were at his funeral—offering up their stories about his time with the Chargers like they were filling Ellie in or something.

“When I first began traveling with the Chargers, Krem came into my part of camp, stepped through it on his way to make pee,” Skinner was saying. Why. The fuck. Was this happening. “and I put my knife in his calf.”

“Oh no,” Ellie sympathized, he had his arm around her, and she had his other laying in her lap as did that thing, tracing her fingers along the underside of his forearm.

“Got the scar to prove it,” he assured.

“Yes,” Skinner said. “And when Stitches got my knife out and stopped his bleeding, Krem took my knife. He cleaned it, sharpened it, and returned it, said my hit had been a ‘good one’ and apologized for stepping into my camp. I had been afraid—waiting for a shem to come into my space, try to push for what was mine. And when one did, I defended it. And then he showed me I did not have to. That my space was respected, my claim to it secure, what was mine was not mine because I drew a circle around it, but because it was mine, and I was safe with these strangers, they had welcomed me into their space and it was unjust to make it unsafe for them when they had made it safe for me. That was the first night I slept since Edgehall.”

Oh. Shit. He…he hadn’t realized she hadn’t been sleeping, that…that was like a week after they met.

“You know Ellie, Tuesday dinners were supposed to be Mondays?” Dalish asked before
Krem could say anything to Skinner—what? Oh. “We’d been in Haven for three days and everyone was taking in the Inquisition, out doing their own things, we ran drills but, I thought it was important that we make a point to try and be together at least once, a set aside time that was guaranteed. So I got word to these berks, got everything together to start cooking for the whole crew. Krem was already in the clearing, had the fire going, helped me cook. And he was the only person that remembered to show up,” a chorus of apologies rang out across their guilty members, “and Krem just shrugged, said ‘more for us’ and said it was too bad everyone was busy, reminded me that we were in a new place and we were all having so much new information thrown at us—schedules and security protocols, and reports from Bull, it was little wonder my one ‘dinner, Monday, six o’clock’ after running drills slipped through the cracks. And then he cleaned up—said I cooked and he should do the dishes. Kissed me on the cheek, thanked me for dinner. When I came for morning drills, everyone was doing pushups.” She deepened her voice to mimic him, “‘What time is dinner tonight?’” then, “‘six oclock!’, ‘and what are you gonna do?’ ‘apologize to Dalish!’ Tuesday night dinners became a thing, and every single Monday since, barring unforeseen disaster, Krem always has dinner with me.”

“I uh…I hadn’t been trying to blow up the Shaperate, not exactly,” Rocky said. “Family didn’t care what I meant, when it was done. I got kicked out, banished topside, I…I wasn’t even sure what was happening, never seen the damn sky, the sun before and suddenly I’m just on this elevator bleeding, barely conscious, and when I come to, boom. Topside. Little explanation, no chance to defend myself, just, cut off. Anyway, I’d been experimenting, trying to get my prototype blackpowder to work and I just about blew the whole damn camp off the map. And immediately I think, this is it, I’m gone—there’s all this yelling and my ears are ringing. And when I open my eyes, it’s Krem. Keeping pressure on this huge gash in my chest, yelling for Stitches. He didn’t care I’d just burnt down tents and nearly choked him to death with smoke, his first concern was me. Bull asked what happened and Krem just, shrugged it off ‘little experiment got out of hand, no biggie, I’ll help clean up’. Patched up tents, checked in to make sure I was fine—ended up with a respiratory infection from smoke inhalation, got sick as a dog—no offence little pup,” he nodded to Anya who was still licking clean a bowl Skinner was holding for her. “Never held it against me, just, said he was glad I was alright.”

“When everyone started to learn Sign for me, Krem sat down, and apologized for not taking the time to breakdown the language barrier,” Skinner said but Grimm was signing to her. “He said he felt like he did not include me enough, but he was wrong. Every morning since he joined the Chargers, Krem would ask if I slept well, if I was hungry. Asked me if I liked the things we ate or not, when we’d go, eat in towns, he’d point out things he knows I like on the menu, order for me so I don’t have to point and hope the waiter sees it right. Never made a big deal about it, or made me feel like I was incapable just, was mindful, offered support. He made a point to check on me after skirmishes to make certain I was alright, kept close in fights so I was never in need of a voice to call for help—help is there. There was never a language barrier between us—no one speaks my language more than him.”

Well. Damn.

Then Stitches opens his big dumb mouth. “We get close to the Tevinter border, and Bull says he’s got a contact to meet in a town on the other side. Told us to hold camp at the border, he didn’t want us getting caught up in any ‘Qunari in Vint territory’ nonsense, said he could stay incognito without us. So we sit tight. Six hours later, this kid comes lugging Bull—got the oaf’s arms around his neck, dragging him into camp. Kid’s covered in blood, shouting at the top of his lungs that we better fucking be the Chargers because ‘this asshole’ says his crew should be here—and mind you, we don’t know this kid from the Maker, Bull’s bad off, we don’t understand what the hell happened, so it takes a few seconds to try and process what’s going on, in the meantime, this lunatic’s got a sword out, isn’t sure we’re Bull’s crew or not since he’s kind of expecting a
crew of Qunari—this Vint kid, dragging an injured Qunari, literally hoping he’s going to get him back to his Qunari friends for help—demands to know if any of us is a medic, says I better ‘fix him or else’. So, we help get Bull down and I start working on the big bastard, assure the kid he’s got him to the right crew—we’re the Chargers, this is our Chief, he’s in good hands, what the fuck happened? He does his best to explain, help with holding bandaging to wounds, handing me shit I tell him, gets the hell out of my way when I say to make himself scarce—one of Bull’s baby blues is clean gone, and uh, well, getting that patched up wasn’t pretty. Chief rouses, not sure where he is, where’s the boy that brought him in? Strong, can hold his own in a fight, he’s got a job if he wants it—then he’s out like a light. I try to help this kid, he is so not interested, and he looks like shit—beat all to hell, hurt bad but the only thing I can do is let him have a go with my supplies in private, holed up in a tent, offering instruction blind.”

“I spot the brat a clean shirt,” Stitches continued, “tried to get him to give me details. Kid’s basically shutting down, won’t give me his name, says he was having trouble with a Tribune, Bull stepped in and saved his life, and that’s all we need to know. I tell him to get some rest, think over Bull’s offer. Three days, I swear to the Maker, this kid is wide awake, busy as fuck—checking on Bull, checking in with me, bringing Bull medicine, food, water. Helped make meals he doesn’t eat a bite of, and the only words out of his mouth are him asking if he can do something, helping Dalish mend tenting, or me preparing bandaging or potion. Morning four rolls around, and I hear this shouting, loud enough to end the damn Age—you crazy bastard, you don’t even know me! What the hell were you thinking? And Bull just rolls with it, cool as can be. Convinces this kid to stick around—cost Bull his eye right? We’re a mercenary crew, we’ve got work, and with Bull recouping, we’re down the strength of ‘ten men’—so he’ll just have to make up for it. Be his Lieutenant, his eyes on the field, watch out for his crew, help them fight, talk nice with the people that pay us, handle everything Bull would be doing until he’s back in working shape. Tells him if he needs anything at all, he can trust good old Stitches. Mind you, what I hear at the time is ‘I’ve taken a blow to the head and suddenly think the Chargers is a babysitting service, here’s your blankie, cry to Stitches if you need a diaper change.’”

“What I saw…was Krem. Kid the size of Bull’s arm, fight like hell, fierce, and brazen, first man on the field, last one off—always checking on everyone, helping me prioritize injuries, patching up people where he can for me when there’s too many injured and not enough hands. He learned our tactics, pored over our mapped out strategies, our rules, like they were the Chant. When we’re on the move, he’s helping Bull, training with him, getting him back into fighting shape working with half his vision. Seemed like there really were ten of him—when he wasn’t with Bull he was with everyone else; do we need anything? What can he do to help? He handled our clients, spoke on Bull’s behalf, talked us up without making promises we can’t keep—nobles can be cheap as shit, always trying to knock down the agreed upon price when it’s time to pay up, and he didn’t back down, negotiated and maneuvered until we’re leaving with what’s ours, and then…when was it?”

“Justinian I think,” Dalish said.

“Yup. Krem hasn’t so much as spent a coin, that we can tell, and Bull explains he’s been sending most everything back to Tevinter, clear up his legal crap, support his mother, holding on to what little he keeps back in case of emergency. We get this job—fight off fifty damn bandits trying to take this village, and when all is said and done, the best the villagers can do is pay us in rice. Which you know cool, you can eat rice. Can’t do much else with it, and we’ve all got our own things going on. I was in a bit of a paycheck to paycheck situation after some bad investments,” being shit at cards, “and I send a chunk of change home every week to help my brother, his family and that isn’t done lightly so I’m trying to figure out what to do. Krem says I can just take all the coin we made off the village job, no problem.”
“…but they paid in Rice? Did you sell it?” Ellie asked.

“Turns out they were able to scrape a little money together, passed it along to us,” Krem said, shrugged.

Stitches snorted. “Yeah. They managed to scrape together the exact amount of money I send home every week. And Krem just so happens to get a nice little letter from Tevinter saying if he’s short on his payment again, there’ll be consequences.”

Only had so much money saved up, covered mother and uh, other things first. Imperium had enough money, it could survive one shit payment on some bullshit fine. “I swear half of all mailed currency gets eaten by the delivery birds.”

“Lying little bastard,” Stitches shook his head. “But Maker help us, we love you.”

“Pretty sure that was the first thing I thought, first time I laid eyes on the brat,” Bull spoke up. “I’m heading to this bar to meet my Viddethari contact. And I see him alright—hightailing it out of the bar, doesn’t so much as stop to hand off the info I’m after just, running like hell because there’s a damn Tribune cutting loose on some guy, and he knew I was coming so he was getting out of there before I showed up and could get him involved in some fight because who’re these assholes gonna go after? Some guy, or huge ass Qunari? And I figure, hell yeah they’ll come after me! So I bust in looking for a good fight. Find this kid, back against the bar, surrounded by a Tribune, beat to hell but he’s holding ground like he’s got the advantage, still got enough fight in him—their leader just shouted about making an example of him, and this brat shouts back ‘You wanna make an example? Suck my dick!’ so. First thought, holy shit, second thought, I love this kid. And I gotta see this through—mostly did. And I got no regrets. It was a good damn fight, and at the end of the day, eyepatch bags me my weight in lays, and I gained the best damn lieutenant this side of the Waking Sea…and that’s only ‘cause he can’t be on both sides of the Waking sea,” he winked at Ellie as he stole her line.

“Sounds about right,” Ellie said, taking Krem’s hand in hers. “Cremisius Aclassi is an honorable man, respectful, compassionate, trustworthy, selfless, and brave.”

“Damn straight,” Bull said, reaching in a pocket and pulling out parchment, folded over, from across the fire it looked…oh, yeah that was mother’s hand- “We, are your family Cremisius. You found us. Fought with us, cared for us, been there for each and every one of us.”

“Even before we were members,” Thom saw fit to remind him.

“Tonight is to focus on what is. Who you are, not who someone wants you to be. Leave the bullshit behind, and move on with the truth,” Bull intoned, passing his mother’s letter, that damn invite he’d sent off for Ellie to read, back to him. “You are Lieutenant Cremisius Gistin Aclassi. And your family? It’s your father, the Chargers, and whoever the hell else comes your way that builds you up.”

To my beautiful daughter, Cremisius.

Words seemed less powerful when he could crumble them in hand, toss them in the Charger’s fire, and watch them be gone, forever.

He held Ellie tight, and looked to his Chief. “Horns up.”

“Horns up!”

And things…things really were looking up. Everything, really. He…there was this pressure
off him now, like he could actually take it all in and enjoy the things he had in his life now. His time with the Chargers, his friends, with Ellie. With the people in her life.

Seeker apparently saw fit to make up for a lacking Wintersend. Nothing big but Cassandra invited him along too, a get together in Haven’s Chantry. Just Ellie and her party, her advisors, gathering around a big table in the great hall, having a huge meal, indulging in way way too many gingerbread cookies, lots of warm cocoa, and exchanging little gifts. Though Sera and Solas’s was pretty genius—they’d worked together to make Ellie some kind of humidifier, a long necklace made of a thin, white leather strap that held this two-inch long leather pouch that was corked at the top. It would make the air she breathed in less harsh and dry when she was out and about in Haven and she was totally floored by it—the two Elves got big hugs and kisses on the cheek. Sera was a freaking genius…Solas too, sort of, if he wasn’t such a sketchy bastard.

Ellie had totally forgotten Wintersend existed, but she passed around little slips of parchment paper torn from one of her notepads Varric kept her rolling in, little personalized vouchers they could cash in with her—a Haven version of a spa day with Vivienne, an afternoon of reading with snacks and warm drink with Cassandra, things like that. He felt a little awkward he didn’t have anything to give anyone, except maybe Ellie but he was holding off until later—but it’d been pretty spur of the moment, Seeker inviting him just that morning, to festivities that took place at noon.

“Happy Wintersend, Krem,” Cassandra said, a small, pleasant smile on her face. She was seated across from him and Ellie, sliding a little box his way.

“For me?” Krem asked uncertainly, but the Nevarran woman nodded, gesturing for him to go ahead. So he carefully opened the small gift box. There two little golden pins, one the shape of the Chantry’s sun emblem and the other, a sun inlayed with ebony, a ring of red bridging the gap between the tendrils of light—a symbol that represented the Maker. Huh.

“These once belonged to my brother, Anthony. He wore them on his coat collar and would touch them, say a prayer before closing in on a dragon, said it held his prayers and helped them hold true. He was older than I—around your age, while I was ten. I’d had a nightmare, he had to leave for work and I was fearful, so he took them from his coat, pinned them to my nightgown and insisted they would keep me safe,” she cleared her throat. “They did, I believe. I stored them away for safe keeping after his passing. Now, I think he might like them passed on to another brave young man I would see safe.”

Oh. Oh man. “Thank you, Seeker. You’re certain?”

“Truly. I would be honored if you accepted them, Cremisius.”

“I promise to keep them safe.”

“The intent is they keep you safe, sweet boy. May I?”

They were seated at the end of the table so when Krem nodded, Seeker just came around and he lifted his chin so she could pin them to the high collar on his gambeson.

So uh, late Wintersend was…pretty special. Good food, good company, overwhelmingly kind gifts he wasn’t certain how he deserved. And when all was said and done, Krem and Ellie walking back to her cabin afterward, he decided to offer…it wasn’t a gift really, just…asking, flat out, if she’d agree to be considered his girlfriend.

She seemed to take it as a matter of consideration. “On one condition.”
“Name it.” He had dragon slaying pins now he was feeling ready to take on whatever she needed to make this official.

“If I’m going to be your girlfriend…then you have to be my boyfriend.”

Oh man, he was smiling like a damn loon. “You drive a hard bargain…but it’s a deal.” Good deal, sealed with a kiss and everything. Maker!

Life. was so. good. Everything felt like they were riding high. Both in lifted spirits and their focus on the Breach. Word went out in Haven they’d a set date to seal that thing once and for all, and everyone was preparing.

Some preparation was resting, relaxing. Ellie got some time off to just recoup after months of nonstop—run for your life, the world is ending! Okay you stopped the world from ending, let’s teach you how to keep it that way! Go here and seal this, fight that, survive these crazy circumstances! But no schedule didn’t mean she didn’t have a routine and for some reason, the Maker was finally letting things go Krem’s way. Ellie’d come around to check in on him, bring him water or a snack when he had breaks in work, training. She’d usually eat lunch with the Chargers except for her lunch dates with Leliana, sometimes Lady Josie. They spent a lot of time just hanging around, reading together, and he finally met Sam, sort of. It was wild but Sera’d had a connection to him all this time and hadn’t known it, so now he and Ellie wrote pretty consistently, and the guy wrote Krem, asking about him, seemed like he was making sure Ellie was dating someone he'd approve of, and it was a relieving sort of cool to have a sort of pen-pal friendship with someone just like him. Other than reading and writing, there was a lot of playing with Anya, Sera, Cole. Spirit had been helpful with pulling off some scheme of Sera’s. She wanted to prank Haven’s cook, give his staff some relief and Cole was to tell her the perfect time to strike—when there was enough ‘hurt’ and stress pressing everyone to require a little break of pace to ease the tension.

Ellie and Lace went up to Cook after the mess was closing out dinner, and they were just finishing cleaning up. The Herald of Andraste and sweet Scout Harding distracted the guy while Sera and Krem set up the little catapult Sera and Lace had built, pushed it into position and got it set to strike. Cole was playing ghost, unseen but watching and waiting to signal Ellie and Lace when it was time to let the Cook turn around and face his fate.

Ellie nodded when Cole did…whatever it was he did to signal. “Thanks so much for all your hard work!” she enthused.

“Have a great evening!” Lace said to the man in farewell.

“…yeah,” Cook said, and then his gathered staff staring at Sera and Krem caught his eye, “Oi! Quit lollygagging. You’re done for the day, you can come back and be bitter disappointments to me in the morning-“ he was saying as he turned around and-

**SMACK!**

Cook got a nice, big old face-full of thick, gloppy vanilla cream pie, pie tin sliding off his face and clattering to the ground.

Everyone, even the staff members caught up in shocked surprise and laughter, bolted when Ellie squealed, “*Run!*”

It was fun. She always invited him along no matter who she was having dinner with too—didn’t always take her up on it just to make sure he didn’t overstep, make it seem like he wanted to
take away from her time with the others. Commander was big on what he declared to be ‘family
dinner’ which always meant Ellie and Cassandra—but it could turn into Flissa’s being full of each and
every member of her party. Been just a uh…little awkward, first time Krem came along to
dinner with Ellie, to eat with Cullen and Cassandra. He wasn’t sure what he’d done—Commander
had been fine with him, amicable and cheery as always this morning, even got a warm greeting
when he and Ellie arrived but when Cullen helped Ellie out of her coat, took her scarf to hang it up
for her, it looked like…like the Commander saw something that didn’t sit right with him, had him
tense.

“Would you pass the potatoes please, papí?” Ellie asked.

Cullen lifted the ceramic bowl near his plate, “Of course Ellie, sweetheart, most precious
light of my life, you can have whatever your heart desires. But if they burn you, I will be obligated
to destroy them.”

“Um…they seem cool enough to eat,” Ellie offered, uncertain.

“Lots of things seem harmless. But all potatoes can burn you.”

That got him a confused look. “Like, in the world? I guess? You’d have to cook them first I
think.”

“That’s the thing, eventually they are. All potatoes just go around, looking to be cooked—
and they either plan to make you happy, or break your heart!”

“Oh sweet Maker,” Cassandra complained, elbow on the table, head resting against the
palm of her hand.

“Am I the potatoes?” Krem whispered to the Seeker.

“Undoubtedly.”

“If Cremisius were a potato, he’d be a sweet potato with lots of cinnamon sugar,” Ellie was
certain. Not sure that helped.

“Oh, that’s what they want you to th-!” the Commander started.

“Cullen. Cremisius is indeed the Human equivalent of a pleasantly warm, non-burning
sweet potato in your ridiculous analogy. And Eleanor is a young woman-”

“She calls me papí,” Cullen whined.

“And Lady Josephine is nearly thirty and does the same of her-“

“Potatoes aren’t going around giving Lady Josephine-” he huffed, whispering across the
table like Ellie wasn’t sitting right there, fully capable of hearing, “h-i-c-k-e-y-s!”

“Hick…hickeys?” Ellie pieced together.

Cause uh, yeah, she knew how to spell now. Cullen slapped a hand on the table, “Damn
these Tevinters!”

Whoa, whoa wait, “No one’s giving anyone hickeys!” he swore.

“Cullen. I put that there—I do apologize again, Eleanor,” Cassandra said, reaching across
the table to pat her arm Oh…oh! Her neck! Ellie’d joined them when they trained that morning,
wanted some practice herself. Seeker’d accidentally caught her hard in the side of her neck with a fighting staff. Definitely not a hickey, and all Krem did was offer sympathy when he saw the bruising forming up later, pressed a little kiss to it which she assured helped ‘make it better’ and she was basically a certified Healer so, that was legit. “It is a bruise from earlier today.”

“It wasn’t a big deal, trainings supposed to be a little rough,” Ellie said.

“Oh. Well then,” Cullen seemed to feel better about it, “Forget I said anything. Ellie—hiccies aren’t real.”

Ellie nodded, agreeing, “They are not.”

Yeah they were, but uh, be a little weird for the Commander to go checking under Krem’s shirt. Nice ‘not real’ mark on his collarbone.

So. Maybe some people were giving out hiccys.

They weren’t…doing a lot more than that. They had time alone, and they really enjoyed it but he just…wanted to make sure he did right by her. By them both. Be absolutely, one hundred percent positive and ready before they took any major steps. So, for now, waiting. And communicating, which was good. They both agreed they weren’t ready, just…not right now. Bit embarrassing to start with, but Ellie didn’t have any hangups when it came to discussing the two of them…being together. Having sex—shit! He wasn’t new! He wasn’t sure why he was so nervous, weird about it. There was some element of it that came from what Cole said. About Ellie uh…

No. It was him. It was Krem being nervous as hell to be Ellie’s first. What if he messed up? What if she doesn’t have a uh, nice time, ends up disappointed, or hurt or-

Well. Body confidence was booming at least. He just about thought ‘pregnant’, but uh, thank the actual Maker that wasn’t another thing to add to the list of things that could go wrong.

“She wouldn’t get pregnant, but she could die.”

So. Uh. He might have taken to chatting up Cole again—Krem and the Spirit were lying on the floor of the Charger’s tent, laying in opposite directions but their heads were side by side, thankfully he’d taken off his hat…but what the actual hell was he on about?

“Uh. Cole, buddy—nervous as shit I’ll mess things up but uh, not that spectacularly.”

“Oh. Not with you—I mean after. You aren’t extremely nervous it will be an unpleasant time, Cremisius. You are scared it will be the only time.”

“What’d you mean?”

“The Breach is big, and so is despair. Ellie is always warm acceptance—you know if you get off to an uncomfortable start, she would not ridicule or rebuke, she would be patient and work with you, you would both find comfort and care. You are afraid it will be like before—when you found the fullness of acceptance, love, someone who finally saw you for who you were and then they were gone. Taken. You were terrified in your early days of the Chargers something horrible would befall them, waiting for the other shoe to drop, that they would all be taken away. And now with Ellie, you find it again. You are afraid it is too much—scared that if she sees you and accepts you, she will do so, so greatly that the Maker will finally take notice and take her away.”

“So. In my fucked-up brain, I think that if I have sex with Ellie, the Breach will kill her?”
“You’re always scared the Breach will kill her. You’re just afraid it will hurt so much more—it is later your fucked-up brain will tell you it was somehow your fault.”

Maker he was a bad influence. “Don’t say ‘fucked’.”

“Alright.”

There was another big meal in the Tavern—they’d have the place to themselves for their get together, meant for Ellie’s party, the Advisors. It was the 28th and they…they were going to seal the Breach. Tomorrow. Trying to anticipate the event being made a holiday or something and honestly, yeah, he could see it being a huge matter of celebration—didn’t matter what the rest of the world did, if everyone gets to walk away from the Breach safe and sound, Drakonis 1st will be a permanent holiday on Krem’s calendar.

“…anything?” Krem could hear Ellie talking to someone, voice filtering through the slats of Flissa’s windows as he headed for the door.

“Ruffles assures me she just got confirmation from the Free Marches,” Varric was saying, “Transport just cleared customs at their northern border this morning.”

“Thank the Maker,” Cassandra praised.

Ellie let out an excited squeak, “Yes! Wow wow wow, okay. We can keep our chill a little while longer. Maevaris wrote to check up on me actually, says I should—”

“Call her Auntie Mae-Mae? Figures sh-“ Varric went dead silent when Krem came in—everyone was uh, real quiet. Cullen, Cassandra, and Varric were seated at the bar Bull, Marehis, and Ellie were behind the counter, working together chopping veggies. “How the hell you doin’, Boyfriend? Long time no see!”

“You know, it’s been so long since drinks last night, I almost forgot what you looked like,” Krem drawled, though he did worry, “Am I interrupting something?” Everyone was either looking right at him or avoiding his gaze entirely.

“Nah, just yacking. Come on, take a seat,” Varric invited.

“Certainly, join us, Krem,” the Seeker encouraged, patting the empty stool at her side. “You’re having a pleasant day I hope?”

Uh. Aside from everyone being a little weird just now, “Yeah.”

“If you are hungry there are hors d’oeuvres,” the Nevarran woman offered, reaching to pull the plate of little crackers topped with little bits of meat and veggies to sit in front of him—Varric snickered and got a glare for his trouble from Cassandra as she said, “The lieutenant hardly ate a passable lunch, I am in my right to worry.”

Cullen came to stand at his back, hands on Krem’s shoulders, massaging as he assured, “It’s okay to be nervous, but do rest assured, we are all prepared, ready. Tonight is for fun, enjoy it.”

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“Just wasn’t real hungry—day off, so it wasn’t like I’d worked up an appetite or anything, s’all good,” he promised, Maker this lot was…nice. Good to him. “Thanks,” he said, taking a cracker and taking a bite. Commander gave his shoulders a squeeze and then a pat on the back.

“I’m going for a water run—mija, quieres una rellenar?” Cullen asked, Antivan spoken carefully as he tested his growing knowledge of the language. Ellie’d been using more Antivan
 lately—turns out, ‘guapo’ means handsome.

“Sí!” she chirped, bouncing on the balls of her feet, “Gracias, papí!” she called as Cullen took a pitcher, grabbed Ellie’s canteen off the hook by the door on his way out.

“How are you feeling, sweet girl? Are you nervous?” Marehis asked,

“Nope! Everyone’s been working so hard, and I feel ready,” Ellie said, nodding her head. “I know we can do this as long as we work together.”

She...she was saying that, sounded real cheery, confident but she sniffled, had started to cry.

“Hey,” Krem said, rising and going around the counter, getting Ellie to face him as he rested his hands on her shoulders, tearfully looking up at him, “you are ready. Everyone is. Tomorrow’s going to go amazing, you’re going to seal the Breach and show the Elder One he’s got absolutely nothing on the Herald of Andraste. You’ve worked so hard, and I know you can do it,” he promised, resting his forehead against hers, “You’ve got this, El.”

She sniffled again, shit, he’d meant to make her feel better, but her shoulders were shaking like...crap was she going to cry worse?

“Cremisius...thanks...” she said, sounding...was that laughter in her voice? “I was just chopping onions, though. But I really do appreciate you.”

Oh. There were little chunks of white vegetable stuck to the blade in her hand and yup. Onions. Onion tears. Cool cool cool.

Bull was already chuckling. Bastard. Krem sighed, closing his eyes. “m’I ever gonna live this down?”

“Hell no!” Bull assured him, Varric was outright laughing, Marehis giggling into her hand. At least Cassandra was on his side—smiling, warm and she had this look on her face like she thought it was all adorable, nope. Not that much better than laughing.

Felt better when Ellie kissed him on the cheek and assured him it was an easy mistake...a lot better when he was back in his seat and-

“Ellie?” Cullen was worry the moment he returned from the pump, “Sweetheart, what’s wrong, what can I do?” Sera and Lace were following him in,

“Who the frick made Inky cry?!”

It was an easy mistake! Though Sera had a bone to pick with the onions now, took over for Ellie, the Elf girl hacking away at the produce like it deserved it. And it did, damn it!

Tavern was pretty packed and it felt like a party, there was this high energy, excitement and anticipation rolling through everyone as they talked a mile a minute, eating and laughing and drinking. Maybe a little too much—Krem got giggly drunk. In his defense, he’d only meant to have one drink, Varric’d broken out a nice bottle of bourbon he offered from. But one glass turned into two. And then the Dwarf had insisted Cassandra deserved a stiff drink after everything, hell, she’d done just about everything to get the Inquisition where it was today. And yeah, Krem agreed she deserved a drink but uh...given her current medicinal routine, that wasn’t advised. Seeker turned the drink down but Varric poured her one anyway and Krem snatched it up and knocked the glass back like a shot...definitely wasn’t a shot but he’d sort of panicked. Kept his
“Not cool dude. Seeker wants to keep a clear head, leave her be. Got it?”

Varric was looking at Cassandra hard for a moment, then Cullen and back, “…got it.”

“Thank you, Cremisius,” Cassandra intoned quietly, pressing a kiss to the side of his head.

Oh man, so uh…yeah. Varric’s bourbon was big time meant for being sipped, holy shit, everything was warm and hazy, and Ellie found his giggling at everything cute which was…she was sweet. Beautiful and sweet. Pretty pretty lady. Loved her.

“Come on, Cremisius. Here,” Ellie…where was? He was pretty sure they’d just been in the Tavern. He was sitting in Ellie’s desk chair now. Who was licking his feet? Where were his shoes? He’d been wearing socks right? Was Ellie doing that? Huh, hadn’t pegged her for a foot girl. Oh wait, cold wet nose. Anya was a foot girl, that he knew. Oh hand…his hand? That was his hand right? Yup. Mug in it, Ellie was pressing it into his hand…that was his hand right? “Drink.”

He snorted, giggling as he grinned, “Think’ve had’a bit too much to drink, El-Elllllie, Ellie. El-leee. Do I say your name right?”


Hmm…water. Water was good. Love it. Got two mugs of it, Ellie making sure he was okay with her putting a little Elf root tonic in the second. Why the hell not, mixed drinks are welcome!

“Cremisius, we’re gonna sleep now, okay?” Ellie asked when he was done, “Do you need help with your binder?”

Sleep…now? “Kay, you uh, you wanted to be on top right? Which way’s top?”

“Just sleeping,” she insisted gently, “it’s bad to sleep with your chest bound.”

He nodded hmm…almost asleep sitting up, was that bad for his chest? Oh his binder loosened up, Ellie’s hands under his shirt undoing the stings and then she gave him privacy to pull his shirt open and slip the leather off over his head, heard it hit the floor as he tightened up his tunic strings again though Ellie was back, carefully picking up his binder and laying it on her desk. Huh, had she worn pajamas to dinner? Pajama dinner. Pa-jam-a pajama was a weird word.

He could kick his own ass he was pretty sure when he woke up the following morning. Still dark out, at least it seemed that way from grayish light in the room. Dinner…too much bourbon…

He asked which way was top.

But he had Ellie, warm, sleepy, laying against him, her head on his chest and that was enough. Didn’t like that he’d made an ass of himself but uh, this? Was pretty damn perfect.

“Are you feeling better?” Ellie asked, voice soft with sleep as she sighed, snuggling against him.

…didn’t have a hangover surprisingly enough. Oh yeah. Elf Root water…did Stitches know about that? Bastard never had a hangover! “All good now. Sorry about last night.”

“Don’t be. I saw you were just sticking up for Cassandra—though it’s your business if you did want to get a little loose, as long as you aren’t hurting anyone.”
“How bad did I embarrass myself?”

“How… I mean, your rendition of Sera Was Never was heartwarming. She sang along with you.”

He groaned. “I sang?”

“Uh-huh. No worries, I called it a night when you were done, and Marehis and the Iron Bull helped me with getting you back here. Sera was pretty looped and so Cassandra let her go sleep with her in the Chantry.”

“How was everyone cool with me coming back with you?”

“They trust us, it isn’t their business what we do,” Ellie listed, “and you might have shouted ‘Not for sex! We aren’t ready!’ when I said we were going back to my cabin.”

“So. If you wanna toss me into the Breach, I totally understand.”

“Just throw the whole boyfriend away, huh? Nah… I think I’ll keep you if its all the same. Get some more sleep if you can, okay? Big day today.”

Yeah, it was. But it started out simple enough… a little bit perfect. Warm bed, Ellie in his arms, Anya curled up against his side.

The Breach would still be there when they woke up.

“Nervous, Ink?”

Ellie smiled to her friend as Sera handed off her gloves. They were almost ready, armoring up for the day ahead just in case the Breach wanted to spit a demon or two before they could seal it. Harriott was amazing! He’d made Ellie new armor now that she was a bit too big for her britches in the literal sense—old armor was tight on her calves, vised by what was supposed to be covering her ankles, and the sleeves of her armored tunic had fallen short of her wrists, it’d all been very pinchy. The Inquisition’s blacksmith had really done it again! It was a little silly but she liked the idea—she asked him if it would be okay to make her armor the tawny brown Inquisition scout armor used like in Marehis’s armor and the pretty lavender kind of leather Cassandra’s armor used. It turned out super pretty—brown armored tunic, matching gloves and boots, and then her long overcoat and leather leggings were purple.

“A little bit? I’m confident in everyone just…I’m a little scared, you know?”

“Oh my brave girl,” Marehis said, coming and adjusting Ellie’s armor’s overcoat, “Everything is going to be alright.”

“Mare’s right,” Sera said, “If… if it don’t feel right, if something’s going wrong, you stop, and you tell us okay?”

Ellie nodded. There was no stopping, she was going to seal that damn thing no matter what, and she knew she could, it was just… sort of like after having bad experiences in the Fade, being afraid to go back with Solas. She knew how to keep herself safe, and she trusted Solas with her life,
but she’d been terrified the first time they tried meeting each other in the Fade and exploring.

“You ready Anya?” Ellie asked the pup, receiving an enthusiastic bark in return—gosh she was so big now! And strong! Everyone had done such an amazing job of looking out for her and Ellie had made sure she ate really well and got enough sleep and all the exercise! All of it! Mabari had so much energy! She was coming too, it would be sort of like a test start—depending on how well she traveled and things, to see if she could come out into the field with Ellie now that she was big enough. Harritt made her Puppy Armor! A plated harness she wore over the evergreen poncho Cremisius had made for her.

Armed and armored, packs all set for the day ahead, they went to regroup with everyone. Her party was set to meet in the Tavern, have the morning meal together, make sure everyone was on the same page for the day.

It was a little early still, but Ellie was surprised it was just Cassandra and Varric in the Tavern. The Seeker was seated at the table by the fire, she had an omelet and toast and juice in front of her already, but she was just sort of picking at the omelet and Varric was cleaning up a pan behind Flissa’s counter.

“Ahh, good morning ladies,” Cassandra said, holding out a hand and Ellie went and joined her, the Nevarran woman humming a bit as oh! Ellie’d been meaning to sit beside her but she didn’t mind being pulled into Cassandra’s lap. “Would you care to split this with me?” she asked, offering her a fork.

“Sure!” Gosh, she was hungry and Varric’d really…gone all out, the omelet was huge, and stuffed with spinach and ram meat and carrots and peppers, and he’d made five or six slices of toast split into triangles. And a mug of orange juice…oh and there was a mug of tea, wow, had he and Cassandra had a fight or something?

“Where’s the rest of breakfast, Dwarfy?” Sera asked.

“Seeker was the first one here, I just thought she should eat!” Varric defended, “People got to right? Big day ahead of us and shit. But of course I uh, was planning on making breakfast for everyone. Coming right up.”

“I believe I’ll help,” Marehis said, going to join him. Sera came and sat across from Ellie and Cassandra, taking up a slice of toast.

“What did Varric do?” Ellie quietly asked Cassandra,.

“I do not know, he has been almost annoyingly considerate all morning, this is the second omelet I did not ask for,” Cassandra replied before she sipped at her tea. “How did you sleep?”

“Good, I spent time with Solas and Cole,” Ellie said, “it was fun.”

“And Cremisius is well?”

“Yeah, he’s okay…it was nice,” Ellie admitted shyly. It’d been super nice—she’d been a little worried he’d get sick after drinking so much so fast but Elf Root and water always did the trick it seemed, and it’d…she always felt safe sleeping alongside her friends, but it was just a different sort of safe maybe. She liked waking up and having him there.

“I’m glad, Varric’s bourbon is nothing to trifle with.”

“I’m real sorry about that, Seeker,” Varric said, putting the pan over the fire to cook,
“Really. I uh, didn’t know you were- er, not drinking.” Oh. That must be what he’s feeling so badly for then? He certainly liked apologizing with breakfast food.

“Was real good, ‘sandra, nothin’ wrong with cuttin’ loose,” Sera said as she bit into her toast, though she just about choked when Varric snapped,

“She doesn’t have to drink; step off her junk!”

“Varric!” Cassandra chastised, “Do cease that tone with Sera. Honestly.”

“Sorry, just, your business. Overcompensating for being a dick last night I guess.”

“Well do stop.”

“You got it.”

Aside from Varric’s…weirdness, breakfast was great. Her party gathered and ate, discussed the game plan—together, they and the Advisors would lead their Mages and Templars to the Breach. It was a bit of a way there and back, not a bad trip out, but Haven’s cooking staff was working tirelessly to get both breakfast for everyone through and done and send them off with lunches they could stop to eat on the road. They’d get time to rest though—they wouldn’t be back until later this evening, and then it seemed like there was going to be a pretty big party to celebrate.

“It feels weird, after all this time, there’ll be no more Breach in the sky,” Ellie admitted when they were getting ready to head for Haven’s gate.

“We’re with you, Ellie-girl,” Thom said with certainty, “you’ve got this.”

“You have everything you need before we leave?” Cullen asked her, looking her over from head to toe, tugging her hat down a bit more to cover the tops of her ears, adjusting her scarf, “You’re warm enough? You’ve extra water for your necklace?”

Ellie nodded—Sera and Solas were the absolute best in life. “Yup! I’m all set!” it was steaming nicely with water and Embrium—she had a little flask of it now she kept strapped to the back of her canteen, Cremisius had given her the idea because he always walked around now with a little flask full of Embrium water for her, just in case.

“There is something we would like you to have, Eleanor,” Cassandra said, clearing her throat as she came near, holding her sword in its sheath…oh, wait no, it was a little smaller than Cassandra’s, and her sword was on her belt so…

“For me?” Ellie asked.

“You’re trained to use it, and the Commander and I have discussed it at length. If you wish it, you should have it in case you’ve need.”

Wow. She nodded, “Thank you,” she said, and Cassandra helped to fasten the sheath to Ellie’s belt. It wasn’t too heavy and she was sort of excited to use it? She didn’t want to go on a murder rampage or anything but like, a duel, or something.

If Cremisius’s father was sad over that horrible woman marrying Cornelius, that lady was getting challenged to a duel!

The journey to the Breach wasn’t as horrifying this time it…was like a big, organized walk through the sunny, snowy countryside around Haven. The bridge was mended that once fell under
Ellie and Cassandra’s feet…wow that seemed like a long time ago. Ellie’d been pretty sure Cassandra was going to kill her. Like, a thousand percent positive that was how their relationship was going to end. She was super glad to walk arm in arm with her now, Marehis on Ellie’s other side, it was very warm and honestly grounding. She could focus on the people with her, on the certainty they had, and on her breathing—everything was going to be okay.

It somehow felt like it took forever to get to the Temple of Sacred Ashes remains, everything had been so adrenaline fueled and frightening and new, it almost passed like a flash when Ellie thought back on it.

But she was here and now. She was stronger, could use her Mark the best she knew how, and she had all the power of the rebel Mages, and fallen Templars on her side.

The Chargers were going to stay up high, with Lady Josie and Anya—Rocky was absolutely amazed by the crater, staring down into it while the rest of his team mates were staring up into the Breach. Cremisius only tore his eyes from it for a moment, gosh he looked nervous, but when he looked to Ellie he forced a smile, mouthing, ‘You’ve got this’ raising a hand to touch the prayer pins Cassandra had given him, pinned to his gambeson. She nodded, smiling back.

“Are you ready, Eleanor?” Cassandra asked.

“Let’s do this,” Ellie nodded, her arms were free now, they’d separated as they got to the temple, but she reached out her unmarked hand to Sera who clutched it tight, shaking like a leaf, but she shook her head fiercely when Ellie offered that she could stay up high, not get too close to the Breach.

“Imekari,” Bull grumbled out when they got to the drop off down into the crater. He’d been very quiet since they got to the Breach. “You’re a badass.”

“‘s’what B-Quad’s all about.”

“Our people are ready when you are, Ellie,” Cullen said, his hand went to her shoulder and it seemed like he wanted to pull her into a hug but she was about to do a pretty grown up job here in a sec, work with a lot of people who needed to see someone capable of the job set before her, not a crybaby little girl that needed a hug. Even though she was a hundred percent a crybaby taller-little girl who really did want that hug! Cullen was getting so much hugs when this was over. Everyone was. If the Breach sealed shut, the whole Inquisition could just line up and get hugged!

The Iron Bull was amazing help getting down into the crater, she was worried he might hurt his ankle, being the first to drop down, but he was careful and then reached up to help Ellie down, Cassandra, Cullen, Solas dropping down into the crater after her.

Oh gosh, Marehis too—it didn’t matter she couldn’t suppress or power anything, having her near boost Ellie’s spirits and that counted! And no one was going to just make her go back up...might be funny if they tried.

Drakonis 1st, 9:42, Eleanor Trevelyan raised her hand to the sky, and backed by the power of the united Mages and Templars under the banner of the Inquisition, the Breach was sealed. Power tore from her hand and plunged into the Breach, her entire body felt energized and burned from head to toe as power surged into her Mark, flooded the connection it held to the Breach and with one final painful pull, it snapped shut with a resounding CRACK.

Ellie’s ears were ringing, pounding with the hyper thumpthumphumpthump of her heart racing, stomach rolling like she might be sick as she fell to her knees, catching her breath.
“‘vehnan?’” Marehis’s voice warped into being, like she’d been speaking from far off and her words were suddenly loud in her ears.

“Eleanor?” Cassandra asked, there were hands on her shoulders.

Ellie pushed to her feet, tried not to make it too obvious she too Cassandra’s arm and was leaning on the woman a bit, “All good.”

More than all good, she was great! The Breach was gone! Gone gone gone gone gone! The Elder One could suck it!

And so could image! Cullen swept her up in a big bracing hug when the Iron Bull helped her up out of the crater, and then the Commander let her ride piggy back, head resting against his Pauldrons because she—while totally, out of this world excited and relieved and happy—was completely and totally exhausted…

“…is she alright?”

“She is fine, vehnan, merely tired.”

“Can I get her anything?” hmm…Cremisius was sweet.

“She will be alright,” Cassandra assured. “She can rest here, undisturbed, Adan is nearby if needed.”

Voices had been hazy, like hearing them half in the Fade, and half awake. Anya was curled up against her when she woke up. She vaguely realized she’d been laid down in Cassandra’s room and—

**WAKE! UP!**

She sucked air into her lungs as she shot up, panic panic panic in her veins as her magic screamed something was wrong wrong wrong wrong wrong.

She shot out of bed, slamming into the door before pulling it open, Anya yipping, confused but following as Ellie practically fell into the hallway, catching herself on the palms of her hands and pushing up—move move move!

Cassandra and everyone, her party, advisors, Cremisius were standing just outside the Chantry, seemingly admiring the scar in the sky that was once the Breach, talking, but they needed to be moving.

“Imekari?”

“Eleanor, child, what is it?” Cassandra asked as she went to her knees, catching Ellie and holding her by her arms as she crashed into the Seeker.

“Something’s wrong, something’s coming, it’s bad, we need to move, everyone has to get out of here, now!”

“Did you have a nightmar-“

“Cassandra! Listen to me. I am awake, and my magic is screaming. We just sealed the Breach the Elder One massacred thousands of people to open—he is pissed and he is coming!”

“Him and what army?” Varric wanted to know.
“I don’t fucking know but it looks bad,” the Iron Bull announced.

There was fire in mountainside hundreds of lights heading for Haven.

War horns sounded across Haven, and in the hills and they were running, all of them, to the gates—Cremisius broke off with orders from Bull to round up the Chargers, find everyone, and-

And what. Haven…Haven literally had one way into the Inquisition base.

That was currently being flooded by…huh. Well then. Ellie wasn’t certain if it was a copycat situation or if great minds thought alike.

There had been a great number of mages unaccounted for in the rebellion, from Redcliffe, Alexius had some woman named Calpernia that approached him initially with the offer from the Elder One, to save Felix’s life. And Cullen had been…very disturbed when Sir Barris mentioned a Templar named Samson, that he’d been in Therinfal Redoubt off and on over the past few months before the Inquisition came and put a stop to what was going on there.

Now, it would seem, the Elder One had his own army, a mix of Rebel Mages converted to the Venatori, and Templars. Red lyrium Templars, they…they didn’t even look Human anymore as they thundered across the frozen ice of Haven’s lake, stormed the walls. Everyone had been celebrating, no one…no one thought there would…Maker.

“We need to get everyone to the Chantry,” Cullen called out as they came out of Haven’s gate, Venatori and Templar bodies littered the area, the Chargers holding ground and protecting the gate.

“We’re on it!” Cremisius assured, leading the Chargers back into Haven while Ellie and her party headed for the practice field…

Battlefield, it was a battlefield holy crap. Where was her staff?

Back in Cassandra’s room. Cool cool cool. She had her knives, and they hadn’t taken off her belt, so, sword! Except her hands were a little busy right now—her party worked together with Inquisition forces, they needed their catapults up and running and someone had to turn the dang-the- the spinny things! Twist twist twist until the catapult was in the correct position and reared back to fire, and she could do it! She shrieked when the catapult was released, it was so loud, and the platform she was on shook! But take that! Elder One didn’t have catapults, so there!

Dumb! Mean! Jerk old man! Haven was her home!

“Something’s wrong, they aren’t firing,” a scout called—oh crap, yeah, there was another catapult group, but everyone had been celebrating, maybe no one was manning-

No one was manning the other catapult because they were all dead.

Magic was burning with her anger, her…grief could wait, she needed to focus, these men were dead, but there were hundreds more that needed saving, “Keep them off me!” she called as she rushed ahead to work the catapult controls.

*Thwack!* Ellie covered her ears as they launched their second catapult into the mountains. Hopefully it squished the Elder One like a pancake!

Probably not, but a girl could dream.
“Harritt!” Ellie called out when they were heading back to the gate, the Blacksmith was trying like mad to break into his own cabin but the door was blocked.

“It isn’t—” necessary? Didn’t matter, he was trying hard to get in so Ellie— oh! Staff! There was a staff leaning against the low stone wall kind of conveniently but she wasn’t going to question the Maker. She grabbed it and cast at the debris to bust it up, boom! Rocky’d be proud!

“Thank you, my lady,” Harritt called as he rushed inside.

Wait Harritt… what about the Horse Master? Oh! “What about the horses?” Ellie asked, turning to her party.

“I’ll hit the stables Ellie-girl, you get to the Chantry,” Thom volunteered, rushing off.

“Da’vehnan!” Marehis called out in reprimand as Ellie broke off from the group,

“Imekari, there Chargers are all clear, no one’s in there!” she could hear Bull shouting. Yeah, but there were things! She yanked the nearest case off of its pillow and used it as a sack as she took the lock to Cremisius’s trunk in hand and burn burn burn burn ouch! Hot Metal! But she sent a blast of cold and it turned into a chunk she could drop onto the floor, yikes.

When she had all she could get in the sack she twisted it and tied it closed, rushing out to rejoin her party.

“Imekari what the fuck—“

“I have what I need, let’s go!” she said, slinging the sack over her shoulder.

They made it back to Haven’s gate and Maker. The streets were flooded with enemies. There was a woman, a Templar, Lysette, Ellie asked Bull to go help her, she was being bombarded by Red Templars.

“Seggrit needs help,” she heard Cole murmur and then he disappeared, reappearing on the roof of a cabin used as a stockroom and dropping into it through a hole blown in the roof. Everything was on fire, Haven was burning. But Cole busted open the door and got out with the Human man intact, thank the Maker!

“Eleanor, the Chantry!” Cassandra half-reminded, but it sounded almost like a panicked demand.

“I’m not leaving people trapped! I’m looking!” she called back, and she could hear—,

“Flissa’s in trouble!”

She bolted for the Tavern running as fast as she could, bounding into the burning Singing Maiden oh crap!

“Flissa!” Ellie cried out, setting the sack down and trying her hardest to hoist a fallen beam off of the woman. Smoke burned in her lungs, painful tearing breaths that choked in her throat— ugh! Not right now! Body! Cooperate! Save Flissa!

“Ellie no, get out of here!”

“Imekari!”

Bull! Get on over here you big beautiful badass! Muscles! Get it! He practically threw the
beam off of Flissa, hoisting the woman to her feet, and Ellie over his shoulder, she just narrowly grasped the sack in hand before he was whisking her off, though he placed her on her feet the second they were outside.

“Shit, shit, kid, are you okay?”

Embrium steam from her necklace was helpful, soothing in her lungs as she forced air into them, “Adan-“

“Fuck-“

“Trouble!” she croaked out, she didn’t need him, he needed them!

Adan and Minaeve! They were pinned down under…why were there heavy pots of oil just in the middle of the square? Who put that there? Why did they just want people burned alive?!

Fire was traveling trails of oil leading up to the pots but Madam de Fer blew them into solid ice! And Ellie helped Minaeve up while Bull got Adan to his feet, and they both bolted for the Chantry—seemed about that time!

Oh! Threnn! The Quartermaster was under attack just outside the Chantry—it was an emergency so Ellie cast Barrier over the woman, she could apologize later for saving her life! Her party worked together and cleared the Chantry yard of enemies, Threnn rasping out her thanks before heading into the Chantry, and they followed, Thom catching up with them, helping to pull the door shut behind them.

“Now what?” Ellie asked they…well there wasn’t anywhere else to go—they were in the actual back of Haven. The Chantry was built into a mountainside. Haven was just one big deathtrap now they were sitting ducks! Baked ones! That wasn’t funny but it was!

Maker bless Roderick. There was a way out—a old mine carved a path through the mountains but-

Okay. Think think think. You want out, you want gone! You need to escape! How? Once upon a time she’d seen several ways of sneaking out of Haven, now she just needed that on a mass scale—

“There’s still one more catapult, right?” Ellie asked.

“Eleanor?” Cullen prompted.

“The Elder One isn’t taking Haven. He doesn’t even want it,” Ellie said. “Think about it—what did he want in Redcliffe? Therinfal? Me."

“He certainly cannot have you!” Cassandra snapped.

“Mami, listen to me. Everyone needs to get out of here, get to the mines—if I go off, the Herald of Andraste, heading for the last of our trebuchets, that’ll distract his forces—he wants me! So everyone can get into the escape route while—“ Cole. Be quiet, she thought to the Spirit, “while we get one last good hit on his forces before we get the hell out of here.” It wasn’t a lie.

Cassandra’s eyes looked wet with unspilled tears, “We’re going with you.”

“Absolutely,” Marehis agreed.
Okay, yeah, that would work, she’d…she’d figure it out, she needed help getting to the catapult so, “Thank you,” she said.

“Alright, we’ll work together and get everyone to the mine, be safe, Eleanor,” Cullen intoned.

“Cremisius!” Ellie called out, hoping to be heard over the din of the panic ringing in the Chantry.

“Ellie!” Cremisius found his way to her, a hand reaching grasping hers, “Maker, you’re alright.”

“I have to go, here,” she said, handing him the pillow case, “This is yours.”

Cremisius snorted. “Great minds, huh?”

Oh. Oh Maker he’d- the scarf she slept in was being used like a sack, she could see the edges of her box-

“Keep it, yeah? We’re getting everyone out of here—help Cullen okay?”

“Where are you going?”

“We have a job to do—you do too, go and be safe okay?” Ellie pled. "Keep Anya with you.”

Cremisius nodded, swallowing harshly.

Great minds, yeah. They squeezed each other’s hands three times.

*I'm scared. I don't want to do this. I love you.*

Maker watch over them all, keep them safe.

Haven was devastation as they carved through the path of Red Templars and Venatori, toward their final trebuchet.

Please please please let this work!

Really felt like it did. The second they were in the clearing around the trebuchet, there were forces all around them, congregating, trying to overtake her party. She was scared for them, but a little grateful the bombardment was overwhelming enough they weren’t watching just where she was aiming this last shot.

The Elder One wasn’t going to be able to follow after their people, no way in hell.

Seemed like hell already though with the huge, honking walking mountain of Red Lyrium attacking—they were almost there, almost done! She had the catapult in position and it was almost ready for launching. Someone would have to do that, it was the only way. So.

And then there…there was the dragon. Big, scary, nightmarish dragon.

That…worked things out pretty perfect, actually. One last offer of help and hope from the Maker. The Dragon’s assault blazed a path between Ellie and her companions, even as Marehis had been pulling her along when the Dragon appeared, she’d lost her grip and then boom! Wall of fire between her, and everyone else—they needed to run, Cole! *They need to run!*
Get to the mine, get to the mine, get to the mine!

Oh. Oh crap.

The…Elder One, she presumed. He did look old and ancient…and like three times taller than Bull. Big, big gray, lyrium warped monster man with hands like the claws of a terror. Okay, breathe breathe breathe breathe! She needs to get to the trebuchet. She was just gonna bolt for it-

“Enough!” that horrible voice she’d only heard from the Breach called out, oh he, he was definitely—how the hell had he survived the blast?! “Pretender,” he accused, “you toy with forces beyond your ken. No more.”

“You don’t scare me you big-! Jerk!”

“Words mortals often hurl at the darkness. Once they were mine. They are always lies.”

Just a little bit! But fuck! Him!

“Know me,” he said, “know what you have pretended to be. Exalt the Elder One: that is the will of Corypheus. You will kneel,” he said, raising his hand what? Was she supposed to kiss his ring? He wasn’t even wearing one and-

“Make me!” cause that was literally the only way that was happening. This asshole came into her home! Killed her people!

He hummed at that. “You will resist. You always resist. But that ends here. I have come for the anchor, the process of removing it, begins now,” this…Corypheus? Stupid name! What was that he had in his hand? An…an Orb? Her Mark began to thrum like it was near a Rift.

Ouch ouch ouch!

The Orb was glowing, burning red as pain shot through Ellie’s Mark, sending her screaming as he…it was her fault? Something about planning for years and ye- hurt hurt hurt hurt hurt! She didn’t steal! Her ears were ringing, her magic was on fire, it cried out in her blood! Ahh!

She screamed when he yanked her up by her arm, glaring into her Mark like it disobeyed him while he ranted and raved about raising Tevinter high and correcting this Blighted world and how he’d seen the throne of the gods and it stood empty.

He was a liar! The Maker sat in the sunburst throne and He was always with her!

Even as this monster threw her, hard, she was flying like, like she weighed nothing to him and she hit the wall again-

No. not a wall. The Maker was with her—and the Elder One would just have to deal with that, he played into His will and he didn’t even know it!

She was on the trebuchet!

Admittedly, it was a little touch and go, by the time she was able to stand, he was there, in her face, hoisting her up by the collar of her coat and ranting in her face some more.

“You know what your problem is? I mean really, master tip for your bad guy schemes—listening?” Ellie asked, holding his gaze.

“You think you-“
His turn to scream—thank you Sera and Solas! He hadn’t been paying attention to her hands, and she popped the cork off her steam necklace splashed him in the face with the burning, boiling water and he dropped her to her feet.

“You talk too much!” she let him know as she drew her sword and cut the tension line on the trebuchet, and it launched overhead, the Elder One snarling as he twisted about to see where she’d shot, following its path right into the mountainside directly over Haven village.

It was her flashiest escape ever, and she was admittedly proud. She’d faked heart failure, pretended to be blind, and even resorted to spooking Druffalo, but she’d never once used an manmade—nope, sorry guys but—\textit{woman}made avalanche. Until today.

She ran as fast as she could, racing and running, maybe she could catch up—

She fell into the shaft just as snow swept over the opening.

\textit{Crack!}

It…it was so cold. She was freezing, but alive. Cool. Ugh.

Okay, head pounding, she’d hit it when she fell, but at least it was still attached? Small blessings. Legs still work, arms—up we get.

She really needed to stop falling into mines.

The tunnel was cold and dark and empty, but the former footfalls of her friends, her people —Haven had escaped through here, she was certain. She was too. Or at least she hoped so. A little bit. She kind of thought she was going to die doing the whole ‘trebuchet into the mountainside’ thing but the Maker wasn’t done with her yet. Possibly. They’d see.

Her Mark was on fire, it burned with…she wasn’t sure, it just, it hurt! Cory-face had done something to it, it thrummed with some kind of new power and she wasn’t-

She’d been stumbling along the path and came to an open area in the mine to find herself face to face with two despair demons, and in a moment of panic she raised her Marked hand and \textit{pop!}

She…she made a Rift. A small one that stunned the demons and held them writhing as it…it looked like it was sucking them in, absorbing something from them until they withered away, out of existence, and then her tiny Rift snapped shut.

“I’ve seen too much weird shit today.”

Everything hurt, she was sore, bleeding just…wasn’t sure from where, her brain was…she couldn’t think really everything felt slow and sluggish, and she was pretty sure she had a concussion.

And no more Embrium steam in her necklace, extra flask was empty.

Clearest thought she could manifest cut sharp across her consciousness and it almost sent her turning around to go back because—
It was gone. Marehis's necklace, she’d been wearing it for good luck with the Breach and now it was gone, it must have fallen when…she’d touched it, she remembered, when they left the Chantry to head for the trebuchet—

Corypheus had torn it from her, his claw caught it when he took her up by her coat collar.

Dry, harsh air cutting through her lungs, freezing cold, and a snowed over path met her when she emerged from the Mine. There was…there was a vague path made of debris, a dying fire that mocked her when it flickered out in the wind…where…where did everyone go?

Her magic rang in her veins when she heard the howl of a wolf in the distance. And despite everything that said that wasn’t safe…she followed it into the wilderness.

Their calls would lead her home*.

Chapter End Notes

There's only a few things that aren't 100% explained with context--words in different languages.
Antivan:
'mi Tia' this means 'my aunt/auntie' sort of like the friend of 'Mija'--you can call any important female figure in your life 'Tia', no blood relation required.

Guapo, ven aqui--means 'come here, handsome.'

Cariño is a Spanish term of endearment, meaning 'sweetheart'

Qunlat: Kadan, which is Bull's term of endearment for a Romance, it means 'heart'.

*Visus is a sword-shaped constellation that is the symbol of the Templar Order.

*The Matchmaker is a Spirit Solas will tell Inquisition about in Skyhold if you ask about stories from the Fade.

*Breakthrough Bleeding--is an unfortunate side affect of continuous birthcontrol, when you take it so you never have your period, sometimes your body is like "I'm doing it anyway!" and gives you, usually, like a mini-period.

*Kingsway is September

*Wintersend is the sort of Solstice-y celebration in Thedas, it comes at the 1st of Guardian (February).

*Since Dorian, Cole, and Roderick are all accounted for already in this fic, there isn't anyone to come pounding on Haven's gate to warn them about the impending attack. Since Ellie's magic is always about that #SurvivalLife it acts as a substitute.

*It took. two. playthroughs. after Tresspasser. for me to get this. I always thought it was lame, they have you hearing Wolf calls in the woods but you don't get attacked by wolves as you try to follow the Inquisition's trail. But then I realized duh. Dread Wolf. If you follow the sound, you're going in the right direction. So thanks for being a pal, Solas, you lying liar egg.
UPDATE: Next Chapter titled, mapped, mostly written, to be posted by March 1st! Heads up, I'm not 100% certain because my draft is still saving okay, but it is getting on the longer side, so this might end up being a double chapter update due to AO3 character limits. Be sure to check the Chapter Summary up at the top to make sure you're in the right place! Next chapter picks up right where we left off, directly after the attack on Haven--if you're in Skyhold, you've gone too far!
All were seated in devastation, gathered around one of the many campfires lighting what was left of Haven's Inquisition. Quiet, crying, even Anya was aware the loss they’d been dealt, the pup whined, seeking to comfort Cullen, laying at his side. Lady Josephine had nearly been sick from her sobbing into Leliana's lap, she lay crying, staring into the fire before them. The Spymaster had sought the Chant, and was met with Lieutenant offering up the very copy she’d gifted Eleanor, the woman was quietly reading as she stroked her friend’s hair. Dorian was lying on his back in the snow, staring up into the sky as he wept in frustrated silence. Marehis was sobbing heartbreak into her hands, as she sat at Solas's side while Adan examined him, offering the woman a consoling hand on her shoulder as he informed her the Elf was stable, to call on him if there was any change before he took his leave to tend their wounded. Oh Maker, Cassandra prayed Solas would wake. She...she was not certain she would ever sleep again. It was well past midnight, her body was weary, heart ruined with despair, but every time her eyes slipped closed and she began to fall asleep in her seat she heard the most horrible-

She heard Eleanor screaming.

They had been separated by a wall of fire, heard that horrible voice from the vision they witnessed at the Breach, his words were unperceivable but there was no mistaking it was him. And then Eleanor's screams. Solas, his connection wide open, monitoring the girl, he’d cried out in agony, convulsed, his body seized up before he fell limp and unconscious in the snow. The Iron Bull had taken him over his shoulder and carried him, Marehis had needed to lean on Cassandra and Vivienne to move forward half carrying, half dragging the Elf woman.

Eleanor...Solas was still alive. But his reaction, her...her horrifying cries...

The resounding crash through the mines, echo of the devastation befalling Haven. An avalanche.

“She was talking to Justinia a great deal,” Leliana murmured, gently gliding a hand along the edge of a page before turning it seeming moved.

Talking?
“Justinia?” Cullen asked.

Leliana cleared her throat. “I lent Most Holy my Chant when she’d need of it before the Conclave, knowing well her habits.”

Ahh. Justinia wrote often in the margins of the Chant. Her thoughts, notes for her sermons, a visual conversation between herself and its contents. And when Cassandra peered at the open text in Leliana’s hands she saw the scrawling cursive of Justinia’s hand, with replies beneath them. Not answers from the Maker, but from Eleanor.

“The Maker Appears to Andraste,” Leliana read quietly. “Eyes sorrow-blinded, in darkness unbroken, There 'pon the mountain, a voice answered my call. "Heart that is broken, beats still unceasing, An ocean of sorrow does nobody drown. You have forgotten, spear-maid of Alamarr. Within My creation, none are alone." The Spymaster huffed, sniffling. "Justinia was preparing for the Conclave when she wrote alongside this passage, ‘What glory to see the Maker’s face and know He is with you. I have faith in His promises, but I feel the weight of this impossible task before me. I am surrounded by allies and yet my heart feels as though I am alone. I fear for the future I worry I am unprepared to guide His people into. I know His heart weeps for His children as they seek war with their brothers and sisters, I pray He shows me how to remind them we are all His children.’ Eleanor,” Leliana seemed to lose her voice.

Lady Montilyet sat up, wiping at her eyes before laying eyes on the girl’s handwriting herself. “Oh mija,” she whimpered out, taking the Chant in trembling hand. “The Maker is always with us. It’s how we show love for one another that reveals His love for us all. His love is endless and if we open ourselves to that, it gives us the capacity to love the same—I love so, so many people, so very much. I know you did too. You reminded people of the Maker’s love every day—how you loved Leliana, and Cassandra, how you did your best to bring everyone together, how you wanted to move forward, doing what was best for not just some, but with all of us in mind. I can’t remember meeting you, but I know we did—the fact that you wanted to take the time to talk to some nobody little apostate, listen to whatever it was I had to say, show love to me by having my voice in mind as you worked through whatever the Conclave could have held? No one can ever doubt His love if they knew you.’”

“Goddamn it, Tumbles,” Varric swore.

Indeed. The girl had shown the ultimate form of love, and Cassandra wanted to part of it, could hardly stand it—couldn’t stand it. How could her loss be proof the Maker loved them?

"I should have sent her with Cullen," she found herself saying. The Commander wrapped an arm around her shoulders as she spoke.

"Come on Seeker, don't do that to yourself," Varric said, "Here," he offered his canteen. She was terribly tempted, it was likely hard drink that would interact with her potions, quiet her hurt, make all a blur she would not have to consciously experience, but he assured, "It's just water. You should uh, stay hydrated." Ahh. Cassandra shook her head in quiet refusal.

"I had her," Marehis sobbed out, "I had her in my hand, all I needed to do was keep pulling wh- why-?" she could not voice her pain further and Madam de Fer, who'd been pacing the length of their parties camp, was quick to her side, seated and wrapping her arms around the Elf woman's shoulders, pulling her close.

"Oh my darling, you cannot blame yourself."

Cole let out something like a whine, he was seated at the Lieutenant’s side, curled up
against Krem’s arm, hands gripping his head like he were in pain. Perhaps he was, the Spirit of Compassion, made to hear Hurt...there was hurt in abundance just now and precious little to do about it but he did try. "It was not any of you," Cole spoke up. "It was him. And ultimately her."

"You watch your mouth boy," Rainier ground out, murderous, even as he had to sniffle, red faced and tear streaked as he warned "don't you dare blame Ellie."

Cole was insistent as he spoke from Eleanor’s mind. "I have to get them out of here, he just wants me. Everyone can get into the escape route while-Cole. Be quiet-we get one last good hit on his forces before we get the hell out of here. It isn't a lie. She was never going to shoot at his men, but they would get hit with what she did launch the trebuchet at. And someone had to launch it. She couldn't let him follow us, so she buried Haven, and it's escape route with it. If he comes for us, he will have to go around the mountain range. But he won't. He just wanted her. And she knew that, wanted to keep us safe." And then he winced. "I am sorry. I did not mean to make it worse."

"We won't leave her buried in the snow," Cullen said. "We can't."

Absolutely not. They could not leave her abandoned they- she- it was so cold, Eleanor hated to be cold-

Her sweet girl. Precious, innocent Eleanor. Oh Maker, what was she going to do? How was this happening? Why? Her chest ached so fiercely, anguish fresh, burning in her heart, in her veins, she wondered if this was the very agony she could inflict upon those with Lyrium in their blood, perhaps it was recompense, once upon a time she sought to make that girl feel this, what a wretched thing that had been. She felt like she might die of her grief, and if that made it so she might be with Eleanor again, perhaps the Maker was showing her compassion after all. How could He let this happen? How could He expect her to survive this?

Krem was sitting on the ground, curled in on himself, arms around his legs, his face buried in his knees while the Iron Bull sat at his other side, an arm around his shoulders. "Stop talking like she's dead!" he raised his tear streaked face to snap, "She isn't!"

"Krem-" Bull started, gently.

"She isn't!" the young man practically roared in the Qunari's face

Oh Cremisius.


"No you stop!" Sera rallied to the Tevinter's defense, rising from her seat. "You stupid- you stupid arseholes! Inky isn't dead 'cause- because she can't be! She can't- she can't survive the Conclave, survive the Breach and every single damn thing in between, just to get k-killed by some old git! She's alive!"

"Sera," Cassandra sighed.

"She- she- screamin' don't mean n-nothin' 'sandra, I'll-," the girl stomped her foot and started screaming, fierce and loud into the sky, and Cassandra shot to her feet, went and covered the girl's mouth before she alarmed someone or alerted something unwanted's attention, as it was Cassandra could faintly hear the echo of a wolf cry in the distance. Sera cried against her hand but finally stopped her din, and when Cassandra pulled her hand away, "See? 'm not dead. So neither's Inky. W-we hav- have to go back! We have to f-find her! She- she- sh-" the Elf girl's eyes were wide and she clutched at her chest as she started hyperventilating.
The Seeker pulled her fast against her. "Sera. Sweetheart, breathe. Try to match your breathing to my own. Good, good, just focus on the next breath," Cassandra tried to soothe, holding the girl close as she trembled and fought her panic. And it was of some help to Cassandra, every heartbeat felt like she were one away from the thing rending literally in twain, stopping forever, but Sera bringing her focus outward brought her some semblance of...well it made her certain she was still needed. She wanted to lay down in the snow and sob until she had Eleanor in her arms again, but Sera needed them just now and that was a binding line between her grief and her semblance of duty.

Dorian sluggishly rose into a seated position from where he'd been laying in the snow, and Cole seemed to perceive what he was after, moved so the Altus could sit alongside the Lieutenant, pull him against his shoulder, Dorian meeting Bull's gaze with tear-filled eyes as he ground out with just the barest bit of tremor in his voice, "Let the boy grieve, Bull. This is only natural. I know you do not like him hurt, but he is." Cassandra could understand, the Iron Bull trying to keep the young man from putting a voice to denial, that those hurting around him would only hurt more for hearing it but it was natural. Oh Maker he is so young, and this is so hard, his sweet heart.

Eleanor was still resting, sleeping peacefully with Anya at her side, poor girl. Sealing the Breach had exhausted her. So much so, Cassandra found herself wandering back to her quarters for the fifth time in an hour just to lay eyes on her and make certain the girl still breathed, was merely resting to recover. Her Mark had not vanished with the Breach, but reports were coming in from the field that there were still Rifts to be closed, so perhaps...perhaps when they were gone for good, her Mark would leave then.

Night had fallen and celebrations were still underway, residents of Haven dancing and making play in the snow, enjoying the starry sky above that shone with just the barest bit of green scarring left still in the heavens, the only indication the Breach had been there to begin with from where they were standing. Lieutenant Aclassi stood atop the drop outside the Chantry, looking up at the sky.

"It is still sinking in, isn't it?" Cassandra asked as she joined him, he startled a bit but smiled as he looked to her.

"Yeah that was...Maker. I still can't believe...you know the first time I saw her, this tiny thing popping out of the Chantry, arm in arm with Marehis. She was real excited about something and just- she looked like she made joy."

Ahh, Cassandra could understand that, and it was incredibly precious to hear, "You sound as if you were rather," what was the word Marehis had used to describe Eleanor and Cremisius's first encounter?..."smitten."

The young man snorted, "Oh yeah, big time. She's just beautiful and compassionate, and she immediately welcomed me, assured me I would get face time with Lady Josie and sat me down to a proper meal. I'm looking at this girl and I'd heard all these things about the Herald of Andraste, demon slayer, sealer of Rifts, her assault on the Breach. I didn't realize I was seated across from her, until Marehis said something, called her the Lady Herald, and even then it didn't click until I saw the Mark myself. It all seemed impossible you know? Still does." he shook his head, and then, as if he were shy to say so, "I...I love her, you know?"

"I've had reason to believe as much, certainly." Cassandra assured warmly, "does she know?"

"I think so? I just...I haven't said it yet," he admitted, "I...I mean I've said it before, to people. My parents, Chargers, Bull. But I've never...this is all new, in a way at least. The last time I
told someone I was involved with I loved them it was so Mother wouldn't slap me when we got home.” Violence, Cassandra literally wished violence upon that woman. "I've never done this, the dating thing, the relationship thing, for real. I mean..."

Oh. Oh goodness. Was the young man seeking advice? Cassandra was certainly more than glad to deliver it, pleased he would seek her council. "You struggle with just how to convey your feelings for Eleanor?"

"Little bit. I mean what if I say something and she...it's too soon or something? It's not like I'd want her to say it out of obligation, just to be polite or kind because she doesn't want to leave me hanging."

Cassandra rested a hand on his shoulder to reassure him he needn't look so very concerned, "Cremisius, I know without doubt, she would go to the very ends of the world for you." Cassandra could not say exactly what taught her that, but Eleanor had more than proven as much during her time in Orlais, Cassandra knew now why it was so very vital, why the girl would wholly ignore the need to rest and recover after the Oasis, to get to some supposed casual lunch date with Varric's cousin. "Sweet man, tell her how you feel, plainly, and I'm certain she will return the sentiment in full."

"...do you think it'd be lame to tell her tonight?" he asked.

"Tell who what? Whipped-Krem, what the fuck, why're you up here with Seeker instead of partying your ass off? The end of the world is cancelled!" the Iron Bull's voice sounded as the Qunari approached, backed by the whole of Eleanor's party, Marehis, who detached herself from Solas to go slip into the Chantry to peek in on Eleanor.

"Why the hell aren't you off partying?" Krem shot back.

"I am the party, brat. Came to get Seeker, figured she was up here checkin' on Imekari. How's the kid doing?"

Hmm. Cassandra's hand still rested on Krem's shoulder, so she gave it three gentle squeezes, and what she hoped was an encouraging smile, to privately convey it would indeed not be 'lame' if he felt compelled to confess his love for Eleanor when she woke this evening. "She is well."

And now she wasn't. Cassandra's heart hurt.

"m not- I'm not grieving, sh- she isn't-" Krem whimpered and the Tevinter Mage shushed him, a hand cradling the back of the Lieutenant's head to hold him closer as he let him cry, the Iron Bull looked remorseful, rumbled out an apology as he used his great arm to wrap them both up, tears falling from his good eye as he pressed his lips to the crown of Cremisius's head, his hold so fierce as if he were trying to physically hold the Tevinter men together.

Mother Giselle was seated in the open-faced tent near their fire, holding congress with her fellow Chantry clerics and Sisters, Chancellor Roderick, holding vigil for them, praying over their camp, for those they lost…for their fallen Herald.

For Eleanor.

“Shadows fall/And hope has fled. Steel your heart/The dawn will come…”

Mother Giselle’s voice*. And while it certainly felt like no such dawn would come, Leliana, Cullen, eventually all including the Iron Bull—she was uncertain how he knew the hymn,
but he joined in out of respect—were singing. Save Cassandra, so suddenly found herself being supported by Sera as she held the girl and wept, wishing with everything she could back—that she could go back to that night in the Hinterlands, what a fool she’d been then! She’d had Eleanor within arm’s reach, but she’d sat so very far from the girl even as they kept watch, sang this very hymn together after a rather wretched day trying and failing it felt like, to secure the Hinterlands. She should have held her then, she should have always held that girl whenever she could! She did not feel the Maker’s peace as the whole of their camp sang of His promises, she felt hollow, and world weary as the final note rang out.

The cry of a wolf pierced the night sky, Anya jumped up from her seat and began barking like mad before racing off followed by Solas…oh thank everything, he shot up, gasping in air he used to cry out,

"Ellie is near!"

Dorian and Madam de Fer's gazes snapped up, the Mages speaking in unison, "Her soul is in the Fade?"

That…oh Maker that was such a horrific prospect and somehow selfishly Cassandra was grateful for it, that the girl had sought them was…was she scared? Confused? Did she even know she was dead? Had she something to say to them?

Sera had shared with her, in private, what Solas had explained as the young Elf girl picking up residual magic and unnaturally casting to defend Eleanor—Sera had shyly admitted to being petrified she might be becoming a Mage. Of course, such a notion was ridiculous but…Cassandra had never wished more for such a possibility—she felt she could dedicate herself to such a thing, if it meant she could speak with Eleanor again before the Maker reunited them.

"Have we Lyrium?" Madam de Fer asked in earnest "oh good heavens we must help her-"

"She is not in the Fade, she is here," Solas insisted. "She approaches our camp as we speak but she is injured, weary, she cannot even cast- south, follow the ridge, go!"

Sera launched herself at the Apostate, hugging him fiercely while Marehis rushed to get Adan. Cullen was on his feet barking for soldiers to follow as he and Cassandra, raced to seek-

"There! I see her!" Cullen called out as they ran. “Good girl, Anya!”

And now Cassandra did as well, in the distance oh, "Thank the Maker!"

But more would be asked of Him. Eleanor, weak and limping, barely able to pull her legs up out of the snow that she sank into up to the tops of her knees, frigid cold. Cassandra's heart shuddered when the girl collapsed onto her knees, but Anya was there, supporting some of the girl’s weight, licking at her face in enthusiasm that surely helped to keep the girl conscious. And in the next moment Cassandra was there, able to lay hands on her. On she and Cullen both, the man had beaten her by a millisecond, had Eleanor in his arms and Cassandra had hers around he and this precious girl, oh however had she survived?

Only barely, it seemed. The girl rasped out a breath that sounded like relief and then she was unconscious, in the arms of those she trusted. Cullen cradled her in his arms, setting pace for their camp, for Healer Adan.

And Ser Stitches it seemed. The healers waited for them when they returned, it looked like everyone was on strict orders to keep at distance so they could work but all stayed to watch and
"Ma da'vehnan! Elgar’nan, Mythal, halani!" Marehis sobbed out in urgency, Solas and Sera holding her the only thing keeping her on the sidelines it seemed. Solas paled, burying his face against Marehis’s hair, stricken by her cry.

Rainier looked rather the hypocrite, he visibly took a few steps forward only to step back with a hand on the Lieutenant’s arm,

"We should stay out of their way, my boy."

Krem swallowed as he watched Cullen lay the girl down by the fire, “M-Maker, is she…?”

"Gonna be okay brat, I hear her,” Bull assured, “Sounds tough, but so is she.”

Cassandra had never been so relieved, never in all her life and still trepidation flooded her, she felt it seeping into her bones—Eleanor was here, she was alive, it was more than they had mere moments ago. But there was so much wrong, battles still to win in order to fully secure the certainty of her life.

Her complexion was practically grey, cracked lips bleeding and turning purple. There was a gash at her left temple, it had bled profusely, the girl’s face was caked with half-drying half-freezing blood. At Solas’s instruction, Adan removed the glove from Eleanor’s Marked hand, for an instant Cassandra was struck by the horrific impression that her Mark had spread but no, it merely burned brighter. There was something else shining near her Mark, it was...Maker, metal of some sort had burned a hole in her glove and melted in the palm of her hand. When Adan rolled up her sleeve it revealed thick, harsh rings of bruising from the Elder One’s hand. There was no steam coming from the necklace Sera had crafted for her, no smell of Embrium, which, at the moment, was vital.

“Damn it girl,” Adan swore as he used the implement he put in his ears, pressing its other end to Eleanor’s chest to listen to her lungs, “did you lot just hold her over every fire in Haven? Smoke inhalation is bad enough, but this air is killing her, and she—” he sighed in harsh frustration when he twisted the top off of Eleanor’s Embrium water flask and found it despairingly empty.

“Here,” Krem wrenched his arm out of Thom’s hold, pulling a flask from his hip as he went to Adan, “It’s just Embrium and water, little bit of um, Elf Root tonic too since Stitches said it was okay. Cole said something to me about the air scraping, and that just sounds like it’s tearing her lungs up or something, so I worry.”

“Give it here,” Adan instructed, taking the flask in hand and filling the necklace, “Boy. I could kiss you on the damn mouth ‘little bit of Elf Root’ that’s exactly what she needs right now, as much Elf Root as her body can process, a straight shot of it to her lungs. We need to get her hydrated I’ll work on that—Liam do you- ahh good.” he said when he realized Stitches was already soaking a cloth in Elf Root tonic.

The Charger’s Healer cleared his throat. “You remember what to do, yeah? Done this loads of times,” he said, to the Lieutenant, extending the cloth to Krem. Offering him the opportunity to put himself to use, give him something to do that would occupy his focus and give him the satisfaction that he was doing something that would help Eleanor.

It was a simple enough task, the young Tevinter took the cloth in hand, which trembled for a mere moment as he looked scared he may well hurt the girl before he pushed past that bit of unnecessary insecurity. Wholly unnecessary, it brought Cassandra a sense of relief, contentment as
she watched how very carefully the young man treated the injury to Eleanor’s head.

"Maker, what the hell did that?" the Lieutenant asked when Stitches moved on to Eleanor’s hand, examining it as he thought of just how to go about how to treat it.

"I think she uh, burnt the lock off your trunk," the Iron Bull supplied, "Pretty bad ass."

"She-," Krem took a deep breath, bracing himself before he began helping Stitches as the Healer worked to extract the melted metal from her palm, it left a trail of blistering— it was horrible, and Cassandra could only bear to watch because as bit my bit the injury was exposed, the Lieutenant steadily applied Elf Root tonic that did much to set it to rights.

"Her shoulder," Cole offered to the Healer's now that they'd done what they could to treat her more serious injuries like her head and lungs.

That...that horrible creature, it had wrenched Eleanor's arm almost cleanly out of her socket it was partially dislocated, and the pop was as sickening as it was swift for Stitches to get it fully back into place. For a second time. It was the shoulder she'd dislocated in the Oasis, it had only within the last week or so been regaining its full range of motion with the help of Elf Root treatments.

Madam de Fer’s tent had been one of the many things lost, abandoned in Haven’s demise, but they did have shelter—while their evacuation plans did involve Haven’s gate, they did have rather a good system in place despite their pitfalls. They got Eleanor settled as comfortably as they could in these conditions; Marehis was at her side, holding the girl’s unmarked hand as she slept. Where were they going to go? Did any of their allies know what had happened? They needed to make contact, first with those they had in the field, then their allies for assistance, find a place for the Inquisition to rebuilt headquarters, redirect their supply of food, materials, ingredients—

Everything Eleanor owned was in her cabin, save for what she had on her person or in her pack—Marehis had kept it after their assault on the Breach. A small mercy came in that they had been prepared for travel—none of them had unpacked from their journey to the Temple of Sacred Ashes, neither had they stopped in their own quarters except to lay Eleanor down in Cassandra’s. They’d had their packs, which meant they had some medicine, sleep clothes they wore on the road, and the like. But…oh, she thought it was albeit befitting, that Eleanor’s turn of phrase fit the situation—Cassandra’s heart was indeed very sad that the home they had provided the girl was gone, all of her things, while they were just things…they were moments—all of her books, her coming of age presents, her first celebrated birthday.

“Hey,” Krem approached Cassandra as the Nevarran woman stood in the entrance to the tent they’d laid Eleanor to rest in, watching over the girl, “sorry to disturb you but I’ve some things for you.”

This young man. Oh this sweet, blessed, most precious boy! Cassandra found herself caught up in her moment of realization she barely realized she’d started to cry, let alone pull the young man in for a fierce hug until he was hugging her back and words of gratitude fell from her lips, “Cremisius, thank you, Maker bless you, truly.”

She didn’t need to unwrap the silken scarf Eleanor often slept with, to know what he had done. But when she finally did…oh, ‘I’ve some things for you’ he did. She had wondered how he had Eleanor’s Chant on his person—he’d collected it when he stormed her cabin before their retreat. But that was not what the Lieutenant meant.

Not only had the young man the presence of mind to save Eleanor’s things, he’d also taken
the opportunity while their numbers congregated in the Chantry to grab a few things from Cassandra’s quarters—a few books, her own supply of potion, but most importantly he had rescued her locket, the sole image she had of Anthony.

“What’re you still doing up? Should be getting some rest,” Varric’s voice drew her gaze up from the locket in her lap. She was seated by their campfire when the Dwarf approached her, looking half asleep himself though he was more aware, startled it seemed and then, "Oh shit. Crying. Uhh, hey," he attempted soothing as he came and...wrapped Cassandra in a hug, patting her back, "Seeker it's okay. Everything's gonna be alright. We've taken a hard hit but we're all gonna work together, get back on our feet."

"I am fine, Varric-"

He pulled away from her then, "No one's fine right now. And you... Look, I uh, I'm not an idiot, okay? I know. Why you can't drink? I've got your back, Cassandra. I’m serious, whatever you need."

"You...know?" Cassandra asked, uncertain. And when the Dwarf hesitantly nodded, “Have I been displaying symptoms?” she asked, concerned, mildly horrified. The Iron Bull being aware, she understood, but Varric? She thought she was doing well, her medication was assisting her as it should. Had she been behaving strangely?

"No!" he was quick to assure, “You uh, I mean you’ve probably cried more in the past twelve hours than you have in the past twelve years but no one’s gonna bat an eye at that I mean, shit. Everyone’s got plenty of reasons to need a good cry session.” That much was true, Cassandra allowed. “You been feeling alright? Adan checked you out after everything?”

She would not seek the Healer if Haven’s destruction had sent her spiraling. Cullen, Sera, Leliana—she had friends and allies she could rely on, “My injuries were minor, potion set me to rights.” Varric looked wholly relieved to hear that. “I trust you have not said anything to anyone?”

“No one’s gonna hear it from me. Except I’m sure Cole knows because of his whole ‘thoughts’ thing but I pulled him aside, told him to keep his mouth shut if he hears you or anyone else thinking about it. But uh...I mean, Krem knows? What about Cullen?”

“Cremisius is aware, he...provided potion from Adan’s, when I was running out, and I trust his discretion. Cullen is aware, certainly, he was the first I consulted before seeking Adan.”

Varric nodded. “Yeah, of course. Curly took it well, right?”

“He has been supportive,” Cassandra assured.

“Good. Cuz otherwise I’d have to kick his ass,” Varric informed her. “Look, everything’s pretty up in the air right now but you gotta take care of yourself, alright? You need anything, break, some rest, I can yell at people for you.”

Cassandra huffed. “I hardly know where to begin giving orders, nor would it be appropriate for you to take over my station—if anything, Cullen would stand in for me in such a scenario, as I would for him.”

Varric nodded. “Alright, just let me know if there’s anything I can do. I’m uh, real proud of you, you’re handling this all pretty incredibly considering everything,” he said, patting Cassandra on the shoulder. “Get some sleep, okay? You need anything before hitting the sack? We’re good on water or uh, you hungry or anything?”
“I am well, Varric. Thank you.”

“No problem, Seeker.”

Rest came easier to her than she expected, sleeping comfortably alongside Cullen in their shared tent, potion of course helped tremendously. And her gratitude to the Lieutenant for securing such potion had her sitting up in her bedroll first thing, gasping, “Mister Aclassi!” Oh good heavens!

Cullen sighed with sleep, sitting up and staring at her through half-closed eyes, “The young man has already laid claim to my precious mija’s heart, do not tell me he’s managed to steal mi cielo’s as well.”

“I meant the elder Aclassi—”

“You’ve not even met the man!” Cullen complained, sighing, “It will be incredibly awkward but if I must, I will duel him upon his arrival. Which will be fine,” he assured, “I considered as much last night, spoke with the Iron Bull and Varric on the matter. Leliana can get word to his transport—too assure them Cremisius is well and safe, we are just experiencing a change of address.”

“Oh. Good,” Cassandra breathed, relieved. And then, “Cielo?” she questioned.

Cullen smiled, something warm as he kissed her on the lips, the Commander humming as if he’d tasted something sweet before saying something sweeter, “I have slept well in the confines of your quarters, this tent have I not? I’ve no need to seek the open air when I have you—mi cielo, my sky,” he took her lips with his own, pushing her to lie back as he rolled to hover over her, “my heaven,” he insisted.

Good Maker, god in the heavens.

“Uhh,” the Iron Bull could be heard clearing his throat, and Cassandra peered around Cullen’s shoulders to see the Qunari’s silhouette against the tent, he was standing just outside its entrance, “Morning. Sorry to interrupt. Healer’s gonna wake Imekari, get some food, potion in her system, if you two wanna be there.”

She was certain Cullen understood when she pushed him off of her as if he were on fire and she’d no intention of putting it out, abandoning him to rise on his own and run to catch up with her as she dashed from the tent.

Marehis was asleep, her hand still covering Eleanor’s as she slumped over in her chair, head resting against the Herald’s cot. She stirred when Solas put a hand on her shoulder, “Vehnan? Ellie will rouse a moment if you wish to see her.”

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“Ma seranas,” Marehis said, pressing her hands to her face as she shook herself awake, sighing as she sat back, and her hand rose to lay over Cassandra’s when the Seeker came to stand beside her, resting a hand on the Elf woman’s shoulder.

Solas closed his eyes and focused on their bond, and after a moment Eleanor’s eyes sluggishly opened to stare at them, bleary as she slowly came to her senses.

“Good morning, little Herald. You’re safe. We have broth and potion; can you sit up?” Adan asked gently.

She could not, she couldn’t even speak it seemed, she was utterly spent, falling back asleep
already as Marehis climbed into the cot with her to support her, help her sit up while resting against
the Elf woman who carefully offered her sips of broth it felt like a miracle to watch her take,
Cassandra was unspeakably grateful to see even the smallest semblance of progress toward healing.

Although that progress seemed halted when Adan began administering potion. Marehis had
her potions on her person when they fled Haven, thank the Maker. Elf Root tonic, and her potion
for depression were accepted readily enough but when he offered a third bottle she held up a weak,
trembling hand to stop him, shaking her head.

“Ellie?” Adan asked. “Sweetheart, you took a pretty nasty bump to the head, it’s okay to be
confused—this is just for monthlies, you take it every day.” he assured her.

She took in a rattling breath, and quietly croaked out, “St-Stitches.”

“No, you didn’t need any stitches-“

“Liam.”

Ahh. Mister Stitches then.

“Hang tight Boss-girl, I’ll get him,” the Iron Bull said as he bound off to fetch his company
Healer.

“Eleanor?” Cassandra asked, confused. Perhaps the girl was truly disoriented.

“Well if it isn’t my least favorite patient—and I say that because I hate your need for
healing little love,” Stitches greeted the girl amicably as he swept into the tent, ready to assist.

“We’re having trouble getting her to take this,” Adan spoke quietly to the other healer,
handing off Eleanor’s potion.

“Well that’s alright, we’ll get it sorted—feeling overfull, or like you’re working with too
much in your system right now? Sounds crazy but more water will help…” he stopped when he
met Eleanor’s gaze, the girl was looking at him very hard before she looked to the bottle in his
hand, and back again. “Ahh. I think I understand. We uh…it’ll be okay.”

“Please,” Eleanor rasped, tears in her eyes, and with her unmarked hand she formed a series
of…Cassandra was uncertain, the Iron Bull had mentioned the use of Sign Language in his
camp, “Please.”

“You’re absolutely certain?” Stitches asked, and when Eleanor nodded. “I’m sorry, could I
ask for a moment alone? Healer/patient confidentiality.”

Eleanor nodded, and Marehis pressed a kiss to her hair before very reluctantly helping her
to lie down and leaving her alone in the care of their healers.

It was dark again, when she woke—no prompting in the bond for the first time in days, just
slowly becoming aware of the world again on her own.
Haven was gone. She broke it. H- he’d broken it, but she’d buried it, it was gone.

And it wasn’t. Haven wasn’t just cabins and tents. More so, it was the people who lived in it.

So many of them were dead…the Mess hall had been wholly torn apart she’d seen one of Sera’s Friends pulling a staff member away from-

Oh Maker she felt sick. Brains were meant to be on the inside of a person’s head, they were such delicate organs- Cook didn’t deserve-

“You are awake,” a thick Orlesian accent at her ear spoke, and Ellie blearily looked up to see Mother Giselle seated at her bedside, holding a book, huh. She vaguely heard someone softly reading the Chant now that she thought of it.

“—you are being unreasonable!” Leliana was shouting at Cullen. Ellie’s gaze went to the campfire in the middle of all their tents, the Advisors, Cassandra, Marehis…everyone it looked like, all of her party, even Cremisius and the Chargers were seated nearby, circled up and listening like there was some big meeting underway.

“The Inquisition has nowhere to go, you can’t expect-“ the Commander argued back.

“Stop yelling, all of you!” Lady Josie shouted, “We will never make a proper decision if we cannot hear ourselves think!”

“I agree,” Cassandra said.

“Brilliant,” Cullen snapped, “that’s one thing we can agree on.”

“Hey, check the ‘tude Curly. Everyone’s stressing right now,” Varric spoke up.

Oh. They were arguing about where to go from here. Yeah…they probably needed to get moving if they could, but they could run themselves to death if they had nowhere to run to.

“No child, you should rest,” Mother Giselle insisted when Ellie sat up. Ugh. Yeah, body was protesting too, she was so sore all over, and her chest was on fire, in terrible pain both physically and emotionally, her shoulder was pounding with pain with the beat of her heart, and she could already feel her hips aching.

But, she’d kind of buried their last home without so much as a ‘by your leave’, so she should help with finding them a new one. And she was still…she was still part of the Inquisition, right? Even though the Breach was sealed?

“I should help,” Ellie said, yowch, maybe…maybe with lots of listening though, her throat was just, fire, speaking felt like a knife dragging along the back of her throat. It wasn’t like she was going to be coming up with any big solutions she thought, but she could still be an extra set of ears and maybe having her sitting there awake would…everyone seemed to try harder to get along better around her, and what they needed was team work right now. She smiled her thanks when the elder woman rose to her feet and took her Marked hand, grasping at her elbow to support her as she got down off the cot. She was still in armor, her skin felt somehow itchy and slimy and gross like it was slowly sludging into becoming one with it, but at least it was warm.

Oh, Anya was there, she’d been resting under the cot, but she came out now that Ellie was up, awe. That was sweet she’d stayed with her, Ellie guessed she hadn’t been allowed on the cot huh? “Hey girl,” Ellie offered, and the pup yipped, rubbing against her legs almost like she was
helping support her, push her along as she took the few steps to the tent post. Maybe being upright wasn’t a good idea, her head was pounding, and her vision swam as she leaned against the post.

“Hey,” someone came close and had their hand up under her forearm, more support—Cremisius raised his free hand to cup her face, thumb brushing along her cheek, “you’re awake. How’re you feeling?”

She offered him as good a smile as she could manage just now. Maker she was glad he was alright.

“Eleanor,” Cassandra said, everyone had been sitting in pouty silence it seemed like, but they looked up when the Seeker said her name and came to join her and Cremisius. “Sweetheart, you should be in bed.”

Ellie shook her head, wrapping her arms around the Seeker’s neck, the woman hugged her back…poor Cremisius’s arm was sort of trapped between their stomachs but he just moved so he was hugging Ellie from behind. Hug sandwich—that was totally a remedy for ‘post-traumatic-home-demolition broken heart’. Which was officially a disease, and Ellie was sort of dying from it right now.

“I want t-to be with-,” she winced at the sharp tear in her throat, and Cassandra shushed her before the Seeker and Lieutenant each took one of her arms, Anya shuffling after them as they brought her to sit by the fire, Marehis immediately offering her a place at her side, pulling Ellie into her lap oh gosh, the woman was crying, warm tears against Ellie’s neck. Oh, her neck...that...that reminded her, and now she was crying too, the words tore from her throat, "H-he g-grabbed me, I-I'm so s-sorry mami," she whimpered into the woman's shoulder.

“Shh shh shh,” Marehis hushed, “oh sweet girl. What are you talking about?”

"The Elder One grabbed her, took her up by the collar of her coat to pin her to the trebuchet," Cole supplied. "His hands are like claws, they cut the chain of your necklace and it fell into the snow, she is sorry she lost it. Do you hate her?"

"I could never!" Marehis sounded horrified at the notion, "Oh da'vehnan, that necklace was just a thing, you are what I care about, I'm grateful it is your arms I have around my neck than my mother's necklace, do not even think of it, your life is far more precious."

“We have any…?” she heard Cremisius asking.

"Ahh, in my pack, it's just in there," Madam de Fer spoke up, gesturing to one of the nearby tents, “help yourself, darling.”

“Awe Inky,” Sera said, coming to sit in front of her, Anya climbing into the Elf girl’s lap. “Don't be sad okay? S'hard to be mad at you, when you're sad.”

"M-mad?" Ellie croaked out.

"Only 'cause I love you, you little! Friggin jerk! Next time you wanna run a little suicide mission, have Cole fill in, yeah? He’s already dead, and you’re not allowed to die!"

‘I’m sorry’, she mouthed. She really was. Sera nodded, reaching out to rest a hand on Ellie's knee, "s'okay Ink."

“I am not dead,” Cole corrected, “but Ellie, I could have launched the trebuchet and escaped. Oh. You did not want to risk me, that is kind- ahh. Corypheus would have gone after you,
followed us into the mines before its entrance could be buried in the snow.”

Varric visibly startled, “Whoa whoa wait, Corypheus?”

“That is what he told Ellie his name was. *Exalt the Elder One: that is the will of Corypheus. You will kneel. Make me!* he did but you did your best,” Cole assured her, “You were very brave. Screaming is response to pain, and it was very painful—it is not your fault he tried to remove your Mark but he only made it worse, it feels more now, doesn’t it? *Oh crap crap, demons!* But it startled you worse when the Rift appeared, but then it sucked up the demons and sealed them away in the Fade, Rift closing behind them—it took all of your power, that is why your magic is quiet, not gone, just resting.”

“Shit. Uh, like-” Varric started.

“Yes,” Cole said.

“Well. Shit.”

“He did something to your Mark—tried to remove it?” the Iron Bull questioned.

Ellie nodded. She didn’t much care if it hurt, “Asshole.”

Marehis let out a wet sounding laugh as she kissed the top of Ellie’s head, the adults around her offering up a little laughter of their own, Cremisius smiled, snorting—he was back with…oh that was sweet, it’d been tea he was after earlier, he’d found a little pot to boil water in and got it hanging over their fire.

“Cremisius, come,” Cassandra said, waving the Lieutenant over to sit with her while they waited for the water to start heating up. “Mister Aclassi has been very helpful—he’d a flask of Embrium mixture for your necklace, it was empty when you found us.”

“Keep him distracted—I have to get this thing launched! He’s busy talking, just pull the cork and—there! You talk too much!” Cole said, “She threw boiling water in his face so his hands would not hold her pinned. She used her sword to cut the line and then she was able to run.”

Cassandra’s eyes looked teary, “Truly?” Ellie nodded.

Everyone seemed to be calmer now, no more arguing at least, thought that might have been because everyone was just quiet while Ellie sat and sipped at her tea. It helped a lot, soothed her throat, and warmth in her belly soothed a bit at the start of cramping lower. “Thank you, Cremisius.”

He nodded. “Of course. Are you hungry?”

“I’m okay.” She didn’t…she was kind of worried about that—food. How much did they have exactly? Were there hungry people in their camp? She didn’t want to risk taking something someone else might need more than her. They needed…they needed a lot, and they needed it fast.

“You haven’t been given anything other than a little broth today Ellie-girl,” Thom fretted.

“Certainly child, you should eat if you’ve the ability,” Madam de Fer agreed.

“I’ll whip you up something light, alright sweetheart?” Cullen asked, oh gosh, eyes—he looked hopeful and sad? Was he guilt ing her into accepting food? She nodded, so, it worked.
“Thanks.”

The Commander smiled as he got up to set about ‘whipping something up’ though he came and stopped to press a kiss to her forehead, gosh.

“Eleanor?” Solas prompted, “Would you come with me for a moment? There are things I wish to discuss.”

Huh. “Sure thing,” she felt a little better, but she wasn’t the steadiest on her feet when she rose to go with him. Did they really need to talk in private? Was it something bad?

Marehis stood up with her, supporting her when she swayed, “Is this truly necessary?” she asked him.

“Vehnan, I do apologize, but I should examine the Mark—a precaution, after such a violent intrusion with it. If Ellie is at ease, I would prefer our examination be contained. It will involve Rift magic interacting with her Mark and should anything go awry, she and I would be able to remain unharmed, but I cannot say the same for any bystanders.”

Oh. That…that made sense, she guessed? And she definitely didn’t want to hurt Marehis. It…it did feel a little different. It burned more, brighter she thought but not bigger like it’d spread or anything. Ellie nodded, they should check it out.


“You be careful with Inky!” Sera called after them.

Solas’s arm was around her, supporting her as they walked through camp…and away from the Inquisition’s camp entirely, which yeah. Examining her Mark, that…that made sense. It did. So why did something feel off? Just…maybe she was on edge, paranoid after everything. She was safe with Solas.

He led her to this lantern. Something that could be lit with veil fire just, sticking up out of the snow. Like someone had put it there…and Solas approached it like he’d known precisely where it was, but that could make sense. Ellie wasn’t really sure—oh. well. It was Drakonis 3rd. But he’d had time explore the area around their camp, and maybe a scout or something told him about it. Still it was a little disconcerting, just, him walking them right up to it and lighting it with a wave of his hand.

And then he let her go, sitting down in the snow with her, and he explained something of the Orb Corypheus used. That it was ‘his people’s’ and he would help her however he could with understanding and retrieving it—it needed out of Corypheus’s hands. That he would appreciate it if Ellie would keep the Orb’s origins to herself because he only said as much so she would trust his guidance on the matter, but he would prefer no one else know the Orb could be connected to Elves. That he feared the world at large would blame them for the Breach entirely, if word got out.

…”You’re certain it’s Dalish?” she asked.

“I am certain of its origins, da’len.”

And then he got to the lantern he’d led her to*. That it was one of several that lined a mountain path—a path they could follow to a place he’d discovered in the Fade. Skyhold. A fortress, long abandoned, that would suit their purposes—they could merely set up there, claim it as theirs, they were welcome to it. She felt strange about that too—that he’d just sat there while the
others argued over where they could go—but then…well she supposed it made sense when he laid out that everyone needed someone they could depend upon right now. That she’d already done much to make herself that person—a symbol of hope, making the ultimate sacrifice for the Inquisition, only to survive. Losing Haven was heartbreaking and moving forward would be hard. If she showed them the way, guided them along this path of light, and brought them to Skyhold, it would do much to heal them emotionally, spiritually, and ultimately provide for them physically. So he wanted her to be the one that lead the way, but he wished to discuss it with her beforehand.

“I would not pressure you, da’vehnan, but if you seek my council on the matter, it is what I would advise.”

It scared her a little, to try to step up for everyone like that, but it was the closest to genuine Solas had been since he opened his mouth in the past hour. Yeah, she was tired, and sore, and hurting in about fifty different ways—she’s not the best at math and right now she doesn’t need to be, it feels like fifty!—but lots of people were hurt, they’d elderly and injured—if she set the pace, everyone could keep up, stick together, there’d be no way someone got left behind, and everyone could help each other.

And so she agreed.

And then Solas walked her back to camp.

“Just a heads up,” she spoke quietly as they walked, “I’m um…going to be running my courses here soon, I’m not bleeding yet but-”

“You are cramping,” he offered sympathetically.

“Yeah so…I mean I’m okay—physically, I mean I’m still beat up, but I don’t think I need monitoring, you know? I mean Cole will be watching out for me and can help if I need it, and he can do that without actually experiencing symptoms with me, and it’s kind of embarrassing for me, and I feel badly, and I think the last thing we need right now is both of us being a hormonal cramping mess,” she offered, trying to tease.

“Ahh, I appreciate it da’vehnan. If you are certain, I would allow you discretion—I will not seek the bond unless there is an emergency.”

“Thanks, I appreciate it.” She really did.

Oh Maker she wanted to cry, this…this was all…what was happening? She…she was pretty sure Solas was lying to her. In fact she knew he was. There’d been a pretty major wall of fire and debris between them, and Corypheus was huge but he’d held the Orb low, close to his side, she hadn’t even seen it until he was using it, and when he did? She’d worried, asked after everyone with Healer Adan, Solas—she’d been horrified to hear how awful a state he’d been in but…maybe…I mean he’d been with her in the Fade? Seen it then? But there was something in how he was speaking. Something in how he was speaking, how he wanted her secrecy—she could understand, in fact she did understand, that if word got out about the Orb being Dalish, Elves would be persecuted further. But that was something they could keep in-house—no one outside the Advisors, they should know everything there is to know about this orb shouldn’t they?

And then there was the fact that his reasoning for pulling her aside?

Bullshit.

“Ahh, there’s our Herald now, and how fares the dread-Mark?” Dorian asked, trying to go
for jovial, he was sweet. And his insincerity came from not wanting to be too open with just how very much he was worried. It wasn’t the wrong sort of lie, it was a mix of both their pride.

It was on the tip of her tongue. She wanted to call him out a bit, wanted to tell them he hadn’t even bothered to look at it. But if this…getting him to stay out of the bond would be pointless if she tipped him off to his face.

And so she did the only thing she could think to do in front of everyone, in front of Solas.

They were sitting on Ellie’s bed, she and Cremisius, knitting like mad to finish her list of scarves and hats she wanted to make before leaving for the Oasis. The Tevinter was just finishing the Iron Bull’s horn cozies as she was casting off another scarf.

“Whose that one for?” he asked, taking up her parchment pad sitting between them, she liked what he’d done with her first gift from him, a little parchment tag with twine and he was helping—had everyone’s name on a slip of parchment he’d tear from the pad and carefully cut a hole in with his knife big enough to put twine through without tearing up a bunch of paper.

“Solas.”

“Cool, got it,” he said working his magic with the tag before handing it off to her so she could lace it onto the scarf however she liked, “I’ve never really talked to him much. He uh, nice? What’s his story?”

He...huh. “I dunno really—he is nice, the nicest! But I don’t know a lot about what he was doing before the Inquisition. He studies the Fade a lot? And...he grew up in a village.” But uh, what village she couldn’t say. Was he...was he from Ferelden? Or the Free Marches? His accent wasn’t...she’d never really heard anyone speak like him before, so that wasn’t super helpful. “He doesn’t talk about it I guess. Why?”

Cremisius shrugged. “Dunno, just curious. I mean that’s kind of weird he doesn’t—sorry, not my business.”

Ellie shrugged. “I guess it is a little strange...I mean everyone has things they’d rather not talk about.”

“Their entire life though? I mean Thom was pretending to be a whole other person and he still gave you real things about his past—where he grew up, his family, his time in tourney.”

Ellie mulled it over a bit. “Well Solas talks about the Fade a lot, that seems to be the part of his life before that he cares the most about so, it makes sense that’d be what he focuses on?” and then, “Are you worried or something? About Solas?”

“Just curious I guess,” he supposed, and for a second it looked like he was making to scratch at his forehead, but he quickly extended his thumb and pinkie finger out. The Sign for ‘bull’, but it was also a signal of sorts. An understanding they reached—Ellie knew there would sometimes be things he couldn’t talk about in relation to his work with the Iron Bull, and that was okay, so if he ever needed to be dishonest with her, or she walked up to something in conversation that he couldn’t get into—‘Bull’ and it made anything he had to lie about more honest and let her know not to press.

But it also told her there was something to press. So here and now, when she had things to be ‘just curious’ about with Solas, she went to Cremisius. He was seated by Cassandra still, and she held out her arms, readily accepted, and she sat in his lap, curled up against him, and laced her
unmarked fingers with his, offering him a kiss on the cheek.

And then she very gently squeezed his hand three times, “Solas checked it out.” and then she ran the back of her Marked hand under her chin, like she was reaching to scratch an itch on the side of her neck, but the motion—brushing the back of your hand under your chin, it was the sign for ‘lie’.

Cassandra’s hand was resting on his shoulder and he steadily met Ellie’s gaze as he casually raised his free hand to grasp the Seeker’s thumb tapping the back of her hand three times. “Is it bad?” Cremisius asked. Then going for teasing, “The Iron Bull will go full-blown mother-hen if it’s bad.”

Was that…was that code? Cremisius never called the Iron Bull erm, well, ‘the’ Iron Bull except the few times he’d been formally introducing him or something, he was always Chief or Bull. And he definitely signaled Cassandra? What was going on?

“I’ll fuck something up if it’s bad,” the Iron Bull assured.

“Nothing too bad,” she said hoping…and she didn’t want them getting the wrong idea, that Solas had taken her off to hurt her or something. Just, “Burns a little. More than usual. But it isn’t anything detrimental.”

“Ahh, yes,” Solas cleared his throat, sounding a little uncomfortable…that might be good. “Truly, I have deduced the Mark is not spreading or causing harm. It has merely gained a new ability Ellie will grow used to in time.”

“Good,” Dorian said to her, “we can’t have you turning Breach green from head to toe—you’d clash horribly with the furniture plan I’m visualizing for our new headquarters, we’d be a mockery.”

“I actually think Solas and I found a solution for our current homelessness situation,” she offered up as brightly as she could.

“Truly, mjia?” Lady Josie asked in earnest.

Ellie nodded. Gosh she was tired. Though Cullen brought her warm soup, and she just loved him so much. It helped with the lump in her throat, warmed her up, gave her reason to pause and think as she, with a little help from Solas, explained about Skyhold, that Ellie knew how to lead them there.

“You discovered this place in the Fade?” Leliana asked, “Are you certain of its existence, Eleanor?”

Ellie nodded. It better exist. And Solas said, “I verified it myself.”

“Eleanor, you’re certain you’re well enough?” Cassandra worried.

“Uh-huh,” nope, but they couldn’t stay here, she’d be moving forward anyway, and doing things this way, she’d be the one setting the pace, she wouldn’t be trying to keep up with anyone to save face. “I can do it—I’m the one that knows the way, right? We’ll work together, same as always—my party’s just, a few hundred strong this trip.”

And so, it was decided. Come daybreak, they’d start heading that way. For now, her party members discussed the finer details—checking in on each other too, it sounded like, which was nice, and Ellie just sat and listened, resting her forehead against Cremisius’s neck and trying not to
be too obvious with the crying thing. It was happening, she needed it on all of the levels, and anyone who brought it up could actually fight her. Cremisius rubbed circles on her back, quietly comforting.

“Imekari,” the Iron Bull said as things started winding down, “you wanna bunk with me tonight? Madam’s tent was a casualty, you’d be warmer hanging with me.”

“Thanks,” she agreed, wincing as she stood up.

“Da’vehnan?” Marehis worried.

“’m okay, just tired.” And officially needed bandaging. And a bath. And a hug. Pretty sure she’d get at least two out of three in the Charger’s camp.

“Get some good rest sweet girl, don’t hesitate to send for me if you’ve need,” Marehis insisted, pressing a kiss to Ellie’s temple before letting her go.

“Come on Imekari, we’ll get you settled,” the Iron Bull said.

They did—The Iron Bull and Cremisius led her to where the Chargers were staying, their tent was empty for now, and the Qunari said he’d give them a minute. A minute in which Cremisius returned Ellie’s scarf, her things he- he’d saved lots of the important stuff, even Cole’s rocks. And most importantly right now—

“They were laying out, so I grabbed ‘em real quick,” he explained when she launched herself at him for a hug. She hadn’t been sure how the Breach would go down, how she’d feel afterward, but there was supposed to be a party, and she’d thought she’d be totally wiped once it all wound down so. She’d laid out one of her dresses, and a set of sleep clothes so she didn’t have to go digging around for them, and Cremisius had rescued them! And her boots—the little ankle ones Cullen ‘got’ her! It was a little embarrassing, but she was grateful he’d saved her nicer underthings too—it wasn’t-! She’d laid them out to wear later, but she wasn’t exactly planning on anything too…just…she’d been planning on dressing up for the party! She hadn’t known she’d end up sleeping through it. And yeah, maybe she kind of wanted to make sure that if Cremisius saw her in her underthings, they were the nice lacy white ones. That she was so so so so so not going anywhere near until her uterus was done with its hissy fit, her regular things would suffice for now though Maker she needed new things so badly-

Mister Aclassi!

Oh she’d asked about him, duh. Wow her brain was kind of just…not the best right now. She’d asked if she could see Cullen and Cassandra again before falling back to sleep the first time they woke her up. They already reached out to the transport and now, they needed to get them instructions to get to Skyhold. She hoped he was safe, and that…Maker, had anyone heard what happened to the Inquisition? She hoped he wasn’t scared for Cremisius, she promised him he was safe!

And he was. She’d been so scared something would happen when Haven was falling. But he was safe and healthy. And Mister Aclassi would have plenty of work when he got in…she wondered if maybe…she would wait to speak with him again first, but everyone had lost so much, uniforms—not armor, the sort that cleaning and kitchen staff wear—sleep clothes, plain clothes, and she knew the Inquisition wanted to replace things like that for their people…obviously he couldn’t do that for the whole of their numbers but he was a designer—he could benefit from designing new things for their people and helping out with some of the workload of production.
As it stood for now, she didn’t think she’d be dressing up anytime soon anyway but she had sleep clothes! She needed those in her life, right this minute, Maker preserve her soul.

“Thank you, Cremisius, seriously. They’re just things but they’re important to me and I’m so grateful you saved them.”

“Are you kidding? El, you nearly burnt off your hand—” had she? Huh, she sort of remembered her Marked hand being wrapped up the first few times they woke her for potion, but it was gone now, and her hand looked all better. “I can never thank you enough for rescuing my father’s things.”

“It’s not like you didn’t do the same for me, and you kept Anya safe.”

“Yeah,” he said, “can we just make it clear I will resent you leaving me grieving single puppy father? That’s just not where I saw myself at seventeen.”

“But it’s such a good hook though,” she teased, “—big sad eyes, an adorable puppy—the Iron Bull would have to be fighting people off left right and center if you wanted any peace.”

“I’m serious, El,” Cremisius stressed, oh he did look serious and she set her things aside, and he took hold of her hands, “I can’t- if you hadn’t-” he took a deep breath, seemed like he might be avoiding her gaze for a moment before he met it and then, “…I love you. So much sometimes it scares me because of days like that—it’s hard enough hearing your near-misses in the field but actually living through one? You being gone, and it seeming impossible for you to come back…I know it comes with the territory, and you can’t make any promises—”

“But I can. Nothing fate altering but Cremisius,” oh gosh, “I love you too. I think I’ll always love you, no matter what. And if something does ever happen to me, and we’re together, I wasn’t completely kidding about finding other people—if you ever found someone else who loves you the way I do—even better than I do—I would want nothing more than that, whether it’s three days, or three years later.”

“Three days?”

“I’m developing a pattern of threes? I woke up three days after the Breach, was gone in time for three seconds…and again with Envy huh, kooky. Anyway, you hear I’m dead, give me a few days I might come around and I’ll be a majorly jealous bitch to whoever is trying to steal my man before my body’s even in the ground.” Cremisius chuckled, shaking his head, and she said, “My point is, I can’t promise I’ll always come back. But I can promise you I will always try.”

“I can work with that.”

Mmm, kissing was nice his lips were warm—

And so was her entire face when the tent entrance flapped open.

Skinner entered the tent, hands behind her back. “Leave,” Skinner said, and it took a second to process that she was kicking Cremisius out, not her. “I will help the small one dress.”

“Oh I wasn’t going t-,” he rambled, flustered, he looked to Ellie, “I mean I would help if you needed- I wouldn’t be weird about- I’m just yeah, gonna, check on the thing.” Ahh, yes, checking on the thing was always important, of course.

She had been nervous about that, dressing. Her shoulder felt a lot better than it had when she was slowly trudging her way through the snow, but Maker it hurt. Skinner came and set down
something on a nearby cot—oh. Bandaging and a wet cloth. She helped Ellie out of her armor, and once she was set bandaging wise, and they carefully got her sleep shirt on, Skinner gave her a gentle shove so she sat on the cot before the Elf woman handed her a wet cloth to clean off her thighs, the smaller trails down her legs while Skinner took up her leggings, “I will wash the leather in the snow. He will not see it.” she solemnly assured. “Thank you, small one, for bleeding for him.”

Ellie nodded. “Thanks, for helping me.”

“I am pleased you are not dead.”

The Iron Bull didn’t press or question right out the gate. When he and Cremisius returned, they got settled in. They just laid down, Bull letting her lay on top of him, on her stomach while he held her, arms resting at the small of her back, and Maker did that help.

“The Iron Bull?” she asked quietly. She was being rocked by the rise and fall of his breathing, didn’t feel like he was asleep yet.

“Yeah, Imekari?”

“I think…” it…it made her so sad. She didn’t want to cry again but she was. “I think Solas lied to me.”

“Yeah?” he asked, thumb rubbing circles on her back. “Safe to talk about it? He won’t feel you feeling anything he’d question?”

“I made sure he won’t be paying attention to the bond, because um,” she used her Marked index finger, drawing ‘o-v-e-r-e-e-s’ against his chest. He snorted.

“Not how you spell that babe.”

Blah! “Spelling can kiss my ass.”

She was jostled a bit as he chuckled quietly, sighing, “Alright Imekari. Smart move, getting him off your back. We’ll compare notes in the morning, okay? Get some sleep.”

“Okay.”

When she woke next it was still dark out…and she wasn’t sure what these cots were made of, but like, wow they could hold up a lot. The Iron Bull, Ellie on his chest, Cremisius ended up tucked up against his side at some point in the night, his head was next to Ellie’s, and he’d fallen asleep with his hand over hers. And Anya, to literally top them off, was laying across Ellie’s legs.

The Iron Bull woke next, and they decided they should get up for the day. Cramps were bad, so bad, and she was amazed she didn’t bleed through her sleep clothes, but it worked out okay, she didn’t feel anything wet when she brushed her hand under her bottom, didn’t see anything on the front when she got Anya to scooch off and then executed the most elegant acrobatics to get up with as little chance of any spillage as possible. Why did her body need to do this again? It was dumb. Dumb!

But you know who wasn’t dumb? The Iron Bull! He was so! Smart!

She pulled on her overcoat and shoved her feet into her boots, making to lead Cremisius and Bull to the lantern Solas showed her, but the Qunari had them swing by another tent on the way. Apparently it was all part of their covert operation because the Iron Bull stopped outside the
“Ca-caw! Ca-caw!”

“Shhhh!” Cassandra hissed as she emerged from the tent, “I heard you approaching, do not wake Cullen or so help me-”

Oh. “Is papi okay?”

“Eleanor, good morning,” Cassandra startled a bit as if she hadn’t seen her, “Cullen is fine. He is merely tired, as is expected. This has all been trying.”

“Are his headaches really bad?” Ellie worried.

Cassandra seemed hesitant to say much but she came and put her hands on Ellie’s shoulders and admitted, “He had rather the rough night, but he is sleeping peacefully now. We shall look out for him today, yes?” Ellie nodded, and Cassandra smiled warmly, before she dropped a kiss to her hair, “Very good. Now, come.”

Ellie giggled, “Um, I think you forget we’re playing follow the leader today huh? You come with me.”

The Seeker conceded and Ellie led them to the lantern Solas lit last night, sat them down, and listened.

“The Iron Bull,” Cassandra said, “this started with your suspicions.”

The Qunari nodded. “Look. Imekari, I got nothing against the guy, but there’s a lot of shit that doesn’t add up.”

The Iron Bull had found everything about Solas’s involvement with the Inquisition suspicious and when she thought about it, yeah, his entire appearance after the Conclave had been terribly convenient, sounded even more so when the Iron Bull talked through his suspicions. That Solas… he might have known what was about to go down. Had known to keep the distance he had to “watch the proceedings”. Which was total crap—Ben Hessrath agents had been watching the Conclave had all perished in the blast, so where exactly was he watching from? And how much he knew about the Mark, and Rift Magic. Magic that apparently, Humans were incapable of learning—the Iron Bull had been listening to just about every last thing Solas has ever said within earshot, paying attention to conversations he had with Madam de Fer, Dorian—the Tevinter Mage, who was apparently in on the conspiracy as well as he ‘did so love subterfuge’, found the spy business to be very sexy, had even outright asked the Apostate Elf why he couldn’t be taught for the purposes of reporting back to Bull, and Solas had given him some explanation of it being a very unnatural form of magic for Humans, that the reason Ellie’s Mark was so very painful was because it wasn’t meant to be on a person, period, let alone a Human—its magic conflicted with hers. So was it just something Elves could learn, and why wouldn’t he just outright say that? Solas knew a lot about it he wasn’t saying—Rift Magic, Ellie’s Mark, and worse, the Conclave it felt like. And then there was the whole ‘time magic amulet’ thing. Huh. Ellie hadn’t thought about it—she hadn’t been sure what happened to the amulet after Redcliffe Castle, but she was glad it was gone. But Solas… his insistence they hang on to it, and ultimately his ease of banishing it? He’d said it was a difficult task apparently, but the Iron Bull wasn’t exactly buying that, and Ellie…

She hated that she was inclined to distrust the claim too. Especially when Cassandra could attest to just how unsettling she’d found the whole thing, that it was what prompted her to speak to the Iron Bull about his suspicions in the first place. They’d begun a joint investigation of sorts,
trying to figure out where Solas came from, what he knows, how he knows it, and why he’s being so incredibly secretive about all of this.

So, she filled them in on what Solas had said last night, about the Orb.

“What Orb?” Cassandra asked.

“The Iron Bull, do you know what I’m talking about?” she checked with the Qunari before answering.

“No clue boss, what’s up?”

“So neither of you saw Corypheus with the Orb?”

“Babe, I’m the tallest person you know, and I barely saw anything through all that fire,” the Iron Bull said. Eh, she kind of knew Corypheus now, and he’d seemed a lot taller than the Iron Bull, Maker, her shoulder was still ouch from being hoisted and thrown around like a rag doll by her wrist.

“Corypheus had this Orb, kind of…” she used her finger to draw a circle and some swirly lines sort of like what it had looked like. “it’s what he used to try and remove my Mark, I think it’s what he used to open the Breach to begin with. He called my Mark ‘the Anchor’ said I stole it, and he wanted it back. He said something about wanting to bring Tevinter back from it’s ashes? I dunno he was really ranty.”

“Head still bothering you, El?” Cremisius asked quietly.

Little bit, she was pretty sure it was from falling headfirst into a mine…again? But it could be from…she didn't want him suspecting anything, that she was currently hosting her long-kept-at-bay monthly guest. She needed to suck it up and stop being a baby about it, she realized then she was rubbing at her temple. “I’m okay.”

“When we are settled, you should sit down with Leliana and recall all you can of your encounter with the Elder One. We saw precious little of it and heard—“ Cassandra stopped and cleared her throat, “very little.”

“Yeah, that’s what got me worried about all this—Solas stuff. Because see, I didn’t say anything about what happened. But last night he fakes pulling me off to the side to check out my Mark and instead starts telling me all about how he knows this Orb that Corypheus used, and how we have to get it from him, and I’m supposed to trust him about anything he says blah blah about the Orb. And I’m not supposed to tell anyone about it, full stop. But I didn’t promise him or anything so, hi, telling. He said he was worried if everyone knew it was Dalish, Elves would suffer for Corypheus’s crimes but we can keep that in house, can’t we?”

“Imekari,” the Iron Bull considered it, “this asshole seems like just about the only one that knows anything about your Mark. So…until we have something solid, find something that says he needs taken out—we got plenty of other shit to report on to the Ben Hessrath. Orb’s origins can hold off until later, maybe never, we’ll see. I get the level of bullshit that could come from people blaming Elves for this. You cool with me giving them Corypheus’s name, the low down on what happened in Haven?”

Ellie nodded. “If you want, I’ll sit down with Leliana tonight and you can sit in on it with me, or just use her report or I can do a separate sit down with you and answer anything you want if there are spy questions you’d rather Leliana not hear you asking. Oh!” she remembered! “I took
notes…I think,” she was pretty sure, at some point, the hazy memory of leaning against a tree, desperately trying to get something down in writing. She dug around in her overcoat pockets and, ha! “Here!” she said, offering over her parchment pad to the Iron Bull who squinted and then handed it off to Cassandra.

“Elder One = Core-if-ee-iss (sound),” Cassandra read, “Tevinter. Bad Orb. Looks like a big Darkspawn, says he saw where the gods live and no one is home—real mad about it. Called Mark an Anchor…” she flipped the page, “My na…”

“What’s up?” Cremisius asked.

“Is it illegible or something?” Ellie asked, “My handwriting’s not the best when I write too fast and it was super cold—”

“You wrote this when you were trying to catch up with us,” Cassandra commented quietly.

Ellie nodded. “Yeah, just in case-‘ oh. She sort of forgot. She’d sort of… “I wasn’t sure um…I wasn’t sure I’d find you. But if anyone ever found me…” she shrugged. She’d written her name, that she was with the Inquisition and they would need this information. That she loved them.

Cassandra cleared her throat. “I do appreciate you did all you could, to ensure we would get this. Would you mind terribly if I held onto this, passed it along to Leliana?”

Ellie nodded. Cassandra tore the page from the pad and handed it back to Ellie.

“So,” Cassandra pressed on. “Solas did not examine your Mark at all when he pulled you aside?”

“It seemed like he was so busy convincing me to rely on him when it came to the Orb and keep it secret he totally spaced on the excuse he gave Marehis so no one would follow us.”

"…should someone look at it?" Cremisius worried.

Ellie shrugged. "I dunno anyone else but Solas who could. And it really doesn't feel badly different, just burns more. The Rift thing saved my butt, but totally wiped my magic."

She was kind of scared if she thought about it too much. She hadn’t really felt her magic at all since Haven. She dreamed in the Fade last night because she hadn’t taken potion, but…but she thought maybe the Mark might make anyone dream in the Fade, not just Mages. Though her Mark still burned so, it must still be in conflict with something and that was hopefully still her magic. It’d been drained in a scary way that made her worry it might not recover. It would…she was pretty sure, just, scary walking around knowing she can’t cast to defend herself even if she had a staff.

Huh. She had a really bad track record. She lost her staff at the Conclave…then at her first assault on the Breach. Sera had to rescue her staff in the Oasis, but she left it behind in Haven’s assault. Found a staff while dealing with Haven…and ultimately it was somewhere off in the snow. Possibly down in the mine? When had she last had it? Anyway that was one…two…four. Four of them. In like, less than a year!

In her defense, she only lost them when she lost consciousness. That happened a lot in the Inquisition. Thank the Maker for Healer Adan.

But she had her friends. And her knives. And her sword! So…maybe if she just let her magic take a break it’d be back in working soon!
And she had a plan now, with Bull, Cassandra, and Cremisius. An understanding, at least, to be mindful of Solas, and as soon as Humanly possible, Ellie would try to get Marehis alone out of earshot of the Elf Apostate.

She hated this, she hated it so so much. But there was too many sketchy details, and suspicion, she couldn’t risk this—the Inquisition, or Marehis.

Armored up, everyone rallied for a little breakfast—Inquisition headquarters had emergency stores of things the kitchen staff knew to grab when evacuating or to pull from if they’d been put under siege or something—rice, oatmeal, hardtack bread, and there were jars of preserved things like broth stock and jams. And everyone in her party had a little something just from things being left from traveling. Things were a little on the scarce side, but they’d make it through. Every little bit counted, so she asked Cole to keep her informed if he could, make certain she wasn't filling her belly at the expense of someone else in her camp.

Thom was the best! He got a big kiss on his beautiful cheek for rescuing their horses! He’d gotten to the stables and had them loose, free to run, they’d only just beaten Ellie to finding the Inquisition by a few hours—smart, brave horses! Russel was safe and sound! She hadn’t even wanted to think about something happening to him, sweet horse. The sweetest, he nuzzled Ellie’s face in greeting when they crossed paths again and he was very good about letting a stranger ride him, one of their injured.

Sera carefully offered something from her stores—she kept an emergency supply of some of Ellie’s potions on her, like the kind for asthma attacks…she wasn’t currently having an asthma attack, but she wasn’t exactly going to try playing tag anytime soon—her chest still felt rough, and the last thing they needed was for her to end up in some sort of medical emergency while she was supposed to be assuring everyone everything was going to be okay and leading them to safety. An ounce of prevention is worth more than a pound of cure…even though in this case the prevention was technically a cure. They’d be mindful of how much they used, save some for an actual emergency and in the meantime, Ellie had some nice medicinal steam going from her necklace which helped. so. much.

Once it seemed like everyone was just about ready, Ellie and her party, her advisors, the Chargers taking up their flank, started walking to get to the head of their camp, begin the procession forward to Skyhold. Cassandra and Marehis walked close behind her.

And they marched.

It was hard, but a little fun? Lots of singing—Marching was tiring and boring and long, and they weren’t entirely sure when they were going to get where they were going. When she’d traveled with Trevelyan, or her friends now, they’d passed the time talking, but it was hard to have a hundreds-of-people conversation, so: hymns and some of Maryden’s songs—oh Maker!

“Maryden is in Orlais, touring, she is happy and safe and she misses me,” Cole informed her quickly he…gosh he was busy and she appreciated him. There was so much hurt happening over Haven it was a wonder he had the two seconds it took for him to hear her panicked thought, her fear for the minstrel and come to quell it fast with reassurance before blinking away again.

Cullen looked exhausted as he followed their party, and as the sun got higher in the sky, it shone blindingly bright off the snow, it hurt Ellie’s eyes a little, but it seemed like it might actually be killing the Templar who squinted against it. Ellie shrank back a bit to walk alongside him.

“Ellie, sweetheart you’re doing great,” Cullen cleared his throat, “do you need anything?”
“Just wanted to walk with my favorite papi is all,” Ellie assured him brightly, taking his hand in hers, and then quietly in case it might embarrass him, “if you want to close your eyes, you can, I promise I won’t let you trip or walk into anything.”

Cullen sighed and for a second she worried he was insulted or wouldn’t go for it, but he wrapped an arm around her shoulders, “I’ll simply have to catch the both of us if we fall.” It was nice, warmer to walk like that.

Every mile was marked with a veil fire lantern Solas would light as they passed. They came across fifteen. Entire. Lanterns. By the time nightfall came and they really should set up camp. She was so hungry—officially ‘the dread bleeding is upon me, I want to eat everything in life’ hungry and until they got a better grasp on just how much farther it would be to Skyhold, and just how long it would be before they could get supplies rolling in, lunch was only a thing for people who really needed it. It wasn’t a strict thing, anyone could eat but it was just a ‘make a conscious decision while our resources are limited’ thing and it didn’t feel right to her, to eat when a majority of her ‘hundreds strong’ party weren’t. Though she did end up sharing an apple with Cassandra—no one in her usual party ate lunch, Lady Josie was feeling shaky but she wasn’t used to being hungry or traveling so hard so she was grateful but hesitant about Ellie getting her a bowl of rice, but she felt better when Ellie said it’d give Anya someone to eat with! Because puppies didn’t have to ration their food, that was just a rule. Varric insisted Cassandra eat something to the point of pressing an apple from his pack into her hand and saying he was just ‘having her back’ and giving Cullen side-eye like he should back him up. So, Cassandra offered one of her disgusted grunts and used her boot knife to halve the apple and offered half to Ellie.

She was so glad when they could finally stop for the day, set up camp, dinner was still on the table (pun intended), it was well deserved, and it would be hard for anyone to sleep with an empty belly that hadn’t had much of anything since breakfast.

Cole was a big help calling her attention to people who needed a moment of her time, sometimes it was just walking by a section of camp so people who’d only heard the Herald of Andraste was still alive could actually see it with their own eyes, have assurances of their own. And it was nice to be able to touch base with people, some she vaguely knew, and then regular faces like Flissa! Gosh she’d been so scared for the barmaid! Tavern-owner-turned-Chantry Sister*, apparently, Flissa wanted to serve the Inquisition differently now, her brush with death made her want to pursue her faith more, help others do the same, which Ellie thought was super sweet, though she’d miss her cooking!

“I’ll still be around, just serving in different ways. You’re welcome to have dinner with me anytime sweet lady,” Flissa assured.

Ellie got to pray with lots of people, she thought she knew most in Haven, and their faces were familiar but there were so many she didn’t know.

And some she sort of knew. Cole prompted her, led her to where a group of men were gathered together, talking, eating. Oh! Lord Berand was with them, and some of them were his men she was pretty sure…ohhh, they were the soldiers from the Fallow Mire.

“My lady,” Lord Berand greeted as she approached. “Maker, I’m so relieved you’re alright—we were all devastated when we heard what you did, back in Haven. That…that was incredibly brave.”

More like it was just incredibly necessary, “Everyone was brave, you all did an excellent job keeping it together and moving forward, getting out safe. And I am glad to see you all again, I’m so relieved you made it back safe from the Fallow Mire—I didn’t even realize you all were still in
Haven, I hadn’t seen you around,” she said, looking between Berand and the Inquisition soldiers.

“‘My men and I left Haven on assignment before your party returned, we just got back in
time to see the Breach dealt with,” Lord Berand said.

“We…we actually did wish to speak with you, lady Herald,” one of the soldiers spoke up nervously, “but we…were ashamed, are ashamed. Were keeping scarce because erm…we have
said unkind things, my lady. About you. That you were not um…”

Oh. That was why Cole told her to come here. Apparently they were the men that said those awful things Skinner beat them up for—that Ellie was mentally unstable, which uh, she kind of was? And a slut, which she wasn’t really except insofar as chocolate or feta cheese is involved—for the right snack, Corypheus probably could have had Haven if he wanted it. But she definitely hadn’t been sleeping around with Varric and Thom. And yeah, she’d seemed inadequate to handle the Breach that day so, it was mean, but understandable they’d blow off steam by disparaging her among themselves. But they were apologetic now, had been wanting to apologize to her but they’d been too afraid to approach her, had regretted that dearly when they thought she had died and they missed their chance, and then everything had been so busy once she was back and up and they were moving forward they hadn’t been able to approach her. Her approaching them seemed to do the trick though.

“Don’t even worry about it—I’ve never been super mad about it. You didn’t hurt my feelings or anything, and even if you had, we still work together for the Inquisition, and you’re still people—my people, a bit of mean gossiping wasn’t going to make me turn a blind eye while you were in danger. I’m really glad you guys are safe, and I appreciate your apology.”

"Th-thank you, my lady."

While she appreciated the opportunity to get to know so many different people, she…she was pretty wiped, and was so incredibly relieved when she circled back to the head of camp.

"It's just us here, right?" she croaked out, voice spoken-hoarse, as she joined her party and advisors huddled around their campfire. Thom offered her his canteen when she came close, yeah, water should probably be a thing, she smiled before taking a few sips and passing it back.

"Certainly, Eleanor," Cassandra said and then, well, she knew the deal, "Josephine, Leliana, Cullen do not be alarmed-"

Oh yeah, they were new. Ellie offered a reassuring smile before she flopped onto her back, "I am so old, this form is weary. I am ready to perish. My body is decaying, my bones are dust, and my soul is attached to this mortal coil only by the strength of my agony."

"Wh- why shouldn’t we be alarmed by that?" Cullen asked uncertain.

"It is a jest," Cassandra assured him. "Mostly."

"Oh my lady," Josie offered up a giggle at her dramatics while Leliana shook her head.

Sera flopped to lay in the snow next to her, "Tough day ain't it, Inky?"

Uh-huh. "I should have just called it quits, laid down in the snow to die after the second—second dead fire pit I crossed paths with catching up with you jerks."

"Were they at least warm?" Dorian asked, sympathetic.
"Little bit, but the first one burning and dying the second I got close enough to benefit felt like a major 'screw you' from the universe."

Awe, double awe- Sera snuggled up to her, arms around Ellie as she kissed her on the cheek, and Anya came and started licking at her face, trying to rally her. Sweet puppy. Sweet friends.

"I love you all. so. much."

She really did. In the next moment Anya was moving out of the way like she knew what was about to go down, and Ellie rolled Sera off her just before the shing of her sword unsheathing and clang!

“If it isn’t the Krematori,” she said calmly, just—letting everyone know he hadn’t suddenly gone rogue or something.

Cremisius laughed, then, “Die Herald scum!”

Scum? Rude!

Ellie pushed his blow back as she got on her feet standing! Was so! Gross! But fighting! Kind of fighting. She wasn’t sure if he was taking it easy on her or what, but it was a good bit of a workout, trying to fight without magic or the use of her left arm really. Practice dueling around their campfire while the adults stared in confusion, not entirely sure if they should stop their before-dinner sword fight.

“Kremmy-boy, what the frick?!” Sera shrieked.

Ellie got him pushed into the snow, her sword at the collar of his gambison—he’d definitely gone down too easy but eh, it was mostly just ‘am I capable of unconsciously reaching for my sword to defend myself if I need to’ practice more than anything. And then she sheathed her blade, and he his as she offered a hand down and pulled him up, pulling him forward and wrapping her arms around his neck, pressing a quick kiss to his lips before turning to address their confusion, though the Iron Bull was just chuckling, since he was sort of in on it too.

“I haven’t been able to cast since the whole ‘a Rift popped out of my Mark’ thing, so I asked Cremisius to keep me on my toes, surprise attacks as practice for actual attacks,” she said, “Gracias, guapo.”

“That…is incredibly responsible of you…” Cullen struggled, “…but do not do that ever again, I almost killed the boy.”

“Sorry,” Cremisius offered laughingly, “s’why I waited ‘til it was just us—I figured if I attacked the Herald of Andraste in front of the whole Inquisition I’d be pretty screwed.” Plus… Anya really did love all the running around she got to do while they marched but even she got tired, and Cremisius hefted the pup up on his hip when she whined at him earlier, walked the last several miles carrying her

“Darling, do quit rough housing and come,” Madam de Fer interjected, waving Ellie over-oh. okay, she wasn’t uncomfortable or anything, but Vivienne didn’t usually pull her to sit in her lap the way Marehis or Cassandra did. “You’re shaking, you’ve hardly had a thing to eat today, and we must put that to rights my dear. How are you feeling?”

“I’m okay, tired, and yeah I’m starving but dinner’s on soon, you’ve got to be hungry too. You’re feeling okay, right?”
“Certainly Eleanor,” Vivienne assured, “now, you cannot make use of your magic still?” Ellie shook her head. “If you wish, I would try something.”

That something was meditation—Ellie and Madam de Fer seated with the girl in her lap while Vivienne rested palms up on Ellie’s knees while Ellie laid her hands in hers. It took a minute but Ellie could feel Vivienne’s magic gliding through her the way her magic usually did, pressing at different points until she got the most subtle push back, gently prodding at her magic, encouraging it, and then,

“Master Pavus, I’ve a suitable response, would you care to assist me?” Ellie vaguely heard her say.

“Resp…ahh, brilliant. Yes of course. Shall I…?”

“Be seated as I am, before us, mind our knees touch dear-”

Dorian tittered at that. “Madam de Fer you do honor me, but whatever will people say?”

“…and place your hands over Eleanor’s, you know I adore you but do not try my patience, I am working here you realize.”

“Ahh yes, quite. I do apologize. Let’s see here.”

“What the frig is they doin’ to Inky?” Sera asked quietly.

“A transfer of sorts, da’len,” Solas supplied, “Ellie’s magic has been tested to its limits and now it is exhausted, it is not unlike rousing someone from unconsciousness. As Madam de Fer and Ser Pavus have magic like to Eleanor’s, they can offer it support, and leave some of their own power behind to blend with her own.”

“Oh. Shouldn’t you help then?”

“Ahh. The key is like magics I’m afraid,” was all he had to say.

She wasn’t sure about any of this but it was soothing enough. Her magic started coasting again like normal, weaker, but it was there, thank the Maker. Her magic let Dorian and Vivienne’s magic guide it along, but the glide of their magic slowed, dragged along her Mark, but their magic shielded hers, and for the several minutes they meditated like this…it was the first time, save the few seconds with Madam de Fer in their first lesson, that her hand felt like hers again, no burn or sting of the Mark.

She flinched when their magic slipped away and left hers to coast on its own, Mark’s burn returning in force, though gosh she was glad her magic could do that again, it felt a lot better, stronger.

“Are you alright darling?” Vivienne worried.

“Not much worse for wear-“ Dorian said.

“I was addressing Eleanor, my sweet, do wait your turn.”

“Thanks you guys, my magic feels a lot better. Are you okay?” she asked when she opened her eyes. Poor Dorian was pale, sweating, Madam de Fer’s head was resting against the back of Ellie’s.
“I am well, Eleanor,” Vivienne assured thought she rested against her a moment more before pressing a kiss to the back of her head, raising a hand to brush against Ellie’s hair. “My dear girl I’m so pleased we could get that sorted for you, it must have been frightening to be unable to cast for yourself, and it wouldn’t due to have you in such a state.”

“I certainly could not abide it,” Dorian said, “Ellie, you are to tell us if you need further assistance.”

Ellie giggled, reaching out and poking him in the shoulder, “That’s very ‘mother-hen’ of you Dorian.”

“Oh do not think you’ve domesticated me young lady,” he spoke haltingly, “But I do… worry for you. As you are my dear friend. So you’re to come to me when I can be of help to you.”

Dinner was winding down and they were getting ready to go rest for the evening when Harritt approached their campfire.

“My lady, I’m pleased to see you survived,” he greeted as he came to kneel where Ellie was seated with Cremisius and Marehis. He looked over his shoulder to make certain the Seeker couldn’t see as he handed her, “something I grabbed before hauling out, thank you for getting me back into my cabin.”

Ellie gasped as she took the item in hand, “Oh my gosh oh my gosh oh my gosh, I love you! You’re amazing and incredible and just the best!” she informed him as she launched forward to hug him—big hug! “Cremisius! Any objections to dating a married woman? I’m marrying Mister Harritt.”

“Hey, if he makes you this happy, I say go for it,” Cremisius agreed amicably at her enthusiasm.

“Let’s just slow our roll here Tumbles,” Varric interjected.

“You promised me we would dissuade her from marriage until she is older,” Cullen complained to Cassandra.

“Eleanor, do please reconsider marrying the Inquisition Blacksmith,” Cassandra drawled.

She’d totally let her if she knew what he’d saved! Yes, yes, yes!

She’d find out soon enough!

Leliana and the Iron Bull sat down with Ellie for a while, and she did her best to report everything she’d seen and heard in her meeting the Elder One. And they worked together with Bull, helping him write up his report to the Ben Hessrath to break the news of what happened to the Inquisition—report that the Breach was sealed, apparently there were still Rifts all over the place which…gosh, she felt awful she was a little relieved to hear that. But she’d been…scared. Really scared. She loved everyone she worked with in the Inquisition, but when it was all over with, when there were no more Rifts for her to seal, they…theys wouldn’t really need her anymore. So…what would happen? Maybe they’d still let her help? She could do things! Like cooking and cleaning and fighting and- and- lots of stuff! She could! Blah! Anyway, the Iron Bull reported that the Inquisition was still standing, their agents in the field were still active, and everyone that had been in Haven were just relocating to a new headquarters.

Which...sort of reminded her, "Leliana, um, how's Lady Josie feeling? Is she too tired to talk right now, do you think? If you guys are up for it, the Advisors and Cassandra, I'd like to talk to
you about something."

"It is sweet of you to worry, but I think Josie's up for a chat, the Iron Bull, would you give us a moment then, please? Send the others our way, would you?"

"Can't say no to you Red," the Iron Bull assured with a wink, patting Ellie on the head as he rose and went to get the others.

"Hello, mijita, you wished to speak with us?" Lady Josie asked as she came and knelt to sit beside Ellie, raising a hand to brush back the girl's hair.

Ellie nodded. "Um...I'm just gonna launch right into this I suppose? We uh...beds, uniforms, desks, parchment, ingredients for potions, food—we need a whole lot of everything after Haven. And I know we have emergency funds or whatever but um...I mean those aren't endless, right?"

The adults all shared uncomfortable looks, "We will be alright Ellie," Cullen said, "We've allies that will lend us aide we're certain, once they hear our plight."

"Well...what about an ally that already knows our plight?" Ellie asked.

"You've someone in mind?" Leliana asked.

"I am someone in mind. Me. Hi, Eleanor Trevelyan?"

"Absolutely not," Cassandra refused, "Eleanor we will not accept a substantial donation from you, we are your- we are to- you are not to take care of us, that is for certain."

"Agreed," oh gosh, wowza, she never thought she'd hear Cullen, Leliana, and Josie all say that word in unison over anything! They once argued over what to order for lunch...and they could all order whatever they wanted for themselves, they were literally arguing with what the other person wanted because Cullen wanted potato soup and Fliss' makes that with lots of garlic, Lady Josie did not want him smelling up the War Room.

"I thought you might say that, but it isn't a donation, except for the minimal amount I can donate to get a...what did Varric call it? A tax write-off? I've never paid taxes before, should I really be getting a write-off?" blah, she wasn't even sure what taxes were, so, she waved her hands dismissively before reaching into the inside pocket of her overcoat, "I talked to Varric about it at breakfast, and he's been kicking it around in his business brain all day, went over this with me during dinner—see what you think," she said as she offered the folded parchment to Lady Josie, who scooted to sit beside Leliana and hold the parchment so she and the other adults could huddle around and read it.

"You...you wish to invest with the Inquisition?" Cullen asked.

"Uh-huh. I'll put in enough money to help us out, keep us making progress with our new Head Quarters without anyone having to go without pay, and if anyone else wants to chip in, cool, but we won't exactly have to go to our allies with our hats in our hands, you know?"

"It would see her repaid in full, and then some eventually," Lady Josie reasoned as she finished reading.

"I do admit, people merely donating out of solidarity, and not having to play suck-up to those who would not do so without it is...appealing," Leliana said.

"Indeed, Cullen Rutherford sucks up to no man," the Commander said, and he got a look
from Cassandra.

"You purchased Eleanor a puppy for her birthday."

"I'm sorry, Ellie, has your gender identity changed? No? I do believe I said man," he corrected, winking as he assured, "I've no qualms sucking up to women."

Cassandra looked like she was restraining herself from outright praying for the Maker to 'preserve her from this man's antics' as it seemed like she often did, as she returned her attention to Ellie. "I still do not like it," Cassandra said, "but it is...an acceptable compromise."

Ahh! "Really?!" Ellie cleared her throat, "I mean...excellent, I'll have my people contact your people..." and then she thought about it, "Lady Josie, please write yourself on the details."

The Antivan woman smiled, laughing as she assured, "I'll see to things just as soon as...well, I'll need a bit of parchment, Varric has some, yes?"

Skinner always rose early to keep watch in the night and Ellie asked her to wake her up. It wasn’t as scary as Cremisius warned it might be...though maybe that was because Ellie was used to waking up to Sera right in her face.

“Small one. I am waking you. You are pleased?”

“As pudding, thanks Skinner,” Ellie rasped out sleepily, beckoning with an index finger for the woman to lean in even closer and Ellie pressed a kiss to her cheek. She was a little startled that she got a kiss on the cheek right back!

“Have a pleasant day,” Skinner trotted out before leaving the tent.

“Kid,” the Iron Bull rumbled out quietly, “I’ve seen you manage some weird fucking things. That’s top five.”

“Top three,” Cremisius offered up still half-asleep.

“Get some more rest if you can, I’ll be back when it's time to head for breakfast,” Ellie said, giggling when, the moment she was off of Bull, the Qunari used the arm that was laying under Cremisius to pull the Tevinter man up to replace her, and the Lieutenant settled in comfortably enough laying atop the Iron Bull and his ‘pillowy man bosoms’. Anya was still snoring away as she lay across the Iron Bull’s thighs.

The sun had just barely begun to rise as Ellie scurried through camp to where Cullen and Cassandra set up a tent, and she listened for a moment just...being cautious—she didn’t think many people would have the energy to get up to much in times like these, but you never know. They were awake but just talking quietly to one another before getting out of bed for the day, wishing each other good morning.

So she waited for a pause and then she slipped into the tent, Cullen and Cassandra rousing at the intrusion though they seemed to realize it was her, Cassandra readily welcomed Ellie crawling into bed with her, snuggling in close.

“Did you have a nightmare, sweet girl?” Cassandra asked as she brushed a hand across Ellie’s hair, the other rubbing her back.

Ellie shook her head, Cole had been staying with her in her dreams while she slept, kept her from nightmares in the Fade. She smiled against Cassandra’s neck, “Happy Birthday, mami!”
Cassandra was very quiet for a moment, oh. Oh Ellie hadn’t meant to make her cry, she could feel a few tears on the back of her neck. “Thank you, Eleanor. Oh, I am so pleased to hear you say that,” the Seeker said, holding Ellie tighter. “This is a most blessed birthday present indeed.”

Ellie pulled her head back to look up at her. “Oh this isn’t a birthday present, this is just—happy birthday, I’m glad you were born, and I love you so much so let’s cuddle! I have your actual birthday present if it’s okay to move my arm.”

At first it felt like Cassandra was just going to keep holding her, which was fine by Ellie but she did loosen her hold so Ellie could get her arm out from around her and hand her the little cloth-wrapped present Harritt had rescued.

Cassandra sat up and Ellie rose with her, tucking her knees up under her, kind of bouncing in place, she was just a little excited to see if Cassandra liked it.

The Seeker carefully pulled back the cloth. “Eleanor, this is lovely,” she said, hand brushing over the book cover.

“Harritt helped me bind it.”

“You made- ” Cassandra stopped and opened the book, and then she smiled, warm and seeming pleased and proud, “oh sweet girl, you- Thank you, Eleanor, truly. I will cherish it always, I cannot wait to start.”

She did and she didn’t—Cassandra got Ellie laying between her and Cullen and they just sort of laid there for a bit until it was time to get ready for breakfast. When Ellie came back from changing into her armor to join everyone for breakfast, Cassandra was seated by the fire with her nose in her birthday book.

“Where’d you get new reading material?” Varric asked as he squinted at the freshly cracked spine, trying to get a look at the cover for a name.

Cassandra was beaming, like, gosh she looked so happy, “It is a birthday present. A novelette by my favorite author,” she said jerking her head in Ellie’s direction as she turned a page.

Oh gosh! Ellie just about choked on her breakfast, she was pretty sure she heard everyone’s heads snapping in her direction.


“Kind of—it’s only little. Dorian had me write a story as an assignment and he liked it well enough, so I worked on it a little more, and Sera proof read it for me before I copied it down onto the nicer parchment!”

“Truly?” Dorian asked, “I trust there is a dedication to me?”

“Uh-huh!” she said.

“Ha! As it should be. You see Tethras, I would read your books if you dedicated them to me.”

“Sparkler, I haven’t published anything since we met,” Varric said.

“And what was stopping you before?” Dorian asked.
“I literally didn’t know you.”

“That’s hardly an excuse.”

Varric snorted, shaking his head, then, “Oh man, Seeker, come on—you gotta let me read it when you’ve finished.”

“Oh come now, don’t be unreasonable,” Cullen spoke up. “You’ll rush her-”

“He is rushing me? You’ve been reading over my shoulder this entire time,” Cassandra said, “Are you even getting through the whole page?”

“Of course not love, you read too fast for that. I was going to suggest you read it aloud and we can all enjoy it together—it shouldn’t take long, you’ve nearly finished it already. Do some voices, turn it about to show everyone the pictures, it’ll be like a proper Chantry storybook time.”

“I’ll not do voices,” Cassandra assured drily. Why not? She always did voices when she read to Ellie! It was cute!

“Wait! There’s pictures?! Oh come on, don’t triple threat me kid,” Varric complained, “I can’t compete with author, illustrator, and ridiculously cute.”

“I’m only a double threat then,” Ellie corrected, “Though maybe it’s like one and a half? Cremisius is also super cute—and he’s the illustrator part.”

Varric flopped back in his seat, laying in the snow. “Fuck me, they’re a power couple.”

“Woah woah, I wanna see,” the Iron Bull said. “Just the pictures—won’t turn down a read-along though.”

“Do be careful with it and do not lose my place,” Cassandra warned as she passed him the book. The Iron Bull kept a thumb where her page was—gosh, she was almost done! It was super short though, so. He flipped through the pages to look at the pictures, whistling appreciatively when he found them. The Seeker smiled, “It’s rather a lovely way of conveying a part of the story left unwritten—it is a tale of the littlest dragon slayer, a young girl that goes about miraculously slaying dragons, but in the illustrations...”

“Oh shit, that’s so cool,” Bull affirmed, holding up the book to show the others one of the first images—she’d gotten the idea from Anya! The pup was absolutely certain she was a little mage because Ellie would cast and let her pretend she'd done it. So she'd written a little story about a girl slaying dragons, but the pictures would show it was always someone watching over her, following her around and letting her build her strength and confidence while actually doing the heavy lifting. Until one day she can do it all by herself! Which...Ellie wasn't going to count Anya out for being the first actual puppy mage. She was pretty sure Russel was secretly a magical horse.

“Thank you, Krem, for lending your talent. They are beautiful,” Cassandra said. They’d turned out so cute!

“Glad you like it,” Cremisius said, extending her something between his index and middle finger, a smooth silver oval with a little loop on the top like it was meant to have a chain threaded through it, “you can do whatever you like with it but it’s something I thought you might like. I was keeping it safe in my father’s shaving kit, El grabbed from my bunk so—happy birthday.”

Cassandra accepted the little oval. When she flipped it over, there was glass and her hand
raised to her lips as she looked it over. “You sweet man—you are to come here this instant and hug me,” she held out an arm and the Tevinter man went and gave her a good hug, awe! It was so nice!

“What is it?” Ellie asked when they were done.

Cassandra turned the glass portion to face Ellie...with Ellie’s face, and it wasn’t a mirror, though they were both blushing, “You drew me?” she asked him. It was a small, colorful portrait of her face all smiley and blushy, just, when had he done that? Her hair was longer and if she looked close enough she could see that it'd been black-and-white before he got all fancy with his oil pastels, like he'd drawn it while she was away in the Oasis. Gosh, it was super sweet. And it seemed like it meant the world to Cassandra. "It's really pretty."

"Hard not to be, considering the subject," he offered with a little wink. He! That wasn't fair!

"sandra!" Sera, wow, loud! The Elf girl bound into breakfast, and sort of crash-collided with the Seeker, hugging her tight. "You was born today right? Happy Birthday! Many more n' pish. Oi, you lot sing to her yet?"

"They have not, nor do they need to. I appreciate the sentiment, but it is wholly unnecessary."

...yeah. Weeeeeeelllllll.

They did sing. As a group. As they marched. Ellie threw it in with their march-singing and boom! An Inquisition-wide 'Happy Birthday Caaaaaaaassandrraaaaaa!' unfolded.

It was fun, lots of fun, and it did seem to lift a lot of spirits. But marching was still hard. Ellie was sick and sore as they reached their twelfth mile-marking lantern. Three less than yesterday, but they did end up calling it a night because it was already getting darker, had they marched slower today? Maybe. She was the one setting the pace, and as it was, she was stiff and sore and she could very distinctly feel something running down her leather pantlegs and that just...needed to stop right now.

She sat as still as possible just, brain-willing her body to cooperate with her until she could get some privacy to make with cleaning up and changing her bandaging ugh. Her underthings were...she was just going to burn them the second she didn't need them anymore.

"Ellie?" Cremisius came, sitting at her side, resting a hand on her back, "We got the tent set up, you said you need a minute?"

Ellie nodded, opening her eyes and smiling her thanks as she stood oh ouch ouch ouch, she flinched at the stabbing cramps. They'd been steadily stabbing while she sat but standing made it feel almost like tearing cuts and,

"Oh shit, El, you're hurt, fuck, what happened-"

Cool. She'd given her boots from Harritt a break because they could honestly rival the Iron Bull’s feet stank right now, and worn her ankle boots that her leggings met but couldn’t tuck into so. Her blood was officially in the snow, and she could just kind of curl up and die right now, that'd be cool, thanks.

"I'm not hurt, please shut your handsome face before you scare someone. I'm fine, I'll just be a minute."

"Bullshit, Ellie, come on, what's wrong? Why-?" he went very quiet for a second before his
arm wrapped around her back, hands supporting her arms as he quietly walked her over to the tent which uh, really helped, she definitely wasn't feeling the whole walking thing anymore.

Skinner was waiting already with her sleep clothes laid out and bandaging which she quickly hid behind her back when Ellie and Cremisius came in, but the Tevinter man held out his hand, gesturing for her to hand it over. "We're good here."

The Elf nodded, handing over the bandaging and reaching out to squeeze Ellie's arm as she passed, and left them.

"You should sit."

So she did. Cremisius knelt and set the bandaging down beside her on the cot, before he started taking off her ankle boots, stripping off her socks.

"These need washed."

"I don't have more," she said quietly was he...what was happening right now? Was he mad? "Yeah you do," he pulled the pack off of his back and dug out a pair of his own socks that had been in his trunk. He set them on the cot. "Do you need help?" he asked. She shook her head, 'no'. "Kay. How's the underwear situation? You don't have any others except- you'd rather not use them?" she nodded. "I get that. No worries, get your things off, I'll give you a minute," he said, taking up the bandaging and stepping off to the other side of the empty tent, his back to her while she got out of her armor. She startled a bit when he came back over, but he had a hand over his eyes, sort of exaggerated his movements like he were trying to make light as he blindly found the cot and rested...huh, he'd lined some underpants with bandaging, and it all looked clean. And then he turned his back and gave her space again so she could deal with just...so much yuck, this was so incredibly gross. She got in her sleep shirt, got off the old...gross...everything and Skinner had left a wet cloth she tried her best to clean up with before putting on the underthings he'd left her.

"You decent?" he asked. She felt kind of dumb, she nodded at first, but his back was to her, duh.

"Mm-hmm."

He turned back, she'd bundled up everything gross in her leather leggings and he took that in hand, was leaving the tent only to find Skinner standing on the other side of the entrance as he opened it. They didn't say anything just, she held up her hands and he handed over everything for her to take, leaving them.

"So. Monthlies huh?" he asked as he turned to face her again. "Funny thing those. You know, weirdest thing happened here recently."

"Weird things are always happening it seems," she offered.

"Uh-huh. See, when shit hit the wind in Haven, I had a vial of my own potion for monthlies left—you know, little vial of stuff you saved from my trunk?—and Stitches promises me as soon as he's up after the 'we Sealed the Breach' party, he'll make fresh, which yeah, that's his usual routine. Well, obviously that doesn't work out. But, Drakonis 2nd, mid-morning, Healer Adan rolls around. Says he was thinking of me, and knew Stitches would procrastinate, and he'd already gone ahead and made potion for me, which he grabbed before hitting the road. Which is flattering but when I think about it, of all the vital, important things he could have reached for, and he grabs potion. That he's never made for me before. For me."
Ellie bit her lip nervously.

"Probably should've tipped me off when he said he'd miscalculated when accounting for my height and weight, and I'd need to take doses two bottles at a time to work." oh. Yeah, it wasn't like they had bigger bottles just laying around to cover up the fact that the potion had been made with someone smaller than him in mind.

"Are you mad at me?" she asked.

Cremisius sighed. "Little bit, yeah. El,-"

"I'm sorry we didn't tell you, and that we lied," she insisted, "but it- it's perfectly safe Cremisius, I promise, honest. It's the same formulation Stitches uses, I swear, if I thought for a second it would hurt you or something I wouldn't have done it. I know it's shitty to give you something under kind of false pretenses, and not give you all the details but it's safe, it's what you've always taken, and as soon as we're settled everyone will be back to their regularly scheduled potions regimen."

He looked at her like she'd just grown a second head. "...you...you think I'd be mad because you had the Healers use subterfuge to have me take potion I regularly take? Shit, El I'm not mad for me. I'm mad about you! Honey, look at this," he said, crouching and taking her left ankle in hand, and her brain sort of filled up with that sensation so much she almost didn't see- Oh. She knew she was sore all over, but she hadn't really looked at herself at all since Haven, it wasn't like there were any mirrors around or she'd been doing a lot of bathing. Her legs were covered in all sorts of different bruising, the skin was all black, purply, yellow-green. "You just...Ellie, you're hurt," his voice broke over the word. "You've got enough problems right now, and you're beat up bad enough on the outside, choosing to be beat up on the inside too? I...your heart is in the right place, but you should have talked to me first. I would've said no, El."

"You could have," Ellie agreed. "But I couldn't have. I wasn't exactly in a conversational condition, it was an emergency situation I had maybe three minutes of consciousness left to deal with it in? Otherwise yes, I promise, I would have talked with you first. Cremisius, this...it sucks. But it just physically sucks for me."

He stared at her sharply at that, "You think I can't handle my brain's bullshit? Kind of been handling it through way worse since forever," he snapped.

"Which is why I don't want you handling it now," she explained, “—it shouldn't be something you have to handle, not if there's some other way. You're one of the strongest people I know, never doubt that, never assume I think you're incapable or something that's just- okay. You've been through so much, made so much incredible progress and you deserve to get to keep that, not have something that could be avoided pick away at it. Just, follow this thinking. There are certain potions I need to deal with physical illness, that can be taken...basically any time, by anyone, for any reason, even if they have no reason at all. Stuffy nose? Embrium tonic. Sore throat? Embrium tonic. It's a Wednesday? Slap some Embrium on it, all it does is clear up your chest and sinuses. Anyone can benefit from that at any time. You could have benefited from what you had in your flask, but you let Adan use it on me."

"Because you have asthma!" he said like she’d lost her mind.

"Yeah. It's something that I need, but you could still use for yourself."

"You could barely breathe."
"A physical form of bullshit. It's not any different from what your brain does to you. I have asthma. You have gender dysphoria. Respiratory illnesses are bitches for both of us," she offered that up lightly and it earned her a bit of a snort. "Just because it wasn't life threatening exactly, doesn't mean it isn't serious. This is gross, and I hate it, but I don't hate my body, or feel inadequate, or wrong or any of the complicated, horrible things you could feel on top of in general monthly crap. I can't- I couldn't just sit by and let you go through that, watch you go through that —that is what would have beaten me up inside. This? I'll take this over that, any day."

Cremisius was very quiet, and then he stood up and left the tent.

She...she really messed up, hadn’t she? Crap! Damn it! She-

But then he came back, looked terribly serious, and he had a wet cloth in his hands as he came and knelt at her feet. And then he took her ankle again and started carefully cleaning the tracks of dry blood off her calves, only meeting her gaze when her legs were clean up to her knees and he stopped to make certain he wasn’t pressing too far, out of bounds, before he began to wipe at the blood left on her thighs, and she...really hoped the Iron Bull wasn’t around to hear her heart hammering in her chest.

“If roles were reversed, and it was me,” Cremisius finally spoke as he worked, “…you would help me, however you could. I would appreciate you affording me the same opportunity, Ellie. Okay? You just...you’ve been bleeding badly all day, and you didn’t stop to change out bandaging.”

“No real privacy to do that in out in the open," bathroom breaks were awkward enough to work out as it was, "and...”

“You didn’t want me knowing. Found out anyway so that didn’t really work out, huh?” was he...? oh! Teasing, teasing was worlds better than upset, "It’s okay. Tomorrow just, be honest with me. I could help you, you know? Get you privacy, breaks when you need them, anything. Alright?”

“Alright,” she agreed, and Cremisius nodded, pressing a kiss to her knee.

"Here, get comfortable. Now, in all honesty," he stressed teasingly, offering her a smile as he handed off her sleep bottoms, "how're we feeling?"

She was kind of beyond exhausted, so he suggested she just lay down for a bit—he’d get her when dinner was ready. Which turned into her waking up with someone holding her, too spindly limbed to be Cremisius or the Iron Bull...Marehis was laying with her in the Chargers tent.

"Hey mami."

"Hello sweet girl, how are you feeling?"

"I’m okay.” Napping had helped, cleaning up had too. And now, dinner—everyone else had already eaten together, but they’d saved dinner for Ellie, Marehis offering her what looked like double, maybe triple dinner? The bowl was full all the way to the top!

“Da’vehnan, you should have told us,” Marehis chastised lightly as they sat on the cot while Ellie ate. “This travel is arduous, demanding—da’len people feel more hungry during their monthlies because their bodies are hungry*. Your body is working all day performing this process, burning more energy. On top of this journey? As it stands you may have been consuming the whole of what is offered to you at breakfast, dinner, but you are still starving yourself—you will

*[The term 'are' is used to emphasize hunger in the context of the journey and the body's energetic needs. This is a creative use of language to underline the importance of food intake during strenuous periods.]
only make yourself sick and weak.”

“Sorry, I didn’t think about that,” and then…it felt a little mean—Bull knew too, but she hadn’t outright said anything to him—but she had said something. “But, I didn’t mean to keep it a secret from you or anything, I told Solas he should avoid monitoring me for a little bit unless he wanted to feel cramping in parts he doesn’t even have,” she offered a little jovially, making light.

“Did you?” Marehis asked her, which sounded a bit like she’d gotten him into trouble. “And he agreed with this?”

Ellie nodded, he had—and she hadn’t felt him in the bond at all. She…she didn’t want—she didn’t know what she wanted! She just…wanted to make sure whatever this was, whatever he was hiding, it didn’t hurt Marehis! Maybe he wasn’t hiding anything! Maybe he was just coincidentally shady? But it did seem…she should have told Marehis herself, but didn’t it seem a little weird that Solas spent most of the day with her, they shared a tent and he hadn’t said anything? It looked like it really bothered Marehis.

Marehis sat with her while she ate, wow it was a lot, she almost felt overly full but the Elf woman insisted she eat every bit of it. And then as the Chargers started filtering in for the evening, Cremisius smiled when he saw the empty bowl, kissed her on the forehead to be sweet…and distract her so he could snatch the bowl out of her hands and go clean it out himself. Marehis asked the Iron Bull if he or the Chargers would mind at all, her joining them while they slept.

The Iron Bull sort of looked to Skinner as he slowly said, “I…think that would be just fine…”

Skinner grinned, something that looked almost evil—a mischievous sort of evil. “Soon, we shall outnumber the Shems.”

“Sounds like its cool then,” the Iron Bull said.

So, they got two cots side by side, Ellie laying between the Iron Bull and Marehis.

Well. It was out there now. Varric poured almost an entire jar of jam—he would have dumped the whole thing if Ellie hadn’t stopped him!—onto her oatmeal and patted her on the head, saying it was poor substitute for chocolate but at least it was sweet. Cullen came and felt at her forehead like he were checking her temperature and asked if she needed anything—asked if Ellie wanted carried the rest of the way! She did, damn it! But she so wasn’t saying that! And Cremisius was great help when she started to feel like new bandaging needed to be a thing—the Charger’s dispersed into the crowd to inform them they were due a break, and with the help of the mountain range having large rocks cover could be taken behind, he and the Iron Bull stood guard while she did her thing. And he let her nap when they broke for lunch, she ate a little bit, and then Cremisius let her rest against his side and sleep for a little while until it was time to be chipper and play march conductor again.

Thankfully, after five days of marching…they’d been about five miles out from Haven when she found them, apparently. It was seventy miles total, from their old home to their new. And Maker.

She might just kiss Solas...if things weren't so...yeah—when they came up over the ridge on the 8th of Drakonis, could finally lay eyes on and know with certainty there was such a place as Skyhold and it was huge, it was nothing short of head-spinning relief.

“You did well, lethallan,” Solas commended her as they came to a stop.
“Eleanor, my word,” Lady Josie breathed.

“That…just might work,” Leliana supposed with some levity.

“You’ve done an incredible job Ellie,” Cullen said, “now, lets go see if anyone’s home, shall we?”

There wasn’t. Solas had been right about that much—Skyhold lay big and empty and perfect! It was definitely old and long-abandoned, full of little critters and cobwebs and dust, Cole warned Ellie to wear her scarf up covering her nose and mouth just to enter the great hall but Maker. They had a great hall! They had a frigging palace! And courtyards and a barn—stables for their horses, a big one! And- and- and just! Everything!

“We can do this,” Ellie breathed with relief as she and her party, the advisors examined the Great Hall, “We can rebuild here.”

“But the real question,” Dorian said, “is can we bathe here.”

“True.”

They could, eventually. It took all hands on deck—not specifically just for bathing—but they dug in, and cleaned the place up, cleaned it out—got rid of all the mice and rats and nugs that had claimed Skyhold for their own. They got Lady Josie set up in an office, and she set to work contacting everyone—allies, government bodies, and most importantly right now, their suppliers—telling them of the Inquisition’s relocation so they could get food and ingredients and the like rolling in. So they dug in and kept the progress going, Leliana had an excellent place to keep her birds now, an actual rookery! She sent word to all of their agents in the field, to keep them updated and reestablish contact with them. There was a place for a tavern, and while Flissa wasn’t about the bar tending life anymore, there was a Dwarf man, Cabot, who set up shop, had people cleaning the place out so he could get it up and running.

Gosh it was great when things started arriving—Lace was incredible help leading teams and scouting the area and getting directions they could pass on to others needing to find their new headquarters. It took a few days but soon they had things that would let them make this place somewhere really, truly livable, and everyone ended up with their own space it seemed like. Dorian found he liked the library—he didn’t say where he would sleep but um, Ellie was pretty sure it wasn’t in the plush, comfy chair in his claimed portion of the library. And Madam de Fer had ordered some sort of daybed, a pretty desk and chair, and then two huge chairs for entertaining she said—she set up high in the balcony area where she could overlook the Great Hall or the courtyard. Solas wanted to stay in the lowest portion of the library tower, where he had a daybed and a desk, close access to books and the kitchens weren’t too terribly far either. Branching off of that was a walkway to where Cullen claimed an office, and it really did seem to suit him best—there was a little loft above it where his bed went, and Skyhold didn’t exactly have a hundred percent of its roofing, so, there was a major hole overhead that worked out pretty well, let him breathe the open air and see the stars overhead at night, and it was comfortable for him and Cassandra. Varric had a room in the same wing of Skyhold where Marehis claimed one, off overlooking the gardens, but the Dwarf took to hanging around the Great Hall, by the fire, they got him a desk and chairs and he could be warm and have a place to write…and be in a good spot to catch all the whispers and rumors of Skyhold, get some nice material for his writing. Though he was doing an awful lot of letter writing it seemed, apparently he had a friend who might be able to help them with Corypheus! Cassandra had seemed more suspicious than relieved to hear that, but as far as Ellie was concerned—any friend of Varric’s was a friend of hers!

Oh! Places! Thom wanted to stay in the stables of all places though, but it seemed like he
was warm enough out there—Ellie checked! She’d been worried he’d freeze his butt off, but nope, he had a cozy little set up, and he could have some space, he was a big introvert at heart—liked being with the Chargers, they were great friends just, he needed time to decompress and be by himself—so the stables gave him that. And he had space to really get some woodworking done—Varric made the yuckiest joke about that blah, but hey, as long as he wasn’t doing it in front of the horses or stable hands…he could knock himself out.

The Chargers set up camp near the Tavern, of course, the Iron Bull was almost always in there when he could, had a little chair he’d squeeze into—Ellie asked if he wanted a bigger chair, because they’d get him one but he said he was fine…comfortable enough and it apparently emphasized his bigness? She…she wasn’t going to question that. Whatever floats his boat. Cole was all over the place, working hard to help, but he liked to stay in the Tavern—not on the first floor like Ellie thought he might, because that’s where Maryden would be, but she was still in Orlais so maybe that would change. For now, the Spirit took to staying on the tippy top floor of the Tavern, being up high really suited him for some reason, and he was happy and comfortable up there he said…Ellie still got him some pillows and blankets for his corner and a little candle in case it was too dark.

It…it kind of made Ellie sad, when she and Sera realized there was this great spot in the Tavern, second floor with a big window and window seat, and Cabot said Sera was free to use it—it’d keep people from wandering in there drunk and falling out the window or something, discourage people from finding privacy in the Tavern to get up to something other than drinking and paying their tab…especially since if you really were hard up for coin, you could always slip in here, get on the roof, and it was a safe enough drop down for most.

“Oh Inky! Come here,” Sera said, when she was showing the place to Ellie. She waved her over for a hug, squeezing her tight, “It’s nothing against bunking with you Ink, friggin it’s the best—and we can have sleep overs ‘n pish all the time! Whenever you want—your place when you find a room of your own, and you’re always welcome to come cuddle with me here! It’s just nice having your own space.”

“You’re not um, still mad at me or anything because of Haven?”

“Of course not! I didn’t like you being so danger-y but that was real brave Ink. This doesn’t have anything to do with you in a bad way, honest. Just…even though the Breach is gone, there’s still gonna be a lot on you, you know?” was there? Traveling around and sealing Rifts would be the same work she was doing before she supposed, but…somehow it didn’t feel quite as significant, without the Breach overhead. “And I wanna be there for you when you need me, but sometimes you’re just gonna want everyone to leave you the frig alone. Maybe with Kremmy-boy?” she teased.

Ellie blushed, hiding her face against Sera’s neck as she hugged her tighter, “That’s not ‘everyone leaving me the frig alone’,” she pointed out.

There wasn’t really anywhere to be alone—she didn’t have a room yet, she wasn’t really sure where she’d set up. For right now she was bunking with the Iron Bull or Lady Josie—the Antivan woman had a hard time sleeping in a new place their first few nights in Skyhold and Ellie’d slept in a bedroll with her, and that turned into sleep overs in her room overlooking the gardens. Cassandra and Cullen let her sleep with them too—because they liked it, and because Solas had invited her to sleep with him and Marehis and that…just wasn’t on right now, she was kind of afraid to Fade dream with him, and she definitely wasn’t in a place of feeling comfortable sleeping in the same bed as him, but Cassandra spoke up and said she and Cullen had already invited Ellie to spend the night with them, but maybe another time.
Which didn’t happen because after a solid week of nonstop work, cleaning, and moving in, well, she didn’t need to share rooms with anyone anymore.

“Eleanor, sweetheart, it’s time to wake up.”

_That is Cassandra, Cole said in the Fade, you should go. Good luck today, Ellie, you deserve it._

_Deserve it?_

Oh, she was awake now. Mmm, it was warm—she didn’t think it would be, because of the hole and everything, but between the blankets, and being literally between Cassandra and Cullen, Anya was laying across her legs, head resting on Cassandra’s hip. They were so toasty and safe, it was just the _best._

“I’m awake, promise,” Ellie mumbled out, rolling over to snuggle against Cassandra some more.

“Are you now?” Cullen asked, amused, and Ellie felt a dip in the bed, oh—his place was still warm, but he hadn’t been in it when she woke up. He was back now, oh! He…how exactly had he gotten it up here? He had a tray with him? There was a ladder? She really hoped Cole helped or something, it couldn’t be safe otherwise. As it was she’d been scared when Cullen hoisted Anya up, holding her on his hip with one arm while he used the other to do the whole climbing thing, but it worked out well enough…she was still nervous about getting Anya back down, but the pup had really wanted to go with them! They needed a puppy elevator! Sera could probably figure something like that out!

Oh, but the trays! The Commander brought breakfast for them! Like! Actual breakfast! Biscuits, eggs, sausage, potatoes—no more emergency stores!

"Gracias, papi!"

"Only the finest breakfast the Inquisition has to offer for my girls," he insisted, dropping a kiss to Ellie’s head as he petted Anya and offered Cassandra a wink.

Cassandra gave a dismissive sound at being considered one of his "girls" but that was all the fuss she made. They dug in and chatted—Anya ate so many eggs! She was such a hungry puppy! She was so much bigger now, she could lay across Cassandra and Ellie’s laps with her legs hanging off the sides, but she’d always be a puppy to Ellie. She used to be just the tiniest!

"Eleanor," Cassandra said as they finished up, Cullen set the tray down on the floor and Anya followed after it, looking to lick their plates clean, "there is to be a ceremony of sorts this morning."

"For Haven?" Ellie asked, somber. Lady Josie had been working on a memorial service, she let Ellie help sometimes, which was…nice in a way, she was glad to be part of paying tribute to those they’d lost.

“That is this afternoon,” Cullen informed her, “however…”

“The memorial service would be complimented nicely if our Inquisitor said a few words, we believe,” Cassandra said, “as we have come to a decision on that front, we will be announcing the Inquisitor this morning—hold a bit of a ceremony in the courtyard for Skyhold to bear witness. But first we shall have our first official War Room meeting, to prepare you.”
“Do I get a sneak peek? Since I’m the Herald of Andraste and all that?” Ellie asked.

“We do wish to discuss the decision with you before a formal announcement is made, certainly,” Cassandra said, “Have you the time?” she asked, tapping at her own wrist.

Oh! “Uh-huh, just a sec,” Ellie said, carefully rolling over Cassandra, kissing the Seeker on the cheek as she bounced from the bed to get to her pack, and dug out her watch, “six fifty…” she squinted, it was just barely past the line “six!”

“We’ve four more minutes Cassandra,” Cullen said, and when she nodded, the Commander waved for Ellie to join them again on the bed they- they had to get going somewhere right? But when she went to them, four arms shot out to whisk her back into bed, nestled between them. Well, if a cuddle session was on her schedule, who was she to complain?

But she got what they meant by ‘four more minutes’—at 7 o’clock sharp, Ellie heard gentle rapping on the door to Cullen’s office, and then the steady *thunk, thunk, thunk* of someone climbing the ladder, but the adults didn’t move to see who it was, so she hoped it was who they were expecting.

Oof! Marehis! The Elf woman just crawled right up the center of the bed and laid on top of Ellie, smiling against Ellie’s cheek before she started peppering it with kisses. “Hmm good morning sweet girl, did you have a pleasant evening? Did you sleep well?”

“I did!”

“Excellent,” Marehis said, “now, you’ve a bit of a day ahead, I’m here to help you get ready, escort you for the day.”

Cullen took Anya and carefully made the climb down out of his loft. Skyhold presented the opportunity to actually wash up a bit, she’d been able to scrub head to toe a few times since they got here, so she was already clean though Marehis decided to indulge in massaging oil into Ellie’s hair—her scalp really, it got so dry in this weather—which was just super relaxing, which was nice —she was a little nervous honestly, about who this Inquisitor would be. She was worried it would be someone entirely new, or someone that…what if they didn’t like her? This would be someone who had power and influence over everyone in the Inquisition—what if she messed up with them and they sent her away? They could actually do that! She knew her friends—her family, would fight something like that but if the Inquisitor says ‘the little apostate brat has to go’ that probably isn’t a gentle suggestion.

Once she and Cassandra were armored up for the day, the Seeker let Ellie help with braiding her hair-crown! And then they were off,

“Eleanor~” Cassandra was already chastising as Ellie climbed down onto the ladder…and proceeded to, as the Seeker feared she might, slide her way down to get to the bottom floor faster.

“Elgar’nan, da’vehnan,” Marehis swore as Ellie giggled. They were such worry warts!

“That looked like spectacular fun—can you show me how to do that?” Cullen was asking.

“Cullen Stanton Rutherford, don’t you *dare* encourage her!” Cassandra snapped as she descended the ladder.

“Me? Encourage my sweet Ellie? I wouldn’t dream of it.”

Marehis was shaking her head as she joined them, and wrapped an arm around Ellie’s
shoulders as they left Cullen’s office to cross the walkway to Solas’s little piece of Skyhold. But he wasn't there when they passed through into the Great Hall, Josie's office...oh! They were making the room at the end of that hall the War Room, cool! It'd been one of the things she hadn't been allowed to help with—there was a door across the hall from Harritt's new forge she wasn't allowed to go into for some reason. There was a table set up...wow, even bigger than the one they'd had in Haven! There wasn't anyone else there save for Lady Josie and Leliana waiting for them, but that was okay, she supposed they wanted to talk to her first before introducing her? Lady Josie usually did give her a run down on guest's likes and dislikes, how best to speak with them and stuff, she supposed that yeah, it would make sense to do the same before she meets their future Inquisitor.

The…their chosen candidate for Inquisitor’s likes were chocolate, puppies, hugs, and words that start with q-u. Their dislikes were brussels sprouts, spiders, secrets, and words with confusing silent letters in them. And you could talk to her just about anyway you want as long as you’re being honest.

“M-me?” she asked. That…that was definitely a sign she wasn’t meant to be Inquisitor—that wasn’t a very good question at all, and questions—inquiring—was like, the whole job wasn’t it?

“Yes, Eleanor,” Cassandra said. Cassandra. Who was she and what had she done with her overprotective mami that didn't even want her sliding too fast down a ladder? Did she have a fever? What was happening?!

“Ellie,” Leliana spoke up, “what we need out of an Inquisitor is a face for the Inquisition, someone reliable, who can lead us, who people can look to and find purpose for the cause we serve. And ultimately? That person has to be able to do what is necessary for the Inquisition as a whole—and you’ve more than proven yourself in that regard.”

“I…I have?”

“Absolutely. When it came to the security of our members in Haven, when you realized they could indeed be saved if only with your sacrifice, you did not hesitate to do so,” Leliana said, “our understanding from Cole is you saw obstacles in your way—our thoughts and feelings on the matter, that we would have stopped you if we’d known your true plan—and you figured out a way around them, did what you needed to do, to get your people—your people—out and safely away, and having the presence of mind to think steps ahead of the enemy—what if the Elder One had given chase? We do not know still if he’s traversing some treacherous mountain path trying to go around to where we came out when we went through the mountains—because you sealed our escape route behind us. And even when you did not know if you would reach the safety of our camp, you did all you could to ensure we would have the name of our enemy.”

“You are fair, and loyal, and you accept guidance from your betters,” Lady Josie said, “and you are an encouragement—a leader.”

“You’re all really okay with this?” Ellie asked, looking to Cassandra.

"Make no mistake Eleanor, I still...this is not something I would have ever dreamed I would ask of you," Cassandra assured, "but I have prayed tirelessly, endlessly, for the Maker to provide for us in this regard, and again you are the one He has sent."

"You think so?"

"We have exhausted every avenue, but none seem...they all have their complications, their pitfalls, the could not serve this Inquisition without their political ties restricting our progress, and
at the end of the day...there are none we can be certain of, who would serve as you have."
Cassandra was quiet for a moment and then, "Eleanor, are you aware Cole reports to Leliana?"

The idea hadn't ever really crossed her mind, Cole reporting to anyone. She shook her head 'no'.

"Indeed. We often lost track of you during our travels, when we made camp for the evening—we believed it to be something in the vein of that evening you took time to rest before dinner, that you were merely seeking seclusion to save face while still recovering after Haven. But you were not. You spent your day leading us forward, with all the hope and encouragement—we hadn’t any solid evidence Skyhold was truly here, and if it was, would it truly serve us? Such unsteady promises are hard to make with a brave face, but you did it, you made people believe, and then you delivered. And when you weren’t doing that, you were bolstering that work by seeking to meet the needs of those in your ‘hundreds-strong’ party. You prayed with people, offered forgiveness to those who wronged you because they needed it, and you…you considered others in all things, even when it came to your own health, chose not to eat when a great many of your people went without, and when you did, you did so only when you knew there were none wanting in your camp. You chose to endure ailment that could have wholly been avoided in you, for the sake of another, an act of love that…as I have been allowed to know you, Eleanor, I am certain you would have done regardless of personal connection."

Regardless? Oh! Of course! She would—she wouldn’t let anyone in that situation go without something she could give them access to.

And then Cullen sighed, seemed very contemplative for a moment, Ellie…Ellie was pretty sure she’d start crying if they kept on like this…sounding so proud of her, and confident in this crazy decision.

"I wanted to make you Inquisitor ages ago just to spite Roderick," Cullen shrugged.

"We do have another we can fall back on, Eleanor, if you truly cannot perceive yourself in this role. But it is not unlike what you have already been doing for the Inquisition—you will be representing us to foreign dignitaries, helping as we mend ties between the Mages and Templars, and assisting us in our pursuit of the Elder One," Cassandra said, "and in addition…we have several prisoners now, that we have not been able to give trial as we have no Inquisitor. You would be the one to decide their fates. As you have been at the center of the problems they’ve caused, seen first hand the fullness of their crimes, your insight would be invaluable to an Inquisitor deciding their punishment."

That…had actually been a worry for her. That they’d bring in an Inquisitor they would make sit down with Ellie to listen to her input, only to conflict or watch them disregard everything she had to say just to do whatever suited them or their agenda over that of the Inquisition's.

"Ellie? Sweetheart, you don't." Cullen was soothing, quick to pull her in for a hug, Marehis and Cassandra laid hands on her shoulders as she started to cry, she couldn't help it!

"I-I'm okay! I want to do it, if you still want me after this," she sniffled, "I was so scared! I...I was really really worried about what might happen if I sealed the Breach and all the Rifts closed with it. And then w-we found out there's still R-Rifts and- I know that makes me a horrible person- b-but I was afraid you wouldn't need me anymore a-and I'd have to leave if I didn't work for you- or i-if I messed up with a new Inquisitor they m-might-"

"Eleanor," Cassandra chastised, "you are not a horrible person, and...oh dear girl, do not accept this job if you're only doing so for the security it brings in that regard."
"We would not have sent you away, child," Leliana rasped out, looking mildly horrified at Ellie's upset, "Eleanor, you're not invaluable merely so long as there are Rifts to seal-"

"I know—I can cook and I can clean and I can fight and I know healing things and I have like, I dunno, a bunch of the Chant memorized, and I can read, and write and stuff now, I'm not the best but I could help with- I dunno, Chantry things? There's just lots of stuff I can do!"

"You would not have had to resort to going from Herald of Andraste to being a chambermaid, Eleanor," Lady Josie spoke up, "what Leliana means is, while we certainly appreciate you would wish to earn your keep...we would not merely have sought to terminate your relationship with the Inquisition the moment your Mark no longer was of use."

"Eleanor, we..." Cassandra seemed to steel herself and then she cleared her throat and said, "We are a family. You will always have a home with us, no matter the circumstance."

"She is right, da'vehnan," Marehis said, "If the Inquisition disbanded tomorrow, you would be free to go on your own way, but you would also be more than welcome to go with whoever you choose to, any time you choose to."

"If you choose me, we will get another puppy," Cullen stage whispered his attempt to bribe her before he kissed the top of her head when she giggled. He was such a nut!...Anya might like having a friend though? Someday, one puppy was enough for right now. They'd talk.

Ellie smiled as she pulled away, almost wiped at her eyes with the back of her hands but Lady Josie offered her a handkerchief. "Thanks," she said, cleaning up the mess she'd made of herself but she...it made sense, when they said it out loud, she just...this was new territory, people who she could rely on like that, for permanent. "Um...am I out of the running for Inquisitor?"

"Certainly not," Leliana said, "you are in the privacy of a meeting with your advisors—you've seen us all work up in to varying states of anger and distress in the War Room. You were not here for the meeting sweet Josie threw her clipboard at Cullen's head."

"It slipped," Lady Josie insisted, red faced.

"Right upside the back of my head," Cullen chortled.

"You are a young person, with quite the complex situation...too, I understand your monthly is still at hand?" Leliana asked, and Ellie nodded, not wanting to voice the lie—until she got a chance to sit down and talk with Marehis in private, she was 'having her monthly' indefinitely, forever, she was sure she could get a note from Adan and everything that says so. "We did not realize these were worries for you until you voiced them, Eleanor," Leliana said, "you feel better about them now, yes? You are not to accept this position merely out of fear of being cast aside."

"I'm not—accepting out of that, I mean. It's...scary, but I want to do it. Um...you can fire me if I'm really bad at it, right?"

"There will be a learning curve I'm certain," Cassandra allowed, "but we've every confidence in you, Eleanor. If you truly are 'bad at it', yes, we will have a discussion and work to set the situation to rights."

Ellie nodded. "Alright. I'll do it."

"Excellent!" Lady Josie enthused, oh gosh was she bouncing?

"We must settle her contract and make the announcement first, Josie. Then you can have
"your fun," Leliana assured the Antivan woman.

"Of course, yes, just, here-

Ellie turned to look as the old door to their new war room was...pushed open with force that would have sent their old War Room door crashing into the wall, but as it stood, this door was bigger and old, it creaked on its hinges and slowly came to an anti-climactic stop to reveal a sorely disappointed Varric.

"Can someone grease this thing up and let me try again?" the Dwarf complained, "This entrance blows."

"It is a highlight of my day," Cassandra said, amused, "when I am on my deathbed, I will look back on this moment and savor it."

"Glad it puts a smile on your heart there Seeker. How you feelin'? Having a good day?"

"I am well," the woman drawled, almost sounding annoyed with him, "as are we all. This is indeed a great day, Eleanor has agreed to be our Inquisitor, as I'm sure you're aware, thus you are here."

"Yup, Maker bless Cole. Love that kid, maybe gimme a heads up on the door situation next time little buddy," Varric called into the air as if Cole could hear him...he probably could. "You're moving on up huh, Tumbles? Or is it 'Inquisitor Tumbles' now?"

"I like it," Ellie teased, "it'll strike fear into the heart of the Elder One when he hears Inquisitor Tumbles is coming after him," she looked to her Advisors, "that's part of the job right? Going after that jerk."

"Certainly," Leliana nodded.

"Good!"

"You are truly eager to face him, da'vehnan?" Marehis worried.

"You bet!" Ellie informed her...serious, but she went for jovial, punching her unmarked hand to her Marked palm, "I wanna climb up on the Iron Bull's shoulders, and punch him in his stupid Darkspawn face!"

"You'll do no such thing. Unless you want me to have a heart attack," Cullen insisted, and then he realized, "—is that why you two don't like Ellie sliding down ladders?"

"Yes!" Cassandra and Marehis groused.

"Oh good heavens—Eleanor, no sliding down ladders in front of your mothers! You give them an awful fright."

The implications of 'in front of your mothers' earned him bemused glares from Cassandra and Marehis, and was likely why Varric snorted as he came and laid out the parchment he had in hand on the War table.

"Alright kid, this is just an addendum—an add-on to your contract with the Inquisition that gives you your new rank, updates your job description, little boost to your hazard pay because of stupid Darkspawn face. Still managed to get you weekends off, amnnnd a sweet fluffy allowance for your uh wardrobe needs."
Ellie gasped excitedly, looking to Lady Josie, "Did you get a chance to look over Mister Aclassi's designs?" she still couldn't believe he'd done them on the road! Ellie had literally flipped over backward—she'd been sitting when mail came during lunch and she had all of two seconds to register it was something to keep out of view of the Tevinter man sitting right beside her, so she'd thrown herself back out of her seat, tucking the envelope close to her chest as she did a little backward somersault to roll over her head and onto her feet before announcing she needed a 'private minute’ and raced away put eyes on what the elder Aclassi had sent…admittedly, the backflip was well deserved because,

"For Inquisition staff uniforms?" Lady Josie asked, “I did, and I must say Eleanor...I'm rather excited to see what he does with you, I adore them, I sent them off to a few credible local tailors we have worked with in the past to assist in their production, I thought he might appreciate the sentiment of patronizing them."

"The transport made contact with you guys right? I haven't written him much because I'm afraid Cremisius will see. I feel like we're out of the woods with this, but he still wants it to be a surprise...which reminds me, Varric, would you mind doing me a favor here in a couple days?"

"You got it," Varric assured.

Lady Josie was riffling through her clip board papers just to verify, "Yes, they made contact yesterday, the Blades of Hessarian met them on the beach, hosted them, and saw them safely out of the Storm Coast."

Yes yes yes yes yes!

"Good," Ellie breathed a sigh of relief. Closer. So close!

She was excited. And nervous-scared. Cremisius…hadn’t been pleased the last time she kept something from him. Hopefully he understood about this, and if he was mad…well it would be fine. They’d fought, and gotten over it…and she was pretty sure he’d come around on this.

“Are you ready to sign, Eleanor?” Leliana asked.

Oh! “Of course, thanks Varric for always being my surprise lawyer.”

“You mind if I put that on my resume?” he asked as he handed her a quill.

She read it over first, because Varric had her promise to ‘never ever sign anything ever’ without reading it for herself, first. It really was just a little update, to some of the things that had been contingent on their staying in Haven too—now it said she was to be provided housing in Skyhold, weekends off when she was here, cool!

So she signed. And then it was time for the announcement. Like. A big one.

When they first said there would be an announcement of the new Inquisitor, she thought, cool, there’ll be a big get together of everyone and someone will be proclaimed Inquisitor. But then they said it was just going to be her, so she kind of thought, it was something they’d just put in a bulletin or something, mixed in with Tavern and dining hall menues, ‘hey, you know that Herald of Andraste kid? She’s Inquisitor now, surprise!’.

But nope. Nope nope. Leliana left them literally to go ‘get in position’ and she was very afraid of that phrasing. What position? Why were there positions? What was happening?!

“Do not look so very worried Eleanor,” Cassandra said as she walked with her arm wrapped
around Ellie’s shoulders, down the Great Hall, “it is merely ceremony, it would be done with any
who was appointed Inquisitor. You will merely go to Leliana—we will all be with you—and be
bestowed with a weapon with which you will serve the Inquisition, after which you will be
announced as Inquisitor and say a few words acknowledging that. That you are honored, perhaps a
mission statement if you are so inclined. Blacksmith Harritt is rather pleased with his work and
sends his regards.”

That sneak! “He didn’t say anything about any of this when I checked on him the other
day!” he’d been very excited about his new set up and grateful again, that she got him into his old
cabin—he’d been able to rescue a family hammer!

“He likely did not realize its purpose outside of replacing weaponry for you—traditionally,
the Inquisitor is presented with a sword,” Cassandra sounded…the sort of amused she did when
Ellie was in for what the Seeker hoped was a pleasant surprised.

Cassandra let go of her, and fell back to flank her with Cullen and Lady Josie, Marehis
dropping a quick kiss to Ellie’s hair before breaking off, saying she’d be near if she needed her and
set off for…dunno, somewhere she needed to cut through the library tower to get to. And then
there were guards waiting at the doors to the Great Hall, throwing them open when Cassandra
 cleared her throat—Ellie could hear the sound of Leliana’s voice calling out to be heard, but the
words were muffled through the door, and then…

Oh gosh. Everyone was in the courtyard below. Everyone—all of Skyhold was gathered to
fill every tier, and when she looked up she saw the Chargers lined up high on a battlement over the
gate…which was likely a security position but um, it was also nice to see the Iron Bull…and
Cremisius, the Tevinter was grinning like mad and offered her a thumbs-up.

She’s got this.

This situation…and a new weapon.

She’d keep better track of this one. She’d try to, anyway.

Leliana stood down on the platform where the stairs then turned down to meet the ground
level. Ellie was so nervous her limbs sort of felt numb, and she was pretty sure it was some sort of
divine intervention that kept her from tripping, but she made it to Leliana, who waited patiently,
presenting Ellie…with a very pretty, brand new staff, long and silvery, the head of which shaped
the Inquisition’s sigil. It matched her tattoo!

Oh gosh and her magic really liked it, wow! Could she go fight Corypheus now? She was
gonna go fight him.

She would. Someday, they knew who he was now, and they’d find him, and they’d stop
him, together.

“I am honored to represent the Inquisition,” she said, resting the butt of the staff on the
stone underfoot. “The Inquisition—and everyone in it, we are not only Mages. We are Soldiers and
Rogues and Templars—we are the stable hand, and the kitchenmaid, the blacksmith, the horse
master. We are our scouts, and our raw recruits, we are our veterans, and we are those we lost in
Haven. Maker guard their souls and give them peace—may our Dalish brothers and sisters be safe
from the tricks of Fen’Harel and find blessing with Elgar’nan beyond the veil. Those we lost died
bravely, and we will honor them. Corypheus must be stopped—too many have been lost to his
crimes, at the Conclave, in Haven, in Redcliffe, and Therinfal Redoubt. We know his name, and
we know what he wants. We will find him, and we will stop him, reclaim justice for the Divine
and her people, for our people. And we will do that together!"

The Iron Bull made a motion—‘big finish’ in exaggerated sign as everyone hollered and cheered and the Qunari raised a fist overhead, so, she guessed she was supposed to top it off. She raised her staff high and…oh Maker, there was something…affirming, relieving. A Mage standing high, raising a staff, the action only spawning further cheers and encouragement—not cries of fear or anger.

Cassandra was announcing when it would be time for the service for Haven, Ellie felt light headed as Cullen and Josie were whisking her away, back into the Great Hall, an exit or something she supposed? Her staff came holstered and she slung the strap over her shoulder just before- Oh, nice! Cullen was sweeping her up in a hug the moment they crossed the threshold. Oh!

He wasn't planning on putting her down! He'd hoisted her up against his chest, her chin on his shoulder while he kept going his merry way down the hall, the Advisors, Cassandra rushing to catch up, Marehis came running back. "That was incredible Ellie!" Cullen said, "You did so well!"

She felt like a rambling mess at the time, so, cool!

"It was excellent Da'vehn'an!"

"You were wonderful, my lady," Josie agreed, "Cullen do slow down, I am in heels and I will beat you with my clipboard if you do not let me have my fun."

Cullen slowed it way on down and let Lady Josie get ahead of them as he just...kept carrying Ellie down the hall, it was very snuggly so she wasn't complaining!

Oh. Oh Maker.

It was about to be very snuggly. Lady Josie led them to the wing of Skyhold she hadn't been allowed to set foot in since they arrived. There was a creaky old corridor that circled around, stairs, a platform, more stairs—should Cullen maybe put her down? This was a lot of stairs! Oof! He did put her down when they got to the door, and Lady Josie looked like she was about to bust out of her skin with excitement as she stood with her hand on the door handle, and Cullen put his hands over her eyes, "I promise not to let you trip or walk into anything," he said, sounding amused and so...gosh everyone was excited! Even Leliana seemed eager, following quietly behind them all.

"There are stairs," Cullen warned, "up up up."

She could hear giggling echoing from somewhere, Anya letting out a few barks—Ellie wondered where she'd gotten off to!—as they trotted up the steps, and then Cullen was moving, for her to turn left when they got to what felt like the top.

"Alright, are you ready my lady?" Lady Josie asked, shushing when there were more giggles, and then, "these are your quarters."

Cullen removed his hands and she opened her eyes and- and-

"Surprise!" Sera and Lace announced from the bed—they threw the last of the pillows they'd apparently been putting in place by the headboard and jumped into the bed, big smiles on thier faces and Anya was already making herself comfortable, laying on the foot of the bed, panting excitedly.

She...had a room. Like. Like a huge, massive room she had no idea how to even begin to process having. "Santa mierda, que Maker me ayude." Holy shit. Maker help me.
Josie gasped, and then giggled, "Te gusta, mijita?" Did she like it? Was that even a matter of question?

"The frig is all that?" Sera wanted to know.

Whoops, they broke her brain. She was sort of mentally screaming about all of this in Antivan. "It's beautiful!" she assured in Trade so all the adults could understand.

She...there was no way she deserved all of this. It was incredible, her bed was ginormous and there was so much light! And the fireplace was amazing and there was a huge couch, and Maker she had book cases! With like! Books on them! She'd need a ladder to reach- oh! There was a ladder! And a huge desk that had to weigh a ton.

"Oh, I'm so glad you like it!" Lady Josie enthused, oh gosh she must have done so much work for this!

"Thank you so much!" Ellie enthused as she hugged Lady Josie.

"Of course, oh it was such a pleasure to arrange!" she assured as they pulled apart.

"You like it, Inky?" Sera asked as she bounced off the bed and came to Ellie, "I told you you needed your own space."

"Sera! You're ridiculous! And we are having so many sleep overs—you're absolutely positive you don't want to bunk with me?"

"I'm good where I am, but thanks for wanting to share," Sera said, pulling her into a squeezy hug. "Lace 'n me are gonna go get drinky before Cabot has to close*. You want anything from the Tavern? You can come with if you like."

Ellie smiled, shaking her head, "I'm good, but thanks for asking, have fun okay?"

"Good seeing you honey," Lace said and Ellie leaned a little so the Dwarf woman could kiss her on the cheek before heading out with Sera.

"What would you care to do now, da'len?" Marehis asked her.

She...was actually totally wiped, now, this was...a lot of change. Skyhold was change period, on top of everything else? Her morning felt like it'd been stretched into days—absolutely incredible, humbling days but still, days. "Actually, if there isn't anything I need to see to, I think I'll lay down for a bit?"

"I asked Sera and Miss Lace to see to it your pack and all of your things were moved into your quarters," Cassandra said as she came close and rested the back of her hand against Ellie's forehead, before using that hand to smooth her hair back, "get some good rest, you have done well today," she said intoning, "you deserve this, enjoy it."

"I've a bit of work I need to get to, but I'll see you later," Cullen said as he came around to be in front of her, "I'm so proud of you sweetheart."

Oh gosh. "Thanks, you guys, for everything."

The Advisors and Cassandra took their leave, Ellie waving bye to them.

She was feeling...was happy-sad a thing? She was so incredibly blessed, happy for all the
crazy amazing opportunities she'd been given, and her speech thing had gone okay right? And she had a room now! But her heart still hurt after Haven, and she...

She kind of felt empty, like she was going numb underneath it all, but that didn't make any sense.

"Da'vehn'an?"

Ellie startled a bit when Marehis came and rested a hand on her arm, looking at her as if the Elf woman were a little concerned, "Is something the matter?"

"Just tired, I really am beat." She just needed a nap! Processing time! Marehis helped her out of her armor and into her sleep clothes, and then she laid down with her in the bed, Anya climbing across the bed to curl up in front of Ellie while Marehis held her from behind, gently playing with a lock of Ellie's hair, it was getting a little longer now, just springing out a bit more from her head in actual little curls instead of the kind-of-curly fluff she'd had.

"Is everything alright, da'len?" Marehis asked quietly once they were settled. "With us, I mean."

With...with them? What? Oh. "Of course, mami, why?"

"I...perhaps it is nonsense, but it was...I had some difficulty keeping up with you as we traveled, and I got the feeling you might be avoiding me. A feeling—you've not been unkind or cold just distant, but I know you were busy. I just wanted to make certain everything was okay."

Oh. She had been avoiding Marehis, actually. Not because of her though! Just! She couldn't stand not speaking to Marehis about things she couldn't talk to her about until they were alone and...oh gosh, what was she thinking? Napping could wait, this was the first time since Haven that they'd been entirely alone.

"Solas isn't stopping in or anything is he?" she checked, she was half tempted to press the bond and see if she could figure out where he was but she was scared she'd get caught peeking.

"He just got some new books in he was planning on getting into today, I can send for him of course, do you wan-"

"No! I-," Ellie sat up, oh gosh, she didn't know where to start.

"Da'vehn'an?" Marehis asked carefully as she sat up with her, "What is it?"

Okay, she wasn't super sure where to start...though maybe it should be with a confession, she felt so so bad about it. "My courses ended our second day in Skyhold."

"...alright," Marehis said, uncertain. "You...are you experiencing something we should seek Adan over? Or would you prefer speaking with Miss Elan?" Elan...oh yeah! She was head Apothecary now, and Adan was super chipper about it, he'd never really planned on being head Healer for the Inquisition in the first place, his impromptu promotion had blindsided him and now he can do work he loves without all the stress and bureaucracy of being super in charge. "You've been cramping still, having head aches since then."

"I was lying, I'm really sorry. But it was so Solas would stay out of the bond, it's sort of why I stayed the night with Cassandra and Cullen instead of um, you guys. He's the one I've been avoiding, not you...well you a little bit because it wasn't safe to talk to you until we could do that, you know," she gestured to the room, "alone. Except for Anya. But we've got puppy/mama
Marehis looked very grave. "...has Solas done something?"

"Maybe. I'm...I'm scared Solas might not be who he says he is."

Marehis was very quiet as Ellie carefully walked her through the best she could. The Iron Bull's and Cremisius's suspicion, Cassandra's, the things they'd seen and heard. The things that made Ellie suspicious, what he'd said about Corypheus and his Orb—well before Ellie had even been capable of talking about what happened in Haven—and his lying to keep Marehis from following them. That he had all this weird convenient knowledge about everything going on, and zero explanation for it that actually held up and...where the hell was this 'village' he grew up in, Ellie wanted longitude and latitude on that! Get her a map!

That wasn't the most serious thing but seriously, did Marehis even know anything about his past?

...apparently not. But she did have some weird stories he'd given her. About a 'schism' he claimed to have witnessed when he was growing up. He said there were Elves that believed in the gods, while others in his village that believed the gods were merely people, from a time when Elves were all magical and immortal. They did great things in their lives, and were proclaimed gods because of their power that outshone the rest of the Elves. Until there was a civil war of sorts among them—Elgar'nan and the others saw to the death of Mythal, murdered her, and Fen'Harel, the Dread Wolf, had avenged her, seen to it these Mages couldn't hurt his people further, lead them into further devastation. He punished them by creating the Veil—the Fade, and locking them away forever, and with that action, cut off a great many Elves from their natural born magic, and made them mortal.

"That...that's a lot of deflection to the question, 'where did you grow up'," Ellie said. Maker that...was all so wild but, "C...Corypheus, he said something about there being no gods. That he'd seen their thrones stood empty—I thought he meant all gods like the Maker, b-but-" she gasped, reaching to clutch Marehis's forearm as she promised, "I swear I'm not saying I doubt Dalish gods exist, oh my gosh, I'm sorry! Just! It's weird Solas has stories like that and he's got all this insight to things like the time travel amulet Corypheus gave Alexius, and the Orb. I mean, it sounds now like they both believe the same things about the Dalish gods."

"It was merely stories, lore, da'len, Solas..." Marehis seemed to be thinking about it, like she wasn't certain if they'd ever properly had a conversation about his personal beliefs.

"I offered to pray with him once, because he was worried about you, back when he couldn't say as much? While you were away after the Butler/Farrier thing. And Solas said he doesn't bow to the Dalish gods."

Ellie's heart leapt into her throat, and Marehis startled, pushing Ellie behind her as she drew a blade, when a voice sounded.

"He does not have to, Ellie," oh gosh Cole...it was just Cole, perched on the foot board of her bed.

"Elgar'nan child, you gave us a fright! What are you doing here?" Marehis asked.

"I heard your hurting, you and Ellie because you are afraid you cannot trust Solas."

"What do you mean?" Ellie asked when she could find her voice. "I mean about what you
"He does not have to, because he is one. Ellie," Cole said simply as if it were common knowledge*. "Solas is Fen'Harel."

Chapter End Notes

Dalish:
Halani=help

*Switch around with the song--one part feels, one part I need Cullen's dramatic ass singing while still maintaining that with smol Inquisitor, ain't nobody singing when she wakes up for real, they wanna pounce with "OUR BBY PLEASE VERIFY YOU'RE ALIVE, WHAT CAN WE DO? HOW CAN WE HEAL YOU?"

*Lanterns= I think they lead you to Skyhold? You see them a few different times in the cut scene journey. Looking at maps, measuring, math, I figure it's about 70 miles from Haven proper, to Skyhold. After reading up on foot travel and averaging times it takes to travel certain distances, 5ish days seems about right, with them being down to 65 when they start heading for Skyhold, they have to average 13 a day to get there, so, having a few varying days of 'we knocked out 16 miles' and some 'we have gone 12 miles and now we must go back for snacks' days, it works out.

*A Human Inquisitor is the only Human in canon we see who can use Rift Magic. It doesn't come up as a classification we see in any other non-Elf mage, even the person who can train you in Rift Magic when you play Mage Inquisitor during "Specializations for the Inquisitor," is an Elf woman 'Your Trainer'.

*Flissa's fate=if you save Flissa from Haven, when you get to Skyhold Cabot is running the Tavern, and you can find Flissa running around Skyhold. If you talk to her she thanks you for saving her, and her only dialog options after that is to tell you she's still serving the Inquisition, just in a different way now and then she giggles, which I swear on my life I thought she was implying that she was serving sexually...and then actually looking it up and reading about it, she's serving in a Chantry role and wants to be a Sister. So. Thanks for the context, bioware!

*Nourish yourselves my duderuses with uteruses. Ya need to up your caloric intake during ya period by at least 200-500 more calories a day when the flood is upon you. Break out the chocolate or your snack of choice, and be blessed.

*So, every chapter I publish, the very next moment after initially publishing I have a visceral moment of "OH MY GOSH I FORGOT _____ IDEA/PLOT POINT or REALIZING _____ IS A CONFLICT" and last chapter's was--I had Cassandra and Cullen give Ellie a sword bc Herald ends up with one despite their class in the cut scene with Corypheus, and instead of being like "oh! and here I have a sword!" I was like "it can be a nice gift, here are some feels"...however, I forgot that you get a sword. for being. Inquisitor. It's part. of. the. initiation. gah. But coincidentally, I got her dropping her staff left right and center, so I thought it'd be a nice switch up and a major statement, to bestow a Mage Inquisitor with a Staff. SO, it kind of worked out.
*If you talk to Cabot, one of the first dialog things he has is saying he'll be closed soon for everyone taking a breather to remember the loss of Haven. Also he's dating Elan Ve'mal (head Apothecary once in Skyhold)? Like? It's so cute and I love their little background romances?

*In the Twitterverse, writers of Dragon Age have confirmed that they believe Cole knew Solas's identity and purposes the entire time, this is why in 'Return to Haven/First Day Eve' there is no 'Ellie thoughts' on Solas, because Solas refuses to interact with Cole until he can speak with him privately, get initial impressions out of the way for fear Cole might reveal who he is, and fathom out how to move forward with him. I set the stage so he'd be inclined to share that information with the rest of the class. This is one plot point I'm a little nerve-wracked over exploring—I was always planning a bit of an early reveal, but I'd always thought to do it more slow burn than this. I decided last minute to just go full blown 'whats up, what's good, you've been banging the Dread Wolf, woof' and I'm screaming but I'm going with it. Pray for me. Just not to the Dalish gods, thanks.
Settling and Secrets

Chapter Summary

Going backward to go forward. Starting shortly after finding Skyhold, following the point of view of Ellie's Advisors and Companions as they settle in Haven, and a certain tailor arrives.

Oh. And they discover Fen'Harel. But minor details.

Chapter Notes

Thank you so much for your patience! I promised this part up a day or so ago. I got struck by the actual Blight! Not really, but I've been sick and I had some major changes to make to this part due to last minute decisions in the last one, so I'm sorry for the wait, but it's here! This covers all the in game conversations Inquisitor has with their companions and advisors, with twists and changes due to the content of this fic/young!Inquisitor. Thanks for reading! <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Josephine's eyes ached as she endeavored to read the same paragraph over again for the fifth time...the sixth? No, it was the fifth. She thought. She'd written the impertinent thing! But proofreading was vital, it would not do to send something in need of further scrutiny-

Of course, she could always take a break. Such opportunity rarely presented itself, but,

"Hola Lady Josie, que pasa?" Eleanor chirped sweetly as she came around the desk to hop and seat herself with her bottom resting in the empty space to Josephine's right.

"What's up indeed. "It would seem you are, my lady," both being up on her desk and physically upright. "How are you feeling?" they had been in Skyhold not even a week and the girl had been helping nonstop, but Leliana had been by earlier, complained of her worry for Eleanor. Oh, the Spymaster did not like at all how much easier it was to so openly care for their young Herald, but she did, and Josephine had known she would! Oh, her heart had absolutely melted the very moment she laid eyes on the girl after she joined the Inquisition, she was just a child! Leliana had endured much she did not always share with Josephine, things that hardened her resolve...but there were things that had softened her as well over the years, and Eleanor was all soft. Apparently she'd been assisting in clearing rubble and mess from the Rookery, so Leliana could properly set up. However, this was the fourth thing she'd tasked herself to do before noon on the Herald of Andraste's self-imposed schedule to help make progress in Hav- Skyhold. Josephine had to remind herself. As it was, the girl had been visibly weary, pitched on her feet when she rose to them after hefting a heavy box up the circular flights of stairs to the top of the tower and setting it down where Leliana instructed, and the Spymaster had ordered her to lie down. As she hadn't a room for herself yet, Leliana had seen her to Josephine's room, she claimed she came by to inform her as much since it was her room after all. Josephine had merely jested, asking if Leliana had sent her off
with a story of Schmoooples®, only for the Spymaster to appear wholly gobsmacked, stumbling over her words as she seemed to be trying to deny such a fact while asking how Josephine knew.

"Oh, loads better now, thanks so much for letting me crash in your room. How about you? Everything um, okay?"

"Certainly Eleanor, why do you ask?"

"Just checking in I guess. You're always holed up in your office so I worry, you're taking breaks right?" She...she currently was, was she not? Speaking with Eleanor as opposed to rereading her missive for a sixth...or would it be seventh time? There was something wrong with it she knew, she just couldn't find it. "I mean gosh, there's so much you're doing right now, if there's any way I can help, let me know, okay?"

Oh, bless her heart, it was so very sweet of her to offer but Josephine's work needed done in her own hand, to be credible. Too, it also worked for her peace of mind that it was done, and done correctly for that matter. She was certainly not mentioning Lady Forsythia's...colorful existence to the young lady. The woman was mean spirited, strong willed, and extreme, but a necessary ally for the Inquisition Lady Josephine hoped Eleanor never had to entertain. As it stood, the Ambassador had barely convinced the woman not to set soldiers after them for...ugh, it was a terrible misstep, Josephine knew better, she should have been better prepared, known of the feud between the Lady and her brother before she reached out in interest to strike an alliance with him as well. She was hardly going to bring up such a threat to the young girl after Haven, so she merely said, "I have everything well at hand, although I will admit it is times like these I miss my staff from the Antivan Embassy. We would often discuss the day's visitors and how best to set about the task at hand, discuss tactics and the like."

Eleanor brightened at that, oh it was precious to see, and she was glad she'd chosen to exclude any mention of her current task. Even more so when the girl said, "We could talk tactics if you want! I'm a good listener!"

Well...that would sort then, wouldn't it? She was rather burned out on her letter writing as it was, and perhaps a change of pace would right that.

The upper battlements surrounding the gardens were vacant, it was a side of their fortress that faced a steep cliff, the air was bracing. While Josephine detested the southern climate, how very cold it was here, the air was the freshest there was she was certain. And too, the chill meant it was that much warmer to walk arm in arm with the young girl as they chatted, discussing matters of the upmost importance.

"...right on the parlor floor, in front of everyone at the soiree! Who does such a thing?"

Eleanor giggled sweetly, "The Duke of Kellington apparently," she said, hugging the Antivan woman's arm more tightly.

She'd gotten rather sidetracked, starting with why she thought the Iron Bull should endeavor to find a shirt to wear around their noble guests had turned into the tale of the Duke of Kellington dropping his pants before all, one warm summer evening. She'd been getting to, "And then there's Cole's lurking. He frightens our guests half to death! Lord Genart still won't return our letters. And Sera, she walks around, I swear, with the same glob of mustard on her armor for who knows how long. Dorian refuses to take anything seriously unless it suits him. And then there's-" Good heavens. The sun had visibly moved overhead as they talked, it was now beginning to set, just how long had she been going on? "I apologize, I've lost track of the time."
"Good! That means we're having fun!" Eleanor enthused, smiling brilliantly.

"You are very kind, mija. You must think me a terrible gossip." Had she been setting a bad example for the girl? She really should be more mindful.

"You aren't gossiping exactly—you're blowing off a little steam while letting me know how we can better help when we have fancy guests, I'm the one who asked you to anyway. And I like talking with you," Eleanor insisted in earnest. Ahh. True, she had asked, but Josephine had forgotten all semblance of decorum, she should not have complained so poorly of the people she worked with. 'Cole doesn't always understand boundaries very well, but he's working on it—it might help if...I know you're busy and you might not be comfortable talking with him, but if you are and you have time, you might want to sit down with him and talk him through the importance of not startling our guests, come up with some rules. He hears hurt and goes for it. But um...I mean if he startles people too badly he can make them forget. So if it does happen again, maybe just let him do his thing, they really don't remember a thing that happened while he was interacting with them, honest, and it doesn't hurt them."

Ahh. Josephine had been there when Cole startled the Lord, began speaking of...personal matters not meant for the Ambassador's ears, and she gave Lord Genart escape. She had not known exactly, how Cole's power worked, but she trusted Eleanor and if the matter could be avoided in future, and she would find time to speak with the young man if that would help.

"Dorian's going to flirt no matter what, but I can talk to him if you like? Sera...I'll try to see if she'll clean up ole' mustard boob but I honestly think she keeps mustard there just in case she needs it."

"There are situations in which one needs such instant access to a small amount of mustard?"

"I find myself in them all the time, s'why I hang out with Sera so much really," she said with all seriousness, such that it took Josephine a second to catch on.

She smiled as laughter bubbled up in her throat. "Very good my lady."

"Don't be so hard on yourself, okay? You have such a hard job and you do so incredibly. You deserve a break every now and again," Eleanor intoned, and then she did take proper look at the time, but perhaps she'd an eye on it because she said, "Thanks so much for letting me hang out with you, but I promised the Iron Bull I'd meet up with him here soon. I'll walk you back though, yeah?"

"I would appreciate it, certainly," she agreed, she did truly wish she'd more time to spend with the girl. But she'd her own duties to get back to. Figure out whatever is the matter with her missive to Lady Forsythia, get it sent, draft the new agreement with Lord Belmont, and see to it the order goes out for the new dining set. And then she really should get back to mama, but she keeps forgetting to write her and-

And dinner, apparently. A member of the kitchen staff was setting down a tray on her desk. Goodness, she'd wholly forgotten it...lunch too it felt like, but when had she sent the order out?

"Your order my lady," the servant said as she dipped a curtsy to them.

And then, "Thanks, Abby!" Eleanor said, "I really appreciate it."
"It wasn't any trouble. Have a blessed day lady Ellie, Lady Montilyet," she said as she took her leave.

"Thank you Eleanor..." Josephine said, it was so very sweet of the girl to think of her. "I understand you've another appointment, but we really should have a meal together sometime soon."

"Totally!" Eleanor agreed, "Just put it on my schedule," she said, offering a little wink before she left the Ambassador's office, "have a great evening, Lady Josie, don't work too hard, kay?"

Hmmmm, whenever the new dining set comes in, Eleanor will be the first guest to eat from it, Josephine decided as she sat down at her desk again, it really was nice how much room her new office had here in Skyhold, they could have a proper set up-

Ahh. *That* was what was wrong with her missive to Lady Forsythia.

It was a bit of misfortune, having to rewrite an entire page to fix a single word, but it was an important one.

*All is well here in Haven, we've settled nicely.*

*All is well here in Skyhold, we've settled nicely.*


“She running late?”

Koslun’s ass this guy worried too much, not so much as a ‘hello’ huh? “She just got here—she’s up at Sera’s getting changed, calm your dick.”

“I haven’t seen Marehis hot on her trail lately,” Krem defended as he dropped into his usual chair, just got in from keeping guard, patrolling the battlements. While everything was still settling Bull lent out his guys to fill in gaps places, Stitches helping the Inquisition's wounded, sick, everyone else taking up slack in the guard. “I mean Leliana still has someone on her right? I know everything’s pretty crazy right now, but-“

“She’s got her big bad boyfriend watching out for her like it’s his job,” Bull said, favoring the guy a little wink as he said, “Oh, and you too.” Got him a snort from the brat. “So I think she’s good. And Marehis is still trailing her, in range to put the smack down on anyone that shows their ass, but yeah, she’s been giving Boss more space than usual.” Killed the kid she hadn’t been able to get the woman alone, so she distanced herself from Marehis in general, which told her minder to give her space it seemed. Bull was almost worried Solas suspected something—guy was always trying to be around when Marehis and Ellie *were* together but...that just checked out as regular behavior he guessed. He might be sketchy as hell, but one of the few, solid, honest facts about Solas What-Ever-the-Fuck his last name is, was he loved Marehis, and despite himself it felt like, he loved Ellie. But there was something out there he might just love more, and that could be dangerous.

“Ready!”

Awe man, but what the hell could that asshole love *more*? Imekari, cute as shit in mercenary armor, came hopping down the tavern stairs like it was a game and she was havin’ loads
of fun. “So,” Ellie asked as she reached them waiting for her at the bottom, “What’re we up to? Why the…er…disguise? This is supposed to disguise me, yeah?”

“Yeah Boss, tonight you’re rolling with me, incognito. We’re just gonna go have a few drinks—you want the water flask, or apple juice?”

She seemed to take it into consideration. “You know what, it’s been one of those days—hit me with the hard stuff.”

“Apple juice it is,” and then smiling to Krem, “Later loser.”

“If this goes stupid, I’m kicking your ass!” Krem said as he rose to his feet, reaching out to take Ellie’s hand and pull her toward him—that was sweet, gave them a second. Guy had a hard time letting the girl out of sight without something—a hand on the shoulder if they really needed to keep it kiddy-friendly, like Mother Giselle, the Maker, and Andraste were watching, but in the middle of the Tavern it bumped up to their usual kiss goodbye. Well. A chill variation of it. Boss-girl was a biter.

Eh, it’d be fine—nothing would go ‘stupid’. No one was gonna get real loose tonight or anything, he was just taking Imekari around to get some face time with the little guys in the Inquisition, the people that keep this whole thing moving forward—their soldiers. Figured it’d do her some good, help keep her grounded…give her good insight for things.

Advisors were eyeballing her for Inquisitor, he knew it, they knew it. Hell, he was on board just as long as Imekari was. Shit, he’d joked about her being Inquisitor before but for her to actually have the job? New danger, new responsibility. Which he was down with, whatever she needed. He’d have her back in the field and uh, he’d already volunteered his services with the Advisors. Part of being Inquisitor was judgement, and if Ellie needed someone put down, she could count on him, the way he sees it, he’ll be lucky if he actually sees anything come of that—Rainier situation was enough to tech him that. If even Ellie thinks death is the only form of punishment that can be called on, chances are she’s right, kid wouldn’t use it to show off the power of her station, if she’s ordering executions it isn’t lightly, and they’re probably the sort of person Bull would be glad to kill.

“So, what’s our top-secret mission all about?” Ellie asked as she left the Tavern with Bull.

“You. Come on, keep it low profile, just listen for a bit,” he said as they approached the little set up a few of the soldiers had—table, short stools to sit on, to just drink at or play cards. These two were just the drinking sort.

Kid had a bit of a weird look on her face like uncertainty…he’d thought this would be right up her alley, getting to know people. Maybe she was feeling shy? She wouldn’t have to talk though, he had a good cover for that.

“Hey, how’s it goin’? I’m Bull, my merc group just joined up. This here’s Grim, she doesn’t talk much,” he introduced, as he and Imekari took a seat to join them, patted her on the back, she snorted quietly and then shrugged and grunted. Hell yeah, get up in that persona Imekari, just sit back and learn some new things about your-

Oh shit, wait, maybe this was about to get stupid, the female soldier put her hand on Imekari’s forearm but then, “…the Qunari is with you?” she asked quietly, eyeing Bull warily and he realized it was a defensive action, she intended to pull the girl behind her for safety if something weird was up with Bull. Wait. Huh maybe he miscalculated, should’ve brought more people along so it didn’t look like a giant Qunari walking around with a little mute human girl. Yup, reflection,
Imekari broke out into giggles. *Giggles.*

“Yup, he is! It’s all good, honest, he’s my friend. The Iron Bull this is Mira and…Tanner right?”

Mira and what now?

“Got it in one,” Tanner assured. “How’s little Anya?”

Fuck him.

“She’s great! Sleepy though—I was going to bring her along but she’s conked out hanging with my friend Sera.”

So. Mira, it turns out, used to work as Guard Captain for a Lady Pendell, and Tanner…is some asshole from ‘near Jader’ and he wasn’t sure if his lesson was shot, or just entirely unnecessary, because fuck him sideways, she knew these guys. Not like they went way back or anything, but she knew their faces, had gotten their names when they were helping with moving into Skyhold, and they knew hers. Which yeah, in hindsight…if she was just another full-grown adult running around in mercenary armor, yeah, no one would question. But uh, yeah, the little Human girl stuck out more distinctly from blending in with her elders.

Bull sighed as they made their way back to the Tavern. “Alright, that was supposed to be…just. I got the ability to know everyone under my command. You don’t exactly have that luxury, but I thought a few familiar faces would help, give things perspective.”

“I love it!” Imekari enthused, bouncing in place like she were excited about something. Oh, “I think we should make this a regular thing! Like once a week when we’re in Skyhold, you and me, we can have dinner or drinks or whatever and try to find new people, hear their stories and perspectives and stuff. If you want, that is.”

Not his usual idea of dinner and drinks to hunt randos, but uh, yeah, with Imekari, that sounded just about right. "You know what kid? That sounds good to me.”

"Oh! I almost forgot—say, if the right tailor was brought to bear, would you consider a shirt? Lady Josie would appreciate it if you'd wear one when she introduces you to noble guests. You arouse and confuse them apparently and there's already been three cases of threatened divorce."

Three huh? "Sure thing boss, whatever she needs." Ambassador worked hard, he wasn't gonna make her job harder.

"Well if that's the case, Dorian keeps either flirting with everyone she brings by the library on tours, or telling them crazy stories. Josie posts schedules for tours and the like..." Wasn't sure what that had to do with him. "Think you could distract him sexually during those times? Your place, obviously, not the library unless we're selling tickets and you keep it tasteful."

..."I think I can handle that."

She smiled at that. "Good," she said with some relief. But then, suddenly worried, because technically she’d given him options. "Wait, which one?" Bull just grinned and kept on walking. "I'm serious, the Iron Bull! Which one?!!"
*While Primaetas Root has been extinct since the Second Blight, studies have shown that dried Red Moss cut from a wandering hill has similarly restorative effects if handled properly. Red Moss has a high level of toxicity in Humans, Elves, and Dwarves, though Qunari metabolize the moss at such a rate it seems to have little effect on their species. Through careful experimentation, we have found an emulsion of Silverite and Elfroot Extract can counteract the fatal toxicity, leaving only the beneficiary elements of Red Moss. Mage fire is-

“Good afternoon, Madam de Fer!”

Goodness, what was the time? Madam de Fer admittedly startled when the girl approached, she quickly closed the text she was poring over, casting subtle heat across the parchment page she’d been taking notes on to dry the ink so she could slip them beneath the text without smudging her progress. She had lost track of the time she realized, laying eyes on the small, ivory clock she kept at her desk, Eleanor was on time, but she’d meant to be better prepared for the girl’s arrival.

“Good afternoon, Eleanor,” Vivienne said as she rose from her desk, hands smoothing along her thighs as she stood to rid the silvery-white material of any wrinkles. Oh, how incredibly precious. They almost matched to an extent. The girl hadn’t much just now in the way of clothing, but her young suitor had apparently ransomed things from the fiery devastation of Haven. Eleanor had chosen to wear the sole dress she owned now, altered to fit by adding a panel of silver to the bottom of the skirt so it fell just past her knees, matching material cuffing her wrists to lengthen her sleeves. Though she’d still a bit more leg showing, wearing those darling ankle boots she’d gotten in Val Royeaux. Oh, Vivienne was itching for an opportunity to whisk the girl off for a bit of shopping, she did hate she’d so narrowly missed the chance in Val Royeaux, but her shopping spree with the likes of the Iron Bull and Varric was amusing enough to hear from dear Dorian.

Ahh, she was admittedly pleased to see the hair combs she’d had gifted the girl for her coming of age, as they were silver, inlaid with sapphires, they matched rather well with her dress, she’d used one to pull back a portion of her hair out of her face…it displayed the scar on her temple, across her lip more predominantly, not a move Madam de Fer would have taken but the girl was beautiful and seemed to be so at ease with the marks that they merely accentuated that, so she was hardly about to say anything that would derail the girl's spirits.

“You look stunning my dear,” Vivienne complimented as she greeted the girl with a hug, she was pleased she had to cross the balcony to do so, that Eleanor had been mindful of her space and stood at the banister near the turn it took to lead you to the library.

“Thanks! You’re always so beautiful!” Eleanor said with such sincerity, “Thank you for inviting me for tea.”

Certainly, she really should have been keeping more careful watch of the time. If she stepped into the library there should be someone around to take their order-

Oh. A servant arrived with a tray, though they seemed timid, perhaps a bit confused. “Madam de Fer? Lady Herald? I was told to bring you this but I…I can’t rightly recall who.”

“Oh, that was probably Cole,” Eleanor said. Ahh. Well, the Spirit was strange but at least he was useful.
“Do set it over there,” Vivienne said, and as she was in the presence of the Herald that expected graciousness even to the lowliest stable hand, she added, “thank you.”

“Of course, Madam,” the servant said, setting the tray down on the small table between the chairs she’d had set up just for such an occasion.

“Please, come take a seat my dear, make yourself comfortable,” Madam de Fer said as she gestured for the girl to do so. Oh. She’d not taken even a moment to tidy up, had she? She did enjoy the convenience of having her office and quarters be one, but this wouldn’t do. Eleanor chose the chair that still had a book upon its seat, a blanket draped over its arm. She had been reading late into the night and taken chill…though she did not recall actually rising to fetch that blanket, and she certainly hadn’t sat down with it.

It was a mild embarrassment, but Eleanor made no fuss, she simply afforded Madam de Fer the opportunity to take a seat in the empty chair while the girl took up the task of neatly folding the blanket and hanging it neatly over the back of the chair before taking up the tome. “An Alchemist’s Guide: A Grim…Grimoire of Philters, Elixirs, and Tonics.”

“A riveting read,” Vivienne assured her drily, as the girl set the book aside so she could take a seat. She’d searched cover to cover for what she eventually found was the extinct Primaetas Root. Dorian, who seemingly took up residence in the library had graciously taken what information she could give him and found her the text she’d been reading all morning.

“Are you working on a potions project?” Eleanor asked with interest as Vivienne began pouring tea.

Nothing that was any of the young ladies business, but, “After a fashion, a niche study I’m currently enamored with.”

“Cool! It’s fun to learn about different little things people don’t know much about—it means there’s more left to explore.”

Exploration would indeed be fun, if Vivienne did not long for something quick and simple that met her urgency. “You may borrow it if it’s sparked interest in you, I’m finished with it for now.”

“Oh, thanks! Did it help you any?”

“It led me to further study. Unfortunately the Primaetas Root has been extinct for quite some time.”

“Oh Ages,” Eleanor sympathized, “but Dorian and I were reading a few days ago…gosh I can’t remember the title, but it’ll come to me—it sounds crazy, but Red Moss is a good substitute it said.”

“Crazy?”

“Because it’s poisonous—there’s an emulsion you can put it through to separate enzymes, create a concentration of the beneficiary ones, while nullifying and reducing away the toxic ones. You have to use magical fire though, since there isn’t really a fuel source that creates natural fire hot enough, plus your heat needs to be spot-on consistent or you risk enzymes melding together again and leaving poison behind or losing the healing properties’ potency. It’s super tricky.”

…ahh. That was how Master Pavus was able to find her book so quickly. She would have
to take note about the fire, that would save her a bit of reading she supposed…though no, it would be irresponsible to rely solely on Eleanor’s memory, still. “Is it?”

“Uh-huh,” Eleanor paused, taking a sip of her tea, “I mean the text says the potion starts degrading the moment it’s exposed to light, but even magical fire burns with light so even if you brew in total darkness it seems like you’re still compromising its integrity from the start.”

She…oh. Well goodness. She’d considered that fact—that she would need to find a windowless room to prepare potion in, and she thought to work by the light of her fire. “You believe fire light would degrade the potion’s properties as sunlight would? I thought it a reference to natural light.”

Eleanor shook her head. “I mean yeah, there’s key differences between sunlight and the light we get from fire but the issue, usually, with a lot of potions ingredients is light itself—exposure to the energy our eyes perceive as light can deteriorate them. Red Moss and Ghouls Beard are similar like that—it mostly grows in the shade and the best is found from caves—it’s the most potent, you know? Because it’s had the least exposure to light of any kind.” Madam de Fer nodded as she handed Eleanor a cup of tea. Yes she had considered that to a point, had planned to instruct her suppliers accordingly, that she only wanted materials derived from dark places. “Thanks. But anyway, this process, you’re basically stripping the Red Moss down to its most basic, most potent form, and that takes away any protective coating it had to defend from light. But it’s what allows the Elf root to sink in and boost the healing properties and nullify the toxic ones so you’re not breathing poison—definitely a potion you want to wear a mask for—and Silverite purifies but it also protects. The Silverite is why it take three days for the potion to completely deteriorate after contact with light, but even with that it still starts to lose potency after…huh, dunno. Ava worked with similar things, and they were perfect until maybe after an hour or so before they start to lose potency.”

“How would she have advised its brewing then?” Vivienne asked, albeit curious.

“Complete and total darkness, but she had a lot of know-how, working blind. I would practice a lot before hand if I had the chance to. Make a base to set your cauldron on, out of ceramic, so the fire can heat it from the inside and remain completely covered, and then your potion could be heated that way. You’d have to practice and get your timing down to a science of how long it takes for everything to get to the right temperature at every single step, how long before the enzymes separate, and then when to divide them, and then how long it takes to reduce the nullified toxins away. Vivienne? Are you okay?”

Had she some strange look on her face? “I am well, merely thinking, darling. “ She…good heavens. She could have made something that would have been wholly useless by the time she reached Bastien, there were some precious three days before the potion was wholly ruined after initially exposed to light and- and she did indeed want it to be as potent as possible. Perhaps she could secure use of a lab in the University of Orlais. She would handle those arrangements when the time came, as it was she wasn’t wholly satisfied with her findings, there were other properties she was looking for in this remedy she just hadn’t found yet. But she would keep looking…and perhaps…“Eleanor, would you care to assist me when the time comes? I would like to experiment with this remedy after a fashion and I could use another set of hands, another mind cognizant of what is going on as we practice, and perhaps ultimately formulate a perfected potion.”

“Really? Oh gosh, I’d love to!” the girl offered sincerely. Then, "Um…you’re okay, right?”

Okay? Was it so out of character that she seek her assistance? She’d done so in the
past...and may well do so in future. Ahh. But that was not what she meant. “Oh yes, my dear, of course. It is experimental, I said, I’m seeking to make this treatment more powerful as a matter of pure interest.”

“Well, count me in, I think it’d be super cool—I mean there’s all sorts of horrible diseases that Primaetas was used to treat, there’s a reason it went extinct during the Second Blight. You might end up making something that could replace it, cure the Blight.”

She hadn’t considered that aspect of it but yes, perhaps it could be beneficial to many. But first and foremost, it must be beneficial to Bastien.

"So, Eleanor. How are you liking Skyhold? It's shaping up rather nicely I believe."

"It's amazing, I'm so glad we found it. You're comfortable up here now, right? Do you need anything? I asked about getting you a few of those...oh gosh, what are they called? They're like walls you can move around?" that...wasn't a helpful description. "A..." she snapped her fingers as she sought for the word, and came up the Antivan version as she still blanked on it's Trade counterpart. "Tabique?"


She brightened at that, "Yes! Partitions!" though she took interest in, "Hablas Antivan?"

Hm. Well. She...supposed, given her present company... "Si. Mi familia son de Rivain*. As they are sister countries, Trade and Antivan are commonly spoken. Mine was the first generation born in the Free Marches, Wycome," but that was enough of that, she cleared her throat, "my dear you were telling me something about partitions?"

"Oh! You can use them for privacy when changing or cleaning up or as like a 'do not disturb' sort of thing, leave them up to block the view when you come in from the Library or the garden rooms, so people can walk by without being all up in your business when you're trying to sleep or just want privacy or something. Lady Josie helped me pick some out, I hope that's okay."

"I'll surely appreciate it Eleanor, thank you." It was only fitting she supposed, Lady Josephine had enlisted Viviene's assistance when picking things out for what may just be Eleanor's quarters should she accept the position of Inquisitor. It was...rather deserved, Vivienne thought. Strange, and true the girl was young, but she was disgustingly brave, almost to a fault, and with the proper guidance, she had the makings of an excellent leader. Vivienne...cared for the girl, but she had not been expecting how very gutted she would be by her demise. But she had been, to such a point she...she had spent time with the girl in the past but still, she did wish to have more when they were in Hav-Skyhold. As it stood, the young lady was to resume lessons with her once things were better settled, and they had tea dates set to schedule. Perhaps she could be persuaded to take dinner with the Grand Enchanter some nights. For some reason it felt awkward, clumsy to request time with the girl, something in her pride still did not like her showing that she outright wanted time with her.

It seemed their time was winding down though, all too soon their tea grew cold as they chatted, and when Madam de Fer offered to reheat the pot, Eleanor took note of the time on her wrist watch.

"Thanks so much for inviting me for tea, but I promised Thom I'd meet up with him here soon. Do you need anything before I head out?"

"Of course not my dear, oh do never mind the tray, I'll handle it," she said when it seemed
the girl was about to take matters into her own hands. "It was a pleasure to have you," Vivienne assured, then, "In fact, I was wondering if you would consider having dinner together when we are in Skyhold, a dedicated time set aside for the event."

"Really?" Eleanor asked, looking absolutely delighted at the prospect, "Oh gosh, that'd be really great!"

"Splendid, I'll make note with Lady Josephine."

Skyhold’s air was wintry chill, wind whipped through the battlements as Thom stood in wait on the wall just over the stables, the satchel over his shoulder was light enough, even as it was filled, it swayed and he firmed his grip on it, definitely didn’t want all of that hard work go to waste. He smiled when he heard the sound of boots clattering up stone steps, as if their wearer were skipping up them, it was plain enough who it was even if they’d not set a time to meet. Too, the bouncing curls that came into view were a good warning she was about to arrive, her hair was longer now, she had a nice head of springy curls—Maker it’d given him a good startle when she first revealed she’d chopped it clean off—but now she could even wear those comb things Madam de Fer had given her. Had she dressed up for this? It was awfully cold out to be running around in a dress but at least she was wearing her armor’s overcoat.

“Hiya, Thom! You look so handsome!” she encouraged. He’d cleaned up a bit, armor was clean, shaved, trimmed up his hair. This was the first year in many he could face this day with pride in his accomplishments, a clean slate.

“Thank you, Ellie-girl. You look lovely.”

“Oh gosh, thanks! I figured I should dress up, you know? And my dress matches my hair combs so it gave me an excuse to wear them for Vivienne,” huh, true, the woman wouldn’t want her wearing them with just anything. It was nice to see she still wore the bracelet Thom had made for her. “We just had tea!”

Ahh. “You had a pleasant time, I trust?”

“Uh-huh!” she assured him, and then she looked to him expectantly, unsure just what she needed to do.

It felt foolish, asking her. But she’d…Maker, she’d taken a break from playing moving manager—running around the whole of Skyhold helping however she could—and come across Krem, apparently, when the lad-

Thom had mentioned Liddy’s birthday coming up, talking with Cyril when they were having dinner as a group, all the Chargers together. He wasn’t sure how he was going to swing his yearly ritual for her, felt right badly about it. Next thing he knows, Krem’s showing up at the stables, Ellie-girl at his side, the two of them toting armfuls of paper flowers she’d found Krem making up for him, and used her break to help him complete the task—it was quite the feat, thirty-eight in total.

Maker, he was beyond grateful there weren’t sixteen more. Haven falling had been hard enough, but he hadn’t even been able to begin processing the blow of Ellie’s loss. Horrible, it’d been nothing short of hell. Everything was ruin, everyone was struck hard, and in the middle of it
all, they’d lost the most precious, irreplaceable thing. And then there she came, somehow, some way, she’d survived. He hadn’t been able to sleep those first few nights, he just kept pacing, and checking in on her, because he couldn’t believe, he couldn’t believe it that she was alive, and they would get to keep her.

“Alright sweetheart come stand with me,” he instructed, and she took his hand and they walked up to the edge, standing before where the wall dipped for firing weaponry, paper flowers would be the only ammunition flung from these battlements today…Maker willing. He set the satchel down and took two flowers in hand, Ellie took one in her Marked hand and waited. “I usually take a flower, and pretend it will carry what I say to her.”

“It isn’t pretend if that’s what you believe. She does hear you.”

Thom had to clear his throat. Seemed silly to be struck by that…sometimes it seemed silly to be stuck on this—Liddy had been gone nearly thirty years now. But that was thirty years that could have been waking up and making her breakfast, tying her shoes—she’d known how, he was sure of it but she always liked him helping her, he’d thought it an annoyance at the time. Tie her damn shoes every day for the rest of their lives if it meant she was still around. She was supposed to live, have a life, find a nice boy…or a girl, she’d only been nine when she’d passed there was no telling what the future might have held for her. Find someone that made her happy, build a life, maybe end up with Thom having little nieces and nephews to dote on. In another life, he knew he would have been there, guiding and protecting her. In this life, one day out of the year, he got to be her brother again, do something for her.

“Thank you. I um, I say whatever it is that’s on my heart to say to her. Give her a little update, what I’ve got going on in my life…this year will be pretty wild to recap.” This year he could actually be proud of what he had to say to her. “And then I set this flower loose, offer up the rest in silence and then uh…” usually drink himself into a stupor, have a very public cry in an unfamiliar pub and be off to the next thing come morning. Didn’t think he’d do that bit this year though. He was more of a social drinker these days, a round with the Chargers, the occasional nightcap whenever he had a headache and was trying to head for bed. “would you like to have dinner in the tavern, me and the guys after this?”

“I’d love that! Can Anya come? I think she’s hanging out with Cremisius anyway right now I didn’t take her with me to Madam de Fer’s—she’s house broken but she’s very nervous about being in a new place and keeps the chair he sits in when he’s hanging around the Tavern.”

Thom chuckled, squeezing the small hand that still laid in his. They got serious then. Thom filled Liddy in on the wild ride this past year had been—regretfully informing his sister that, if he started the year at her last birthday, it began like any other. He was a liar, guilt and shame dictating his every deed, living on the greatness of another. Now, he had his life back, and everything that had been good about it, friends, his crew, his man…and while it would have been embarrassing to admit as much out loud, he’d already told her, but he thought about it, appreciated
it in his heart, that he had this little girl again. Someone who looked up to him, depended upon him, worried for him. He had all the best pieces of all his old lives woven together by the most important thing—the thing that the lack of, led to his ruin in the first place. Purpose. Ellie, the Inquisition, his found-family, they gave him purpose in spades, and he could never be grateful enough for that.

“Your brother’s the bravest,” Ellie said to the flower in her hand, “He’s so very smart and strong, and he’s living a good life now. He has a great job, lots of friends, and he’s very loved—I love him lots, so thanks for sharing him with me,” Maker help him—he thought he’d skip his cry all together this year but uh, nope. Just didn’t need drink to pull it out of him. “I’m very proud of the man he’s turned out to be, and I’m sure you are too.”

They tossed their flowers over the battlements, and then Thom let go of Ellie’s hand, took up the satchel, and together they cast the others into the wind to follow after.

“I hope they end up somewhere nice where things can grow!”

“Grow?” Thom asked as he wrapped an arm around her shoulders, and they started the walk to the Tavern.

“Well real flowers would have seeds in them, eventually they’d decompose and possibly leave new flowers behind. All this paper…I was feeling a little badly about littering? When Elan heard there was a garden here, she might have gotten ahead of herself because she had Josie order just a bit too many seeds. The ground is mostly hard but there are a few nice pots for growing ingredients right now, so we had a bunch left over—Elf Root. Cremisius and I dropped a few seeds into the flowers, eventually the paper will break down and maybe some day there’ll be a nice patch of Elf Root around to help someone.”

“I think she’d like that.”

Leliana rubbed at her temple as she listened to Marehis’s report. Her agent was taking a moment to touch base with her, since her ward was otherwise attended. Safe, in the care of the Bull’s Chargers.

“You’ve done well to guard her as we traveled, I know that cannot have been an easy task. I’m not fully confident we’ve found every possible hole in Skyhold security,” there were literal holes in Skyhold’s infrastructure, although some were conveniently located. Her personal favorite, being the one in the dungeons. Cassandra’s too it seemed…the Seeker of Truth may have held Knight-Captain Denhem at it’s edge, only her hand grasping the fabric of the back of his shirt keeping him from slipping over the edge and plummeting into…well, they weren’t certain just how far the drop was, and it would be a pity if he survived. And too, it was an Inquisitor’s job to pass judgement on the man. Still, it may well come in handy, as it was, the cells surrounding the hole would be ideal for storing prisoners they wished to make uncomfortable or wished to question further.

“Thank you,” Marehis said quietly.

“Is there something on your mind?” Leliana asked. The woman was usually more talkative than she was behaving tonight. “Losing Haven has been hard on us all. How are you coping?”
“Oh I…Elgar’nan do not get me wrong, I feel the loss of Haven, but it…it was nothing while enduring the loss of E- I- I honestly am uncertain just how I still have this job after that. The girl was in my very hand, Leliana, and furthermore I should have-”

“We cannot change the past, nor should we, honestly. Eleanor acted of her own accord, she is at the center of a great world turmoil, the decision she made was…reckless, but what needed to be done in the moment—that does not mean I like it,” Maker she…her heart still ached if she thought of it too long, nearly losing the girl—believing they had, it had been heartbreaking, horrifically so. “You are not at fault, Marehis, you serve well, above and beyond.”

“I…thank you, but I don’t…I am concerned,” Marehis said. “That perhaps I have failed Ellie in some way or done something wrong or- has she seemed distant with me, since Haven?”

“How so?” Leliana asked.

“She just…she is not as…we used to talk, about everything, all day—during breakfast, as I escort her about her day, and especially when our days are at a close—but I cannot recall the last conversation I’ve had with her that has equated to more than asking after one another, and ensuring she’s well. And she has not…maybe I’ve coddled her too much? She hasn’t wanted to sleep with me since Haven…but it seems only where I am concerned—she was sleeping with the Iron Bull and I spent a night in their tent…of course her monthly is upon her and the Qunari is warm. But since we’ve been in Skyhold, not a single night has she wanted to spend with me. At first I thought perhaps she wished to give Solas and myself opportunity to,” she cleared her throat, “reconnect. But…I don’t know. I don’t even escort her as I used to, I’ve been keeping my distance because I fear maybe she does need space from me? But I do not know why and I haven’t a moment alone with her to broach the subject.”

Ahh. There were eyes and ears everywhere, and while Cassandra had clued Leliana in to suspicion of Solas, Marehis was still in the dark and would unfortunately remain so for the time being. It was complicated, and honestly if she had any concern as to Marehis’s capabilities, it was that in how she could overlook such questionable behavior. But love was blind, and too, Marehis did not have all the reasons to suspect that they did. She had not been there to see what Cassandra or the Iron Bull had born witness to, and the shady apostate had kept her from following he and Ellie to the discussion that led to the girl’s suspicion. Ultimately…this was something terribly personal, and Leliana did understand the need for both subterfuge and care—Marehis would best understand, if it was Ellie that spoke of this to her. She would trust her ward with little question—whereas if the Iron Bull or Cassandra approached her, even Leliana, she may be able to brush it off, and even when discovering Eleanor had reason to suspect Solas, may believe it was merely the manipulation of the adults in her life that brought her to that, as opposed to the man’s actions. And Cremisius bringing it to her attention was out of the question, she may just see that as the young man seeking to drive some toxic wedge between the girl he is dating and those she loves.

But Eleanor speaking to Marehis about Solas requires the man not being anywhere around, and the two of them being wholly alone. Neither of which had happened since Haven it seemed. And it was rather difficult to outright ask in front of others to speak privately with Marehis, they were hoping for a natural opportunity to arise as to wholly keep the Elf apostate from realizing their suspicion. If they tipped him off, he may run.

There was giggling echoing up the staircase that immediately sent Marehis smiling, turning to face the stairwell to Leliana’s Rookery. Seconds later, Eleanor, arm in arm with Lieutenant Aclassi arrived, the two of them looking lively and content. Oh, it was admittedly sweet to see them together, Josie just adored their pairing to pieces.
Although Eleanor visibly startled when they reached the top of the stairs, flinching and exclaiming in surprise, “Marehis! H-hi! Gosh, s-sorry I thought you were er, following us.”

Marehis’s ears twitched. “My word, da’vehnan, are you alright? Did I truly frighten you or are you experiencing panic?” she worried.

“Oh,” Eleanor raised her free hand to her chest, “I wasn’t expecting you here, is all, I’m all good. Um, I was just looking for Leliana actually.”

“…oh.”

“Me?” Leliana asked.

“Uh-huh! I just wanted to check in with you, tomorrow’s Monday and we um…well we usually had lunch dates when I’m home—but I totally, totally understand if you’re too busy, I just wanted to touch base with you, make sure you knew I was still interested and everything.”

Oh, she’d nearly forgotten, and she did enjoy her time with the girl. “Certainly, Eleanor, I would be pleased to continue our Monday afternoon tradition. It is admittedly a pleasant way to mark the start of a fresh week.”

That sent the girl blushing. “Oh gosh, yeah, I think so too!” Eleanor said. “How’re you doing up here? Are your birds happy?”

“They seem to enjoy the Rookery, yes. This set up is admittedly more comfortable. Thank you, Eleanor, for your assistance yesterday…Josie says you were feeling better after you laid down, I trust you’re truly well?” The woman still incessantly teased about Leliana’s…it hadn’t been softness in the least! She-! She merely- Eleanor, while a legal adult was still very much a…a young adult. Little more than a child. She’d been exhausted, and concerningly lightheaded yesterday and Leliana suspected she lifted more than she should—she’d carried a great many things up all…two flights of stairs just to get to the Great Hall, and then up two more to get to the Rookery proper, and Eleanor’s shoulder still troubled her a great deal. Anyway the girl was tired and possibly in pain, and needed to recover, so Leliana did her best to provide as such. Which involved tucking her in and telling her a story about Schmooples—that Nug was precious, and Eleanor had adored learning of Leliana’s pet.

At least Josie had not guessed her…it hadn’t been singing, humming. She’d hummed a bit as she waited to ensure the girl would sleep. Just a bit. The girl needed rest!

“Oh gosh, yeah, all better!” Eleanor assured. “Is there anything else I can do for you? You’re all set up here, right?”

“I am, thank you Eleanor. You’ve had a pleasant evening? Marehis informs me you dined with the Chargers? Was it a date night perhaps?” she asked, eyeing the girl’s state of dress.

Eleanor let out something like a squeak at that and then she looked to the Tevinter man at her side, “I-! I’m so sorry! We’ve been so busy and I- gosh, we haven’t really had a time just you and me-“

“El, you’re kind of busy running the Inquisition right now?” Was he…did he suspect Eleanor’s upcoming promotion? “Don’t stress it, we’re good, I see plenty of you. You want to make a point to do something though?”

“I’d really like to, and I feel badly, I think we should.”
He kissed her temple. “Don’t fret about it then. I’ve taken note, and I’ll ask you proper sometime. We’re not turning into those people who go about ‘penciling each other in’ out of obligation. Not without a decent fight.”

“Kay. Thanks,” Eleanor giggled, hugging the arm she held. “Oh! Sorry! Side tracked—not a date night, I had a sort-of funeral to attend? And tea with Madam de Fer.”


Marehis looked to the overcoat Eleanor had worn, as if only now realizing it matched Leliana’s and Cassandra’s armor. “Oh, indeed it does—it looks just beautiful with your complexion da’vehnan.”

Eleanor blushed at that. “Thanks. I wanted to match Cassandra a bit.”

“Ahh, that is nice.”

“Oh! You too, you know? My boots and gloves, and my tunic? They all match your scout armor!” Eleanor enthused as if she truly did like that aspect.

“Was…was it intentional?” Marehis asked, interested, “The decision to make your armor that color, or was it a move on Harritt’s part to use material he had around.”

“Oh… I guess that might be a benefit, I hadn’t thought about that, that it might make it easier on him,” Eleanor admitted. “But it was my idea—I wanted to match you both, because…I dunno, you’re my mamis and it’s sort of like having you right there directly with me, protecting me in the field.”

Oh, Marehis looked wholly moved by that. “I…I like that very much, da’vehnan. Harritt did a wonderful job on your armor, it suits you well, has protected you through such harm,” she cleared her throat. “Sweet girl, it is getting rather late—I wouldn’t rush you, but do you plan to retire soon at all?”

“Hmm yeah, why?”

“If you’ve no other plans for where you’ll lay your head tonight, perhaps you could spend the evening with me?” the Elf ventured, reaching out to brush back the un-bound portion of Eleanor’s hair. “We could have a sleep over of sorts.”

“Really?” Eleanor asked, as if she were excited for it. Yes, it would be wonderful opportunity, if she could get the woman alone-

“Certainly—I could… we haven’t nail polish but I could still treat you to a manicure if you’d like, do your hair, just a nice bit of pampering. Solas may even indulge in a manicure, he could honestly use one, and he could make us some of that milk tea you adore…da’vehnan? What is it?” Marehis questioned when Eleanor’s expression fell at mention of… well. She certainly wasn’t going to get Marehis alone tonight, was she?

“Um… actually I’m sorry I—“ she swallowed, paled as she seemed stricken in the face of disappointing her minder, unsure how to… there was some risk, Leliana understood, of Eleanor falling asleep near Solas. The man may seek to dream with her in the Fade, or search through their bond—and they were uncertain his limits with that. It was best to avoid those situations all together. It would not do for him to suspect they suspected him.
“Ellie?” Marehis worried.

“Oh man, El, just hitting you all of a sudden, huh?” Krem offered, sounding truly sympathetic when he said, “Courses are a right pain.”

...was she truly still running her courses? It'd been well over an entire week. Though potion to suppress monthlies could make them strange for a while when you suddenly stopped taking it. She would touch base with the Seeker, just for peace of mind that Eleanor was not unwell. It could be subterfuge after a fashion, the girl was using her 'current state' to keep Solas from monitoring her.

“Yeah,” Eleanor agreed, “I’m really sorry Mare but um, I just don’t feel very well, my head’s sort of pounding and I’m cramping pretty bad. I th-think I just wanna lay down with the Iron Bull, if that’s okay?”

“I...could get you a warm waterskin?” Marehis tried, oh she did miss the girl. "There is a massage technique for the lower back that may hel-"

"You don't need to go through all that trouble really," Eleanor insisted, "I wouldn't be any fun, I'm pretty miserable and just want to go to bed, and you'd just be reheating waterskins and I wouldn't want you to be up all night over me. We'll just do it another time, promise."

"Oh...oh of course, da’len, I am sorry," Marehis said. Though she worried, "The pain just came on you all of a sudden? Is it sharp? You’re certain it is your monthly?"

Eleanor nodded. “Yeah, I’m sure. I really should go lay down.”

“I’ll see her safely back to the Charger’s set up,” Krem assured, “—her things are at Sera’s anyway still, from last night. Stitches can check on her and everything.”

“Is that alright with you, Ellie?” Marehis asked. "It would be no trouble for me to walk you-"

“Yeah, you...we interrupted your meeting with Leliana, sorry,” Eleanor apologized. "You go ahead and finish up, have a nice night okay?"

“C-certainly. Feel better, da’len,” Marehis said, swallowing harshly as the girl and her escort turned away and began their descent down the stairs. Marehis was still facing Leliana, looking wholly forlorn, her lip quivering for a brief moment before she called out over her shoulder, to be heard by the girl, “I love you, ma da’vehnan.”

There was a beat, and then from down the stairwell, “I love you too, mami,” the girl called back, a little flat, like she were trying not to cry. Oh.

It did not matter if their suspicion led to anything of import. When this was all over, Leliana might well take a page from Cassandra’s book and hold Solas over the dungeon hole.

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...wonder if she really likes me...maybe it's foolish- but maybe...maybe that guy was right. Huh. Can’t remember his name. Funny hat though. Elan doesn’t care about status or race, she just...I guess I’ll write her back...
...damn it, oh man, Seeker’s gonna be so pissed. But it’s fucking Corypheus! Hawke...we need him. Shit...will chocolate work on her? It does for monthlies. Maybe I’ll get my chocolate supply restocked before that bastard gets here. Yeah. Keep it in my pockets at all times. Should probably do that anyway, poor kid’s still cramping all to hell apparently.

...Frick! I lost the friggin- oh. There it is. Inky’ll be by later, maybe when I’m done with my meeting with 'sandra we should...

“Cole?”

He could hear very well, all of the hurts in Skyhold, from up here. He was above, he thought it let him hear everyone loud and clear. But that was louder, too loud—not too loud but louder than the rest. Was it real? It was all real but-

He opened his eyes. Oh, Ellie. I hope he’s okay, gosh it’s so dark up here was she afraid of the dark? Lots of people were, it felt like. This can’t be comfortable. Why can’t it? He was comfortable, he thought. But his body had...was it aches? Sometimes he felt them in this body’s stomach, they went away when he ate, but then it had to do other things that were time consuming and foreign to him. He’d never had to do them in the Fade. So he tried to avoid eating or drinking too much. The ache did not bother him so much as being slow to respond to those who needed him because he was...’answering the call of nature’ the Iron Bull had called it, when he had been...fearful of what was happening, and the Qunari explained. That had amused the Iron Bull—not unkindly, but he had found it fun to ask if Cole was ‘scared shitless’ when it was all over. Oh. It was a pun, that was funny! Maybe it was okay then, if it could make the Iron Bull laugh. Maybe he would make shit again if the Iron Bull was very sad.

Oh, the aches. He felt them other places too sometimes. When he stood here for a long time, shoulders hunched, head hanging as he listened, when he stopped listening he would notice them. Something in his neck, his back. His feet. Aches like in his stomach when it was empty, or his bladder when it was full. Bodies were strange.

“You’re worried about me, Ellie?” he asked with outside words. She was awake, she couldn’t hear his inside words.

“Just a little,” she admitted. That was a lie, she worried a lot, for him. So did Krem. They were kind. “Here, I brought you some things.”

She giggled when he asked her that. “No Cole, I put things in the pillow cases so I could bring everything in one trip. They’re for you—so you can have light up here whenever you need it. And pillows and blankets so you can be comfortable. And a book in case you get bored or something and no one’s up to play with you.”

That was sweet. “This is Charlotte’s book,” he said when he looked at it.

“Uh-huh, I thought you might like having it—it’s a very good book, it has lots of interesting stories. And she was your friend, I think it’s nice if you have it.”
“Charlotte was Cole’s friend. She felt very badly for him. She tried to get him food. They almost put her in a cell for that. Her parents pulled her from the Circle then.”

“I’m sorry,” Ellie said. She meant it. He hadn’t meant to make her sorry.

“It is not your fault. You are my friend now, that makes me very happy.”

“That makes me happy too,” Ellie smiled. Oh good, he fixed it, mostly. “Huh. So…Cole was friends with Charlotte, but not you?”

“She did not know me. I did not have many friends before the Inquisition.”

“But you did have some?” Ellie asked.

“Rhys. And Evangeline. A Circle Mage, and his Templar keeper. They were my friends but now they are gone. I lost them.”

“Lost them?”

“They are not dead. They just are not with me anymore. And that is good. We were friends, but I made bad choices Ellie. I was a bad person. I do not deserve them as friends. I do not deserve you or Krem as friends. But you still want to be—even hearing me say so makes you want it more, you are sad I would disparage myself. That is kind, but I was not. I took compassion and corrupted it, I almost became a demon through my own fault. My friends are better off without me.”

She did not think that was true, but she didn’t argue with him on the outside. “Cole, why…I mean do you want to talk about it?”

“You helped me with the dying soldier—the one who was in so much pain?” he prompted, questions for questions sometimes gave the best answers.

Ellie nodded. It made her sad he was dead. But she was glad he was no longer in pain. “That was hard, but he was so miserable, in so much pain and there weren’t resources to make him comfortable or heal him it…it was a hard call Cole, but that is a type of compassion—there are things worse than dying, and you spared him that.”

“There are. But I did not use to ask, Ellie. I did not wait until worse-than-death was at the door. I saw, and I judged, immediately in the moment and I killed. In White Spire. When I became Cole. I had to stop them—the Templars, they kept bringing in new mages*, planned to make them Tranquil, and when…” the last time a mage knew Tranquility was reversible, it had gotten them marked for death, he did not like Ellie dead, her soul would go to the Maker, and he did not want that to happen for quite some time. “The Templars were slaughtering Mages themselves. So I got to them first, ended their suffering before they could be made Tranquil or experience the fear and pain of being locked away, scared and confused before a Templar came to end their life. You wonder why I did not simply kill the Templars? I did try, but more replaced them, and they were crueler to the Mages because they did not know it was me. They thought it was them, punished them worse, I made that mistake once, I did not make it again until…until later. I made a friend in Rhys, he always remembered me. I tried to keep him safe, but I messed up. I killed a Templar again and he was imprisoned for it. He is free now. That is all that matters. Evangeline watches over him. They do not need me.”

Ellie did not think that was true. But maybe she was thinking that about herself? She hugged him. He liked hugs. This body did too, it was comforting, something that was the opposite
of aches. “Your friends do need you—we love you lots, okay Cole? That... sounds like a very complicated situation. I honestly don’t know what to think but I know you. You’re kind, and compassionate. And I’m glad you’ve moved on from that—I mean you didn’t ask then, but you did ask last week. Keep asking, and listening to your conscience, okay? You help lots of people, and I’m very proud of you for who you are today.”

That helped his aches too. Not the ones in this body, but in him. “Thank you Ellie,” he said. He wondered if she would cuddle with him if he laid the blankets out. Sera had soft places in her room she would share with them if they asked.

She did. She had to meet with Cassandra, but they were welcome to her room. Krem too when he was done with his shift, he sat on the window seat and Ellie laid with her back against his chest, and Cole laid on top of her, on his front, his head resting on her stomach. He did not mind taking off his hat if it meant Krem would reach around to make play with his hair, Ellie’s hand rested on his back, rubbing circles that soothed... could she hear aches like he heard hurts? Were they the same thing perhaps? His back did not ache as it had when he was standing all of the time. Maybe he would do that less.

Maybe he would do this more. Laying, loving, listening. No hurts to hear, just Ellie reading from Charlotte’s book.

It was very comfortable.

Well. Inky was having all sorts of fun, wasn’t she? Sera hadn’t expected not to be the one to have this room’s first threesome in it. Wait... would Teetness be down for a threesome? That’d be... hmm... thoughts.

“You don’t like having those around me because I might say them out loud,” Cole said. Frick! Right! Shite! She thought they was sleepin’! When Sera got back from training with ‘sandra, the three of them was looking like they were conked out—Kremmy-boy was dead aslee, and Inky looked like she was sleepy too, her book hand was limp, the book resting against Cole’s back, and she’d forgotten he didn’t really sleep. He looked like he was though, eyes closed, laying against Ink all comfy cozy... maybe too cozy, Ellie was cool with it right? “She is, but you can ask her yourself to make sure.”

“Whassa’ matter bud?” Krem asked, half asleep, eyes scrunching but stayin’ closed, he had a hand on Cole’s head, fingers scratching a bit.

“Mmm. Nothing is the matter. We are all safe, and warm, and comfortable. And Sera is here, that is good, I’m glad she’s back.”


Inky yawned real big, holy crap! “Hey Ser’, sorry, we’re in your space, right? Didn’t mean to fall asleep...” for someone who didn’t mean to fall asleep, she was doin’ a piss poor job of staying awake. But that was all good. Sera... had something that might help her with the whole, ‘waking up’ thing.

“Ink, you busy right now? Are you real tired?” Sera checked she... she was worried about that, she wasn’t real sure where Inky slept when she wasn’t with her. So that made her worry she
wasn’t sleeping. But Cassandra said she was, Marehis too, but still.

She let out a little groan but she was stretchin a bit, arms reaching out over Cole, before she sighed, shakin’ herself a little, “I’m awake! Whatcha’ need?”

“Nothin’ serious, just looking for a little girl time if that’s alright.”

“Sure thing Ser’. You heard her gents—out!”

Kremmy-boy sighed, arms tightening around her as he settled more comfortably, looked like he was about to drop off to sleep again. “Technically, according to Tevinter—” he wheedled, wowza he really comfy wasn’t he? Didn’t want to leave.

“Tevinter has no power here! Or anywhere! Okay some places,” Ellie allowed. “But they have no power over your pants! Or what’s in them, or what’s in your soul! So saith the Herald of Andraste, on this day, whenever the heck it is, at whatever time it is!” she declared sleepily, raising her Marked hand high before dropping it to her side. “I had to go digging in storage to find candle things for Cole and didn’t want to risk banging up my watch.”

“If you three knuckle heads’ll get up, it don’t got to be just me and Inky,” Sera decided, “I was thinkin’ it was but…ugh. You’re all my friends. And I think I got enough pish for all of us.”

Oh frig, Cole perked up at that, pushing himself up on his hands, so he could turn to look at her, “I am your friend?” he asked like it meant the frickin’ world to him!

Blaaaaah. “Yeah, Cole. You are.” He was, weird as shite, but he was a damn good friend so.

“That does mean the world to me! You are a very good friend, Sera, I am happy I am one for you.”

They got untangled from one another and Sera hopped up on the window seat, pushed open the window that sat direct over the roof. “Follow me.”

She got close enough to the edge of the roof that there was room for Inky, Krem, and then Cole to sit.

“Ser’. I love you,” Ellie said as she rested her head on Sera’s shoulder, “Remember that, if I fall twelve feet to my death. And by that I mean if I fall, leave me where I lie. Just let the embarrassment kill me off, thanks.”

She was just bonkers. “No worries Ink, here.” Sera untied the sack she’d tied to her belt once she was done in the kitchens, frick yeah, they was still warm! She’d made a batch so, there was plenty. She passed them along and Inky perked up immediately.

“Sera! You made cookies!” she enthused, soundin’ excited and proud, as she passed cookies down to Krem n’ Cole.

“Yeah Ink, just like you taught me, I used your recipe and everything!”

“Oh, this is very important to you, I am glad you let us come,” Cole said, “I will eat your cookies.”

“Thanks,” Sera said, kicking her legs nervously. “I just…well I didn’t used to like cookies very much. It’s kind of dumb. Lady…there was this baker when I was little yeah? And Lady
always told me never to go ‘round to his place, to stay away because he didn’t like Elves, right? A real racist bastard. Except it turns out, he wasn’t. But he was Lady Emmauld’s cookie connection. See, I go to her one day cause I dunno, I’m tryin’ to connect with her, do family stuff. All I know is, lots of kids around, they learned shit from their parents. Daughters was learning how to make cookies from their mums so I thought, why the hell not? Lady makes great cookies. Except she doesn’t. Turns out all those years she was getting her cookies from the bakery, bringing them home and puttin’ ’em in a dish and then takin’ them to functions and shite, passing them off as her own. Because there was some bullshit about being the perfect homemaker or some shite—good mum’s make good cookies, and as long as it looked like she was doing it, bully for her,” Sera sighed. This was just, stupid! She felt stupid for rambling on but she had…she had a point she was gettin’ to for Inky. She...had thought about it a long time, and didn't think it was important enough to bring up. But then friggin’ ruddy Darkspawn Tevinter bastard from hell comes busting up Haven, breaking Inky, and...she hadn't wanted to believe Ellie was dead. But part of her had. And when they got her back...you only got people back so many times before they got taken away for good. So. “She let me hate Baker, let me feel hated because of her stupid pride. So I just didn’t like cookies much after that—pride cookies. But then you come along, Ellie. You’re like a proper little mum, you know? Running around, looking after everyone, always trying to take care of ‘em, even me, from day one. Then you go and you actually know how to make cookies, and you take the time to teach me how to make ‘em too. And that...dunno. Just helped me like em a bit more again.”

“It healed a hurt!” Cole enthused. “Forced family is pain and suffering, but found family is love and acceptance. Lady Emmauld saw you as a puzzle piece she could force into place, clipped your wonky edges to make you fit. You taped them back on as best you could, and Ellie loved you even when she didn’t know you’d fit, you didn't have to, you just had to be you.”

Frick!

Inky smiled real big though, and hugged Sera tight. “I’m really sorry Lady Emmauld did that to you, Sera. I love you lots, and I’m so proud of you! Mwah!” kissed her good on the cheek.

“Same here, Ser’,” Krem said, “thanks for sharing with us. That was real big of you.”

“Yeah well, we’re all friends ain’t we? So. Friendship cookies!” Sera declared them, clackin’ cookies with Ink, Cole and Krem doin’ the same before they all decided to take a bite.

…

Well. These’d wake a great-gran from the dead but not cuz they was sweet.

“…wow Ser’! You did a…sensational job!” Ellie encouraged. Sensational, which could mean assaulting to the senses.

“…they’re so…flavorful,” Kremmy-boy tried, as he soldiered through chewing the bite in his mouth and swallowing it.

Cole gulped his down and smacked his lips. “My mouth does not like them, but I like them because you made them for us.”

Mmhmm, thanks for keeping it real, Cole.

“These taste like the inside of a salt filled arsehole!” Sera cut to the chase, blah! What the frick! She followed the recipe!

“…Sera, you’re the best, but uh,” Ellie ventured, “did you mix up your salt and sugar?”
Well frick! There was only supposed to be like, a pinch of salt and cups and cups and cups of sugar! They was both white and came from sacks in the kitchens! “Think the horses can eat em?” Sera wondered. Shame for all that salt to go to waste.

“You know what, they might,” Krem said, “we can check with the Horse Master first. That’d be a nice treat for them I think—you did a great job Ser’!”

“Poisoning us and making horse treats!”

“That’s two birds with one stone!” Ellie said, “That’s like, genius level multitasking!”

Sera couldn’t help but laugh. “Okay. Maybe next time we’ll make ‘em together—all of us. We’ll be a cookie club.”

"Sounds good to me, Ser’," Krem said.

"Yeah!" Ellie agreed.

"I am also excited!" Cole announced. Shite, Sera was starting to find his weirdy stuff more adorable than annoying. "I am adorable?"

“Absolutely precious babe,” that was Bull's voice? Where's he at? "Sera? Why the fuck are you trying to poach from my club?” Oh frig, haha, Bull came out of the Tavern, was down on the ground lookin’ up at them. “Why’s my Imekari on the roof? And my Lieutenant? Cole, I’m worried for you too buddy, you’re my funky lil’ Spirit friend—you start to fall you poof to safety, okay?”

“Okay!” Cole agreed.

They was headin’ down anyway, might as well take a short cut. So Sera held out a hand and Bull reached up, helped her drop down, offerin’ his other to Kremmy-boy.

Dropped him right into the bushes though. Safe landin’ that didn’t hurt anything more than his pride. It was friggin’ funny, even Inky couldn’t help it—she at least tried to seriously reprimand Bull and asked if Krem was okay before busting up into laughs.

“You drop Inky you know right where my arrows is goin’,” Sera saw fit to warn though.

“Come on Imekari, I got you,” Bull said, offering up both arms.

Ellie slipped off the roof and he caught her right up against his chest, he was all smiles and scrunching his nose at her, big softy he was.

Kremmy-boy was still brushing himself off, shaking his head.

“Hey Chief, want a cookie?”

…He asked me to look after you, in the end, the horrible man. I assured him I would get word to you, tell you everything that has happened.
I do hope to see you again soon, my friend. You were looking well, better I have seen you in years, perhaps the South suits you?

Give my love to Varric, and Ellie.

—M

It was the fourth time he’d read over the missive. And still, its contents hadn’t quite felt like they’d properly been absorbed by his brain. It said what now?

Dorian startled when suddenly there was a weight against his midsection, arms wrapping around his waist. A hug. He blinked to clear his vision as he pulled the letter aside and looked down at his intruder, though he really needn’t see to know who it was.

“Hiya Dorian. Figured I should stop you. Stairs are right over there, ya know? They’re faster than wearing a hole through the floor if you want down.” Ahh, he’d been pacing as he read, just how long had she been there? “Cole said you needed me? You seemed kind of busy when I first came in, so I chatted up Enchanter Fiona for a bit but um, I mean, you seem upset. Is everything okay?” she asked, her chin pressed high on his stomach, concerned eyes peering right up at him.

“I’ve just got a letter from Felix.”

“Yeah? How’s he doing?” she asked. "Did his Healers get the stuff we read about? Even if it can't um, heal him, it could really help with any pain or discomfort he's in. Though Madam de Fer seems to have an interest, in it. She's working on some kind of variation on potion made with Primeatas Root using Red Moss.”

Ahh. Well. “He did thank us for the information. He told me he planned to speak to the Magisterium. And he did. They’re currently in session—Maevaris is absolutely delighted.” The woman did love when the whole of their Magisters were in one room, like fish in a barrel. Not that Maevaris ever fished. But she did enjoy torturing Tiventer's leadership however she could, having them all together made it that much more fun and easier.

“Oh yeah, she’s in the Magisterium.”

“Indeed. She wrote to me as well. Felix stood on the senate floor and told them of you. A glowing testimonial. There has been no official reaction but Maevaris says everyone back home is talking,” Everyone included Halward, he supposed. He...did his parents know he was in the Inquisition? There was some small part of him that wondered what they thought. If they knew. What they were saying about him. What they thought of the Herald of Andraste Felix rhapsodized about. “Felix always was as good as his word.”

Oh. Oh dear. Well, at least their lessons on grammar stuck.

“…was?” Ellie asked softly. Past tense.

“I am sorry Ellie. Maevaris wrote me as Felix could not. He’s dead, the Blight caught up with him.”

Fasta vas! The girl’s eyes filled with tears, chin dimpling the way it did when she might cry but would not, and then she asked, “Are you alright?”
“He was ill…and thus on borrowed time anyhow.”

“That doesn’t mean you don’t get to be sad.”

That…was true. He was, in point of fact, very sad. Not devastatingly sad. Not ‘lay down in the snow and wait for the sweet embrace of death’ sad, not ‘only feeling capable of carrying on because there was a young Tevinter boy in need of a good cry over the loss you share’ sad. But he was at least ‘feel this for a while, take brandy breaks to numb the pain, and grieve like a normal human being’ sad. He could survive that well enough on his own.

But he wouldn’t have to.

“Tevinter needs more people like him. He was someone who always put the good of others above themselves.” Perhaps one day Tevinter would have a mage of that caliber, she’d already the spirit and integrity down, she merely needed the citizenship…which could easily be arranged through marriage…perhaps he should drop hints with Cremisius. They were still young, but Tevinter was hardly going to save itself now was it?

Ellie offered him a little smile. “They have you. You talk like you think he was a better person than you—he was more up front with it, but you have…pride or something, you’ve been turned away when showing your true self and that makes you mean. Acerbic,” who was teaching her these words? Him. But how dare she use them against him, "so people turn away on your terms, not because you’ve opened yourself up and they’ve found something wanting. But you aren’t wanting, Dorian. You’re amazing, and brilliant, and underneath it all you’re kind, and compassionate, and you care a whole lot more than you dare let others think.”

That…was utter rot. Just. Where was her child minder? Shouldn’t she come fetch the girl for a nap or something? Maker. Ahh well. “It’s nice to see Felix wasn’t the only good sort hanging around here,” he allowed. They were to have a moment it seemed. Bah. He was hugging her back now, how incredibly lovely and pathetic. “I want brandy.”

“I want apple juice—lets go get wasted! I’ll make sure you don’t make bad decisions or have a hangover or anything,” she promised as she let go, after a fashion. Just one arm, stepping aside so they could walk with their arms around each other. He rested Maevaris’s letter on his desk as they passed and down the stairs they went. It was admittedly faster than wearing a hole through the floor. "I'll tell the Iron Bull to come tell you how handsome you are, bet I can get him to feed you grapes! He's already shirtless, that's like half the job of grape feeding!"

“That sounds delightful.”

His head pounded with ache, the sort that consumed most of his focus, reverberated through his skull like the beat of a drum. Or perhaps more like a hammer beating down upon his head.

The pain was such it consumed most of his focus…that…was…had he just been considering that? He’d been forgetting things. He had taken his Lyrium kit out of the desk drawer last night and set it out on his desk, he’d been keeping it locked in since they moved…Cassandra had hidden it from him on the journey—he’d asked her to. There had been…it had been worse than
usual, given their situation. And the snap and strain at his heart, losing Haven, the home they made there was one thing. When they had lost Ellie?

He’d…a struggling relationship, with his Maker. His time in the Circle Spire had pretty well worked that into him. Just the barest bit of thought on the subject made him sweat, the walls of his office feel very, very close, but he wasn’t in the cell again, he wasn’t.

Ten…nine…eight…seven…six…five…four…three…two…one…

He was in his office and nothing more. Now. He’d a bit of a renewed sense of reliance in the Maker he once felt…distant. Because only a god could have saved that girl that night. How in the world had she survived Corypheus, let alone…how had she found them? They’d been traveling en masse, left something of a trail but it sounded like it hadn’t been very helpful all told. And she’d been so hurt, so focused on just being able to drag the next bit of air into her lungs and force it back out to take on fresh, he…divine intervention had surely been at hand. He found himself praying to that god more as of late. Because Maker help him.

Ellie was his sweetheart—his sweet heart. She brought out everything pure in him and was intrinsically inseparable from his beating heart. She was precious and meant to be protected but now…now she was also Inquisitor. And there were things…she deserved to know.

So. As he’d been forgetful as he was coming down from a horrible flare of his symptoms and still recovering, he’d taken his Lyrium kit out of the desk drawer and laid it on his desk. He’d almost made to put it away as swiftly as possible but then he remembered why he put it there in the first place. And too it was…a bit of an exercise. Open it up, look inside, to be so very, very close to the tools he needed to take on what his body craved without lifting a finger to do anything of the sort. He used to have to sit on his hands until they were clumsy and numb, and then slam the kit shut so he could not feel the Lyrium’s call. Now he could sit here, kit open wide like it was just another tome on his desk, he could even trace his fingers across the symbol of Andraste, it did nothing more to sate the ingrained desire for Lyrium, but neither did it chip away further from his resolve. He would not touch the stuff, never again, not for as long as he lived. The Order would have no hold over him. Not after Kirkwall, and certainly not after Therinfal.

And certainly not while he had Ellie to think about. He could do this. He could. And he would. She would not see him go mad, his mind lost to the degenerative state Lyrium eventually induced in non-magical consumers. He could not regret the choices that set him on the path to the life he lived now, but he was certainly not taking the things he did regret further still.

“She will be here soon,” Cassandra said. Oh, Maker, he had not heard her come down. She was armored, ready for the day, putting the final pins in her hair to keep her braid in place. “Do you wish for me to stay?”

Yes. But that was true of all days. “I’ll be alright. Thank you, for offering, love.”

“Of course,” Cassandra said, coming to sit at his side, leaning back against his desk as she looked him over as if she could verify every last detail of his well being by sight alone…admittedly she probably could at this point. As he would not be keeling over in the next several hours, she offered him a soft smile and a kiss to his temple before she pressed her lips to his. “Send for me if you’ve need,” she intoned. “Have a pleasant day.”

“You too.”

“I will be back for dinner.”
“Oh and I count the hours. Time passes like the slow blade of cruel fate across—”

“You will cease your poetry Commander, that is an order.” Good, he hadn’t had more
than a starting line really, but he’d counted on her interrupting him.

“You turned down your chance at being Inquisitor,” he reminded her. “Only Ellie can stop
me now, and I do believe our dear girl would only assist me in my endeavor. Wooing her—”

“Do not say it.”

“Her mami—admit it, you love that she calls you that.” The woman had laid awake her
first night back in Haven and had rather the moment of elation over the milestone, there was lots of
blushing and happy sighing involved and it was incredibly precious.

“I’ll do nothing of the sort!” Cassandra snapped, speaking quietly as she’d already begun
to open the door, “Focus on the task at hand, wooing me is the least of your—”

“Who’s wooing you?” Eleanor wanted to know, speaking from curiosity as her head
popped through the door before the girl proper popped in to the room, arms around Cassandra’s
waist. “Is it Papi? Because I approve! I’ll hold her still—dale papi, dale!” she encouraged, oh and
she smiled all the more when Cullen laughed.

“I will be late for my shift, Inquisitor,” Cassandra insisted, endeavoring to set the tone. “I
believe you have a meeting with the Commander of your armed forces?”

“Indeed I do, Lady Seeker,” Eleanor returned smoothly, unrelenting in her hold. “But not
for another two minutes. I know what’s up, so I came early for hugs. And I already have Barris
covering your morning shift. I talked to mami yesterday, about what to do for dessert. She wanted
your opinion on it though, she’s not sure it’ll be any good. Cole had some interesting ideas
though.”

Was the girl suffering a stroke? She’d said Barris, dessert, Cole, referred to a second mami
which he was pretty sure was Marehis? But so very close together like they were all connected and
made sense? Did they make sense? Cassandra seemed to think so…she seemed very grave for just
having been given the morning off to talk dessert with Marehis.

“Are you alright?” she asked the girl quietly.

She shrugged. “It’s officially 8 o’clock, so I kind of have to be,” she said as she pulled
away from the Nevarran woman. “Lady Seeker,” she nodded.

Cassandra could not help but grin as she returned the nod in kind, “Inquisitor.”

He was concerned and admittedly confused, but Ellie was not visibly upset. Still it was
worrisome, and he almost used it as an out.

But no. He would not do that to her. Rob her of knowledge he would give any other
Inquisitor seated before him. Before, his boss, if there was one to be had, had been Cassandra.
When she came to him nearly a year ago, to take up this task, Commander of the Inquisition, he’d
disclosed to her on the spot.

“I’ll not take Lyrium, Lady Seeker.”

“Ahh. I am sorry you’ve had to endure withdrawal. You needn’t worry, Ser Rutherford.
We’ve an apothecary on hand and a steady supply of lyrium through the Chantry-“
“Cullen.”

“Pardon?”

“Just Cullen, Lady Seeker. And I’ll not be taking Lyrium, not from you, or your Inquisition, or anyone else. I’ve my kit still full, perfectly preserved, untouched since Kirkwall. I have been enduring withdrawal. It is my choice to do so. You understand the complications that involves, yes?”

“…I do.”

“Then you understand why I cannot possibly work for you.”

“Does your withdrawal truly debilitate you to such a state you could not do your job?”

“I- well…no, I just thought-” he rambled.

“You assumed. What is that precious little saying—when one makes assumptions, they make an ass of you and me?” You and me?…Assumed. Ass u me. huh. Clever little pun, he might like her. “If you wish…I would monitor you. I know your career, Cullen, your merit. I would not ask this of you if you were not the one for the job. And I would best know when you truly work at your limits, if withdrawal from Lyrium is compromising your duties.”

“…you would?”

“Certainly,” Cassandra assured. “We leave for Haven at dawn.”

Hmm…he wanted to marry that woman someday. Everyday.

“…tattoo of Cremisius’s name on my butt. I just think it’s be super cute, you know? I know—Cremisius Gistin Aclassi is a lot of letters, but I got a lot of ass so. I might as well use it.”

Maker above, god in the heavens what the hell was going on!!

“Eleanor Liana Trevelyan!” he shot out, wait, she'd been by the door hadn’t she? She was seated now, in the chair across from him. Grinning like something was the height of hilarity.

“Cullen Stanton Rutherford!” she shot back in mock tones of his shocked outrage. “You’re the one not paying any attention, I was talking to you for like five minutes! Did you just call a meeting so I could sit here while you stare into space? Or is there something that needs my attention?...if you were just trying to give me an easy first morning as Inquisitor that ship has sailed papi, I’ve had a day and a half, and I’ve not even been up for three hours.”

She… “You are not seriously considering a tattoo on your…places?”

Oh goodness she did have quite the laugh at that, she practically screamed with it, wiping at her eyes with the back of her hands as she caught her breath. “No! Honest. I mean I love Cremisius, but no way am I getting his name tattooed anywhere on my body.”

Oh Maker, he’d made rather the spectacle hadn’t he? He hadn’t meant to ignore her to the point she saw fit to give him a heart attack.

“Good,” he sighed. “I do apologize, Eleanor. I did call you here for serious reasons.”

She looked serious—not panicked, just prepared to take whatever it was he had to say to her and roll with it. He’d seen that look on her face several times in the past few weeks. Food
shortages? Cool, they’ll handle it. More hands needed for healing? Here’s two more, and she’s good at giving instruction for others. Cole had apparently confiscated every single dagger in Skyhold, because high stress equated high tempers, and fights had been breaking out behind the scenes, all over the place—Eleanor had spent the entirety of two days—that he could pinpoint in exactness due to this very expression—dealing with it. Having Cole show her exactly who each and every dagger belonged to—returning the ones that had been taken because the Spirit saw a blade and a hand that might wield it, and taken it just in case. And for the ones that had been ready to strike at another—at a member of their Inquisition—she sat them down and apparently discussed with them every implication of that, and all of the ramifications that would bear. A moment of anger could cost them their allies’ life. They were still recovering from Haven. Infection could set in—they might not have ingredients to save them. And if they do, what is used on them in an event that could have been avoided, might not be around for someone who suffers a fate out of their control. And what was worse, they severed trust with each other—not only in the wounded party, but in those around them. How could she even trust them if they hurt another member of the Inquisition? What was to stop them from hurting more, even the Herald of Andraste. They were to have each other’s backs, be open and honest about their frustrations instead of bottling them up until they boiled over at knifepoint, and save their blades for their enemies in the field. And, if they ever thought to harm another member of the Inquisition ever again, she would let the Iron Bull hold them over the dungeon hole. Leliana was a marvelous influence.

But now, well. She took a great deal in the Inquisition personally, but this was truly personal he feared.

“Eleanor. You are aware that Templars imbibe Lyrium, to perform their duties, yes?”

She nodded. “Has there been a shortage?” she asked.

“No sw-., no,” Cullen cleared his throat. “As you are now head of the Inquisition, I feel it is my duty to inform you that I…have chosen not to take Lyrium for quite some time.”

She was very quiet, regarding him unblinkingly for a moment and then, “How long is quite some time?”

“Since Kirkwall’s rebellion.”

She visibly startled at that, sucked in a gasp of air that shuddered through her before she closed her eyes, she took in a few sharp breaths that sounded mildly concerning like she might be having a panic attack, but she slowed her breathing, and he could see her mouthing something silently to herself.

It took her a moment, and then she took a deep breath, looked to him. “So. Your headaches, migraines, come from w-withdrawal?”

“Yes.” They might always be a part of his existence. There were no known cases of a Templar fully coming off of Lyrium addiction and moving forward until their body no longer suffered for the lack of Lyrium of which they’d been ingesting high doses on the daily for decades.

“Okay. Can I ask why? Um, why you choose not to take it, I mean. I know how withdrawal works.”

“Yes, I did. I saw the control Lyrium had over my fellow Templars, saw so many that could have walked away from the corruption if they could have abandoned their need for Lyrium full stop. I never wanted to bend a knee to the Order again, not in a capacity where I was working mindlessly for reward. The only thing still keeping
me bound was my need for their steady supply of Lyrium, so I let it go.”

"This could kill you," she said quietly.

"I know. I would, however, prefer to die a free man. And thus far, I've made it through the worst of it." the initial withdraw from Lyrium was maddening, by far one of the most harrowing experiences of his life but now, "I've handled it well, and perhaps someday I'll be through with it, full stop."

“That’s…understandable. And very brave.”

He had to clear his throat. “Thank you, Eleanor.”

She bit her lip, nervous before she asked, “Um, is it...is it really bad? Is there anything I can do to help?”

“It is manageable. You already help, in ways you can’t even imagine sweetheart. Cassandra is monitoring me—as she has from the beginning—to ensure I’m capable of fulfilling my duties to the Inquisition.”

"Good. Okay. Um, thanks for telling me."

"Certainly."

"I'm proud of you."

Oh. Well then, that certainly did help. He closed up his Lyrium kit, and tucked it away in his desk once more. "Thank you, Ellie."

"Um, I have a meeting with Varric next, and Marehis is busy, Cole walked with me here. I can call him if you're busy or don't feel lik-"

Ahh. "I could do with some fresh air, I'd be happy to escort you, Ellie. Thank you for taking our precautions seriously." She could have very well taken the lapse in supervision to go about on her own. As it was, while he was glad they could provide a home for the girl, give her her own room, he hadn't been able to sleep until he confirmed with Leliana thrice that Ellie's quarters was secure, the door locked and the only people with a key were the Spymaster, and the two residing in the room itself, Eleanor and Marehis. He hadn't known Marehis was spending the night with the girl until the Spymaster sighed and informed him that Ellie was hardly alone. He just...oh Maker, he could not abide anything happening to her.

So, sword at his hip, an arm around his girl, they walked along Skyhold's walls, to where Varric had told Ellie to meet him and his 'friend'.

His best friend.

Oh Maker above, Andraste...all of the other gods if they were so inclined.

"Hallo, Cullen," Hawke greeted amicably, "Long time no see?"

"You know Varric's friend?" Ellie asked him.

..."Unfortunately," he looked to Varric. "Cassandra is going to kill you."

The Dwarf sighed, hand wrenching at the back of his neck. "Yeah Curly, I know. Look, we need his help, I'm tryin' to get him in and out of here as fast as possible, maybe the Seeker
doesn't need to kno-

"Ha!" Fat chance! He certainly wasn't going to go down for this when Cassandra found out, she would undoubtedly so there was little use hiding it from her. "Enjoy the rest of your life. Ellie, if you've anything at all to say to Ser Tethras, I suggest you do so now."

"Papi?" Ellie questioned him.

Hawke's eyes widened at that, a ridiculous smile spreading across his face, "Papi?"

"Yes. Not what you're thinking, but if you so much as hurt a hair upon our Inquisitor's head, you and Varric can have a lovely joint-funeral dedicated to your friendship."

Hawke gasped, looking to Varric, "Oh man, that's exactly how I wanna go out though, wouldn't that be sweet?"

"Fenris will be jealous," Varric warned, but, "Lets do it. No open caskets though, Rivani will steal my chest hair."

"The things she wants to do with it require it still be attached. I'm thinking cremation, get an urn shaped like a tankard, our ashes mixed together for eternity."

"You are the only man ever I'd want to be inside of or inside me-"

Ellie squealed in surprise when Cullen covered her ear with one hand and used the same motion to pull her close enough to cover the other ear by pressing it up against his side.

"Gentlemen!" he reprimanded. Good. Heavens.

"Sorry Tumbles, got caught up in the bromance," Varric offered the girl.

She wriggled her head out of Cullen's hold, "What is even going on?!"

"Garrett Hawke," the man decided to introduce himself bowing his head to her.

'Garret' Varric mouthed, looking as though he hadn't even ever acknowledged his dearest friend had a name other than 'Hawke', nor did he particularly care for it.

"...as in 'Champion of Kirkwall' Hawke?" Ellie asked for clarification and when the man nodded. "Cassandra is going to kill Varric, and I kind wanna punch you in the face, honestly." Did she need a boost?

"Well, I honestly wouldn't blame you," Hawke said, kneeling, bringing himself more level with the girl. "Varric's told me a lot about you, to the point I've considered coming to officially duel you for his friendship," he offered with a wink, and then, "I am sorry, Ellie. There are many things I regret about Kirkwall's rebellion. I regret even more, the mess you're in now. With Corypheus. I have fought him before...to the point that I thought he was dead. Varric informs me he is not, and that is why I am here. To help in any way that I can, in your pursuit of him."

Ellie nodded. "Okay. So...let's talk."

"Do you want me to stay with you, Ellie?" Cullen offered.

She shook her head. "I'm okay, Varric's with me, and the Tavern's right there, Cole, Sera, Bull, Cremisius, I've got options. Besides, I know you're busy," she said, then, "Vas a chismearle a mami?" Are you going to tattle to mommy? oh he did so enjoy learning Antivan.
"Mami?" Varric asked, he'd precious little knowledge of the girl's native language, but that word was plain enough. "Oh shit, come on-"

"Si, mjia. Big time."

"Look just, break it to her gentle okay?" Varric asked, "Don't let her get bent out of shape over this, I know she's got a lot going on right now-"

"You've been awfully concerned for her lately," Cullen said, Maker, the Dwarf had practically made himself a nuisance even to Cullen, as of late, "should I be concerned of your intentions?"

"What? No! Wait, I don't mean that like 'oh gross no' Seeker's- Just- I'm just happy for you crazy kids, okay? What you two got going on is really cool."

It is really cool! And really strange for the Dwarf to feel the need to point that out, but... "Alright. Well then. I'll take my leave, do take care of Eleanor, would you?"

He. Was so. Fucked.

And Hawke was just laughing his ass off at him as Cullen went off to... bah. Didn’t need Antivan to know Curly was gonna go rat him out to Seeker. Oh man. She was gonna be so pissed. He... he didn’t want to piss off Seeker in general but he was pretty sure a hormonal Seeker was gonna be a whole new world of hurt. Wasn’t sure chocolate would save him now.

Oh. But that reminded him. “Here kid, how you feeling?” he asked as he offered her a little bar of chocolate from his coat pocket.

She accepted it, though when she unwrapped it she broke it off into three pieces, handing some off to Hawke who was looking at him like he deadass was offended Varric never offered him pocket chocolate before. Well his ass didn’t have his body violently betray him once a month, did he?

“Thanks for the chocolate—monthly’s gone now but I still have tastebuds,” she said as she sat on the edge of the wall, gestured to the space before her for Hawke to sit if he’d like.

Thank literally everything, he’d been damn sorry for the kid, all that bullshit going down and then on top of it all, she’s beat to hell and got an angry uterus. “Glad to hear it.”

And Hawke was laughing again. Cackling, the bastard. Varric almost hoped he’d fall. “So that’s why you wrote me all those months ago, asking what I do for Bethany?”

Yeah fat lot of good that’d done him. Leave out the nice waterskin and mostly avoid contact, which was a real bitch when we lived in Lowtown, why the hell do you think I’d spend a week at the Hanged Man once a month? Can’t go too long without hearing your dulcet snores? Seriously considered turning her over to the Templars—Maker help them reign her in. Hadn’t been the expert advice he was looking for.

“Bethany’s your sister, right? Is she still with the Grey Wardens?” Ellie asked, concerned. Sweet kid. He sat down on her other side, he’d thought he’d give them space to talk but uh, Cullen
had walked her here…so Marehis might not be around? He didn’t see the Elf woman anywhere and
she usually was never too far away from the kid, Ellie’d talked about ‘options’ for an escort so. He
figured he should probably stick around and make sure she was safe. Wasn’t sure what her
schedule was like and he needed Hawke gone before Seeker could come wring both their necks, but
he’d pass her off to whoever she wanted when they were done. “We um, haven’t heard from them
since the Conclave. They’ve gone missing, did you know that? She isn’t missing, is she?”

“Ahh, no, she’s fine—safe, with friends, I pulled her from her station when things went
sideways in Kirkwall,” Hawke assured her.

“I’m glad she’s okay.”

“Thanks. She’s real excited about you—Herald of Andraste, now you’re Inquisitor I hear?
And a Mage? That’s pretty kick ass. Lot of pressure though huh? Lot of responsibility?”

“This isn’t even the craziest thing I’ve had to deal with in the last twenty-four hours,” she
said, leaning back to rest the back of her head against Varric’s shoulder, “would it be acceptable to
institute an Inquisition-wide nap time? Everyone just shut up and take a nap for a solid hour?”

“Hey, you’re the boss now, I’d be down,” shit. What the hell happened? Kid did look
damn tired, but he thought it was her monthly crap. She hadn’t even been Inquisitor for twenty-
four hours yet, who the hell was making her job hard already? He’d kick their ass!

Oh man, Hawke got serious then. Guy tried to keep things light, just about the only way to
handle half the bullshit he’s dealt with in the last decade. But he sighed and offered a hand to the
kid, and she took it with her Marked one, Hawke holding it while he opened up about how he felt,
when things were starting to get real in Kirkwall. One day his family was just scraping by in
Lowtown and the next, he’s responsible not only for his entire family, but an entire city.

“I made decisions, did things I felt were right for my people in the moment. And
somehow, someway my actions affected even a little girl in the Free Marches that I would never
have even met if it wasn’t for all this,” he said gesturing vaguely to encompass this entire bullshit
situation. “That’s insane. You? You’re going to be making an even bigger impact with this
Inquisition, and it’s going to take a lot of support to deal with that. So. I get if you don’t
particularly like me, but if you ever need advice or anything—don’t listen to Varric, he’s an
irresponsible dumbass,” he’d just been waxing poetic about looking out over Kirkwall’s streets
from his balcony and about the weight of his responsibilities, what the fuck, where was the love?!,
“and do make contact with me, anytime alright?

Ellie giggled. “I don’t hate you or anything. I don’t even dislike you just…I had to be mad
at someone, you know? I guess I’m that someone for a lot of people now, huh, when the
Inquisition does things that people might not like or hurts someone.”

“Can’t let it get to you, or you’ll never get anything done. You’re gonna do a lot of good,
Varric’s a dumbass but he’s a good judge of character and he can’t shut the hell up about yours.”

“You’re being the friendship sort of mean to Varric right? Because I will fight you.” Hell
yeah! Get him Tumbles!

“You really do say that, I love it! Isabella’s gonna flip!” Hawke laughed, “Oh man, yeah
I’m being the friendship sort of mean, no worries. Varric ever told you about Isabella? She’s a big
fan—you’re Antivan though right, not Rivani?” Ellie nodded. “Still, spunky kid. Don’t lose that
okay?”
“I’ll try. Thanks—for being so nice and offering me advice and things. But you said something about how you killed Corypheus? Didn’t seem to stick, I’ve got a butt bruise still receding from being slammed against a trebuchet. He’s big and mean and crazy. And ugly.”

“You got that right Tumbles,” Varric said. Ugly asshole. Fucking asshole whipping her around like a doll. Did not like that, did not like that at all. Weirdly glad that was the only place she was getting butt bruises from though. Oh man, she’s an adult kind of and it’s none of his business—but he had to remind himself of that when he was coming back from the Tavern after everyone went for drinks after the memorial service yesterday. Tumbles and Boyfriend had been real uh… looked like he caught the tail end of a face sucking session way in the back of the Great Hall, there wasn’t really anyone around and they were by her door, and he was low-key terrified she was about to invite the guy into her new room, christen the place or something but nope, she said something, and he’d nodded—kissed her a few more times—then went their separate ways.

But uh, there were bigger issues at hand. Hawke really did know how to find trouble, didn’t he? Maker love him.

“I’ve got a friend in the Wardens, his name is Stroud— he knows where the Wardens have gone, and it has something to do with Corypheus’s return. But there are Wardens working for Corypheus, trying to track him down and stop him from getting help. I know where to find him, and I can give you his location, if you come, he’ll tell you everything he knows.”

“Where is he?” Ellie asked.

“Crestwood.”

“…that…that’s on the map in the War Room, near the Storm Coast. It’s rainy isn’t it?”

“Very, unfortunately.”

“Sabes qué,” she complained, "haven’t the Wardens ever heard of any tropical locations?”

“Apparently not,” Hawke supposed.

“Okay,” Ellie sighed. “You don’t want to chat up my Advisors?”

“I’d probably best get out of here before I get Varric into trouble. I should make contact with Stroud—I’ll send word to your people on when and were to meet up.”

“I’ll tell them then, be safe okay?” Ellie cautioned him, leaning forward and hugging the guy who looked a little startled—yeah, she is a hugger, he warned him. He was either walking out of here with a black eye or a hug, there was really no in between when it came to Tumbles.

Though uh, Varric might end up with a black eye.

Hawke pulled his hood up over his head and walked with them to the Tavern, get Ellie with someone who could see her to wherever she needed to go next, probably the War Room… maybe Seeker would be occupied with this stuff for the rest of the day? A Dwarf can’t dream, but he can daydream can’t he?

“Varric!”

Nope. Can’t even do that. Hawke—asshole! Ass! Hole! He hightailed it out of there when they were leaving the Tavern and walking by the armory to get to the gate, fuck! Seeker had apparently been waiting for them just outside the Quartermaster’s office since Cullen Tattle-tale
Rutherford told her they were meeting in the battlements above.

“Was that-?!” she pointed as—shit how fast was he running? He was already out the gate!

“Heeeeeeey Seeker,” Varric greeted, just, gonna start with sucking up, “you know—
you’re lookin’ real cute? Has anyone told you you’re glowing lately? You’re just killin’ it today.”

Shit, would it be healthy if the popped a blood vessel? She looked like she might pop a blood vessel. “Oh, I’m killing something alright. We need to talk—now!”

Ohhhh she had not been so- so viscerally angry, outraged with this Dwarf since she met him. And they’d had quite the tremulous relationship! The nerve! The absolute gall he had to lie to her face, to Most Holy through her! He dragged her around for days during his interrogation! Days she should have spent handling the Conclave’s preparation with Justinia, should have been there, and present to perceive the threats that had been awaiting her that day! And then to invite Hawke here, have him speak with Eleanor, and slip him out like! Like he could keep this from the Seeker?!

He’d gone with her compliantly when she took him up by his arm, pulling him into the armory and upstairs so they were not doing whatever this was for all and sundry to see, throwing him forward the moment they were alone, “You lied!”

“You kidnapped me! What was I supposed to do?!”

“You could have told me the truth! We needed Hawke and you knew where he was!”

“I didn’t know why you needed him—I thought you were trying to take him down! I didn’t know about the Conclave—” oh goodness sake, what- what bullshit, but he elaborated, “I didn’t know that was what you wanted him for! You never said! I mean yeah, I made some educated guesses, thought maybe you wanted to ‘bring him to justice’ in front of everyone, send a message to whichever side the Divine was favoring and convince them to end this shit, but I swear Cassandra, if I known—“

“You didn’t need to! The Most Holy Divine wanted to know something—and you should have supplied answer! This is not a game, Varric! It was serious and you- we needed him! Hawke was the only one Justinia believed could help her bend the ear of both Mages and Templars, and if anyone could have saved Most Holy it would have been Hawke!”

Several things happened at once.

There was a very, very familiar, very surprised-mixed-hurt sounding gasp.

All of the blood drained from Cassandra’s face, her heart stopping for all of a horrible beat.

And Varric made an ass of himself, coming to her defense—Cassandra’s defense.

Oh Maker, she did not wish to turn around to confirm, but she did. Eleanor was standing there, pallid and Cassandra regretted nothing more in her life, than the fact that she had said
something so thoughtless that made the girl look like…like she were desolately accepting some truth.

“Eleanor, I-“ she did not meant it, not-not how it sounded.

“I’m sorry, C-Cole said I could find you here, I heard y-yelling and um,” she was shaking and Casandra was uncertain if she were about to cry or yell or flee, but Varric made quite the spectacle of himself to keep her from any of those options, to get her to stay and talk this through.

“Whoa whoa whoa, kid, hold on—don’t take what Seeker said personally, okay? That’s all on me, I’m the one she’s mad at. She didn’t mean that—she’s pissed, and pregnant, you know that’s not a good mix—“ and then he blanched, “oh shit. Oh shit, I’m so so sorry Seeker I swore I wouldn’t say anything- fuck!”

“Pregnant?!“ Eleanor and Cassandra asked in unison though Eleanor sounded far more excited with the accusation than the Seeker who railed, “What on the Maker’s green world would make you think I am pregnant?!“

“You…you mean you’re not?“ he asked, sounding entirely shocked—what was there to be shocked about?!

“Of course not!” Maker!

“Well I- I- you’re the one who said you couldn’t drink! And we even talked about it—you worried you were ‘displaying symptoms’ and said Cullen knew and he was supportive!”

“Because I have chronic depression I am currently medicating myself for, Varric! I am not with child outside of the fact I am currently in the same room with Eleanor!” Cassandra snapped.

“Well I— I would certainly not imbibe alcohol if I were and you saw me drinking less than a month before your cockamamie suspicions arose, just how soon do you think women know they are pregnant?”

Oh, Varric went very, very still, “…Human women don’t know they’ve conceived like, right then and there when it uh, happens?”

“No!” Was…was that the case for Dwarven women?

“Uh-huh…Fuck. Uh…I got some people I should write. Just uh. Check in on things. Are we uh, good here?”

“We most certainly are not good! You—“ ugh. He truly thought her pregnant? That explained his recent behavior—constantly checking in on her, making certain that she was not hurt or hungry or thirsty or in need of assistance or a break, he…while misguided and severely mistaken…if she truly had been in such a situation…loathe though she was to admit it, Varric was first and foremost…a good friend. And…and while she still resented his dishonesty she could not fault him for his loyalty. That was loyalty he extended apparently now to her, and most importantly, to Eleanor, and she was glad that if the Dwarf ever did fall in to nefarious hands, he would rather die than give up anything that could lead to Eleanor’s harm. “Go. We will discuss this more calmly later. Right now I should speak with Eleanor, and you should investigate your potential for unknowingly siring bastard children.”

“You’re a real pal.”

“Obviously,” Cassandra found herself…it was not giggling, but it was giddy laughter she supposed, oh Maker but she was struck by, “You offered me so much chocolate yesterday!”
Fifteen times he had gone out of his way to encounter her! She likely would have eaten her weight in the stuff if she’d accepted his every offer as opposed to the one time she did take a piece.

“I dunno, I see a uterus thing, I throw chocolate at it until it feels better. Seriously, I stocked up for uh, the whole ride. So, you need chocolate, I’m your guy.” ‘The whole ride?’ Cassandra was honestly tempted to see this great stash of chocolate the Dwarf had imported to supply a pregnant woman for the next several months. Somewhere in Skyhold there was a mountain of chocolate, and she hadn’t the slightest clue where he could have stored such a thing. “And I was feeling guilty, I knew calling Hawke in would piss you off, but Ellie needed him.”

“And you chose to sacrifice Hawke’s anonymity to aid Eleanor. I do…appreciate it, Varric.”

“I am sorry Seeker, honest. If I’d known what you wanted him for…I don’t know how that would have gone down. But I’m sorry for everything it put you through.”

Cassandra nodded, and Varric sighed, leaving them, giving Eleanor a pat on the arm as he passed her.

Oh. The poor girl looked rather bewildered and confused and possibly upset, Cassandra waved her over, opening her arms, “Oh sweetheart come here,” she was grateful when the girl immediately obliged, let Cassandra hold her close, press her lips to her hair mmm, it smelled like Marehis had freshly washed it—well, she suspected Marehis as the woman had practically been dying for contact with the girl, to do anything with her or for her outside of guarding her from a distance. “I regret you heard what I said—I was not blaming you, I do not blame you for Justinia’s death”

“B…but you’re right. If…if H-Hawke had been there instead of m-me—”

“Then he would be the one with the Mark on his hand perhaps, and we would never have met, you would be dead, and I would not wish that for the world Eleanor.”

“Dunno, that might not be such a bad thing.”

Was that more of her macabre humor? “Eleanor?” it…it did not come off as humorous in the least. Cassandra pulled away to look into her face.

“I just meant it…it might not be a bad thing,” she said, looking to her feet, “if Hawke was the Herald instead of me. Just, he’s done stuff like this before, and he’s bigger, and stronger, and older and stuff, you know?”

“You have said so yourself that you are plenty big,” Cassandra offered, trying to go for something lighter, “and you have gotten stronger, and older. You’ve risen to the occasion, Eleanor, truly. We are all so very proud of you.”

The girl nodded. “Thanks.”

“Are you…are you upset with me?”

The girl shook herself and then met the Seeker’s gaze and it took a second but she seemed to produce a small smile for her, “Nah, I mean after all…being pissed off and pregnant isn’t a good mix.”

Cassandra smiled, hugging the girl close, “Oh I could kill that Dwarf, what was he thinking?”
“Your um, depression though, is it really bad mami?” she asked, her hold tightening around Cassandra’s back.

She shook her head, “No, sweet girl. It was, for a time. I…was experiencing worsening symptoms, sleeping for longer than I normally should, a loss of appetite, intrusive thinking—I did not realize the issue however until your Cremisius advised that I should take care of myself, it gave me reason to analyze my recent behavior to ensure that I was doing as much, only to realize there was something indeed amiss. I sought treatment with Adan during your time in the Oasis.”

That had Eleanor pulling away, wide eyed and truly looking upset with her, “But you just said! You! You drank! That was months ago—you drank while-“

“Eleanor, it- I am an adult-“

“So am I!”

“It is not the same and you know it- I should not have done so, but I know my limitations Eleanor, I am capable of—what I drank was tea laced with rum that was shared among our party to calm and console our nerves one evening as we returned from the Fallow Mire, it was nothing strong, like Varric’s bourbon—if I had consumed drink such as that at our gathering before we faced the Breach, yes, I would have had a severe interaction with my potions. As it was, it relieved a headache, and made it easier for me to find peaceful sleep, I was in full control of my actions, I remember everything with clarity, and I certainly did not black out.”

“Why was everyone so upset? I didn’t see anything like that-“

“You were asleep.”

“And? That doesn’t answer the ‘upset’ part!”

“We were merely up, discussing, processing the things you revealed to us, of your first encounter with demons in the Fade.”

The girl deflated at that. “So…so I made you need to drink?” Eleanor asked, and then, “Y…you said you needed m-medication while I was gone I- did I do this? Did I make your dep-“ her chin was quivering.

“Eleanor! Sweetheart, child, no!”

“B-but-“

“Eleanor Liana Trevelyan, look at me,” Cassandra intoned fiercely, taking the girl’s face in-hand and drawing it so she need only lift her eyes to look into the woman’s face. “You are not responsible for my own, or anyone one else’s mental health. I have dealt with depression for far longer than you have even been alive. I have good times—good years even, years where I suffer no ill consequence, maybe the occasional bad day but that could be simply life than my brains’ incapability to consistently supply the chemicals I need to be a healthily functioning member of society. You have done nothing more so than bring me so much happiness my sweet girl.”

Eleanor sniffled as Cassandra pressed a kiss to her cheek. And when she pulled away the girl smiled slightly, “That’s the second time I got full-named today.”

“Truly?”

She nodded. “Papi said it earlier…he was staring into space and wasn’t responding to
anything I was saying when we started our meeting so I might have gotten creative and just started saying things to get a reaction out of him. Like getting Cremisius’s name tattooed on my butt.”

Oh goodness, Cassandra could not help but smile at that. “That certainly got his attention I trust?”

“Uh-huh!” oh, it was nice to hear her giggle. “Gosh, wow. Okay. I’m on like hour five of my first day Inquisitoring and my daddy has Lyrium withdraw and my mommy has depression, and my other daddy might secretly be an ancient Elven god, and my other mommy might have depression, and I have to go to rain-town to find a whistle-blowing Warden to stop Corypheus from whatever the hell he’s trying to do and I’m just really ready for a damn nap. Can I retire?”

“Certainly, we will need to discuss your Warden-finding but we can wait for you to nap if you’ve need.”

“I meant from the Inquisition.”

Oh goodness, she was jesting but, “Do you truly regret your position?”

Eleanor sighed. “No. Maybe. Ask me again after my nap for real—we do need to talk about the Warden stuff but um, well, you talked to Marehis, yeah?”

Ahh. “Yes. You are ready to move forward with her plan?”

Eleanor nodded. “I’d do just about anything for a nap right now, so yeah. I’m in.”

It’d been rather a quiet day—following a quiet night. He’d missed Marehis at his side, but she’d pulled him aside after the memorial service yesterday and lamented that Eleanor was…well, the girl was hit rather hard by Haven’s loss, sad, and tired, and still sick from her monthlys to a point that Marehis wished to spend the night with her, have Cole join them and he would monitor the girl for abnormality, perhaps she was suffering some greater internal issue. It certainly was not normal for her to suffer so much for so long, perhaps her body was having a horrible response to having been put on medication in the first place, or perhaps immediately bringing an end to taking that medication was causing it, either way, it could indeed be something they needed the Healers to get involved with. Oh he did hope nothing was terribly wrong, he…admittedly did press the bond, and it had shaken him, how much despair, and dread, and hurt he felt, how much pain she was in, emotionally and physically—her head pounded with ache and he was certain she’d been sobbing, and her stomach had hurt horribly, she’d felt nauseous in an extreme that almost sent him retching. He’d pulled away, and…well he certainly didn’t pray, but he did take a moment to wish well for her, think positive things in the hopes perhaps the universe at large would take note and heed his warning that if anything detrimental happened to that girl, he would not abide it.

He…oh he loved her. The notion had been unimaginable so many months ago when they first met. He thought he could never care for anyone that was not his kin. He could barely find palatable Elves in the waking world, Marehis had taken him quite by surprise, Sera too. He’d only been able to find true friendship, companionship with those of his friends who were trapped in the Fade. Spirits…some, who he had lost to corruption, been twisted into demonhood or…perhaps lost in the way Cole was lost. He could never be certain, maybe what was Elven was still alive in him, he did not know personally, the Elf turned-Spirit of Compassion that now possessed the body of
Cole, so he could not know if they were altered irreparably.

Smart, Smooth, Smiling, but Shy, Secretive—Solas is the best, he’s so kind and intelligent and worthy, he does not need to hide himself! He is so loved for who he is!

Those were the words Cole had spoken from Eleanor’s mind when he began his interrogation of the Spirit after the fall of Envy in Therinfal. I know you by another name. But you were always Solas, the other came later, a title. You do not want me to call you that? Okay. What do you want to know?

That had been most of what he’d wanted to know—if the Spirit would be his demise or not. But the Spirit had no reason, nothing to prompt him in any way that might lead him to disclosing his identity…nor, did Solas think, would any believe. The only person who had reason to suspect him was the Iron Bull, and while he had a soft spot for the ‘kid’, it was merely play, petting the boy so he did not bite—the Qunari feared what the Spirit might do if provoked. And he certainly would not take stock in anything wholly outlandish the young man had to say, he still took any of his proclamations with a grain of salt.

There was a gentle knock on the door to the rotunda Solas had taken refuge in, before it swung open and Solas grinned, setting his book aside as he rose to his feet.

“Ellie,” he greeted oh, had…he had missed her—she had been so very busy as of late, Marehis had worried the girl was upset with her, but that was merely his vehnan being too hard upon herself, Eleanor adored her, she was just overwhelmingly tasked with something Solas had been reticent to give her, but she had surely stepped up, and fulfilled it to a T. It had been no small task, guiding them here, claiming Skyhold for the Inquisition, and now, she was Inquisitor. “Ma da’vehnan,” he said, and she offered him a smile when he made to hug her, pull her close, it was relief to hold her it surprised him then, how much he truly had missed this—when last had they hugged? Not since Haven. But he had honestly been fearful to hold her when she woke from the aftermath, he had felt the horrible pain inflicted upon her Mark, and she was still in agony, not in her hand, but her head, her spine, goodness he feared the future functionality of her left shoulder. Corypheus had been brutal. That…bellanaris din’an heem! Foul, corrupt creation. He should have never…he had been a fool to entrust the Orb to Corypheus. He thought the man would die! That awakening the Orb through ritual at the Conclave would leave the activated Orb in the ashes for him to collect and make use of but it had not. No, the only thing that came from the ashes was a Marked mortal girl who did nothing to deserve it’s cruel fate to begin with, he…he was in conflict. In August he would have seen her dead, a casualty among mere mortals, misguided elves that had nothing to offer his people, the best thing any of them had to offer the world, he thought, was their demise leading to the Orb working as it should once more. Allowing him to set things right. But now…so much had changed. He was more horrified, outraged at the bruising on this girl’s arm that meant his hand had held her, than that the other had held his Orb-

“Papi, you’re hurting me.”

He gasped, pulling back immediately, he had not meant to hold her so tightly it caused her pain, “I apologize, truly da’vehnan,” he shot out hands brushing along her biceps to soothe, ahh, he’d been hugging around her shoulders, he should have been more careful, “have I agitated your injury? Do you need potion sweet girl?”

She seemed to be assessing his words and then, “No, I’m okay.”

He nodded, and then it struck him, now that he was past his initial panic. “I…you have not called me that before.”
“Well, I love you just as much as I love Cullen, I’ve loved you even longer than him even,” she said plainly, and oh…oh it was indeed true, her love was spilling into the bond even now though there was something painful, sad in what she was feeling. But physically…her stomach was upset, and her head still ached, her shoulder was sore but not to great detriment.

“Have you had a hard day, Ellie?”

The girl swallowed, chin quivering, and she wrapped her arms around his middle, Solas resting a hand on the crown of her head, oh this poor child. “I’m really tired, and sad, and I’m scared. I really need to lay down and- and I know you’re probably busy but I w-was hoping-“

Oh, “You needn’t even ask, da’vehnan, past the point that obviously a verbal request is the best method to convey your needs,” he supposed. “Do you wish to lie down with me here, or shall we go to your room?”

She looked as if she felt badly to say as much when she pulled away but, “Um…actually—please don’t take this the wrong way but I’m exhausted and sleeping with mami was helpful—I like sharing with other people but I haven’t really had a bed to myself in months except the whole, being unconscious after Haven thing. I mean even last night, I know she didn’t mean to but she slept with her head on my shoulder for most of the night, and most positions with people end up with me waking up and it hurting-“

“Ahh, of course. You needn’t fear sweet girl, I could sit in a chair and find sleep or I could even lie down here, and you in your room—we would not be too far from one another to find each other in the Fade. In fact I have something in mind that may help you feel better, if you wish?”

Ellie nodded, offering him a small smile, “I’m gonna go get ready—wash my face, put on jammies, so it’ll be a couple minutes.”

“Take your time, I will be ready whenever you are.”

She nodded again and made to leave though she paused in the door way, looking back to him, “I really do love you Solas. A whole, whole lot.”

“As I love you, da’vehnan. Go, sweet child, get some rest. I’ll see you momentarily.”

He laid down on the daybed up against the wall, the sounds of activity in the library over head did little to disturb him, it was a library after all. He closed his eyes, focused, and cast his mind into the Fade as quickly as possible. He traveled through an older version of Skyhold, one he felt more familiar with, in days of old when it was his, and he made through the pristine building until he reached the room that now served to house Ellie.

Oh. She was there.

Not Ellie, Mythal*. The All-Mother, and to some degree of irony, soon-to-be-mother. Round and ripe in her pregnancy, her nightgown could no longer billow out to mask the fact, even when she stood. As it was, now In the Fade, she was seated on her bed, she was still warm and rosey cheeked, humming contentedly as she brushed her long raven hair. Her smile was blinding as she looked up to him and,

“Solas, my love, you’ve returned.”

An answer was at his lips, and there it died. Because she was not addressing him. Not as he was now. Oh how he wished he could reach out, shake the man that stepped through him to be at her side—lay hand on the life they made, take her lips in his own. He wanted to stop him, warn
him of the fate that was waiting them, warn him of the terrible, terrible mistakes it would lead him to make-

It was strange but in the same moment he realized he loved Marehis just the same. He still mourned in his way, felt the loss of Mythal. No one had been more pure than she, more compassionate, she had been the best their people had to offer, and they slaughtered her, despite… despite everything. But he could not, even if he brought down the veil, return Mythal’s full self. If even a piece of her spirit lived on it would always be in some vessel that consumed her, precious little of her true being shining through. And it had horrified him, when he first realized that the fact no longer hurt as it had once before. He would always love her, always miss her…but if she appeared before him now, true and alive he would not want her as he once had. He would love her, they would have a beautiful amicable relationship, but Marehis held his heart captive now. He had changed in so many ways, in ways that scared him sometimes, but even now, standing with this vision before him—it’s beauty could steal his breath but in his heart he wished it were truly him, standing before Marehis, Ellie in her arms or even-

He should focus on what he came here to do, this—the imagery of the All-Mother in gestation was a powerful one and it had clearly addled his brain. Now was certainly not the time to bring further life into this world. But if he did do so…he had not wanted such since he woke. But he did very much like the idea that he might one day do so with Marehis—

And it scared him that his very next thought was, he would like that child to know Ellie. Be loved by her, raised at her side. That if she herself had any children in the future, they would know each other. And-

Once upon a time, mortality had stricken him scared beyond comprehension, he grasped at immortality like a man dying of thirst reaching for the last vessel of water on this world. Now it startled him that he felt little fear in the idea of growing old with someone, meeting death…it scared him. He did not know what truly lay beyond this life, would he be punished for his sins? Would he and Marehis go to the Fade with their kind? Or would they be reborn? A mortal life with those he loved, sounded almost like comfort now, and immortality, to live past their loss, he thought he would still have Marehis, he prayed what he planned would work but…Ellie. She, any who came from her, eventually they would be lost to him.

Task at hand. Presently the past was gone, and the future unclear, now Ellie needed him, needed healing. Needed Haven.

He’d just barely constructed his memory of Haven village when she appeared—Ellie, in soft, clean pajamas, socks that seemed too big for her, but comfortable on her feet though the moment she took in the sight around them,

“I should have worn boots, yeah?”

He chuckled. “I suppose. Are you…does it please you? Are you distressed, at all?”

Eleanor seemed to consider it, head nodding side to side before she looked to him. “I miss Haven, and it’s kind of sad to be here but…I like seeing it again, the way it should be.”

“Good,” he said, extending an arm to her, and pulling her to his side, “come.”

He did not bring her here to remind her of darker days. They walked the halls of the Chantry—he’d seen little of the War Room, but there was a table, a large blank sheet in its center and she giggled, moving forward from his hold and she dipped her fingers in the inkwell on the table and—
“War room meetings suck?” he laughed out as he read what she had scrawled out in large lettering across the empty parchment in her mischief.

“Balls—big yucky ones,” she elaborated, “the Iron Bull’s after a week in the desert with no bath.”

“Oh da’vehnan that is absolutely nauseating imagery,” he laughed.

“And now you know what a War Room meeting feels like—you’ll never wish you’d attended one,” she enthused as if she’d done him some great service. This child. What was he to do with her?

She was at his side again, holding his hand as they walked into the snowy courtyard, looking up at the clear sky, “This is what it would have looked like, huh? The sky over Haven without the breach?”

“Yes, it is.”

“It’s strange being here, everything looking so much the same, even when everything is so, so incredibly different,” she said as she released his hand, stepped away as she stared into the sky, like she were endeavoring to get a closer look. And then she sighed, shrugging. “Well, this has been really nice Fen, but I’m done looking around for now.”

Fen? “Da’len?”

She turned around to face him, calm, though playing mild confusion, “Fen?” she offered as if he’d merely not quite heard her the first time. “Oh, do you not like informality? Fen’Harel then. That’s your name, isn’t it? Or do you really just prefer Solas now? Cole isn’t sure.”

…Cole.

“Da’vehnan, I’m not sure what-“

“Oh, you’re not sure? That’s okay, I’ll catch you up. You’re Fen’Harel, the Dread Wolf. You know about the Orb somehow, Cole says it was yours? Not because you saw Corypheus with it. See, when you pulled me aside to talk about finding Skyhold, and to come to you first if I learned anything about the Orb or the Inquisition got to it, you messed up big time. I hadn’t said jack to anyone about what happened in Haven. I mean I’d just woken up really, and you whisk me off, already know about something you couldn’t without having seen it, and apparently not only did no one else in our group see anything, you were out like a light,” she stopped, seemed genuinely sympathetic, “I…I am sorry you felt what Corypheus did to my Mark, that it hurt you so badly,” and then, “but I just…nothing felt right about that. So I talked to some of the others, and it turns out, some of us found question with your whole relationship with the Inquisition to begin with. And then I finally get Marehis alone to talk to her about it, try to find something to redeem you, verify that you aren’t totally sketchy—that it was all just coincidences or paranoia—and Marehis told me all about your ‘legends and lore’ the supposed ‘schism in your villiage’. Where is that by the way? Was that even real?”

“It…I…”

“And she’s talking about your faith and I remember…you don’t really have any that I know of. And then Cole shows up. Because Marehis and I were so hurt and confused by all of this—why would you lie to us? What did you have to hide? Was it bad? Could we trust you? We love you with all of our hearts, it would kill us if it turned out we couldn’t trust you. And just as he’s
showing up, I’m telling Marehis that you don’t believe in the Dalish gods—you said to me once, you don’t bow to them. Surprise surprise, Cole outs you as being one. Is that true?"

“Da’vehnan-“

“Is that true?!” she shouted, voice echoing loud and fierce in the Fade. and then her expression crumbled, "Don't lie to me...please."

…

“They were never gods, da’len,” his voice was hollow, he felt hollow. "They were just mages, the most powerful of all our people. They overstepped their bounds, corrupt with their own power, and I brought them low.”

Her chin quivered, body shaking as she clenched her fists. “Did the Orb belong to you?”

“Yes.”

“And how does Corypheus have it?”

“I…gave it to him.”

Her head snapped down, eyes closed as she could not bear to look at him for a moment, he…how long could they sleep? How long would it take to right this? What should he do? If he- he couldn’t hurt her. More than he already had but, something must be done she could not tell the others. But…but it sounded like they already knew. He needed to fix this, get her on his side, see what he saw-

He wasn’t even sure anymore, what he saw.

At least, in this very moment, about his personal views on mortality and morality and the future.

He saw very well, what happened next.

Ellie looked up with him, anger in her expression as tears streaked her face. “Say hello to Cremisius.”

And then Haven blanked before him, their connection lost, and she surged into their bond to force him awake, sitting up in his bed as he gasped for breath.

And Cremisius Aclassi stood in wait, and he almost did not see the fist reared back, ready to strike past the murderous expression on his face.

“Hey there friend.”

A blow to his temple, the other cracked off the rotunda wall.

Fen’Harel fell unconscious.
His damn hand still hurt, but it was real fucking worth it.

He knew how to punch just...might have punched the guy a hell of a lot harder than he needed to. As hard as he could. Just making sure it knocked him out. You know. For security reasons.

Marehis and Cassandra were in charge of interrogating him. Fuck. He could really kill that guy. Marehis had been devastated—she loved him, thought she knew him, trusted him with everything, her heart, her body, and now he might be someone that, if she’d known who he was, she never wanted anywhere near her to begin with. So, now he had questions to answer. Bull was due to take a turn here soon, sometime. Last he heard, the guy was being talkative but there was a lot to talk about.

So, in the meantime, everyone stepped up, pitched in. Krem’d just come off a shift he’d taken for Rocky on the wall—stupid sap had hit on Elan, and Cabot had challenged him to a drinking competition for her honor or some crap. Dumbass forgot the guy was the fucking barman—now, no one was gonna accuse him of cheating, but Rocky walked away with a pretty nasty hangover to end all hangovers, and Cabot walked off, fit as a fiddle, closing down the bar because there was ‘nothing else to serve tonight’ and whisked Elan off for a stroll in the moonlight. Anyway, Rocky was sick as a dog, so. Krem took his shift, it was six in the morning and he was tired as shit, he shaved because it was morning and he’d needed it a little, then he’d been too hungry to sleep so he left his binder on, threw on a shirt and off he went—then bed!

But, he’d smelled fresh coffee when he rolled through the kitchens for a quick bite to eat before bed, and inspiration struck...well he just wanted to see her, alright?

He was part of the circulation of people trusted with guarding Ellie while Marehis was down in the dungeons with the Dread Wolf. That was just...beyond wild. So, he had a key to her place—Ellie’s. Let himself in, up the stairs and just...took a moment.

Maker, she was beautiful. Sleeping peacefully, thankfully, everything that had happened...she deserved some break from it all. Anya was curled up at the foot of her bed, good pup, protecting her mama. He almost felt badly to wake her, but she’d need to get up soon, for the day ahead, she had a War Room meeting at 7:30, and Mother Giselle wanted her to give a talk or something to the Chantry Sisters in the gardens at 10, and lunch and then the whole afternoon was blocked off because the tailor was finally getting in, and they weren’t sure how long that would need to go on, Maker. Madam de Fer had apparently helped her with ordering new underthings, and she liked stealing Krem’s socks, a few of his shirts to sleep in because—with big eyes, pouty lip she lamented that she just ‘didn’t have anything else’. Like he was gonna fight that? Nah. But she’d been rolling in her armor on the day to day.

When she was begrudgingly clasping up her armored tunic for the ‘bajillionth’ day in a row, he floated the idea that she could just go around naked. He certainly wouldn’t be complaining. That got him a playful swat to his side and, You’d get plenty of complaining! It’s too cold to have my tits and my bits all over the place! Plus papi would have a hay-day over it all, hurt himself going between trying to get me covered up and punching people out for staring. Which made a good point, he had been internally lamenting Skyhold not being a summery location, but uh, yeah, might end up punching some people so.

He knelt by her bed, carefully reaching out, brushing curls back from her face, “El, love? Time to wake up.”

She let out a little groan cracking an eye open just a sliver to look at him. “Have to?”
“Mmhmm,” and then the magic words—literally as close to casting magic as he was sure he’d ever get in his life. “I brought coffee.”

Oh man, that got him a big smile, happy humming as she rolled over more, sat up a bit to kiss him just—fuck, sometimes he was positive there was magic involved, like pouring sunlight into his soul. And then the coffee cup was snatched from his hand and her lips were on it when she sat upright. Dumb coffee—it didn’t even need sunlight!

Well…coffee was a plant right? So a little…but not anymore! Fuck off, ya plant juice!

She sighed contentedly. “Thank you, Cremisius,” she patted the bed, so he rose and sat on the edge, the motion made Anya open her eyes to investigate, look and see it was just Krem, and then went right back to sleep. They’d be concerned she was too docile but uh…Leliana tested having a total stranger come in while Ellie was ‘napping’ her first afternoon having a room of her own, before the memorial service, just to see how Anya would react. Pup had fallen asleep, but Ellie saw the moment she heard the down stairs door being messed with, she perked up, woke up, and the second the guy got to the top of the stairs Anya was growling, barking to alert Ellie and then shot off the bed, would have torn out the guy’s throat if Ellie hadn’t called out Parshaara, Qunlat word Bull taught her that means ‘Enough’, Anya had been trained to respond to it by stopping immediately whatever it was she was doing whether it was eating something she shouldn’t or running or tearing into an intruder. Guy walked away with a cheery ‘thanks’ from Ellie, a silver in hand from Leliana for his service, and soiled underwear Bull was pretty sure. Anya could put the hurt on.

Ellie pouted, “Lazy baby, mama’s gotta go to a War Room meeting and you can just sleep your little puppy life away huh? You sure you don’t wanna go decide between— “ she caught herself, “technically I’m not supposed to talk about it. But um. There might be a few countries interested in getting the Inquisition to voice an official opinion on them? Like? What even?”

“Seriously?” like an alliance or something? Damn. “How do you even decide that?”

“Coin toss. Or rating the people I know from those countries on levels of their hotness and going with the highest scorer. I know so many sexy foreigners.”

“El, you’re an Antivan with Free Marcher citizenship, living in Ferelden. You are a sexy foreigner.”

“Says one of the sexiest foreigners I know!” she enthused, leaning forward to peck him on the lips, giggling. “Thanks for the coffee and making sure I woke up on time. I don’t mind Cole waking me up but this was really nice.”

“Just wanted to see you before I head for bed. Took a shift for Rocky and I’m dog tired,” looked to Anya, “yeah I’m talking about your people, sleepyhead.”

Did she just wuff at him in her sleep? Could she hear him? Just how much did Mabari understand anyway?

“Oh gosh, um, you’re going to sleep now though, right? You don’t have anymore work?”

“Nah, Chief’s uh…” why did he feel guilty saying it? It was the truth, and he could do it! It just…it was weird to accept. “Chief gave me the day off today. For stepping in for Rocky, and I’ve got a hot date tonight so, beauty rest, making sure all the plans are in order, I got a busy schedule.”
“Hopefully not too busy…” she said, “You’ll be awake this afternoon? The tailor will be in this afternoon and I…gosh, it feels silly but it’s kind of the closest thing to dragging my boyfriend out shopping with me? I’d really like your opinion on some things.”

“Don’t gotta drag me anywhere, lovely, that sounds good to me. You sure? Not complaining, I mean I’m not gonna turn down the opportunity, possibility of a nip-slip-“

She gasped, wide eyed—“Don’t you dare wish that on me, I would actually die!”

He chuckled at her exaggeration, took a second but then, “But uh, just don’t…you don’t think you need my okay on the things you wear, right?” Been drug into the ‘bring your betrothed to the tailor’ situation before, by mother, toting Cornelius. That man had say on every last thing Krem wore when they were out together. Had an image he was going for, on top of the in general image he had to uphold just because of his status. Shit he didn’t even want to wear in the first place, double, triple didn’t want to wear it. Definitely wasn’t gonna play that shit with Ellie, she could wear a damn potato sack if she felt amazing and comfortable wearing it, anyone that had a problem with it could fight him. Girlfriend’d look fine in a potato sack, start a whole damn new fashion trend.

“Of course not, I just think it’d be kind of fun, you know?”

“Sounds like a plan then, I’ll ask Cole to let me know when I should get a move on.”

She let out an excited squeal, and it earned him another kiss, “Thanks!”

Well hell yeah! He’d meet this tailor every damn day if it made her that excited.

So he was sent off to bed ‘Inquisitor’s orders!’ to get some good rest. Passed Sera on his way out—she was first watch this morning.

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“Hey,” she greeted, sounded a bit tired but sad was more like it.

“Hold up,” he said, stopping her before she could go in, stepped up, took her up in his arms and gave her, what Ellie would classify as, ‘the biggest hug in the world’.

“Kremmy-boy!”

“That’s better,” he said as he let her down, she was smiling so, she was good to go.

“Thanks, just friggin- baldy! Everything’s so crazy and it makes my brain hurt and my heart sad and blah. Thanks for the squeeze. You wanna come keep watch with me?”

“Yes, but, I’m off to bed. Inquisitor’s orders.”

“Lettin’ the power go right to her head already,” Sera sighed, shaking her head. “Get some good sleep Kremmy-boy, have sweet dreams ‘n pish.”

“Thanks.”

Morning was full of Rogue surprises. Varric and Cole were waiting for him when he got to the Charger’s setup, Spirit stood with an arm up, fingers on some of his hair pinched between them.

“It grows back!” he announced when Krem got in range.

“Yeah buddy, it does.”
“I did not know that it would—Ellie said it would, so I cut some, and it did!”

“Kid’s real excited about it, my old gear went up in flames—I don’t got a sweet little girlfriend running into burning buildings to save my shit, so. I was wondering if you’d do me a favor? Let me borrow your shaving kit real quick.”

Oh. Shit uh, there was a part of him, like a little kid screaming ‘no!’ because, yeah, didn’t want anyone touching the only thing he had of his father’s. But yeah, he wasn’t gonna be an ass about it, and he trusted Varric, Cole. So, “Sure thing, I’ll just grab it real quick.” Wasn’t smart to share razors but there were scissors and things, clean backup razors Varric knew where to get in the lower parts from the time they’d worked together on Thom’s mug.

He only thought about it once he’d handed it off to Varric, shit, “Uh, wait, my uh, father’s pocketwatch is in there.”

“Uhh…” Varric started.


Maker. “Here,” he motioned and Varric carefully opened the box, and Krem pulled out the watch for Cole to see.

“Ooohhh, it is beautiful, it is not surprising pockets like to watch it,” he was even more excited when Krem popped it open, “It moves! Outside and inside tick tick tick tick, it is very soothing, and the magic feels warm, nice, like love.”

Huh. Cool. He uh, seemed real fascinated with it and…the guy was going for his first actual hair cut, he barely liked taking his hat off so Krem wasn’t sure how he’d cope with actual parts of him coming off. “Soothing huh? Hey Cole, bud, why don’t you hang on to it for me for a bit?”

Cole gasped in excitement as he took the pocketwatch in hand, “It worked!”

Worked?

“Works! He means it works. The watch. And him holding onto it. Uh. Thanks for the loaner, Boyfriend, promise you’ll get it back. Get some rest okay?”

He…yeah, tired. Trusted them. So bed.

There was something…sort of picked at the back of Krem’s mind as he slipped into his cot.

But it never did fully occur to him that one Varric Tethras, face as smooth as a baby’s bottom, had specifically needed his shaving kit.

He’s here! They’re ready! Go!

Fuuuuuuuuck him, Cole’s voice in his mind wasn’t…it didn’t feel bad but it was still startling as shit. But that was a damn good way to get someone up. So. That worked. Felt rested, got up, binder on, and it was just a casual thing, someone would be standing guard for Ellie and it wasn’t like his binder didn’t offer some protection, plus he had his sword, so he just pulled on his trousers…wasn’t entirely sure how long this would go, if he’d have time to change again before his date tonight, and Ellie’d had her dress laid out, said she wanted to show this new tailor what he was competing against since Krem’s handiwork had been brought to bear, so he guessed she would be
wearing that now, keep it on for their date. She’d saved the nice crimson tunic Bull got him for First Day-Eve so, he went with that. Red for letting love in his life huh? Dinner and a nice stroll through Skyhold would hold plenty of that for him he was sure, just being together? That felt like everything.

He…wasn’t exactly sure if he should just walk in or not, Cole had come to get him, but still. He knocked a few times on the door before he reached for his key, but he heard Anya let out a few barks and Ellie call, ‘Coming!’ so he slowed his roll, waited…pretty sure she slipped and caught herself because he heard the steady patter-pat of her feet as she hopped down the stairs and then the skid and ‘oh!’ and her giggling before patter-pat, patter-pat all the way to the door. She opened it up to peek her head out,

“Why hello Cremisius, fancy meeting you here.”

“Quite the happy coincidence indeed,” he agreed with a grin. “Am I interrupting?”

“Nope! You’re right on time! You look so handsome by the way,” she said as she threw open the door to invite him inside. Maker she did look cute in her dress, she didn’t have cloth draping off of her six ways to Sunday yet, but maybe this was just a ‘measurements and style’ consultation or something.

“You look beautiful, how’s it going?” he asked the last part quietly.

“So great, come on, I can’t say for sure but I think you might really like him,” she said as she looped her arm through his, pulling the door closed behind them. “I hope you don’t mind, but I invited my boyfriend, to get his opinion!” she called to be heard upstairs.

Him? Huh…he…well that would be hypocritical to be jealous or feel weirdly about or anything. For goodness sake, his father was a tailor-

His…his father was-

His heart stopped when they reached the top of the stairs.

His father…was a tailor.

“Hello, Cremisius.”

His father was the tailor.

“Papà!” tore from his throat like he was five years old again, Ellie had already let go of his arm and he was launching himself across the room fast enough…Maker, it felt like if he didn’t if he wasn’t quick enough the man would be some false thing, some horrible trick, there one second and gone the next he-

He was alive! He was here! Salt and pepper hair neat and tidy, slicked back. Clean shaven, in his suit, pocketwatch chain hanging between where it was looped around a lower button of his suit jacket, and where the watch itself sat half-peeking from his pocket. It was like he never-!

But he had, he had been a slave, sold himself to save their skin, “I’m so sorry!” he wailed against his father’s neck.

“My son, I am sorry. I will do everything in my power to make up for what I have done, not standing up for you, my hand in forcing that horrible life upon you. Oh, meus bello mimo!”
It took a good solid while of holding onto him to really feel like this was a solid thing, he was here, he was real. He hadn’t done a real thorough security check on the room though, there could still be a Magister in the closet waiting to pop out and go ‘surprise!’ and take him back, he didn’t have to go back? How...how was he ever away from back? How was he here?!

He pulled away, raising a hand to hold his father’s face, it was real. Few more lines, marks of age, but that smile, those eyes. It was all the same. His father raised a hand to cup his face in return.

“Maker, my boy. You’re as tall as I am! You’re so handsome and- and Ellie tells me you are a soldier now, a mercenary, how- however did that happen? How exactly did you get hired by a Qunari? The Steel Druffalo?”

“The...The Iron Bull he...you-“

Ellie.

He turned around, found her sitting on her bed, holding Anya...as much of her as she could, the mabari’s lap on the bed, her front paws on the other side of Ellie’s legs while the girl held her around the neck, sniffling, crying—happy crying but still.

“Ellie...you...”

She looked startled like she’d been spotted or something and, “Don’t mind me! I’m just-! I would leave but I might get assassined- I can get in the closet-“ the room with the ladder in it?

“You can get over here,” he said, and Anya jumped down from off of her, she wiped her eyes with the back of her hands as she stood up and came to them. “Lovely...I literally watched you seal the Breach, and come back from the dead. And I still can’t believe how the hell you managed this.”

“Lots of help. Um. M-Magister Tilani? I was asking Dorian abo-about slavery, when we first met, because...I really did want to help, ever since you told me? And there wasn’t anything he could do exactly—his family is from the Qunaris, and he knows the Magister Tilani, but she isn’t family and he owed her so many favors, he couldn’t petition her. But V-Varric he, his cousin—Maevaris Tilani.”

Mae-

Oh, Maker.

“That’s why she wanted to meet you in Val Royeaux.”

“Uh-huh!”

“Why...why didn’t you tell me you were doing all of this? I could have hel-“ oh fuck, “You didn’t pay-“ they owed the world! Enough money to probably put Ellie into debt if she paid it all off on her own!

“I am in service to the Inquisition now,” his father said, “Magister Tilani forgave my personal debts to her, and the Inquisition will send payments to her for my work here, to work off the debt she paid for me, provide my room and board, Healers, as benefits not burdens on my debts. Cremisius, I could be free come next year.”

“I didn’t tell you at first because I was afraid,” Ellie explained carefully, like she was
worried it might make him mad. “I am sorry, I just…if I dangled the possibility in your face and this fell through? I’d never be able to forgive myself for that, hurting you that way. And then—it isn’t an excuse, honest, but I promised your father I would keep it from you, for the same reasons, and then when it was really happening, and close enough to be more certain, he really did want it to be a surprise. So. Surprise?”

“Father have you seen the view from that balcony?” Krem asked, raising an arm out behind him to point, wasn’t even sure it was a wall with a balcony on it but he had a 50/50 shot in this room. Father actually huffed a laugh, turned his back and Krem pulled Ellie forward and kissed her like her life depended on it. He could think of a few situation’s he’d be willing to say ‘let it go’ on his own, but on hers? Literally not on her life.

She had to catch her breath a quick moment when he finally pulled away, hand on his chest as she leaned against him, “Wowza…you have any friends that need freedom? Cousins?”

“Aiming the free all of Tevinter now?”

“…I will actually try, I have thoughts Cremisius, they keep me up at night—they being ‘it’ and ‘it’ being the fact that slavery exists.”

Maker.

Their date night plans went off without a hitch, just, way better than what he’d been thinking. Cole ratted him out to Ellie, his plans, which weren’t super top secret or unimaginable, but still. Bro code. Couldn’t hold it against him though—he just worked things out in the kitchens, made arrangements for a nice dinner for two to be delivered to Ellie’s room, set them up good, have a good meal, moonlight, all that. She tacked on a third order and boom. Dinner for three, nice bottle of wine she added on because he hadn’t been planning to drink on a date just the two of them, but it was something nice his father could indulge in, Krem accepted a glass, and when his father made to pour one for Ellie, she shook her head ‘no’ and said no thanks but then she gasped and assured,

“I’m not pregnant! I just don’t drink!”

…”Uh. Didn’t think you were, El?” Krem questioned.

“Sorry! Varric—he um. Cassandra isn’t drinking, you know?” He did. “And Varric has thought she was pregnant, ever since he found out.”

He...

Krem couldn’t help it, felt bad for the guy but damn, he couldn’t stop laughing! He! What the hell?!

“This Varric is quite the character—Tethras, the author, yes?” father asked.

“Uh-huh!” Ellie nodded.

“What attracted him to the Inquisition?”

“Cassandra kidnapped him and interrogated him for the location of his best friend. Garrett Hawke, the Champion of Kirkwall.”

“And then Dorian, he is Tevinter? How did he come to join your cause?”

“Time travel!”
“Truly?”

“Yup!”

“And The Iron Bull?”

“Well, that’s quite the doozy,” Ellie said, “you see he heard about the Inquisition’s efforts to seal the Breach and he wanted to help,” wasn’t allowed to mention Ben-Hessrath stuff, “and he sent the most handsomest Charger he could think of to deliver their offer to the Inquisition.”

“I was snotting all over everything.”

“You were sick!” Ellie defended. “And had a cute butt! It balanced out.”

Was she drinking? He sniffed the champagne flute in front of her just to make sure it was just bubbly apple juice, that tracked. “When did you-? What?”

“Watched you walk all the way to Haven’s outer gate, guapo.”

“You were ill?” Father asked as he set down his wine glass.

“Just a cold,” Krem assured him. “Ellie helped a lot. Wasn’t exactly comfortable going to Adan when I didn’t know him from Andraste, but she made sure I got treatment I felt safe getting, didn’t let me leave without having eaten and fill up my canteen, good news for my boss, and I think even a meal for the road.”

Father had a few questions about that. Healers, and feeling safe being treated. Krem broke it down the whole ‘sometimes people are assholes about treating people like him’, that uh, he’d actually joined the military to support himself and mother, losing that gig and having to go on the run because a healer hadn’t reacted well to what was or wasn’t in his pants. Told him about Bull, how he saved him, gave him a new place to start over, good work with good people.

“Mother um…she doesn’t accept my checks anymore. I don’t know if you’ve heard…” he looked to Ellie who shook her head ‘no’ that she hadn’t told him.

“I have. Remus told me.”

“…Remus?” Krem asked.

“I went to Remus, before I went to Magister Tilani to ask him to take on my debts, allow me to serve his house. I asked your cousin to look out for you, as he could, and made contact with him when I was released from House Tilani, to keep him appraised—he informed me of their marriage, but I knew well before then. I am only surprised they waited this long.”

That…there were several things messed up about that sentence (but some level of the messed up was a little nice since, yeah, cool he didn’t seem shocked or torn up over mother). And really, the last thing he wanted was a fight with his father, and it could just be a case of simple correction, but, “Her.”

“Cornelius is as much to b-”

“Not mother and Cornelius—you referred to Magister Tilani as ‘him’. She is ‘her’.”

His father’s eyes widened at that, “Oh I meant no offense—I was truly talking of the male Magister Tilani—her father. Athanir.”
Athanir...why was that name familiar?

He...he-

“You mean that Altus that test—oh Magister? That tested me for magic way back when I was like, eleven?”

“Yes, Cremisius. He recognized our situation. That while we did not acknowledge as much, we had been blessed with a son. He offered sympathy to me—that he had struggled at first in the wake of his own child revealing to him that she was a woman born into what we would perceive a man’s body. But he had been quick to accept, and support. He hoped his Maevaris would grow up to live in a world that accepted her as such, and he hoped she might carve a path for even Sopporati may live as themselves, that you could live in a country where your true gender could be acknowledged. When I had to do something—indenture myself or enslave us all, I remembered him, thought perhaps he would be sympathetic still, find use for me somewhere in his home and spare my wife and child—surely he would not allow you to be enslaved, knowing your status. Unfortunately Athanir had passed, some years before—but his daughter Maevaris took up his seat in the Magisterium, and she readily accepted my plea.”

That...he had always on some level wondered how they expected one person to repay the whole of the debt they owed, why he and Mother had never been taken later on but...Maker.

This was all...a hell of a lot to wrap his head around. He...his father was alive, healthy, happy. Sitting here chatting away with Ellie, and he could see—the man had already looked to make certain her attention was occupied checking on Anya—his father looked to him and it was this...look. He liked her. Adored her—adored a girl that he was dating. His girlfriend! Adored him being the boyfriend in that scenario! This was-

Incredible. And overwhelming. And Father had been traveling a long way to get here, it was hard in a way letting the evening with him end, but understandable when he admitted he was tired.

“We...I regret we did not actually get around to discussing your clothing, my lady,” Maker he did sound tired, but “If-“ he seemed like he might offer to stay, work, fearful he may have abused any kindness offered to him.

“Oh gosh! You must be exhausted, I’m so sorry, I really didn’t mean to keep you!” Ellie assured, rising to her feet, “If you’ll follow me, I can show you to your room!”

She offered her arm to his father, and...oh, that was, yeah, good. Gave his father someone to walk with, lean on if he needed to, since Krem couldn’t really. Yeah, shit, he was the only one here—she’d made sure they had privacy which meant, no one was standing guard but him. And he’d been pretty distracted the past few hours. So, he followed, ready and on guard.

They walked down the great hall, but turned left, before the exit, into asshole’s old place, and up the stairs to the library, and across the indoor balcony—two big Orlesian-style partitions blocked off Madam de Fer’s set up, they walked between them and the banister and then out to the wing of rooms over the garden. His father’s was the last one, but yeah, the others had been claimed so.

“Sorry it’s quite the walk, and if you get lost, call out for Cole. He knows to come—he’s a Spirit, but he’s very friendly and he will never hurt you. You can trust him, he’s our friend,” Ellie assured his father as she opened the door to his room.
“This…is mine?” his father asked, surprised.

“Uh-huh, is it…I mean do you like it? We can change things around if you like, get different color bedding or some pictures or anything you need.”

“No I…thank you, this is…this is more than enough, this is all—you’ve done too much for this family, bella.”

“You made the actual best human being I’ve ever had the honor of loving and being loved by. You’ve done so much for me already. Thank you. Do you need anything? There’s stuff to wash up, and we had to guess for sleeping clothes, but they should at least be comfortable.”

“Thank you.”

“I’ll leave you to it,” Ellie said and then she stopped and, “oh wait…oh I can call Cole—“

“Whoa, I mean by all means if you want him now, go ahead,” Krem interrupted, “but I was planning to walk with you, lovely, I wasn’t going to leave you.”

“I can walk back on my own, I mean I’m in the building I live in, and—“

“El. Not happening—I’ll walk you.”

“Have a pleasant evening,” father said to them, “be safe, and have a good time. I will see you tomorrow.”

“Breakfast, and I’ll introduce you to the guys tomorrow, if you’re free.”

His father huffed, almost sounding amused as he said, “I believe I am.”

Door closed, arm wrapped around Ellie, they made their way quietly through Madam de Fer’s, the library, and left in the great hall, down the steps. Ellie smiled as she snuggled into his side. Bit cold, but they wouldn’t be out here long. Just. Maker.

“El?”

“Yeah?”

“I love you.”

“I love you too.”

Maker help him but, “I’m probably gonna ask you to marry me someday.”

“I’m probably gonna say yes someday,” she returned.

“On one condition.”

“Yeah?” she asked.

Seriously. “I need an exact play by play, of just how Varric told you he thought Cassandra was pregnant.”

“I will do voices,” she warned, ”and Cassandra was there.”

Oh man. They might be out here longer than he expected. He held her more tightly.
“Hit it.”

Chapter End Notes

Dalish:
Bellanaris din'an heem!=a curse, basically a wish to make someone dead.

Tevinter:
Meus bello mimo=slang/colloquial that means 'my handsome child!'
Bella=beautiful

*Schmooples is Leliana's pet Nug, she gets them during Dragon Age Origins. Once in Skyhold you can read a note on her desk she's received from the people she's entrusted her Nug's care to during the events of DA:I.

*When you receive the mission 'Bring Me the Heart of Snow White' from Vivienne, you can read notes she's taken in order to craft this potion for Bastien. Everything she's reading from in this 'tome' can be found mentioned in the notes she's taken in-game. Since Primaetas Root was used to cure the Blight it just made sense to connect a few things, and I wanted to do something more personal with Vivienne than the conversation you have with her in-game after you arrive in Haven.

*I had just finished writing Varric's POV and mention Isabella so, I'm looking up Rivain, and WHO DO I FIND ON THE LIST OF NOTABLE RIVANI PEOPLE? MADAM FREAKING DE FER! So, I had to throw that in.

*Cole's backstory is canon, he used to be the Ghost of White Spire after the rebellion. Templars brought mage recruits in in droves to kill and make Tranquil as many mages as possible it seems. Rhys and Evangeline are involved in War Room missions, you can send someone to find them for Cole, which makes him upset until it turns out they were in real trouble and the Inquisition saves them, and then he's pleased you meddled. There is a second mission where you can deploy them as agents of the Inquisiton.

*Stroud is the default Warden that you meed in-game, but if you play with specific choices from your Origin's playthrough loaded into your state of the world during character creation, Alistair and Loghain are also potential Wardens that could be Hawke's contact.

*Alright friends, buckle in. Next chapter will have all the low down on Solas being Fen'Harel, what he discloses in his interviews. But this bit comes from speculation that Solas did once master Skyhold. His whole motivation for creating the Veil in the first place is the fact that the Evanuris (the Elven mages that are now known as gods) teamed up to murder her in her temple, and he went full blown revenge/punishment mode on them, used the Orb to fuck their shit up, created the veil, the Fade, all that jazz. So. Lots of play room and speculation on the ins and outs of that motivation and whatnot.

*Been a hot minute--Krem PoV mentions being tested for magic and Athanir in chapter 13.
Daddy Issues Part 1

Chapter Summary

All the Evanuris tea, Mister Aclassi is in the building, some sweet Cullen/Cassandra fluff to end this part off. Part two will involve Marchis's view on everything, Sera's betrayal, annonnnnd Diego's loyalty mission. Bull's too. So, lots of Daddy issues to go around, but that won't be out for awhile now, but I'm posting this now to keep consistent with updates.

Couldn't fit this in the end notes-- there's an " by the line from Cole to Solas, "They can trust you again but you have to earn it" = "Seriously considered bumping this fic up a chapter to do an epilogue of Trespasser. But no. This hoe egg is gonna earn some damn redemption because it *has* to make sense so. It's not entirely mapped yet, and I'm not sure if it'll be added to the end of this fic or made a separate sequel fic. But Trespasser is officially happening.

Chapter Notes

Back at it! Thanks so much for leaving Kudos and commenting!

Also I might have gotten possessed by Tonio Aclassi. Like. His Pov was not planned for at all? And then it just happened, and it happened so hard. This chapter is 70 pages long, and 57 of them belong to him and I'm sorry?

On a funny note, I haven't played DA:I in so long. Ya'll I done bamboozled myself because I have so much of this fic permanently in my brain! I get to the Hinterlands for the first time and I'm running around the lake, back and forth, looking because I'm like, "WHERE is Thom?! Where he at?! Why aren't he and his conscripty guys l o a d i n g- oh. Blackwall isn't available until after you return from Val Royeaux in canon...duh."

ALSO SHOUT OUTS! To Jessie for the idea of actually implementing the dungeon hole in Solas's interrogation that 100% slipped my mind as a possibility and I loved it, and it inspired a good cut-off point for their scene that I am 100% sorry for. Double sorry to do this sort of late, but I didn't want to give away the near-the-end-of the last chapter, and ran out of room in the end notes but a big thanks to Secret_Life_of_Fireflies for the idea of Krem being the one to punch Solas in the face. She made the suggestion in a comment on a previous chapter and that's how that panned out!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It was a feeling, like floating. Wind was whipping across his body, clothing snapping in the breeze, the chill of it cool across his face. His head pounded with ache and his eyes felt heavy.

And then the crack of a hand slapping him across the face.
A voice that he last heard sweetly wishing him pleasant sleep, that she loved him, now speaking with hard disdain.

“Wake up.”

And what a wake up it was, oh- oh- oh-

His heart was thundering in his chest, blood roaring in his ears as even his magic cried out in alarm and panic. He was floating. Correction he was suspended, only Marehis’s hands on his tunic keeping him from dropping, plummeting into the waterfall.

The last thing he remembered, was the Lieutenant. More accurately, his fist.

And now he was being held over the Spymaster’s beloved ‘dungeon hole’.

“V-vehnan, I can expl-“

Oh heavens! That wasn’t- that did not help his situation, Marehis loosed her grip for a millisecond that jolted him, spoke to the threat that she would surely drop him if he could not mind his tongue. “Do not presume to call me that.”

“O- o- of course.” He- yes, that was understandable.

“Do feel free to take your time, Marehis,” Seeker Pentagast’s voice drawled.

“We can always step in for you if your arms tire,” the Spymaster’s offered.

“That depends entirely on him,” Marehis said. “Are you prepared to answer our questions?”

“You needn’t- I would answer your questions,” Solas assured, though he certainly did desire ground beneath his feet, the fall was far.

She pulled him forward and turned, releasing him in the same motion she pushed him so he staggered blindly toward the door.

Alright. They were in the dungeons. He did have some reticence…he was not in the position to negotiate, but neither would he speak if there were-

Oh. There weren’t. other prisoners, that is. The Inquisition had taken care to evacuate and transport the enemies they’d been holding in Haven’s dungeons. Knight Captain Denham. Magister Alexius. And then there had been that strange Avarr fellow that they found…throwing Ram at Skyhold’s walls, vengeance for cutting down the Hand of Koth in the Fallow Mire. But now, their cells were empty, the only prisoner here was him. Ironic, to be a prisoner in his own home, but justified.

“I appreciate the discretion,” he offered as he took a seat on the chair he assumed was for him—there was a table, with chairs on either side, but only one had restraints—cuffs linked to the back of the chair meant to hold his hands low at his sides. If he did endeavor to cast—which he would not—he would do little more than cast at the ground directly beneath him. When he was seated, Seeker and Spymaster were on either side, binding him.

Oh, but he did regret their privacy, when Marehis found purchase on the seat across from his and informed him, “You should. Ellie had to sit in judgement over our former prisoners, decide their fates on short notice, so we might handle this.”
“Is…is she alright?”

“She’s none of your concern,” Marehis snapped. “Neither are your questions welcome as you’ve far too much to answer for yourself.”

Well. He supposed that…that was fair. But still, there was nothing keeping him from…he would just dip into the bond quietly, nothing Ellie would be aware of, he would be swift, just…he didn’t even know where to begin. But this had to be frightening and confusing and she’d been so upset, sad, and angry in the Fade. And it was due to his secrecy, his betrayal.

And now? She was tired and sad, nervous, and sick to her stomach, light headed—was she ill? What time was it? Had she eaten today? She had a habit of lacking an appetite when she was upset but Cole had been of help with that, it hadn’t been the case for some time now but—should he needed to speak with Marehis, he had to make this right, but who was with Ellie? He was uncertain the time of day but it had been daylight when they were in the open part of the dungeon and he could sense she was over him—in the War Room then. Which usually meant she was not alone, at least Lady Montilyet would be with her, and too there would be her…her Papi, Cullen.

He almost wished it had been manipulation on her part, calling him such before revealing she knew his secret. But she had meant it—every word. She loved him, she hated mistrusting him. It had not been manipulation so much as assurance—there was worry, in the bond. For him. She had been making certain that before they perused this truth, before he found himself in trouble with the whole of those whose trust he’d betrayed, that she loved him, and that came with the hope that this could be made right.

“What is your name?” Marehis started with.

“Solas—that is not a lie. Fen’Harel is a title, something our people called me when I brought our leaders low.”

“You…Solas you’re not even thirty.”

“I ceased aging at twenty-five* but I have been of this world again for a few years. There is a ritual, our people could slumber agelessly. Such ritual served as…living for so long can be daunting, some would choose to sleep through times they may deem unpleasant or boring. Some choose to take turns—all their loved ones to have children who could enter the world without breaking the balance, and one day someone else would find rest so they could rise again for a time. I, for instance, have been asleep for Ages.”

“Ages?”

He could not help the smirk that rose to his lips. “I am the reason when our people speak the word ‘Solas’, it means ‘pride’. It once meant tranquility*, my mother found that fitting. I suppose it used to be.”

Ahh. Well. They all looked rather dumbstruck. Should he get right into it then?

“Our people, long ago, used to be a society of mages—every one of us magical, and immortal, but the greatest of us were members of the Evanuris. If you wonder at the structure of Tevinter? It is rather a similar construct. They were the most powerful of our people, and all others lived in servitude of them. Elgar’nan, Falon’din, Dirthamen, Andruil, Sylaise, June, Ghilan’nain—I was born into the servitude of the All-Mother. Mythal. She earned the title of all mother due to her kindness, her compassion for her people—the Evanuris loved to war with one another, would send their people into battle over any trifling matter that struck them, but Mythal never did as such, always endeavored to reason with the others, many wars were avoided because of her charisma, her
compassion and ability to bring people together.” Solas cleared his throat. “And then they killed her—Elgar’nan, the others. They conspired, and came together to murder her in her temple.”

“…why would they do such a thing if she was on such good terms with them all?”

“Lust for power. Fear. She…it was my fault, ultimately,” Solas confessed. “Mythal…I grew up in her home, served her the whole of my life, saw her beauty and compassion, and somehow, some way, she saw me. Despite my lack magically, she saw promise in me, allowed me to serve directly with her, trained me, and ultimately we fell in love. She removed my Vallislin, and claimed me her equal.”

“You were powerful enough to make the E…Evanuris,” she tested the foreign word, “fearful of your union?”

Solas scoffed, “Hardly. Vallislins…all slaves to the Evanuris bore them, were marked, as a sign of ownership. When the Dalish mark themselves, that is the ritual they uphold When Mythal claimed me equal, she meant that I could be free, if I wished it I was not a true equal to Mythal, magically—but our child might have given them cause for concern.”

“You have a child?”

“Had. Almost. None of the Evanuris had heirs—population control was rather imperative where immortality is concerned, mine was one of the last generations born at the time. When we discovered Mythal was with child, we did everything we could to hide it—Skyhold, is where we took refuge, none but myself were allowed to leave its confines. But we were betrayed. Mythal was called by her people to her temple under false pretenses, by the time I discovered the truth it was too late. I was too late. She was dead, our child with her.”

Marehis was silent a moment, and then she nodded.

*I am here. Listening, and confirming. I will tell them if you lie. They trust me. They can trust you again, but you have to earn it*. Ahh, Cole.

“I am sorry,” Marehis offered, sincerely.

“As am I. I ignored every tenant Mythal once upheld. I abandoned compassion for vengeance. I was certain they would stop at nothing to have their power, and without Mythal to voice reason in their midst, they needed to be stopped. That is where I suppose this story begins,” he said. “I…I was not strong enough, not of my own power, to take on the Evanuris. That is where the Orb of Destruction comes into play. I could not kill them, but I could ensnare them. I used and lost the bulk of my power to fuel it, and in the destruction…well the action is what created the Veil to begin with. The Fade.”

“…you…created the Fade?”

“Yes. Sealed the Evanuris and their most loyal followers within it. They became Spirits who accepted their fate, or Demons, desperately seeking to return to this world through the bodies of others. Cole, the Spirit that resides in his form, is Elvehnan*. A follower of Mythal that was a casualty of my recklessness.”

“Elvehnan?”

“Elves is short for something, v- Marehis. My actions cut us off from the source of our power, without the Evanuris, a great many of us lost access to magic, and our descendants even more so. We began to age. I did my best to assist our people in the transition, but I had lost so many
to the Fade. So many souls I never intended to cast beyond the veil. I tried to get them passage to this world, but it was futile, I did not regret bringing down the Evanuris, but I did regret the consequences. I chose to slumber, laid dormant and unaging for…far longer than I can record. When I woke, it was to the horrifying discovery that our people had fallen so low, become secondary citizens in their world, our people run around painting their faces with the marks. I thought perhaps the Evanuris had been punished for long enough, and could be returned. But I was too weak to power the Orb myself. That is when I made the grave mistake of entrusting it to Corypheus.”

“…entrusting it?” Marehis questioned. “Corypheus has the power to control the Orb?”

“There is—there is something you must understand,” he implored, looking to Leliana, Cassandra. “I… I come from a time when Humankind was undiscovered. Before Shartan rode with Andraste and created the Dalish people, I was long asleep. Humankind, Qunari, Dwarves—I did not understand how you came to be of this world. When I woke, and realized all I had robbed my people of—their immortality, their connection to magic, their history, saw them still branding themselves like they were owned by the Evanuris, that now they worshiped them as all-seeing gods when they can do little more than hope to possess a mortal vessel. All I wanted was to make things right—bring down the veil and return my people to their former status. You were all little more than…I saw little difference between you, and the over population of nugs and fennecs we found invading Skyhold. While we handled them with as much compassion as possible, none… none save perhaps sweet Ellie would have shed a tear over the decision, if we’d needed to exterminate them altogether.”


“I quite assure you that has changed! I only say as much to ensure…I was misguided, uninformed. I have learned. Thought better of my earlier…I do not feel as I once did. Certainly—truly. I did not realize I could…I have come to respect you, Lady Seeker, all that I have worked with in the Inquisition. I-I love Ellie. I would- I had never felt such torment than the realization of such. I love her such that I would lay down my life for her. Will submit without argument if what I reveal to you today calls for my execution. I did not know. It was like when we first went to the Hinterlands—found Templars and Mages waring in the Crossroads, needing cleared so the refugees could be safe. I saw a gathering of beings with value I could not comprehend and thought little of Corypheus’s willingness to destroy them if it meant my people would be returned. When I realized Corypheus desired the Orb, I did not think he would survive the means he would have to go to in order to power it. There was to be a gathering of Humans, he planned to make it his sacrifice—he had Humans with him, ready to help him bring destruction, help him with the sacrifice needed to power the Orb, they went into the Conclave knowing just how many would be lost, that they themselves may well be among the fallen. They were fine with seeing their own kind fall, it only justified by own stance I thought. But I thought he would be among the dead at the Temple—that in the ashes my Orb would be there waiting, and powered, ready to use so I could bring down the veil, and release my trapped people, return the free use of magic without pulling it from the Fade, and with that, our immortality, and eventually, our status, and the world I woke up to would pass on without suffering. But he survived, took the Orb with him, and Ellie had somehow managed to interfere with his plans—he could have fulfilled his plans then and there for mass destruction beyond the Conclave, had she not interfered. The Mark on her hand, it comes from the Orb. She interacted with it and came away bearing a vital power from it.”

Leliana’s slap was expected and deserved, Cassandra’s fist balled up the collar of his shirt as she raised him up in his seat, chair tipping forward as she raised him, “You knew! You knew who was to blame for the Conclave, you yourself are party to its destruction and you let us interrogate a child—Eleanor could have been executed for your crimes-“
“And I did not care. At the time, it mattered little to me. When I told you I could keep her alive I was not certain I could, I was merely trying to position myself so I might be close enough to figure out how she ended up with the Mark and discover where the Elder One went with my Orb. That magic…it is wholly incompatible to Eleanor’s own. Were she an Elf she would certainly have an easier time with it, but even as it stands there are fundamental differences between the magic we can wield now that we are cut off, have to pull magic form the Fade, than the pure, unadulterated Elvehnan magic that emanates from the Orb. I did everything I could in those days you let me tend to her, to take the Mark upon myself, but it would not move.”

“If it is so very foreign, how did Eleanor become Marked to begin with?” Cassandra demanded to know, releasing her hold, the chair he was attached to jolted him as it tipped back to be upright once more.

“I do not know, but I surmise she interacted with the Orb directly, in a gambit to stop Corypheus. We heard her interrupt him at the Temple. Something must have happened, that allowed her to lay hands upon it, it interacted with her magic, perhaps…” Solas sighed. “Her behavior—her kindness and compassion, it is such there are times I wonder if she could put Mythal to shame. Even now- I have had a hand in the things that have made her life so very painful. She is only Marked because I allowed Corypheus my Orb when I know now I should have protected it from him d-destroyed it even. The Conclave would have unfolded as it should, and p-perhaps she would be leading a normal life with Trevelyan. She knows this, certainly, she has reasoned that I am to blame and yet she st- she is angry with me. But she would hear me. L-loves me still, as much as she always has. She cares about the plight of my people—is so very mindful of our struggle, it is ingrained in her—when we went to Val Royeaux, without question she sought to use her privilege as a Human to shield myself and Marehis, Sera. In the Hinterlands, she showed unyielding determination to help Elves and Humans alike. She mourned the Elves that laid down their life for the Inquisition on the Storm Coast, recited rites I did not know lived on- I almost-“ he had to clear his throat. “When Mythal was felled, a piece of her lived on. A fragment of her soul broke free to live on in a vessel of her choosing—is alive in this world today, but I have not discovered where. I thought…originally I- I mourned her so that I did not think I would ever love again, and when I found myself falling for y-“ he stopped, he did not want to press. “Falling for another, I thought perhaps the explanation was that she lived on within them. That is not the case. When Ellie knew rites from days of old, I thought perhaps it was Mythal in her, that she had claimed a Human vessel and that was why the Orb bestowed its power upon her. But I have since discovered she learned it from her time with Elves, that our people still use those rites. Fittingly so—they do not mention any of their supposed gods, not even Falon’Din.” He shook his head, “I digress. I’ve had many theories, but the strongest still is this—Ellie has exhibited traits I once accredited only to Elvehnan, perhaps the Orb saw familiarity there  that it did not find in Corypheus. Further still, there is the fact she is a Mage. Cole’s body is Human, but able to house a Spirit—an Elvehnan I trapped in the Fade. I believe that is only possible because he was a Mage. But ultimately I cannot be certain, perhaps any who laid hands upon the Orb, given the right circumstances, alignment of the stars, even someone as non-magical and non-Elven as a Dwarf, someone filled with anger and lacking in empathy could come away Marked.”

“These Humans,” Leliana pressed, “the ones you say were assisting Corypheus, they were Venatori?”

“No, I didn’t know of the Venatori until we began encountering them on the Storm Coast. They were Grey Wardens. I do not know the severity of the corruption within their ranks, but Varric’s Hawke, bearing witness to something concerning in that regard isn’t unfounded.”

“Go on, we have this well in hand,” Marehis assured.

“Certainly,” Leliana agreed, leaving them, he supposed, to update or check with her own sources. She had been investigating the Wardens’ disappearance, but he was certain even as suspicious as the Spymaster could be, she had not expected them to be so heavily tied to the Divine’s death.

“You understand you are admitting to aiding in acts of terrorism,” Cassandra said. “That you knew the devastation that would befall the Conclave, provided the means by which it was wrought.”

“I do. I did not understand at the time—not in full, I promise you that has changed. If I…” he could scarcely believe it but, “if I could go back, destroy the Orb, I would. I was a fool, at first when I woke I did not understand, and then I did not want to understand—if I could have I would have kept the whole of our team at a distance, I- I was determined to see my plans through, bring back those I locked away but-“ he sighed, depleted, truly. “Ellie. Knowing her, did not allow for distance. She was persistent, almost annoyingly so, in the initial days after facing the Breach. Always seeking me out, to speak, so readily taking up my offer of tutelage—I did not expect a Human to be capable of learning from me, but while our magics are not compatible. She took instruction well and I found it to be not unlike any other matter of learning—she is shorter than the Lady Seeker, but you were capable of teaching her to fight with her own body despite its differences from yours. But I thought she would grow bored, find meditation pointless, think my knowledge of the Fade, posed as theories, to be ridiculous. She listened and did not judge the fact I find Spirits to be a source of companionship—because truly, the Spirits I consider friends are. I have known them since before the veil, and it is…”

“I can imagine that would be frustrating, heartbreaking even,” the Seeker allowed. “To be so separated from loved ones, have people dispute that they can be your loved ones because they do not understand the situation.”

He nodded. “But I must say I consider myself surrounded by more corporeal loved ones. Ellie brought me closer to those around her, I found myself considering her a friend early on and as we traveled…I found myself faced with having to work more as a team than I originally planned, in order to properly care for the girl. When I bonded with her despite the inherent differences in our magic…I spent quite some time in a state of denial, not of the bond, but of its implications. I have bonded similarly in the past, am still bonded to many of my old friends, and should I ever encounter the vessel of Mythal…I will certainly know it.”

They had some questions, about his last time in the Fade with Ellie, garnering just how much he had confessed to the girl. Which was little, after offering up a recap of their time together, he assured that he confirmed Ellie’s accusations of being Fen’Harel, and that the gods had merely been mages. That he had given the Orb to Corypheus. At the questions from the women before him now, he discussed his plan at length. That his goals of bringing down the veil may well destroy the world that is, and he…there was no one he could pray to, certainly, but he did hope Cole’s confirmations were assurance enough that what he was speaking was truth—that yes, he had once thought to wholly destroy the world that is, to return the world that was. But he had…he had come to realize that those actions bore consequences he would have to learn to live with. He did not have the right to play god any more than the Evanuris once had. In trying to take down the tyrannical, he himself had become just that. Blindly so. Cole did make himself known, physically, after a time. To speak for himself.

“I do not miss the way it was. Serving as I did, I could not help people the way I can help them now. I like helping. Lots of us do. Demons wish to take on mortal forms but that is because of
evil and jealousy and hurt. They could not accept the way things changed, want to force going
back, like you did, but just for themselves. I miss Mythal too, she was kind.”

“You knew Mythal?” Solas questioned. He did not remember Cole.

The Spirit nodded. “I am a Spirit of Compassion. Spirits of Faith, Compassion, and
Wisdom come from those who wore Mythal’s Vallislin, served in her house. We did not lose our
immortality—we gained a natural order*. We did not die because there was no place for us to
move on to. Now there is. There are Spirits of Enlightenment that come from Falon’Din’s, Purpose
from Andruil, Anders—his Justice, he comes from Elgar’nan’s house. Spirits of creativity once
served June, and Spirits of Home, and Health—healers, they come from Sylanise. When the Dalish
pray, Solas, their prayers are heard—not by the Evanuris, but those who come from them. Why do
you think they are believed to be gods? So much was lost when the Veil rose. But we serve as we
can, in many ways it is better than before. Vallislins they are not brands anymore, they are
worship, an act of conversion really. When Dalish die with pure hearts and a chosen patron, they
become Spirits and walk the Fade, help serve from the other side. Those who chose to live a life of
wickedness, with darkness in their hearts, they become demons—but even then, we- we try, do our
best to try and help them find a way to become a higher version of themselves, they can learn
acceptance and love, become Spirits if they try. If an Elf does come to believe in the Maker, serve
Him in life, He takes them in death—as thanks for when Shartan helped Andraste.”

That…he- how had he not known? “I did not realize-”

“You did not ask!” Cole…goodness, the boy snapped at him! “You didn’t even think to!
You woke up and felt regret, twisted by selfish desires and you did not stop to think for even a
minute that the world moved on without you.”

“But I have spoken with-”

“With the Spirits you are bonded to—I- oh! You are making me angry!” Cole sounded as
if that alarmed him more than anything. More frustratedly he pressed on, “You say your thinking is
different now, and it is, but just because your thinking has changed—Solas, your attitude, and
actions have to change with it! Think! Listen to the words coming out of my mouth! Spirits. Come.
From. The Evanuris. But your Spirit friends, none of them are aligned with a house because they
are aligned with you!”

“That is- I know they consider the Evanuris gods, but I removed their vallisli-“ he stopped.

Fen’harel.

Oh. Oh dear.

“My friends, they…are bound to me,” he finally reasoned out. “Bound to the purpose of
Fen’harel. They serve me.”

“Exactly. So of course they aren’t going to dispute your thoughts and ideas about the Fade
or the worth of our current existence. They mimic you! You didn’t free them, Solas. You made
yourself just like the Evanuris to destroy them, and now, those who serve you—the ‘rebel god’—
do just that. Serve. I do not know how you might change that, but you must be careful in the future,
remember that they are not so much your free-thinking friend, but they are your charges. You are
responsible for them.”

“We are not godless?” Marehis rasped out, looking to Cole.
Cole nodded. “It just doesn’t work exactly as you once thought it did. When you cried out, prayed for help with Ellie, I heard, and I serve Mythal. A Spirit of Paternity came on behalf of Elgar’nan, you did not see him, but he was there just on the other side, in the Fade, watching over Ellie.”

“What is the implication of Solas’s bond to Eleanor?” Cassandra asked, “Her- her soul, is it bound to him like those who serve him in the Fade?” Oh goodness. That…that would not do for the girl, at all—he would always take care of her, truly, but she loved the Maker so very well, and it would break her heart to be separated from those she sought to be reunited with in death.

Cole shook his head. “No. They serve him now because he trapped them in the Fade while they were bonded in servitude. What he once took as friendship, he turned into service when he pursued the Evanuris for revenge—eh stopped thinking of them as friends and more so as tools. So that is what they became. Ellie, she is bound to him in their friendship, she doesn’t serve him, can think separately from him, she does not see him as a master, but a mentor. Her papi. She is very sad about everything that is happening now. She hopes we can all work together to make it right.” The boy perked up then, “Oh! He- Mister Aclassi—he is near! I’m supposed to let Lady Josie know when to greet him and I- oh I would very much like to meet the man that made Krem.” He looked to Solas, “He isn’t sorry he punched you.”

Solas huffed, shrugging, “I can’t say I am either.”

Marehis looked to Cole. “You’re free to go on, you’ve done very well today, Cole, I appreciate you assisting us.”

“I will check on Ellie for you,” he said before disappearing.

He was nervous to suggest as much but, “I could tell you how she is feeling—”

“You will stay out of the bond or so help me Solas we will suppress your magic altogether,” Marehis seethed.

That would certainly be unpleasant, but he pressed on, determined to be as forthright as possible, “I cannot fully comply with that—”

“You will—!”

“-because I will not retract my arrangement with my magic—I will not risk her, Ellie. If she is in danger, feels fear she needs rescuing from, it will alert me, and I, you. I will not compromise on my knowledge of her safety—it is also, currently, your knowledge of her safety as well. Cole can make certain of her other spectrums of wellbeing, I will not press the bond for further information. Not more than I already have.”

“You have been in the bond today?” Marehis asked.

Solas nodded. “Quickly, for a moment when we first sat down. I just…wanted to make certain she was alright. She was nervous this morning, and heartsick. She felt unwell—like perhaps she was experiencing anxiety that made her sick to her stomach.”

“She had a War Room meeting this morning, concerning our international political ties, Marehis,” Cassandra offered, like perhaps…was the Seeker taking pity on him? Trying to sidetrack Marehis’s ire, make up some other excuse for Ellie’s distress? “I have a meeting with Barris, and then Cullen soon. I do worry Markus is trying to manipulate Eleanor to side with Nevarra because he is, technically, family. While I’m certain Lady Montilyet was able to convey my opinions on the
matter, I should speak with her, make certain she does not allow my relationship to Nevarra control her decision.”

Oh. That would be a very stressful War Room meeting, discussing political alliances on such a large scale. Being Inquisitor would be hard, and he had already...well, he’d certainly complicated her first day of it, it seemed. Her first day after her inauguration, and she’d had to reveal him as the threat he’d been, and handle all of the Inquisition’s prisoners, find them punishment out of the dungeons so they could be used for this. Whatever this was—his interrogation, his exoneration, or more likely his execution.

“Tell her I will be back to her as soon as I am finished here. And I am sorry to have missed her talks today.”

Cassandra nodded, offering the assurance that at the very least, “Cullen cleared his morning to be there for her. I’m sure she could be persuaded to give us a repeat performance.”

He hated this. Hated how very remorseful Marehis looked. She should be with her daughter— their daughter! Be able to make certain of her safety herself! Watch her- oh her talk! That was why she still felt so very near—if he allowed his magic to graze the bond ever so slightly, he could tell she was now directly overhead, no longer in the War Room, but in the Chantry Gardens. Madam de Fer’s suggestion that Ellie would lead a worship service had taken root—at the girl’s shyness to take up such a task, Mother Giselle had proposed she merely speak at one of the Chantry Sister’s Chant studies, one of the smaller services they held during the week. While he did not worship the Maker, he had come to be certain that such an entity existed, and Ellie...well he was remiss that he couldn’t be there, to see the girl’s speech. Oh he was so proud of her, when she spoke before the Inquisition, became Inquisitor.

It was strange. Almost like coming full circle. The desperation he once felt to bring down the veil and undo his deeds was now turned about, into desperation to confess his crimes and make things right. He had much to think on, he hadn’t realized the way things worked, and he hadn’t... he hadn’t stopped to consider that maybe he’d done enough. Playing god once had done more than enough damage. When he made to do so again, he’d only made things worse. Killed so many people it hadn’t been his place to victimize, and left a little girl painfully Marked, and cleaning up after him.

When the Seeker left them, Marehis took a deep breath, seeming to brace herself now that they were alone.

“I am sorry-“

“Shut up,” she snapped, glaring at him.

Certainly. Understandable.

Cole appeared then, a tray clattering in his hands as he materialized, “Mister Aclassi looks just like Krem! And he is kind! I brought lunch because you are hungry. And you are sad—but Ellie’s garden talking went very well, she helped heal hurts! She is going to meet Mister Aclassi soon and Sera will leave her—then it is my turn! I will guard her, I will help keep her safe!”

“Thank you, Cole,” Marehis said, nodding as the Spirit set down his tray.

But she made no move to touch it after the Spirit disappeared.

“You should eat,” Solas ventured carefully.
“I’m not feeding you, if that’s what you’re-“

“I said nothing about myself. I understand I am a prisoner, and what is more, I have betrayed you. I’m hardly concerned about my own stomach. You forget to eat when you are too caught up in your work, I’m sure you’ve not even had breakfast—go ahead. I will still be here, ready to answer your questions when you are ready to ask them.”

Marehis sighed. And then despite herself, she rose from her seat, keys in hand, pressing the sharp-ish edge against his throat as she intoned, “One wrong move and I will make you regret it.”

“Certainly.”

She unshackled him, allowed him water and her bread while she worked on the Ram meat and carrots Cole had brought for her. They ate in silence, Marehis taking a bit more time than she would usually. Stalling perhaps, but more likely she was collecting her thoughts before directing her questioning further. It was rather a lot to parcel through.

“What was your connection to the amulet Alexius used to travel in time?”

He quickly swallowed the gulp of water he’d taken, “It’s none save that I can deduce how it was constructed. Do not get me wrong, with immortality at their disposal, the Evanuris did do intensive research on time travel—competitive, rival research, so they were often more preoccupied plotting how to beat out the others by debilitating their progress than making actual progress of their own. Alexius’s amulet was hewn of materials we often used for magical artifacts—but that could be pure coincidence as they were also natural materials that conduct magic nicely, the sort used for building staffs. But the magic, it is not coincidence. Alexius’s research was useless until Corypheus shared with him the power of Elvehnan magic. That it has inherent qualities that link it more powerfully to the Fade than Human magic, as the Fade itself was created with our magic. I deduce he garnered a great deal of Elvehnan magic to power his amulet, using the spells he devolved while researching and developing time magic.”

“How would he access that, exactly?”

“Alexius had the power in the future Ellie witnessed—the power she has now, to open Rifts. And it seemed his amulet used similar power to open Rifts that would act as portals through time, I can only suppose Corypheus lent him the ability, first to bind it to the physical amulet used to travel through time, and eventually, gave him the ability full stop, as Corypheus’s reign of terror ensued. I sensed—” he stopped and took in a deep breath. He… “I sensed the Orbs power in his amulet but you must believe me—I did not know it was what controlled his time magic. I did not realize until it was too late, and E-Ellie and Dorian had already disappeared, that it was Alexius’s amulet letting off a magical signature matching the Orb of Destruction. I thought the Orb to be physically present—that Corypheus had lent it to his loyal follower, and we had been presented with an opprotunity to obtain it. If I had known, Marehis, believe me. I would have banished the amulet then and there, before it could bring Ellie to harm.”

Oh she looked rather incensed to hear him say as much- “You hesitated to banish it!”

“I hesitated because I was tempted by it’s power—as we all were—to go back! I considered- I thought perhaps it could be used to stop the Conclave, but when we reasoned it out, discovered what Alexius ultimately realized, that the amulet could not go back farther than the moment the Breach exploded into existence, I…” he sighed. “I will admit, I did consider the fact that I intended to bring down the veil and return our people’s former status as immortals. Time Magic would do wonders to keep the Evanuris in line, just the threat that I could have the power to
She scoffed in disbelief. “If they need such power to keep them under control, why in the world would you ever consider bringing them back?”

“I just…I did not know how much we would lose-”

“Lose? What? The entire population living as slaves to the most powerful eight members of society? Or the terror seven of those eight wished to inflict at their every whim upon their slaves by sending them to fight in pointless wars that served their own egos? People die, Solas. That is life. I do not regret my mortality if it means we are not bound to them in life and serve our living people in death.” She huffed, shaking her head. “Though I must admit this is all making me consider conversion.”

“I…I have come to accept as much—if it truly works as Cole describes…” he flinched, he had no reason to doubt him. "I have been struggling, as of late, with my decisions.”

Marehis nodded, taking in a bracing breath. “So. You did not create the amulet, it is banished now? You did not commit some trick to whisk it away for safe keeping?”

“Absolutely not. It is gone, veh-“ it came too naturally to his lips, he needed to watch himself. “It is gone,” he promised sincerely. "Permanently.”

“Alright,” she moved on, “Why did you lie about examining Ellie’s Mark?”

“I merely wished to speak with her alone.”

“And so you let her walk around with this new development unchecked? What if it is dangerous?”

“It is not unchecke- Marehis- I love that girl more than my own life. I would never compromise her safety. In point of fact, I forgot to keep up the ruse when I told her of Skyhold and the Orb’s Elvehnan origins because I know with certainty her Mark is safe.” It...should have tipped him off that Ellie felt something was amiss when they returned to camp and she so readily lied for him. But he thought it an act of taking up for him, merely realizing he’d just wanted to speak with her alone and not finding it questionable herself, so there was no need to get him into trouble with the others. Though he had been, admittedly, in some trouble with Marehis when she discovered Ellie was running her courses and had told him about it, that he had not been monitoring her as they made the trek to Skyhold. Were he not a Mage, he would surely have frozen to death, sleeping cast from their tent when she ceased sharing a cot with Ellie among the Bull's Chargers. "It is not spreading—it is more painful, but not harmful. Corypheus attempted to remove it by dominating it, opening it up and pouring power against it to prove he is stronger than it, than its current master, and that it should transfer to him. All he managed to do was leave it with more power than before —she already had the ability to close Rifts, and now, she can open them. Because of her will—her desire to see the veil repaired, when she tears open Rifts, they pull any abnormalities away with them as they close—deteriorate any near by demonic presences.”

“Why did-“ Marehis cleared her throat, took a moment. “This whole time. Were you using me to keep us blind to your true nature? Or was it some sort of game for you?”

“No! Of course not-“

“There is no ‘of course not’ about it!” she snapped.

“Vehnan, I assure you, falling in love, it was not part of my plan. I joined the Inquisition
with the desire to understand the Mark, if I could, master it, find my Orb, and bring down the veil. I had no intention of getting close to anyone, not truly. And then Ellie happened. And then you. You are beautiful and intelligent— she huffed at that, “do not doubt that. Ellie is not an imbecile for having trusted the likes of Rainier, or myself. Neither are you—I’ve no doubt with all the pieces you two managed to put together with your suspicions, Cole informing you of my former title was unnecessary—it merely got you there faster. Now. My feelings they were not- are not false. I am sorry if you feel I am a stranger now.”

“How did you think that was going to play out, exactly? In the long term? Did you honestly think I would sit by and be compliant with destroying the world?”

“Potentially destroy. And no. Not exactly. I did—“ he sighed. “I don’t know. Knowing Ellie, I did...begin to postpone certain aspects of my plans. I thought, perhaps...Elves naturally outlive Humans, even as we are no longer Immortal. I thought to see her through the rest of her life and then, once she was safely at the Maker’s side...”

Marehis scoffed, shaking her head.

“But that started turning into wanting more for her! She might be a mother, one day, and I thought I could not bear to harm someone who came from her. Or any who came from them—“

“And if Ellie chooses to never have children, the world is fair game?!“ Marehis asked, incredulous. “Will you lose your love for her kin as the generations pass? How many greats need to be before the word grandchild before you decide to play god again?” That was improbable...well, save him taking to ageless sleep again he supposed but- that was hardly- he was not of that mindset any longer!

“No! Marehis-“ she had to understand, “Humans did not exist. At least not to our knowledge, not in the time I walked the world! Forgive me if it took getting to know them beyond the realm of seeing them as appropriators of our culture*, suppressors of our people, to see them as worthy of sparing. I thought I left our people doomed—to live oppressed lives here that only lead to...nothingness in death. Or worse, if there is a hell—there is certainly no heaven for Elves, at least not as I understood it—I did not realize we could pass on to be with the Maker or our own people in the Fade.”

Marehis rose from her seat, hands slapping the table, “You knew who destroyed the Conclave! You knew the Elder One we’ve been pursuing—you let Ellie run blindly, chasing him, she was sent through time and tortured by a demon. She has lost loved ones and been betrayed, known grief she should never have felt! She is a child Solas, she had not so much as killed another living being before the Inquisition! And you let search for this monster, allowed him the opportunity to track us down, Why the hell were we living in Haven’s Chantry village with only one clear cut way in or out, a place we could be cornered in like rats, when a bare seventy miles away you had your safe haven, your Skyhold just waiting to be reclaimed? If Corypheus had sought to attack us here-“ she stopped shivering with disgusted frustration. “But no. That is just another thing you kept from us and instead you allowed Corypheus to come, and destroy our home—lay his hands upon our child! All of that could have been prepared for, possibly avoided altogether if you had stepped up and told the truth to begin with!”

“I would have been executed and our people reviled—at the time I thought I was preserving our future.”

Marehis hoisted him by the collar of his tunic and pulled him back into the broken portion of the dungeon, fists balling up his shirt as she turned and pushed him back to hold him dangling, his feet just barely scraping the edge of the dungeon hole, his heart pounded in his chest, fear and
adrenaline flooding his veins as he gasped for breath.

“Preserve our future?!” Marehis railed with outrage. “You destroyed us—your own people, and then you failed to learn your lesson the first time. You say our pantheon were never gods, and here you have tried to play as much over and over again! You are a monster! You are a monster and I hate you—could see you dead this very instant, there is little that could stop me except for the one thing—the one thing you know would have kept you alive if you’d confessed sooner! You are the only person we know of that could understand the Breach, the Rifts, Rift Magic—Ellie’s Mark. If I could I would kill you now, you would never harm my daughter again-!”

“Stop!” Cole’s hand was on Marehis’s arm, “Stop it, now, Marehis-“

“Cole-“ Marehis refuted but she paled, gave Solas such quick rescue from his precarious position when Cole declared,

“You are hurting Ellie!”

It was nerve wracking and exhilarating to walk through the great stone gate of Skyhold. He had never seen Haven, heard only of it in a polite missive from an Ambassador Montilyet. That it was a lovely place, cold, but safe and there would be a home for him there. Then he traveled, his escorts—Slavers for the Imperium who were more used to taking from, than delivering to Ferelden—delivered to him the heart wrenching update of Haven’s demise. It had taken far too great a moment than what he could bear for them to follow up with the information that Cremisius was alive, well and unscathed by this ‘Elder One’s assault. He was almost ashamed it took him so long to think to ask after the girl—Ellie she had said her name was, but of course that name hadn’t gotten him answers, it took asking after the Herald of Andraste. ‘Come back from the dead’ sounded miraculous and horrifying. They had been on the ship from the Free Marches at the time, and there was talk of returning him to Tevinter if there was nowhere to deliver him to. But another letter from Ambassador Montilyet and it was set to rights—he was allowed to read this one himself, and she apologized for any distress recent news had given him, but he could be rest assured—Cremisius was safe, Ellie was alive and recovering, and they were headed for new Headquarters.

And when he did arrive at this new Headquarters, he was alone for the first time in quite some time. After a fashion. The Slavers stood at the end of the bridge, watching and waiting to make certain he did not make a run for it, and he delivered himself through the gate, worn shoes on his feet, Lady Montilyet had warned that Haven would hold chill, but Skyhold was certainly cold as well, and he was surely not dressed for it.

It had been embarrassing, admittedly. Meeting that girl in Val Royeaux. He was grateful, he could never be grateful enough, but between learning he was in the presence of the Herald of Andraste, and that same presence was in point of fact his Cremisius’s girlfriend? It had been an unfortunate shade of humbling, to sit there in his burlap shirt and trousers stained from work. He had been excited, and terrified at the prospect of tailoring again—he certainly had done nothing like it in the past few years. He’d worked the grounds, and occasionally in the kitchens of the
Tilani household. Now he stood entering a place of strangers looking for any sign of the men that had accompanied the Herald, Ellie herself, even his Cremisius but...he was afraid to see his son after so long, and too...he was embarrassed. His pride, what little of it he had left, it could hardly abide that his son would see him like this, but there wasn’t anything to be done for that. He deserved worse, for the things he had done, the mistakes he made.

“Cremisius is asleep, safe, sound. He will be surprised. He misses you.”

The very serene voice startled him out of his skin, sent him gasping and turning his attention to a strange boy in a very large hat, had he been there this entire time? As he approached the gate? He had not noticed him.

“I was here, you could not see me, that is okay. I brought Lady Montilyet, you can see her just fine. I did not mean to scare you, I wanted to see you—you made Krem.”

Krem...ahh, Cremisius. “I had some hand in his making, yes,” he allowed, he’d hardly borne the brunt of the work.

“I am very glad, he is my friend. I heard your hurting, for privacy—Ellie...huh, she could not hear it, she doesn’t do what I do, but she does? She asked Varric to get your things from Krem—he can be surprised, and you can have your pride. Josephine will take you to them.”

“Cole,” a voice spoke in gentle reprimand as a woman...she looked markedly like Ellie, save perhaps in the ways of height and hair, “Are we within acceptable boundaries?”

The boy nodded eagerly, seeming pleased and proud with himself as he listed, “I did my best not to startle him, I am three feet away, I let him speak back to me, oh! But I forgot a few times. I am sorry. I thanked him for making Krem!”

“And that was very sweet of you, we are all rather grateful Cremisius Aclassi exists,” the woman supposed, looking to Tonio then and smiling softly, “Hello Mister Aclassi-“

“I forgot hello!” Cole lamented physically drooping in disappointment.

“I am not offended, er, Cole,” Tonio offered. “You have been very welcoming.” Confusing, but kind.

The boy perked up at that, breathed a sigh of relief. “Oh. You are kindness, like Krem. I hope I can be your friend too. I will go now, there is a sad man that should eat but isn’t, and Marehis is very sad and worried for Ellie, I will go tell her she is fine and her garden talking went well.”

“Do not interrupt her work, but yes, go ahead, thank you Cole,” Josephine said, dismissing him with a nod. Was she some sort of Mage? Or was the boy-? What had just happened—he had been standing there and then he was gone!

“I do apologize,” the woman said, “Cole is specially gifted.”

That...was not an entire explanation but enough of one he supposed. He nodded. “I apologize, I am Tonio Aclassi, I am here to report to Ambassador Montilyet.”

“I am Ambassador Montilyet, it is an honor to meet you, Mister Aclassi. Please, do follow me—we will get your paperwork settled, and I will see you to the Inquisitor’s quarters.”

In- Inquisitor? “I am to meet the Inquisitor?” he asked as he trailed after her, across the
courtyard and up a flight of stone steps.

“Of course you- oh. Inquisitor Trevelyan I should say—Eleanor has received a promotion since you met.”

That was a bit of information. He was silent as he followed carefully behind the Ambassador. That boy he said Cremisius was asleep? It was the middle of the day. Was he sick, or injured? A soldier, Ellie had said he was now. Working for that large Qunari fellow. He…could not wrap his head around it. How had his son been drawn to such work? He was no bigger than Ellie the last time he saw him, Liviana once- oh, he should have- he should have taken Cremisius and left her then, but she was his wife. He was supposed make certain her needs were met and they could barely afford to live as a family unit. Divorce was out of the question, but- he should have done things differently, so many things. Liviana once smacked Cremisius across the face so hard he’d gone down, fallen like a doll cast from a child’s hand. He could not imagine his son training against a Qunari or fighting in a battle. Let alone…Ellie had said something of him being a bodyguard for her for some time, saving her from an assassin?

All told, he could not imagine his son. He was not certain if he saw him now he would recognize him. Things seemed different, good for him here. Everyone he had spoken with spoke of him with respect, for both his character and his gender.

Varric Tethras was in the Ambassador’s office, waiting for them. He greeted them amicably and Maker, Tonio did not realize how weary he was until he was afforded the opportunity to sit down.

It took several minutes to realize that Mister Tethras was not there simply out of a matter of curiosity, he was standing in as a lawyer of some sort, carefully explaining the terms of their agreement, ensuring, it seemed, that the deal was satisfactory for him it was…a far cry different from before. Opposite, in fact. When he swallowed his pride and went to Magister Tilani, he’d been clean, polished, and humbling himself, begging to sell his servitude. Now he sat looking sorely out of place in the Ambassador’s office, broken, but being treated almost as an equal. Perhaps equal full stop, he…wasn’t sure what to think. He was in service to them still, wasn’t he? He was here to work. He was a slave, he was to take what he was given, and say thank you when most of it was taken back and away.

“…as you see fit. You would meet them in my office, if that would suffice, and all of your materials would be provided by the Inquisition. There is an appropriate mirror in Eleanor’s quarters of course, but I’ve seen to it another will be set up here, and well, whatever you need. Your sewing machine has been delayed I’m afraid, but I’ve been in touch with the courier and…Mister Aclassi?”

He startled, realizing he hadn’t been paying attention. “I am sorry, my humblest apologies, truly,” he shot out, bowing his head, bracing himself.

“Mister Aclassi have you eaten today?” the Ambassador asked.

That…was not exactly what he was expecting.

“Yes, miss,” he responded should he look up? What did he- he didn’t know the rules here.

“A meal, Mister Aclassi,” the woman clarified firmly.

He wasn’t certain just how to answer that, but the woman held up an index finger and rose from her seat, “Just a moment.” She left them, and when she returned she resumed her seat and
cleared her throat. “I was merely explaining the extent of your work here. You could find customers among those within the Inquisition, but we’ve also several noble allies that come and visit our headquarters. We would like to advertise the attraction, so to speak, the chance to be tailored by the man responsible for the Herald of Andraste—our Inquisitor’s—wardrobe. Of course we will only do so if and when you feel up to the task, we would not wish for you to take on clients that are not to your liking or too much of a burdensome workload.”

He- turn down client- what- burdensome?

Perhaps his mind was hunger-addled. Very few of the Ambassador’s words were making much sense.

“You would see Eleanor in her quarters of course, but that would not do for other clientele. You would meet them here, in my office—entertain them, take measurements, discuss design and the like. There are a few places where you could properly set up a workspace—I thought perhaps…it is a bit of a walk from your quarters but, we’ve an empty spire of battlement just above our Requisitions office, there is ample space for growth should you take on staff or assistants. And while I regret we could not get you suitable quarters near the Bull’s Chargers, I thought perhaps it would suit to have your place of business nearby—there is a walkway that would lead you right to their quarters, which branches directly off of the top floor of the Tavern—where you could take meals. Of course you’re also free to put in orders for delivery from there or the kitchens—whenever you are hungry, Mister Aclassi. Meals are provided to all who serve the Inquisition, it would not be detriment to your debt. The same is to be said of the Healers services, and of course your board.”

A serving girl came and laid a tray down on Ambassador Montilyet’s desk, “The Herald sends her regards, Lady Josie—she is behind schedule, her talks with the Chantry sisters still continues but she will be done as soon as possible.” Oh, it took a moment to realize she was wearing the uniform, one of his designs. It was strange and bewildering, an honor to see his work again.

“Thank you Abby,” the Ambassador said, then, “how did it go?”

“Oh my lady it was beautiful. A message on the way we consider ‘for what every man has, another has lost’ that just,” she shook her head, “it was very moving. She is still caught up talking with some of the Chantry sisters, and Chancellor Roderick it seemed when I left, but she promises to head for her quarters as soon as they are finished.”

“Wait, has she even had lunch yet? Is that asshole giving Tumbles a hard time?” Varric asked, Maker, the edge in his voice. Was this Chancellor an unsavory fellow? Should she be giving him audience?

“It sounded like a pleasant conversation,” the servant girl said.

“Uh-huh. We good here?” Varric asked the Ambassador, “Bianca just wants to go check in. Take a look around.”

Ambassador Montilyet sighed. “Varric, please do not brandish your weapon in the middle of the Chantry gardens-”

“She’s not a weapon, she’s a lady—and ladies need to be held every once in a while, taken on a leisurely stroll through the gardens. Keeps the romance alive,” he winked, “Gonna just, woo my girl. If Roderick pisses his robes, sweet deal.”
He wasn’t certain who Bianca was but if she frightened this Roderick…that was apparently a good thing?

“Is Ellie in danger?” Tonio asked as he and the Ambassador were left in her office.

“Certainly not. Varric is merely overprotective. To a point,” she sighed. “Eleanor and the Chancellor have a tremulous past. He would not be permitted within a mile of the Inquisition, let alone Eleanor herself, if he were a danger to her. I would be brandishing weapons in the Chantry gardens.”

Had this Ambassador weaponry to speak of? She didn't seem the type. Not incapable, just, more the person to call upon the guard, than the one guarding.

He ate what he was offered, and was truly glad for it, it was certainly the best meal he’d had in quite some time. House Tilani…Magister Tilani was not an unkind mistress. But he did not work with her directly. Their food certainly hadn’t been…it had been mass produced a sort of gruel that had once been so unappetizing in his first few days he could recall turning it down, before he felt the sort of desperate hunger that made gray gelatinous paste taste like relief. The true hellions were fellow slaves appointed positions of power and authority over their counterparts, and he had most certainly been beneath them. This…the Inquisition, was leagues apart. He wondered where the servants quarters were, just how many he would be sharing with—he’d nothing on him worth stealing anymore. He was glad to be sleeping apart from Cremisius if his son had a better living situation than he.

He was allowed to read over the deal set for him before signing his own name and that…was when it really clicked for him.

“This…this is correct?” he was almost afraid to ask. It felt almost foolish, but if he saw something amiss and didn’t say something…it would be wrong to trick them and only disservice himself and them.

“Have I made some error?” the Ambassador fretted before rising to lean over her desk to peer at what he was pointing to. “Ahh. I do apologize you are not left with more, we…I hope you are not insulted by the valuation of your services, there is only so much room in our current budget but if you wish to negotiate—”

“H-heaven’s no I- my Lady I merely- I thought perhaps you’d tacked on a number too much by mistake.” A number or three too many.

“Certainly not. The cost of your labor, your expertise have been accounted for. Eleanor passed along your designs already as you saw—they are truly exquisite. I can see where Cremisius gets his talent from.”

“Talent?” he…his son was a soldier, he wasn’t certain what talent in that he could have gotten from his father.

“For illustration of course. The Iron Bull had me secure him suitable supplies to draw in his free time—oh!” she sat back in her seat and opened her top desk drawer, retrieved a small leather-bound book and she flipped through the pages and turned it about so he could see. “Seeker Pentaghast allowed me to borrow it, a birthday present from Eleanor that your son assisted her with. See?”

Oh it stole the breath from him. Surely yes, this was his son’s work, a sun setting on a mountain range, a dragon laying fallen and a small girl standing before it striking a victory pose.
while behind her stood a woman, armed, armored, sweating and looking rather bedraggled like she’d had quite the time protecting the child from harm and besting a dragon. Maker…his Cremisius was drawing again? He’d not…he had not done so in years. A sign, a dangerous one that he should have seen, he should have known what his child was feeling—hopelessness, despair at his impending future.

*I’d rather die* he’d said, trembling, sobbing. His certainty though, that was the worst part. *I…I don’t want to die but I’m scared papa. I know I’ll do it. I can’t live like this.*

“There are more, you may look through it if you’d like,” the Ambassador offered kindly.

“I…I do appreciate it, but my hands, my Lady—I would not wish to dirty it.”

“Certainly. Another time then. If you’re satisfied with the terms of your agreement, we can be on our way, you’ll have the opportunity to clean up.”

Ahh. The terms. Maker he could scarcely believe it was not a mistake. The Inquisition had taken on his debts to Magister Tilani. They would make monthly payments on it from his own salary—a salary big enough to make such payments while still leaving him with nothing grandiose but he need not pay for essentials like food or housing or health care. It was enough that he could do things, go for drinks, shop...he could save up. Put more into his payments or purchase things, gifts for his son—his birthday! Oh he- he would- he could celebrate the day with his child!

And what was more he could make more, far greater progress if he took on further clients for the Inquisition. He could...

He thought he would die an old man in House Tilani. Now freedom seemed truly within reach.

Or…or maybe it was in hand. This...was nothing like his servitude before thus far.

He signed. And then he was led back out into the great hall, and through a winding corridor to a door that lead to a flight of stairs and-

“Wait!” a girl’s voice shrieked, “What if it’s poison?!?”

“Yeah, it’s been here a couple hours, but it’s been covered this whole time and it’s still a little warm, it should be fine to eat,” that was Eleanor’s voice, he thought.

“Not ‘gone bad’ poisoned—*poison* poison!”

“Why would it be poisoned?”

“I…I dunno I’ve never done this before!”

“We eat together all the time, Sera!”

“Yeah but not like this! Shit, how does Kremmy-boy know when pish is poison? He kicked that guys ass before you could even take a sip!”

“Memorized the face of everyone that works in Haven, at Flissa’s tavern, knows their schedules and knew that man had no business bringing our drinks,” she explained as if it were simple.

“Well I haven’t ruddy done that!”
There was chuckling, warm and rumbling and a deep voice said, “You want me to take a bite first for her Ser’?” and then, “All good Imekari, knock yourself out.”

“Thank you! I’m starving,” she said, and she’d a mouth full of...it was some sort of food wrapped in thin…bread…something. He certainly wasn’t sure what it was. But the girl looked up when Ambassador Montilyet led him to the top of the stairs and her entire expression lit up, she put her food back on her plate, raising a hand to cover her mouth and swallow quickly before, “Mister Aclassi!” she called out, cheery relief in her voice as she came around her desk and rushed to meet him-

Maker she- she was hugging him- she shouldn’t, he was not- he must be filthy, and her dress was so very lovely, she should not-

“I’m so glad you made it! How are you feeling, you’ve eaten yeah? Are you tired? How was your meeting with Lady Josie-“

“My lady, perhaps if you took a moment to breathe between questions, he could answer you?” the Lady at his side offered laughingly, amused at…well, she really was Inquisitor now, wasn’t she?

The girl pulled away, stepping back though she’d taken hold of his hands still, giving them a reassuring squeeze as she offered an apologetic, “Sorry, I’m just a little excited you’re here,” and then she gasped, twisting about to look at the Qunari, “I could do somersaults!”

“I could do somersaults, chip my damn horns doin’ them but man am I glad to see you,” the large Qunari, Cremisius’s boss he…what was his name again? Oh goodness, he had only been introduced once, but it was an important name, he should have remembered it. The metal… something? Had Lady Montilyet said it earlier? He was too embarrassed to ask in front of the man himself, he may well be insulted, and he would not wish to upset the man his son worked for.

“Thank you,” Tonio said, “I am well, and your Ambassador made certain I ate. Our meeting was productive, I have signed everything.”

Ellie’s “Oh, that’s so great!” was overlapped by barking, then the scrape of a Mabari’s claw-tipped paws across stone as a pup descended upon him, appearing from behind the desk and rushing to meet him, goodness! He- it startled him, but they seemed friendly enough, jumping on him—up with its front paws on his shoulders and he didn’t know what else to do but try to catch the Mabari against him, it was not so big it could stand at his height—heavy thing though, and oh! He ended up on the receiving end of some very generous licks to his face.

“Anya! She’s a good dog honest, I think she thinks you’re Cremisius—he spoils her rotten, still carries her around like she’s a puppy! She didn’t walk half the trip here from Haven, I swear—I can get her to stop if-“

“She’s quite alright,” he assured, though he did kneel to let the Mabari down before he raised a hand to pet behind her ear. Another woman that had captured his son’s heart? He was big enough, strong enough to carry her around? Half way sounded like the girl meant it as exaggeration but Maker…his trip had been shortened some seventy some miles due to their move.

Ellie was bouncing a bit in place. “Anya just gave you a bit of a bath, but you probably want to clean up and everything right? I set everything in there,” she pointed to a doorway to the left of her bed, “there’s a mirror and everything, clean water—if you need more just holler and we’ll get you set! Your clothing’s in there—I hope it fits good, we used the measurements you sent us for a uniform, but you aren’t technically servant staff, you’re more specialized so I thought there
should be a difference, so people aren’t stopping you all the time asking for drinks or directions.
Cole did his best from Cremisius’s memories to figure out what would suit you best. And Sera’s
girlfriend—oh! This is Sera!” Ellie introduced the lanky Elf girl seated on her desk who raised a
hand to wave to him. “Sera’s girlfriend—she’s an Inquisition scout, and her ma’s a
seamstress. Of course you’ll need more than one, but we thought you might like more of a hand in
that in future—unless you’d prefer someone else do it of course, Lace’s ma is happy to work with
you! Just, whatever you want or like. I feel like I’m rambling now I think, sorry.”

“You should eat, mija,” Lady Montilyet gently chastised. “Whatever that…is it…?”

“Not what you’re thinking. Molly brought it to me for breakfast, it’s soft tortilla wrapped
around sausage and eggs and cheese and potatoes. It’s a bastardization of proper Antivan fare but I
can hold my entire breakfast in my hand so I’m not even mad.”

Tonio had been given instruction so…he gave the pup one last pat on the head and went
into the closet—more of a side-room really—and closed the door behind him. There was a small
vanity tucked away in there and a mirror and…

Three things, he took note of first. His old shaving kit. A proper suit folded carefully to
avoid wrinkling, with his pocket watch resting atop it. And a new pair of shiny leather shoes.

There was lamplight, plenty of it to see by as he stripped and used the washbasin at hand
to clean himself, scrub until he was as clean as possible, it took a moment for him to realize she had
left out fresh soap for him. It soothed the aching dryness in his skin, and when he was done he
shaved, a proper, good shave. He expected the sort of gel he used for styling to be long expired but
his son apparently—of course, he used likewise to style his own hair, the jar in his shaving kit
seemed fresh and the familiar scent was comforting as he plied it to his hair.

This suit. That ‘Cole’ had divined something from Cremisius’s memories? It did very
much look like the sort of thing he used to wear, this Lace’s ma was a fine seamstress.

He…well Maker, he felt like himself, very well looked like himself again even.

When he stepped out of the side room, it seemed the others had taken their leave. Lady
Montilyet, the Qunari, Sera. Eleanor was seated at her desk, poring over some document she held
in hand, he was glad to see her hand-held breakfast was gone had she…she must be terribly busy.

It was the pup, Anya that alerted her that he was done, the Mabari ‘wuffed’ at him and the
girl looked up from her work, “Oh!” she exclaimed, and then smiled reassuringly, “Oh wow, you
look so handsome! Do you like it? Everything’s comfortable?”

“Certainly, I truly appreciate it, I…I am not certain where to go next, we have a meeting?
Or are you busy—“

“Oh, sorry, just- it’s been a crazy day and I was trying to get everything done so the
afternoon can just be free and clear—if you give me just a second, I need to sign this and then we
can chit chat until Cremisius comes! He’ll be by in a little bit, I hope you don’t mind waiting? He
really should sleep a bit more.”

Ahh yes. “Is he—“ he didn’t wish to interrupt her further but, “is he alright?” his watch said
it was nearly three in the afternoon now.

“Oh gosh, yeah,” she assured him, “come on, take a seat, please, make yourself
comfortable—you can just leave your old things in there, someone will be by soon to take them.”
Ahh, he stepped back into the side room and put his old clothing he’d had bundled in hand on the vanity. “Tea will be here soon, I’m parched, would you care for some? Oh! Crap, sorry, you were asking—” she stopped, took a deep breath, and held up an index finger before she took up a quill, dipped it in her inkwell and hurriedly scanned the final paragraph of the missive in hand before she signed the bottom and set it aside with a sigh as he took a seat in a chair across from her desk.

“Okay. Cremisius is fine—I saw him this morning, he brought me coffee before he went to bed. Rocky, one of the Chargers? He got sick last night and couldn’t work his shift patrolling the walls. Cremisius has the day off today, so he stayed up and took his shift for him, so he’s catching up on his sleep now. He works so hard, today’s like the first day off he’s taken since…well gosh I’ve never really known him to take one really, unless he’s being tricked into it. But we really wanted him to be able to spend time with you so, it all worked out! Cole will wake him soon.”

Oh. His son took pride in his work, it sounded like, worked hard? Helped his friends, brought coffee to the girl he was pursuing, saw to the start of her day before he laid down, he…everything he had heard—everyone he had interacted with so far had nothing but compliments for his son, had been excited to meet him simply because he was his father. He was excited, to meet this man his son had become in his absence.

Tea arrived shortly after and he gladly accepted a cup, when had he last had tea? It was altogether pleasant. Though, when they were alone again the girl seemed to take the opportunity to broach something that might not be entirely easy.

“I want to make something clear though. Before you meet,” she said bringing his attention back. She looked very serious, almost grave. “Cremisius has spoken very highly of you—do not get me wrong, he loves you, so much and he’s so proud of you. And he’s said that you have been…understanding to a degree—like with the three-squeeze system to help him when he struggled when he was little, before he even understood what was happening with him. And that you came to accept him, for him, before you left. And I will never be able to thank you enough, for what you’ve done—sparing him a life of slavery, instilling him with advice and encouragement before you parted ways. But that…it—” she took a moment, thinking very carefully before she said, “I understand it can be difficult, Cremisius is your child. You couldn’t have known when he was just a baby, you were raising him the way you thought was best, and he struggled just as much to understand his own situation—but eventually he did know, and he did speak up. And while you did eventually listen, you cut it very, very—” she sighed, frustrated, and cut to the chase, “You cut it too damn close. I am grateful you made the right choice, chose a living son over a dead daughter, but it should never have gotten that far. Do you understand that?” she questioned fiercely.

“Y-yes. Oh, most certainly I…have many regrets. That is the greatest of them all, I assure you.”

“Good,” she said, ”Keep it that way. Because I swear to the Maker if you so much as put a single inkling of doubt in his mind about who he is, and the man he’s become, you will regret that far worse. He’s worked so hard, been through so much to get to where he is—so be careful. If you have questions, ask him—privately. It is up to him entirely, who knows, and who doesn’t. And if he gives you certain boundaries, even if you don’t get them, you follow them without complaint.”

“Absolutely. I…I would never want to hurt him, truly.” He had made so many mistakes, he hoped to never repeat them. But he was glad there was someone looking out for his son, would seek to protect him, even from his own father. That…took a measure of courage, she spoke as if he still had Cremisius’s good opinion after all.

“Just making sure. I don’t think badly of you, honest, just- giving you a warning/crash course in getting reintroduced to your Aqun-Athlock son. Qunari term—someone born one gender,
living as another.”

That— he never realized that was a facet of Qunari life. Maker, their god truly was looking out for his son, delivering him into the hands of someone who would readily understand his situation. He had been uncertain, almost afraid for his son, just—the Qunari was large. And a Qunari. And his son was very, very Tevene. It was a caustic mix, he thought, but perhaps not, he had been nothing but outright kind to Tonio.

Anya had been laying at his feet, but her head perked up and she yipped before it sounded like the door downstairs swung open.

“Eleanor?” a Nevarran accent called up the stairs, followed by a male, “Sweetheart?”

Ellie smiled and called down, “Hasta aquí, mami, papi!” in…Antivan. The young lady did share a similar complexion to the Ambassador, and just now, similar accents.

Oh goodness, was he about to meet the young lady’s parents?

If…if they were it…well he wasn’t certain just how that worked. They were very, very white, the pair of them. A very fierce looking woman came bounding up the stairs, followed after by a blonde man whose tired expression broke out into a smile when he laid eyes on the people seated at the Inquisitor’s desk. “My word—“

“He does look like the Lieutenant,” the Nevarran woman said quietly to her male counterpart and then, “Mister Aclassi, I am Seeker Cassandra Pentaghast, it is an honor to meet you.”

“Cullen Rutherford, a pleasure,” the man came forward and Tonio rose to his feet to accept the hand he offered for a…handshake, when had he last had someone look him in the eye and shaken his hand…said his own name?

“Tonio Aclassi,” he introduced himself. “It is an honor to meet you both, you have raised quite the remarkable daughter,” he complimented.

That seemed to give them pause with something that quietly overwhelmed them, sent them looking bashful and then to one another and Ellie saw fit to giggle. Had he said something?

“Thank you, Mister Aclassi, but we cannot take too much credit for her upbringing,” Cassandra said.

“Hardly any really,” Cullen followed.

“Raised myself mostly, so thanks!” the girl enthused, met with the Commander’s laughter.

“We have only been in Eleanor’s life a spare…” Seeker Pentaghast thought on it, but Ser Cullen readily supplied,

“Seven months, two weeks, six days and nineteen hours and some odd minutes,” and then at the surprised looks his accuracy got him, “our first assault on the Breach was a remarkable day.”

Ahh. Well then. That explained how the very visual differences between them all. He had considered perhaps adoption was a possibility he just hadn’t considered it such a recent, perhaps unofficial one, but very real all the same. She…raised herself, she said? Oh. Oh!

He almost apologized but he…hadn’t been paying much attention when they first met—at
least not at first. If the girl had been made to speak of herself to the Magister, he hadn’t taken much note. He hadn’t been told why he was to accompany Magister Tilani to Orlais. He thought he was just there to carry her shopping, and he was, Maker that woman shopped like she was solely responsible for the economic success of Val Royeaux. But then she had him sit alongside her at lunch and that was certainly out of the realm of the ordinary. Then Magister Pavus’s son, the Dwarf, and A Qunari walk in with this little noble girl she looked like. By that point he’d been so nervous he’d been focusing on breathing, had hardly heard past panic. This was all different and that…didn’t usually mean ‘good’. Different treatment, different assignments, from what he’d seen and heard over the years, when your master took greater note of you than before, they were either testing to see if...well perhaps a new rumor had been spread, or information leaked from their house and they were displeased, thought you were responsible and testing you. Giving you something to observe and spread—a Magister having lunch with the Herald of Andraste and her er…they had been…he had never said such a thing, but many were speaking of the rumored Qunari in her company as a um…pet. Regardless, Maevaris meeting with them, and the man she considered her cousin through scandal that still rocked the Magisterium, would be a point of serious intrigue for any Magister regardless of how very benign the conversation could be. Aside from panic, he’d been making a point not to listen—he couldn’t accidentally disclose any part of this conversation in passing if he couldn’t remember what was said. Though a fellow Tevinter in attendance that made it less likely that she was testing him. The Altus could gossip about her far more credibly, quickly than slaves passing things along until it got to a higher up, or another Magister.

And then there was the fact that this girl knew his name. ‘Mister Aclassi’ she’d cried out in surprise. Shock. Which set his panic even deeper because the only other probability was...well usually sudden kindness—a gentler job, closer to the Magister, being made to feel a promotion might be at hand, being fed a fine meal, usually meant you were eating your last meal. That you were about to be used for Blood Magic. He hadn’t witnessed much if any Blood Magic in house Tilani, but that did not mean she might not be here to offer him over to the Mage she was meeting with, an old friend of hers she called him. The girl was just that—a girl, young and seemingly...he was not certain of her accent, was she Ferelden? A Marcher? Not Tevinter, and not a Mage he thought, she didn’t carry a staff and she was certainly old enough to do so. His mind decided to interpret her shock as horror, that she knew well what fate awaited him—how else would she know his name? Magister Tilani had made arrangement to give him over to Magister Pavus’s son, there were rumors...he had been in her home nearly two years ago, injured, and there were rumors among the servant staff that he had nearly been a victim of some dark ritual, that his own parents had set upon him. Perhaps...perhaps he sought vengeance, he’d come to Magister Tilani for assistance once before, who was to say he was not coming to her now for a slave to sacrifice for his revenge?

“...you’re familiar with Aclassi?”

His attention barely piqued at mention of his name again. Oh Maker, what would happen to his soul if he was sacrificed to Blood Magic? If they made a demon enter him or--Then the horrible thought, would they go after his Cremisius, seek him to take up the debt he was repaying? Send slavers, a tribune after his son, who knows what they would do to his boy if they...if they did not agree that he was one, and certainly once he was documented and appointed he would...he would have to dress as the female slaves did, answer to--any sense of self he had found would be stripped from him-

“...not as a brand name. You mean as in Tonio Aclassi?” Brand name? Perhaps he should have been paying better attention, just what in the world were they talking about?

And then words that made his heart stop completely in his chest. Words that set him on the path he was on now, offered him relief he had not felt in years, and answer to all the questions
that spawned his pressing fears.

“*His son, Cremisius, actually.*”

“Is Krem here?” Cullen asked, looking around.

“He will be soon,” Ellie said. Oh, *soon.*

“We apologize for interrupting,” the Seeker offered, “I have been assisting with a matter of import today and wished to check in with Eleanor while I had a moment to do so.” Was she apologizing to him? He started bringing Cremisius to the shop the very day he was fully weaned from his mother’s breast. Otherwise he would find himself constantly leaving his workshop to go and lay eyes on his child, hold him, hear him. Smell him—even when he got older, while he lost the ‘new baby smell’ there was something that was entirely his son, familiar and comforting, just, he would hold him close, head bowed, and breathe. He would never have gotten any work done the first several years of Cremisius’s life if he hadn’t started bringing him to work. If he begrudged this woman the only moment she could spare to seek her daughter and make certain she was well, he would certainly be the darkest pot in existence calling the kettle ‘black’.

“And I- oh, thank you, Inquisitor,” Cullen said when Ellie perceived his need, handed over the missive she’d signed earlier, “you read over everything?”

“Uh-huh,” Ellie said, “Sera helped with the words I got stumped on—I mean I can sound them out and stuff just, wasn’t sure what they meant."

The Seeker came and rested a hand on Ellie’s head, smoothing back her hair, “You’re coming along quite nicely with your reading, Eleanor, but I am pleased Sera was at hand…Marehis promises she will return as soon as she is finished,” Cassandra said, though she looked around now as well, “who guards you now?”

“Anya!” the girl informed them, and then assured, “Cole too—no worries, he’s here, just, you know. On the down low. I thought that’d be better than having someone openly hanging over us, you know?”

“As long as you’re secure, I’ve no issue,” Cassandra assured. “You’re well, yes? You’ve had a good day? I am truly sorry I could not be there this morning.”

“I was pretty anxious earlier, but our meeting went fine; Lady Josie explained your stance on things…you’re absolutely certain you’re okay with saying no to um, him?“

“Eleanor. I care so very little of my family’s good opinion—I’m actually outraged they would seek to manipulate you in such a manner. If it were feasible, I would have us transported to Nevarra so you could go before Markus* himself, deliver this decision to his face while Cullen stood at your back cheering you on in some ridiculous manner.”

“I have considered it,” Cullen told her, “and there *would* be dancing involved.”

The Seeker fought a grin at the man’s words, trying to maintain seriousness as she intoned, “Of course Markus is quite literally insane and such a move would be unadvisable. Moving forward with R-” Cassandra took pause, looking to Tonio, “with who you have chosen, will be rejection enough. Now, I was hardly apologizing for missing our War Room meetings—apparently they suck?”

The…the Fade?

“Oh certainly, that is the most pressing of his crimes thus far,” Cassandra assured, “I meant your talks—Marehis and myself, we are sorry we could not be there, but Cullen assures me you did so well.”

“She was the best one,” Cullen bragged.

“I was the only one!” Ellie argued laughingly.

“That doesn’t make my statement untrue!”

She snorted. “Uh-huh,” she drawled. Though then she seemed…he was not certain, just a moment of something like being dazed passed over her before she cleared her throat and offered up a smile, continuing on normally, “Everyone was super sweet, and I had a nice talk with Roderick. Don’t feel bad about missing that, gosh you- how is um. Everything?” she asked the Seeker.

“As well as can be expected,” the woman sighed. “Thank you, for agreeing to swiftly see to so many trials so we could clear the space for this purpose...though a great deal of our work has taken place more so in the back of the dungeons.”

“There isn’t really a back-“ she stopped as realization dawned in her face, “oh. Ohhhh…” it sounded like that explained something to her, but she took pause again and Tonio was beginning to be concerned,

“Are you well, my lady?” he asked just, sweat had begun to bead at her forehead and she seemed to be taking very controlled breaths.

“Ellie?” Cullen backed his questioning.

“I’m fine,” she said, before asking, “This morning? Around sevenish? You um,” she shook her head as if to clear it, “was that going on? You were with them just a little bit ago, was… are they doing that again?”

“We woke him around seven, yes,” the Seeker confirmed, “When I left they were speaking peaceably but...Eleanor?”

“Um. I don’t think he’s reaching out or anything on purpose, or trying to make me fe-when there’s too much of something from either of us, it spills into the-“ she stopped, thinking before carefully trying to explain, “this morning I got really sick to my stomach and lightheaded, dizzy and panicky like um-”

“Like one might feel while hanging from a great height. You are experiencing this now?” and when Ellie nodded the Seeker spun about on her heel to rush from the room, but that boy appeared, Cole.

“I will be faster,” he informed her before disappearing again.

“Is everything alright?” Tonio asked, confused and…concerned, Ellie was resting her head in her hand like perhaps it felt like it were spinning, and she was trying to steady it.

“Ellie, sweetheart,” the Commander came around the desk to kneel at her side, “what can we do?”

It was very confusing, he wasn’t certain just what was going on. Was she unwell? Their
conversation made very little sense, but it didn’t seem like his business—like they were trying to guard what they were speaking of in his presence. He sat quietly while Cullen rubbed circles on her back, though he…oh he did feel he should do something when tears slipped from her eyes, she hastily wiped at them and whispered something about “Solas lo siente,,” that…was very similar to Tevene if he wasn’t mistaken, something about someone being sorry. Which hardly seemed to pacify the Commander, he looked like he might murder someone. The Seeker was pacing like she were very well considering doing just that.

Her teacup was empty so Tonio refreshed it, offering it to her it…it was something, he wasn’t certain at all if it would help, but she returned him a small smile of thanks and carefully took the cup in a slightly trembling hand and cautiously sipped. “Thanks, sorry um, something complicated is happening right now—I’m okay, everything’s fine, honest.”

“You did not say you were feeling unwell this morning,” Cullen spoke in gentle reprimand.

“I wasn’t feeling horribly enough to stop our meeting, I mean it was pretty important. And I did speak up with Sera, took potion, er, a few times today—I thought it was just my regularly scheduled War Room anxieties having an extra kick. Spicing things up, keeping things interesting so I don’t grow bored with it all, ya know?” This was all a terrible amount of pressure to place upon someone, she’d been expected to save the world from that ‘Breach’ he’d heard about, and she’d done it. Now she found herself…she was truly the leader of the Inquisition? It was little wonder she had such anxieties. At least she seemed to have a good sense of humor about it all.

The Seeker sighed came and pressed a kiss to the girl’s head, “I will go speak with Marehis. Do keep us appraised. We must be mindful of your…bono?” she attempted something Antivan. There were similarities between Tevene and Antivan, but he wasn’t extremely well versed in his countries dying language.

“You know what, you’re not entirely wrong? But that’s more the money one, not the connection kind.”

“Ahh. Do you need anything?” Ellie shook her head, no. “Has er, Cole returned?”

She nodded. “They stopped, I feel better. Cremisius will be here soon too, so, Cole can come help out if you need him?” the Seeker nodded.

“Have a pleasant evening, do let us know how everything goes,” Cullen said.

“Send for us if you’ve need,” Cassandra intoned before she stepped away from the girl, Commander following after her. Anya let out a little whine and left her place at Tonio’s feet to go to Ellie, lay with her front legs and her head in the girl’s lap.

“I’m sorry everything’s so secret-y,” she saw fit to apologize to him, “That…will be something to keep in mind too—Cremisius knows a lot of things, has a lot of information he has to keep confidential to do his job. If he won’t discuss something, it’s likely because he can’t, it’s nothing personal.”

Ahh, of course. His son had such high security clearance? “He would know all of what you just discussed?”

“Just about all of it, yeah.” That was good. He hoped…Cremisius was something of support, if he was choosing to be involved with her. “I’m so sorry this is such a weird day, I really did hope you’d be made to feel more welcome.”
Was she…was she serious?

“My lady, you’ve made me more than welcome, if I feel out of place it is simply because I am to some extent, this is all very new. I am not er…insulted or displeased. You are dealing with a complicated ‘weird’ day, I merely get to observe it and enjoy all of the pleasant things you’ve gone out of your way to arrange for myself, my son.”

She nodded. “Um, you don’t have to call me ‘lady’ or anything—you can call me Ellie if you like!”

Oh. “Certainly. You may call me Tonio if you wish.”

That made her smile. “Thanks!” and then she giggled when Anya trotted out away from the desk and started running in small, tight circles, panting excitedly before she stopped an let out a few short, happy sounding barks. “I think that means Cremisius is here!” she said, and then there was a knock at the door downstairs. “Are you ready?”

He was the one who felt poorly now, excited, and terrified made a nauseating mix. How had his son fared in his absence? Was he angry with him? Would he…should he have sprung this on him? It was too late to consider that, but what if the boy needed warning, to stop and consider if he wanted the father who had abandoned him back and in his life, working in the same facilities as he-

His son. He…oh Maker, he was about to see his son.

Ellie made haste down the stairs, and he almost wondered if he should have gone with her, it sounded like she slipped, but then the door was opening and she greeted her guest, and then the door was closing and she called up to him, “I hope you don’t mind, but I invited my boyfriend, to get his opinion!”

His opinion…certainly would matter, yes.

Oh. Oh Maker.

His son. His Cremisius. He was grown—he had grown, so very much. He had to be nearly a foot taller than when last he saw this boy. This man. Tall and so very strong—that night, the first and last time he’d truly seen his son, he’d been waif thin, so very small. Now he looked every bit the claims of his work as a soldier. He hardly recognized him, even as he felt the smile breaking across his face, and greeted, “Hello, Cremisius.”

Oh, but he was very much his Cremisius still,

“Papà!”

And he was strong, his boy winded him! And he could not be more glad of it, he was holding his son—his most precious child, his Cremisius!

It felt like physical heartbreak to hear this boy apologize to him of all people. He had nothing to apologize for!

When his son did finally calm it was only because he realized Tonio was in fact here, when he should be in Tevinter, and just how had that happened? Ellie had given them a moment as best she could, they were in her quarters after all, though this girl, she offered to retire to a closet if they wished more privacy.
And then Cremisius bid her closer, absently suggesting Tonio turnabout and he obliged but-

It did not feel right of him, but there was an element of concern...he worried, about the implications of his son’s gender. That he might be found undesirable, face so much rejection. That he may either be alone or settle for someone undeserving simply because they are accepting. Ellie clearly...all of this was born of love, something pure, he had seen it when they met in Val Royeaux. She had been genuine, in her insistence that she would want this, do anything in her power to make this happen, despite their personal standing. But to see...they were truly just like any young couple. This girl loved his son, wanted him, desired and made him feel desired it seemed. And what was more, Cremisius did so likewise, he had never in his wildest dreams believed his son would have something like this. It almost felt as though a bit of role reversal had taken place—his son was teaching him what real, true love should look like, it was certainly not the picture he and Liviana had painted for him. That had been...he had a kind of love for his wife, the sort born of obligation. He had done ‘right’ things, but most of what he did do was to make up for the fact that it what they had was hardly ideal. The imperative need to produce a Mage heir did nothing to incite romantic chemistry between two incompatible people.

But here, what Cremisius was experiencing, the example he was living by was a far cry from what he had borne witness to from his parents, even farther than what he had been taught to expect for himself from them. Cornelius had been demoralizing control, force, and farce. This young woman, she made his son feel like the man he is. Loved him the way he could only pray someone would love his son—completely, totally, genuinely.

It was quite the evening, quite the meal and yet somehow they talked far more than they ate. He felt badly when he learned it was meant to be a date night of sorts for the two of them, but they were glad for the intrusion, there was no awkwardness when their meal arrived. Steak, crispy rounds of potatoes, carrots glazed in honey, and a bottle of sweet red wine he...could not even remember when last he ate like this. Cremisius made swift work with uncorking the bottle and poured a glass for his father before he poured another for himself though he made no move to do so for his young lady, Tonio took up the bottle to offer her some but she smiled and politely declined, satisfied with the juice she’d been supplied with though the moment she declined she seemed startled and then assured,

“I’m not pregnant! I just don’t drink!”

He...had not been concerned of such. But should he be? There were...obvious changes in his son, he had been mildly alarmed to see how very erm, flat chested he was now but when they hugged he felt something sturdy beneath his tunic something that seemed to bind his chest. That was a non-magical solution, but were there magical ones? Blood magic that might alter his form? But Cremisius chuckled when Ellie posed the unnecessary assurance, said there’d been no concern that she was, so that put doubt in the notion that his son was indeed changed in such a way he could unwittingly impregnate his girlfriend, or that she would be the sort to er, step out on him. There were other feasible methods for them, of course, but those would require the young couple intentionally seeking to become parents which...was unlikely at this time, was it not? He and Liviana had gone to great lengths to produce a child and in the end it had taken a ritual that would have brought forth new life so long as at least one in their pair had the ability to carry a child, and even then, further still had been the need to secure that life. A Healer came weekly to ensure their child was healthy, cast protections to Liviana’s womb, and she had the vilest smelling potions regimen, things meant to aid in the success of her pregnancy. And too, there were...things that had been more the stuff of wives tales, supposedly they would increase their child’s magical potential. They had both suffered through the poultice of lyrium-infused valerian root (ghastly stuff) and sea holly—while it has a pleasant enough name, it stank of Mabari droppings—that was
to be applied upon her stomach before going to sleep each night. But Cremisius, oh he had been well worth it, he...could not have loved someone more so very instantly, than in the moment the Healer first let him hold his child.

And now that babe was a grown man, working for the *Inquisition*. It was incredibly fascinating to hear just how so many of the people he’d met had joined their cause, although explanations like ‘time travel’ were certainly wild. And it was incredibly...it was nice to hear the girl speak so enthusiastically, of her interest, that the Iron Bull—*that* was his name! he would remember it now after so sorely messing it up—had sent the handsomest Charger to put in their offer to join. Cremisius blushed as he countered with the fact he had been ‘snooting all over everything’, and she defended her stance, that he had been sick. He seemed well enough now, of course, but still it...one of the greatest burdens of their separation had been worry, fear. That some horrible fate had befallen his son in his absence, that he was hurt, or sick and Tonio would have no way of knowing, no way of helping him. It ached in him enough he had to question it—wanted to know just who had been there for him, if anyone. And again, “Ellie helped a lot” had secured him treatment he felt...safe in receiving. Apparently that could be an issue, of course, just the vulnerability of being placed in a situation you could be outed to a total stranger, let alone the possibility a strange Healer may take issue and refuse treatment. Ellie had perceived these worries, listened when Cremisius insisted he needn’t see this ‘Adan’ fellow and she had taken such care of his son, accepted him from the start. He’d been concerned, by the things he had witnessed—the pitfalls and perils of being Herald-turned-Inquisitor but his son seemed to know well what he was getting into and found the situation well worth it, and after seeing them together, hearing these things, he could not be more certain he loved the pair the two of them made.

And then he learned just what had driven his Cremisius—his sweet boy who could not abide poisoning or injuring the mice and rats that endeavored to take up residence in Tonio’s workshop, in their home, would carefully capture, take them up into his hand and find safe haven for them—to join the military, become a soldier. It had been the most viable method of taking care of himself, his mother, but to join as a woman would have meant a betrayal to himself, to the life his father had given himself up for to secure for him. Too, it was less pay and there was some measure further of gender bias—he could receive benefits for his family, as their sole provider, in the men’s unit as opposed to the women’s. So he found a Healer that would allow him to lie about his age, and in the eyes of the government, his gender, on his documentation. Tonio Aclassi was not a violent man, but he could certainly wish harm upon the Healer that sent his son on the run, would not hear his case, saw and would have him fined for forgery, falsifying government documents—exorbitant fees he would be enslaved to work off if he could not pay them outright which of course he could not possibly afford.

He would die grateful to the Iron Bull. Getting involved and aiding his son when he had been in peril—a tribune, Maker. He had risked his life, sacrificed a piece of his own body, there could well have been a future where a blue-eyed Qunari worked for the Inquisition, no need of an eyepatch and no Tevinter Lieutenant at his side.

He had worked so very hard, secured such a miraculous life for himself. He’d taken on so much responsibility, and it...if he was heartbroken over Liviana it was that she would seemingly never appreciate the sacrifices their son made for her. She and Cornelius deserved each other—it made him sick to his stomach, when he thought now how foolish he’d been. Seeing Cornelius’s proposal as kindness, as the man seeing their situation and wishing to help out in the best way he knew how. The kindest thing that man would ever truly do for Cremisius is take his mother off of his hands.

Everything had been so very exhilarating, exciting, but ultimately he was exhausted. He did worry he had not earned his rest—while it seemed Ellie had secured so much of her day to be
dedicated to his initiation into the Inquisition and his reunion with his son, he had thought they were meant to get something of his work for her done, but they had not done so much as even speak of what he might produce for her or taken measurements. But she was immediate insistence that he must be tired, had offered him her arm, to escort him. He thought Cremisius would wish to walk with her but he...seemed to be taking up a defensive position, watching and guarding as they made their way through Skyhold, up through a large library and across the inner balcony to a hall overlooking what he supposed were the gardens Ellie had spoken in earlier. There were several doors lining the wall, perhaps multiple entrances to fewer rooms than there were doors so servants could steadily pass in and out without hinderance or maybe they were small rooms that held however many was possible-

He...had not been expecting a room of his own. His quarters, truly, he was even given a key. He had not even thought of his shaving kit, that he’d left it in her quarters, but no—when servants came to clear away his old things, it had been taken as well, brought here to sit on top of the chest of drawers. They provided him clothes for sleeping in, and what was more, an actual bed. He was not...he certainly felt out of depth. He had received so much kindness today he hardly knew what to do with it, and when he spoke of his gratitude, he was met with further kindness still —You made the actual best human being I've ever had the honor of loving and being loved by — what more could a parent wish to hear of their child? It was all overwhelming, and while he did regret their time together for the day was over when Cremisius insisted he see the girl safely back to her quarters, he was grateful that he would have time alone to process. And too, something in saying goodbye was thrilling because he was saying so while secure in the idea that tomorrow, they would see each other again!

“Breakfast,” Cremisius said, “and I’ll introduce you to the guys tomorrow, if you’re free.”

He huffed a laugh at that, Maker. If he’s free? After everything today, “I believe I am.”

He was alone, safe in a room of his own. He washed up as he changed for bed, there was even tooth brush and paste for him at the wash basin, more soap, and the sleep clothing they left for him...he could not remember when last he was so very clean and comfortable. When he lay in bed, beneath thick, warm covers, he had only the sparsest moment to offer up praise and thanks to his Maker before sleep consumed him, deep and satisfying, restful sleep. No one was going to steal his things, there were no task-masters ready to strike if he did not rise the very moment he was called.

There was however...quiet giggling, the sound of ‘shushing’ and something was crawling, causing the mattress to heave and dip until someone very warm curled up against his side.

He opened his eyes to find the pup, Anya, had taken up residence in his bed, which was admittedly welcome, comforting. Even more so, was the sight of Ellie and his Cremisius, seeming bemused with the Mabari, Ellie had a tray in hand—oh, the two of them were armored, Maker his son truly did look like a soldier.

And young Ellie, setting the tray on his bed, she...looked like a Mage. Was she? When he thought on it, he had noticed a staff sitting propped up against the bookcase at her back the other day, but it bore the Inquisition’s seal at its head. He thought it ceremonial, but she was currently putting fire in the hearth of the small fireplace that warmed his room. Without the assistance of a match, just, from her own hand.

The Maker was either the greatest comedian, or a horrible bastard. He did not wish to get ahead of himself, but what irony would there be, that years of struggle trying to force a mage daughter out of Cremisius, he may just provide one for them. A Mage daughter-in-law.
“Sorry,” Ellie said, “we really didn’t mean to wake you—“

He sat up, hand reaching to pet through the soft fur of Anya’s side, “There is no need to apologize, it is time I rise, yes?”

“Oh gosh, you can rest some more if you’d like, we were just bringing you breakfast for whenever you got up.”

“We grabbed you a tray while we had the chance,” Cremisius explained as he and Ellie took seats to his right and left, on the end of the bed.

The girl whispered Parshaara to Anya when the pup perked up like she might try to help herself to its contents, “You already had breakfast silly girl, you keep eating everyone’s food on top of it and you’ll be a right chunk—a beautiful, adorable chunk that I’ll still love to pieces, but you’ll be pretty miserable joint-wise, it’s just not very healthy for you,” Ellie lectured. The pup may or may not have understood but she laid back down, tail wagging contentedly as she made to observe his breakfast instead of consuming it.

He had slept deeply, through the promise of breakfast with his son—it was nearly ten in the morning! He had never slept that late in all his life! They had been up, the pair of them, since five, had already eaten, had quite the start to their days—but it was a blessing to see them first thing, and while they were likely busy, the couple sat with him while he ate, kept him company.

“Bull’s got Stitches on orders to come check you out here in a bit if you’re up for it,” Cremisius said, “Physical, checkup, eye exam. Make sure you’re all good.”

Oh. That was certainly generous, but, “He needn’t go through any trouble for me, he is your company healer is he not? The Inquisition has offered me access to their healers.”

“Which includes Stitches—but Adan would see you too if you wanted,” Ellie said, “he said he’d be glad to. Elan is head apothecary for the Inquisition now—she’s brilliant—but we figured you might be more comfortable seeing a male healer. You really should have a checkup, everyone needs them. Kind of weird to get used to, I know.” And then she smiled, “My first Inquisition checkup…well, the first one I had I was actually awake for, meeting Adan. We’re going through, asking me all kinds of questions, and he asks me if I’m active and I’m thinking, well I’m constantly on the move, always going from place to place, up walking or running or working all day so I say, ‘oh yeah, all the time’ and Marehis could not stop laughing! She got it way before I did, I was confused until he clarified he’d meant sexually! It was so embarrassing! I thought Marehis was going to pee herself!”

Oh goodness, he found himself laughing, that…would indeed be an embarrassing miscommunication. Though he wondered, “Who is Marehis?” he was…decently certain that hadn’t been someone he met yesterday, but the name sounded vaguely familiar. The Seeker had mentioned her he thought.

“Oh, she’s my mami too, like Cassandra—she was hired to be my bodyguard once the whole ‘treason’ thing was cleared up and I’d been declared Herald of Andraste.” Treason? He would really need to have a proper discussion with someone and get the whole of what he had missed—he’d barely heard of the Breach, had seen it on the horizon when they were traveling, and noticed it was gone. But he didn’t know where it came from really, or how the Inquisition came to be the source of its demise. “She’s usually with me but um, she’s got other work she needs to see to right now, but you’ll meet her sometime!” she said cheerily, though it sounded like she was reassuring herself to some degree.
Cremisius laid his hand over hers, squeezing gently, “She’ll be done soon, El. Sounds like she’s just about got all she needs. She’s doing a sit-down with Bull this afternoon, see if she has enough information to answer any questions he’d have.”

Ellie nodded. “He told me. I’m just not entirely sure um…I don’t know how she’ll be feeling, she might need some time off, you know?”

Cremisius nodded, though he was confused at, “When did you see him?”

“First thing—he came to cuddle! And Sera, and Cole, and Dorian. I um…my room got super cold.”

Truly? Her room quarters had been rather pleasant, toasty warm even as the sun had set last night. The fireplace in her rooms was large and burned plenty- “Thought it was a little chilly when I came to pick you up. Fireplace bothering you again?” Cremisius asked her quietly. Bothering her? Oh.

Haven had burned in the night.

“Little bit,” she admitted, blushing as if embarrassed, “it’s stupid—“

“Hey, it’s anything but stupid, lovely. I would’ve stayed.”

She smiled shyly. “That would’ve been nice, but I didn’t know it was going to be a thing until after you’d already left, and I wasn’t really…Cole had to come put it out. He got the Iron Bull because it’d be cold and that woke Dorian and his initial wake-up whining as they headed my way woke Sera, but it worked great! We were very squished as it was anyway. I mean Cole doesn’t really sleep, but—”

“Guy likes to cuddle though, I’m always game, he could’ve just laid on me. If you need me next time, have him get me, okay?”

“Kay,” she agreed.

That was sweet. He was not sure how the young lady’s parents might feel of such a thing, but they spoke of being with a great many people. He supposed ultimately, it was no one else’s business but their own. He trusted this Ellie with his Cremisius. And from what he had seen, his son was a proper gentleman and he had this sense of…care about him. That was not something he had lost, he had always been something of a constant source of support. He had not lost his sweetness, his compassion, those were not gendered modes of personality, they were intrinsically Cremisius. As much a part of him, as they were of his young lady, who looked to Tonio now and smiled, saying,

“I have a meeting here soon, but Mister Stitches will send me word when he’s done with your checkup, and as long as you’re feeling up to it, maybe this afternoon we can get started on my wardrobe? Only if you feel like it—“

“Of course, I apologize we did not get to it yesterday,” Tonio replied.

“Oh gosh, it’s not your fault everything was so crazy!” she insisted. “Have you eaten enough? We can get you more bacon,” she offered, giving Cremisius a bit of a teasingly reproachful glare ahh. Well then, he had eaten everything off of the tray except…he had been certain there was bacon. He’d eaten the whole of his potatoes, and a hearty helping of scrambled eggs but no-
He’d not noticed, he’d been merely relieved at having an actual proper breakfast, the company of these two wonderful children that he did not realize the most blessed thing had occurred. Something normal, something that had not happened to him in years.

His Cremisius had taken—stolen—his bacon. In lean times, they could get by without notice from their son by making up a single serving of the stuff, and putting it only on Tonio’s plate, because regardless of quantity, even if Cremisius had bacon aplenty with his own meal, the boy wasn’t done with breakfast unless he’d eaten at least some of his father’s bacon. There had been mornings—too many he…oh he had not liked that, worried—when his child would dash into the kitchen, insist he was running late, and he’d snatch a few slices in hand, kiss Tonio on the cheek as he did every morning in farewell, before he’d run out the door. On those mornings, foregoing a larger, proper meal. Liviana had wanted his measurements down, and too, upon reflection he was certain some measure of depression had been involved, he’d had practically no appetite, had not eaten much of anything in the days that led up to the rehearsal dinner.

“Always after my bacon, whatever am I to do with such a horrible child, eh?” he asked and it was merely natural, a habit, reaching out a hand to tweak at the tip of Cremisius’s nose, and the boy grinned, blushing but not seeming off put by the gesture. “I’m well and full, truly, I could not eat another bite,” he assured Ellie. “You have a meeting to get to?”

“Yeah, but um, I could see if someone will switch out with Cremisius—” she was offering.

“El, I already agreed to work this shift, I’m not backing out. For one thing, I definitely don’t want to, I mean I’m getting paid to walk around with you, and I might get to have a good fight…in front of you, these are all big positives in my book. Besides, sudden shift changes throws off the others and Leliana has to make adjustments to how she runs things—there’s literally so much paperwork that happens it’s a nightmare. Case in point: she just finished taking account after Tuesday’s wild game of ‘pass the Inquisitor’ having you bounce from Cole to Cullen to Cole to Cassandra to Wolf-boy, to Marehis, to Bull. She’s gonna physically cringe from the trauma of it all when I put down in my minutes 10:22am, the Inquisitor requested an unscheduled change in the guard—request denied.”

“You’d tattle on me?!” Ellie asked in mock shocked hurt.

“That’s my entire job, babe,” he informed her, “tattling on you all day long.”

“Rude!”

“I’ll be sure to pass your feedback on our process back to the Spymaster, she’ll appreciate it.”

“You can’t please all of the red-heads in your life, Cremisius, we’re a complicated people! It’s her or me!”

“Hmmmm…for your safety, I think I’m gonna have to go with her, sorry lovely,” he apologized laughingly, smiling as he asked, “Will you forgive my grave transgression if I invite you to dinner with the Chargers this evening? Dalish is making some favorites.”

“Spicy chicken rice stuff?”

“Yup.”

“And your papa’s coming?”

“He certainly is—I mean you are, right?” Cremisius checked with him, “It’s a Thursday,
we don’t get together for family dinners outside the regularly scheduled Tuesday ones for any old thing."

Family dinners? “I would be honored,” he assured.

Ellie seemed to take it under consideration. “Hmmm…well I guess in that case—10:25 the Inquisitor forgives my grave transgressions. And says I have a cute butt. I will actually pay you to write that down in your reports.”

“Oh, lovely, come on,” he complained with a sigh, “now I gotta put ‘and tried to offer me bribes to dictate my report herself’ that’s just not a good look, the Inquisitor manipulating the system like that. Today it’s to inform Leliana—and the whole of your security team that I’ve got an amazing butt—”

“I said cute.”

“It’s spectacular—tomorrow,” he continued without missing a beat, “it’s outright lying on them, saying you were dutifully attending the sick or something when really you were off…” oh, that gave him pause, “…I can’t even think of something bad you’d be getting up to?”

She was indignant at that, “I do bad stuff! All the time! I’ll remind you I’m a hardened criminal—I literally have a solid decade of crime under my belt, Cremisius. I’m a menace and I really must be stopped.”

Cremisius snorted at that, “Oh I do quiver in fear, please won’t the Maker rescue us all from the scary five-foot Apostate?”

“I’m five foot two and one quarter!”

Cremisius rose back from the bed, untied a sack from his hip that clinked with coin and tossed it onto the bed at Ellie’s side, raising his hands in submission, “Alright, let’s keep a level head here—don’t hurt us, just take it and be on your way, villain.”

Ellie looked like she was made of mischief as she looked to Tonio, “Abby will be by to take your tray, do you need anything at all?”

“Not a thing,” he assured her, not certain what was so-

Ahh. The girl grinned brilliantly before she snatched up the coin purse and bounced off the bed, giggling as she fled with Cremisius barking out a laugh as she reached the door and Cremisius quickly leaned to give Tonio a kiss on the cheek and clicked his tongue at Anya in the same instant he gave Ellie chase, out of his quarters and he did hope they would be careful on the library stairs.

Oh. Something in his heart sang at that—not only that he was here, with his son, able to receive a kiss on the cheek but…it was another thing he’d feared he’d lose, if not eventually to age, then to identity. That Cremisius would either feel he was too old to wish to display such a sign of affection to his father, or that he would feel emasculated doing so. Tonio’s own father would have brawled him in the street if he ever attempted such a thing with him…of course their relationship had been such that he wouldn’t wish to kiss the man on the cheek in the first place.

There was a knock on his door just as he was finished brushing his teeth, and he opened it to….a very dark-skinned man, who was certainly not the pallid, blonde-headed girl that brought the Ambassador his lunch the previous day. Though he was armored in a cuirass that smacked a closeness to what Cremisius wore-
“FUCK ME STRAIGHT TO HELL THERE’S TWO OF YOU. LIAM BENNETT,” HE INTRODUCED HIMSELF, GIVING TONIO A FIRM HANDSHAKE, “EVERYONE CALLS ME STITCHES, SAME CAN GO FOR YOU. WE ALL GOT NICKNAMES IN THE CHARGERS, I SUSPECT YOU’LL FALL VICTIM TO THAT SOON ENOUGH, BULL’S JUST GOT TO MULL IT OVER IN THAT HEAD OF HIS.”

STITCHES? AHH, “YOU’RE THE CHARGER’S HEALER? IT’S A PLEASURE TO MEET YOU, ER, THANK YOU, SER, I’M SURE YOU’RE BUSY.”

“NOT A PROBLEM—THOUGH DON’T TELL BULL I SAID AS MUCH, HE’LL THINK I ACTUALLY ENJOY MY JOB. MIND IF I COME IN?”

“OF COURSE, PLEASE.” HE...HADN’T THOUGHT TO INVITE THE MAN IN—IT HAD BEEN A LONG WHILE SINCE HE HAD DOMAIN OVER ANYTHING, HAD THE RIGHT TO ALLOW OR DENY ANY WHO WOULD COME INTO HIS SPACE.

“ALRIGHT, JUST A FEW THINGS TO START WITH,” STITCHES SAID, MOTIONING FOR TONIO TO BE SEATED, HE PULLED UP THE DESK CHAIR FOR HIS GUEST AND TOOK A SEAT ON HIS BED. THE HEALER REMAINED STANDING AS HE DUG AROUND IN A POCKET AND PULLED OUT A FEW SMALL SLIPS OF PARCHMENT. “GOT SOME NOTES FROM MY UNOFFICIAL ASSISTANT, BOSSY LITTLE THING. WOULD YOU LOOK UP AT ME PLEASE?” HE ASKED, AND TONIO OBLIGED. “UH-HUH, PALLID INNER EYE, CHECK, YELLOWISH TINGING AROUND THE IRIS AND IN THE SKIN, CHECK CHECK...HANDS PLEASE,” HE ORDERED MORE SO THAN ASKED, TAKING HOLD OF HIS HANDS AND EXAMINING HIS FINGERTIPS, THE PADS OF HIS FINGERS WERE YELLOWISH, streaks of white. “Damn,” he muttered something under his breath before turning them over to look at his fingernails, they were...rather strange looking, truth be told, he was a little concerned they would fall off. “Kay. I don’t know what the hell- you’ve got way too much of some shit, and not enough of the rest. Vitamins, minerals, that sort of thing. I’m going to give you something—it’s like a purgative, but magical. You’ll sick up in about twenty minutes, but after that you’ll be right as rain—you’ve got bad copper toxicity, and that needs corrected as soon as possible.” Purgative sounded wholly unpleasant, but he nodded, and the Healer began digging around in his medicine bag, “What exactly have you been eating might I ask?”

“ER, A...IT’S A PASTE, SIR? GREY, DOESN’T TASTE LIKE MUCH OF ANYTHING. BREAD SOMETIMES?”

“Yeah, okay, shit. Dunno what the hell they put in that, but you’ve been getting a ton of copper from somewhere. And not much of anything else it looks like. You just had breakfast, yeah?” Tonio nodded. “Alright, probably for the best—might not seem like it, but it’ll be easier on you if you’re sicking up with food on your stomach first. I want you to start a fast tonight—no eating after midnight at the latest, and I’ll swing by again in the morning before breakfast—get you tested proper, for specifics but from what I can tell you’re anemic, deficient in most of your damn vitamins and minerals. I’ll get you started on a proper supplement regimen and we’ll keep a good eye on your diet alright? Make sure you’re getting all the proper nutrients there.” He handed him a small vial of black liquid that looked thick, was sort of...glowing? Magical, he’d said.

His son trusted this man, so he swallowed it in one nasty gulp, and answered the whole of his questioning the best he could, how much he weighed, height, how er...many times did he have to relieve himself in a day? Was he sexually active or...the man broached the subject carefully, clarifying that he would need to know if he’d had sexual contact of any sort, ‘didn’t have to get into specifics unless you want’. Blessedly, the answer was ‘none’ which was more than many could say. The Healer took his chin in hand and instructing to keep his mouth open as he checked his teeth for issue. He’d had to ask one of his roommates to assist pulling out a rotted molar last spring, but no new problem came from that. Then the man rose from his seat, went to stand against the far wall, and pulled out a sheet of parchment he held up. He had Tonio read off different lines on it—randomized letters, the occasional miniature silhouette of what he recognized now to be the
Iron Bull’s head. Oh Cremisius had fashioned the sheet for their company Healer, a bit of amusement and ribbing for their ‘Chief’ who had regular eye exams. Hand over his left eye, read the third line, hand over his right, read the fifth, top line please both eyes open. Then there was this wild set of spectacles, thin wire frame but with all of these swiveling glass panes attached that could be raised and lowered before his eyes. He was to try them each and see which combination, if any, would assist allow him to see even the smallest line of lettering on the vision sheet. Miss Abby did come and take his tray while they worked, that was kind of her, he wasn’t entirely certain where the kitchens were exactly. Was he allowed…where exactly was he allowed to go, in Skyhold?

“Alright, that’s enough for now.” He said as he took the spectacles in hand, took down which combination of lenses had been of assistance. “I’ll get the order out, should be here first thing next week. How’re we feeling?”

Very strange for the past several minutes, lightheaded, and there was his pulling sensation almost, in the upper right side of his stomach—not his stomach, actually-

“That’ll be your liver. Where copper’s stored in the body—too much of it and that’s one of the first organs to go, which is pretty uh, not good. No worries though, potion’s literally pulling it out of your liver, should be moving lower? Yup, into your stomach. Feeling nauseous?”

So much so he nodded, as opposed to opening his mouth to speak, he worried he might be sick on the man otherwise.

“Okay—here we go, we’ll have this rinsed out when you’re done, no problem,” he said, emptying his wash basin of soapy water into the pitcher used to fill it in the first place, and then passing the empty bowl to Tonio. “Been through this loads of times—entirely up to you, I can stay, or I can give you some privacy.”

“Privacy, if you would.”

“Good man.”

He…certainly felt ‘good’, better at least, once he was through. Maker, there was a lot of…orangish black gunk.

*It won’t be gross for me. You should lie down and rest some more, I’ll take care of this.* that…he wasn’t sure what that was, but he did lay down, fell asleep for a time.

When he woke it was nearly one. His throat felt raw but…there was a steaming cup of honeyed tea on the bedside table, he had the impression…he’d begun to stir because he’d just barely perceived a hand carding through his hair, a kiss to his temple just moments ago. Now there was a note on his nightstand.

*Feel better. Ask for Cole if you need anything. Dinner is at 8 in the Tavern. Love you ~ Cremisius.*

His sweet boy, oh. The tea soothed his throat, lifted his spirits. Though to look at the time, he wondered when was he to meet with Ellie? No one had come for him, but it was likely to happen soon. Or was he supposed to go to her? Was he allowed to leave his quarters unpermitted?

He washed his face and shaved. Tidied his hair once he dressed for the day. He was just working up the courage to set foot outside the door when a polite knock rapped against it.

Oh. An Antivan, but not Ellie. “Good afternoon, Ambassador.”
“Good afternoon, Mister Aclassi,” she greeted in kind, looking him over, “you look very handsome in your suit. You’re feeling better, I hope?”

“Yes miss, thank you. The Inquisition has been very generous.” He hadn’t realized how… he supposed he’d merely gotten used to it, but now that he’d been purged of the toxicity in his body, offered a few proper meals, gotten ample rest, he felt better than he had in ages. He’d not realized just how exhausted he’d been, worn out—wrenched out, like a washing cloth. He felt much better, worlds apart from even some twenty-four hours ago.

“I was wondering if you’d plans for lunch? I thought you might wish to share the meal with a familiar face since the Chargers are out of Skyhold for a while, and Eleanor has joined them.”

Out of Skyhold? “That is very kind of you, but you needn’t trouble yourself.”

“It is no trouble,” she assured him.

“Then I would be honored.”

She favored him a warm smile at that, “Excellent. Come, we’ll eat in my office,” and as he closed the door behind them she asked, “Have you been given a tour of Skyhold yet?”

“No miss.”

“If you would like, I could provide that once we’ve eaten?”

“I would certainly appreciate it. Am I…I’m not entirely certain when I’m allowed from my room, what exactly is off limits?”

She offered her arm, so he accepted it, and she led him. “You…sir I assure you, you’re free to move as you please—you’ve no restriction to remaining in your room at certain hours. You’ve the run of Skyhold—there are a few restricted areas, but they are off limits to most. I will show you. You’re not a prisoner, Mister Aclassi, Skyhold is your home now and you’re welcome to it. Ahh.” The partitions were folded back to reveal a desk and chair, a daybed, two high-backed chairs. There was a very regal looking woman seated in one of the two high-backed chairs, one leg crossed over the other, a book in hand, though she looked up as they arrived and Lady Montilyet said, “Good afternoon, Madam de Fer—Mister Aclassi, this is the Imperial Grand Enchanter of Orlais, Vivienne de Fer, she volunteered to assist in court relations and she goes into the field with Eleanor, as needed. Vivienne, this is Tonio Aclassi, Cremisius’s father.”

Maker, a Grand Enchanter? He bowed his head. “An honor to meet you, Madam de Fer.”

The book in her hand snapped shut and she offered him a nod of acknowledgment. “How wonderful. I’m informed you are a tailor?”

“Yes Madam.”

“I look forward to seeing your work on young Eleanor—Lieutenant Aclassi has obligations to the Chargers to fulfill, so I shall be taking over guard of Eleanor when they return from the Chargers’ little mission. I will be sitting in on your session later.”

It took a moment to realize who ‘Lieutenant Aclassi’ was. “I would be honored, I’m grateful for the opportunity.”

“Quite.”
“We’ll leave you to your study, Vivienne,” Lady Montilyet said, “Have a pleasant afternoon.”

“You as well, darling,” she offered in dismissal.

“Mission?” he asked the Lady as they entered the library.

“Oh yes, it’s quite the story- oh, Dorian.”

“You really are here, splendid!” the Tevinter man was seated in a chair tucked away in an alcove of the library. “The more of us the merrier I say.”

“Thank you, Altus Pavus, for your help.”

“Please, Altus Pavus…is not my father’s title, but neither would I care to go by it. Do call me Dorian. While I do so love to take credit for marvelous things, especially if I had to put minimal effort into them—in all fairness, that is certainly the case here. Ellie and Varric are more responsible, they worked rather tirelessly to make this possible.”

“Still, I am grateful to you, sir. My son speaks highly of you, and you’ve been a friend to him. I appreciate that.”

“Well, if I am, it is only because he has been a good friend to me. He’s a good man, your son.”

“Thank you.”

Dorian waved them off, and Lady Montilyet led him almost back around to the door they’d come in, to show him the staircase leading up, “That is the Rookery—Leliana, our Spymaster, operates from up there, only security personnel are allowed past this point. However, it is also the method by which mail is sent—her birds—that table there,” she pointed to the nearby desk with locked up boxes sitting atop it, there were slits cut into their tops to slide folded letters into. “If you wish to send anything—orders, personal correspondence—do so there, they’re checked at the top of every hour. Of course if you need anything bigger than a letter sent out, let me know and arrangements can be made.”

A woman in lavender armor, just a bit of ginger hair showing from under her hood, was coming down the stairs, reading something she crumbled in hand before looking up to see them, “Oh. Josie. Abby informs me you’ve miraculously remembered to order lunch for yourself today.”

“It is no miracle I merely- oh. I suppose I do keep forgetting,” she said mostly to herself it seemed. Had she not eaten yesterday? She’d gotten after everyone else to take time for a meal! Well, he supposed he was glad she remembered to do so today, even if it seemed she only did so because, “I’m about to have lunch with Mister Aclassi,” she said. “Tonio, this is Leliana, our Spymaster.”

“An honor to meet you,” he assured.

“Ahh, Mister Aclassi I am pleased you’ve arrived. I’ve had the pleasure of working with your son, he’s a sharp young man,” she looked to Josie again, “I’ve a meeting with Marehis, before her sit down with the Iron Bull.”

Lady Montilyet nodded, “Do give her my love.”

They parted ways then and Lady Montilyet led him down the stairs, and into the Great
Hall, walking directly across the hall and out into the area below his quarters, she spoke as they circled the walkway around the gardens, “These are the Chantry Gardens, all are welcome here at any time to simply enjoy them or seek guidance from our Chantry members, to meditate or pray. There are worship services every Sunday for any who wish to participate, and smaller sessions throughout the week. Schedules are posted in common areas,” she came to a stop at the bottom of stairs opposite the entrance, “These, are a thing of evil,” she insisted, even as they were walking up them. “I cannot tell you how many times I have sought my quarters this way—you would think they lead to the rooms above, but they do not.”

Oh. Truly, they did seem to be placed to lead up to the quarters overhead, but they lead to the outer battlements instead, and did not branch off to give access to those rooms. “That would be disheartening,” he agreed, to be coming in after a long day only to find you’ve gone the wrong way and must walk back and across, and upward and around to get to where you were going.

“I am just there,” she said, pointing down to what he was decently certain was the door next to his, “we are neighbors, along with Marehis. You are comfortable, where you are? Is there anything more you need?”

“It is more than enough, thank you.”

“It was hardly any trouble. Come, let’s head to my office, shall we?”

She led him through her office this time, however, down the corridor to the large double doors, “This is another restricted area—the War Room, where Eleanor meets with myself and the rest of her Advisory council.”

“War room?”

“It is much less exciting than it sounds. It is mostly where the four of us bicker amongst ourselves or handle minor affairs, occasionally Eleanor stands in and gets to listen to us, be a tie breaker of sorts, finalizes major decisions—that is when it is truly exciting.”

Maker, it still sounded intimidating to him.

They sat down to lunch in the Ambassador’s office, which of course he was welcome to any time—there was a hook on the entryway door that she could hang notice on if she was occupied with an important visitor to the Inquisition or handling a confidential matter in her office, she would let him know, of course, when he could disregard that.

“You said I could take on clients, yesterday?” he ventured as they ate, “From Inquisition allies?”

She dabbed at the corners of her mouth with a napkin before speaking, “Certainly. Whenever you’re ready to do as much, I’ll advertise your services to visitors, and in the following update—I pen a newsletter of sorts to keep our allies and donors up to date on the Inquisition’s progress.”

“I would be ready. Am ready, I mean.”

Though that seemed to give her pause. “Truly?” she asked, “We’ve not even finished your tour, you’ve not seen your workspace.”

“But I have one, yes? As soon as I’ve a sewing machine, and materials, I can get to work.”

“I mean that you haven’t taken time to acclimate. You’ve traveled very far, you’ve only
just reunited with your son—you should take the time you need to recover from your journey, get a feel for the bare basics of what you will do here in the Inquisition before you take on so much. You may find you’ll overwhelm yourself. Sir with all due respect, an hour ago you were keeping to your rooms because you feared you would be barred from leaving them, forbidden from anywhere of interest in Skyhold, even from your own workspace except for specified times. You’ve a limited grasp on what your life with be like here.”

“I…you have all been so kind to me already I-“

“You wish to prove to us you are worth our kindness? That is clear enough already, and you’ll make certain that idea even more so as you take on Eleanor as your first, and preferably only client for right now. Let your work speak for itself, see how you do with a single client, and then, when you’ve had time to see where you’re at, how you’re adjusting and recovering, I would gladly help you branch out.”

“I apologize if I overstep-“

“There is no need to-,” she stopped and cleared her throat, taking a moment before she looked to him, rising to her feet as she spoke with certainty, “Mister Aclassi. You are not a slave of the Inquisition. What you signed yesterday was the same sort of contact every Inquisition recruit has signed, including myself. While there are certainly some differences, freedom is not one of them. You could stand up, walk out that door, and straight out the nearest sign of civilization, rent a room, have a drink, a meal, go shopping, anything. You would certainly receive reprimand for missing your appointment with Eleanor, and if you made a habit of frivolously disregarding your work, you would of course be dismissed from your role of tailor. Of course, there is the matter that we have taken on your debts to House Tilani, and you owe us for that, you would of course be free to take up employment elsewhere whether that be a different role within the Inquisition, or a position elsewhere—we would work out a livable payment plan, and you would work your debt off in that way. And if you failed to comply with that, it would be a matter we would take to court—you would need to find legal representation, counter our argument, perhaps the judge is a fan of the Imperium, likes your candor, and ultimately dismisses our claims—we would be left with your debt, pay it off to Magister Tilani, and you could go on your merry way. Free, no more so than you are in this very moment. You may sleep, rise, eat when you wish, you may go anywhere within Skyhold save the two—eventually three—places I will have shown you. If you choose to continue our tour that is, you’ve the freedom to tell me to go to hell with it all. It would be very rude, and hurt my feelings, but you would not be punished, you would not be starved or beaten, or have privileges revoked. You can take on clients, if you wish. But you can also have your meeting with Eleanor, and take a week, take two, three even, to acclimate. Make some progress for her as you can. Take weekends off—evenings! Have dinner with your son, see him whenever you wish. Make friends! Take a lover, get married, make another wonderful child, your first is certainly an incredible young man. You have every freedom available to you under the Maker’s sun. You are beholden to no one, and any obligation you take on, it is your decision alone. If Eleanor came in here this very moment and demanded you make her ten dresses by nightfall, you could look her in the eye, tell her that is wholly unreasonable, and refuse her request. If she asked for something as simple as a pair of gloves in that time frame, and you are too weary to take it on? Say so and move forward accordingly."

“Gloves are actually rather tricky,” he returned, as it seemed she had run out of steam. “You’ve got to fit every finger just right, so they are comfortable and offer range of motion while still being as form fitting as possible, and we’ve not even discussed for what they are for—working in, riding, dining, dancing. Leisurely strolls in the garden—Ser Tethras prescribed as much for keeping romance alive, I certainly hope my son is taking notes.”
She was looking at him rather incredulously and then she broke out in a smile, light laughter lilting into a relieved sigh. “I am pleased you understand. I do apologize if I lost my temper, I merely—” oh she was blushing rather fiercely as she resumed her seat. “I merely wished to make things clear.”

“It was rather impressive, and I certainly appreciate it. I…did not realize, exactly, the extent of what has been done for me here—you do realize that makes me all the more grateful?”

“Well, it would be poor gratitude to work yourself useless,” she said.

“I understand. I will follow your advice. Acclimate,” he smiled, “I do believe I’ll hold off on providing Cremisius a sibling.”

The Ambassador giggled at that, “I do suppose that would be rather a drastic way of marking your newfound freedom,” she conceded, having the grace to blush. “I did mean to imply a bit of natural progression—you will be just as free several years from now as you are today. Do not work yourself to death—enjoy your work, do well at it. But take breaks and make connections, not just business ones. Have a life and enjoy it.”

“I have been, I believe. Thank you, Ambassador, for inviting me to eat with you.”

“You may call me Josephine, please. Hopefully in future, you will accept such invitations because you wish to do so, not because you perceive it as some sort of order.”

Did she think-? “I may have had the misunderstanding, did not know necessarily I could say ‘no’, but that does not mean I accepted out of a lack of freewill, Lady Josephine.”

She smiled at that. “Good. I mean that I am pleased you are glad to be here, it is only conducive to the inquisition that we get along. We will share my office eventually. For your work.” She cleared her throat again and asked, “We should…if you care to, we should see to finishing the tour.”

He held up an index finger which gave her pause as he finished drinking his tea, and she smiled at him extending himself in such a way not rising to set to task right away so he could do something that benefited himself before moving forward. And when he rose, he offered his own arm—it was not an obligation, but courtesy he could willingly extend.

He also took up the tray, in his free hand, as she led him into the hall—sort of, she opened the door and pointed diagonally to the door across the hall from Eleanor’s quarters, “That is the Forge—if you wish to requisition a weapon for personal defense, or armor, or have need to work with leather or metal and the like, Harritt is our Blacksmith and he would be pleased to assist you and give you access to his workstations. Now, to the kitchens.”

There was a rather massive expanse of…basement? It was vast, empty, darker than upstairs, and the Antivan woman hummed a bit under her breath for a second before she steadily lead them across the room, she seemed mildly embarrassed but she said, “I get lost every time I come down here—I had to make up a tune to help me find the kitchens or else I end up in this horrible little library that is the stuff of nightmares, truly,” she shivered at the thought. She lead them to a door near where the room branched into a small hallway, “That,” she pointed to the hallways only other door, “is the wine cellar, you’re technically permitted inside but we do not advertise as much commonly, we would prefer people order their alcohol through the servant staff so we may keep track of our stores, and too, we would rather people not er…”

“I’ve never been one for heavy drink,” he assured her.
Neither have I. And if you should meet our spymaster and she says otherwise, do remember she is a professional liar and is certainly not to be believed,” the woman insisted. “She is my dearest friend. I have perhaps indulged too much in her presence and she will never let me live it down,” she admitted as she pushed open the door to the kitchens. They were mostly empty now, save for a few servants attending to prep work for the rush of evening meals to be upon them in a few hours. “You may send in orders for any meal of the day you wish—I believe there are menus on your desk? They list the weeks schedule of what is being served to the general population from the kitchens, and then there is the Tavern menu—the Herald’s Rest, run by Cabot, you may order your meals from there as well. Orders can be sent along with anyone in servant uniform, and there is a mailbox of sorts nailed to the wall just outside each kitchen entrance to submit orders from here if you wish. Cole would also assist you if you’ve need—I do hope you can grow to be comfortable with him, he accredits you for the existence of, quote, his ‘favorite person’.”

“Then perhaps we shall get along splendidly—we already have so much in common, sharing the same favorite person.”

“He’s a wonderful young man, and I simply adore he and Eleanor—are they not simply precious? You have not seen much of them, but they have such care for each other, so tenderhearted and thoughtful. Oh,” she breathed a contented sigh as they exited the kitchens and emerged outside, a set of stairs leading down to what were quite obviously stables, an area of shops.

“I do find I approve of them,” he said, “he is every bit the gentleman I would expect him to be, and she truly does love him as I would wish someone to.”

“Oh most certainly—I cried like a child when they let us in on her plans for you. We could not wrap our heads around it at first—we were all worried sick, Eleanor’s advisors, Cassandra when we read the Iron Bull’s reports from Orlais. She’d been so badly injured and refused to take time to recuperate, set such a harsh pace for Val Royeaux when it must have been so very painful. We thought it was merely to appease Varric, because she did not wish to disappoint him by cancelling on his cousin.”

Oh. That had been their very last day in Val Royeaux, their last few hours, even. Magister Tilani was supposed to meet with them in the middle of her trip, she’d some tentative plans to spend time with her cousin and his friends, but they were delayed,

“Injured?” she had seemed….well he wasn’t sure. He’d not been paying much mind, and then when his attention was finally brought to bear, she could have looked a sight and he would have thought her the loveliest thing in existence for what she was doing for he and his son.

“Oh! She is much recovered now, but she did give us quite the fright. There was some trouble, with sealing Rifts in the Oasis, she was struck by a demon and fell into a mine.”

“Rifts?” he asked that…he wasn’t sure what that was?

“They are like small Breaches—the sky Breach, not the clothing sort. Demons come from them. Eleanor and her party have closed several across both Ferelden and Orlais.”

There was another door he was not permitted beyond, and it would hopefully remain that way—the prisons. And then there was the Tavern, but something caught her attention that had her moving them forward to a flight of stairs alongside the forge, “Your workspace is just up here, and I do believe…ahh, good.”

The door at the top of the stairs was wide open, voices and chatter, a loud grunt of effort
and the Iron Bull’s voice, “Shit—Krem-cheese n’ bagels, ease up, I got it, give that thing a rest.”

“You better keep a good grip on it—set it down gentle—drop it and I’ll drop you right out the window,” Cremisius warned, grunting and as Tonio and Lady Montilyet came to the top of the stairs, they could see him releasing hold on-

Oh Maker. The Chargers had been on a mission for this?

His workspace was indeed spacious, clean, freshly repaired roofing, lamps hanging but there was ample sunlight. And the Iron Bull and his son, squabbling over…over a sewing machine.

Cremisius breathed a sigh of relief, rolling his shoulders as he rubbed at his forearm-

His heart leapt into his throat. He’d not moved this fast since- since, Maker, Cremisius must have been an infant, toddling toward open flame in their fireplace. Tonio was there, taking his wrist in hand, only this time it wasn’t to wrench him away from danger, but to see the result of some that had come and passed. The underside of his arm was unarmored, tunic torn and bloodied and there- “Cremisius!” he cried out, alarmed, there was a horrible slash, bruising that wrapped all the way to his wrist. “Cuore mio,” bubbled up from his throat.

“s’fíne Papà, look,” he nodded his head in the direction of the sewing machine. “Mission successful, Ambassador, we got that shipment back safe and sound. All of them.”

“All of them?” Lady Josephine asked.

“Assholes—just a bunch of thugs playing highwayman in the mountains,” The Iron Bull explained. Lady Josephine had said something about their shipments being delayed, apparently the issue was bandits. “Nothing organized or official, wasn’t a direct action against the Inquisition just taking advantage where they can. Just got a hold on Elan’s order that was supposed to come in today. We got it all squared away.”

There was the skitter and scrape of boots and clawed paws on stone, coming up the stairs behind them, “Hiya Josie,” the sound of a kiss being pressed to a cheek before Ellie appeared at his side, “Oh good, hold still okay?” she asked, looking to Tonio’s hold on Cremisius’s wrist, “We cleaned it, but Elan helped me whip up something proper to put on it.” She had a jar in hand, full of translucent green salve, and was swabbing some up on the tips of index and middle fingers, looking to Cremisius who nodded before she plopped it to his injury, though the boy grinned as he dipped the fingers of his free hand into the jar and,

“Look up,” Cremisius instructed.

“I need to see what I’m doing-“

“You did it, it’s done,” he insisted laughingly, and Ellie, satisfied with her handiwork, looked up at him and let him dab salve on- Maker!

“Bella, child what happened?” Tonio asked, there was bruising on her neck, her chin, a scrape across her jaw.

But she giggled as Cremisius carefully applied salve, “I was casting from the Iron Bull’s shoulders, and we forgot that trees branches exist! In my defense, I’ve never lived in a world where I’m tall enough to worry about even little trees’ branches.”

“Real sorry about that again, Imekari. You’re all good, right? No concussion?” the Qunari worried.
“A funcussion!” she corrected cheerily, “And no, Elan cleared me—you can ask Cole, he came to check on me and walked me back—I’m all good!”

Well, medicine applied, their injuries seemed to be...less daunting, clearing up. It...had startled him, he’d known Cremisius’s job implied such a thing might happen, but he hadn’t liked that aspect to begin with, and he certainly didn’t like it coming to fruition. Especially not on his account.

He’d a sewing machine now. He wasn’t sure how they’d gotten it all the way here, fully assembled, but Maker it was beautiful. Too, they’d rescued a few rolls of fabric, warm grey cotton for sleep clothes, beigey material meant to make clothing for training in. A few skeins of woolen yarn for socks. Maker, he was going to make clothing again.

“Take a minute to take it in, yeah?” Ellie’s voice drew him from his staring, “I’m gonna clean up a bit. Do you still feel like meeting?”

“Certainly,” he assured. He’d want fresh measurements, and to discuss style, color schemes, and what sort of material he’d need to order for her nicer clothing.

“Great! I saw Madam de Fer on my way in, she’s coming to pick me up so,” she looked to Cremisius.

“Oh, you’re sure?” and when she nodded, “Thanks lovely—I’ll see you at six.”

“Have fun with drills,” she said, popping up on tip toe to peck him on the lips before she went to the door, and waved, he could see Madam de Fer’s head as she’d been descending the steps, heard faintly her offered,

“Darling! Come, shall we?” and the two were off.

“I believe I’ll join them, since we’ve concluded our tour,” Lady Josephine said, “would you care to return to the castle with me or...” she looked to Cremisius.

“Oh, I could show you the Charger’s set up if you want,” he invited Tonio, “got to get ready for drills anyway.”

“C-certainly, I would love to,” he did wish to lay eyes on his son’s set up, just...make certain he was well in that regard, though he looked to Lady Montilyet, “Thank you, Lady Josephine, I had a wonderful time.”

“I enjoyed it as well, thank you. Have a lovely day,” she wished them before taking her leave to follow after Ellie.

“This way,” Cremisius said, waving him along, through the door opposite the one they’d entered by. There was further walking along the top of Skyhold’s wall until they reached the room that merged with the top floor of the tavern*.

The door swung open to reveal a room around the size of his own workshop, it felt like it was warm enough to be habitable, but he was still reassured when he saw his child had a few warm blankets on his cot. Not a bed, exactly but it didn’t feel uncomfortable when he was offered a seat on it. The room was lined in cots, seven total...eight, there were two right alongside each other that he supposed was to bear the Iron Bull’s width, set up beside Cremisius’s. When he sat on his son’s bed he realized it...was even warmer, because the wall was shared with the attic of the tavern, he could feel warmth under his hand when he felt the stone wall, and that...well that gave him
something that choked him up, to some measure. This Qunari he...he made certain he slept within
reach of his son and gave him the warmest possible place to sleep in their arrangements. He had
been taking care of his boy, all this while, and that sent relief into his bones, calmed the ever-
nagging anxieties he’d felt these past years because every moment he had been afraid, worried for
his son and his wellbeing. And the Iron Bull had provided.

There was someone laying down on the cot just on the other side of the Iron Bull’s. He
thought her sleeping, but she cracked open an eye to stare at him in a way that made him feel like
he was being dissected, addressing Cremisius as the boy began unlocking the trunk that rested
between the heads of he and the Iron Bull’s cots.

“Who is that?”

“Skinner, this is my father Tonio—no knifing him, alright? This is Skinner, she bites,” he
warned, undoing the straps and clasps of his chest plate to remove it before he began working the
straps that kept his vambrace in place.

The woman sat up in her cot, regarding Tonio critically, speaking accusingly, “He is a
shem.”

“Did you think he wouldn’t be?”

“You are unlike most shemlen.”

“Hate to break it to you Skin, but I didn’t just materialize from the ether, shemless.”

“How unfortunate.”

“It’s a real shem.”

“Are you going to continue using shem as a pun for shame until I stab someone?”

“Laughing was the response I was looking for,” he shrugged, ”but as long as ‘someone’
isn’t my father, you do you babe.”

“Ha.” The Elf offered drily, looking to Tonio, “You love Krem?”

She...was speaking to him now, yes? “Of course. With all my heart.”

“Stitches informs me hearts are the size of our fists. Show me yours.” He...al-alright. He
made a fist and held it up so she might see. She made a fist of her own and looked to it, then back
to his. “It is even bigger than mine. I suppose it will do. He has been good to you, Krem?”

“Yeah Skinner,” Cremisius assured as he undid the leather straps on his cuirass, “he’s the
best.”

“Has he been kind to the Small One?”

“Uh-huh, Ellie already loves him ‘loads’.”

“Good. He makes clothing?”

“Yup.”

“We will talk,” she spoke with certainty to Tonio. “You will make me socks. I have
money. And ideas.”
Cremisius’s murmured, “Oh my god don’t say ye-“ was overlapped by Tonio’s,

“Gladly.”

Was his son shaking his head at him? “You beautiful fool.”

Had he done something he shouldn’t? He would be glad to work for his son’s co-workers, even the eccentric ones.

“I will not use the socks for murder,” she assured Cremisius, “The Small One has taught me other uses.”

Did she not want the socks for her feet? What uses-

He did not want to ask. Cremisius seemed satisfied with her assurance they were not for murder and if ‘small one’ was Ellie, he certainly couldn’t imagine the girl teaching her some other abhorrent thing to do with socks.

“That’ll be real sweet Skin, papa’s got work to do for El, but he’ll get around to helping you out sometime,” he said as he pulled- should…he didn’t say anything so Tonio just remained seated. It seemed a natural action for Cremisius, the Elf woman certainly had no reaction that said otherwise to his son pulling his torn tunic off overhead as he took up a wet cloth from the washbasin seated on a stool beside his trunk, wiped off his face and neck before scrubbing at his arms, underarms. He’d nothing on underneath his tunic, and there was bruising forming all along the back that faced his father as he finished and pulled something leather from his trunk. Oh. He had gone without the er, binding clothing he had been wearing last night, while he was in armor. Tonio did not wish to make him uncomfortable, but he did look when his son began lacing up the sides of the chest piece, trying to discern just how it was fashioned, to see if perhaps…it was of fine quality, it must be expensive. Perhaps it was something he could make for his son, in future. If he were open to discussing as much, perhaps he could even make improvements upon it—more comfortable, suit his son’s needs the best, and there were ideas of how to make something of that caliber that might be easier to put on.

“You are running drills with the Sergeant and his shems next, yes?” the Elf asked.

“Overseeing them, yeah, Thom wants help prepping them for our next away mission and Bull’s got a meeting—Core crew can just hang, do whatever until dinner.”

The Elf smiled. “I will sharpen my knives.”

Cremisius let out a weary sigh as the woman leapt from her bed and ran from the room through the Tavern exit. “She’s literally going to sit on the Tavern roof and sharpen her knives while she watches Thom’s guys train,” he explained as he pulled a clean tunic overhead. It was then he seemed to realize, “Oh shit, that uh…was okay, right? Doesn’t matter who’s in the Charger’s camp, we’re all pretty comfortable changing in front of one another, I didn’t think to—“

“I’m pleased you live in such a comfortable environment. All of your chargers know? They are…no one is unkind to you?”

“Nah, they’ve all been good from the start. Bull really set the tone, but uh, I dunno. I’ve not really run into too much of an issue. The occasional rude question or accusation from a stranger. Bull’s never tolerated anyone working for him that can’t deal with it—last guy that had a problem got his head put through a wall.”

“Good. On all accounts. May I ask…” he looked around just to make certain the rest of the
cots were empty and there was no one else in the room, “may I ask questions about your um, clothing?”

“I have plenty of clothes papa, but yeah, if I need anything new, obviously I’m gonna come to you.”

“And put whoever made that handsome tunic you were wearing last night out of business?” he teased.

“Don’t know him from the Maker…or her? Bull hooked me up for my first date with Ellie, a First Day Eve present. Oh speaking of—do you need drafting materials? You can use my stuff if you want,” he said, pulling a sketch pad and leather case that Tonio could assume held pencils or pastels.

“Lady Montilyet assures me I’ve been supplied. But may I…?” he held out a hand and Cremisius shrugged, blushing, shy to offer up the sketchpad but he handed it over for his father’s perusal. And then, what he hoped was teasing, “I’m not about to become too terribly acquainted with Miss Trevelyfan?”

“Papa,” Cremisius complained as he sat on the cot and flopped onto his back.

Tonio chuckled as he opened up the sketchbook. Oh, it was such a blessing to see this again. His son’s work. He wondered if Liviana had kept any of it hanging in their home…Remus said the place was up for sale, that she had moved onto Cornelius’s estate into a guest home—like that mattered, the pretense. It was no matter now, Tonio was here, with his son, looking at…quite a few comical sketches, things that showed the Chargers in different settings, at least he recognized the Iron Bull, Stitches, Skinner, so he assumed the others were in their crew as well. A few held additions of Dorian, Ellie, Cole, and that other girl he’d met yesterday…Sera was her name. There was a few images of Anya, she had apparently indeed been around since she was a pup. There was a page of little images of Ellie’s face, like practice, drafts—the corner of that page was missing, cleanly cut away with precision. And then a few more that…were nothing sordid, but it was obvious she was on the young man’s mind.

“These are all lovely, Cremisius. This was a present?”

“Thanks. Yeah, I drew a few things for El, and Bull figured he could be an ass at Wintersend, got me this, stupid nice pastels, ugh, and that’s on top of the new binders. I swear I could kick his ass.”

“Binders?” Tonio asked, and Cremisius tapped his chest twice. Ahh! “That was what I meant—when I had questions about your clothing. It is called a binder?”

“Oh! Yeah, Stitches lectured me about six ways to Sunday when he found out I’d been using bandaging before. That’s super dangerous, apparently, but it wasn’t like I knew any better, had access to anything different in the military. Bull got me set up real fast, counts them as part of my armor in the budget.”

“That is kind of him, I suppose they act as a bit of armor whenever you go without? You don’t wear them under your cuirass?”

He shrugged. “Sometimes, just depends on the day? Most days, I can do that with no problem but uh, dunno. Some days it feels like everything I do is wrong, that everything I’m doing is fake and no one can possibly…that everyone just has to think I’m a fraud or something. So I double down, binding, and armor. And sometimes it’s just a straight up comfort thing, it’ll tick
away in the back of my mind, bug me, being able to er…used to be…my armor’s made to fit me binder or no, but my chest used to fill it out different, press up against the inside of it. Doesn’t do that anymore though, since I’ve been training with Seeker Pentaghast, Commander Cullen, they’ve been a big help, helping me work to a build I’m more comfortable with.”

So they knew? “You…the word is ‘disclosed’ yes? You disclosed to them?” because he was dating their daughter? Or because he worked for their organization?

“Yeah, ‘disclose’, ‘come out’, same deal. With Cullen it was just that he was around enough he saw me in my sleepshirt—sleeping in binders is a no-go—and just rolled with it, never said or did anything to treat me different. He’s nice—he’ll roast me alive if I ever hurt Ellie but that just comes with the territory. Then with Cassandra…Stitches keeps me stocked up with continuous potion to stop monthlies—but even with that, from time to time there’s gonna be breakthrough bleeding. Stitches was out and I wasn’t prepared for anything like that, so my only other option was to go to the Quartermaster. Which…I mean it wasn’t like I couldn’t have just said I was getting bandaging for Dalish or Skinner, but I was nervous and really feelin’ the dysphoria. Cassandra saw something was wrong, and when I explained I needed bandaging from the Quartermaster she just said there was no need—took me to her room and showed me where she keeps her own bandaging for monthlies, said I’m free to it whenever I have need, no questions asked—gave me a way to ask healer Adan for any potion I needed by saying it was for her. I mean he knows too, I’m safe with all the major healers around here, just, he had a lot of new apprentices and trainees in his quarters, so it gave me the freedom to say what I need without worry.”

That…was incredibly kind. Oh, he was grateful beyond words to these people who treated his son so very well. He wished…Maker he wished he’d gotten it. Understood, done everything he could to provide his son with his sense of self sooner. He wished he hadn’t lived in such denial, that he had just accepted his son as his son, point blank, the very moment he had an inkling of his true gender instead of…being so foolish. Afraid. A coward. He’d been terrified he would only make things worse for his son, scared that it might just be some misunderstanding. He once worried what sort of life he might have if he began to live as a man—now he wished he’d had such opportunity much sooner. He hated his cowardice; never again would he be so weak. He may not be the Iron Bull, but any who would seek to discredit his son could…could…there would be consequences! He would certainly fight them. Verbally and perhaps physically, he could dole out a solid trouncing!

Too, their discussion, it did remind him he should seek getting a supply of bandaging to have on hand, for Cremisius if he ever needed it, or anyone who might have such troubles, it certainly wouldn’t hurt to be able to make it available. He’d always done so before, in Tevinter, had monthly supplies in his workshop in case his child was in need of it, but he was glad to hear Stitches was a reliable source of potion. Oh, Cremisius had been so miserable, heartrendingly heartbroken at each and every refusal to supply him with such in Tevinter. But it hadn’t only been er…Liviana did not think it wise given the circumstances, but it had also been…something they could not provide, financially. Now he wished his debt doubled if it meant his son had been brought some level of ease, hadn’t been so miserable, so distraught and disparaging of his own life that he wished to end i-

“Father?”

Tonio shook himself, “I apologize, I was merely thinking. I am sorry you were unwell, breakthrough bleeding? Does that happen often?”

“Nah, just a real bitch when it does. Awkward, having to change bandaging, and if I don’t do it often enough I risk bleeding through my socks- uh. Helps trousers fit right, sort of a comfort
thing like binding.”

Socks? On his fee- oh. Oh it took a second, but it clicked that a folded up pair of socks, especially thick ones might serve as appropriate er, stuffing. “You put bandaging over them or?”

Ahh, Cremisius seemed a bit embarrassed, shy to explain such an intimate thing he worried his father might judge, but no. His only thought was he would need his son’s measurements—already he could think of superior methods for this. As it stood, it required two sets of underthings, even in non-bleeding times, for ease when using the restroom and it was likely sanitary—wearing a pair of underwear proper, and then a second pair with his sock in it, secure from falling out, though shifting was still a concern. Though Ellie had lost almost the whole of her wardrobe and had been in need of underthings—he had apparently shared the pairs that us would usually use to keep his socks secure which resulted, apparently, in them falling out place after he changed for bed one evening on the journey to Skyhold. In front of his young lady, as she had been bunking with the Chargers.

“Oh,” Cremisius seemed to be in good humor over it so he offered a chuckle. “I’m sure she thought nothing of it?” he hoped so at least.

Cremisius was grinning, blushing as he said, “Socks hit the ground and rolled to land at her feet, and she just giggled, tossed them back to me and teased me for being so forward—throwing myself at her when the others could come in at any second, but she ‘appreciated my enthusiasm’,” he sighed. “I love her.”

“I’m very pleased of the match you make,” Tonio agreed, offering his approval. Though his mind was still working with ideas, he was certain he could fashion something better, clothing wise, for his son—underthings with a pocket for packing stuffing into, that Cremisius could have to his liking, whatever made him feel most comfortable. There’d be no risk of anything falling out or moving. He carefully propose the idea, ultimately he did use Cremisius’s sketch pad, just putting down a quick in-general image to explain what he had in mind.

“Oh, shit, really? Yeah papa, that’d work great.”

“Come to my workshop tomorrow, when you’re free.” He would need measurements and Cremisius’s input on materials.

“Sure, as long as you aren’t too busy,” he agreed, looking to his own time piece .”Just about time, I better get down there before those assholes think they’re getting an easy day. Or that Skinner has been given license to murder them. I can walk you back to the castle if you want.”

Tonio nodded, flipping closed the sketchbook and Cremisius locked it away in his trunk.

“What exactly does she want me to make her socks for?” Tonio finally gave in to his curiosity.

“Dolls I think. There’s a lot of refugee kids after the Conclave and rebellion happening all over the place. Ellie’s been trying to start up a little something through the Inquisition, to get them toys—Thom’s a bit of a carpenter, been working on it with her, and she had the idea for sock-dolls, Skinner wants to help with that, apparently. I’ve been making stuffed nugs* when I get the time,” he explained as they made their way into the attic of the tavern, down the stairs.

“Nugs?”

“Got wings on ‘em, Ellie thinks they’re the ‘cutest’. Bull thinks they’d be fun to shoot
from a catapult and see people freak out over flying nugs.” That might certainly be an amusing sight. “Oh—actually I wanted to run something by you. I know getting Ellie’s things done is top priority, but it’s for her? I’ve been saving up—I’d like to get her a nice blanket, something enchanted to stay warm, heat up however she’d like it—she’d love it just in general, but it might help when uh, if the fire goes out or anything in the night. It’d take a long time for me to knit one or sew by hand, I thought I would just order one from Orlais or something, Madam de Fer gave me a few recommendations of where to shop—but that was before you showed up. With your sewing machine, I could order materials and Dalish and Dorian are down for helping with the enchanting part, would you mind helping with putting it together?”

“I would love to.”

“Thanks papa,” his son said as they reached the castle stairs, offering him a warm squeeze to his shoulder as they parted ways, and then Cremisius went to join a group of men gathered between the forge and the Tavern, all geared up for their drills. He worried a bit, Cremisius had taken off his armor, was in tunic and trousers, but he had his sword still—oh. It looked like he might be bragging about his earlier adventures with the Chargers to rescue the Inquisition’s shipments from bandits, he showed the healing mark on his forearm, and something told Tonio the Iron Bull had told him to take it easy in his lessons—truly observe and correct, more so than participate.

Tonio made haste then, to Ellie’s quarters, he almost worried he had kept the girl waiting, it was nearing four now. But when he arrived, she was seated on her bed, wearing comfortable bottoms he supposed were meant for sleep, and a tunic that was much too big for her…Cremisius’s he thought. Madam de Fer was seated behind her using some kind of heat magic, calling warmth into her hand as she held sections of the girl’s hair in it, to dry it after being washed, speaking to the girl who was holding over her mouth and nose, it steamed with something that smelled medicinal to him.

“Delate,” Madam de Fer said.

“D-e-l-a-t-e,” came the girl’s certain, muffled response.

“Correct, definition?”

“To accuse or denounce.”

“Excellent, darling. Abecedarian.”

“Oh gosh,” the girl breathed, scrunching up her nose as she carefully executed its spelling, “Abecedarian. A-b-e-c-e…d-a-r-i-a-n. It means ‘related to the alphabet’ or referencing something being in alphabetical order.”

He worried he was interrupting but he cleared his throat and the girl looked over to him and smiled, pulling the rag away from her face as she greeted,

“Hiya! Sorry, I have a test tomorrow, Vivienne was just quizzing me! Did you have a nice time with Cremisius?”

“I did, thank you,” Tonio said.

“Don’t sweat it, Vivienne’s almost done with my hair, it needed washed and my head gets stuffy if it stays wet too long.”

“You should not have gone out in this weather, child, honestly,” Madam de Fer
complained, “breathe into that until it ceases steaming or I will make your hair a sight. Perspicacious.”

The girl sighed as she brought the cloth to her face again, “P-e-r-s-p-i-c-a-c-i-o-u-s. That’s you Vivienne, to have keen insight or acute mental vision—you’re just the smartest!” the woman looked rather bemused with the compliment. Then to Tonio the girl said, “Lady Josie left you some things on my desk, we can get started here in a minute.”

He went to the desk, as bid. There were indeed fresh parchment pad and charcoal sticks, pencils to sketch with, though…were they still meeting? It looked like she was in the middle of some sort of treatment, “Are you feeling ill, Ellie?” he worried.

“Nah-“

“The child has asthma, and her lungs still recover from smoke inhalation barely two weeks ago,” Madam de Fer spoke as if to remind the girl she should be more careful, and she certainly should be! He’d wondered at the necklace she wore, it steamed almost constantly—Cremisius had refilled it last night while they ate, and he realized that was why it smelled so familiar.

“This is normal treatment I’ve been doing once a day since we got to Skyhold,” Ellie insisted, “Elan said I’m fine to travel and stuff.”

“I would have gone with you if it was so very dangerous, Eleanor. Honestly darling, you should go nowhere without your party.”

“Bathroom’s gonna be a tight fit, but if you insist—”

“Do desist. Both with your incessant nonsense and waving that thing about until the steam has run out, or I will start you a second one. Campestral.”

“C-a-m-p-e-s-t-r-a-l. Referring to the open country—a rural area.”

“Very good my dear, I believe you’ll do superlatively,” the woman insisted, sounding proud. Ellie blushed, thanking her.

He supposed they should get started, and Ellie could focus on finishing her treatment undisturbed—he opened the canister of charcoal sticks, there were pastels in the bottom portion, colorful, which was perfect. He opened up the parchment pad and swatched the different hues, mixing as needed to make different shades, and then he sat before Ellie and held it for her so she could examine it, point to colors she favored, and he circled them for reference. Turned the page and took the colors she liked to swatch them with differing color schemes, sets of three or four colors he offered for her examination to see if they were to her liking. Madam de Fer seemed approving as well, which was rather the vote of confidence.

When the steam died off from her cloth, Madam de Fer took it from her, and the girl followed him over to the large tri-fold mirror that had been set up for her use, to the right of her fireplace. It was wonderfully warm, and he was glad of it not only for himself, but since measurements were needed. The girl stripped to her underthings, and he made quick, accurate work of taking her measurements. Madam de Fer’s eyes were on him like a hawk the entire time, and he was glad the girl had such a dutiful chaperone—he was no dreg, but this was a position craved by such, he’d been glad to be his own child’s tailor because of the horror stories that came from entrusting your child’s body to the care of others who would use their occupation as a means for treachery.
The door downstairs swung open as he was taking down her final measurements and a sullen voice croaked out, “Da’vehnan?”

Elie gasped and was practically flying down the stairs in the next instant, “Mami!”

“Oh, da’vehnan—” she raised her voice then to call up the stairs, “Mister Aclassi I do apologize if I’ve interrupted—“

“It’s okay mami, come on,” Ellie invited.

“Very well,” she called up, “I’m coming up unless you’ve issue?”

…but he wasn’t certain what issue he’d have, “Certainly, join us—Marehis I presume?”

He heard a gasp and then…it was almost comical, the girl was a head or more shorter than her, but still, it was a bit humorous to see the girl of sixteen having been gathered up in the woman’s arms, to sit on her hip, arms wrapped around the Elf woman’s neck while she carried her up, almost protectively like she was wary of the adult voice that called back but then, “Oh. It is Mister Aclassi, just the senior. Elgar—” she blanched, and then shook herself, letting Ellie stand, “I am glad to see you’ve arrived, I apologize, did I interrupt your fitting?”

Hadn’t she already addressed that…oh. Oh! She thought—she initially thought it was the junior Aclassi Ellie was entertaining in a state of undress. Would they be? In the middle of the afternoon? Of course, were he a young person in love, perhaps yes, any time of day would seem appropriate for, er, being together. But certainly these two were not shirking their daily obligations for such activity?

“But not at all, please, join us. I’ve just finished taking the young lady’s measurements. Um, I understand you’ve been handling an assignment, I can…we could always pick this up another time if you wish for time alone with Ellie.”

The Elf woman smiled her thanks, pressing her lips to the girl’s hair as she took a deep breath, but shook her head, “I would not wish to disrupt this, she’s in terrible need of new things. I apologize I haven’t been able to come meet you sooner, it’s an honor to make your acquaintance, I would very much like to sit in on this, if it wouldn’t disturb you.”

“Oh, of course not, please, join us.”

“Marehis, darling come,” Madam de Fer invited her, patting the empty space at her side. “You should see what he has in mind for Eleanor’s wardrobe, the color schemes at the very least seem marvelous.”

Marehis nodded, joining the grand enchanter who wrapped her up in a hug once she was seated at her side, Vivienne sighed, “You need only say the word darling, I would end him.”

“I do appreciate the sentiment.”

Ellie had her bottoms back on, and he noticed she struggled a bit—pulling the tunic on overhead was easy enough but raising her left arm high enough to slip into the sleeve seemed a little bit of a task, made her wince.

“Are you injured, Ellie?” he asked.

She shook her head, “Not really—I dislocated my shoulder a few times, it’s still healing up.”
Injury was still injury until it was healed, to his mind. “Would you mind trying something?” he asked, and when she nodded he instructed her to remove her shirt taking her right arm out first and then bunching it up to pull off over her head before sliding the shirt off completely by pulling it down off her left arm—it needn’t move at all to do so. Then put it back on similarly to how she’d done so before just, letting the shirt hang off her neck, pull the top open wide enough that she only needed to bend her elbow to slip her arm into the sleeve and pull it the rest of the way up her arm before sliding her right arm into its own sleeve.

“Oh gosh, that’s smart—I usually have help or just, go so fast when I do it myself, I haven’t really stopped to think about how I put stuff on or take it off.”

“If you are comfortable with the size I could make your sleepshirts and the like just as big, in this style. Even your practice clothing, it could be made to cinch appropriately with drawstrings at the waist, wrists, once you have it on, so it wouldn’t be in your way in training. Too, dress tunics, trousers, I can fashion them where you need only your right hand to button them up.”

That had her smiling brightly as she said, “I hope Cremisius understands when I marry you—it’ll be awkward at first, but I’m sure we can make it work.”

Madam de Fer sighed at his confusion, “The child offers marriage as a form of gratitude, Eleanor you really should learn to pen thank you cards as supplement,” Marehis giggled in agreement.

“But then the offer of marriage would in writing and that’s so much harder to go back on, someone might take me seriously you know?”

“Eleanor, if I begin to find gray hairs from dealing with you, my fury will know no end,” Vivienne assured.

“Rude! Gray hairs! Never—you just watch Madam de Fer, if anything, I’ll keep you young!”

That got her a derisive sound. “We shall see about that,” the woman conceded.

Tonio pulled over a chair and sat before the foot of Ellie’s bed, the girl climbing back on to sit, though Marehis immediately pulled her into her lap, holding the girl close. Maker, the woman looked exhausted—had she been awake their entire separation? But she seemed to be clinging to the normalcy of this interaction just as much as she did her child, so he offered no further excuse to cut things short. He began talking style with the girl beyond what he had proposed he could do to give her independence when dressing. What sort of designs did she like—fabric patterns, preferred types of material, thickness—the weather certainly warranted lining finer materials with something more substantial. He sketched as they talked, drawing up a few different designs he had in mind—what she had worn before in Val Royeaux had been lovely, but there were things he felt he would do differently, and now he had the opportunity to do so.

“Oh my gosh oh my gosh oh my gosh!”

“Triple ‘oh my gosh’s, I find I agree,” Marehis said as she peered at the example he offered the girl as they talked.

“I’ll have samples of fabrics to show you soon, Lady Montilyet will put me in touch with weavers in the Hinterlands.”

“Cool! That sounds great!” Ellie said.
“You would like a few more dresses also, yes?”

“Uh-huh, what are your views on pockets?”

“In dresses? A necessity. C-” he stopped himself from saying his son’s name immediately, good heavens. “Contrary to popular opinion. I have always deemed it necessary to make dresses for young people with pockets included,” he rambled in an effort to make certain it sounded like he’d just stumbled over his words. Even when he was small—Liviana thought it silly but Cremisius had a great many things to carry! Snacks and rocks, the occasional pocket-sized animal—a mouse once, a few frogs somehow—and more often than not Tonio’s shiny metallic thimbles ended up being found in the wash with Cremisius’s clothes, sticky from being slobbered on by a toddler. It was a wonder he never choked on the things.

“I love that! Hit me with the pocket dresses!”

They talked design until he had a decent enough idea of what she would like, for dresses and too Madam de Fer brought up the point that they may have need for the girl to wear a proper gown to some function or another on behalf of the Inquisition, and Ellie shyly asked if he could make certain Cremisius didn’t get a sneak peek at some of her dresses, things she might like to wear for dates. Of course he vowed on the sanctity of Tailor-Client privilege, sealing it with a pinkie promise.

“The name Trevelyan, it sounds like the name of an older clan that comes from Tevinter*—they’re noble, yes?” he asked. “Would you care for your heraldry on any of your clothing? Either from the Trevelyan house or the Inquisition?”

“Oh gosh, I’m not really a Trevelyan? Not a noble or anything—I was kind-of adopted by the mage I attended the Conclave with, Maxwell Trevelyan, and he um. He named me his heir—I didn’t have a last name until recently. Or a middle name. Getting full named is scary! Cullen and Cassandra full named me the other day,” she said to Marehis.

“I have been informed of your misdeeds young lady—you nearly gave Cullen a heart attack,” Marehis said in tones of reprimand, then, “…but since he is well, I had quite the laugh when I was in need of it, so thank you.”

“Oh! But the heraldry—that’s super sweet of you to think of, and if it isn’t a bother or anything, I think it’d be cool to have the symbol for the Inquisition on some of my things ‘official Inquisition business’ things…you can find noble heraldry?”

Tonio nodded. “I know who to contact for heraldry records, and I’ve old contacts, historians and antiquists who could help me find the correct heraldry for non-Tevene households.”

“Oh, so you could find Heraldry for noble houses from anywhere?”

Anywhere? “I could certainly try.”

“Not for myself. I’m not interested really, I just remembered Lady Josie saying something about how her family lost their old heraldry when they stopped being a source of trade—in Orlais. They used to have ships or something? She’s been looking for a copy of it for a while but hasn’t had any luck, maybe you could help her with that?”

Oh. Old Orlesian heraldry? He wondered if old Barnabus* was still milling around Orlais, he was certain to be able to get ahold of something of that caliber. Lady Josephine had explained their mailing system, he would write a letter later, he took down a quick note to do so on the corner
of his sketch sheet—if it was something the lady was in search of, perhaps finding it would be a start to thanking her for all her kindness.

“Holy crap! It’s almost five thirty!” Ellie squeaked when she checked her watch. “Mami, are you sleepy? Charger family dinner tonight—do you want to come, Vivienne? Dorian will be there. He’ll be with the Iron Bull, and they can get groady, but he’ll be there!” Groady? He wasn’t certain what that meant, but it sounded unpleasant and he supposed perhaps while the Iron Bull and Cremisius got along, the Altus from Tevinter might rub the Qunari the wrong way. But why would they end each other’s company then?

“While I am honored you would be kind enough not to exclude me my dear, I’m afraid I’ve plans for the evening that involve not witnessing anything ‘groady’ in Skyhold’s lovely tavern. Seeker Pentaghast and I are having dinner. Ser Rutherford is free this evening—he may join your Charger’s feast.”

“Oh Cremisius made sure papi knows he’s still always welcome in the Chargers camp even though they don’t really share camp-space anymore! I hope you and Cassandra have fun!”

“If you’re well at hand, I would like to prepare,” Madam de Fer said.

“Oh gosh, yeah, thanks so much for guarding me—it was fun!”

“It was certainly my pleasure darling, I did have a splendid time. You will dine with me tomorrow, yes?”

“Of course!” Ellie enthused. “Um, Anya’s doing better, Skyhold isn’t so scary for her anymore, would it be alright for her to come?”

“Certainly, I’ll make sure there is suitable refreshment for the dear thing, and you can tell me how brilliantly you do on your test,” Madam de Fer said, pressing a kiss to the girl’s temple, “Have a pleasant evening.” Then she rose from the bed and took her leave.

"Test?" Marehis questioned, and then, "Oh da'vehnan! Your spelling test! I was supposed to quiz you! Oh sweetheart I'm so sorry!"

"Mami! It's fine!" Ellie assured her, "Cremisius and papi and Vivienne helped me. And the Iron Bull tattled on Dorian throwing in some words he didn't put on the study guide!"

The Elf woman breathed a sigh of relief. “I’m grateful the others have stepped up in my absence,” she said, asking, “Do we need to leave for dinner now, da’len?”

“Oh! Sorry! Side tracked—wow my brain! Okay, I asked if you were sleepy because you have time to nap! We’re having our first official Cookie Club meeting at six—Cremisius, Sera, Cole and me, they’ll be coming to pick me up soon. We’re going to make dessert and then dinner is at eight! You can join us if you want, but you could sleep here if you like, I brought up some of your jammies and things for whenever you finished, just in case? Anya’s out playing with the cats* but Cole promised to bring her back—she’ll cuddle you!” and then, leaning to press her forehead against her minder’s, “I can cancel though—I mean they’ll still have dinner and stuff, and Cremisius can help Cole and Sera. We can just coop up in here, order dinner, just be you and me mami, if you need.”

“Ma seranas my sweet girl,” Marehis breathed, kissed Ellie’s cheek. “But that is unnecessary. I’m more tired than I am hungry—I believe I’ll rest until you return, do have fun with your friends da’vehnan."
“You’re sure?” Ellie checked.


“I will actually jump off the balcony before I put my armor back on today—I’m just going like this. Plus shoes. Socks! Oh gosh,” she looked to Tonio, “I need socks bad, I’ve been using Cremisius’s.”

Oh, that was sweet, he was proud to hear his son was taking such care of the young lady he was interested in—ensuring she was safe, and warm, and had the things she needed. “I’ll see to it you’ve a proper wardrobe as soon as possible. Socks and all.”

“Thanks! If you like, you’re invited to help us make dessert in the kitchens!”

He was rather antsy to get started on his work…of course if he did so, he may not stop and miss dinner, which would be ill return for their kindness since it was apparently in celebration of his arrival. And he craved time with his son—to meet the rest of his friends, soak up all he could of this new life. “I would be delighted to join you.”

“Yay!” and then she gasped when there was a knock at the door and the sound of muted barking, “Cole! Everyone can come in!”

Tonio rose from his seat. There was liveliness that came up the stairs, oh. Cremisius had always been something of a loner in Tevinter, it was heartening to see him now, a friend on either side, ambling up the stairs, laughing at some amusement, “Papa! This is Cole and Sera.”

“You’re friggin Kremmy-boy’s da! I just about flipped out on you yesterday but Inky had me keep my chill—still!” the Elf girl tackled Tonio in a hug. “Friggin! Boss this is!”

“I am sorry I could not get better acquainted with you yesterday, Sera, Cole,” he offered to the boy who brightened when acknowledged. “I am pleased to meet my son’s friends.”

“Sera, da’assan, do let the man breathe,” Marehis chided.

That sent the Elf girl gasping, letting go of him, “Mare! Holy shit, I didn’t see you, hi!” she rushed to collide with the Elf woman seated on Ellie’s bed, hugging her, if it was even possible, more tightly than he had Tonio. “I’m so sorry ‘bout-“

“There is nothing to be sorry for, I am sorry I-“ oh it seemed like she might cry, but she steeled herself, hugged the girl back. “There will be much to discuss. Debriefing tomorrow morning, you are invited, we…there will be questions. I would ask that you join Ellie tonight when she returns to her quarters. I would prepare you,” she said, her gaze meeting Cremisius and he nodded, a promise of discretion it seemed. “Go, have fun,” Marehis said, kissing Sera’s forehead before letting her go.

Ellie nodded, giving Sera’s hand a squeeze as she and the Elf girl rose from the bed. “I just need-“ she stopped when Cremisius waved her back, toward the bed and then she smiled and hopped to perch herself on the footboard, and Tonio wasn’t certain what he was about until his son knelt—he had a pair of thick, clean socks in his hand and he unraveled their set to pull them onto Ellie’s feet for her.

“Shoes?” he asked, and she pointed to where there were, two pairs by the banister lining the stairway. “Alright, what are we feeling tonight? Knee highs or ankle boots?”

“Ankle boots please!”
“Then ankle boots the lady shall have,” Cremisius agreed, taking up the boots and bringing them to Ellie, shodding her feet, and then rising in the same motion he-Maker, he hoisted the girl over his shoulder, eliciting a giggly squeal, “Alright! Let’s head out!”

“Cremisius!”

His son turned side to side as if trying to see someone behind him, “Did you guys hear something?”

“Krem wants us to deny hearing anything for fun-ness! I can’t hear anything,” Cole enthused.

“Not a thing!” Sera agreed as she followed Cremisius toting Ellie to the stairs, he took up the girl’s overcoat as he passed where it hung over the banister and slung it over his arm.

“Holler if you need anything Mare,” Cremisius called over his shoulder.

“No!” Cuddle mami, got it?” Ellie’s order was audible apparently, Anya yipped and broke for the bed, climbing up to lay across Marehis’s lap.

“Thank you. Have fun, be safe,” Marehis called after them, nodding to Tonio. He was pleased to be invited along, though he did wonder what he should do with his materials—he would merely need to be mindful of them he supposed, or...he was decently confident he knew his way, and at the very least knew how to get directions if he separated from the group to put them away-

“Mister Aclassi, I can put your things away for you, if you do not mind it. I know the way, and where you want them,” Cole said as Tonio made to follow after the young people. The boy seemed eager to help.

“I wouldn’t wish to trouble you, but I’d gladly accept if you’re willing-“

“It isn’t trouble! It’s help! I like helping,” Cole nodded, taking Tonio’s sketch pad and drawing case in hand before vanishing, and then reappearing no sooner than their group was at the door to leave, falling in alongside Tonio. Sera stepped back to sling her arm over the boy’s neck, and he hummed contentedly at the contact. “Lace likes her too.”

“What?!” Sera asked, squeaked the question more so than shouted. “Oh. Pish. Really?”

“Yes. You will see. It will be good.”

“It?”

“Dinner. And what you’re thinking too probably, but that isn’t what I meant.”

“That’s-! Not what I meant either! Friggin’ shush it. But uh. Thanks.”

“What are you two all secrety about? Or is it Cole-fidential?” Ellie questioned. It seemed she accepted her fate as a shoulder ornament, she used her elbows to brace against his back so she could support her chin in her hands and comfortably look up and back at those who followed after them.

“Just a Cole thing. S’not a big deal,” Sera said. “What kind of cookies are we making Inky?”

“Mmm same as last time, just, a bit snazzier—pinch of cinnamon, chocolate drizzled on
top because it’s a special occasion, and Varric’s got mad chocolate to burn through.”

“How mad?”

“If I’d known he had such a marvelous stash earlier, I would have constructed a statue of Mister Aclassi in honor of the occasion.”

“Don’t think I could eat a statue of my father,” Cremisius informed her.

“I must admit, I’d find the notion sweet but disconcerting,” Tonio agreed.

“We wouldn’t eat him! He’d just be extra-chocolate Tonio! Hanging around the basement, being a pal to all. You could have set him up in your workshop and played hooky or have a stand-in when you’re sick!” Ellie suggested to him, and then she gasped, “I should make a chocolate me! Sit her on the Inquisitor’s throne, and she’ll dole out judgments from now on.”

“Watch that sugary bitch go full blown executioner on us, which I’m all for really,” Sera said, “—not judging, you did good Ink, but I still think you should’ve let Bull lob off Denham’s dumb pointy head. Friggin Red Templar bastard—”

“Pisses you off he called me a bitch?” Ellie guessed. Who called her such a name? Who was Denham?

“Pisses me right off! But not just that Ink, I mean shite, he knew what he was working for—led you right to Envy! I get being all friendly with Felix and Dori, being understanding Alexius’s shitty situation made it…blah! A little understandable that you’d let him try to make up for trying to erase you from bloody friggin time! But Denham- friggin’ I’ll lob his head off right now! He don’t got no excuse!”

…Erased from time. Did she mean the Magister Alexius? He thought he’d been merely tired, seeing things when he passed the man that he’d served in Maevaris’s home a little over a year ago, working alongside a mage in Skyhold’s library. When he’d visited Maevaris, she’d sent him away rather abruptly. Violently, according to one of the poor serving girls who bore witness to the altercation, she’d been pouring them more wine and the man had been saying something about ‘Venatori’, and the next thing she knew, Maevaris was casting against the man, calling him a fool and a charlatan and if he dared set foot in her home again with this nonsense, she would make his second departure a permanent one. She’d been preparing on their journey back from Val Royeaux for the yearly congress of the Magisterium*, apparently she wished to denounce the Venatori further and make their practices in Tevinter a punishable offence under the law, considered terrorism.

“You like listening to things—talk or music when you work,” Cole spoke to him, quietly, under the girls’ conversation, “when you are working, I can come and tell you all of the things you missed between the Conclave and now, answer your questions.”

“I would certainly appreciate it,” he agreed.

“I trust Delrin and Fletcher—” Ellie was saying to Sera, “Denham hurt the Templar Order more than he hurt me, I mean even if he knew about Envy…it wasn’t personal. But for the Templars—they gave everything to the Order, served it because they believed in the cause and wanted to serve their Maker in the way they felt best. Denham and the Red Templars corrupted that, took that from them, there’s not even technically a Templar faction of the Order left now, it’s literally just the eighteen recruits we got out of Therinfal. They aren’t really considered Order members anymore, they’re Inquisition soldiers that perform Templar duties. Denham and those like
him did that to them—so it’s only right they get a say in what happens to him. If they want his head lobbed off, that’s their choice to make. Delrin says they’re leaning towards exile though—to the Sea of Ash*.”

What in the Maker’s world was a Red Templar?!

“Who the frick is Delrin?’’ Sera wanted to know.

“Barris.”

“Oh. Him. Sorry Ink, I don’t mean to be yacking at you about Inquisitor pish, you did friggin amazing. Just. You let Kremmy-boy deck Solas! I wanna fight people too!’’

“I promise, the next time I need someone punched for me, you’ll be the first person I go to.”

“Oi, I thought I was the first person you’d go to—it’s part of the deal!’’ Cremisius complained teasingly as he lumbered down the stairway Lady Josephine had shown Tonio to use to get to the basement.

“You already had your turn,’’ Ellie supposed, “No worries guapo—I’ve got plenty of honor to defend.’’ Cole was smiling brightly and seemed like he were about to say something, but Ellie snorted and continued, “You’ll always be the sexiest person I go to though. Sorry Mister Aclassi,’’ she said to Tonio, “—if I didn’t say it out loud, Cole might have so I may as well own it, ya know?”

…why would Cole say- oh had Cole some interest in his son? Oh. Oh that was…sweet, that the boy had a crush so long as he did not make Cremisius uncomfortable or Ellie for that matter-

“Oh. No. I have a crush on Maryden—or I like her very much,’’ Cole said, “crushing sounds…not good. I would not want to crush her. Krem is very handsome and my best friend and he makes me feel safe, but I do not want to share my-“

“Buddy, we’ve been working on this,’’ Cremisius interrupted, “please do not say the ‘p’ word to my father, in this context. I will die.’’

“Oh!’’ Cole chirped and then amended what he’d been saying, “But I do not want to bump beautifuls with him.’’

“Oh my god,’’ Krem lamented, “how is that worse? Who taught you that? No wait, let me guess-“

“Dorian,’’ the four young people chorused—Cole in confirmation.

How had…he hadn’t voiced his thought. But it seemed that happened a lot around Cole, actually. Tonio ventured, “Lady Montilyet says you are specially gifted, but I am not exactly sure what that means.’’ Ellie had mentioned something of him being a Spirit the other day he thought, but he wasn’t certain what that meant.

“Cole is a Spirit of compassion, and has powers meant to help others,’’ Ellie explained, “he can hear people’s minds—when people are hurting he hears it and he can go to them, by teleporting. Of course if he’s talking to you, focused on the discussion, he can hear your thoughts casually which is why sometimes he answers when you haven’t said something out loud.”
“Uh-huh, hold up,” Cremisius took pause stopping just before they could enter the kitchens, and he set Ellie on her feet, turning to face their followers. He wrapped an arm around Ellie’s shoulders as she smiled and hugged him around the waist, though he spoke to Cole, “Bud. Look here. I dig that I make you feel safe, but that implies you’ve been feeling unsafe. Someone doing something to mess with you? What’s going on?”

“It is not any one thing, no one is intentionally harming me,” the boy assured serenely.

“Do you feel unsafe a lot?” Cremisius pressed.

“Oh. All of the time,” Cole informed them, unbothered. Well that certainly wouldn’t do. “Bodies have chemicals that make fear, and this one does it a lot. I feel badly that I cannot heal all of the hurts in Skyhold, and that makes this body anxious. And then there are so many…I make people scared, they do not understand what I am, and what people do not understand…there are often startled thoughts of killing me that my body takes seriously. It has learned to always be afraid. Unless I am with you or Ellie or Sera or the Iron Bull or any of our friends.”

“You need me, you come get me, okay? Want me to come stand in and have your back when you’re talking to antsy people, just say the word.”

“We can always call on you, Cole, is there a way you can call on us like that? We could get you a horn or do you think that would startle people worse?” Ellie questioned.

“I…it- you- it startles you, but you do not think to hurt me—I can speak to your minds when we are near each other like we are here in Skyhold, but-“

“Do it!” Ellie and Cremisius and Sera insisted. Cremisius saying, “I’ll run it by Bull to see if he’d be freaked or not—it wouldn’t be anything personal if he wouldn’t want you doing that to him—but seriously Cole…”

“We call on you all the time for all sorts of things,” Ellie picked up for him, “you should be able to rely on us too.”

“We’re your friends, you floppy-hatted git!” Sera said. “So anyone makes you feel weirdy, they gotta answer to us. Got it?”

“You…are very good friends,” Cole said, raising a hand rub a fist against his eye, “my eyes are salty.”

Salty? Oh. Tonio pulled the handkerchief that had been folded into the breast pocket of his suit jacket, and offered it to the boy, “Here child,” though when he did look up at Tonio the man wondered if he…he spoke of his body like it were foreign to him, a Spirit, Ellie said. He said his eyes were ‘salty’ not crying so he may well not have done so before, so he handled it much the way he had for Cremisius, when his bello mimo was small and upset, and handkerchiefs were big and confusing—to either be tossed away in frustration or played with when he felt better. He raised a hand to Cole’s cheek to keep him looking up and used the other to carefully wipe at the corners of his eyes, “are you alright? They did not mean to upset you.”

“I am alright, thank you.”

“Your powers are strange, take getting used to, but I’m very glad you have them, Cole. I am grateful for all the help you’ve given me since I’ve arrived, for all you have done for Cremisius,” Tonio said, pleased to see the boy preen from his praise.

The kitchens were lively—servants preparing to take loads of trays out for deliveries,
“Molly, hi!” Ellie greeted enthusiastically, hugging the girl before Sera joined in.

“I set everything up myself, everything’s safe,” she reported to Sera who nodded.

“Seriously Molls, you’re a total babe.”

“What are Friends for?” Molly supposed shaking her right wrist, huh. She wore a woven bracelet that matched the one he’d noticed on Cremisius’s wrist, Ellie, Sera, and Cole’s as well.

Apparently, they were symbolic for more than just friendship, but for Friends with a capital F. As they set to the task of mixing up a few large bowls of cookie batter, Sera filled Tonio in on the organization she worked with—offered to fashion a bracelet for him if he’d like. She promised she already told people not to ‘mess with his stuff’ he and his workshop would not fall victim to their pranks, and he could rest assured that he could trust any who wore one of their friendship bracelets.

“Oi! How’s pensive is tailoring pish? Can little people hire you?” Sera asked.

“Certainly,” he assured.

“Sweet! Josie sweetness says you’re busy with Inky’s things, but I’ll be sure to tell Friends they can go to you once you’re all open for business!”

“I appreciate the advertisement,” he grinned. Cremisius handed him the eggs needed oh. Well, at least he’d not lost practice with this, working the kitchens. He took both eggs in one hand and tapped them against the counter top before pulling them open over the bowl.

“Cripes that’s fancy!” Sera shrieked over Ellie’s, “That’s so cool!”

Oh it was fun, to be included in their ‘cookie club’ of which he was now an honorary member. They whipped up several dozen cookies in the two hours before dinner—the first dozen had several taken from it once they finished drizzling them in chocolate, put on a nicer plate and Cole whisked it away to provide dessert for Madam de Fer and Seeker Pentaghast, and a few more plates that were sent to any in Ellie’s ‘party’, her friends around Skyhold, one of which was delivered to Lady Montilyet. Too, when they were finished, they cleaned up and left two of their dozens as offering for the kitchen staff, Ellie fished a little parchment pad out of a pocket on her overcoat and wrote up a little thank-you note so they knew it was for their own enjoyment.

He was almost worried the Tavern was over-crowded, that there was certainly no way to host this proposed dinner here, when he realized the crowd was their dinner party. The whole of the Chargers he’d seen in Cremisius’s sketch book were gathered around a large table before the fire place, with the addition of Dorian, a dwarf woman he could assume was Miss Lace from Sera bounding forward and taking a seat in her lap, and Commander Cullen. Maker—Elves, Dwarves, Humans, a Qunari—people that you could visibly see came from all parts of the world, soldiers and rogues and mages, it looked like a gathering of world peace even as they were all squabbling over something.
“—his favorite, you assholes, get it straight!” the Iron Bull said, Dorian was seated… almost in his lap, they were seated so very close their thighs touched. Ahh. ‘Groady’ apparently meant the Altus rubbed the Qunari the, er…right way, he supposed. That was quite a pairing.

“Bullshit!” Stitches snapped back, “I’m his favorite. Of course I am, I’m the one doling out potion and expert life advice.”

“Like what? Krem puff needs life advice, who’s he gonna come to? Me. Wise beyond my damn horns.”

“Grim. He and Krem have the most enlightening conversations,” Skinner said.

“You’re all wrong. You simpletons. You fools,” the Dwarven Charger spoke up. “I am, by far, the superior Charger.”

“What the hell are you lot on about?” Krem asked as they joined their party, he and Ellie taking their offering of cookies to the other Elf in the Charger’s group, a willowy woman with the sort of facial tattoo he’d seen on Dalish slaves in Tevinter before Ellie went to sit across the table from the Iron Bull, on the Commander’s lap—there were few empty chairs around the table, maybe one or two.

“Krem de la Krem, my man! Tell these toolbags who your favorite Charger is,” the Iron Bull ordered.

“If you say anyone but Bull, I’ll buy your drinks for a month,” a very light skinned Human man said—not Cullen, they hadn’t been introduced yet.

“No problem, you crazies. Rocky’s right, you’re fools,” Krem informed them, and the Dwarf that had said as much earlier seemed pleased with himself but deflated when Krem wrapped his arms around the Elven woman who had taken their dessert and set it at the end of the table for later, “Dalish is my favorite Charger. Makes my favorite food, doesn’t give me grief, has never once called me a ridiculous nickname.”

“Ha!” the woman, he supposed who went by ‘Dalish’ said, patting Cremisius’s arm and kissing him on the cheek before letting him go.


“Don’t be an ass,” Cremisius drawled, dropping into the open chair on the Iron Bull’s other side. “You know you make the top three of my favorites in general. Ellie, you and papa, then Cole.”

“Hell yeah! Cole, buddy, take a seat—you too Papa’classi. Sit down with your bad self.”

Cole took an empty seat that was near the fire, and too it was near the woman playing a lute, music for the Tavern it seemed. She smiled at the Spirit who blushed and turned his attention to her, she kept playing but started up a conversation with him, asking about his day. Maryden, Tonio assumed. Huh. He would have to pull up a chair for himself he supposed though Cremisius was already looking around the table and he rose from his seat and offered it to his father. Tonio accepted but he wasn’t certain where- ahh. Well, the Iron Bull’s thighs were rather massive, the Tevene boy sat right in the Qunari’s blind spot but that didn’t seem to bother him, the weight was a familiar one and the Iron Bull made a rumbling sound in his chest as he raised a hand to tousle Cremisius’s hair.
“Alright assholes, Spirits, Boss-girl,” the Iron Bull winked to Ellie. “For anyone blind in both eyes—this here’s Krem’s father, Tonio Aclassi. Sound off, make him feel welcome, ask him embarrassing questions about this brat’s childhood. I’ll start—when, if ever, did he stop wetting the bed?”

Oh, he did not wish to be mean, but it was a bit of fun, “You know, we had consistent dry nights after he turned three.” And it earned him laughter from those around the table.

“Hear that El? I’m all kinds of impressive,” Cremisius snorted, and Ellie giggled.

“I’m Rocky, nice to meet you, this here is Grim,” the Dwarven man said, gesturing to the Human man seated next to him who waved to Tonio in greeting, “—he doesn’t do the speaking thing, but you hang around us long enough you’ll probably pick up on his sign language.”

“Thom Rainier,” said the Human man who offered to pay for Cremisius’s drinks, the man at his side raised a hand in greeting,

“Cyril, good to meet you.”

“It’s an honor,” Thom insisted, “your son is one of the finest young men I’ve ever served with.”

“Thank you—it’s an honor to meet you all,” Tonio said.

“I’m not a Charger, but I’m super glad to meet you, Mister Aclassi. I’m Lace Harding,” the Dwarven woman at the table introduced herself.

“Pleasure to meet you miss, please give my regards to your mother, I do appreciate the work she’s done for me.”

That sent the Dwarf blushing. “Oh golly, it wasn’t a problem—I’ll tell her.”

“I’m Cole!” Cole needlessly, but enthusiastically introduced himself.

“Yeah you are buddy,” the Iron Bull said, “who’s the fox? She wanna join us?”

“She’s a Human, but it’s okay if you got confused, your eye is tired because you need to sleep. Foxes are beautiful and so is Maryden! She makes music that heals people’s hurts,” he turned his attention back to the blushing woman, “you are hungry, you should eat with us, it would make me very happy to sit with you.”

“Oh, I do suppose I am due for a break,” the minstrel* decided, “just let me get her put safely away,” she said before bringing her strumming to an end and heading up the stairs with her lute.

The Iron Bull whistled. “Okay. What the hell? How are my boys bagging red-heads and my ass is landed with this one?”

“This one?” Dorian asked, insulted, “I’ll have you know I’m both an international treasure and a universal delight.”

“Didn’t say I was landed with you, Sparky. Could’ve been talkin’ ‘bout blondie over here, got a mean smolder Commander, Seeker treating you right?”

The Commander sighed, resting his forehead against the back of Ellie’s head. “Please
“Indeed!” Dorian agreed. “You will not seduce the Commander—if someone could, it would be me. Our chess matches are very invigorating.”

“No,” Cullen was certain, though where he was uncertain was, “if I were...hmm, Ellie who would I be with if I weren’t with mami and was inclined toward the masculine population?”

“Thom!” she readily supplied, sending the elder Charger choking on his drink. “He looks like an older male Cassandra, and he’s a big softy romantic at heart! He even likes Wintersend romance serials!”

“I do not like them,” Thom said, “I merely...agreed that there was nothing wrong with enjoying the occasional—“

“Occasional?” Cyril drawled.

“Oh bloody hell, they’re good!” Thom conceded, earning the table’s laughter.

Maryden rejoined them, and Cole sent Cremisius a rather blinding smile—the Spirit had been making to rise from his seat to offer it to the songstress when he heard her on stairs, but Cremisius had cleared his throat and it looked like Cole were listening to something and then he resumed his seat and Maryden smiled and readily sat in his lap. They sat and chatted amicably, the table had a dozen different conversations overlapping each other, it was a wonder anyone could keep track of who was saying what to who. Tonio was pulled into conversation with Stitches, at first just talking about how he was liking Skyhold, and eventually slipping in that he did want to check in—assure Tonio the order went out for a proper pair of spectacles for him, and to make certain he was well after their appointment.

Which caught Cremisius’s attention. “Yeah, what the actual fuck did you give papa? Cole came and told me how sick he got, and he was out cold when I took him tea.”

Stitches looked to Tonio, a refusal on his lips, but Tonio nodded that it was fine for him to speak freely—he didn’t personally mind—he would explain himself, but the Healer could likely better do so, quell his son’s worry.

“Purgative lad,” Stitches said, “you know I wouldn’t give him something he didn’t need. Good tip on the cooper build-up in his eyes, little love,” he winked at Ellie, “Might not have caught that myself. Hard to tell sometimes, with brown eyes.”

“Oh yeah! Gosh, you had to take purgative for it?” she asked, sympathizing, “Wow, I’m sorry, that sucks.” She looked to Stitches, “How...um, that’s, I mean it happens but—I mean are his kidneys—“ she worried.

“Functioning normally,” Stitches assured, “The amount he chucked up, he had to be consuming the stuff. Pretty sure it’s in that paste shit but I don’t have the foggiest idea why the hell they’d load sl- servants up on copper.”

“Well I mean it is a necessary nutrient, in the right quantities,” Ellie thought it over. “We need copper for cardiovascular health, it strengthens the immune system, helps our brain communicate with the rest of our body—it’s a nifty little thing, but too much of it in your system and your organs can’t hang and start to shut down.” She tilted her head side to side, thinking and then, “Sera?”

Sera looked up from chatting quietly with miss Lace, “Yeah Inky?”
“You and S- you guys used copper in my necklace thing, right?” Ellie asked, fiddling with the white leather necklace.

“Yeah sweets, remember? Did a science lesson on it. Electromagnetic induction. I learned you about copper being a conductor, which…” the Elf girl prompted.

“Oh conductors and insulators are opposites right?” Ellie asked, “Insulators protect against or stop electricity while conductors carry voltage-“ she went very quiet then, paled.

Ahh. That did make sense then, he supposed.

“El?” Cremisius asked.

Tonio smiled reassuringly to the girl. “I was never harmed in such a way,” not to great detriment—little more than the initial ‘stay in line or you’ll get more of this’ introduction he’d been given to their Laetan task-master’s brand of punishment. Once he had slept through the call to rise, but the warning shock had been enough to prevent that from happening again, Maker, he’d felt it for days. “I worked hard, kept my head down, stayed to myself, never attempted to run.”

Ellie swallowed, nodded. “I’m- I’m sorry. I’m really glad you’re safe,” she looked to Dorian, “I thought you said House Tilani—”

Dorian sighed wearily. “It is horrible and disgusting, but a…precaution. I don’t necessarily agree with it, but that is the standard. Magisterium dictated. It costs masters little to feed their er, people, and it- those in ownership are elite few in comparison to the number it takes to serve them, they make up a fifth of the population of Minrathous if slaves were accounted for in the census.”

“So making them-“ easier to control, to kill if necessary. Ellie shook her head, “Nu-uh. Nope. Papi, nuestra carta ha sido enviada?” she turned her head toward Cullen.

His eyes went a bit wide at that, and he seemed to consider it a moment, mouthing her words to himself before he decided he did understand her sentence and, “You signed off on the first draft, but Lady Montilyet hasn’t finished working up the final document for your signature,” he said.

“I have a debriefing first thing tomorrow morning, but do you think we could call an emergency War Room meeting for after?”

He seemed to give it some consideration. “I don’t know, can we?”

“Oh yeah, sorry,” Ellie cleared her throat and rephrased, “I have a debriefing first thing tomorrow morning—there will be an emergency War Room meeting after.”

Cullen grinned, “Of course, Inquisitor, I will inform your advisory staff.”

Oh, Cremisius looked rather stricken, despite Tonio’s assurances. He rested a hand on his son’s on the table top, “Everything is well. I am here now,” he offered. Cremisius’s jaw set, like he wasn’t certain how to reply to that, like he might argue, hash out the issue further but a second hand placed itself on his son’s body—the Iron Bull laid a hand on the back of Cremisius’s neck, and the boy sighed, relaxing.

“Listen to Papa’classi,” the Iron Bull intoned, though then he spoke as if in offer, “Shanedan? Lots of big things been going on, we haven’t really had a minute to get into it.”
Cremisius snorted, smiling. “Dorian’ll be pissed if you’re up all night chatting with me.”

“Why would I be? Am I no longer allowed to watch?” Dorian questioned. “I do enjoy your little talks. You two say the most disgustingly sentimental things a Qunari and a Tevinter could possibly say to one another, it’s as blasphemous as it is amusing, and when it’s over you thank me like I actually did something more than observe and silently judge. Your syntax, of course, not your actions, it’s healthy to vent but you really could put more effort into it, at least try to wax poetic about it all.”

“Wax yourself,” the boy shot back.

“I’m insulted you think I don’t—shave this glorious form? And risk nicking it? Perish the thought.”

That got his son laughing. Tonio was glad of it certainly but…well it…it would be foolish to be jealous, it was only understandable after all. He had been out of Cremisius’s life for so long, and even in the few years leading up to their departure, there had been a growing rift between them, Cremisius withdrawing from his family more and more as the wedding approached. Their discussion the night before he left was one of the first conversations they’d had in…Maker, he wasn’t certain how long—there had been weeks upon weeks of days filled with little more from Cremisius than one worded sentences. When he looked back, his son had been silent for days, nodded to everything, and when the engagement party was unfolding, smiled when it seemed appropriate. I don’t love him! I’ll never love him, and I will never be anyone’s perfect wife! was the first thing he’d heard from his child in days. Ahh but that was all to say—once upon a time his bello mimo could be crying as if his heart had broken, and Tonio could always take him by the hand and knew exactly what to say to get him smiling again. Now it seemed that power lay with the Iron Bull, and the members of his found family. Tonio could only hope to earn that ability in time.

“Hi!” a cheery voice addressed the table, and all turned to see a small, ginger-haired Dwarven woman, waving to them in greeting. “You guys are the Chargers right?”

“Dagna!” Ellie offered, excited, “Oh my gosh, hi! You guys this is Dagna—she’s the Inquisition’s new Arcanist!”

“Well hey there, cutie!” Dagna greeted the girl, “Gosh, I didn’t know you were going to be here- oh! Your boyfriend’s a Charger, duh!” She gasped, pointing to Cremisius, “Is that him? Oh wow, he is handsome! Hi boyfriend!”

“Hey, pleasure to meet you,” Cremisius said with a wave, "Ellie’s been real excited about you joining up.”

“I hear a red head, Krem-puff, she a red head?” the Qunari asked Cremisius quietly.

“I am!” Dagna chirped cheerily.

Cremisius almost fell out of the Iron Bull’s lap as the Qunari swiveled around in his seat to lay eye on their guest, “Asking for the Chargers huh? I’m their leader, the Iron Bull, and what brings your fine self to our party?”

“Oh-“ Dagna was cut off of course by,

“I invited her!” Sera…and miss Lace both, offered up—and they looked rather surprised about it, looking to one another, both seemingly caught up in explaining.
“Uhh…” Sera said.

“I just-” Lace started.

“She’s new!”

“Yeah, she’s new and really sweet—“

“The sweetest, and Inky likes her—“

“Yeah I uh, just thought we should make her feel welcome!”

“Ditto!”

“Yeah, it was really nice of you two!” Dagna enthused.

The Iron Bull sighed, shaking his head as he resumed facing the Commander and Ellie, “Every damn time,” and then, “Pull up a seat, everyone’s welcome with the Chargers.”

“Thanks!”

Though there were truly no more seats to pull up now. It was clumsy, but Lace suggested she could ‘squeeze in’ if that was alright, which it apparently was. Sera and Lace switched places—Sera seating herself in the chair and Lace sat upon her right thigh, Dagna hopping onto Sera’s left.

“Golly you guys know how to make a girl feel welcome,” Dagna giggled.

“You…you’re an Arcanist?” Rocky asked, “I need every detail on just how exactly that happened.” It was admittedly strange for a Dwarf, people characterized by their lack of magical capability, to take up such a magic-heavy study, but Maker, this Dagna was passionate about it.

Dalish stood and stretched, Cremisius and Cole rose with her, following her to the fireplace. They helped her with the task of dishing out heaping servings from the pot over the flame, filling bowls, passing them out, Cremisius wedging between Tonio and the Iron Bull to deliver their meals, pressing a kiss to Tonio’s cheek, “Eat up, you want seconds, just ask,” before his mouth was level with the Iron Bull’s ear quietly apologizing, “Sorry, fork’s in your bowl on your right—three o’clock, pepper shakers at two if you want,” and then he was off again with Bull’s,

“Thanks brat.”

Maker, it was delicious, he could understand why it was a favorite for his child. Warm, spicy rice and chicken, peppers, broccoli, peas, carrots. He was pleased his son had no further quarrel with eating his vegetables. Ellie was apologetic when a Dwarven man—Cabot, the Tavern’s owner apparently—came with water and ale for their table, “This is okay right?” she asked of their…ahh, he supposed it might be unorthodox, to use his Tavern to cook in, eat a meal he wasn’t getting paid for.

“I didn’t have to cook for a huge-ass party which is my jam any day of the week, ’s’long as these assholes pay for their drink, I’m game. You want juice, babe?”

“Uh-huh, thanks! Can I put in an order for Marehis? To go, please, I’ll take it when we’re done here.”
“You’re the boss,” Cabot said, “Usual dinner? On it.”

“Thanks!”

“Yup.”

It was altogether a wonderful meal, and the cookies were rather the hit, earning their makers a round of thanks.

“Friggin Kremmy-boy’s da can crack two eggs with one hand! It was so cool!” Sera enthused.

“Papa’s always been able to do that,” Cremisius said.

“Hardly always, but I did get lots of practice,” Tonio supposed, it always amused his child how he could do so, he found himself making more eggs than probably necessary when Cremisius was little, just to see the toddler giggly and clapping at the trick. “My bello mimo—when he was just a little thing, he would just clap and laugh, got the biggest kick out of the trick.”

The Iron Bull grumbled something under his breath that sounded like a claim he could crack ‘fuckin’ half a dozen eggs with one hand’, but it was rather overlapped by Ellie letting out a little squeal and, “Cremisius had to be the cutest baby!”

“He was,” Tonio assured. There…he wasn’t certain if it was still there, or if it would be disconcerting for Cremisius, but he took out his pocket watch. The mechanism was purely magical, there were no gears that turned the hands, you could press in on the clockface and it would swivel, flip to the other side to hold a portrait. He quietly slipped his pocket watch out of his pocket and opened it, held it low for Cremisius to view it, made certain his son saw as he pressed the clockface, could see the edge of the old family portrait, he and Liviana standing, Tonio holding up young Cremisius between them—an offer, he could share it if he liked, or tuck it away.

“That- oh. I didn’t know it- wow,” Cremisius smiled as he took the watch in hand revealed the picture himself, elbowed the Iron Bull before he held it low in his range of sight so the Qunari could take a look.

“Oh man, Imekari,” he rumbled out, close to a coo.

“Oh-huh?” Ellie asked.

“Not you right now babe, I got Imekari out the ears,” the Iron Bull said, “Krem-cake, look at you, cute as a damn button.”

“Oh, positively precious,” Dorian agreed almost sounding like he found it sickeningly sweet.

Cremisius passed the pocket watch back to his father and gave him a nod that it was fine to share the portrait, Tonio grinned and passed it along to Ellie who lit up and took the pocket watch in hand, “Oh my gosh oh my gosh oh my gosh! Cremisius! You’re only tiny!”

“He was two, when we posed for that,” Tonio supplied. It was a simple black and white portrait, photography was still a relatively new concept, while it had Orlesian origins, it had gained some popularity in Tevinter, advanced to some degree over the years. Though for all its ability to capture an image in an instant, it took, Maker…months, nearly a year—he’d all but forgotten they’d posed for a family portrait when they arrived in the mail, an even smaller copy had been placed in a locket Liviana wore, and a larger one hang over the mantel in their home. Cremisius
was clothed in a white gown all children wore regardless of gender when dedicated to the Chantry —the very reason they’d marked the occasion.

“You absolutely have to show this to Cassandra sometime,” Cullen insisted.

“He’s so! Cute! Cremisius! I can’t handle this!” Ellie enthused as she passed the picture on, “How were you this adorable?! Little chubby cheeked baby! And you had so much hair!”

“He was born with a head of it, if you can believe it,” Tonio informed her, “He was so little, weighed barely six pounds and I’m certain most of it was hair.”

“Oh my goodness,” Ellie breathed.

“Oh do shut up!” Dorian gasped, sounding appalled at the information like he startled him to think of Cremisius being that small and vulnerable—the Iron Bull’s jaw had dropped, and he looked down at his own hand as if he were certain he could have likely held a baby Cremisius in his palm, he likely could have.

“Shite, Kremmy-boy it’s hard to imagine you was so little!” Sera exclaimed, Lace nodded in agreement.

“Awe! Cute! This is you, huh boyfriend? Gosh you’re so smiley. Your ma’s really pretty. Oh! And you’re handsome too Mister Aclassi,” Dagna complimented.

“Thank you,” Tonio said.

Dalish openly cooed over the picture, Rocky and Stitches gave Cremisius a bit of heckling over being ‘adorable’, that Grim fellow smiled and swiped his index and middle finger down his chin* which seemed a positive reaction. Miss Skinner blinked at it, expression souring. “I don’t like it.”

“Skin?” the Iron Bull asked over Cremisius's mildly insulted, "What the hell?"

Skinner passed the locket back to Tonio, informing them all, “It makes me want to produce offspring.”

Goodness.

It was all great fun, but their evening together wound to a close. Sera and Miss Lace were to walk a bit with Dagna, return her to Skyhold castle, and Cremisius rose to escort Ellie back to her quarters, and Tonio was the recipient of two farewell kisses to the cheek.

He did take leave of the Tavern, but he took to the stairway up alongside the forge, to his workshop. He’d rested most of the day away, a good meal in him, and he was more than inspired. He wished to take the opportunity, get a jump start on his work, as best he could. Though he almost regretted returning to his workshop—Cole had returned his things, parchment pad, materials, his sketches to his room- oh. *I know the way, and where you want them* Cole had said, and he’d meant it apparently. He’d perceived Tonio’s desire to get to work, his things were waiting for him on a table in his workshop. Tonio lit the lanterns in his shop and set to work.

And Cole further made good on his word. At first Tonio was concerned the boy should be asleep, but he was given the assurance that apparently, Cole needed no such thing. As Tonio worked, the Spirit appeared and offered the man a recap of sorts, answered all the questions he’d had since his arrival—about the Breach, the Inquisition, all major world events he could care to know that had transpired in his absence. It was…rather a lot, the south had a rebellion across all of
their Circles, the Conclave, the Divine’s death—it didn’t much affect Tevinter, of course, but still, Divine Justinia sounded like an admirable woman and many good souls were lost in the destruction of the Temple of Sacred ashes.

Though there was a knock on the workshop door, he would have thought perhaps it was Cremisius—it was the door that led in the direction of the Tavern, the Charger’s quarters—but the sound was off, harder, more thunking than rapping.

“The Iron Bull—I’ll leave you to talk, you really should,” Cole said, “You’ll do good work, but remember to get some rest,” he intoned before vanishing.

The Iron Bull? “You may come in,” Tonio called.

The door swung open and the Qunari had to duck to step inside, “Hey. You uh, busy? Krem-pie’s out like a light, and I heard you tinkering away in here, thought I’d uh, check in.”

“Please, sit,” Tonio offered, gesturing to the stool he’d pulled up across the table from him for Cole to be seated. The Spirit had sat on the table to be situated higher, that was his prerogative he supposed, the Iron Bull nodded and sat, he’d two glasses palmed in his right hand, and placed them on the table.

“Imekari’ll skin me if I give you anything stronger right now, something about alcohol being bad for you when you have deficiencies—she calls apple juice the ‘hard stuff’ so, I thought it might work. Got vitamins and shit in it.”

“Imekari?” it sounded as though he meant to reference Ellie, but he’d used it before, talking of Cremisius.

“Qunlat—means kid.” Ahh. Well that sorted didn’t it? “Drink?” he offered, pouring apple juice from a waterskin.

“Certainly. Thank you,” Tonio said checking the time before he sipped, he still had an hour to spare before he would need to be strict to the Healer’s order of fasting. Cremisius was ‘out like a light’, “I trust you had a good talk?” he asked. “I did not…I hope he is not distressed by the implications of my time in servitude.”

The Qunari nodded, sighing as he rubbed at the back of his neck uncomfortably. “Yeah. Look, you’ve…I’m sure it was rough, hard. But if you can—whenever you’re ready you should probably talk to him about it yourself.”

“I hoped to spare him the details—“

“To protect him or yourself?”

“Him of course.”

The Qunari shook his head. “That’s not how that works my guy.”

“He’s- I understand that Cremisius has grown but he is a child—“

“Yes. He’s a kid. Your kid, and he’s gonna have questions. He’d feel a hell of a lot better, cope with whatever he’s struggling with—he’s been worried for you, these past few years. Scared. He’s got this shitshow of possibilities, of horrible things that might have happened to you, and they’ve been cooking up there for a while. If you can work through giving him answers…he’s basically been thinking you’ve been living in hell for the past few years and it’s all his fault—he
said you already told him not to blame himself. But he’s been doing that every damn day for a while now, it’s gonna take a hot minute for his brain to think something different.”

“I…he- I’m not-“

“Look. He uh. He was guilty as shit about uh…he tell you about how we met?” the Iron Bull asked.

“Oh,” Tonio breathed, “certainly. Maker, I- I have been meaning to thank you. You gave much to save my son and I will always be grateful—that you saved him that day, for all you have done for him since.”

“Well he blamed himself for that. And uh…it was a lot- might not seem like a big deal but it’s something I had to adapt to, losing half my sight. I don’t do vulnerability, or letting people see me struggle. But the guy thought he ruined my damn life, and letting him in on my recovery, helping, being uh, open, honest about the bad—because whatever I was experiencing, was a lot better than what he was beating himself up with.”

Oh. That- “I will speak with him, certainly. I apologize I’m…that makes sense. I’m afraid I’m out of practice with all of this. Being a father.”

The Iron Bull snorted at that.

“Have I offended?” Tonio asked at the derisive sound.

The Qunari shook his head. “Look. Krem- we talk a lot. A whole fucking lot. So you and me need to make something clear about your parenting choices. Cremisius was a child. I don’t know what the fuck flies in Human world but ten is nowhere near the age Imekari should get shackled into marriage to someone your damn age.”

“I absolutely agree- I- there is no excuse. I was wrong to put Cremisius in such a situation.”

“Yeah,” he agreed, but, “Hit me with some excuses though because I really need to understand just what the fuck you were thinking.”

Tonio sighed. “We were in rather a desperate situation. Business was declining, we were so deep in debt. I have no other source of…I’m trained in nothing else. I took up work, manual labor, several nights a week on our city docks to keep us scraping by but even that did little to keep us afloat. Cornelius was a friend. He’d been incapable of bringing himself to marry after losing his wife and child. I was…not in my right state of mind, exhausted, fearing my family would be indentured, and my wife, and a man I considered a friend, he…they sat me down when I was getting in from work and proposed, well, his proposal. Cremisius was young, but that only meant he would er, eventually grow to be a suitable…um. Be able to provide a suitable heir—he was a Laetan, while they’re not wholly immune to slavery, they’ve certainly a more forgiving system in place for their debts. And as it stood, he was very wealthy—is very wealthy, his household controls trade for the whole of our city. The arrangement…it secured a future for Cremisius—at the time, I swear to you, there had always been struggles, with his identity, but we did not know. I did not know that he was…I did not know he was my son. I did not know that I was dooming him to live a life that would harm him, bring him so much misery. While Cornelius was not ideal romantically—marriage does not necessarily need to be so. Liviana and myself were betrothed to one another from birth. Cornelius’s age was certainly a concern, but he had no problem waiting until Cremisius was old enough to start a family…of course I- I did not agree fifteen was an acceptable age but it was…there was no healer that spoke against it. Liviana and myself were
married at fourteen, many are—we lost our first child in the spring of the year we turned fifteen. Cremisius would be taken care of, have a life and a family and be able to pursue his interests—he has always been something of an artist, he would be free to pursue that without risk of indebting himself. But I should have…I should have stopped it sooner. Cremisius railed against the arrangement—he threw a tantrum when news first broke, but he seemed to accept it for a while, and then it was never ending arguments between he and Liviana. I should have stood up for him, helped him stand his ground, ended the engagement—I should have never agreed to it in the first place. There are many ‘should have’s about it all.’

“Marriage is a weird-ass concept. But I get…you were following example. Trying to secure a good life for your kid. Being manipulated into it”

“I was a fool,” Tonio corrected, “and I take full responsibility. I…I knew my wife was having…I knew there were others. It was not ideal, our situation. I never stepped out on her but neither did I kick up much fuss when I realized she may be seeking others to fulfill certain needs. I guess I thought it was a way of making up for the lack of our situation. I did not realize Cornelius was one of her dalliances until…well. I caught them together, a few months before the wedding. They insisted I’d misinterpreted what I saw. I should have called things off then and there, realized it was all manipulations so they might be together without the scandal of breaking up a marriage and marrying a Sopporati divorcee.”


“Ironically enough, yes.”


“Do you? I never would have deduced as much,” Tonio supposed teasingly.

“Aclassi guys, always gotta give me grief,” the Qunari lamented, “Guess I can deal with it. Sorry for the uh, inquisition. Just making sure…you’re cool with Krem being Krem. That all that bullshit in Tevinter wasn’t something you’re still hung up on, planning to repeat somehow—that you know it was garbage.”

“Certainly. Thank you, for looking out for my child. Though I believe I had a rather similar conversation with young Ellie. She has imbued me with the fear of the Maker should I ever hurt Cremisius.”

The Iron Bull shook his head. “Damn, Imekari keeps beating me to the punch.”

“She loves my son, as do you it seems?”

“He’s uh, a good kid. You raised a pretty incredible son.”

Had he? “I provided for a child, I believe you are more responsible for the man he is. I must confess I’m admittedly jealous.”


Was he…did this Qunari truly love his son as much? So much so he felt insecure now that Cremisius’s biological father was around? Tonio offered, “As are you, after a fashion.” It seemed no different to him than Ellie’s arsenal of parents and guardians.
“Me?”

“Certainly.”

“Huh.”

There was rather the timely knock on the door, gentle rapping followed by the son in question poking his head in, rubbing sleep from his eyes, “Papa, what’re you still doing up?” ahh, he was dressed for bed, had he woken and come in search of Tonio?

“I was merely getting some work done, the Iron Bull has been keeping me company,” Tonio said.

Cremisius blinked at that, still waking up it seemed, “Oh. Bull, hey, there you are.”

“Papa Bull,” the Qunari corrected, “—just got certified by your old man, brat!”

“‘m’not calling you that,” the boy mumbled out as he staggered over to join them, just laying against the Iron Bull’s back, pressing his forehead against the back of the Qunari’s neck, “Had the dream again.”

Dream? “Shit,” Bull sympathized, “Everyone in the Inquisition is actually Venatori dream, or you’re making out with Boss-girl and when you pull away she’s Rocky?”

“Second one. And she doesn’t turn into Rocky, it’s just my worst nightmare—he’s her biological father and suddenly she looks just like brown, red-headed girl-Rocky.” That…did sound horrific.

“Sorry kid.”

“You weren’t in your cot, winded myself falling into it, you ass, woke Dorian.”

“My bad,” the Qunari chuckled, lumbering to his feet, “just hanging with Papa’classi. Knocking back a few drinks Imekari style. I’ll walk you back—kid shit, you already kicked your fuckin’ socks off,” the Iron Bull sighed. Ahh, that was a habit of his—he couldn’t fall asleep if his feet were too cold, but he always managed to kick them off in his sleep. Cremisius let out an umf as the Qunari deftly hoisted the boy over his shoulder, and, “Back to bed.”

Cremisius was already half asleep it seemed, Tonio was a little nervous that his son had walked the battlements when he was so tired, but even as he was he raised a hand to point to Tonio and intone, “Shouldn’t be working so late—get some rest, got it?”

Tonio smiled. “I’ll not be at it too long. Sweet dreams, Cremisius.”

Tonio Aclassi worked until his watch made him aware it was three in the morning and he made a neat stack of soft sleep clothing for the Inquisitor, dimmed the lanterns in his workshop, and made his winding way through Skyhold, and back to his quarters.

He was not the only person working late he supposed.

“Ambassador,” he greeted politely. The Antivan woman was just unlocking the door to her own room, she smiled as he passed by.

“Mister Aclassi. You had a pleasant evening, I hope?”

“I did. My meeting with Ellie was very productive, we had a lovely dinner and I’ve gotten
a good bit of work done.”

“How excellent.”

“Your evening was well?”

“Certainly,” she said, then, “I would love to see what you have in mind for Eleanor’s wardrobe, I’m remiss I could not attend your meeting. Would you perhaps be willing to discuss the finer details with me? Over dinner, perhaps?”

“Certainly,” he agreed.

Lady Montilyet offered him a warm smile, “Wonderful.”

Skyhold was quiet as Cassandra walked alongside the Commander, taking in the night air before retiring, it did seem to help Cullen wind down, fall asleep with greater ease when they took the time to relish in the peace and quiet of their new fortress, walk the walls and feel the security Haven’s fall had robbed them of. Oh, but it was a relief to be back in his office, his quarters. He afforded her the opportunity to ascend the ladder before him—he always followed her up closely, it was ridiculous and welcome, flirtatious. Too…a bit of protectiveness. Something she noticed in him where she and Eleanor were concerned. There were little things—always having an arm up, ready to keep them from falling or support them when they ascended stairs or walking on the side that bore more passersby when they walked alongside one another. And she knew when he woke from nightmares because she either woke the same instant, finding herself being pulled into a defensive position—the man crying out as he moved to protect her from danger that was not present—or if he had gentler waking, she woke when morning came, his leg over her thighs, her head tucked under his chin, arms around her as a hand cradled the back of her head and he held her so very close like he could envelope her, physically shield her from any and all harm. And never did it feel like coddling, or that he did not think her capable of defending herself. It merely made her feel…it spoke to his desires, made her feel cherished in a way she had not expected someone to make her feel. It made her feel loved.

Maker, did she love this man.

“Did you enjoy your time with Madam de Fer?” Cullen asked as they prepared for bed.

“Certainly,” Cassandra assured. The woman was an excellent hostess and they’d taken to having meals with one another, since the Enchanter did not care to dine in the Tavern. It gave the woman some company. Too, she’d been one of Eleanor’s guards during the day and that provided the opportunity to get insight on how the girl was faring. Ugh…Cassandra was not certain how to feel, or what to do about the situation—if there was anything to do. Eleanor had apparently ordered a bottle of wine for her dinner with the Aclassi men. However, between the two of them, the Misters Aclassi had not drained the bottle, left half of it abandoned in her room. When Madam de Fer returned Eleanor to her quarters to clean up after her impromptu mission with the Chargers, the girl had handed it over to Madam de Fer to take for herself or dispose of as she saw fit, with the shy admission that while she had not imbibed a single drop of the drink, she had certainly
been very tempted to do so. Ugh. Cassandra had set a horrible example for the girl. She was not certain if she was more upset with herself, or with that horrible Elf.

Strange how once upon a time Solas had seemed a blessing—a miracle that showed up when they most needed it, someone who had some semblance of understanding about the Breach in the sky and the Mark on their prisoner’s hand—and Sera seemed a horrible curse. Now their roles were reversed.

“How was dinner with the Chargers—with Eleanor?” she wondered.

“Fun. She seemed well, in good spirits, and Mister Aclassi is acclimating well. He has a picture of Cremisius—as a baby.” Oh! Ugh. That sounded incredibly precious. “It had Skinner wishing to, quote ‘produce offspring’ and I honestly can’t blame her,” he said as he pulled back the covers and slipped into bed.

Cassandra huffed, beating a fist against her pillow to fluff up the sides before climbing into bed alongside him, shaking her head as she warned, “Do not allow Varric to hear you speak as such,” that had Cullen turning onto his side to face her, “I have discovered why the Dwarf has been endlessly annoying.”

“Truly?”


“Certainly.”

“And when he learned as much he assumed it was because I am with child. That is why he was so attentive and overly concerned for my wellbeing.”

Cullen’s eyes widened at that, “He thought you were pregnant? I thought you discussed your depression with him.“

“He took that conversation as- ugh. I suppose it wasn’t wholly clear—I thought he had realized I was taking medication, when he asked if you knew I merely said yes, I did not elaborate what you knew. I suppose him threatening to ‘kick your ass’ if you were not supportive should have tipped me off to his line of thinking but-“

“He should certainly kick my ass if I were anything less than supportive of your decision to treat your depression,” Cullen said. Though, “He truly thought as such?” he smiled, “you know, when I did question his recent behavior, accused him of having something of an interest in you he said, ‘I’m just happy for you crazy kids’ and he thought what we ‘have going on’ was ‘really cool’…I thought he was speaking purely of our relationship…I can’t say I disagree on either account.”

“Either?” Cassandra questioned.

Cullen shrugged, though he seemed almost shy. “Our relationship is, in point of fact ‘really cool’. And perhaps, someday…if- if you were so inclined…”

“Cullen!”

“In the future- far far off in the future—never if you have no interest-“

“I…have never thought about it. Not much.” It had more than crossed her mind of course,
marriage and children had been things crammed down her throat since the moment her infant body was saved a scarce millimeter from the carriage floor and Antony called out ‘I caught him, I caught him! Oh! He’s a girl!’ . Antony had been rather caught up in the idea he would have a baby brother. He adapted, however, it took all of the moment he first held her to love that he had a baby sister. But marriage, babies of her own—it had been something she’d had to rebel against to have any say in her future, stay the course of her training, her career. Eleanor was most assuredly her child, she felt that with such a ferocity—she could hardly abide the idea of losing her. When...whenever Solas spoke of his own past, Maker, it was almost inconceivable such things could be true, but Cole had confirmed every word and...the Spirit was forthright. To the point that when Cassandra had the passing thought that they would trust him until he took off a mask and revealed he had an entire other name and horrific backstory of murder and betrayal, the Spirit had informed them all out loud that his name, before the Veil, was ‘Theron’ it meant ‘he who hunts’ but he had not used a name in literal Ages, neither did he wish to hunt any longer. He wanted to be Cole. And he had, he confessed, been something of a murderer, an executioner in the White Spire. His blatant honesty of course only furthered their assurance that they could rely on him to tell them if Solas was lying. So when he confirmed Solas’s heartbreak, that Mythal had been murdered, their child...she could understand it, to a degree. She could level cities in Eleanor’s name. If someone took her, or Maker forbid, took she and Cullen both? The possibilities would be limitless, just how far her fury could take her.

So...needless to say, the way she was feeling...marriage, a child, children. These did not seem like such a foreign concept any longer. She did not wish to cement such a thing, just yet, but in the next few years? She could see something like that in the future. M...marrying this man. Having their life with Eleanor. And perhaps...

“In the far far future...perhaps it would be ‘really cool’,” she offered. It felt like vulnerability to even allow that much.

Cullen smiled, “Truly? Perhaps?” he asked, taking it as it was—that what most would perceive a mere inch of commitment, was indeed truly a mile in this circumstance, as far as Cassandra was concerned.

“Perhaps,” she agreed, with a smile of her own, and then she- it was not a squeak or a squeal, but the man was smiling, and his lips were ticklish on the sensitive skin of her neck as he rolled over in bed to straddle her, peppering kisses to her neck, her collarbone before taking her lips with his own, kissing her soundly before he chuckled and,

“Perhaps we could do with some practice then?”

Hmm, indeed. “Where would we be if we did not train?”

Chapter End Notes

Antivan:
Hasta aqui=up here!

Tevene:
Cuore mio=my heart

*25 is about the peak age of maturity, when our cells start breaking down and we start aging in a deteriorative way.
*Solas old AF and Fen'Harel is, a title for him, not his actual name. So either he slaps the name 'pride' on himself, but more likely, is that after his whole 'YEETing the gods' thing, the name Solas came to mean 'pride'. When I think about Solas I like that the name sounds like 'solace' which means to be alone--which, when you look at Solas's tombstone in Nightmare's part of the Fade during Here Lies the Abyss, his ultimate nightmare is to die alone. ANYWAY I digress. Solace, being alone has the implication of being at peace, being undisturbed, 'tranquil' so, I whipped it around to the definition that it's possible that once upon a time, someone loved this egg head and named him something nice.

*Canon, OG 'Elves' were called 'Elvehnan', which is why in this fic, Solas usually tip toes around calling Elves anything other than 'his people', because they aren't Dalish--that's the name Humans gave them. They're 'Elvehnan'.

*Kay kiddos. Once upon a time, after Solas done yeet the gods, Elves discovered that Humans existed. They origionally blamed Humans for the loss of their connection to magic and immortality. Anyway, Shartan--when Andraste was doing the whole 'big adventure that made her the center of Andrasten religion' thing and got the Maker to be like "you know what, Humanity? You cute, I'll keep you" the Elf, Shartan rode with her and as a thank you to the Elves for their help, they were given the land called the Dales, thus Dalish. But uh, Humans changed their tune about that eventually.

*The Fade working as Elf afterlife for non-Andrasten Elves isn't canon but it's implied just in little details that make me think this is how it works now. It's a system that makes sense. All Dalish 'gods' mentioned are canon, and the kind of Spirits I've linked to them match the description of what they're considered god of. How you behave and who you align yourself with in life as an Elf, dictates how you serve in the Fade in death. Solas has spirit friends he knows from before the Veil, and they work with him--in his loyalty mission 'All New Faded for Her', you see one of his spirit friends, she speaks in Dalish, has no Vallislin, like 'Your Trainer' has no Vallislin, I take this to mean they work with Solas/he removed his friend's Vallislin when she joined his cause to take down the Evanuris, binding her to him/serving the idea of Fen'Harel in the Fade.

*The Tevinter Imperium is literally just a Human Evanuris.

*Markus Pentaghast is the current ruler of Nevarra, and Radonis is the name of the current reigning head of the Tevinter Imperium, since his name is a bit more rare, and would tip Mister Aclassi off that the Inquisition has been asked to pick political buddies with either Tevinter or Nevarra, it goes without saying. In game, when Josie proposes the idea to the Inquisitor, she recommends siding with Tevinter since it is an older power that will likely still stand in the future, as opposed to the dwindling, questionable strength of Nevarra. You can ask if it'll bother Cassandra, since she's literally a Pentaghast and Josie will tell you the Lady Seeker could give absolutely zero craps.

*if it's been a minute since you've played, Tonio's workshop is in the stone room on the corner of the wall, directly above the Requisition's office, and then the Chargers I've placed in that stone room that branches off the attic of the Tavern, where in game there's just a broken bed with an axe sticking out of the foot board.

*Iron Bull dialogue in game reveals Krem sews winged nugs--Bull asks Cassandra if they can borrow a catapult to launch them
*If you play as female Trevelyan, Dorian reveals that you're distant cousins and the
Trevelyan line descends from Tevinter.

*Barnabus is the merchant you can go to complete 'Heraldry from a Herald' in Val
Royeaux. *cough cough*

*Skyhold has cats running around according to Cole's 'weird behavior' where he has
the cats dance and play for the Cook to see and laugh at. So, Anya has some kitty
friends!

*Maevaris is mentioned in DA:I in a War Table mission "A friend in the Qunaris", you
get from Dorian. Maevaris is addressing the Magisterium about the Venatori and
wants them further denounced and acted against in Tevinter, Dorian suggests the
Inquisition support her in that endeavor.

*Options for Denham's trial are execution, Conscription, Exile to the Sea of Ash, and
being handed over to the Templars for them to punish. I combined the last two--
handing him over, and letting them decide to exile him.

*Just a fun trivia thing--I'm not talented or patient enough to do so, but all of
Maryden's dialogue in game is in Iambic Pentameter.

*Grim uses the sign for 'sweet' to describe Krem's baby picture.
Daddy Issues Part 2

Chapter Summary

Disclaimer: We cover a lot of loyalty and side missions here, so any dialogue taken from in-game to use here belongs 100% to DA:I, writers, producers, etc. I own none of it! If I did, Krem would be romanceable and we wouldn't be here now would we?

Wrapping up Solas reveal, Ellie has a spelling test and gets Dorian's loyalty quest, and the Qun has one or two demands.
We're handling all the major daddy issues.

Chapter Notes

Here we go! Thank you so much for reading, and all the lovely Kudos and comments! I hope you enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It was warm, when she woke. A body on either side of her…one laying directly on top—the smell of coconut oil and mustard and puppy dander, which somehow made a perfume she so loved. Her sweet girls. She wasn’t sure how long she slept, but her girls had just slipped into bed with her, Sera snoring against her ear, Ellie’s face pressed into her neck to shield her eyes from the orange-red glow of firelight against the darkness, and Anya was a comforting weight across their legs. Oh, she hazily remembered their return, Ellie's at least. Krem had seen her safely back and she roused Marehis gently, had brought her dinner she scarfed down, topped off with cookies they had saved for her. She had been ravenous, and still so tired, Ellie must have taken care of whatever dishes she'd left empty.

She would not be falling back to sleep tonight, but that was alright. She needed this—a moment of peace and quiet and comfort. She carefully carded a hand through Ellie’s hair. She had missed her terribly—she thought her child had found her wanting, had lost faith in her ability to keep her safe after Haven’s fall. That she resented her. And all along- ugh! She could not believe—

She could not believe she had not seen anything more questionable about Solas’s lack of a past. She should have realized he- just- she should have known! And she definitely should have realized Ellie was avoiding him! She had seen her open enthusiasm at the prospect of spending time with Marehis evaporate the very moment Marehis made mention of Solas.

What he tried to do to Sera! Oh!

She felt- she felt foolish and used and she would be requiring everyone that wanted to come within even a mile of her children to have a severely good reason, and an elaborate background check. She would want to lay eyes on their parents, their birth certificate, they would have to be able to point to the village they grew up in on a damn map—name that village! Have three childhood friends as reference!

That wasn’t all entirely plausible, not for everyone. But Cole could verify their identities at least. While he hadn't done so right out of the gate with Solas, that was merely because he did not realize he should say anything. He explained as much when apologizing for her hurt. It wasn’t until they brought Solas so heavily into question themselves, delved down the right path of
thinking, that the Spirit realized they needed to know they were working with Fen- oh she wanted
to cry. Wanted her own mother, because- she had trusted him! She had loved him, trusted that man
with her heart and her body—trusted him with her girls! And he had betrayed them.

“Mami?”
Oh! Oh she could kick herself if the motion wouldn’t risk unsettling Anya or hurting the
girl’s on either side. She’d begun to cry, quietly but of course Ellie was roused by Marehis’s tears
falling off the Elf woman’s jaw onto the girl’s cheek.

“Da’vehnan, shhh, everything’s alright. Go back to sleep-“
The girl hugged her tighter, “I’m sorry you’re sad, mami. I’m so sorry about all of this-“
“It is none of it your fault-“
Oh she did not like that she could feel Ellie’s chin quivering against her neck. “B-but I-
I’m the one who got all stupid and matchmakery- it was none of my business, I shouldn’t have-“
“Shh, no, sweet girl- you- I assure you-“ Marehis sighed. “Your teasing did little to prompt
our relationship—we had already been interested in one another.”

“So…are you and pa- um. Are you guys broken up?”
Were they? It was somewhat implied when your lover revealed themselves an ancient
being you’d been taught to avoid, hate, and fear the whole of your life, who was now responsible
for several horrific acts of terrorism. “Right now we are certainly taking a break.” She could not
abide the man at the moment. But neither…she was not certain just how she could trust him ever
again. But she was not about to- part of her wanted to march down into the dungeons and toss him
right into the dungeon hole, but she wasn’t about to rip away someone Ellie loved. Too…she hated
it but still, she loved him. Perhaps that was what made her hate hurt. It would be up to Ellie
entirely, just how the Inquisition moved forward with Solas, and if her child still wanted some
semblance of a relationship with the man she considered a father-figure…well Marehis wasn’t
certain how to handle that, there was a part of her that knew there was a level it would be unjust to
keep her from that, but it was so dangerous, she- she- she couldn't trust him!

“I’m sorry about baldy,” Sera mumbled in her ear, her arms around Marehis’s waist
holding her more tightly, “You wan’ me to punch him?”

“Sera’s very jealous I let Cremisius deck Solas.”
That almost sent the woman teasing, but then she remembered, her remorse fresh, “It…it
did not hurt you, when the Lieutenant punched Solas, did it?” she was grateful when Ellie shook
her head ‘no’, “Da’vehnan, I am so sorry—I should have been more mindful of your bond in my
interrogation-“ oh she could have done so much worse than fear and a bit of vertigo.

“It was an accident—you didn’t know. And it um…it wasn’t like he was doing it on
purpose or anything.” Marehis did have to concede that that much was true. Ugh. He…really did
love this girl. Still, it ached that she had inflicted such discomfort and fear upon Ellie, even
unintentionally. “Plus, I mean, it was an interrogation—you had to do what you had to do to get
answers.”

Oh. She was- she was so ashamed. In the moment, she’d been so angry with him, so hurt
that yes, even as he was still speaking truth, even as he’d been nothing short of forthright since they
woke him, she’d- she just- he had not cared! Had not given a single care for this girl when they
first met, and what was more, he’d been trusted to care for her! They had relied on him to keep her
alive in those first few days—after the Breach initially opened and after their first assault on the
thing. Once upon a time, Solas would have let this girl die from her Mark if it meant it would
transfer to him, let her be executed for his crimes while he pursued his madman’s scheme to bring
down the veil. And while that had changed, coming to the realization that she had trusted this man
in those days was a harsh blow.

It was still early, they did not need to be up for hours yet, for the debriefing…and a bit
more questioning. Of Sera, and Marehis was not allowing such a thing to happen without the girl
being prepared. Ellie put up no qualms with sleeping further, when Marehis said she should rest
more, it took no more than a few minutes for the girl to drift off again. Oh, she must be so tired.
Sera reached out to brush the girl’s hair back from her face, pressed a kiss to her temple before
looking to Anya—the pup was awake enough and when Marehis and Sera climbed out of bed, Anya curled up next to Ellie to keep her warm.

Marehis took up one of their blankets and took Sera by the hand, to lead her out onto the balcony across from the bed, they could seat themselves behind the fireplace, stay warm as they talked and it gave them privacy. They sat with their backs against the wall and Marehis draped the blanket over their shoulders and took a moment to collect her thoughts.

“What’s up Mare? You know I’m not all Elf-religioni. Um, you okay though?”

“I am.” Her religion was somehow the same as she’d been taught, and completely different at the same time, their gods were real...they just weren’t gods. Eternity in the Fade was not wholly appealing to her, and she was...she might speak with Cassandra and Ellie, she was sincerely considering dedicating herself to the Maker. But that was not what mattered right now. “Sera, Solas has confessed to something you should be made aware of.”

Apparently, as Elves were all once magical, they were all born with some natural affinity for it. According to Solas, any Elf could nurture their magical state, and if they were not already a born mage, they could certainly become such. He had since verified this with others he’d met in his time since he woke. And more recently, with Sera. Without her knowledge, and certainly without her permission. The poor girl was wide eyed and speechless as Marehis carefully explained the magic Solas had sensed in her, that her training with him had been his subtle way of influencing her to nurture the talent she didn’t know she had, and ultimately that she truly had cast, of her own power, against a demon attempting to attack Ellie. That her ability to power Ellie’s Mark so greatly was because of her own magic. Oh her poor girl, she was trembling and it certainly wasn’t because of the chill.

“Da’vehnan-“

“S-s-so w-what? Am I some kind of freak half-mage or some shite? I’m not gonna start having Fade dreams am I?” Sera let out a startled sound, brought her fists to her temples like a vise, “That asshole asked if I was Fade dreaming when I was freaking out about what happened, and he- he friggin! He was disappointed—he friggin wanted me to have been! He-!”

“Shhh shhh shh, emma'asha,” Marehis cooed, pulling the girl close and rubbing her back, “you are alright. Cole has confirmed you have not er, fully awakened your own magic. If you ever choose to do so, it will be just that—a choice.”

Her chin quivered but she nodded, “K-kay. It’s no offence to Inky—I don’t mean that Mages is freaks but I just- frig!”

“Of course, da’len, he should not have manipulated you into such practice. I- I am so sorry.”

"S'not your fault," Sera sniffled. Wasn't it? She felt a fool for letting this man into her life, trusting him with Ellie, Sera. And she had! Implicitly! One of the few reasons she felt a modicum of certainty for their safety when they traveled on to the Oasis without her or Cassandra was the fact that she was leaving them with him! “Thanks for giving me a heads up. Um. I’m gonna be questioned?”

“Not as if you’ve done something wrong, da’vehnan,” if Solas had somehow managed to get Sera into trouble, Marehis certainly wouldn’t be leading her into questioning, she’d be managing her escape. “I swear you are not in any sort of trouble, the Iron Bull will have questions, as will Leliana merely about your experience with Solas in the time he was attempting to er-“

“Turn me into a friggin mage! That tears it—if I see baldy, I’m swinging!”

No one would stop her. To make an informed decision was one thing—to be manipulated unwittingly into a life altering situation? He had this delusion that all Elvehnan had once been magical, and Sera having such an open access to her own magic already meant she would take to it swiftly and it would feel so natural to her that she would not dislike the change, it would feel right, and she would be glad of it, thrive. It did not matter if such a thing changed her life permanently for the better—it was Sera’s life!

Oh! She just-! She was so infuriated with him!

Sera calmed, enough to sniffle out that she was done, wanted to snuggle with ‘Inky’. They
rose to return to bed, Marehis wrapping an arm around Sera’s shoulders.

“What if he’s watching us in the Fade?” Sera asked in fright, that sent Marehis’s eyes opening wide, heart pounding because yes that would certainly be very disconcerting.

She could kill him.

“Let’s…just try to get some sleep, da’vehnan.”

“Kay.”

Sera curled up against the younger girl and Marehis climbed into bed to hold her, oh her poor da’assan. Her sweet girl—how could he?! She wasn’t going to focus on that now—she was going to hold this girl and help her through however she was feeling about all of this, comfort her and make certain she slept pleasantly. Hmm, she may need a bit of a trim if she wished to maintain her current style—oh she had the most precious ears! They were adorable, and the girl had grown to be less self-conscious of them. Sometimes when they hugged or laid down like this Marehis would press kisses to her ears the way her own mother did and they would flutter just adorably she almost couldn’t stand it! It made her wish the use of time magic herself so she might find her girls when they were little ones—rescue them from orphanhood, she would certainly do a much more suitable job than that horrible Emmauld woman or those so called ‘caretakers’ in Ellie’s orphanage. Human toddlers were adorable in Marehis’s experience, and Sera! Precious blue-eyed sweet-eared baby she must have been!

They did rest a while longer. and the kitchens delivered breakfast for them. It was a relief to be back in a sort of familiar schedule, something normal. Their schedules did not always allow for the morning ritual of prayer and breakfast, but they did try their hardest. Cassandra needed to touch base with her people this morning—Barris and Fletcher, to ensure the Templars were well in hand so the rest of her morning was free and clear for her to spend in debriefs and meetings—she was likewise protective of Sera, did not wish the girl to face Leliana and the Iron Bull’s questioning without the Seeker there to either guide or offer support, and too, to be there for Ellie. So Marehis would do her best to keep up routine, get back into the schedule they’d lost with Haven—breakfast and prayer.

When Marehis was just finishing getting their meals set before the fireplace, Sera was already sitting up, petting Anya to rouse her and the pup yipped and bound off the bed to sit patiently at her food bowl and wait for them to join her before attacking its contents.

“Inky sweets, s’time for breakfast.” Ellie stirred slightly, but merely rolled over and settled back into dozing, “Ink?” The girl mumbled unintelligibly in response, almost fully asleep again.

Marehis sat on the edge of the bed and brushed back her hair so she could rest her hand on her forehead. “Da’vehnan? Are you feeling unwell?” Her skin felt warm from sleep, but not feverish.

“M’okay, just tired,” Ellie sighed, and after a moment she sat up, rubbing sleep from her eyes, “Sorry, I’m up.”

“We could always send word, delay things if you need more rest,” Marehis offered.

Ellie shook her head, “This is important, and then there’s the meeting, and I still have lessons later—I’m okay.”

“Breakfast is ready, sweet girl,” Marehis said, “there’s coffee.”

Ellie nodded, and while it didn’t pull a smile from her, she did rise and they sat before the fireplace. They sat in silence, and for Marehis…she just meditated, she supposed. She was not inclined to offer up prayer to the Evanuris, not as she understood the system now. Perhaps in an emergency—if she was truly in need of a Spirit. Breakfast with her loved ones was no such situation. She held Sera and Ellie’s hands while the girls prayed to themselves…mindful now, to take Ellie’s Marked hand in her own. Apparently- Solas had finally seen fit to mention that Sera’s tendency to hold Ellie’s Marked hand came from her underlying magic being attracted to it—her Mark could sense someone more compatible laying hands on it, the action distracted it from attacking Ellie’s magic.

Marehis released all hold of her hand when breakfast was underway, it was either that or feed the girl. Which she had no objections to, but it was a touch too close to babying her, Ellie
might find it embarrassing—she needed her Marked hand for eating as her other hand was occupied with holding a report she was poring over, only setting it aside to break out her parchment pad and take down notes, absentmindedly taking bites of food every now and again. Sera fretted she wasn’t eating enough and took up the task of maneuvering a piece of toast in Ellie’s eyeline, “Inky! Open up!”

Her distracted, “Wh-?” was cut off by a squeaked, “mf!” as the Elf girl unceremoniously shoved toast in her mouth. She did take pause to take a few bites of the slice properly before setting it on her plate, downing a few gulps of coffee before resuming her work.

“What’re you readin for? You’re super ready for your test today,” Sera said.

“Just brushing up before my advisor meeting, there’s a few things I want Josie to consider me adding to my letter for picking sides,” she said distractedly, jotting something else down before she stretched and rose to her feet, going to brush her teeth, and the moment her mistress was up, Anya was gulping up any left overs on Ellie’s plate, licking it clean.

Ellie did seem reticent when it came to donning her armor again, and Marehis was more than glad to offer her an excuse to put it off a moment more, pulling the girl into her lap to wet and comb her hair, style it a bit, just another thing she had sorely missed. She had wanted desperately to indulge the girl, offer some level of pampering and comfort when she was so poorly as they traveled, when she was taking up the task of making Skyhold a livable space for the Inquisition. Oh she could throttle-! It- it didn’t matter now, because now she could do as much. The weekend was upon them and Ellie would have no obligations, neither would Sera. Perhaps the girls could be persuaded to spend their downtime together, have a weekend in, Cassandra could join them even. She wanted to catch up—Ellie had made mention of Sera and something about Miss Lace and Miss Dagna that sounded like…well Ellie hadn’t been certain, and she hadn’t wanted to gossip, but Lace and Sera had invited the Inquisition’s anarchist to dinner, and neither had told the other about it and they seemed rather flustered about the whole affair. Oh! She felt like she’d missed out on so much! Had her child taken a further step with her relationship with her boyfriend? Was her dear da’assan forming a Dwarven Harem? What was happening in their beautiful little lives? She wanted all the details! Well, maybe not all of the details, but anything her girls wanted to share with her, she’d gladly listen to—it had gotten to the point she missed their voices, if they took up the task of reading the Chant aloud to her she would not grow bored.

The elder Mister Aclassi had apparently been a busy man—Abby arrived when they called for their trays to be cleared away, bearing a few sets of clothing meant for sleep, some meant for practice or casual wear, which seemed rather a relief to the girl. And oh, he’d done such lovely work—Ellie was able to slip her shirt on comfortably, and where it cinched at the waist so it did not billow out to be in the way or get caught on anything and the hem could fall at her hips, cinches at her wrists that gave her the option to have open sleeves or close them for training made the casual clothing seem somehow both more comfortable, and more dressy. He’d embroidered a little greeting—Ciao, bella into the inside of her sleeves, it was altogether very cute, and her sweet girl seemed relieved to be able to go the day without donning her armor.

She did still carry her staff though. That was a bit of a change Cassandra had taken note of with Marehis—Ellie did not set foot outside her quarters without her staff during working hours, it was symbolic of her station, and too it would likely work as a sign—she did not carry it in her down time, so if someone had need of her in an Inquisitor capacity, they would know she was readily available, working, when they saw her staff. Marehis took point, flanking her as she led them from her quarters to meet in the War Room, Anya close at her side. She expected Sera would be walking alongside her, she usually sought constant contact with the girl when they were together, but the Elf girl hung back, walked alongside Marehis, speaking very quietly, “Ink wasn’t hungry again.” She…she’d eaten breakfast-? “That’s four days in a row now that we know of—Cole said she barely ate when he was with her, her first day on the job. A few bites at breakfast, and then she was off to Commander Dreamy’s office and then just nothing the rest of the day. She didn’t eat until like, almost three in the afternoon the next day when I was with her and that was only cause I um—Cole was so worried about her and all the parents are busy right
now so he came to me, and it got me worried, but she’s been eatin’ good in bigger groups, so I had Cole get Bull to come and say he just wanted to see Kremmy’s da arrive safe, and Krem put in his report that Anya ate most of her breakfast yesterday. Sounded like an accident but the same thing went down this morning.”

But- oh. Oh goodness. It had, hadn’t it? Damn it all- how long had this been happening? She’d been keeping careful watch of the girl but she hadn’t had a meal with her after they arrived in Skyhold, not until the day she became Inquisitor. She’d been eating well enough then hadn’t she? What- “Has Cole offered any enlightenment on the issue?” Marehis asked quietly.

Sera sighed. “Only that it isn’t like before where she was hungry, and her brainy stuff made her ignore it when bad pish happens—she’s just flat out doesn’t have an appetite. She ate good at dinner last night though so it- I don’t know what the frig.”

Marehis wrapped an arm around Sera’s shoulders oh—anyone worth their godhood bless this girl. All of the ‘parents’ may have been busy but Cole had done well to go to Sera, she made Marehis proud beyond words with her care of Ellie. “Thank you, da’vehnan.”

“Hola, Lady Josie!” Ellie offered up cheerfully. It almost startled Marehis to realize it was the most energized she’d heard the girl sound today. She would see if the girl would be agreeable to an appointment with Elan or Adan today, she must be coming down with something. There was a bug going around as they came up on the beginning of spring, it was still working its way through Skyhold.

The Ambassador looked up from her work, rising from her seat, “Oh Eleanor, you look absolutely precious, mjia!” Lady Josephine sounded delighted as she had the girl turnabout for her, “Mister Aclassi did a marvelous job.”

“Oh-huh,” the girl nodded, smiling for the Antivan woman. “I really love it.”

“Come,” Lady Montilyet said, coming around her desk and offering her hand to Ellie, “Everyone is congregated in the War Room.”

The War Room was rather full, of people and voices overlapping one another, not arguing just lots of conversations happening at once, reviewing what they had learned from Solas, speculating on his future, though that silenced when they entered—replaced with-

“Eleanor,” Cassandra greeted warmly.

“Oh sweetheart-“ Cullen started, running a hand over his face as he leaned back in his chair and then pitched forward to rise to his feet.

“Official meeting,” Leliana reminded in singsong.

“Do not care” Cullen returned as he steadily approached, ”my girl looks absolutely precious.”

“Papi!” Ellie laughingly complained as he swept her up in a hug, blushing at his compliment.

“You do!” he insisted as he set her down. “Doesn’t she?” Goodness, he looked prepared to fight any who would deny it.

“Very pretty,” Leliana agreed, amused.

“Ellie is beautiful!” Cole offered up enthusiastically before cheerfully realizing, “Oh! She is wearing different clothes!”


“Mister Aclassi has done splendid work, you look lovely,” Cassandra agreed.

“Thanks,” Ellie replied shyly.

The War Table was clear, chairs placed around it which seated the Iron Bull, Cassandra, Cullen, Leliana, and surprisingly enough, even Cole was sitting in a chair-

“It is not as fun as sitting with someone else, but it makes Lady Josie happy that I can sit still!” the Spirit announced.

“I’d let you sit with me buddy, but we’re about to get into an important meeting,” the Iron Bull apologized.

“Meeting schmeeting,” Sera declared it, and Cole smiled brightly as the Elf girl squeezed in to share the chair with him, wrapping the Spirit up in a hug, “I got you Cuddly!”
Oh, it was sweet how that sent the boy gasping in delighted surprise, “Instead of Creepy!” Sera blanched at that, “Shite, I haven’t called you that in like, weeks and weeks I don’t think but um, I am real sor-“

“It is okay, it takes time to get used to something strange, a Spirit in Human form is very strange. And you have always been very afraid of the Fade. And I used to always poof places and that can be very startling. Now you like me—and my floppy hat!”

“Love you and your floppy hat!”

Ellie took a seat at Cole and Sera’s sides, patting the empty chair next to her for Marehis to sit, with the door secured behind them and guards in the hall she supposed it would be alright, she was a part of this meeting after all though…well she certainly hadn’t wished to speak it- she felt so ashamed, but Cassandra had been kind enough to sit down with her before she finally returned to Ellie yesterday, talk through everything with her so that the Seeker could speak on her behalf—offer up everything that they knew now about Solas.

“Thank you all for coming,” Leliana said, starting them off. “Understand that everything we speak of in this room is absolutely confidential for the moment, and may only be spoken of with those present—save of course, Lieutenant Aclassi as he has appropriate security clearance and has helped us greatly in these matters.”

“Oh cool,” the Qunari sounded like he hadn’t expected as much, but had been full well planning on cluing his Lieutenant in, “I dig permission—could’a had me begging for forgiveness though, Red,” the Iron Bull winked.

The Spymaster smirked, moving right along, “Seeker Pentaghast, if you would.”

They all sat in silence as Cassandra reported all they had learned of Solas’s identity—his past. They started with his crimes, that he was responsible for Corypheus having the Orb, that he handed it over knowing full well what the monster intended it for. Though that came also with…the explanation of his further reaching past. That he had been born in a time Elvehnan had never encountered Humans or Dwarves or Qunari—the Iron Bull seemed to find that almost understandable, Solas’s earlier lack of remorse over the loss of Human life, it was…fairly similar to the Qun’s mentality that Qunari were meant for world domination, and they had Ages to get used to not being the only sort of people on the planet. That Solas woke to find strange people on his world, that he would see their brothers and sisters so very casual about murdering them and find no fault in his own decisions to aid in that—it was the only thing between him and returning the world to what he thought ‘rights’. Oh, Ellie looked like she might cry when she learned of Mythal’s demise, the life of their child. All seemed sympathetic, but…well grief could take many dangerous forms but sealing away their murderers along with the majority of the Elvehnan population was a bit extreme. Ellie blanched and Sera shrieked at the knowledge that Solas created the Fade—that the Orb he used to fulfill that act was the one Corypheus now had, Solas’s hand in the Conclave.

That he had originally only endeavored to be close to the Mark, take it on himself before pursing the Orb and complete his plans, when he gave himself up to the Inquisition.

“Oh,” was Ellie’s hollow response, oh- she looked desolate but there was something like acceptance, like she’d expected as much. “I see—“

“But it changed!” Cole offered up rapid fire, urgently, “It isn’t- he wasn’t using you or pretending! Ellie he changed! He loves you, so so much and you know that!”

“It’s okay Cole—“

“Da’vehnan, he does. Do…do not doubt that sweet girl,” Marehis offered, raising a hand to rest on Ellie’s shoulder. It was truth, and she could not abide how much hurt being allowed to think otherwise would put in the girl, “yes, his motives were selfish and bent on something horrible to begin with, but he has…moved on from that. He came to love you before he even bonded to you da’len—such a bond could not form unless he felt as such. Elvehnan would find themselves bound to their loved ones, connected through their magic like,” she had to think on it, how he described it, “magic would come to naturally form a relationship that mirrors it’s master, but he did not expect he could do so with a Human.”

“Cuddly—you got all sealed up and made Spirity because of Solas’s Dread Wolf shite?”
Sera asked.

“I did. He did not mean to—he sealed away the Evanuris and all its followers, Mythal was a member so those in her house were sent away. There were Elvehnan that were not enslaved, not technically, they escaped and lived in hiding, they, and anyone Solas and Mythal lifted their Vallisilins from, they remained in the waking world.”

“Why wolf?” Ellie asked, still staring into space as she thought.

“Eleanor?” Leliana questioned.

“Dread Wolf—why wolf?” Ellie elaborated.

“He was a shepherd, da’len. In his youth, when Mythal found promise in him—it was because of his affinity with wolves. How your magic,” Marehis cleared her throat, but Ellie nodded that it was alright to say as much out loud, she supposed by now all present knew well of it, “how your magic has the ability to help you find things of import—treasure and the like. Solas’s magic gave him the ability to communicate with them, control them even—steer them away from the flock. Da’len?” the last word shot out in alarm as her panic spiked, oh goodness, she’d gone ashen!

“S-Solas can—” she shook her head as if to clear it.

“Eleanor?” Cassandra asked, concerned.

“Inky,” Sera whined, “you’re scaring me.”

“Sorry,” Ellie hurriedly offered, clearing her throat as she collected her thoughts, took a few deep breaths. “W-when um…I was trying to find you—catch up, after Haven? Um. Well I wasn’t exactly—” she swallowed and then restarted. “I was hurt, bad. I was in so much pain, concussed, I could barely breathe, let alone think straight. I couldn’t see where I was going most of the time—I mean the notes I took were the last coherent thing I did, I was just blindly stumbling, barely able to take in the next breath, that was just about where all my focus went—breathing and taking the next step forward. The only reason I got so close to camp was because I…there were wolves. They kept howling and my magic just kept telling me to follow, that I could trust it, that they would lead me back to safety. Except it wasn’t my magic exactly—it was pretty toast after the Rift, but it was something familiar like—”

“Solas’s magic,” Cole confirmed, nodding. “Solas wasn’t comatose, he was in the Fade—looking for you. The wolves saw you as easy prey, but he stopped them, took control of their pack and used them to guide you, kept you safe as you made your way to the Inquisition’s camp.”

He…he had not mentioned as much, in his interrogation. Of course they had no reason to think he had anything to do with Ellie’s miraculous recovery from Haven’s fall, so it had not been in their line of questioning. But he…he’d truly gone to such lengths?

Cullen huffed softly. “Well. I certainly accredited her survival to be the mercy of a god—I almost feel rude for assuming it was the Maker.”

“Shite,” Sera breathed. “Inky’d be toast…double toast if Solas wasn’t er, who he ruddy is.”

“Double?” Ellie asked distractedly, though she turned her attention to Sera.

“Uhh…you know how ‘sandra said Elvehblahblah used to be immortal mage pricks? Solas thinks all today-Elves have mage-shite. And uh, apparently he was being all sneaky with his training, when I was leaning to help you with Rifts and the Breach? Trying to uh…make me magey. And it um, kind of worked, a little bit. Friggin just about killed me, scared the crap out of me, and I want to be pissed as hell—I was, but…” But?

“W-wait, Solas- he tried—” Ellie blanched, “Without even asking you?!”

“I didn’t have a clue he was doin’ it,” Sera said, “End of the day, I can’t be too mad at it—Ink, you’d be dead. When you fell into the mine in the Oasis, Solas had been doin’ all this shite to wake up my magical potential or whatever and I think it…when I reached you I was too close to shoot, my bow was holstered so I could carry your staff to you anyway, and friggin, this Rage demon was just,” Sera pinched her index finger and thumb together, “this close to bashing your head in. And I just…panicked. Wanted with everything to save you. Next thing I know—bam! Icey pish is blasting out of my hands, and Ragey is frozen solid.”

Ellie’s chin quivered, “Sera…”
“Whatever it was didn’t stick though. It was just the once and Solas was all mopey that I didn’t start Fade dreaming afterward.”
“I’m so sorry he tried to do that to you—“
“I’m not, not really. I mean it’s ruddy fucked up. But it saved you—“
“I’m not-! It’s your life, Sera, Solas manipulating you into doing something like becoming a mage against your will is so not worth- that was so stupid, I can’t believe h- he would try to do that to you without your knowledge!”
“Inky, I’m pissed at him too, I’m just sayin’ it worked out, kay? I love you, I en’t gonna be mad that I was able to protect you.”
Ellie sighed, frustrated. Then she reached for Sera’s hands, the older girl gladly obliging, and Ellie asked, “You’re okay now, right? You haven’t been Fade dreaming or feeling badly? You said it just about k-killed you?”
“Blistered up my hands real bad is all, just scared me bad but Solas um, he made sure I healed up okay.”
“Good!” Ellie insisted, rubbing the back of Sera’s hands with her thumbs, “Since he’s the one that got you all magicky in the first place!” and less angrily, sincere, “Thank you for saving me Ser’.”
Sera launched herself into Ellie’s lap, hugging her, “Inky! Of course I saved you—you’re friggin’! You’re littler’n me, s’my job to look out for you!” she said, pressing an enthusiastic kiss to Ellie’s temple.
Oh, Marehis loved them, her heart ached it felt so full, a soothing ache after all that had happened in the past few days. Solas may have betrayed her trust, stolen some level of security she felt in the decision to send Ellie and Sera on to the Oasis without her—but Sera certainly hadn’t betrayed any such trust. In spite of everything, she could trust her girls to look out for one another.
“Ser’,” the Iron Bull spoke up, “we have a few questions about your time training with Solas.”
She certainly could trust her girls to look after one another, Ellie’s hold on the elder girl was protective as she leveled the Qunari a fearsome look as she defended, “Sera didn’t do anything wrong!”
“Imekari-“
“You wanna go?!“
The Iron Bull rumbled out a hearty laugh at that, “Simmer down boss girl, it’s all good—not interrogating her,” he assured, “she can stay in your lap even, no one’s blaming Sera for anything, we just want to get a feel for what exactly Solas was playing at, help look for warning signs in case he took it into his head to train anyone else like that.”
“He used to—not from scratch but he used to help less powerful mages waken their magic further,” Cole informed them, “Solas has found magic in many of the Elvehnan he has met since, when he can get close enough with them—he found it in Marehis too, but when he saw how much raw potential Sera has for Magic, she seemed like a good first attempt at trying to help an Elf cut off from their magic, it would not be quite so difficult considering she- S- Sera won’t like—“
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“You aren’t a mage but you could be, if you pursued it. Magic is in you, active and alive, you use it all of the time and you don’t even realize it. Whenever you’re experimenting or excited about something, your magic is awake and helping you, it prompts inspiration and keeps you safe from harm when usually, for other people, things would go awry.”
“Like the friggin’ bees,” Sera breathed in disbelief.
“Like the friggin’ bees,” Cole confirmed sagely, nodding.
“We all have some connection to magic?” Marehis asked.
“Yes. It is why Ellie’s Mark is distracted by you when you hold her hand. Your magic is quieter than Sera’s, it would take more training, more time than it would for her to fully activate her magic, but it is there. I can hear it.” it…she did wonder if it was something she should consider coming to understand, if it would help her protect Ellie— “It already does!” Cole chirped excitedly,
“Oh, your magic loves Ellie just as much as you do, it is where your intuition comes from—it’s always watching for things under the surface you might not see and listening to Ellie’s own magic.”

That…was reassuring. It had been frightening, at first, when Solas made such claims—that there was magic even in her, that there was something she thought of as foreign to her, living inside of her throughout her entire life. But that it was such a piece of herself, that it had been assisting her all this time was comforting.

Sera detailed Solas’s practices, having her meditate, questions on her training with Seeker Pentaghast, how learning to suppress magic and the Breach had given her the tools to perform the reversal—he called it powering Ellie’s Mark, and it was to a degree, but it was encouraging her magic to amplify. He’d had her start with activating one of the Dalis-Elvehnan artifacts. Something he admitted to fashioning; his followers had scattered them. In Solas’s interrogation, he confessed that he had intended to use them to measure the veil, find thin places, survey the Fade from this side to find the ideal spot to bring down the veil, find where it was weakest, where he could get a firm grasp on it and cast it aside, the world be damned. They had genuinely served now, to discover Rifts, but oh did it make her blood boil that Solas had led Ellie to so eagerly helped him, and his original intent was to have her let him find these artifacts and activate them for his ulterior motives.

“So, it doesn’t sound like the guy was just adding another member to a secret mage army,” the Iron Bull concluded, Leliana nodded.

“Sera,” Cassandra said, sounding grieved, “I am remorseful that our training gave Solas such a foothold. I do understand if you are disinterested-“

“It en’t your fault ‘sandra, you and me trainin’s a right blast! And I’m…glad I can do things like power Inky’s Mark, according to baldy and all his bullshit, it gets so boosty when I help because I’m Elf-blahblah. What’s happened is happened, Inky’s safe, Breach is closed, and Wolf boy is behind bars. So, win win sorta-win.”

“So, Inquisitor, have you any questions?” Leliana asked.

Ellie took a breath and seemed to consider it. “I would like to take some time and think everything over before um, doling out a judgement.”

“Of course,” Leliana agreed.

“Certainly, Ellie, take all the time you need,” Cullen said, “we understand this is difficult.”

“Don’t sweat it Boss girl. When you come to a decision, you and me will sit down and hash out what, if any of this, I can send back to the Ben-Hessrath,” the Iron Bull said, promising, “they won’t hear a peep from be about any of this mess until you give the go-ahead.”

Ellie nodded, “Thanks, the Iron Bull,” and then to her Advisors, “I want to speak with Solas myself.”

All of the adults around the table fell silent and Marehis had never understood the phrase ‘bite your tongue’ more—she secured the muscle between her molars to physically restrain herself from the immediate refusal that rose to her lips. She did not like that the man was even in the same vicinity as the girl at this point, to let him be in the same room as her? Lay his eyes upon this sweet girl, hear her voice—speak in her direction—

She was admittedly sore given the circumstances. She loved that man such that she considered- she thought- marriage had certainly seemed a prospect! She had been more than prepared to give him forever before she learned just which plane of existence he was planning to take the sentiment on. Now it felt like they had divorced, and she was keeping their girls! He couldn’t have them! He couldn’t look at them, he couldn’t think about them—he could not speak their names! He didn’t deserve to!

Ellie wasn’t just a girl she was Inquisitor but! Marehis was her mami! That- that should count for something! She should be able to put her foot down shouldn’t she?

Unfortunately, no. That wasn’t right, or fair. But why did she have to be the right and fair one?! ‘Surprise I’m an Elven god’ was certainly not right or fair!
“Certainly, Eleanor,” Leliana agreed, hesitantly, and she did offer Marehis a mildly apologetic look. “Let us know when you feel you are prepared, and we can make arrangements.”

Ellie nodded. “Thank you. So…crazy meeting debriefing us on the Dread Wolf is over?” she asked, and when her advisors nodded. “Cool beans—emergency advisor meeting please! How is talking about international affairs suddenly my easy thing today?” she wondered, sighing as she rested her head against the table top for a moment. “Two-minute table power nap and then, important emergency meeting.”

Marehis reached out to stroke the girl’s hair, “You can go and rest a while if you need to da’vehnan. You can always meet later.”

“Nope,” Ellie raised a fadelit index finger to declare “—Inquisitoring first, then studenting, and then a big nap,” she turned her head to look at Marehis, “Can we stay in tonight mami? The kitchens can send things, or we can order from the Tavern.”

That did sound absolutely perfect, especially if the girl was truly looking forward to dining. She seemed to have forgotten she had a dinner date with Madam de Fer, but worst case scenario, Marehis would pull the woman aside and apologize, and Vivienne was understanding, would agree if Ellie was so weary she forgot a commitment she’d made, she certainly did need to take a break from it all. “Certainly da’len.”

Ellie nodded and then her forehead was against the table again, resting her eyes while the War Room was returned to rights—the Iron Bull rested a hand on the back of her neck as he passed, oh he was sweet to her, able to massage her neck and shoulders with one great hand for a few seconds before bending over—Sera squeaked as she laid flat against the table and Marehis had to scoot back ever so to avoid his horns as he leaned down to press a kiss to the back of her head, “Have a good one boss-girl.”

“Thanks,” she said as the Qunari rose up, patting her on the head before leaving them. Ellie’s unmarked hand reached out to tap at Marehis’s knee, “Can everyone be invited to dinner in my room?”

Oh, that struck her as- it- it was almost something reminiscent of Marehis asking her own mother if she could have permission to go to the market with her friends, or invite them for a sleepover…though in her youth, Marehis had been something of a brat, always asked a bit more whiningly because she was certain her mother would say no, find some such chore for her to do. Did this girl think she needed permission? It just…it was nice, it made her feel as if she really was—

“You are really her mother.” Cole was taking his leave—walking, he did so more and more lately, he was likely planning to walk with Sera—but he stopped to wrap his arms around Marehis’s shoulders, the brim of his hat resting atop her head as he whispered very quietly.

Sweet boy. “Certainly, da’vehnan,” Marehis said, “that sounds wonderful.”

“I know everyone you want to invite, Ellie! Sera is nervous to leave you and Marehis today, but she will have fun!” Cole announced excitedly, “Sera we can go invite everyone! Ellie doesn’t want to cancel her plans with Vivienne, just include everyone, be more comfy than formal, we can tell her—“

Sera gasped and for a moment Marehis worried Sera did not appreciate Cole announcing her ‘mind stuff’ but, “Cole! Friggin can I watch and you poof to Viv?!”

“And let you be the one to invite her—if it is timed right-“

“Double startle!“

“Don’t be too mean,” Ellie offered up quietly.

Sera giggled, laying against Ellie’s back and hugging her around the waist, pressing a big kiss to the younger girl’s cheek before she promised, “You got it Ink!”

“Do you need anything before I step out, sweet girl?” Marehis checked once Cullen finished his bit of flirtation that was bickering with Cassandra over just where each piece that marked their War Table map, at least it bought Ellie a few more moments rest. She rubbed her back as she offered, “I could bring you back a snack, or are you thirsty at all?”

Ellie shook her head as she sat up, leaning back to look up at Marehis, oh her girl had such pretty eyes. “I’m okay, but thanks mami.”
Marehis kissed her upturned forehead and offered polite farewell to the advisors, entrusting Ellie’s potions to Seeker Pentaghast.

Well, she was certainly going to try to get something on that girl’s stomach, at this point she would see her eat her daily caloric intake in chocolate if she would just do so! But first, she was going to Adan, she just- this was ridiculous! It was more than time to put her foot down. She gave Ellie space when the girl had needed her! She had known something was amiss, and she let self-doubt corrupt her intuition, let her relationship with Solas cloud her judgement—she should have seen it, she had seen it and written it off as pure nonsense that she’d misunderstood when Ellie so clearly deflected offers of being together the very instant Solas became involved. She needed to listen to her child, and her instincts—she was seeing warning signs and she was going to make an appointment with Adan, he knew Ellie’s medical history best, and the most familiar of their healers and she wanted to consult with him now.

“—watch your consistency there, love,” the Healer was ordering…was she interrupting something? Oh, Mister Stitches was with Healer Adan when Marehis entered the Apothecary, but the elder Aclassi was also present—the man was perched on the exam table, and the Healers were working over a cauldron of something purple and bubbling. “Marehis—” he greeted though he looked around her as if to make certain she wasn’t heralding a medical emergency, still he asked, “—is the Herald—”

“Ellie isn’t with me,” she assured. “I do apologize, I didn’t mean to interrupt,” she said, looking to Mister Aclassi.

“Oh goodness, it is fine,” the Tevinter man assured warmly, waving her concern off, “I can—”

“You will sit there until this potion cools—” Adan commanded, “we’ll want to observe your first dosing to make certain you’re not allergic to Spirulina.”

“Krem’ll murder us if something I give you makes you sick again,” Stitches seconded the notion.

“What did you need? We’re nearly finished here,” Adan said as he turned put out the flame under the cauldron to let it cool.

“I wished to consult with you about Ellie, just a check in since we’re really getting settled—please, I have time, we can speak once you’ve finished,” Marehis insisted, Cole knew to get her if Ellie’s meeting was going to be ending any time soon.

“Oh! It’s good you stopped by—the Charger’s own supplies of potions ingredients is back in order, and I just finished Ellie’s um…” he did not wish to divulge her medical business in front of Mister Aclassi, of course.

“Ahh, but three sets of hands bottling a month’s worth of potion will certainly get the job done quicker,” Adan picked up on what his partner was getting at, “—you uh, need anything, Mister Aclassi, while you wait?”

The tailor shook his head, “Not at all, thank you.”

The Healers left the exam room and Marehis…wasn’t exactly certain what to do, if she should step out or strike up conversation-

“Elan’s just finishing up in the other room,” Stitches said, “this isn’t ready to bottle yet,” he jerked his head in the direction of their cauldron.

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Oh, Mister Aclassi had already dropped from the exam table to grab a chair, “Please, have a seat—I do apologize for the wait,” he offered before resuming his own place on the table.

“Thank you—it isn’t a problem, I just needed to speak with Healer Adan while I have the time. I am usually with Ellie throughout the day, she’s otherwise occupied at the moment, I thought I should take the opportunity while it was available.”

“Oh, Mister Aclassi nodded, though he did venture, “the Inquisition was rather set back with potions ingredients? The Chargers as well?”

“Haven’s loss was hard on all fronts,” Marehis nodded. Oh- she supposed he was worried,
she would be if Cremisius were her child…in point of fact she had been worried for him when she heard of shortages, “The Chargers were still able to supply um, appropriate potions to their members.”

“Oh, oh truly?” Mister Aclassi sounded relieved, albeit uncertain as that conflicted with what they’d just been discussing-

“This is not knowledge for public consumption, but I usually keep Ellie’s potions on my person,” Marehis shared, “when she realized a certain charger would be without potion, she substituted with her own.”

Mister Aclassi looked taken aback, eyes misting over as he swallowed and said, “Ahh, Maker bless her—I paid compliment to the Seeker and Commander the other day, but you and I haven’t had much opportunity to speak—you have quite the incredible daughter.”

“Thank you—you may call me Tonio, if you wish.”

“Marehis,” she confirmed likewise. “He is exactly the kind, compassionate young man I would wish for her. And he’s an incredible friend to Sera.”

That sparked a bit of realization in him, “Ahh, I wondered if that might be the case, I didn’t wish to assume-“

Marehis smiled, “She is not biologically mine, of course,” the girl was only a scant seven years younger than her, nineteen going on twenty soon, “but yes, I consider her my da’len.”

“Well then you’ve been blessed with two incredible daughters.” Oh she certainly had, hadn’t she? “I do appreciate the friend she has been to my son.”

“He’s been a wonderful friend to Sera,” he was always looking after her, protective of the girl Ellie loved so much. “Oh! Ellie’s new clothing is wonderful, she looks absolutely precious and it fits so well, she’s so much more comfortable, being out of armor.” Did Sera need new clothing? She didn’t have much, and Sol- they- it had been taken under consideration, between herself and certain parties, that they should provide her more clothing. For comfort sake, and too, the girl was dating, she might like...there was something pure and fun and exciting to put on something special for a date, dress up a bit.

The tailor blushed, seemed bashful to accept compliment, “Oh, thank you. I am pleased to work with her,” he said. Then, “You’re feeling better today, I hope? I am…uncertain what exactly has been going on, you had some sort of business to attend to?” he asked, “I do not wish to be nosey just- you seemed…seem upset.”

“I...let someone into my girls lives, who turned out to be...not exactly who we thought he was. We are still parceling out everything, deciding how to move forward.”

“Let into their lives?”

“His was? My erm,” she cleared her throat, “boyfriend.” Quite the term for a man who was born literal Ages ago...quite possibly before they started counting ‘Ages’ oh would one of the gods just strike her down already? How-? How did such circumstance occur?!?

Tonio nodded, seeming sympathetic, “I am sorry to hear that. Broken bones tend to heal faster than broken hearts,” he mused, and Marehis found herself nodding, it certainly felt like it might work that way. “I...when Cremisius was young, there was a family friend. He endeared himself to my wife and myself, there were many years I considered him my best friend. Ultimately he revealed himself as little more than a leech of sorts, a predator—he did not have the pure, helpful intentions he pretended to have for my child, and I allowed myself to be blind to every indication that said something was wrong. That you see this person for who they are now is to be commended, that he was someone so close to you and you were willing to hold him accountable takes integrity and strength.”

“I couldn’t not question him when Ellie brought her concerns to me.”

“Then you handled it far better than I—it was not until I almost allowed things to go too far, came far too close to losing my own child, that I did the right thing.”

“This person tried to kill Cremisius?” Marehis asked aghast. Solas had not given a care if
Ellie lived or died in those first days of their acquaintance, and the mistakes he made before they met had brought her so much harm but he’d never hurt her himself, would never dream of bringing her harm as things stood now. He…when Cole interrupted them, with warning that they were causing Ellie to be panicked and ill like she was experiencing Solas’s punishment the man had been wildly apologetic, remorseful to a point she thought he might cry for having hurt her further still. He let Marehis scream and shout in frustration, blame him until her voice was hoarse, and then he quietly wondered if she needed anything for her screamed sore throat—and then he requested- he requested the Seeker or Commander could come, and suppress his magic for the remainder of their meeting so it could not reach out to Ellie in distress no matter what they did to him. But the man was forthcoming and Marehis, oh the very thought she’d unintentionally laid hands upon Ellie made her stomach roll, she could not abide it. They spent the remainder of questioning seated and civil, with Cassandra and Cullen alternating shifts to stand by in case of emergency.

Which was good of them, though Cullen was rather…he could not stand Solas’s betrayal, it left him raw that the man had been given a position in Ellie’s life as something of a father figure, and he’d inflicted such a horrible blight on the role. He’d made a comment in passing that perhaps the man deserved to be made Tranquil—and it was a possibility for judgement that would be on the table; the man had more than used his Magic for unprecedentedly horrific acts, people were Tranquil for far far less than sealing away unquantifiable amounts of people into a man-made realm of magic, and following it up with handing over a weapon of mass destruction to a mad man, with the intent to power it through Human sacrifice that led to the death of thousand. And that was only the first charge of many the Inquisition could bring against him.

“That would likely sever the bond,” Solas said to Cullen’s suggestion, “I’m hardly in a position to stop you, Ser,” he cleared his throat. “If…if Ellie…if something happens. If I am to be executed, should I have any say in it, I would ask you make me Tranquil first. It would be a far gentler experience for her, magically, to lose connection to me, than feeling my death in the bond before it is lost. That- it is horrific to fe- please. Do not allow her that experience.”

“You were bonded to Mythal?” Marehis asked quietly.

He looked absolutely haggared, like even now he felt ill at the memory, “Yes. I felt them die.”

Mister Aclassi shook his head, and Marehis flinched, startled when his voice brought her back from her thoughts, “No, no it- I set my son on a life path that would have made him unbearably miserable, demoralized to the point…he would have preferred not living. That is what I regret more than anything, that my child was suffering, and I ignored every sign that something was wrong. He was somehow bone weary exhausted and yet he constantly needed to be doing something if he were awake, always on the move to occupy his time, his mind with anything other than circumstance. He lost his appetite, his interests in anything that he once enjoyed. He withdrew entirely from his life, pressed on until he could not take anymore. I am so grateful to see how far he’s come, but there are so many things I wish I had done differently.”

Marehis’s mind almost felt like it came to a violent halt.

“I apologize, I’m a bit um, loopy, forgive my rambling I haven’t eaten yet today,” the Tevinter man apologized and at Marehis’s startled look assured, “I worked rather late, I only just woke, and my appointment today required I fast.”

“If you are free for lunch,” Marehis ventured, “I know Ellie would be delighted if you joined us, Cremisius as well if he is free.” Regardless of what was happening, it was clear…while breakfast was touch and go, eating with so many witnesses, or perhaps it was being distracted with being surrounded by so many friends, Ellie reportedly ate better. With her mami and…well, for all intents and purposes, Sera was something of a sister to the girl, was another story—they were family, and that was wonderful, and that came with the comfort that she could be herself, there was no pressure for her to behave as if she were fine when she wasn’t. It was heart wrenching that it finally clicked for her, that her child had been withdrawn and tired, almost numb seeming all morning, only able to conjure up a smile out of force, to appear happy, normal in front of Lady
Montilyet. Her current self was…possibly suffering worsening depression. Elgar—ugh! She could not believe she had not realized it! It was staring her in the face!

“Certainly,” Mister Aclassi said.

“Excellent, she’ll be so glad,” Marehis hoped so at least. They would have a pleasant lunch, and she would consider how to move forward with her suspicions.

“Marehis…if you do not mind me saying as much—I may not know the exact details of your situation, but you cannot blame yourself for another’s deceit. When your child came to you and expressed concerns…not everyone would have listened to question about someone they are so close to, someone they wish to trust. It is more often easier to believe a pack of beautiful lies than an ugly truth. Do not beat yourself up for believing him. You know the truth now, you can use that to move forward however you need.”

“I do not know how I’ll ever forgive him.”

“I’ve found forgiveness is something best done for ourselves. I…could be angry, upset with my ex wife, and the man she has chosen to marry—the man I once considered my best friend until they manipulated such a horrible situation for our family and Cremisius. But without those mistakes, my son would not be living the life he does now. I would not be here, getting to bear witness to it, live it with him. And if Cremisius’s mother ever…ever saw the error of her ways, was willing to be the sort of mother my son deserves, I would not keep her from him—oh. Oh my dear lady, I apologize, I did not mean to—” the man was already up off the table, coming and offering a handkerchief which somehow made it worse, damn that man and his handkerchiefs!

Marehis sucked in a sniffling breath, red faced with embarrassment, her throat was too tight to speak past and she was crying, practically sobbing, she was making a scene of herself it was ridiculous. But Mister Aclassi was kind, patient, she accepted his offered handkerchief and the man patted her on the shoulder, crouched so he was more level with her and waited until she calmed to offer a quiet, sympathetic, “It is alright. It is alright to be hurt and to grieve.”

She swallowed, “It has just been very trying.”

“Understandably so.”

“I’m so angry with him, and I’m so scared how all of this will affect my girls.”

“Well, they have quite the spectacular support system it seems. The Iron Bull has been amazing with my Cremisius and he loves your girls, and from what I have heard and seen, Sera and Ellie have Cassandra, Cullen. Cole is a wonderful friend, his…existence is strange, but we are blessed by it I believe, he adores Ellie and Sera. My son loves them, would gladly be there for them as they struggle I believe. I am rather new, but I am rather a good listener.”

“Did you make this?” Marehis asked, waving her cloth armed hand.

“That is curtesy of Miss Lace’s ma, but I can make handkerchiefs, yes.”

“Do you- I would certainly appreciate it if you could-“

“I was planning to make up matching ones for Ellie’s nicer clothing, and I’ve plenty of material at hand to produce a good amount of plain ones to go around if you wish. I can have them to you this evening- ah, do not even consider paying me. The materials are already covered, the labor is minimal to say the least—easily covered when one combines the ‘friends and family’ and ‘broken heart’ discounts.”

It was ridiculous, but his light jesting did make her laugh, oh she felt silly. Foolish and embarrassed for having gotten so very worked up in front of someone who was practically a stranger. But he was a kind stranger, Krem was certainly his son. “Thank you,” Marehis said as she wiped at her eyes, returning his handkerchief to him. She was burning hers. Anything that man had given her, it felt strange to be almost grateful that a great many of her personal belongings had perished in Haven’s blaze. She’d half a mind to burn her clothing as well, she did not need much…perhaps when Mister Aclassi was finished securing Ellie’s wardrobe, she would see to obtaining her own.

“Think nothing of it my dear,” he waved her thanks off.

“Oi—we en’t done with you yet Aclassi, Maker’s balls I knew two of you would be a handful,” Stitches complained as the Healers returned, “you’re just as bad as your son—up on the
exam table old man and take your potion!” the Healer ordered, ladling out a vial full of purplish potion to dose the man and see if he reacted negatively.

The Tevinter man did as instructed, and Healer Adan handed Marehis a bag full of fresh potion for Ellie, oh maybe that would get a genuine smile out of her girl. “Thank you,” she said.

“We’re almost done here,” Adan said quietly, clearing his throat, “you can uh, wash your face if you wish, before returning to uh, the little’un.”

Marehis did quickly wash up, cleaning her face in the Healer’s water basin. Mister Aclassi was not allergic to whatever ‘Spirulina’ was, thank goodness, and the Tevinter man was sent on his way, and Mister Stitches took his leave to rejoin his crew.

“Would you be free to speak with Ellie if she needs it, later?” Marehis asked Adan once they were alone.

“Of course. You didn’t come here to ask that,” the man reasoned.

“I am concerned. At first I wrote it off as Ellie coming down with the bug that’s been going around but um…after thinking it over some more I wonder if perhaps she could be experiencing a worsening of her depression.”

Adan blew out a breath, considering. “That wouldn’t be out of the realm of the norm. People experience fluctuations in their depression all of the time, but after Haven, and her hormones getting fucked all to hell yo-yoed by ‘no monthlies’ and then ‘very sudden monthly’ her chemistry set’s probably a little haywire at the moment. What exactly has been concerning you?”

Adan listened carefully as Marehis detailed her worries, and when she was done he said, “Keep a close eye on her. Try talking to her about it and see if she’ll swing by—we’re overdue a checkup anyway, she should come in, I could just schedule her in and we could touch base as normal, she might be more forthcoming that way.”

Marehis nodded, good heavens, yes it had been a while since they had a mental health checkup. “That sounds good.”

“We might need to look at an adjustment to her potions regimen, and she’s confiding in you still?”

Oh. “We…with everything that has happened I’m afraid we haven’t had a chance to catch up—but we will make up for that this weekend.”

“I’ll try to get on her schedule for Monday then—take the weekend to assess and touch base. Medicine has its place but sometimes all we need is a break, time to rest and vent and have our mami’s tell us everything’s going to be alright.”

That was certainly what was going to happen. For both of her girl’s, Haven had been so frightening and Sera had gone through so much since the Oasis, and Marehis did not wish to speak out of turn with the Healer but she was working over how best to bring it up to Sera. The girl had an out-in-out panic attack when it seemed Ellie had been lost, and she’d shared with Marehis before, that she once struggled with as much when she lived under the roof of Lady Emmauld. She felt horribly she hadn’t risen to be of comfort to the girl, but she was so grateful to Cassandra, for knowing immediately what to do to help her. She would see to it—try to catch Cassandra today, or tonight, the woman would clear her weekend for their girls.

Marehis made it back with a few minutes to spare, the Advisors were still talking and there was the sound of quill against parchment,

“How do you spell sufficient?” Ellie’s voice asked.

“How do you think it is spelled my lady?” Cassandra returned.

Ellie sighed tiredly but after a beat, “S-u-f-f-i-c-i-e-n-t?”

Marehis jumped when Cullen gave off a loud cracking clap, “Excellent job sweetheart-!”

“Cullen do calm yourself,” Cassandra offered amusedly.

“She killed it, Cassandra! I still spell it ‘suf-f-i-s-h-ient’ on a good day,” the Commander said.

“It’s a hard word!” Ellie offered in his defense, “Trade is weird! Dorian says it’s all of the other languages horrible bastard child.” There was one last long scratch as Ellie finished her writing. “Okay. I’m really really sorry this needed redone but-“
“Oh mija it is fine,” Lady Montilyet assured. “this is important and if we can have any influence on Tevinter’s treatment of their slaves now we should do so—there is no telling what influence we may have in the long term.”

“If we make ourselves something the Imperium comes to rely on for their outer nations relations…gosh I dunno I just feel like we have to do something if we can. And you’re right about them being the more long-lasting power—no offense-“

“Do not trouble yourself,” Cassandra said, “I know Nevarra’s troubles believe you me. This was the wisest move to procure a strong ally and with time we may be in a position to bring reform to an unjust system.”

Ellie sighed with relief. “Cool. Okay, I’m comfortable with this draft if you guys are.”

“It is excellent,” Leliana assured, and while there was no verbal response from the Seeker or Commander, Lady Montilyet said,

“Splendid! If you would sign off on that then, I’ll work up the formal missive and have it on your desk this afternoon, Inquisitor, you’ll need only sign it.”

“You’re amazing and I love you—anyone else have anything to add?” Ellie proposed.

Cullen cleared his throat, “Only the addition that I love you, with the whole of my heart,” and then, ever the professional, “Inquisitor.”

Oh that made the girl giggle, and it was wonderful. “Back at you, Commander! Meeting adjourned! Do you think mami is back yet?”

Marehis pushed open the War Room door, “I am, da’vehn— you are ready to depart?” she asked as the girl came to her side and she pulled her close, “I hope you do not mind it but Mister Aclassi would join us for lunch.”

“Oh!” Ellie nodded, “Papa or Cremisius?”

“Both, if the Lieutenant is free.”

“That sounds good—great!” Ellie said, “Anyone else up for joining us?”

“I’ve business to attend, but thank you,” Leliana apologized, excusing herself.

“I’m taking lunch in my office, I’ve some things I would like to see to before dinner, but gracias mija,” Lady Montilyet said, pressing a kiss to the girl’s temple as she passed to take her leave.

Cullen and Cassandra looked to each other, and then nodded, “Certainly,” the Seeker said, “we would love to join you.”

They convened in Cabot’s and Marehis was relieved to see Ellie eating so well—she did offer down the occasional bite to Anya but the pup was sweet and always after food, one would think they never fed her! But it was no more than what she would normally give away and the Lieutenant did join them, and his plate bore a large amount of fried potatoes from which Ellie stole bites—was habit enough he knew to order extra. And at Cullen’s suggestion Mister Aclassi showed off an image of the Lieutenant as a babe that was wholly heart melting, oh! He’d been simply precious—Cassandra had outright made a high-pitched borderline cooing sound she immediately slapped a hand over her mouth to stop as she tried and failed to hide just how very cute she found it and the Commander’s “It’s very cool, isn’t it?” sounded loaded and sent Cassandra pink as she cleared her throat and hastily passed the picture along to Marehis as the Nevarran woman offered, “It is. Very cool,” and then after a beat, “I hate you.”

Ellie’s brow furrowed in concern, “Mami?”

“Don’t fret it Ellie,” Cullen reassured her, “your mami is a complicated woman and she is very much in love with me.”

“I will cast you from the battlements,” Cassandra assured him.

“Oh that my final gaze upon this world would be your beautiful face, I would truly be blessed.”

“I- do shut up!”

Krem whistled, “Hear that El? They’re just fine—’sandra’s already saying ‘I do’. ”

The Seeker huffed, indignant before she threatened, “Cremisius I will triple your laps around the walls this afternoon I swear it.”
Ellie giggled, leaning into her boyfriend as she whispered something Marehis was certain was not meant for her ears, that if the Tevinter worked up a nice sweat he should seek her out after his workout, she may well be done with her test by then and it would be reward for her spelling accomplishments.

“I’ll smell,” he whispered back, confused.
Her lips were against his ear then, assuring, “Uh-huh, good.”
Krem blushed and cleared his throat, “You know what, you two? Cutest couple—just think about it Seeker, your cheekbones, Cullen’s eyes—“
“Laps and pushups,” the Seeker threatened.
The boy grinned, “Sweet.”
“Cremisius, do cease giving them so much grief child,” Tonio reprimanded.
Krem offered a rueful smile, “Sorry papa—sorry Cassandra, Cullen.”
“Oh, sorry to me? Whatever for?” Cullen asked, clearly pleased with the boy’s teasing—if he knew it derived from Ellie’s encouragement that she apparently liked her suitor sweaty then he may not feel as such but, “You know what, I’ve always liked you Cremisius, Ellie—you’re dating a fine young man!”
Marehis offered Cassandra a sympathetic smile that sent the woman huffing in amusement and shaking her head at the Commander’s antics.

All things considered…Marehis delivered Ellie to the library after lunch with a wish of good luck, and once Dorian had given Marehis an awkward hug out of sympathy she was sure, she ascended to the Rookery. From there, she could keep watch but remain scarce for the girl so she would not be nervous while testing, could do so with focus and er…in case she did receive a visit from the Lieutenant after she was done.

Perhaps Solas’s being in the dungeons was something of a blessing for him as the man was spared any embarrassment when Ellie led the Lieutenant into the lower staircase that led from the rotunda below, up to the library, the girl squeezing when it sounded like perhaps the young man lifted her and um. Well. It sounded like a bit more than kissing but not…not too tawdry that she would intervene—purely out of decency sake, of course. If they truly wished to be…close, she would certainly give them space to safely do so in the privacy of Ellie’s quarters. As it stood, she let them have their time, and when Ellie questioned where Marehis had gone, she descended the stairs to join her sweet girl, and the bashful Mister Aclassi who was adjusting the collar of his tunic as he cleared his throat,

“Hey Mare! Just uh, checkin’ in on our resident spelling wiz,” uh-huh. Oh they were precious. “before cleaning up to meet papa,” he said, and Ellie looked up to Marehis as she announced,

“I aced it!” she said, offering up folded parchment for Marehis’s perusal, Dorian’s elegant script congratulations and a large ‘A’ at the top. Oh!
“Oh da’vehnan! I’m so proud of you!” Marehis enthused, sweeping the girl up in a hug, Oh it was so nice to see her seeming proud of herself, “Thanks mami!”
It was rather fortunate the young people were done acquainting themselves in the stairwell, Mother Giselle was coming up the stairs, passing by with a polite, “Excuse me,” as their trio pressed against the wall to let her by.

“You must show everyone when we have dinner tonight,” Marehis said, “What is next, da’len? Your schedule is clear now.”
“Nap time?” she asked hopefully.
“Certainly,” Marehis agreed.
“Have fun with Papa’classi,” Ellie wished her boyfriend who pressed a kiss to her forehead, and Marehis got a kiss to the cheek from the Lieutenant, sweet man.
“Get some rest,” he said, and when they entered the rotunda he opted to walk the walls to his father’s shop.

Though their move forward was halted when Dorian’s voice rose—Marehis had heard Mother Giselle speaking with him but she had not been paying much attention, though now there
was not much choice in the matter, even Ellie could hear the Tevinter man shouting,

“I’m being clucked at by a hen, evidently!”

“Don’t play the fool with me, young man!”

“If I wanted to play the fool, I could be rather more convincing, I assure you!”

Ellie was already turning back, Marehis following behind as the girl dashed up the stairs to see what the fuss was about, smooth things over more likely—Dorian did not always get along with Mother Giselle, he took some measure of thrill from riling the woman up but in this case it sounded like she’d done as much of him.

“Your glib tongue does you no credit,” Mother Giselle’s voice echoed down the stairs, and as they reached the top,

“You’d be surprised what credit my tongue gets me, your Reverence,” the Tevinter snapped back and Marehis cleared her throat, getting his attention that not only was he saying such things to a Chantry Mother but there were tender ears listening. “Ellie, Marehis.”

“What’s going on here?” Ellie asked neutrally.

Mother Giselle’s mouth worked for a moment, so Dorian supplied, “The Revered mother is expressing concern about my ‘undue influence’ over you.”

“You know,” Ellie said, “I am a bit envious of your glorious mustache, I’ve been thinking of ordering one of those fake ones for costumes? We could match.” Dorian quietly snorted, smile twitching at his lips.

“Quite,” Mother Giselle said awkwardly, “It is just concern, your worship you must know how this looks…”

Oh. Oh Ellie crossed her arms over her chest, took up a pose that forewarned the oncoming ‘tude her girl was about to take as she listed just what it looked like to her, “You’re yelling—in a library—at my best friend, and interrupting my plans for a nap. A nap I’ve been looking forward to all day mind, so could you please be more vague about your concern?” Marehis had to bite her lip, she was not certain if she might start smiling or offer up reprimand for the girl’s tone. Though she was albeit tempted to let it stand—Maerhis was perturbed with the interruption in their plans to nap as well.

“You might need to spell it out, my dear,” Dorian informed the Mother, getting Ellie to smile a bit—a spelling test of sorts for the Orlesian woman.

“This man is of Tevinter. His presence at your side, the rumors alone—“

“You’re interrupting my nap, to be xenophobic, toward Tevinters. Cremisius is from Tevinter—are you concerned of my every connection to the Imperium?”

“Oh my lady, I do not disapprove of- I am aware that not everyone from the Imperium is the same. But insofar as your connections to the Altus of…ill repute, Ellie, the rumors…”

“I’d like to hear what these rumors are exactly.”

The Mother looked wholly awkward then, abashed as she said, “I…could not repeat them, your worship.”

That seemed to pique Ellie’s interest, “Repeat them. So you’ve shared them before?” she asked pointedly.

“I…I mean no disrespect, Inquisitor, only to ask after this man’s intentions,” Mother Giselle said, “if you feel he is without ulterior motive, then I humbly beg forgiveness of you both.”

“Well, that’s something,” Dorian supposed as the woman took her leave.

“She didn’t get to you, did she?” Ellie worried, resting her unmarked hand on the man’s forearm.

“No, it takes more than thinly veiled accusations to get to me,” he assured, patting her hand, “it is your good opinion I care about, not hers. Do rumors bother you?”

“Only in that I don’t like people speaking badly of you when they don’t even know you,” Ellie said, looking stricken at the thought.

Dorian sighed, pulling Ellie in for a hug that seemed more natural for the Tevinter Mage, “Don’t fret it, I quite assure you I’ve made a point of having something of a bad reputation,” he promised cheerily, dropping a kiss to her hair, “I’m your ‘best friend’ am I?”
“Uh-huh! So if people want to be mean at you I have to fight them—and I’m very tired right now but I’ll do it!”

“Go on and get some rest then,” Dorian said, rubbing her arms as he pulled way, “I’ll see you at dinner.”

Ellie nodded, popping up on her toes to kiss him on the cheek, “If not, it’s because I’ve officially mastered magical invisibility.”

“Da’vehnah, you’re already imbued with so much Fade magic it’s concerning, you’re absolutely not to try developing spells all your own,” Marehis teasingly forbade it as she pulled the girl into her side and waved her farewell to Dorian…though the thought did spike a bit of fear, if the girl did turn invisible and they could not find her…surely Cole could find her. They would not need to turn to Solas.

She’d do her best to keep her eye, and maybe a hand on her child at all times, just to be safe.

On both of her children, oof!

“Friggin, about time!” Sera complained as she collided with Marehis the moment they set foot into the great hall, “Took ruddy forever!”

“Sorry Ser, I didn’t know you were waiting for us,” Ellie apologized.

“You should have joined us da’assan,” Marehis said as she wrapped her free arm around the Elf girl, heading for Ellie’s quarters, “you could have seen our young Inquisitor squaring off with Mother Giselle.”

“What?!” Sera asked, caught between surprise that such a thing happened, and disappointed she’d missed it.

“I got a little mouthy,” Ellie admitted, though, “She was being mean to Dorian!”

“Good job Ink, no one gets to be mean to Dori. Cept for me because I’m only friendy mean. Or Bull, being sexy mean. Or Viv being friendly-sexy mean!”

It was such a relief to be in for the day, the door secured behind them and no more obligations laying ahead of them—Cole was a blessed being, he heard a passing thought Marehis had as she mentally planned just how to tackle the weekend, and gone to the Iron Bull with it. The Inquisition had commandeered a large, heavy tub that required the Iron Bull lugging it to and fro, but he’d little complaint—it was a bit of exercise and Ellie had only endeavored to find them something that size due to considering the Iron Bull may want to indulge in a soak himself. When they arrived to Ellie’s quarters, the tub was waiting with warm, bubbly water.

“Would you care for a bath, sweet girls?” Marehis asked.

“Frick yeah!” Sera had a growing exuberance for, “Bath time, Ink!”

Ellie giggled when the older girl swooped her up in a hug and kissed her on the cheek before the Elf girl challenged, “Last one in’s a rotten egg!”

Of course, challenge or no, Sera proceeded to help the younger girl undress because her ‘new duds’ had so many ‘tie-y things’, it was sweet. She couldn’t abide Ellie hurting, was making certain she didn’t agitate her shoulder or lingering aches in her back—being slammed against a trebuchet by a monster who, Solas had confirmed to be nearly twice the height of the Iron Bull, had not exactly been a gentle experience.

But soaking in a tub of bubbly bathwater with Sera was surprisingly gentle, even as the Elf girl did make play, tickling at Ellie’s ribs with her toes and occasionally splashing in the suds, and seeing how great a mass of bubbly foam they could pile atop their heads. Marehis kept watch and simply enjoyed getting to see them unwind, sitting alongside the tub she got to help with their washing, Madam de Fer had taken the task of caring for Ellie’s hair so Marehis wrapped it up securely to keep it from getting wet, and her bathing provided opportunity for the woman to massage Elf Root oil into Ellie’s back, her shoulder to assist with its rehabilitation. And Marehis got to scrub Sera’s hair good—the girl had gotten better at bathing herself, but oh her sweet girl loved having her scalp scratched and massaged, it was almost reminiscent of petting Anya. Out of the bath, of course. Anya liked playing in puddles, with an affinity for muddy ones, and then she was very distraught at being placed in a body of clean water, plied with soap—she currently sat by
the fire panting contentedly...silently judging the bath-takers Marehis was certain.

All cleaned up, changing into their pajamas, Sera offered up a cloth steaming with Embrium and Elf Root Elan insisted upon at least once daily for Ellie to breathe. The two insisted Marehis indulge herself in a good long soak, Ellie plying a bit of pyro magic to the tub to warm it back up while Sera hugged the woman around the waist and whispered that she’d be awake and watching out—Ellie could nap and Marehis could relax. It was silly—not Sera, she was sweet—but Marehis realized then guards would be on the lookout outside of Ellie’s quarters, and Anya was a diligent guard dog. But she’d been on edge, watching like she were waiting for some sort of attack. She supposed she was just- sealing the Breach, having that thing gone and no longer looming overhead as an ever-present doom for them to face, it had been the most relieved, relaxed she’d felt in so long. She was so proud of Ellie, of all of her companions for their efforts, and looking forward to celebrating with her and then the night ended in devastation. Being so relaxed now, some part of her worried if she let her guard down for even a moment, Corypheus would appear.

He did, after a fashion. Marehis was half dozing in the bath, warm water soothing every ache until she was practically asleep—and then suddenly she was very, very awake because Solas was at her side, she shot up in the bath gasping as she crossed her arms over her chest- just- it wasn’t anything he hadn’t seen but he didn’t have the right to see the girls in or over her heart! And just how the hell was he-

He raised his hands in surrender, hurriedly explaining, “I am in my cell, you are asleep—I am waking you because I am about to wake Ellie from a nightmare, she- it will be through my magic, she won’t have to see me but she is so frightened and Sera is endeavoring to wake her but she doesn’t realize it is something she can wake up from.”

Marehis woke with a gasp, jumping up out of the bath and snatching up her robe and catching herself when she slipped, wet feet and stone floors were not a graceful mix, but if Solas’s appearance in the- it can’t have been the Fade- had he always the ability to communicate with her in her sleep? That wasn't important- oh she hated him and his confusing Elf-Magery-Fade business! Agh! If Solas appearing hadn't been jarring enough, Ellie's heart hammering in her chest was horrifying.

“Mare!” Sera called out with some relief, the girl was sitting up, distressed.

“I know,” Marehis breathed out, tying her robe closed as she went to the bed and Ellie shot up, gasping in harsh gulps of air she used to scream, and Marehis climbed onto the bed and grasped Ellie's hands in her own, "Da'vehnan, da'vehnan it's alright, you're safe!"

"Corypheus he-! You have to run- you have to run mami, S-Sera please! He'll hurt you!"

Ellie sobbed out frantic, trying to push Marehis away, Anya whined as she padded up to lick at Ellie's cheek, which seemed to wake the girl up, and Marehis felt tears welling up in her eyes, oh her poor girls! Sera was already crying, pulling Ellie in tight and Marehis wrapped her arms around them and holding them close.

“Sweet girl, you were only dreaming,” Marehis promised.

"C-c-corypheus w-was- Haven was burning and everyone was dead and he had me, mami," the girl squeaked out the word around a sob, voice tight as she buried her face against Marehis's neck.

"You're safe Ellie, we are all safe, and alive, we are in Skyhold,” Marehis hoped to ground her.

"Inky, everything's okay, you're okay yeah?” Sera tried to reassure, “Cor-sniff-a-piss is a dumb, greasy git and I bet you crushed him in the snow, squashed him flat!” and then the Elf girl let out a startled shriek, horrified when that only made Ellie's sobbing harder, before the girl cried out,

"N-no, I just b-buried Haven. It’s g-g-gone and it’s all my fault!"

What? “Da'vehnan, shush, no, sweetheart you didn’t - it- it was Corypheus who destroyed Haven, you rescued it’s people—the Chantry or the Marquis who owned the land can always reclaim and rebuild, sweet girl. You cannot rebuild the people you saved with your actions.”

But Ellie shook her head, “It was stupid! I’m so stupid! We knew the Elder One was a
threat, knew he was behind the Breach—I didn’t- I didn’t even think, I should have thought! We should have tracked him down first and put a stop to him and the Venatori and everyone working for him and- and stopped him before closing the Breach!”

That may have been plausible—if Solas had been forthright. Leliana was an amazing Spymaster but until Corypheus revealed himself, they’d pictured a Human madman, some wrinkly, elderly Mage with an agenda against the world at large for the treatment of his fellow mages. They hadn’t a single lead on just who the Elder One truly was. Though as it stood, perhaps it hadn’t been far off the mark—Solas confirmed Corypheus had been Human, once upon a time—and his crazed ranting at Ellie had revealed he’d some connection to Tevtiner.

“We hadn’t the ability to do such a thing, Ellie. We—you are not the sole mind behind the Inquisition’s decisions, it is an effort of the Advisors as well, their resources and agents. All of that in culmination and we didn’t know where the Elder One was operating from or how many were in his forces—we did not know he would have the ability to descend upon us the very night the Breach was closed—“

“But I should have!—”

“Ellie!” Sera snapped, “You friggin! Little dummy! You’re not stupid, but you’re a dummy—bein’ so hard on yourself! We didn’t know about that Darkspawny shite! And we thought he just had like, a few Venatori, and maybe a couple Red Templar blokes—we got the Mages and we fought all the Red Templars at the fancy Redoubt place. We thought he was some scaredy baby hiding behind a scary monocle!”

Ellie’s despairing quieted, sobbing dissolving into sniffling that turned into little giggles as she wiped at her eyes and pressed her hand to her mouth as if to restrain herself from the correction, but Marehis- oh it was- blessed Sera, Marehis couldn’t help herself, laughter bubbled up in her throat as she offered, “Moniker, da’assan. I think you mean moniker.”

“Whatever the frig, there wasn’t no way we could have known Haven was gonna get blowed up. The shitty thing about you burying Haven is that you was doin’ it and thinking you was gonna bury yourself!”

“It wasn’t- it wasn’t like I was trying to kill myself, Ser’, I just- he was coming after me, if I’d gone into the tunnel with everyone he would have just followed me. So I needed to be at the trebuchet, distract him from everyone escaping, and I needed you guys to help me get there and—“

“Yeah. All of us. So, in your plan, if Cory-face hadn’t had a friggin dragon, if we hadn’t gotten separated, how was that gonna go down? We were all gonna stay and pull the lever together?”

“No! We- you- I dunno. I was kind of making things up as I went along, I…kind of thought we’d um…you guys were getting out of there, it was my plan, and you’re all my responsibility. So.”

She…she thought they would have stood by and—“Da’vehnan!” Marehis reprimanded, “We would never have abandoned you, left you to do such a thing on your own—“

“Well yeah, I know that, so in a way Corypheus was like, super helpful, or his dragon was at least,” Ellie sighed tiredly, “I mean if we hadn’t gotten separated I was um…well I was pretty sure—I’m kind of slippery? And it wouldn’t have been lying, to yell for everyone to run for the mine, I just…wouldn’t have run with you.”

Sl…slippery…had she- had she pulled away when Marehis took hold of her? That was behavior they could not have in future. “Ellie. You are to never work to put yourself out of our protections.”

“Sometimes I have to do dangerous things mami, if I hadn’t stayed behind, Corypheus could have just followed us through the mines, the Inquisition might have gotten wiped out. I had to make sure he couldn’t follow us, someone had to stay back and launch the trebuchet—”

“Cole could’ve—“ Sera argued.

“He gets hurt just like all of us, Sera! Just because he’s a Spirit- he might not be dead-forever dead, but he wouldn’t be— it wouldn’t be the same!”

“He can poof! And his body was ruddy beaten to shit and dead when he got all up in it so-
Pretty sure he could get flattened like a pancake and poof out of the avalanche a-okay or at least alive and we could’ve helped him or whatever—you bounce back from shite but not pancaking!

“Dunno, felt pretty pancaked when I fell into a mine,” Ellie offered up like she was teasing but,

“It isn’t funny! “

“Sera-“

“You can’t just toss your life around like that! Dying wasn’t the answer to saving Haven—“

“It’s- it’s not more important than everyone else’s life, especially not collectively!” Ellie insisted, "Ser’, I get- I get you guys would be sad," devastated. Marehis hadn't been entirely certain she would survive it, she'd felt like she was dying, "but the Breach was sealed and So- um. The Rifts probably could be dealt with by someone able to experiment with Rift Magic enough.”

“So?! You think that’s the only ruddy thing you have to do?! Seal the Breach, seal the Rifts, and what? That’s it?! That’s shite! You’re supposed to grow up, Ellie! You’re supposed to go do any schooling you like, date who you like, marry some lucky guy, gal, or non-binary pal and ruddy! Have a life!” Sera lectured before she yelled “You’re not allowed to die until after I’m dead as a doornail and waiting for your dumb face with the Maker! And probably ‘sandra and Cullen and everyone because you’re gonna live a long-ass time, got it! And I have dibs on your first ghosty hug, that’s just-! Friggin I called dibs so everyone else can suck it!”

“B-b-but I don’t want everyone else to-“

“We’re all living to be ruddy a hundred! We’re all different ages but-

“I’m the littlest!”’ Ellie complained at that.

“Well then marry someone younger than you! Or if you’re dead set on Kremmy-boy, either he gets a few extra years, or you get a few short, and you die at the exact same time. Super old and wrinkly. In bed. S’up to you two if you’re getting up to anything freaky or not.”

“Sera!”

“Yeah, like that but Kremmy-boy. Though- ruddy, ‘Cremisius!’ is a real mouthful to be all scheechy during sex—” well then, this conversation had taken rather a turn, hadn’t it?

“No it isn’t!” and when Sera let out an excited scream at that Ellie turned so red her cheeks nearly matched her hair! “We- I- we haven’t- Cremisius just isn’t a mo- you- shut up!”

Sera was giggly at Ellie’s embarrassment, squeezing the younger girl more tightly, “Awe Inky! I’m only teasin’.” She pulled back, raising a hand to bop Ellie on the nose with an index finger, “You and Kremmy-boy haven’t…?”

“Nope!”

“Oh da’vehn, that is nothing to be embarrassed over,” Marehis assured warmly, brushing back the girl’s hair, “you shouldn’t do anything until you’re ready. You’ve been rather busy, and only just had private quarters of your own, if you ever needed,” Marehis cleared her throat, “time, wished for privacy, you need only let me know—“

“I know it isn’t embarrassing but it’s not exactly the sort of thing I want to advertise to my mami—“

Marehis shrugged, that was understandable, she’d been rather embarrassed when her own mother found out she was um…sexually active. Of course that only happened because the woman—who was supposed to be at the bakers!—had forgotten her coin purse and returned unexpectedly, walked in on them, and Marehis had sworn up and down that was the first time. And it was. She certainly hadn’t lost her virginity in the confines of a fishing canoe some three years prior, no.

“Well, it is understandable you would want privacy just to have a moment to yourself—everyone needs time to decompress, I would have no reason to assume anything of it.” The Lieutenant’s comings and goings would be noted for security purposes of course, but for Ellie’s peace of mind, she wasn’t about to bring that up.

“I guess not,” the girl conceded shyly.

“Da’vehn..I did not realize you felt as such, about Haven? You cannot blame yourself. It was through no fault of your own that Corypheus is a monster, or that he attacked Haven. Sometimes that is the natural thing, it is the easiest course of action, for us to blame ourselves.”
Well, she certainly felt like the pot and the kettle. She…she had no way of knowing Solas’s secretiveness of his past had anything to do with being Ages old and for all intents and purposes, an Elven god. Any pressing to his past made the man seem pained and reticent, uncertain how to speak and so she left it be, thought it was something hard for him to discuss outside the realm of his journeys into the Fade. Now, she understood, it had been just that. Solas…had endured hardship. Heartbreak she could scarcely comprehend surviving herself. Losing…Mythal, their child. Seeking his revenge, vengeance she could understand seeking herself because everything help her, the only thing that kept her dragging in the next breath when she thought Ellie was lost was the thought burning in her brain that she would find that monster, and she would destroy it, leave it in ruin, inflict every ounce of fear and pain upon it that it dared to inflict upon El- she…she’d spiraled, it had admittedly gotten very dark. And too, he thought he was saving his people by locking away the Evanuris. And then when he did, things happened he had not expected, had not intended. Woke to a strange world that seemed broken to him, met with so many things that hadn’t been there when he slept. His past…was something that pained him to speak of. She had not been wrong about that, the rest? There was certainly no way she could have suspected such things were true.

Ellie sighed, “I guess. I just- I all of these things keep happening, the Conclave and Venatori and Time magic and Red Templars and Haven falling, I’m always involved somehow and so many people get hurt and die and I keep- I dunno. I just-”

“Ellie!” Good heavens, Cole gave them a fright! He appeared on Ellie’s bed, hovering crouched just over the mattress, “It’s okay, it is okay! I know who you need—oh, Marehis and Sera are helping I-I think, but I got-“

She was glad she heard the thud of familiar footfall in the corridor leading to Ellie’s room before the door flew open with a bang and, “Imekari!” was roared out like a battle cry before the Iron Bull raced up the stairs, stopping and assessing the room like he were looking for danger, great axe drawn for a fight. He sighed, deflated as he tossed his weapon to rest on the couch that sat alongside the banister, “Cole buddy. You- come on man I ran up so many fuckin’ stairs. Imekari, love you, comin’ in, laying it down, holy shit,” the Qunari complained as he came and Ellie and Sera giggled when the bed heaved violently with his weight cast upon it, as it stood, Cole had to teleport so he was not in the way, standing now at the bedside while Marehis had to be swift to grip the headboard and keep an arm around her girls to keep the three of them from being popped off of the bed.

“Oh, next time I will let you know if it is an emergency or not, I am sorry I made you scared your Imekari was in danger,” Cole apologized.


“Cole said you needed me—need usually means sexually, which uh, wouldn’t be the case, so that leaves fightually.”

“Awe!” Ellie cooed, leaning forward to press a kiss to the Qunari’s forehead, “Thanks for doing the stairs to save me!”

“More like the stairs did me babe. But you’re welcome,” he blew out a breath as he’d finally caught it well enough. “What’cha need?”

“I um, I’m sorry,” Ellie offered, genuinely confused, “I don’t know-“

“Survivor’s guilt!” Cole declared.

Survivor’s guilt?

The Qunari let out a rumbling sound in his chest and he was immediately up, and situation himself so he was facing them, seated in lotus position and holding out his arms, “Imekari. Come ‘ere,” he intoned, and Ellie scooted to be seated in his lap, smiling as she was met with his warmth and snuggled into his chest and the Iron Bull sighed as he wrapped his arms around her, rested a hand on the crown of her head. “I’ma tell you a story, Imi-kadan. Sad a shit. But the main character is a sexy favorite.”

“Cremisius?”

“What? No, forget that guy. You think he's a ten? You should've seen me—younger, just as musclicy, smooth as the day I was damn born,” gesturing to his horns as he claimed, “I have these
bad boys so everyone is forewarned that I'm a solid eleven. Just young, rock hard, ready to take on
the world,” he set up his tale. It…was ‘sad as shit’, traumatic for the Qunari it seemed, even now,
he spoke of it very carefully, holding the girl close and Marehis realized he was grounding after a
fashion, seated in the comfort of Ellie’s quarters, warm fire at his back, one hand in Ellie’s soft
hair, another rubbing circles along the muscles of her back, breathing in the smell of her
conditioner. It helped him speak of his time in Seheron. He had made some mention of it before,
but now he laid out all he had survived, the baker that gave him silent warning that saved his life
while the rest of his men were fatally poisoned, and Tal-Vashoth slit the baker’s throat. A school
house suffered a similar fate—poisoned the very same, an act of terrorism by the same faction of
Tal-Vashoth. That ultimately he took what was left of his men, and sought this faction out, went to
their fortress and took their revenge…or tried to, at least. It was where he earned the bounty of his
scars, he had nearly died—he only survived because the Tal-Vashoth believed him to be dead.
Even then, his rescue was hazy for him, all he knew was he survived, and him alone. His men had
perished and their mission was wholly a failure. It was after that, that the Iron Bull struggled with
his sense of self, with depression to the point it was either allow himself to be felled by Tal-
Vashoth, or turn himself over to the Re-educators.

“Ultimately I felt like my surviving was a failure in itself. That I should have died with my
men—there wasn’t any way anyone was walking out of there but Tal Vashoth if I gave away
something was up with the baker, and I know that, but I was convinced I should’ve just, known it
was a trap, fallen into it with the others. And then it was my fault we failed at the fortress, I led
them, I let them die, and I got to walk away. And I couldn’t think of one damn good reason I
deserved that.”

“Don’t say that! The Iron Bull- you’re the best! You’re brave and strong and smart
and kind! You didn’t deserve any of the things that happened, except getting to survive! And it
wasn’t—“

“Imekari, I don’t feel that way anymore, I’m just layin’ it down for you. Survivor’s guilt is
a thing. And everything you just said about me? Same things apply to you in droves, babe.
Conclave, all the shit that’s gone down since then, none of that is on you. not your fault it
happened, and there’s no fault in the fact you survived. Might take you a minute to come around to
that fact, but that’s what it is—a fact,” he said, letting her pull back so she could look up into his
face, “Ellie. You ever start feeling like I used to—apathetic about your own survival or uh, looking
to end it, imi-kadan—little heart—you gotta come to us. To me, anyone, I’m serious. Even if it’s
just in passing thought. You hear me? I’m gonna need you to pinkie promise it boss girl.”

Ellie nodded, offering up her unmarked hand, pinkie extended to wrap around his, and
Marehis had quite honestly never been so relieved to see someone swear upon something—she-sh
could not stand the thought, that the girl might feel moved to end it herself, it was unthinkable-

“I…” she started, then, “It’s not like I want to die, or I think about killing myself or
anything but um…” her chin quivered and she looked down at her hands, wringing them nervously
and the Qunari took them in hand, his expression grave like he were bracing himself and even still
he looked as gut punched as Marehis felt when Ellie confessed, “I keep thinking I should have died,
that it would st-stop Corypheus or fix things somehow. Wi-wishing I hadn’t been the one to
survive the Conclave, I mean there had to be a thousand other people way more qualified than me,
that could do this better, make less mistakes, be stronger and bigger and more capable.”

“Ellie…” Marehis breathed. Sera was wide eyed, mouth working, and it seemed like she
might shout, start railing at the girl to convince her otherwise but Marehis held her more tightly,
shaking her head and pressing a kiss to her cheek with a quiet ‘shh’.

The Iron Bull took a deep breath, blowing it out slowly, “Okay. Okay—good job keeping
your promise Imekari.”

“Da’vehnan?” Marehis ventured gently, reaching out to rest a hand on the girl’s back,
“perhaps we should consider a mental health checkup. You have not had an appointment with
Adan in quite some time—since before the Oasis.” They should have sought one after her return
from the Fallow Mire but she’d been given a break of sorts, seemed in such good spirits, and their
Healers had been so busy, working to train underlings as the Inquisition grew, and preparing for the assault on the Breach.

“Mmkay,” Ellie quietly agreed, nodding. “I have been feeling kind of um…I dunno. The way I used to feel, before I went to Adan for help. Empty? Not all of the time, just,” she shrugged.

“You have been exhibiting symptoms I find concerning. Lack of appetite, being so very tired,” Marehis said.

“I am tired, just all the time. I kind of… I dunno, it’s how I felt in the Hinterlands the first time, sort of wanting a break but like—it’s weird. Like I don’t want to die, I just- I just want to not exist for a bit? And then be right back at it, no consequences, no one knows I was even gone, just…” she sighed in quiet frustration.

The Iron Bull cleared his throat, “Alright boss girl. Well, that isn’t possible,” he paused like he was thinking very carefully about something that worried him, and he raised a hand to rest atop her head, “But you can take a good break this weekend, longer if you need it-“

“I’m Inquisitor-“

“Yeah. You can declare a national holiday or something, give everyone a damn day off,” the Iron Bull informed her, it was likely exaggeration but still, “you can take whatever time you need babe.”

Ellie seemed hesitant to accept as much but she did nod.

Sera cleared her throat, “Inky? Sweets, there’s still time before dinner and pish.” The older girl exaggerated a yawn as she stretched, “I’m real sleepy. Nap some more? Cuddly can get in here, you’re not busy, are you?” she asked the Spirit.

Cole nodded, “I am very busy—I am going to nap and keep Ellie from nightmares in the Fade!”

“Clean up and get in here,” Sera instructed, rather amusing to hear the young Elf admonish someone on hygiene but the Spirit removed his hat and jacket, started shucking off his boots and socks before going into the closet to seek the wash basin. Marehis rose from the bed, “Bull, would you mind assisting me with draining the tub, please?” she asked. It was heavy enough it was almost worthless to bathe in if you hefted the thing yourself afterward to empty it.

“You got it,” the Qunari agreed.

“You can nap with us if you want, the Iron Bull,” Ellie offered as she went to Sera when the older girl motioned for her to curl up against her, oh her da’vehnan—Sera, she held Ellie tightly, pressing her lips to the top of her head.

“Alright boss-girl, get some rest,” he said as he got up to assist Marehis, and Sera laid back with Ellie in her hold, Anya whining a bit as she came and laid down against Ellie’s other side.

Sera was always timid about song—dancing she would do even without music, at the drop of a hat at any given time—but she was cagey when it came to singing, even though heavens her girl had the most beautiful singing voice. She used it now, singing softly as she played with a curl of Ellie’s hair, lulling the girl into sleep where Cole would keep her safe.

The Iron Bull did not necessarily need help with hefting the tub, but Marehis helped him nonetheless, to get it out to the balcony behind the fireplace and pour its contents over the edge into the river below.

“Bull?” she asked quietly, out of earshot of the Human girl.

The Qunari sighed. “Gonna be okay. Important thing is she’s talking about it.”

“Cole?” Marehis asked when she heard the closet door open, the young man had been returning to the bed but he appeared on the balcony at Marehis speaking his name. “We have asked you to keep us appraised to Ellie’s health, we did mean all realms of her health.”

Oh, the boy was crestfallen, looked so very disappointed in himself, “I am sorry—I-I am trying but I can’t hear- I hear hurts. Ellie isn’t hurting not in a way that is necessarily painful, that she can acknowledge. When she is numb her hurts are quiet, but there under the surface festering, they go to a place I can’t hear them. I did not realize she was feeling this way. I can’t even hear her
guilt—but I knew to get the Iron Bull because I heard your hurting, and when I came I heard what Ellie was saying and it sounded like his old hurts.”

“I am not displeased with you Cole, I merely thought there was clarification needed—you do so well, and I appreciate your help,” Marehis promised, and the boy sighed, nodding. Marehis rested a hand on his shoulder, raising the other to brush the hair back from his face and press a kiss to his forehead, smiling when he made a happy little sound at that, “Go on and join the girls, give them sweet dreams for me, would you?”

He nodded eagerly, “I will!” and then he dematerialized and appeared in the bed on the other side of Sera, arm over the Elf girl and resting his hand on Ellie’s arm as he settled in to ‘sleep’.

“Adan is getting on her schedule for Monday, should I have her see him sooner?” Marehis worried to the Iron Bull as she sat back against the banister.

“Monday gives her the chance to decompress and maybe you can take some inventory on how she’s doing, and what she needs before her appointment, but if you got something in you that says you should go sooner, I say go with your gut—hell, she can nap the whole way I’ll carry her, have a full blown intervention.”

“Thank you but that isn’t necessary. I’ll confirm with Adan and Lady Montilyet. I plan to speak with Cassandra and Cullen tonight, keep them appraised and get their input.”

“Good.”

“There was something you weren’t saying earlier,” Marehis prompted.

The Qunari nodded. “Just uh, wasn’t sure if I should bring it up to the kid, but that ‘not wanting to exist for a bit’ thing is a kind of suicidal thought, that sounds benign but that’s what makes it pretty bad.”

It was likely why the girl struggled with mixing drink and potion, desired for times when her mind wouldn’t be able to process or record anything going on around her, but oh that could be dangerous. Too- just- she hated this, hated that the girl was feeling this way. It almost startled her when she found herself the recipient of a very warm hug, strong arms wrapping around her frame and lifting her so her feet were off the ground and a chin rested atop her head,

“Hey. Everyone’s got your back. We’ll regroup and work together, keep an eye on her, be there for her.”

Marehis sniffled. “Will you hug her? At least once a day. You’re very good at hugging.”

“On it. Hug her every hour on the hour if it would make this better,” Bull swore and then, “And you know, I’m good at way more than hugging. Things aren’t too great with Wolf-boy, you know you I’m always around to uh, work out frustrations.”

She snorted as he released her and she shook her head, smiling. “And just what would Ser Pavus think of that?”

“One, Qunari don’t usually do the whole monogamy thing, two—Sparky’s down, says there’s enough of me to go around. No pressure, just letting you know you start getting antsy, need a little something like that, I’m always down to help out a friend. Even my brunette ones.”

“I’m honored, thank you, but I’m well.” And if she did truly need to er, work out sexual frustrations…well, while the Iron Bull was kind and she was certain he would do so without awkwardness or making it anything more, but “Leliana and I have an understanding,” she said with a shrug before she turned to return to the bedroom.

“Damn it, where the hell is my red head? They’re running around here left right and center—you know what, forget what I said about my brunette friends, if Sera dyed her hair you’d all be a matching set of red-head thieves.” Would they? She supposed as much was true. “You see her last night? Had two of ‘em!” he quietly complained as they returned to the bedroom.

“Perhaps Dorian can dye his hair for you,” Marehis quipped, her girls were fast asleep, Cole was resting curled around Sera’s back, sweet boy. “If you are staying here, I should go, make some arrangements, make dinner happen.”

“Go right ahead.”

She did. But it wasn’t Cabbot’s she sought first.
Solas was seated in his cell, facing the bars, arms hanging over his knees, head hung though he did look up when she approached, “Ellie is alright?” he asked.

“You can see that for yourself,” Marehis supposed.

“I have kept my word, Marehis. I only realized she was suffering a nightmare when her distress cried out in the bond.”

“I mean you are free to look. Monitor her, as you please, so long as you do not cause her distress yourself.”

Oh goodness. He looked at her like she just offered him the world, “Truly?” he breathed a sigh of relief. “I do not know how you did it. When you were separated while the Venatori infiltrated the Inquisition, when we went to the Oasis,” he listed, “I…I have not liked not being able to know she is safe.”

“You should monitor her if you wish. It was good of you, to get me. How…how did that work, exactly?” she wanted to know. “When I was in hiding there was an evening I swear, I saw you. in the cargo bay of a ship I’d stowed away on-”

Solas nodded. “Yes. I was worried, scared for you, as was Ellie. I just- I wanted to make certain you were safe, alive, so I reached out to you in the Fade, and made contact through… through your magic. That is what I did this…afternoon?” he guessed the time.

“Yes.”

“I apologize that I disturbed you.”

“Certainly.”

“She’s sleeping well now. She feels better about something; Cole is making play with her in the Fade. Tag, with the run of an empty Skyhold.”

Maerhis took a deep breath, restrained herself from- she wanted to cry and she hated that she could feel her chin quivering and that had caused the man to sit up and come to the bars, be so very concerned he forgot himself. She was so frustrated, sad that the girl wasn’t…she wasn’t in danger necessarily but she did feel wholly safe.

“That- that is good,” she offered nodding but, “She is struggling, having th-thoughts- that she deserves to die, that that would fix things somehow or-“ Marehis pressed a hand to her eyes, “I don’t know.”

The man went to his knees, hands gripping the cell bars, devastated, “I- she was debriefed today I- oh I’m-“

Oh. She wished a great deal of penance from this man but she could not allow him to think he had led someone—especially someone he loved—to thoughts of s- of thoughts related to suicide. “It was not the debriefing, she has had such feelings before, she shared them with me when you first returned from the Hinterlands. She has been having thoughts, feelings like that since Haven fell, she feels some guilt for having to bury it. Cole is kind and helpful, but he says he hasn’t been able to hear these feelings in her and I- I would appreciate if you-“

“I will be on guard, certainly. Marehis I swear to you, if I feel she may be a danger to herself, I will sound alarm. Truly. I can communicate with Cole, and send him to get you or the others, go to Ellie himself, if things are truly dire I may be able to be of help through the bond. Too you should consider her magic has always been a powerful ally in the past, keeping her alive, if nothing else it should step in and dissuade her from anything drastic.”

“You…you have been able to send calm to her when she has bouts of panic, can you… could you fix this? Send her continuous-“ what? Will to live? She already had that and she wasn’t certain it could be quantified as an emotion but-

“I will help as I can but I should not interfere continuously—if that was necessary I swear to you I would do it, I would not sleep the rest of my days if it meant she would be fine but veh-“ he cleared his throat, “Marehis, if we wish for healing, forcing her to feel something her mind truly doesn’t feel won’t be of use in the long term, it may only further rob her of the ability of doing so on her own.”

“But you will monitor her? Continuously?” she intoned, a pointed reminder of his omission that he was no longer keeping track of the girl in the bond after Haven- she- they had
nearly lost her! Marehis could scarcely sleep upon her return, the girl had barely been able to draw in breath and she had- she had required resuscitation twice in the first night. She’d only been able to cope with the distance the girl put between them as they traveled because she thought Solas was monitoring her, would alert them and aid her if she’d some further complication. At the time, she thought she could never be more angry with him. Of course, as always, the man managed to outdo himself.

“I will. I…I do not know, but if you needed it, there could be some system put in place, for me to report to someone at regular intervals.”

Marehis nodded. “I will consult Leliana,” it would take consideration, they did not wish to trust Solas with writing materials for fear he would communicate with some form of ally that way, but they would figure something of the sort out. “I hate you.”

“I know.”

“I hate that I have to come to you now.”

“I know that as well. But you did not have to—you did so for Ellie,” Solas said, “Thank you.”

“Do not thank me, she is my child, I would go to the D-“ the Dread Wolf himself, she nearly said but. Well. she already had, hadn’t she? “-damned ends of the world for my children.”

Solas nodded, and then, “Would you…” he seemed hesitant.

“What?” Marehis snapped, impatient.

He swallowed, head hanging as he spoke quietly, “I do not know how exactly things will move forward. I may be imprisoned permanently, or exiled or executed. No matter the result, it is not likely I can venture into the field with Ellie. I-if you…” he sighed, “if you wished for the benefits of such a bond, ve-. If you wished for another to be bonded with her as I am, I believe it is possible.”

… “Another?”

“You.Your magic if called to spark, the bond is already there, it is just not as active, potent as my own. Your sense of intuition, it works but it is quiet, you’ve always mistaken it for mere worry or gut feeling but it is your magic. You bonded to Ellie even before myself—magically and then emotionally.”

“What do you mean?”

“The night that Human…Daniel? Danner?” he sought to remember, “He made to assault Ellie under the guise of a mistaken dinner delivery? It was the first night I sensed the life spark of your magic—it takes time find it, weeks, months, but a handful of days knowing you? That night it flared to life in such a way it was visceral when you arrived in the Tavern. It was your magic that made you so very concerned over her mood that day, and then when you defended her, felt the threat posed to her, and she was so frightened you were injured her magic reached out, and while she did not cast upon you, the bond formed. It…you were so miserable when Ellie first went to the Hinterlands. She had been in your care for barely a week, because she stepped out of range of the bond. Ellie is endearing but she was gone for far longer than you had time to get to know her, you’d greater opportunity to grow detached. And Ellie was miserable when you were reunited in the Hinterlands by surprise—she’d hardly slept or eaten, was sick, pained—while yes, her excitement did perk her up, it was your magic, powered by your own excitement that reached out and spurred her exuberance, I could feel it in the bonds-”

"Bonds?"

Solas’s mouth worked a moment, voiceless, and he was blushing when he found explanation, "I- I-. Vehnan I have not loved another the way I love you since the Veil. When-when you ceased contacting me and went into hiding I was worried, and then Seeker Pentaghast came to inform me of the reason behind your sudden silence and- there was an instant, before Cassandra explained in full, when I thought she was telling me you had been harmed in the field or- or perished. I realized I could not abide losing you, your mere absence was distressing. When I found you through your magic, made contact, that was the moment my magic bonded with your own. I…am sorry if that knowledge distresses you now."
"Your magic-"

"Is bonded to yours. Yes. It is not like Ellie's and my own, she has full access to her magic, further still there is the fact that she has an extremely intimate relationship with her magic, and has for more than a decade. As Elvehnann, you have had your magic for the whole of your life like a mage, but you've never been connected to it, as it stands it is...I can find you more easily in the Fade, and I can make limited contact through your magic, as you saw, it requires you to be in a state where you are closest to your magic, which is to say, sleep. If you gained access to your magic, you would be able to use it fully as I do, be capable of feeling what she is feeling, her magic would be able to communicate with yours. Our own bond would be...more, but I swear to you, Marehis, I would stay out of it as much as possible, even teach- er, Cole could teach you, how to keep a sense of privacy. I...I have thought to offer the same to Ellie but given the circumstances- I- I have always feared she might um- she is a child and I wish to protect her. As I do not use the bond to cause her harm, nor do I judge or ridicule anything I find there, I did not feel it was needed, or even right to do so."

Alright, she was going to ignore how very...Sera would term it 'weirdy' the idea of being bound to Solas unawares made her feel and focused on the possibility it posed. "I could have a similar bond to Ellie? I would have to become a mage?"

Solas considered her phrasing, "You would have to wake your magic, but you needn't pursue magery unless you wished to, and even then, if you'd some passing interest you could treat it as little more than a hobby. It would not be as hard for you as it is a human—magic is more natural for you, even if you do not realize it. Dalish handle their own mages so well because they've a more natural grasp upon it, and further still there is the fact that Humans handle mage-hood the entirely wrong way. If a mage has no interest in pursuing their magic, they needn't, we had very few who studied their powers, I certainly didn't in my youth. At most, Magic was little more than a tool for how we lit our homes, cooked, occasionally protected ourselves, and formed deeper familial bonds, and communicate with loved ones across some distance. Only the Evanuris studied further, developed branches of magic. You would have magic, it would be yours to use or not use as you saw fit. If you or Sera did pursue it- I was so concerned over whether of not she was Fade Dreaming in the Oasis because she’d been suffering nightmares and I worried she was experiencing something out of the norm—that she had indeed wakened her magic and was continually Fade Dreaming, that is rare in Elvehnann and dangerous*. It is usual to Fade Dream the eve your magic awakes, it is when you are most intensely connected to the Fade, but after that it requires dosing with Lyrium. I...you would not be alone. I may not be of comfort, but Ellie could join you, Cole—any of our mage friends, to assist you that first time, keep you safe and calm."

She...had far too much on her mind at the moment, she needed to think. "I will consider it." And then, "Are you bonded to anyone else we should know of? Varric, perhaps?"

"Much as I do adore the Dwarf, no. I am still bonded to many of my friends in the Fade. Spirits. But I...my magic is bonded to Sera's as well, after our time in the Oasis, rather incidentally I assure you, but when she was injured it- I realized if I could take her injury from her, place it upon myself I would have, that I love her as I do Ellie."

"Ahh. Well then, I'm sure you can tell Sera wishes to trounce you." Or at least she’d been very willing to fight the man when she first learned he’d been endeavoring to make her a Mage without her knowledge.

"Tell? No, but it is not beyond the realm of imagination. That is rather understandable. I owe her more than an apology- I- I did not- I was not thinking correctly. I...if it makes sense it is only because I have come to care for Sera. When first we met I thought her vapid and childish, insufferable, and her racism toward her own people appalling. When I actually had to get to know her, came to realize it was self-hatred wrought from abuse- she is kind and funny and more intelligent than I dared think she might be and her magic, Marehis, it is- if she ever chose such a thing for herself, she would be quite the force to be reckoned with. When I realized she had never been trained as such, I sought to bring her up how I would any Elvehnann child—nurturing magic it- it is commonplace. No different as I understood it to our discovery that Ellie could not read and
righting it. More comparable it is as if a child has been made to lay lame the whole of their life simply because no one took it to task to teach them how to walk—teaching them to walk would change every facet of their lives just as becoming a mage would.”

“Walking would not introduce them to demons or the threat of possession—” Marehis argued.

“Knowing Ellie is enough to prove one can walk into dangers even more serious than demons,” she found nothing amusing about that, yet he was fighting a smile? Oh, “Was it wise to house her with such a fearsome flight of stairs between her doorway and her bed?” he meant, “I swear even in the Fade she trips.”

She did suppose that yes, perhaps it was rather similar. “You will have to speak with Sera yourself.” If she wished it. And if he got the chance. “She is rather grateful her unwitting education saved Ellie’s life in the Oasis,” then, “Ellie made claims today, when she was debriefed on your status of ‘Dread Wolf’. That the only reason she found our camp when Haven fell, was because she was led by wolves.”

The man flushed at that, “Ahh. Yes. Well,” he shrugged.

“You did not mention of this.”

“You did not ask—you did not know to but I hardly…I did not consider it yesterday, neither am I trying to make up for what I have done by throwing up every instance I have rescued the girl. If I were doing that, I would remind you all that girl would have perished collecting Shards in the Hinterlands.”

Marehis had to cover her mouth with her hand to keep from smiling. She still recalled the letter she received from Solas detailing the girl’s headlong fall into a gulch—that if she heard of the incident she was to be without fear, he casted Barrier that shielded her from detriment. She cleared her throat, “I suppose that is true.”

He seemed to regard her for a moment like he was measuring something, like a person judging if they could extend their hand to a Mabari without being bitten. “…may I ask how Sera faires?”

"Sera is well," she allowed.

He seemed relieved to hear as much. "And Ellie? She was nervous this week, about her upcoming test, the bond is a powerful thing but it does little to divine her grades."

"Oh, she got an 'A'," Marehis was proud to inform him.

"Truly?" he breathed, "Oh she's come so far. She-" he stopped and then swallowed, like he'd a lump in his throat. She hated...she hated that she was certain she knew exactly what he was thinking of, that he was missing the girl, and how she'd come to be so confident in her reading that even his more arduous texts, she would endeavor to read aloud with him.

This…was getting too familiar. Speaking so amicably, chatting about the girls. She came here for a purpose and now she was done. “I should see to dinner.”

He nodded. “Of course. Have a pleasant evening.” Marehis nodded, turning to take her leave. “I am sorry.”

She did not look to him. But, “I know.”

She hated this, hated him…maybe it was she hated that she had to hate him for what he had done. Dinner—she had girls to feed and things to take care of to secure their safety.

She stopped in at Cabot’s—the Tavern usually spelled fun, and it had more variety food-wise than what the kitchens could provide on such notice. The Dwarf grumpily took up the order, but it would be done, delivered. And she lastly popped in to Lady Montilyet’s office, to make certain Ellie was scheduled appropriately.

“Yes, Healer Adan sent word to make certain space was clear in her schedule for Monday afternoon,” the Ambassador assured.

It may be overstepping but, “Has she War council to hold or judgments, diplomatic meetings?”

“A War Room meeting yes, to touch base on affairs, see if she is prepared to dole out judgement for- to move forward with- to see where she is on handling our recent inter-party upset.”
the woman decided to call it, “and speak of when she might journey to Crestwood, but we have yet

to hear from Hawke. Other than that, she has lessons with Cassandra and Cullen, and then Sera

later in the afternoon.”

Marehis nodded. She would discuss that with them tonight then. “Thank you, Lady

Montilyet.”

“It is no trouble,” she assured, “Do give Ellie my love?”

That, she could certainly do. Back in Ellie’s quarters, Marehis climbed into the bed,
crawling up the middle to lay alongside her girls, Cole wriggled over to make room on his side, and
the Iron Bull cracked open his good eye to acknowledge her return with a nod, he was laying on
the other end with Ellie resting atop his chest, Sera curled into his side with a hand on the girl.

It was only as she was growing comfortable that she realized she’d been traipsing about
Skyhold in her robe. Well then. At least it was closed?

When Marehis woke, it was because the Iron Bull was informing her someone was
approaching the door, “Seeker and Commander, figures they’re early.”

Ellie was still fast asleep against the Qunari’s chest, Sera snoring next to her so Marehis
rose and went to get the door before a knock could sound, quietly closing it behind her—Cassandra
and Cullen were indeed early, and that suited, “Ellie is still resting—dinner is on of course, but I…
if you can I would request that you try to make time for her this weekend, we are planning to stay
in and rest, relax.”

“Certainly,” they agreed in unison.

“I think an intensive Mami-daughter weekend is needed, papis too, if you’re well,”
Marehis assured the Commander—he’d some….nothing contagious it seemed, but some sort of
chronic ailment Marehis had noticed, he had such horrible migraines. “I have received new
information of how Ellie is faring, and I would appreciate it if we could have a meeting of sorts to
discuss how to move forward, as a group. The sooner the better.”

“That sounds dire,” Cullen pointed out.

“I do not disapprove—I trust your judgement,” the Nevarran woman promised, resting a
hand on Marehis’s shoulder, “Even with your very casual fashion decisions,” she offered in jest.

She could feel her ears burning red, “I did intend to dress—do come in and make
yourselves welcome, you can wake Ellie if you wish, I’m sure that would be pleasant for her, I’ll
just be a moment,” she said, leading them into the room and dashing up the stairs to fetch her
clothing and step into a side room to change.

She heard a blessedly happy, sleepy sigh from Ellie, before she quietly greeted, “Hola
papi, que pasa?”

“We’re here for dinner. Did you have a pleasant nap, sweetheart?” Cullen asked warmly.

“Uh-huh! Cole and I played tag and explored around Skyhold- oh!” the girl gasped and
when Marehis returned the girl was looking to Cole, bouncing a bit in place as she shook Sera’s
shoulder, the Elf girl snorted in her sleep before shooting up in bed, haphazardly hugging the
younger girl, though the action looked more like a reflex to throw her own body over her to shield
her than anything else.

“’m up! You sleep good Inky, Cole made you have happy dreams yeah?” Sera asked.

“He did! We have a mission before dinner! A Friend’s mission!”

“Pranky one or serious one?”

“Serious one—real quick, we should be back before dinner arrives,” Ellie said, looking up
to Marehis, “is it okay if I go with Sera and Cole somewhere real fast? It isn’t dangerous, we’d be
right back,” she promised.

“Certainly da’vehnans, have fun, be safe,” Marehis wished them.

“I will get Krem, he can help!” Cole declared as he vanished and the girls scrambled out of
bed, and the adults shared a laugh as the duo rushed down the stairs and the door shut behind
them.
“You’re a trendsetter I believe,” Cullen said to Marehis. Well, at least they were in pajamas.

“We got company,” the Iron Bull inclined his head, “sounds like Tethras and Sarge. Huh, Madam and Sparky are takin’ up the rear, ten to one they complain they didn’t get to be fashionably late or some shit.”

They did not complain so much as apologize that they weren’t late, but Madam de Fer was interested to hear how Ellie fared on her test from the girl herself, and Dorian had backed the woman’s decision to cast aside the social demand. Though that did lead to the Enchanter complaining at the girl’s absence.

“She’d some mission to attend,” Marehis said.

“Nothing dangerous?” Vivienne worried.

“Certainly not, and if it is, Sera and Cole are with her, and he did say he was fetching Krem to aid them—I trust together they will all return safely.”

They did, safely…and a bit dirty, they’d all dust on their faces and hands, on their clothing, but they also were smiling and seemed very excited as their quartet ambled up the staircase, Ellie seemed genuinely excited as she looked to Cassandra,

“Mami, look! We found Tio Anthony!” she announced.

Cassandra’s eyes widened, “T-tio…” oh, uncle.

“Friggin’ rat stole him*, little bastard,” Sera swore.

Cassandra looked dumbstruck as the four of them came to where she’d been seated, leaning back against Ellie’s desk and the girl offered up an old locket that looked like it had seen better days, there were smudges on her shirt like she’d used it to clean it off the best she could.

“I-“ the woman’s eyes looked misty, oh bless her. She took the locket in hand, opening it to check on the image inside, “Oh I thought I had lost it,” like she’d been beating herself up and was relieved she could stop.

Cole shook his head, “No, a rat found it in your dresser, he thought it would be nice for his home, he did not know it was precious to you, would hurt you to miss it.”

“We found it when we were playing in Skyhold in the Fade,” Ellie said.

“Thank you for rescuing it. I trust none of you were harmed?”

“Cremisius was lots of help, he got the rat to come out and held him so Sera could reach in and get the locket out—I tried but my arms are too short.”

“Thank you Cremisius,” Cassandra said, met with the Tevinter boy blushing and waving it off,

“It was nothing.”

“It was a very large rat!” Cole corrected.

“Thank you all,” Cassandra offered tightly, it was a bit of an armful but she did manage to get her arms around Cole and Krem who pulled along Ellie and Sera between them to hug the Seeker.

Dinner was a much needed boost. They had an indoor picnic of sorts, spreading out a blanket, pillows and seating themselves on the comfortable arrangement to eat and chat, and Sera was enthusiastic to remind Marehis about sharing Ellie’s graded test—she wanted to see it herself and when she was done looking it over and cheering on the younger girl, before passing it on. Miss Lace wasn’t in attendance, neither was Dagna, but the Elf girl still had two dates of sorts, or she attached herself to a pair—Krem had no qualms sharing his seat at Ellie’s side with Sera—she seemed…their earlier conversation had clearly gotten to her, she was glued to the younger girl’s side, always had a hand on her.

“Inky! You’re so friggin’ smart! You learned so many big words,” Sera enthused as she passed the test on, and it was sweet to see all of the adults rally to be encouraging to the girl, and if Cullen was proud of who he termed his ‘precious, brilliant girl’, the Iron Bull snatched up the test, and slipped it into his harness, the strap that went across his chest so the ‘A’ was displayed proudly, a walking advertisement of the girl’s grade. Of course, his chest ornament made eating a task to avoid dirtying it but somehow the Qunari managed.
And they did get a surprise visit of sorts—the pleasant kind—when Mister Aclassi stopped by. He of course checked in on the younger members of their group, asking after their days and dropping a kiss to Krem’s hair before offering Marehis his promised handkerchiefs.

“I thought I’d best get these to you before it got too late,” he said, sounding apologetic that he’d taken so long. Oh they were nice, white, and for he had said they would be ‘plain’ there was a bit of lace around the edges, three for each of them, she and her girls—he’d embroidered their first initials in the corner and…oh the man was sweet. He’d apparently taken note of the necklace Marehis wore, the one Ellie had gotten her for her birthday, he’d apparently laid eyes upon it when they spoke earlier and been able to accurately embroider the constellation along an edge of each of her handkerchiefs, and for the girls’ he’d embroidered peonies for Ellie and… buttercups for Sera, apparently he’d learned Varrie’s nickname for her.

“Thank you, they’re beautiful,” Marehis said.

“It was no trouble,” he assured.

“They’re really pretty!” Ellie enthused, “would you like to stay and eat with us?”

“Oh, I do appreciate the invitation bella mia, but I’m afraid I’ve plans already—I’m due at the Ambassador’s office.”

“You have a meeting with Tia Josie?” Ellie asked sweetly.

Tonio nodded. “Dinner—she wished to see our plans for your wardrobe.”

“Oh! Gosh, yeah, she really really loves what I wore today, gosh it’s so pretty but like, still practical? I wore them to a War Room meeting and I usually wear armor or my super fancy things for those and I didn’t feel underdressed, but I’m also not nervous about wearing them for practice fighting. Though gosh I’ll feel badly if they get torn up,” she confessed.

“Oh, do not worry, I took into consideration your day-to-day,” Tonio assured, explaining, “There are seams at the elbows of your shirts, not just the shoulder, and too, just under the bust just where it cinches. Pantlegs are sectioned to seam at the ankle and knee—if any piece of it becomes torn or worn out to the point it would need to be tackily patched, or replaced entirely, I can do so easily without having to recreate the whole of the item of clothing, just remove and replace the damaged section.”

“Oh wow, that’s so smart!” Ellie complimented.

“Cremisius’s injury yesterday inspired it actually.”

“Oi, Bull, just put ‘muse’ on my resume,” Krem informed his boss.

“Bull snorted, “As many variations of ‘Krem’ I gotta come up, what makes you think it isn’t already on there? You’re just one inspirational son of a bitch Krem-fraiche.”

“You were injured?” Cassandra asked, concerned—she and Cullen were seated at Krem’s other side and the Nevarran woman reached out to brush a hand against the shaved portion of the young man’s hair scrutinizing him like she would be able to tell just where he’d been injured and if it had been healed properly by looking into his face.

He smiled, “Wasn’t a big deal—this asshole had some kind of scythe blade on a chain?”

Krem explained, “Swinging it around everywhere, kept trying to get it to grapple around Bull—“

“How sweet, great brute that you are he still felt compelled to rescue you,” Dorian teased the Qunari.

“He had Ellie on his shoulders, and he was making some way too close calls to snagging her and that was just a big ‘fuck no’ so I intercepted and got a hold on the chain, the end wrapped around my arm, blade ended up in my arm but I was able to pull the bastard in close,” he grinned, “I do my best work up close and personal,” Ellie giggled, ducking her head shyly while Sera cackled.

Cassandra huffed a laugh, “That…is rather an ingenious move, and I am proud of you for keeping track and care of Eleanor in battle,” she took his chin in-hand and pulled him forward to press a kiss to his cheek, “Sweet man, I trust your injury is healed? Good. You are to take care of yourself Cremisius, do try to be more careful.”

Tonio looked pleased, relieved to see- oh. Well, she supposed it was a sort of relief to see that, while there was a tremulous relationship between the Lieutenant and his horrible mother, he
had something of a mothering figure in Cassandra. Someone who gave him acceptance and
guidance, encouragement, a positive association with a maternal entity.

“Have a pleasant evening,” Tonio wished them.

“You too!” Ellie answered.

Dorian took a great measure of fun in reenacting his library altercation with the Chantry
Mother—Ellie turned red and launched herself at Cassandra and Cullen to hug them as if doing so
would endear them, particularly Cassandra, enough that they would not seek to rebuke her for her
attitude with a member of the Chantry.

“That was horribly rude,” Cassandra insisted, but she meant, “Mother Giselle, has she
harassed you like this before?”

“Only when she’s bored I assume,” Dorian drawled.

“She had better find better ways of passing the time then,” Cassandra decided, “Eleanor
did well to defend you I think, and she does seem to care for the girl’s good opinion—if that is not
efficient enough to dissuade her in future, do let me know, Dorian.”

“You’re not mad I got mouthy with a Chantry Mother?” Ellie wondered, her arms still
around the woman’s waist, looking up at the Nevarran woman who favored her a smile and shook
her head ‘no’.

“If you had taken the tone unjustly, certainly, that would be wildly inappropriate. She is a
member of the Inquisition, and you are Inquisitor—you saw her acting out of turn and brought
correction to the situation as is your right and responsibility, I am proud of you, for how you treat
your friends and allies, Eleanor.”

Ellie blushed, hugging the woman tighter, “Thanks mami.”

A smile came to the Seeker’s lips as she rubbed the girl’s back and ventured, “If you truly
wish to show your gratitude, Eleanor, perhaps you could deliver the sermon your mamis missed
you giving?”

“And various uncle figures of ill repute,” Dorian offered up as further incentive.

Oh the girl looked so abashed as she resumed her seat, worrying her lip, hands fidgeting in
her lap, Sera giggled and took hold of them to play a bit, wriggling fingers to tickle at the palms of
Ellie’s hands while the girl gathered her thoughts,

“Baby version? I don’t have the big ‘Chant Study’ version in me,” she said and the Seeker
nodded that that would sort. “Kay, it was just on the Commandments? Transfigurations Chapter
one, verse five,” Ellie started, “With a focus on the first sentence: All things in this world are finite,
what one man gains, another has lost. It goes into a decrying o theft—that we shouldn’t steal
because it also takes away our fellow man’s livelihoods and peace of mind, and that makes the
Maker sad. But it’s not just that—it’s a very literal verse. Things are finite. When someone has
something—that’s something someone else doesn’t have, whether it’s a loaf of bread or a place to
sleep—if I’m in my bed, I’m taking up that space, and it’s gone for everyone else,” she explained,
smiling a bit as she shrugged, offering her current audience, “well. Most everyone. You lot know
I’m all about sharing, sleepovers are my jam. But, coming up…I didn’t have a lot to share,” she
said, “Usually when it came to the ‘gain/loss’ situation, I was in the ‘loss’ column. And that’s what
made it one of my favorite verses. I mean it’s awful when you don’t know where you’re going,
where the next meal is coming from, when and where it’ll be safe to sleep—if it’ll stay a safe to
sleep once your out. and then I learned that verse and it was…comforting. Nice. Because it tells me
one thing—if I’m in the loss column, that means someone else somewhere got to be in the gain. A
meal I missed was one someone else got, if I couldn’t find a place to stay, it meant the beds were
filled with others who got to have a safe place for the night. If Templars were chasing me, it meant
those same Templars weren’t off chasing someone else. Thinking about it as other’s gains instead
of just my loss made it better, it was kind of relieving. Yeah, I was experiencing the bad of things,
but that just meant there was good from it somewhere else. And ultimately it helped me be content,
when I lose, I know it’s not in vain for no reason, and when I gain? I know I’m blessed, and I’m so
grateful, because I understand the cost it comes at.” She shrugged, offering a shy smile as she said,
“I’ve gained a lot lately, I’m so incredibly blessed by all the amazing people in my life, and I’m so
grateful for you.” Well. Marehis was certainly glad she'd acquired new handkerchiefs.

When she fell silent Cullen started clapping and insisting, “It was even better the second time!”

“Damn Boss-girl you preached the hell out of that!” Bull cheered...possibly blasmephemously, given the Qun.

Marehis was uncertain just how to move forward as dinner wound down. She had been able to communicate the need to have a group meeting to Cassandra and Cullen, but Ellie had returned before she could include the rest of the class. And now she was admittedly concerned at the girl’s current behavior—she’d resumed her seat, and dropped out of the conversation, been quiet and contemplative, staring into space for the better part of five minutes. But,

“Hey Cremisius?” Ellie asked quietly, her gaze still focused ahead a moment before she turned to look at the Tevinter.

“Yeah El?”

“I um, I made the Iron Bull a promise earlier, and I forgot, honest, but I just remembered I made a similar promise to you too, awhile back. Can we go on a walk, please?”

“Course lovely, as long as it’s alright with Marehis,” he said, looking to the Elf woman, “I’ll be watching out.”

“Of course da’len, I trust you,” she assured him, “go on, take all the time you need.”

Sera didn’t let the girl go without one last squeezy hug. “Hey Ink? I love you lots. Kay?”

“I love you lots too,” she promised, kissing the older girl on the cheek before Krem assisted in donning her cloak and linked arms to escort her on their walk. “Oh! We’ll be back, I’m sorry, I’m kind of scatter brained, I don’t mean to be rude to you guys—”

“Go da’vhenan, no one is insulted, we’re finishing up anyway,” Marehis stepped in, “go, be safe.”

She held up a hand for everyone to remain silent, and waited until the young couple made their way out of the corridor proper, and she heard the door to the Great Hall closing behind them. “Well that sounded serious,” Dorian said, looking to the Qunari, “Just what have you made the girl promise?”

“Ellie—” Marehis started but,

Sera let out a frustrated sound, hands slapping against her knees as she cried out, “Inky wants to die!”

“She doesn’t want to die, da’vhenan,” Marehis corrected, slinging an arm around the girl’s shoulder’s and pulling her sideways so she leaned against her. “She has assured us of that,” she assured the other’s, who all looked…bewildered, to say the least.

“Shit,” Varric breathed.

“Kid’s struggling with some major survivor’s guilt after everything,” the Iron Bull said, explaining the promise they struck, and the resulting admission from the girl, Marehis assuring she had already seen to it that she’d arranged a check up with Adan to address her feelings, the dip in her depression, and putting forth the suggestion that they all take the weekend as it goes, and did Cullen and Cassandra think perhaps she could have the morning off of War Room meetings so long as nothing of great import had happened? Their agreement was immediate.

“We should not have pushed Inquisitor upon her so soon, it is too much pressure,” Cassandra lamented.

“She just needs time, Cassandra,” Cullen defended.

“Eleanor is doing well in her role of Inquisitor, she handled her judgement hearings beautifully, and her Chantry talks, oh,” Madam de Fer breathed as if moved.

“Inky…Inky’s a good Inquisitor,” Sera said, “She just has to work through her depressy shite.”

Cassandra sighed, nodding. “I did not mean to imply that I thought her abilities lacking, I just wish she did not have so much on her,” she said, Cullen rested a hand on her shoulder, squeezing gently to comfort.

“We’ll give her a nice weekend, do what we can to make sure everything’s relaxing and
“fun,” Rainier said, “We’ve been so busy she hasn’t had a lot of time with Russel, I know the girl misses him, she’s always popping by the stables to check on him, brush him-“

“She’s always popping in to check on you, Sarge,” the nickname rang like ‘dumbass’ from Varric’s lips, “Loves that horse, but it’s you she misses and checks in on.”

“We should try to spend Sunday as a group,” Marehis voiced, “I thought tomorrow could be something of a mamis-daughters day, just staying in and relaxing, giving her time to rest while still surrounded by people she might cheer her while still making her feel comfortable just being, feeling whatever she’s feeling without the need of a brave face. She was exhausted, subdued all morning, and the very instant she was in sight of Lady Montilyet she immediately- she behaved no differently than usual but that is the thing. She obviously wasn’t feeling as smiley and chipper, but in front of others,” she sighed.

“I am still invited or do you think she would be falsely cheerful for me?” Cullen asked.

“We’ll simply have to see, you’re such a comfort to her and-“ well she certainly couldn’t find much cheer with her currently incarcerated papi, could she? “- I just think she could use that right now. Would you and Cassandra mind at all, spending the night tomorrow night? We could surprise her with news of our day in at breakfast.”

“Certainly,” Cassandra agreed.

“We’ll bring it up when we come,” Cullen said, nodding. “I will make muffins.”

“Muffins?” Cassandra questioned.

“My mother’s recipe,” and at the Seeker’s wry stare, ”She passed it down, and I make it edible.”

“I certainly hope so, you’ve only referenced your mother’s cooking as a tool for torture.”

“That is the only possible reference I can make,” he assured, “I promise nothing but comforting breakfast food.”

“Excellent.”

“Should I stay tonight or head back to my place?” Sera asked Marehis, “We’ll do things on Sunday?”

…w-well yes, but, “Oh, do you not wish to join us tomorrow da’vehnan?” Marehis asked.

“I thought it was just Inky and you guys-“

“I did say ‘daughters’ da’len.”

Cassandra smiled at the Elf girl’s surprised look, leaning over in her seat to scratch at Sera’s hair affectionately before pressing a kiss to her cheek, “We would not dream of excluding you, sweet girl.”

“Blah!” Sera complained, blushing fiercely.

“I don’t see why it should be so ‘blah’, the ickle Herald considers you a sister,” Dorian drawled, “siblings do traditionally share parentage.”

“Who the frick says I’m Inky’s sister?”

”‘Inky’ did, Buttercup,” Varric informed her. “least that’s what she said when- oh. Uhh...never mind.”

“Friggin what?” Sera demanded to know.

“When she was trying to figure out a birthday present for you!” Cole announced. “It’s almost Cloudreach and Ellie has been trying and trying to figure out what to get you, she’s so embarrassed that she can’t think of what you might like, but you are not a very ‘things’ person. So she asked everyone—all of her friends and companions in Skyhold, saying she wants to make it special because she loves you and you are like a sister to her.”

Dread Wolf take- Blah indeed, the Dread Wolf could not take her! But Cloudreach! It was soon to be upon them—Ellie had voiced that very concern to her the day of her initiation to Inquisitor and she’d forgotten! Sera’s birthday was the 4th! Oh she was a horrible mother, she- heavens, what in the world would you get for someone like Sera? The girl truly wanted for nothing, she had interests of course, maybe-

“She…she really went to all of you worrying about this? Saying that about me*?” Sera
asked, her voice sounded tight, was she upset?

Maerhis’s ears twitched when she heard footfalls in the corridor, and then Ellie and the Lieutenant were bounding up the stairs, holding hands, and it looked like perhaps her new handkerchiefs had gotten some use—Krem had one balled up in his free hand and while their faces were clear, one or both of them had been tearful, from what Marehis could smell. The young couple seemed fine now, though,

“Sera? What’s wrong?” Ellie asked, releasing Krem’s hand to start heading for the Elf girl.

Sera surged to her feet and almost stepped on Dorian as she broke out of their blanket circle and collided with Ellie—tackling the younger girl, literally, they went to the ground in a hug, Sera falling onto her back with the younger girl held to her chest fiercely as she said,

“Inky! You’re my little sister and you made sure everyone knows it! That’s friggin the best birthday present ever?”

Ellie giggled, humming contentedly into Sera’s shoulder, “Really?”

“Yeah really!”

“Cause I did get kind of an idea, if you’re down for it,” Ellie said, scratching behind her ear. Oh, did her tattoo itch? The Iron Bull did beautiful work and it had healed splendidly.

Sera gasped for some reason and, “Yes! Inky! We gotta—on my birthday?”

“Uh-huh!”

“Sweet!”

Sweet was rather the term for their weekend. They all slept so well, and Ellie seemed lighter with the day ahead of her free and clear. And she was sincerely pleased and surprised when, on the strange occasion that Marehis allowed her to answer the door on her own, she opened it to find a pajama clad Cassandra and Cullen, armed with a plate of fresh blueberry muffins and followed after by kitchen staff bearing trays of breakfast. They gathered before the fireplace to pray and eat. Cullen’s muffins, oh the man was brilliant. He’d taken on the challenge that Ellie hadn’t been exhibiting an appetite in the mornings and offered something that would compel her to ignore that without force or stress—she wasn’t going to let the man go through the trouble to do something so nice for them and leave that with anything that looked like ungratefulness, and of course it only stood to reason muffins—dessert—had to wait until after she’d consumed everything else on her plate, and she did well to earn the reward, Anya only made off with a rasher of bacon she snuck off the girl’s plate when she settled into her lap.

“Gracias papi! These are so yummy!” she enthused, popping another bite of blueberry muffin into her mouth. They were delicious, Marehis had to agree…and the fact that Sera was cleaning the crumbs off of her shirt by plucking them up and eating them made it clear the girl felt the same way.

“Thank you Ellie, I’m glad you enjoy them. Would you care for the recipe?” he asked. "It is mine to pass down after all."

Oh, that sent the girl gasping excitedly, genuinely excited! Oh she could kiss Cullen if that wouldn’t be wildly inappropriate! “We can make them together sometime?” Ellie asked him.

“Of course we can sweetheart,” the man assured her warmly.

They spent the whole of the rest of the day gathered on Ellie’s bed…well, all of them once Sera’s hair was seen to, it was in need of a trim so Marehis saw to that, garnering a chance to chat with the girl alone while Ellie was occupied, nestled between Cullen and Cassandra, Anya laying across their laps while the Seeker read aloud for them. Marehis led the Elf girl out onto the balcony so her hair could be easily swept away, sitting near the balcony railing while she worked.

“How are you doing, sweet girl? Since Haven?” Marehis wondered.

Sera shrugged, “Haven was right shit—I mean it was great, but what happened, that blows. Friggin’ Corif-in-piss is- I still can’t believe half this shite is happening.”

“Neither can I,” Marehis admitted.

“He- he’s so friggin big, Mare. I’m so scared he’s gonna come after Inky again—she’s so-his handprint took her whole forearm!”
“That was terrifying, but we are safe and secure here in Skyhold, we would see him coming from-”

“Miles away, yeah, Not-Beardy gave me a similar spiel. Just-“ Sera sighed. “Haven really freaked me out. We thought we were safe there, I mean all the shite in the world could happen when we were out in the field but Haven always felt safe, any threat that popped up there was either avoidable or things we could handle.”

Marehis nodded, kissing the back of Sera’s head, “I know. Hopefully we will grow to feel more safe here as time passes. Sweet girl-,” Solas, “someone made mention that you have been having nightmares since the Oasis. And you had a panic attack-“

“It was just-! Frick, it wasn’t a big deal, I don’t even know why I got so freaked out, just-“ what was she talking about? It made sense she was under duress directly in the face of losing someone she cared about- “how’d you even hear about it, Lace swore she wouldn’t tell and there wasn’t a whole bunch of people in the Tavern-“

“Da’vehnan, this is why I wished to discuss this with you—miss Lace has not broken confidence with you, I was speaking of your attack right after we escaped and made camp after Haven.” And too, Solas had informed her of one she’d suffered while walking the battlements with him one of their first evenings in Skyhold, that she was still struggling with this was worrisome.

“Oh.” Sera said. “It en’t…it’s not as bad- I used to get ‘em a lot when I was younger. But I haven’t had them in forever and then- yeah I keep having nightmares that I-Inky dies and it’s all my fault. And I’m so scared all the time that I’m gonna do something to mess it up, put her in danger. Or I’m not gonna be fast enough or strong enough.”

“Sweetheart I am so unspeakably proud of you for how incredibly you do, the lengths you go to protect Ellie, but she is not your responsibility all of the time—I left her in your care, the care of the others when you were in the Oasis and you went above and beyond. I am always watching, she has so many friends and allies—you have so many friends and allies. Remember that. I am always here for you da’vehnan, if you need me. You have so many friends and allies. Remember that. I am always here for you da’vehnan, if you need me. You can always come to me if you need to talk or vent. And if you’ve ever need of it, sweet girl I would go with you if you needed to speak with Adan or Miss Elan, if you find you’ve a great deal of trouble sleeping soundly, or-“

Sera sighed so Marehis fell silent. But then, “I dunno. It seems dumb to go to him for something that only happens every once in a while. I mean it used to be all the time when I was younger, Lady never- I never saw anyone about it.”

“She did not approve of seeking help?” Marehis asked, aghast.

“She always called it ‘throwing a fit’ said I was just pretending or whatever for attention.”

“Well no one is accusing you of such a thing now,” Marehis assured. “Da’len you do not need the weight of the world on your shoulders to feel that way—people drown in all measures of water, being deeper below the surface does not make one more drowned than someone laying unconscious face first on the surface.”

“Kay, I guess…maybe,” the girl allowed. “Thanks Mare. I promise to come to you if I need you.”

“I am glad.” Marehis breathed with quiet relief. She did not want to press the girl too much on the subject. “You are happy with your space in Skyhold?” she wondered, a bit of a change in subject, it was still related. She hadn’t been there more than once, but it was safe, and warm. The first evening the younger Elf lived there, while Ellie was secure with helping Leliana, Marehis slipped into the room and made certain there were enough pillows, brought her blankets, and seen to it the door could be securely locked—it hadn’t had one before, but Solas had- they had both had the concern for the girl sleeping on her own in the Tavern where the place would be full of drunken people. Solas had voiced the worry, and Marehis checked the door for a lock and when they found none, the man had disappeared for all of five minutes and returned from somewhere with an iron bolt for the door, and they’d worked together to install it so Sera could lock the door behind her.

“Yeah, it’s real sweet—I told Inky she could sleep over any time she wants, and she did a few times before she got her room, do you think it would be okay still even though she’s Inquisitory now? Like safe ‘n pish. I keep the door locked when I’m sleepin and uh S- someone
warded the windows, same way the ones in Ellie’s cabin were? Made it so they open to magic from Inky, or me tappin on them in a specific way.” Someone? Solas. He’d thought of as much in the following days, pressed a kiss to Marehis’s head as he informed her he’d seen to it the girl was secure-

“I don’t see why not,” Marehis agreed.
“And you’re always welcome to come too, it’s a bit of a squeeze but Inky always lays on me and I only take one side of the window seat.”
“I’m glad it is spacious enough for you,” Marehis offered, oh it was bad of her but she couldn’t help smiling, “Miss Lace likes it?”

Oh the girl blushed, tips of her ears reddening, “Yeah, it’s a nice set up. She um, stays over when she’s in Skyhold—told her she can sleep there even when I’m bunking with Inky.”
“Oh, “I hope she is not frustrated you haven’t been sleeping there the past few nights-“
“Nah, Lace…she knows how important Inky is to me, it don’t bother her none.”
“She is a very sweet young lady,” Marehis said as she finished up, “a very lucky one, I think I’m all done, you look beautiful as ever da’assan.”

“Thanks Mare, you’re the best,” Sera said, popping up onto her feet and turning about to help Marehis rise once the woman gathered up her sheathed razor and scissors. And once the implements were tucked away in one of Ellie’s desk drawers, it was sweet to hear the Elf girl giggle as Marehis caught up to her at the edge of the bed and wrapped her arms around her, falling onto the end of the bed together as Marehis peppered kisses to the girl’s ear.

“Mare!”
“They’re so precious and you’re hair is adorable!” Marehis laughingly enthused.
“The cutest! Lace is gonna love it,” Ellie insisted, giggling as she teased, “Danga’ll like it too-o!” in singsong.

Sera let out rather the eloquent squawking sound as she slapped her hands over her eyes.
“Dagna?” Marehis asked, interested, dying to broach the subject.
“Ahh yes, you did seem very comfortable the other night at dinner,” Cullen teased the Elf girl.

“I thought you were dating Miss Lace?” Cassandra asked, lowering the book in hand to look to Sera, “Is the Inquisition’s Anarchist giving you undue attention?” she worried.
“Nope! N-nothing like that, she en’t bothering me or nothing um,” Sera laughed nervously, “Yeah it’s…I dunno. We really like her?”
“We?” Maerhis prompted.
“Lace ‘n me. It’s-“ Sera blew out a frustrated sounding breath, “I dunno! Friggin' weirdy, I don’t know!”
“It isn’t weirdy,” Ellie corrected, smiling as she sat up, rocked forward to press a kiss to Sera’s cheek, “It’s polymamy silly!”
“I don’t feel sick-“
“It’s not a disease—it’s a kind of relationship. Like I’m polymami-y. I love Cassandra and Marehis the same, just like I love Cullen and the Iron Bull and So- I just, I love lots of people, I have similar relationships with them, and I don’t love any of them any less just because I love more of them. You’ve been my best friend for a while now, but I didn’t stop loving Sam when you and me became friends, just like I didn’t stop loving you when I became friends with Cremisius or Dorian or Cole,” Ellie shrugged. “You like Lace, and you like Dagna. As long as Lace likes her too, and Dagna likes both of you, I don’t see a problem.”
“Huh. Dunno. I guess that makes sense?”
“It does,” Marehis offered as she thought it over, “I did not have to start loving Ellie less to love you as well, neither do I love you any less than I love her.”
“Well put,” Cassandra agreed.
“Frick! Stop- stop being all lovey it’s freaking me out!”
“We can’t help it!” Ellie enthused abandoning her place between Cassandra and Cullen to crawl across the bed and just lay on Sera, “We just love you so so much! Mwah mwah mwah
“Inky! Blah!” Sera laughingly complained as she was bombarded with Mabari and Ellie’s kisses, Marehis reaching out to tickle at the Elf girl’s ribs, “I ruddy love you lot too!”

All in all it was a pleasant, lazy day well spent. Sera lay with her nose in the latest newsletter from the University of Markham, Orlais’ resting at her hip for later. Cullen must have been in need for the break himself, he lay with Ellie on his chest, his arm around Cassandra’s shoulders and his hand had been playing with the Seeker’s loose locks but it had stilled, the man dozing for most of the day while Cassandra and Ellie shared a book the girl was reading for her lessons with Dorian—something fictional and light that would still stretch her current vocabulary. Technically it was a bit of homework, though she did sleepily mumble that her eyes were getting tired and Marehis smiled bemused at, “Would you mind reading to me mami?” it was so sweetly asked, and she did not think Cassandra could deny her anything when she used the ‘m’ word. As it was, the Seeker nodded, pressing a kiss to Ellie’s head as she held her closer and allowed the girl to slip in and out of consciousness, rest while Cassandra read aloud.

Marehis…was avoiding reading, mostly. She’d made a request of the Seeker that the woman had of course made good on, but…ugh, she did have better things to do! She’d seen to Sera’s hair, and then gave the Elf girl a pedicure as she read, cleaning and painting her nails now that they were set up well enough to indulge in such things. ‘Buttercup’ yellow was pretty, and the girl liked it well enough—while she warned that they’d get ‘right chipped’ when she made to use her bow again—Sera subjected herself to having her fingernails painted. The Seeker even allowed Marehis’s procrastination—when Maerhis was finished painting Ellie’s finger and toenails lilac, Cassandra assented to matching with her…

It was a bit of mischief, but Ellie was giggly delight as she took the lilac nailpolish and with and mirthful nod from Cassandra, as it could be easily hidden or fully removed if the man did not care for it…Cullen ended up matching as well. While the man slept, Ellie removed his socks and painted his toenails. While he was surprised to wake with his toenails a different color than when he’d fallen asleep, his only question was why they hadn’t done his fingernails.

Eventually Marehis ran out of excuses though—Ellie painted her fingers and toes a pretty pale pink color and once they were dry…could she paint Anya’s claws? The idea was sound but when she looked to the pup with the thought in her mind, Anya had stared back and gave a quietly growl-laced huff that implied she had best not attempt such a thing. So.

It was after lunch when Marehis cracked open the weathered copy of the Chant Cassandra brought for her. She took a deep breath, and supposed it would be wisest to start with the first page, introducing herself more formally with the possibility of a change in religion. But she’d…she’d some interest in the section Ellie had taken her Chantry lesson from, and at her request the girl took the Chant in hand and flipped to the book of Transfigurations, the first chapter listing the Andtrasten Commandments, a code to live by she supposed.

These truths the Maker has revealed to me: As there is but one world, One life, one death, there is but one god, and He is our Maker. They are sinners, who have given their love to false gods.

Lovely.

“I don’t like the use of sinners either, but that’s only because of how people misuse the word. We’ve learned to use it to shame and guilt people, to mean ‘bad person’ or ‘evil’. Yeah, sins can get pretty extreme and make you evil or a bad person, but the word itself just means imperfect. Everybody sins and falls short of being absolutely perfect all of the time, and that’s okay, that comes with the territory of being a person—it’s okay to believe in other gods, but…” Ellie shrugged, “I guess maybe it really was a forewarning that the Evanuris aren’t gods in the same way the Maker is? And if you think you’re getting exactly the same deal with them, you’re making a mistake. I would rephrase it like ‘Giving love to false gods is fruitless’ or something—it isn’t anyone’s fault if they’ve been brought up to believe in Dalish gods, and they do exist on a level, and there is a system in place now that works, just, not as flowery and love and light as the Dalish have been led to believe. They don’t know the history of the Evanuris, that they weren’t gods to
begin with and aren’t really gods now. That when they die, they’ll serve the next generations in the Fade either as Spirits, or um, terrorize them as demons. And the only person alive that was involved has been painted a ‘trickster’ god, so even if he did try to explain, it’s not exactly believable on a wide scale. I wish there was some way of letting people know about that without making them feel disrespected or hurting them—because its forever, you know? How many demons are created purely because people die thinking they’re going to some happy, beautiful ‘field of flowers’ afterlife and wind up in the Fade?"

Certainly, it was distressing enough to Marehis and she was still alive.

“Do not think of it, sweet girl,” Marehis said, brushing hair back out of her face—she was supposed to be relaxing, not trying to figure out how to fix a system misunderstood, left broken for a thousand years. “Thank you, for explaining—I appreciate your understanding of Andrasten religion.”

The girl nodded, “You got it mami, I’m always down for talking faith! I’m sorry it doesn’t work exactly like you thought, but um, it doesn’t sound horrible, being able to help people, being a Spirit of something pure in the Fade. Mythal sounds like she was nice, and you always pray to her,” hmmm yes, how lovely it was, to discover she was praying to her lover’s ex…girlfriend? Wife? Who was dead? But not entirely? It made her head hurt. “I think it’s nice, you have an understanding mami to mami. It’s really sad what happened to her and her baby, but it might…I dunno, be nice for her, to hear from someone Solas cares about so much, reaching out to her, talking to her about people Solas loves. He’s made some beyond crazy mistakes, but he…he wasn’t lying about loving us—you me and Sera.”

That…was true. And Marehis, oh it hurt her heart to think of the fate that had befallen Mythal. No one should have to suffer so much. “That is a very sweet thought da’vèhnan.”

“It’s…it’s really hard, figuring out what to do about Solas,” Ellie confessed. “It’s kind of like judging two people—the man he was, and the man he is, and if there’s even a difference between them. With Thom…I can’t imagine the man he is today ever repeating the same mistakes, he never meant to make them in the first place, the man he is today is worlds apart from who he used to be. And yeah, Solas joined the Inquisition for totally selfish, borderline-psychotic reasons, but he’s helped a lot, tried to fix this—while hiding the hand he had in it to begin with,” she sighed frustratedly. “And I mean with the other things I had to sit in judgement on, I was personally involved but it was easier to look at the facts of everything and deliver judgement based on what they did, regardless of how I feel—I mean there wasn’t much ‘feel’ to Denham or Goat-thrower man. But, I mean, in my heart I just wanted to send Alexius home when we arrested him, let him be with and bury his son, then gotten him back for punishment.”

“We could not have had Alexius returned once he was safely in Tevinter, even if the man was contrite enough to turn himself in, the Magisterium would likely have held him captive if need be, refuse to let us have him,” Cassandra offered, “you did do your best—compromised. Encouraged the man and his son to reconcile before Felix’s passing. This situation with Solas is…difficult to measure out. And it is far more personal to you than even Alexius’s case. While your role as Inquisitor demands you consider the facts…” the woman sighed, sat up on her knees to be before Ellie and take the girl’s hands in her own. “Eleanor. You would not be the Inquisitor you are, if you were not the incredible, compassionate, justice-driven young lady I am so very proud to consider my daughter. You will come to a decision on this, and I have every faith it will come with a balance of what is right to pay penance for what evil he has wrought, and what is right, in return for what good he has done since.”

Oh her da’vèhnan, the girl’s eyes welled up with tears, “That isn’t- you can’t just- I’m really happy and sad now and I need a hug!”

Cassandra gladly obliged, pulling the girl close and pressing her lips to the top of her head, holding her while the girl seemed to be hugging the woman with everything she had.

“Sandra just parented so hard,” Sera whispered like she were in awe.

“She just keeps making it cooler,” Cullen said as if in agreement.

“Is that code for something?” Ellie wondered, voice muffled from being pressed into
Cassandra’s shoulder. “You two keep talking about something being cool.”

“It is code for nothing at all!” Cassandra assured…nervously, voice pitching high, was she embarrassed about something? Her cheeks pinked as she pulled away from Ellie, patting the girl on the head in a motion that looked like she was going for nonchalance but um…well, failing, it was choppy and awkward.

“Well, it is code for nothing right now,” Cullen supposed, ”But in a few years…”

“Decades!” Cassandra snapped.

“You…you do realize we don’t necessarily have decades er, n-no offence-“

“Full offense! I am only in my thirties! I will have you know my great grandmother Genevieve Pentaghast gave birth at fifty-nine*—“ she immediately fell silent and turned very, very red.

Oh. Oh goodness.

Sera let out a loud, happy sounding scream as Ellie slapped both hands over her mouth, staring wide eyed at Cullen and Cassandra, and squealed.

Strangely enough, imprisonment was maddeningly dull to the point Solas lamented his interrogations were over. No one came any longer to question or barb him. No one came at all, save for the guards who brought him his meals that came at surprisingly regular intervals, and the one instance Marehis came down to speak with him. He’d…he’d been expecting more yelling, and foolishly there was some small part of him that said she must have returned to seek to smooth things out, talk things through—cast all blame from him and forgive him purely because of love, but that was as unrealistic as it was unworthy. Marehis was not some flighty love-struck fool, and he deserved every bit of her ire.

What he was wholly undeserving of, and still received, was her compassion—granting him permission to monitor the bond, and trying to take the blame from him, Ellie’s current struggles. It did make him feel better, that she would try to comfort him but…no. Ellie—Ellie would be living an entirely different life, she would not know the wonderful people she did now, but she would have known others—she had known Trevelyan. They would have had a life together, and she would not constantly be thrown into situation after situation that worked her to her very limits, tried and strained her until she snapped. He had given Corypheus the Orb. He’d stood idle by while the man carried out the assault on the Conclave. He had expected to walk over his ashes…it made him sick to think now Ellie’s ashes could well have been those he stepped on if things had gone to plan, and walked away from the destruction with his Orb, powered and ready to take down the veil.

His Orb that destroyed the temple, Marked her, made her a target for Corypheus to handle personally. None of this should be happening and it was, because of blind ambition and pride.

He was grateful he could monitor the bond again, it gave him something to do, and the peace of mind that he knew where Ellie was, how she was faring. And it was something of reprieve—that he got to vicariously experience her weekend, the love and rest, and recovery she felt so deeply it rang in her magic. There were times she felt empty, passive about it all, but the feeling did spark back up, come through again and he was glad of it. Happy for her, relieved. She was nearer come Sunday evening, in the tavern he thought, her exuberance so great since that morning that he knew she must be surrounded by the whole of her party, of those she cared about the entire day…he’d woken in the morning with his magic panged with the long-forgotten ache of missing his own father, drifted back to sleep and searched to find what made it think of the man that had passed Ages ago, before Solas even came to work in Mythal’s home. What he found was the Inquisitor’s party having taken over the kitchens after the breakfast rush—Ellie standing alongside Cullen and the duo mixing up batter for something with a great many blueberries in it, the girl dutifully
following a recipe written out before them, asking the man about his ‘mami’ and why was her cooking considered a form of violence? Her recipe was ‘super’! Marehis was perched on a counter top with her chin resting on Sera’s shoulder, arms wrapped around the younger Elf who had been smiling as she watched the bit of chaos ensuing as the likes of the Iron Bull and Varric tried their hands at baking, the Qunari was surprisingly gifted at it, partnering with the Dwarf who had…the sort of baking abilities expected of the gruff, drunken author. Sera had been amused with the Dwarf and Qunari bickering over if they’d added the butter yet, when she paled and looked…looked directly at him—Solas. Glared in his direction and then looked around like she weren’t entirely sure what she was looking for or where it was.

“Da’vehnan?”

“Thought I saw…er…never mind,” the Elf girl sighed and turned to face Marehis, hugging the woman tight. “We’re gonna have fun today, yeah?”

“Certainly da’len.”

“I thought about um. What you said? I set up a thing with Elan,” the…the Healer? Was she ill? “Not ‘cause she’s Elfy, just, dunno. Feels weird going to a stranger but it feels even weirder going to someone I know pretty good.” Weir- oh. Oh he was glad she was going to seek some form of help with her panic. Marehis detailed the attack she’d had after Haven and Solas…he’d shared with the woman last week, the panic Sera experienced a few nights into their living in Skyhold—they’d been meditating together and Sera wanted to find places to explore in Skyhold—a bit of preparation so she could take Ellie exploring without fear of running into any places that were too dangerous to enter due to crumbling infrastructure or anywhere that she termed ‘scary’. They’d been walking the battlements and the girl lost her breath in the least pleasant way, could not catch it, became overwhelmed with how high up they were, and there wasn’t ‘any ruddy railing! Someone could fall!’ she nearly did, but Solas had had her, held her and coached her to breathe with him before she hyperventilated to a point of passing out while he quietly dipped into his magic to reach out and seek some communication with her own, instruct it to assist her, help her find calm again.

“Would you like me to go with you? I would not wish to intrude, but if you wanted me there…”

“Sandra said she’d go with me if I needed, and ‘sides someone has to stay with Inky-“

“Sweet girl, I would take the time for you—I’m going to Ellie’s appointment tomorrow, that is no more important than your own. There are a host of people capable of stepping in for me—if you want me there, I will be.”

“Kay. Yeah um, I’d like that.

Ellie let out a surprised squeak that got all Elves attention—Fade-hidden and those in the waking world alike. Solas looked to find the girl smiling despite herself as she tried to glare at Cullen—the man had gotten batter on his finger and wiped it on her nose, catching her by surprise and earning a giggly, admonishing, “Papi!”

He left them. His magic was merely…equal parts sentimental and jealous, wanting comfort and that bled into seeing Ellie with a father figure and making it wish for his own, and then jealousy of Cullen—that the man was able to be with her and enjoy a role Solas longed to return to, not take from the man of course, but share.

Even as it stood…still, there was ache in the bond—Ellie missing someone. Him. She missed him, and it was blessing and burden, he was thrilled she could still find it in herself to miss him, and hated that he could not go to her. He needed to fix this—part of that was complying with his imprisonment but it did not stop the constricting feeling like someone was holding him back from launching forward and actively doing something to make this right.

While he could not leave his cell…that did not stop him from receiving yet another visitor. In the Fade, late Sunday evening. He was meditating, sifting through the bond while Ellie slept to see if he could ensure she slept pleasantly—she’d done so without taking potion, she would Fade Dream and he did not…it had been horrible, she’d been so very frightened and heartbroken at whatever she witnessed in the Fade while on her own.

Though she was not on her own now, exactly. There was a painful press in the bond, like
someone jabbingly poking at his magic with spite in mind—so he hunched forward, relaxed and sought sleep.

He woke in the Fade to Ellie seated across the bars from him ‘criss-cross applesauce’, arms crossed over her chest, sporting quite the impressive glare.

“I’m sure you have questions,” he offered.

“Uh-huh.”

And then she cried. Sobbed uncontrollably as she frustratedly tried to temper it—she had apparently come here to yell at him, but she was so upset, and hurt, and sad.

“I’m so mad at you!” she wailed once she could speak.

“Understandably.”

“I want to hate you—I really really do, and I can’t! And I hate that!” she cried, reiterating, “I am so mad at you!”

“I’m sorry.”

“You should be!” she sniffled, “I’m-I’m sorry too.” Whatever for? “I-I’m really sorry about Mythal, and your baby. Does it make you sad to be here? Er, Skyhold I mean.”

Does…does it make him sad? Was that her first question? “I lived some of my best times of my life here. It does not sadden me to return, I am glad it can serve as a safe home for you. You are safe here, Ellie, I swear it. The only sadness I feel in relation to Skyhold is that I did not offer it sooner. I should have, I see that now, it was purely my own efforts to not be caught out, have my past revealed, that kept me from offering it before—but this place is yours, to secure you, to do with what you see fit.”

Ellie nodded. “The Inquisition can really rebuild from here and it does seem a lot more um, sturdy than Haven. I’m glad you let us use it.”

“I do not think you understand da’vhehnan. Skyhold was mine, now it is yours, as in you personally. You allow the Inquisition to use it. I have no say in who domiciles here any longer.”

He had already made that plain with the Advisors, now that the truth was out there. There had been some concern in their council that Solas had dominion over Skyhold. He’d immediately given it over—to Ellie herself, she was his da’len despite everything he had done, and if she needed to cast him from this place as punishment when she sat in judgement over him, she was free to do so now—they would be secure in their claims to this place without him.

She stared at him a moment, and then, “Kay. Um. So…you really never met a Human before you woke up in our time?”

“No even once—I’d no idea such a entity existed da’vhehnan, I woke up and suddenly there were Dwarves and Qunari and Humans—it was mind boggling to say the least.”

“Oh gosh, I just about crapped my pants the first time I saw the Iron Bull! He’s the first Qunari I’ve ever ever seen! And I at least knew Qunari’s existed, had some context for what they would look like. That must have been scary for you,” she said. Then, “You must have been asleep a really long time.”

“Ages,” he assured her. “I went to sleep before they even began counting Ages.”

She looked dumbstruck by that, and yet, “Huh. I guess that’s why your accent’s so funny.”

“It is not ‘funny’-“

“It is too funny!” she argued cheerfully.

“I quite assure you my accent was once common among Elvhenan. Low born Elvhenan at least.”

“Really? I mean it’s funny as in ‘weird’ like I’ve never been able to place it, you’re the only person I’ve ever met who talks like you do. But it sounds super fancy to me."

“I assure you I sound like a yokel in comparison to a member of the Evanuris.”

“I’m sorry for what they did,” she offered. “Um. I don’t…it doesn’t make it better, but…it’s really sad, that must have been so scary for Mythal. But she’s the ‘all mother’ now, and people pray to her for help with babies and children all the time, and the way things seem to work, she gets to help! Her people go to those who pray, and help them. And um, mami, she used to pray to
Mythal all the time, like every day when we did prayer time in Haven? And I dunno...like, I love Cremisius. If we ever broke up, or I died or something, I would still want him to be happy, find someone else and be loved, have a great life. So I figure Mythal feels the same way about you. So getting to know Marehis through prayer, and hear her praying for your safety, about the um, children in your life,” Ellie shrugged, “in a way, all of those things kind of give her the experience the Evanuris took away. Sorry, did any of that make sense?”

Was...was she punishing him with kindness? Was that the play she was taking with this? Come try her best to comfort him over something that happened Ages ago, that led him to do horrible things that affected her in the present day?

He had to clear his throat, “I believe it did. Thank you, Ellie. That is a comforting sentiment.”

She rocked her head side to side as she thought about further questioning and came up with, “You used to be a slave?”

“Yes. We were never beaten or starved or punished. We were cared for, and in return for that care, we worked together as a community to serve each other, and first and foremost, our masters. However that came with fulfilling their bidding—the Evanuris thought themselves gods long before the people of today claimed them as such. They would send us to war with one another over petty rivalry that could have been better settled with a reasonable conversation between the High Mages.”

“Did you ever have to fight?”

“No. Mythal never played into such nonsense, and she always held herself as a voice of reason to the others, stopped many rivalries before they started. However...there was one time, Falon’din had said something in passing—a rude remark that Mythal and Sylaise and Anduril should err...it was sexual in nature and demeaning, meant to disrespect the women in their ranks and instead of war per se, Mythal met this with the host of the women in the Evanuris sent all of their male slaves to Falon’din’s main estate to just stand and crowd his property. While in a state of undress.”

She gasped at that eyes alight with mirth as she asked, “Naked?!”

“As the day we were born. Thousands of us in his courtyard, his estate was not unlike Skyhold—”

She squeaked, giggly at the imagery of Skyhold’s courtyard filled with a sea of naked Elvehnan.

“Um, so you were in Mythal’s house?” she asked, “How did that happen? Did your parents work for her?”

Solas shook his head, ‘no’. “In truth, we come from albeit similar circumstance, da’len. It is a lack of parents that put me in Mythal’s house. I was born to Elgar’nan’s house, my mother was lost in warfare, my father passed after a counter attack for Elgar’nan poisoning Anduril’s people—she’d a very ‘eye for an eye’ mentality. Mythal took in all who found themselves orphaned in their youth, I joined her House in my twelfth year.”

“You were so little,” Ellie breathed, “It must have been hard, scary to start all over again all on your own in a new house. I’m sorry you lost your parents like that.”

“Mythal was kind, and all in her house had faced similar circumstance, we looked out for one another and could lean on each other for support.”

“That’s so good,” she smiled, relieved. “Did you like working in Mythal’s home—oh! Mami said you were a shepherd, and told me about your um, affinity with wolves,” she seemed shy as she said, “Thank you for saving me.”

“Of course, da’vehnan. I would always rescue you.”

She nodded, seeming uncertain what to say to that. She returned to, “So, you liked working in Mythal’s home?”

“I did, I found my work satisfying, peaceful. My life in her home was something of a dream state, there was hardly any strife with the other houses, I tended to fields, the flock of sheep she cared for, and found myself surrounded by friends and loved ones,” he did not wish to be cruel,
but he did want her to understand, “Imagine your life now without Corypheus or threat of the Fade, demons, none of the dangers, just doing meaningful things that kept Skyhold running smoothly and safe, always with your family and friends. That was my life before Mythal’s death, before the Veil.”

“Gosh, I… I get you wanting to take down the Evanuris so very badly.”

“They took everything, everything good in the world—and not just for me, my experience is shared across all under their rule, there were few who truly prospered, lived lives wholly unaffected by the Evanuris’ cruelty. With Mythal gone…it was not purely vengeance I worked from, da’vehnan. She was the only one ever capable of protecting the people, with her gone? Power gets redistributed and there are wars over that—who gets her slaves, her lands? Who can lay claim to her magic? We did not have the Fade as we do now—now when a Mage dies their magic returns to the Fade. Then, it was more of a tangible resource that could be harvested. I took Mythal’s magic and hid it, and eventually it is the power I used to work the Orb of Destruction and create the veil, seal the Evanuris away forever.” At the time, he thought it was what she would have liked—having such a hand in stopping the Evanuris once and for all.

“That’s so insane—I mean it all sounds wild but I can’t believe you made this,” Ellie breathed, something caught between awe and quiet fright.

“It is why you are always safe with me here, da’len. Some demons have grown more powerful than what I can manage, but for the most part I…have a sense of domain. That is why I have such control over what I can witness in the Fade.”

“Oh,” Ellie chirped, “I guess that makes sense. I just thought it was experience or something, that eventually if I got old enough I could pick and choose what I experience here.”

“You can, when you enter the Fade with myself or…I assume Cole was with you when you laid down?”

Ellie nodded. “Yeah. He’s giving us space, but he said he…huh, he had to ‘let me in’,” she said. Then, “So…you made the Fade, and after seeing the consequences like ‘no more immortality’ and a loss of magical connection and stuff, you decided to undo it?”

“Yes. But it is… prison, it works with restraint, and time—time is so meaningless to us da’vehnan, when you are alive for long enough a decade passes like a minute, a hundred years is nothing. In order to truly inflict punishment and correction upon the Evanuris I had to make certain they felt the eons passing endlessly, something they would find themselves unable to endure so that upon their release they would be malleable, repentant and able to be corrected, controlled. So I went to sleep so I might live to reach an Age to bring them back.”

“You…used Mythal’s power to make the Orb do its thing before. You needed it powered up again?”

“Yes. Corypheus and I found one another, and I saw it as ample opportunity to revive the Orb and set things right—to what I thought was right at the time. He heard of its power, but he did not understand, could not comprehend—he sought to murder the Divine, believed the purity of her soul would be enough to power the Orb. He barely understands what he’s using, but of course I was counting on that—I did not intend for him to live after using it, I thought he would perish in the blast.”

Her chin quivered, “Did you know everyone was going to die?”

He hated this. Hated himself. “Yes. That… was the point, da’len. It- it was a meeting of Mages and Templars—all people who have magic in quantities big and small, they were meant to die, you were all meant to die, and the Orb being Elvehnan, it would keep your magic from being reabsorbed by the Fade, it would be attracted to it and power it adequately enough.”

“Adequately? There were hundreds of people Solas.”

“Mythal was a powerful woman. The Evanuris, they are not considered gods today because they were street magicians, Ellie. They had god-like power, beyond your wildest imaginings.”

“Are you sorry?” she asked quietly.

“Yes. I acted blindly, Ellie—that does not excuse what I did, but I do wish for you to know
I regret it now, trying to take down the veil. I already bungled the system so badly, caused so much pain for my own people, I did not need to doom us all to fix a mistake I made before recorded history.”

“Do you know how I ended up Marked?” Ellie asked.

“No. I can only surmise that you touched the Orb at a critical stage in powering it. What is on your hand is a power the Orb had—to close up the veil, and now the ability to tear holes in it.”

“What would you do if you had the Orb back? Would you kill a bunch of people trying to power it some more? Bring down the Veil? What would bringing down the veil do? You talk about wanting Spirits to walk alongside us but somehow I imagine there’s no ‘us’ in that equation.”

“That was a bit of wordplay. Spirits used to be Elvehnan—when they were corporeal, they walked this world,” he conceded. “I wished to make them so again. But I…I will admit I am not even certain bringing down the veil would make them so—they’ve no bodies to return to—” he shook his head, trying to get back into focus, such lines of thinking were pointless because, “I do not know what I would do with the Orb, Ellie, but I certainly would not use it. Hide it, destroy it, but I would never—I swear to you, never use it to bring down the Veil. I was willing to risk the unknown, but that is because there was so much here I did not know. In destroying the Evanuris I became no better than them, I see that now.”

Ellie nodded, quiet and contemplative. He did not want to disrupt her, but…oh he missed her, the bond was a blessed substitute, but a substitute all the same, ”You...you've had a pleasant weekend?” he asked.

"Huh? Oh! Yeah, it's been really great. We had like the best lazy day yesterday, I um, kind of needed a break. So, just a lot of relaxing, it was nice."

"Relaxing? You were terribly excited about something yesterday-" he cleared his throat, he was uncertain if Marehis had asked he be discreet about monitoring her, "your excitement was so great it spiked in the bond enough to be felt," which was truth.

"Yesterday? I mean it was great hanging out with everyone- oh! Do you mean Saturday?" He supposed so, so he nodded and she considered it, "Huh...oh! Sera and me, we were so excited because Mami's having a baby!" she announced gleefully, and Solas was so very startled he almost fell out of the Fade, back into consciousness- he- they- they had always been careful-

"M-Marehis-?"

"Oh! Gosh! Sorry sorry sorry! Cassandra! She isn't pregnant, just, um, she and papi are thinking about it in the future," she explained, oh thank the heavens. He- it would not displease him in the slightest, but this was hardly the time. "Sera thinks it's crazy Cassandra wants to risk all that heartburn, Cullen's hair is so wild we're positive he had to have been born with it."

"Heartburn is some indication of hair?" he wondered. A bit of masochism he supposed, Mythal had suffered a great deal of heartburn.

"Oh! It's a kind-of wives tale? People have lots of heartburn when their babies have lots of hair—but it's more like babies have lots of hair because their parent is making a lot of estrogen? Higher estrogen causes heartburn."

"I wish them happiness then, and um, a lack of heartburn, I understand it's rather unpleasant," Solas offered. "I'm glad you and Sera had such a fun weekend."

Ahh, mention of Sera set her questions back on track, "Why did you try to mage-ify her?"

“It was foolhardy of me, da’len—I will apologize to her if I am given the opportunity. You came to me already a mage, nurturing your magic is one of my greatest pleasures. When I discovered the potential Sera has for it, I thought it would be horrible, irresponsible to not encourage her magic like I would of any young Elvehnan I would come to care for before the Veil. She is so very scared of magic, so I thought it best to…there are many children who dislike eating their vegetables, I have seen people go to lengths such as hiding them within their meals so they eat them without their knowledge, before introducing them as something they might enjoy eating. So I encouraged her magic through training to do something she wanted, would find purpose in—to help with the Rifts and the Breach. Then I introduced the real thing, on a level she could perform. Gave her a taste for it to see if she might like it. I woke up her magic enough that she was capable
of casting while under a great duress, wild magic, something any Elvehnan could be capable of if circumstances aligned and they were desperate enough.”

“Sneaking her magic veggies, huh?” Ellie posed the question with an edge to her voice, like the comparison was pathetic. “And all the secrecy because she’s afraid of magic? Isn’t that like, the exact reason not to do something like that to her? Solas! That was selfish, and horrible! She got hurt! And she didn’t want it! Do you understand that? What you did was wrong!”

“It was, and I am sorry.”

“You should be! That was so wrong! And you hurt Sera! She said it felt like it almost killed her!”

“It was, but I had no intention for her to be hurt—in her urgency she channeled magic through her own body, before fully opening her connection, I am so sorry that happened, believe me da’vehnan it killed me that she was injured.”

“You were disappointed she didn’t become a mage!”

“I was admittedly pleased at the prospect of her having access to her natural born right. I could ease her into magic-“

“Easing her into her magic?! Do you hear yourself? Do you even realize how crazy and manipulative you sound?!?”

“I only mean that if she’d wakened her magic, I was prepared to help her if-I thought I had pushed her too hard too soon, realized I was doing something dangerous, thought I had done something irreversible to her! If I had, I was going to take responsibility, help her find her footing with her newfound power, do all I could for her.”

“You shouldn’t have done any of it! It’s Sera’s life! If you’re so worried she should embrace her magic or whatever you should have talked to her about it! Been honest! If it freaked her out too much to pursue it—she shouldn’t pursue it!”

“I know, da’len that was an offer made purely to put her mind at ease-“

“Bullshit! You can’t just keep trying to push people to- Solas! I understand all Elv-Elvehnan were magical in your time but don’t you see you’re just trying to make the Elves in your lives like the ones you knew before?”

That…that wasn’t true. Was it? “I…I did not consider as much.”

Oh, the girl growled at him. “For an old-ass man you need to grow the hell up!” she shouted at him, "The people in your life aren’t yours to manipulate and control—they’re people! They’re going to do things and be things that don’t fit the picture perfect idea in your brain of what they could or should be! If you ever try to trick my Mami or Sera into magic again, I will make you regret it!”

It felt like a door slamming in his face. One instance she was there, seated before him, railing. The next she was gone, awake again, her outrage pulsating in the bond. In his urgency he chased after her, after a fashion—immediately found himself where she was in the waking world, in her quarters, her bed with Marehis, the girl gasping as she shot up in bed and Marehis was wakened in the same instance, resting a hand on her back as the girl caught her breath,

“Da’vehnan? What is wrong?”

“Sorry, I’m okay, sorry can- can we just go back to sleep? I’m sorry I woke you up.”

“Sweetheart, stop apologizing, you need to calm yourself, your heart is pounding. Did you have a bad dream?” Ellie shook her head, and Marehis felt at her forehead, and then wrapped her arms around her to bring up blanketing with her, rubbing the girl's arm, "you're chilled. I'll make us some tea, take deep breaths,” Marehis instructed, rising from the bed to head for the fireplace, “—can you tell me five things you see?”

“The stars, my bed, my blankets, Anya, and my beautiful mami!” 
Oh she was beautiful, blushing as she smiled softly at the compliment. She was beautiful, perfect and wonderful as she was— he did not need her to be a mage—his advice before, it had been purely for her own and Ellie’s benefit, had it not? He just…it was like with Skyhold. He did not wish to leave any loose ends behind—if they still wanted the benefit of someone being bonded to her, they should know they would have that ability, shouldn’t they? Had he seen something lacking in Sera? He thought her brilliant and sweet, and he’d lamented her upbringing, that Lady Emmauld had found her wanting and made her feel that, taught her she was—she was—! Sera was perfect as she was. Magical aversion and all. It had been wrong of him to try and change that—quelling her fear of it to give her a sense of security was one thing, thrusting magic upon her was another.

“I didn’t have a nightmare, I’m not scared or anything,” Ellie said as Marehis worked. “I um, kind of went to see Solas.”

“You visited him in the Fade?” Marehis asked levelly.

“Uh-huh. Are you mad? I wanted to talk to him on my own somewhere just…dunno, it seemed like the best place to do it without any outside pressure or interference, nothing that would have to be official or documented so we could get out anything messy without um totally screwing him later down the line.”

“He’s in a great deal of trouble da’vehnan. Did your talk reveal anything new?” Marehis wondered.

Ellie shrugged, flopping back against her pillow to stare up at the ceiling. “I don’t know what to do. I’m so mad at him, and I can’t believe the things he’s done. but he’s also done good things, and even though…I mean he could have just walked away from the Breach, from the Inquisition when he realized he couldn’t get the Mark from me. He could have tried to figure out how to handle Corypheus on his own—he’d have never gotten caught for the things he did. But he stayed, risked that—hid it, but still, it was a risk—to stay and help get rid of the Breach and stop the people that work with Corypheus,” she reasoned out, chin quivering as she pressed her hands to her eyes. “And he- I still love him, it’s so dumb!”

Marehis sniffled quietly, taking a deep controlled breath as she kept her back to the girl, “It is not dumb, da’len. It is normal. I…love him too.” She cleared her throat, and it wasn’t until the kettle she’d hung over the fireplace came to a boil that she turned to face her ward, brow creasing with worry when she saw the girl still despairing, and for a moment Solas forgot himself, that he was in the Fade—he opened his mouth to offer to see to the tea, let her go to the girl more quickly. But Maerhis was returned to her soon enough, seating herself before Ellie as she offered her a cup, “You will come to a decision on this—no one expects it of you overnight.”

Ellie sighed and sat up, “Thanks mami. Are you mad I went to see Solas?”

The woman hummed a bit as she considered it. "Well. I do appreciate you were honest with me, and it is your prerogative where you go in the Fade so long as you are safe.”

Solas sighed. He…he wanted to stay, to just be with them even if it was only through the Fade. But he had already disrespected their sense of privacy already.

He settled for staying in his cell and studying the bond. It was the closest he could be with those he loved, he did not expect he would be seeing any of them again until they decided to move forward. And that did not seem to be happening anytime terribly soon.

It wasn’t. And he still received another unexpected visit.

Ellie’s appointment had been trebulous, he’d felt her anxiety in the bond, followed by relief…and then shortly thereafter, anger spiked across the bond, outrage.

And then a little while later, she was back—not in the Fade, in the waking world, with Mister Aclassi er… It was his understanding in his absence, the Lieutenant’s father had arrived—it was Cremisius who joined Ellie as she descended the stairs to the cells, the girl was stamping her feet like perhaps she was working off some of the anger still thrumming in her. The Lieutenant, ever the dutiful boyfriend, was hefting rather the large sack over his shoulder for the girl, he set it down before Solas’s cell, leveled him a glare and assured, “I’ll be right outside the door, don’t try anything Wolf-boy or I’ll do more than black your eye.”
“Thanks for helping me, it’ll be fine,” Ellie assured him, popping up on her toes to kiss the Tevinter on the cheek. He nodded, and left them.

“Have you reached a decision?” Solas prompted.

“Nope! Don’t ask again, it makes my brain hurt—I’m just here to bring you some things and give you a heads up. I’m going to be going out of range of the bond for a while, on mission. We’ll be leaving in a bit, so don’t freak out if you can’t feel me anymore or something—I’ll be with everyone.”

“Mission?”
“Uh-huh,” was all she had to say about it.
“You brought me things?”
“Yup! Just…you know. Don’t get any ideas, I just…” she sighed, frustrated with herself and then she pulled open the bag the Lieutenant had brought down, sliding items through the bars—pillows and blankets, and a great many—oh. His books, study materials from his quarters. “Here. I don’t know how long we’ll be gone. So,” she shrugged.

“Thank you, da’vehnan. This is very kind,” he said. “Do, please be safe.”

Ellie nodded. “Thanks,” she said, turning to take her leave though, “Um. Hey Solas? I love you. I’ll see you when I get back, okay? We’ll figure this out.”

His throat felt tight, he almost feared she might leave before he could force the words through,

“I love you as well, da’vehnan.”

There was something, quiet ticking coming from something wrapped up within one of the blankets she’d given him.

She left him her wrist watch. She was allowing him to know the...the time, the date, mark its passage which somehow returned a bit of sanity being so timeless had picked away at. And with it, came a little scrap of her notepad paper torn away, saying Planning on being gone a week or so. You’ll be in the loop time-wise. We’ll talk when we get back. <3

He sighed as he settled in, it was a relief to have softer things to find purchase in, and his books. It was blessing to have something else to occupy his mind. He...losing connection in the bond, while it was different, than experiencing the loss through death, but still, it was largely unpleasant for him, for his magic, focusing on his studies would occupy his mind from the sensation, help him ignore it.

Though there was one thing more to occupy his headspace, to consider while Ellie and the others were away. He had one visitor more, before their party left.

She kicked the prison door open to hit the wall with a resounding bang.

“Alright baldy, you’re a fucking asshole, and I hate your stupid guts!”

“S-Sera,” Solas cleared his throat, setting his book aside and rising to his feet as she stomped up to his cell door. “I am so s-”

“Sorry, yeah yeah yeah, blah blah blah—can it!” Sera growled, "We're ruddy leaving in an hour and and and and." she stomped her foot with frustration as she very frustratedly screamed the very last thing he expected to hear,

"I need your friggin' help!"

Mother Giselle was officially a bitch in Ellie’s book. She’d felt badly when she called her that in the Fade with Envy, but nope! It was a thing!
The absolute nerve!
She pulled Ellie aside in the Great Hall after she was done with her appointment with Adan, she...she felt a lot better about things. She wasn’t going totally crazy, yeah she had a lot of hormone whiplash and trauma, and guilt, and it had just been grinding her down and she’d felt so
ungrateful—like it was horrible of her to feel that way because she had so much good in her life! Cremisius had cautioned her about being open and honest about suicidal thoughts and things, but he’d…he’d felt like that when he had so many awful things happening in his life, she felt so dumb when she talked to him about her own experiences, but he’d just held her close as they walked the battlements and pressed a kiss to her head, listened and understood. “You don’t have to have a miserable life to be miserable, love, that’s not how depression works. You’ve got a lot of good around you, but you’ve been through a lot—whatever you need, I’m here.” He was the best.

And Mother Giselle was the worst! Anyway! After her appointment, Mother Giselle waved her over and was going on about Dorian. Again. It turned out she’d been in contact with his parents! His father at least. And that— that jerk! He’d sent a ‘retainer’ that just sounded awful! Like he wanted to hurt Dorian, take him home by force! His father had wanted Mother Giselle to make it so Dorian would go to the Hinterlands, meet this retainer—without informing him beforehand! She thought the best way to do that was to have Ellie trick him—which was a big, big nope!

Ellie tattled to Dorian right away, and she was taking him to the Hinterlands, alright! Meet that retainer, and dare him to try and touch a single hair on Dorian’s head with Ellie standing there! Oh she was going to fight so many people!

Try to kidnap her best friend?! Freaking bring it!

Dorian chuckled when Ellie let out another frustrated huff as she tightened up the straps of Russel’s saddle, the Tevinter patted her on the head—it was kind of nice, made her wonder if that was why Anya liked being petted. “I like your energy, but maybe save it for the retainer.”

“If you want me to go in swinging, I will. I’ll punch him so many times!”

“Maybe try talking to the guy first, Imekari,” the Iron Bull suggested as he offered Dorian a hand, helped him into Bitsy’s saddle before climbing in after him.

Oh well. At least the Iron Bull was here—everyone was here! A big big group going together! Both-Aclassi’s big!

Everyone in Ellie’s party was coming except for currently imprisoned papis. And non-imprisoned papi’s but Cullen didn’t go with them usually anyway. Marehis was coming too! And the Chargers—Bull and Thom’s men—they had an Inquisition mission! They were joining them, at least part of the way to the Hinterlands. Once they got to where the road forked between there and Haven, the Chargers would head there®, to survey the damage done, set up a memorial in honor of those they lost, and see if there was anything or…or anyone they could get out of there. Ellie…she was pretty sure everyone who had been alive at the time when they gathered in the Chantry, had made it out, but part of her was really really scared that…what if there’d been someone still trapped when she caused the avalanche? Or injured—looked dead but really hadn’t been? If she’d killed her own people-

Arms swooped her up in a great big hug! Sera! “Inky! Cole says you’re thinking hurty thoughts! Stop it! Don’t make me get squeezy!” the Elf girl threatened pressing an enthusiastic kiss to Ellie’s head.

Oh, that made her giggle, and she felt it! Felt how much she loved Sera, how amused she was, “Thanks, sorry—overthinking, I’m okay.”

Sera set her down, “All good, innit?”

“You’re all ready now? I put your pack on Russel, is that okay?” Ellie asked, Sera’d been very pacye when Ellie went to go pack after talking with Solas—Mami and Sera had been busy so Cremisius went with her to see him. Sera was all set to go, and said she wanted to help her pack, but she’d mostly paced, just about worn a path in the floor walking back and forth while Ellie and Marehis packed up, and then she let out a little growly sound and announced she had to ‘friggin do something!’ and stomped off without her things.

“Sweet, thanks Ink. Am I riding with you, or are you going with Kremmy-boy?”

“You can ride with me if you want—Cremisius isn’t sure how his father will do on his own, we’re pretty sure he’s never ridden a horse before.” Mister Aclassi was coming to the Hinterlands too, since it wasn’t for something super dangerous, and he would like to meet his suppliers in person, have a genuine rapport with them, and get to lay eyes and hands on the things
he was going to use, fabrics and the like to make sure it was what he was going for, for Ellie’s fancier things. And it was kind of a baby-step—Ellie’d felt so badly that Cremisius would have to leave so soon after being reunited with his father, and Mister Aclassi was so nervous about his son going off, doing a dangerous job, but his first time leaving Skyhold he’d get to go with him, at least part-way, and they’d be back together even faster since Cremisius was going to join them once the Chargers were done in Haven. They’d be in the Hinterlands a few days, touching base with the refugees, checking in on Castle Recliffe to make sure it was still Rift-less, and just having a little fun. Like a working-vacation! Papi was very jealous he couldn’t come.

“Please be safe—you’ll write me, yes?” Cullen asked as he came to say goodbye, hugging Ellie tight tight tight!

“Uh-huh!” she promised.

“Good—be good for your mothers and have lots of fun,” he intoned.

She smiled a bit, “I mean, I can either be good or have lots of fun…”

That made the man grin, “I know—just my fatherly duty to at least pretend to encourage you to behave,” he winked mischievously as he conpired, “You keep your mamis on their toes.”

“You got it!”

“Commander Rutherford, I heard that!” Cassandra reprimanded him as she joined them.

“Hmm, did you? Oh no, I do so hate enraging you-“

“This is hardly the time for such nonsense. We are leaving,” Cassandra sighed, “and I will miss you. Keep me appraised.”

“To the weather? Inquisition business-“

“To your wellbeing you horrible man!”

“I will, and I will miss you too,” Cullen promised, and Cassandra smiled even as she held up a hand to cover Ellie’s eyes, the girl giggled because she knew they were kissing, she could just turn around if she really didn’t want her seeing, it was silly!

Anya yipped for attention, her tail wagging excitedly—she got lots of goodbye pets and kisses from Cullen—she was so pumped! It was her first official mission! She’d trained so good, and her test run had extended from just an afternoon facing the Breach to full on week long journey to Skyhold, so, she was ready…but gosh Ellie was nervous about taking her out. Just- she was just a baby! A strong baby that could tear the throat out of a grown man with her teeth—but that still has the word ‘baby’ in it!

Everyone saddled up and ready, they were on the road. Anya trotting along…there was a running bid on just how long she would whine to be let up to ride along. Awe, Mister Aclassi looked so cute! That probably wasn’t what he was going for—but Cremisius had insisted the man wear something protective so he was in Inquisition scout armor, and he was so out of his element in it, but it did seem to help when Lady Josie came to say goodbye, hugging Ellie and wishing her well, and uhh,

“Oh! Mister Aclassi! I almost did not recognize you!” Josie said, smiling warmly as she reached out and took his hands, “You look very handsome in armor—both Aclassi men, you’re quite the dashing pair.”

“You’re too kind, my lady,” Tonio said.

“Do have a pleasant time in the Hinterlands and be safe.”

“Thank you.”

He did look very handsome, but he’d never worn armor before—he needed so much help getting into the saddle! But it was nice, he got to ride along, seated in front of Cremisius, it was nice to be little spoon in the saddle—it was like a constant hug!

Mmm, Sera was very into hugging today, Ellie ended up holding Russel’s reigns even though usually the person in back was in charge, but Sera just wrapped her arms around Ellie, just squeezing, humming quietly.

“Are you comfy, Mister Aclassi?” Ellie asked, horseback riding could be very hard if you weren’t used to it.

“Good mission ahead, fresh air, with my papa and my girl—comfy as hell, lovely,”
Cremisius assured with a wink—oh he knew what she meant!
“Not you, gaupo, don’t be a mister smarty pants!”
Tonio chuckled at that, answering, “I am well, bella. Comfortable. Nervous, but
Cremisius’s horse seems a pleasant sort. I am excited to see the Hinterlands.”
Well, it’d take a little while longer, that was one not-pro about their move, they were
further from the Hinterlands, but they made good progress. It was amazing how much ground you
could cover when you had a smallish group and everyone was on horseback—even resident
warrior pups because Anya did her very best the first three hours and then she started whining for
her papi Cremisius to let her up, sweet baby!
They stopped for the evening to take in dinner and rest up—they’d split up in the
morning, but for now—camp party! Felt that way with all the Chargers around. Sera wasn’t
picking up the spirit really, she was kind of quiet today except for the humming and occasionally
asking Ellie how she was feeling, which was sweet but um...kind of smothering? She shouldn’t
have told mami and the Iron Bull about how she’d been feeling in front of Sera, it was dumb, of
course she would be freaked—Ellie’d be way way way beyond worried if it were the other way
around, gosh if Sera ever-
Oh. She didn’t like that at all, Sera feeling er...that way, like she deserved to die or
something. That kind of helped. Anyway, Sera just, wasn’t acting super normal.
“Hey Ser? Is everything okay?” Ellie asked the older girl quietly as they were gathering up
kindling for the Iron Bull’s bonfire.
“Huh?” Sera asked distractedly, then, “Yeah, sure sweets. You’re okay?”
No worse for wear than she’d been when Sera asked five minutes ago, “I am, but I’m
asking about you—are you feeling badly or something?”
Sera was quiet for a moment and then, “’m’okay, but um, I kind of have a headache? You
got potion for that, right?”
Oh ouch, yeah she kept some of her headache potion in her field bag. She held the
kindling she’d been gathering up close to her chest with one arm so she could raise her unmarked
hand to feel at Sera’s forehead for fever, she didn’t feel warm—that was good! But she looked kind
of miserable, awe, “Gosh, I’m sorry—yeah Ser’, go ahead, my field potions bag is on the ground
by Russel, help yourself!”
“Thanks, Ink.”
“I got this—drink some water and go ahead and take half a bottle of potion, if it isn’t
working beyond the initial burst of relief after five minutes, take the rest—you should lay down
while it kicks in, I’ll check on you when dinner’s ready. Mami’ll probably lay down with you if
you want!”
“I shouldn’t leave you—“
“It’s fine—I’m in earshot of like half of everyone we have with us, and Cole’s always
around. Go on, please? I’d feel just awful if you got sick.”
Sera sighed, “Kay,” and then to the air, or well, Cole, “Cuddly! You come watch Inky!”
“I’m here! I’ll help you Ellie—here,” Cole offered as he materialized, taking the bundle
Sera had in her arms and then turning to do the same of Ellie’s, “I am being a gentleman! Lady
Josie is teaching me!”
Oh! That was sweet, “Thank you, Mister Cole!”
“You are welcome, Mister Ellie!” he returned enthusiastically, oh he was the cutest! He
was really trying!
Sera snorted at his fumble, but, “You’ll get the hang of it Cuddly,” she assured kindly,
reaching out to squeeze his shoulder as she left.
“Is Sera okay?” Ellie asked him quietly when she thought the older girl might be out of
earshot, “Is there anything I can do?”
“Everyone’s been very loud today, it is hard to sort through. Dorian is scared about
meeting the retainer, it frightens him that there is even the smallest chance he might be captured
and sent back to his parents’ home. The Iron Bull and Vivienne and you are all worried for him.
The Iron Bull is nervous about something, he wants to talk to you about it, he just isn’t sure he
should—he will not tell you if you go to him, let him come to you, it will help if you settle things
with Dorian and have some down time in the Hinterlands. Marehis hurts over Solas, she is worried
about you and Sera, and Cassandra is worried about leaving Cullen, he is investigating the Red
Templar leader, he might know him and that makes him sad. Mister Aclassi is scared to see
Cremisius go tomorrow, he does not want him to get hurt. Varric is still feeling badly for Hawke—
keeping him a secret from Cassandra, he dislikes that he has hurt her. Thom is the least quiet of
everyone, which is strange, because he is usually the loudest. He does not hurt so much anymore,”
Cole rattled off as they collected more kindling, Ellie let him, he usually couldn’t help it, and even
if he could…well it was helpful to know how she could help. “I think she is worried about you,
she’s never traveled with you without Solas there. It makes her nervous. She wants to know how
you are, how you’re feeling, stay patient with her and be honest with her.”

Kick the retainers butt…maybe go to Tevinter, kick Dorian’s parents butts! Let the Iron
Bull come to her…which was funny considering he’d been coming to her for this daily thing of
hoisting her up in a hug. Maybe she should give Mister Aclassi extra hugs. Mami too—boy
troubles needed cuddles, weather it was your son going off to do potentially dangerous work, or
your ex-boyfriend was a Dalish god. Talk to Varric and Cassandra. Be honest with Sera. She could
do that.” “Thanks Cole.”

The Spirit nodded, “Come on, Krem is getting nervous how long kindling is taking—the
others too but he wants to sit with you, he will miss you when he goes to Haven.”

Ellie nodded but first, “Wait— you said what everyone else needs, what about you? Are you
okay? You got to say goodbye to Maryden, right?”

The Spirit smiled serenely at that, “Oh, yes. We miss each other, but I am not sad or
hurting. I know she is safe and we will be very happy when I return to Skyhold,” he informed her.
Then, “Thank you, Ellie. For thinking about me. I am sorry I was so angry with you,” he said as
they started the walk back to camp.

When had Cole been mad at her? “Did I do something?” she worried.

“You saved Rhys and Evangeline. Oh! But that was not why I was mad—I was angry you
tried to find them for me when I said they were better off without me. But you found them anyway,
the Inquisition did because you asked, and found out they were in trouble—you saved them, and I
am so very happy you did. So I am not mad anymore.”

“Oh gosh, I just asked Leliana if they could find them so you could talk to them, Walker*
did everything—tracking them down and arranging their rescue.”

She might not have done any of the heavy lifting, but she still got a kiss on the cheek! Cole
was sweet—she hadn’t even realized he’d been upset with her and that kind of bothered her, he was
one of her best friends, she should have known they’d had an issue but…well, Cole wasn’t the sort
to get in someone’s face over something he was upset about.

He did want to sit with her—the moment she and Cole returned with Kindling, Cremisius
was seated with his father and he just smiled so! Gosh he was handsome! He reached out and took
Ellie’s hands, but she didn’t sit with him, she didn’t want to get too comfortable before checking,

“How’s Sera?” Ellie asked, she didn’t see her so hopefully she did really go rest. She
might lay down with her—neither mami had, Maerhis and Cassandra were sitting with everyone.

“The dear girl was poorly so she’s lying down,” Madam de Fer verified, awe, she even
looked kind of concerned for Sera—that was progress!

“She wanted to be alone,” Cassandra said, “we said we would check on her when dinner is
prepared.”

Alone huh? Ellie got that, Sera always emphasized alone time being important. So, she
joined everyone—even though Anya was a little seat stealer! Cremisius was sitting on one end of a
fallen log he and the Iron Bull had hauled over, between his father, and sneaky little Anya had
hopped up to lay across the other side, head resting on her front paws though she did look up to
Ellie and ‘wuff’ like she wasn’t doing a thing in the world!

But that was fine, Cremisius chuckled when Ellie stuck her tongue out at the pup and
pulled her in to sit on his lap, and Ellie coughed quietly to cover her surprised gasp—was he wearing something different? She never really noticed his socks until they came tumbling out of his underthings. They were more of a comfort thing for him, but whatever he was wearing now was um...just a bit more noticeable, “Everything all good?” he asked. With her seat, or with life? Either way,

“Uh-huh.”

“Mmm, good,” he said, smiling against her hair as he wrapped his arms around her, was it weird that somehow made her feel safer than the armor she was wearing?

She was going to miss him tomorrow—it wasn’t like they’d never gone separate places for work, but still. Being back in Haven for so long, facing the Breach, the journey to Skyhold, it would be weird to wake up to a day Cremisius wasn’t in.

But he was in this day, and it was nice. Sera too! She joined them once it was time to eat. Dinner was actually really good. Oh! Not that the Iron Bull was a bad chef, gosh, he was the best, just...yeah, she guessed she had been more depressed lately. She hadn’t been very hungry, nothing appealed, nothing had any taste, it was weird! It was crazy she could have some of the best food she’d ever been offered in her life at her disposal, and not want any of it. Talking about how she’d been feeling, just saying it and being heard had helped so, so much. Tonight, she enjoyed every bite, and listened, and just drank it all in. Everyone was chatty and lively, Sera seemed to be feeling a lot better now, and Cremisius was joking along with her—had the Elf girl shooting water out of her nose! Cleansing, and hilarious. Oh, she was so glad Sera seemed to be feeling better!

Could have done with less giggling—not that she didn’t like Sera being happy, just- gah! Madam de Fer didn’t have a replacement for her tent yet, so they were all either camping out in the open or sharing Inquisition tents. Since they were so little, Sera and Ellie bunked together in one, but the Elf girl was super giggly over it all, like she was up to something—and she was!

Cremisius took first watch with Thom and some of the other Chargers, Anya would probably sleep outside, right now she was keeping watch too, and it sounded like Mister Aclassi stayed up for a bit—Ellie saw them chatting when she turned in. Ellie volunteered to take second watch with Sera but she woke up to more giggling from her and someone wrapping their arms around her middle, mmm Cremisius had slid into her bedroll and Sera said,

“Cuddly’ll keep watch with me, you get some more shut-eye or,” she snorted, way too pleased with herself, “whatever, kay Ink?”

Sneaky! The sneakiest!

Ellie sighed, turning to face Cremisius, resting more against his chest—it was so nice he was used to it now, he smiled and sighed contentedly, holding her closer. It’d startled him the first time she curled up against him when he wasn’t binding, he’d taken off his armor while helping her study, and she’d just sat with him like normal, and it took him a second to realize it was normal, they always sat together like that, it wasn’t any different. She liked the sturdy support against her back or under her head when he was binding, but she also liked how warm it was to lay like this, strong muscle, softer tissue, it was just him, and she loved it.

“Cremisius?”

“Yeah lovely?”

“I’ll miss you tomorrow,” she said.

He nodded. “I’ll miss you too.”

“Can you do something for me?”

“Anything.”

“Will you be honest with me? About everything you find in Haven?”

He sighed and thought on it a moment, rubbing her back, “Of course. It’s all gonna be okay honey, you did what you had to do. You saved everyone that got into the tunnel, and I mean you scoured Haven pretty thoroughly,” had she? She’d just kind of been panicking it felt like, running all over the place with no clear sense of direction except ‘oh no, I think I hear my friend yelling for help’. What if there were people who couldn’t yell? “We’ll get through it, okay? You did good, and so many people survived because of it. That’s what’s important,” he reminded her,
pressing his lips to the top of her head. “Don’t think about it anymore. Put some happy thoughts in your head and try to get some rest. You’ll get to check in on all the Refugees—there’s even toys to hand out this trip. And papa’s excited to meet his suppliers, and you might get to beat up on some assholes trying to mess with Dorian—you love beating up assholes that mess with your friends. It’s your favorite kind of violence,” she giggled at that, could feel him smiling against her hair.

“Anya’s never seen the Hinterlands before, she’s gonna have a major blast with all the fields, and streams, and nugs to chase,” he went on, okay, he was definitely trying to lull her to sleep, voice dipping lower, cresting softer over his lips, hand massaging at her back.

Woke up with his hand on her butt—but that was normal too, when they fell asleep together. Had his other hand on the crown of her head, just his subconscious ‘protecting the goods’ he called it—the brain and the booty.

The Chargers took off after breakfast. Not before Ellie got a very sweet goodbye kiss, and Cremisius got the tightest hug from Tonio, Ellie was pretty sure Cullen’s hugs were shorter,

“You will be safe?” Tonio questioned him, not relinquishing his hold.

“Always am, papa.”

“And- and you make regular contact on away missions, the Iron Bull tells me. You will do that?”

“Yup, s’what the big lug pays me for.”

“Are you sure you’ve had enough to eat-”

Cremisius chuckled, patting his father on the back as he pulled away, “Yeah papa, we’re all set—it’ll be all good. Once we’re done I’ll catch up with you guys. Go, make some good connections, and have fun. Watch out for Ellie for me?” What?! She already had like, all the adults she knew in life looking out for her. But she guessed it made Mister Aclassi feel better—like it was something he could do for Cremisius, a way to help his son. So. Eh. More the merrier, she was down a papi anyway.

“Certainly.”

Sera and Ellie tackle-hugged Cole—he volunteered to go with the Chargers partly because he was really feeling the angst Mister Aclassi felt at Cremisius going off, and the relief he felt at the idea that someone like Cole would be with him, and Ellie was glad he’d have someone joining him on the journey to the Hinterlands. And Cole might be able to get into places the Chargers couldn’t to recover things from snow-buried buildings, from Haven’s Chantry.

“You be safe, Cuddly, you got it?” Sera intoned.

“I will be!” Cole promised.

Anya was such a papi’s girl! Like mama like daughter she guessed. The pup whined at Cremisius when he started leading the Charger’s away, and he had to give her lots of pets and a firm ‘Parshaara,’ so she would stop trying to follow him, and make a promise of sneaking her treats and taking her for a good run when he got back, but she has to stay with her mama—they couldn’t focus on the task at hand if they had to keep track of Anya, they weren’t entirely certain what the avalanche would have left behind for them to look through either, they didn’t want her getting lost or hurt.

Cassandra let Mister Aclassi ride with her the rest of the way, it was really sweet to hear them chatting, mostly about the Tevinter boy. She loved that her mamis and Cullen all loved Cremisius so much. And the Iron Bull let him read any field reports he got—getting them meant everything was cool, and they’d be marked differently if there was an emergency, so he put off reading them until the end of the day and would claim his eye was tired, that since his Lieutenant wasn’t there to take up the slack, his papa could do it for him, and Mister Aclassi would quietly read Cremisius’s reports out loud to him. All in all, Skyhold added half a day’s travel to their old routine of getting to the Hinterlands. Which wasn’t bad—they had their routine, and Ellie wasn’t all alone when she meditated, she thought she should still keep up the practice even if she didn’t have Solas around. But Sera joined her—Vivienne did too sometimes—but every single night Sera made a point of reminding Ellie they should take some time to meditate after dinner, which was really sweet of her. Dorian was always invited, but he wasn’t really feeling it this trip. Gosh he was
“We’ll go meet your father’s retainer first thing, okay?” Ellie said, sitting next to Dorian by the campfire their first night in—the lake-side camp was a favorite spot for them so they’d made their way there when they arrived. It was just a short jaunt down to the Cross-Roads and up to Redcliffe, if they took Russel, they’d make it in no-time. It…it was just going to be them—they’d thought it through, talked about it, and Mother Giselle was to bring Dorian to the retainer, she’d only been in contact with Dorian’s parents through her poking around into his background, her concern for his association with Ellie. But the Gull and Lantern didn’t exactly have great sight-lines, it wasn’t like anyone would really see them coming, as long as he showed up seemingly alone, or with just one person, and a small one at that, the retainer wouldn’t get spooked and run off before they could be spoken with, and sent away. But it scared Ellie, that she was going to be the only one to help him if things turned violent—she would kill for Dorian, like full on, plan and execute an actual murder for him—but she’d feel horrible if she wasn’t able to protect him, if he got hurt of taken. Thankfully, they would be given a head start and then the others would be along and arrive separately, hopefully they’d have backup if they needed it.

“Well, I mean breakfast is the most important meal of the day or some such rot. We’ll have to eat first thing. And then we really should brush our teeth…and you know morning is the ideal time for chess matches—“

“You once threw a mug at the Iron Bull’s head for asking how you slept, too early in the day. You insisted no thinking was allowed before noon.”

“You believe I need to think to play chess? How quaint—“

Ellie reached out and rested a hand over Dorian’s. She was scared, but so was he. “Hey. It’s going to be okay. I will actually destroy anyone that tries to harm a hair on your head, if your parents want you back, I’ll fight them. The sooner we deal with this, the sooner its off your back and your parents get our very polite, eloquent, ‘fuck off’.”

Dorian barked a laugh at that, “Good heavens! The Hearld of Andraste, telling Magister Pavus to fuck off?” he shook his head, squeezing her hand, “Oh, Ellie. I do adore you. Thank you—I know you’re going through something right now, I am regretful my business has fallen into your lap—“

“It isn’t your fault—Mother Gisselle should have minded her own business, if anyone is to blame for this, it’s hers for going behind everyone’s backs and giving your parents access to you,” Ellie said, “And we’ll have lots of fun once this is over and…um…I dunno,” she shrugged, “being busy helps? Being with everyone, and doing good things, things that help, helps.”

Dorian nodded, “I am pleased to hear as much, but Ellie…there is a difference between taking ones mind off of ones problems, and ignoring them altogether. Er, avoiding your unpleasant thoughts doesn’t make them go away. You need your thinking to change, that only comes with…well, thinking,” and then, over his shoulder, “did I explain that correctly? I refuse to memorize your psychological vocabulary, I’ve a refined lexis palate, and their mouth-feel is simply atrocious.”

“You’re a real bastard, Pavus,” the Iron Bull grumbled from his tent

“Oh, if only. We would not be here if I were, by definition, a bastard,” Dorian said, looking to Ellie, “I was worried, about you taking up my bit of a quest when you’re struggling. I had the thought last night that you should be reminded to focus on repairing your train of thought, Bull fed me some jargon to help me explain, but it apparently didn’t stick—the problem isn’t that you are alive, Ellie. Your little sermon—all things are finite? People are finite as well, and world-altering situations will always find a way to have the needed roles filled. If it was not you in Corypheus’s line of fire, it would be another. You are not the problem. You are, in fact, as you’ve proven again and again, acting as a solution. We’ll stop him.”

Ellie sniffled, sitting up on her knees to hug him, “You’re the best, and I’m punching the retainer in the face! Just wham, as soon as we see him!”

She…did not do that. While it would be super easy—they’d been expecting to walk into a busy Gull and Lantern only to find it empty—the person they were meant to meet was the only one
present. But the second she saw his eyes as he stepped into view, called Dorian’s name, well, she
didn’t need her friend to confirm,

“Father,” Dorian greeted hollowly. “So. The whole story about a ‘family retainer’ that was
some kind of what? Smoke screen?”

“Then you were told,” his father sighed, looking to Ellie then, at her Marked Hand, “I
apologize for the deception, Inquisitor. I never intended for you to be involved.”

“Of course not. Magister Pavus couldn’t come to Skyhold and be seen with the Dread
Inquisitor. What would people think?” Dorian sniped. “What is this exactly, father? Ambush?
Kidnapping? Warm family reunion?” he sneered.

Magister Pavus sighed, “This is how it has always been.” Like this was Dorian’s fault!

“He has a right to be angry—you tried to trick him here,” Ellie defended, “He has every
right to be furious.”

“You don’t know the half of it!” Dorian assured her, “But maybe you should.”

“Dorian, there is no need to-” his father tried to interrupt.

“As you well know, I prefer the company of men. My father disapproves.” Yeah, he’d not
gotten super into it, but she’d gotten the gist his parents weren’t thrilled and disowned him or
something for it, or made him miserable or scared enough to run away—which was dumb of them!

“You alienated your son because of who he loves? I think you’ve got it confused—
Dorian’s your son. You have to love him. He’s a man—but he doesn’t have to love women. That’s
not how that works.” She had to physically stop herself from herself from saying ‘the Maker put
the prostate where it is for a reason’ at least on people born with penises. It was normal
to be attracted to people born equipped to work with that! “This is seriously what this is all about?
You’re trying to what? Kidnap him so you can whisk him back to Tevinter and force him to marry
some girl?”

“I wouldn’t doubt it,” Dorian spat. “You’ve no idea the lengths he-“

“Dorian, please, if you’ll only listen to me-“ Magister Pavus started.

“Why? So you can spout more convenient lies?” Dorian looked to Ellie—oh she was
throwing hands! Magister Pavus was getting punched! Dorian looked almost sick, frustrated tears
welling up in his eyes, that counted as making her friend cry in her book. “He taught me to hate
blood magic. ‘The resort of a weak mind.’ Those are his words.” he railed, “but what was the first
thing you did when your precious heir refused to play pretend for the rest of his life?” he asked.

“You tried to change me.”

…ch…change? Like use blood magic to change him? Make him- not like men anymore?
Or make him compliant, unable to voice his ‘wants’ any longer?

How exactly did they need to stage the room to make it look like self-defense? Dorian
would alibi her, right? An accident would work too. Was it believable that Ellie was just getting her
boot knife out to let it get some air and accidentally tripped into Magister Pavus like, five times?
She was very clumsy, no court in the land would convict her!

“I only wanted what was best for you-“ the Magister tried.

“You wanted what was best for you!” Dorian accused, “For your fucking legacy!
Anything for that!”

Dorian is hurting, badly. Do you need help? Cole! Oh, he was here!

Cole, is there anyone else here with us? In the Gull and Lantern? Do you know if
Magister Pavus has anyone in Redcliffe with him to attack us or anything?

Hmm…no. No he is alone. He is hurting too. He is sorry for what he tried to do to Dorian,
regrets that he hurt his son, that he sent him off and drove him into such a dangerous life. He
wants Dorian to go home with him because he is scared for him. He wants with everything to make
things right.

Okay. So maybe she’d hold off on murder conspiracies…for now. It was so, so incredibly
wrong, what Dorian’s father tried to do, but if he…if he really understood that…was sorry and
would never do something like that again…maybe he’d learned. Now he just wanted to protect his
son. If Dorian was game to give him a little foothold back into his life, that was his choice to make,
but…well he was a bit angry, and hurt right now, so much so he obviously wasn’t considering it. But…*the resort of a weak mind*, he’d said that before. Dorian, he’d said that when he first joined them, when Vivienne barbed him with questions about if they needed to worry about him being a Tevinter mage, if he might use blood magic. And she knew he had his heraldry necklace—he’d only sold it because he desperately needed the money and…and it was the very, very last thing he sold, he’d held onto it until he absolutely had to give it up, and then the very moment he got the opportunity to get it back, he did.

Dorian was at the bar, leaning against it sort of catching his breath, or maybe he was just trying to control his breathing so he didn’t blow up any more or cry or something. Ellie joined him and offered, “Hey. You got a lot off of your chest. You have every single right in the world to walk away from this right here, and right now, never speak to him again, but um…I’m kind of going through my own papi issues—“

“With a man that practically framed you for terrorism and treason and was willing to let you be executed for his crimes?”

“Uh-huh. I’m pissed, and I don’t know that I’ll ever forgive him…but he’s gotten to explain himself a bit, and I plan to talk to him more when we get back, to see how we can move forward,” Ellie said. “Tevinter is a long way away. You don’t know when you’ll see him again—I think you might regret not hearing what he came here to say, because no matter what, if you don’t know, you’re always going to wonder what he wanted. And eventually you’ll regret never truly finding out.”

Dorian sighed, before offering another thing he’d said to her before, “You’re a disgustingly intelligent little thing aren’t you?” he asked resignedly with a wink before he stepped back from the bar and approached his father. “Tell me why you came.”

“If I knew I would drive you to the Inquisition…” the man tried to explain but seemed at a loss, he clearly hadn’t expected Dorian to actually hear him out.

“You didn’t,” Dorian said. “I joined the Inquisition because it’s the right thing to do. Once, I had a father who would have known that.”

Magister Pavus seemed urgent then, afraid Dorian might leave, “Once I had a son who trusted me. A trust I betrayed,” he found his words then, “I only wanted to talk to him. To hear his voice again. To ask him to forgive me.”

Dorian looked…well he kind of looked like he could use a hug…maybe from his father? She reached out and took hold of his hand, “Hey, I’m gonna go touch base with the others, they’re here. Mister Aclassi wants my opinion on fabric and things, we’ll be a while.”

“I’ll join you shortly.”

Ellie smiled and then looked to Magister Pavus to offer a polite nod, but still, “It wasn’t great meeting you!” she offered in farewell. Whoops, Dorian made a sort of choking sound at that. She was glad they were going to talk things out. Stepped out to give them a little bit of privacy, and ended up securing them even literally bigger privacy because mister Qunari ears was listening in! She almost broke her nose running into him as she exited the tavern!

“Ow!”

“Shit, sorry Imekari,” the Iron Bull rumbled out, raising his hand up under her chin to raise her face to him while she rubbed at her nose.

“And I forgive you!” she assured him, he was just worried for Dorian. But he would be okay, so she took the Iron Bull’s hand, “Come on, stop being a nose-breaking nosey pants and come help me shop. Papa’classi is here right? Meeting suppliers?”

He was! Oh gosh it was so good to see him seeming so in his element, he was chatting away with the different vendors in Redcliffe and when Ellie joined him he smiled and caught her up, introduced her to the different merchants and showed her different rolls of material they had available. Which was so much fun—she got to touch so many soft things! And it was all so pretty. Mami sideled up to join them, linking arms with Ellie—Sera was paling around with Thom and Varric, so Maerhis took the opportunity to ask about getting clothing for her from Mister Aclassi, looking at different fabrics that she might like, asking Ellie’s opinion. She was going to be so cute!
Sera really could use more things, so Marehis was going to set something up so she could be fitted for a new wardrobe for her birthday! There was this really pretty red flannel fabric that reminded Ellie of Sera’s old tunic, except not diagonal—Sera always looked so pretty in red, and when she started talking about the idea for a dress, Mister Aclassi asked if someone had anything to write with, she offered up her notepad, there was still a few sheets less, Varric kept her stocked and he always poked fun of how many she went through—she had things to remember and keep track of! Tonio drew up a little sketch of a knee length, long sleeved shift dress with a high button-down collar, that was so many words he rattled off after she said ‘dress’ wow!

“The collar and cuffs would be black to match the lines of course,” he spoke as he finished sketching.

“Do you think maybe you could make her a little flannel bow-tie?” Ellie wondered, running her index finger along the plaid material, it was nice! It’d be so warm!

“I believe I could,” Tonio agreed.

“Ohhh she will love that da’vehnan,” Marehis breathed, pressing a kiss to Ellie’s head. She was so excited! Sera would have comfortable new clothes for running around and date night things and sleeping clothes! She was going to be so snuggly! Her girlfriends would have to wait their turn or join them because napping was going to be so comfy, and Ellie called sister-dibs! That was a thing, right?

Dorian seemed…okay. A little tired and sad but…lighter, like there was some pressure off of him now when he joined them.

“Kadan?” the Iron Bull asked when he approached, a hand ghosting over the small of the Tevinter man’s back.

Dorian sighed. “Well. That was more than enough of that—my father is returning to Tevinter- he has transport, he is fed, he is clothed, he will have an extravagant roof over his head come nightfall so do not even think of commandeering his care, Ellie,” he was quick to instruct her, well gosh! Fight her for worrying about people! He was…he was a very, very bad father, but he was still a person.

“Do you feel any better?” Ellie asked. Gosh…she really, really understood why Dorian was so afraid before. Blood magic was- it was the worst, that had to have been so scary when his parents tried to- ugh! He didn’t need to change! “You’re the most perfect person in the world!” she assured him, context be damned, it wasn’t necessary because he was! The most perfect! And everyone that thought otherwise could fight her! Just start a line behind Mother Giselle!

“I am, aren’t I?” he supposed, smiling softly, “Thank you, Ellie. We had a talk. He’ll give mother my love. Maybe in another two years I’ll write them or some such rot,” he said, leaning against the Iron Bull. “I will be insufferable about this in the coming days I hope you know. My demands start with a back rub and a steak dinner.”

“You got it. Gonna be ram steak, but I’ll cook it how you like, Sparky.”

“I suppose that will simply have to do.”

It was super good! They made up steak and potatoes and Varric broke out a bottle of brandy he’d brought along for Dorian, it was very sweet of him. They were just getting started eating when the Iron Bull’s head quirked to the side like he heard something, and then he sniffed the air and a smile spread across his face.

“Incoming, in 5…4…3,” the Qunari counted down.

Ellie could hear footfalls behind her and Anya started barking up a storm! She smiled, it had to be- oh gosh she’d missed him so much!

“Cremisius!” she greeted as she stood and turned to see him and- Oh wow! He missed her too she guessed, Cremisius stopped when he arrived in camp, stared at her a moment and then he was walking right up to her and wrapping his arms around her, pulling her to his chest and just held her like he needed to, which was fine by her.

“I love you,” he said, very serious.

*Haven was hard. He almost lost you.*

Cole. “I love you too, Cremisius.”
He pressed a kiss to the top of her head and then cleared his throat, pulling away. “Recon’s all done Chief. The guys are transporting everything we uncovered to Skyhold as we speak.”

“I looked everywhere!” Cole announced as he appeared, seated in the Iron Bull’s lap, and the Qunari rumbled out a quiet laugh as he patted the Spirit on the head. “Everyone that was alive when we evacuated, made it into the tunnels, we did not leave anyone behind and you did not bury anyone that could have been saved.”

Ellie pulled back to turn and look at him, “R-really?”

“Really,” Cremisius assured, reporting, “We set up the memorial Lady Josie arranged, lots of stuff burned in the cabins from what Cole reported back but he got out lots of things from the Chantry still intact, the guys are transporting everything we uncovered to Skyhold. Well. Almost everything,” he said as he let her go and stepped back, digging into a pocket on his field pack, holding something that clinked a bit in the palm of his hand before he stepped behind Ellie, “Cole was able to show us where the last trebuchet was, took some digging and Spiritual guidance, but…” something cold was on her chest, looping around her throat and he secured the clasp at the back her neck-

Ellie’s mouth dropped open as she slapped a hand over it, he- he-

Her chin was quivering as she turned back around to launch herself at him, arms around his neck as she hugged him as tight as she could, crying out,

“You found mami’s necklace!”

Marehis gasped and Ellie let go so the Elf woman could see the necklace as she approached them, her eyes wide with surprise as she raised a hand to touch the necklace safe and sound, and then she hugged Cremisius, cooing out, “Oh da’mi! Ma serannas—bless you, sweet man!”

“Oi! We’re matchy now, Kremmy-boy!” Sera announced giddily, “Mare calls me da’assan—means arrow-“

“Little arrow, it is a term of endearment,” Marehis assured to gently embarrass the Elf girl, “Blah! Whatever!”

“Da is merely diminutive, ‘little’ as in ‘young’—mi, is blade.” Marehis offered Cremisius. He shrugged, “I can dig it. Um…you cool that I left the uh, charm on there?” he wondered. “It’s Ellie’s I figure it’s up to her if she wants it or not.”

Charm? Oh- oh! That sneak! Not Cremisius, Solas! Her little charm, it wasn't an accident or trick of the light, upside down it was a Wolf! What a jerk!

...kind of a sweet jerk. That...was nice. That he wanted something that really represented him...actual him. Even if he couldn't tell her, he wanted her to have something that said he was always protecting her. Wolves had certainly saved her life.

“I still want it. Um. Is that okay, mami?” she checked.

Marehis nodded, expression soft as she brushed Ellie’s hair back. "Of course, da'vhenan.”

Mister Aclassi was very patient, but Cremisius chuckled and dropped a kiss to her hair before going to his father who, the moment his son was approaching, stood up so fast he nearly spilled the contents of his plate, Cole appeared and took it in hand so the Tevinter man could go to his child and hug him properly, rattling off questions—was he hurt? Was he safe? How did it go? How were the others? Was he hungry? He could have Tonio’s plate-

“Slow your roll, papa’classi—figured Krem’d be in, plenty for him,” the Iron Bull assured, already making up a plate for his lieutenant. He sniffed a bit, looking to Cremisius and then, “Steak’s just about ready, why don’t you go wash up?”

“Got it,” Cremisius said, coming to Ellie and holding out his hand, “getting the lay of the land, think you could show me where to put my things?” Ellie nodded, leading him into the tent his father would be staying in, Cremisius sat down on the trunk of Tonio’s materials-haul with a grunt, undoing the straps of his chest plate, “Didn’t want to freak papa out. Think you could help me with this? I was running low on potion when this Rogue bastard caught me, slipped his blade right up under my cuirass—Cole was a big help but-“

Ellie was already helping him get his cuiras off and getting it over his head before casting it aside, his tunic was bloodied and she met his eye for the half second it took to know that yeah, it
was fine for her to pull up his shirt, that was kind of the point. Cole had wrapped it up and it looked like they’d gotten a little Elf Root tonic applied to at least part of the slash just along his rib cage and down to his hip bone, half-healed, the bleeding slowed greatly. Part of it had clotted to a full stop but that was only part, and what hadn’t stopped was stitched, a bit sloppily like he’d had to do it himself, and the whole of it was inflamed and messy like he hadn’t been able to clean up at all. It made her stomach twist, it was just so ouch, and—

“Sit right here, do not move—I’ll be right back-“ she was instructing but, “Here!” Cole announced as he appeared, Ellie’s field potions bag in one hand and her canteen in the other.

“Thanks,” Ellie said, and he vanished once she had her things, she poured a bottle of Elf Root into her canteen and shook it up, dousing a cloth from her field bag before she handed the canteen off to Cremisius with instructions to, “Drink.” And, “Sorry—this will sting, but then it’ll feel better,” she promised, carefully cleaning up the injury and the mess of dry and fresher blood off from around it.

“I can take these out and get this healed properly,” Ellie informed him and he nodded, steeling himself like he expected it to hurt terribly, “You’ll feel some pressure,” she cautioned before taking her sharp set of scissors—tiny ones meant for this sort of thing, and cleaning them well before using them to snip the sutures, careful to pull the end out by the knot so it didn’t tear through his skin, and pulling the rest out in short, quick pieces, and then she held clean cloth over the newly opened injury while she got another bottle of Elf Root and then pulled it away while she applied potion. She cleaned up the mess, getting rid of any sign Mister Aclassi might see that Cremisius had needed an injury tended.

“You feel okay? Sick or light headed at all?” she asked as she checked his pulse, just being safe, making sure it wasn’t thready, that nothing concerning was creeping up, but it was all good. She liked her vitals the way she liked her boyfriends—steady and strong! So Cremisius was basically killing it today.

He shook his head ‘no’, “Nah. Tired, but I’ve been on the go all day. Headache, Elf Root usually helps with that-” he wondered at.

Ellie smiled, “It’s a little busy with the whole ‘internal healing’ thing. No worries,” she said, opening her field bag up and digging around—it’d been a minute since she used potion for headaches, she hadn’t this trip so it took some digging to get to it, but Sera…had, hadn’t she? Huh. it was all there she was pretty sure…maybe Sera just hadn’t needed it after all. Oh well- huh. She hadn’t really looked in here much, but um…one, two…she always had three vials of lyrium, she tried to keep fully stocked in case Solas needed it, but she never used it herself and um, he wasn’t here. That was weird coming up short, but not super important she supposed. She handed Cremisius headache potion, and when he downed it, she pressed a kiss to his forehead for good measure.

“Well look at that, all better already,” Cremisius said, grinning as he wrapped his arms around her waist to pull her closer. “Thanks, lovely. Missed you.”

“Did you?” she asked teasingly. “Or did you just miss having a healer on hand?”

“Mmm, it is a benefit—that and you’re a hell of a lot cuter than Stitches,” he supposed, kissing her once…twice, huh, third time was for keeps which was very, very nice, his hand slipped up under her tunic to rest against her back, mmm, his hand was warm-

“Bello, your food will be getting cold-“ Tonio started as he came in and…yeah, they all sort of stopped frozen, the three of them annnnd if people could die of embarrassment, she was pretty sure that was happening right now. “Ahh. I am sorry- er- t-take your time!”

“Be right out,” Cremisius assured as his father practically fled, oh gosh! Cremisius chuckled, resting his forehead against hers, “Join me for dinner?”

“It’s a date,” she giggled. “You might wanna put on a shirt first though.”

Everyone fully clothed, Ellie and Cremisius joined their friends and family—the Iron Bull thought it was just hilarious which was kind of nice—Cole was right, something was on his mind, and Ellie hoped he’d come to her about it soon, this waiting around thing had her worrying about
him. Mami Marehis was very sympathetic about it all when they were getting ready for bed—about getting caught kissing her kind-of dressed boyfriend, looking like they were getting up to something when Tonio interrupted, it was embarrassing, but apparently it was a right of passage of sorts. When Marehis was Ellie’s age, she got caught by her mami—like! Right in the middle of everything! Cassandra assured Mister Aclassi would be more focused on his own embarrassment than anything he’d seen—she once walked in on Tio Anthony and a Chantry Sister! Sera and Ellie just about died laughing!

Oh! Sera! “Hey, Ser”? Did you get into my field bag at all the other day?” Ellie asked as she brushed the older girl’s hair—she always got it so super tangly when she scrubbed it with a towel to dry faster.

“Uhh yeah Ink, headache stuff, right?”

Oh, “You took some? Huh.”

“What?”

“Nothing, guess I’m just losing it. I swear I had three bottles of lyrium and six headache draughts but…gosh I must have been looped when I was helping Healer Adan,” oh man, what if she’d gotten a bunch of potions mixed up? Accidentally brewed too many of some and not enough of the others, his stores could be inaccurate- it wasn’t like someone would end up with the wrong potion, but they’d run out sooner than expected at the very least and- “So you didn’t get into it at all? A bottle didn’t fall out or something?”

“Friggin, I dunno Ellie, shite—not my fault you lost your mage crap,” Sera snapped, defensive.

Oh. “I- I’m sorry, I wasn’t blaming you or anything, honest, I didn’t mean-“

“I’m not responsible for your pish, you gotta keep track of at least some of your own things right? Cripes, you’re friggin sixteen not six, you’re not a baby!”

“Sera,” Marehis gently reprimanded, “It was only a question there’s no need to-“

“It’s okay,” Ellie said. She…yeah. It was pretty…pretty silly, selfish wasn’t it? Someone else was always in charge of a bunch of her other potions, and everyone was always doing everything for her, she was an adult, sort of, she did need to be more responsible, she probably messed up Adan’s stores, or she lost the potion herself which was so dangerous, just leaving Lyrium around, she needed to be more careful! She was just the worst sometimes, honestly. “I’m sorry, Sera, really-”

“Whatever!” Sera huffed, rising to her feet and stomping from the tent. Oh- oh crap! She- she hadn’t meant to make Sera mad or upset- she wasn’t- what just happened?

“Eleanor…” Cassandra ventured, “You are certain your lyrium stores were full?”

“No. I mean yes, I thought they were,” she amended, “I always keep it full for Solas or if Vivienne or Dorian run out, I haven’t used any-“ She shook her head, “That isn’t important, um, what should I-? She- I didn’t mean to upset her-“

Oh man she messed up, she wasn’t sure how- oh. Her stomach did somersaults, Sera had gone out on her own when Lady Emmauld died, had to steal and stuff, but she was pretty flush now—she must have thought Ellie was judging her or something, that she was jumping to the illogical conclusion that Sera of all people had stolen a bottle of Lyrium to make some quick cash just because of things she’d had to do to get by before—which was crazy! Ellie was the last person throwing stones over stealing. She shouldn’t have said anything, it was dumb! She stood up and went after Sera, she needed to apologize- she was such a jerk!

Sera wasn’t in sight but there was this very agitated…something, like someone…huh. Sera did have magic even if it wasn’t active, it was like someone with very agitated magic had passed through leaving an air of it in its wake, Ellie followed it across the shallow stream and up the hill toward the lake where Sera was very-angry pacing. She sighed when Ellie approached and stopped her pacing but she wouldn’t look at her, gosh-

“Sera, I’m so so sorry, really. I swear—I swear on everything I wasn’t accusing you of stealing anything, I’m sorry I made it sound like it was your fault or something. I was just…I’ve been forgetting things?” She felt like she was always forgetting lots of things, that’s why she tried
to write everything down. She’d brought the problem up and Cassandra shared she sometimes struggled with forgetfulness as a symptom of depression, and she’d been concussed, mami said to just be patient with herself. “Little things like why I walked into a room or if I’ve put something away or not, I mean I packed and repacked my field bag because of it- I thought maybe you would know what happened, be able to say ‘oh yeah I saw it all there so you or someone must have used it’ or ‘it was that way when I looked’ I’m sorry I made you feel badly.”

“Friggin’ shut up! Shite, Ink, you- you’re making me feel like shit- I-“ Sera growled frustratedly, “Stop apologizing, okay? Just stop. Frick, I- just forget about it, okay?”

“But you're mad and that’s totally totally okay,” Ellie assured, “I’m…kind of annoying, I get that, there always being something with me? I just wanted to apologize and t-tell you I get it and I’ll um, I can give you space—you can have the tent with mami’s to yourself and I can sleep somewhere else o-or we can set you up your own tent if you need to just be totally alone or something. And if you’re still upset with me or just want more space you can have Russel, honest, I can ride with anyone-“

“Inky, shite, it’s not that I don’t want you hanging around- just-“ Sera came and hugged her very hard, tight so much it almost hurt but it was better than refusing to look at Ellie, wasn’t it? “I’m not mad at you, and you didn’t do anything wrong.”

“Then why did you get so upset?”

“Would you care to confess?” Cassandra’s voice sounded and Ellie pulled away to look to the Seeker as she joined them, Marehis on her heels, the two of them looking very peeved-geesh! What was going on?! The Iron Bull must have used too much salt in his cooking tonight because everyone was salty! “I’ll extend the opportunity to you now, if you choose to decline that privilege, it doesn’t matter, I will be having a word with you here and now about this, young lady.”

“I er,” Sera gulped eyes darting back and forth between Cassandra and Marehis, and then down like she was trying to see- oh Cassandra was holding something behind her back. Sera let out a shuddering sigh like she might cry and then, “You didn’t loose any potion, Ink. I…I stole it. A bottle of your Lyrium.”

… “You…” Ellie was confused, why-? Cassandra held out the bottle she’d found in Sera’s things? “I don’t understand, Ser’, is something wrong?” did she owe someone a bunch of money or something? Did she need help?

“How long has this been going on?” Cassandra asked levelly, tucking the Lyrium into an empty potions slot on her belt. “Sera, how long have you been using Lyrium-“ the air sort of whooshed out of Ellie’s lungs but-

“N-never! I swear Sandra, honest to the Maker, I’ve never- I’m not an addict or anything- I mean I was gonna take that but s’not-“

“Da’vehnan!” Marehis exclaimed, appalled.

Cassandra stomped right up to Sera, and then she pulled her into a hug, “You absolutely fool-headed child,” she spoke with conviction, “I know, I know you are struggling right now, but this, this is not the appropriate course of action. Seeking a temporary high will not fix anything, take away any of the things that give you angst. You must speak with us, and seek seek help. I would always be there for you, hear you, hold you, help you. If you need a break or time or rest you would have it, but you have to-“

“I wasn’t ruddy trying to get high- just- stop it!” Sera sobbed out, and Cassandra loosed her hold when the Elf girl pulled away, wiping at her eyes with the backs of her hands, “I wasn’t being a bitch to you because I want space from you, Inky—I was being bitchy because I was afraid you-you were gonna find out I’d stolen Lyrium and be mad at me. I don’t friggin want space from you—I wanna ruddy be bonded to you!”

“…bonded?” Ellie asked, confused.

“Like baldy is!” Sera frustratedly explained, “I wanted lyrium cause- cause I figured it make’s Mages all Fade dreamy right? I thought- it sounded like the only thing I didn’t do when I got all magey in the Oasis was Fade dream, I thought if I meditated a bunch and did shite that Solas says makes my magic active or whatever and took lyrium, I’d go to sleep and boom! Fade dream,
wake up a mage.”

“Solas told you to do this?!” Marehis- oh holy crap, Ellie was pissed too but Marehis looked more like ‘Murderous’ right now. Oh, Ellie was too! She was going back to Skyhold and telling the Iron Bull he could lob Solas’s stupid! Head! Right off! Maybe then the Qunari would feel cheery enough to talk to Ellie about whatever was bothering him! Two birds, one head!

But,

Sera growled in frustration, fists clenched, “He wouldn’t freaking help me! I asked him- I went to see him before we left and I practically begged that asshole to help me wake my magic up and he bloody just- spouted all this nonsense, that he was sorry he tried tricking me into magic and that I’m ‘perfect the way I am’ and- and- ugh! That don’t help me none!”

“Sera,” Ellie breathed, “chica, you don’t have to be- we’re sisters! That’s like, the bondiest bond there is! You don’t need to be a mage-“

“But we don’t have baldy around and what if you need it?! Cole can’t always hear you and- and- it’s not just that, honest. I-“ she was quiet, shaking out her hands nervously as she collected her thoughts, “I…maybe the Oasis messed me up. But I felt my magic shite and it was scary and it hurt but- but it also felt- I dunno. Good? Like- like when I first got into chemistry, or when I found the Friends, or when I joined the Inquisition and actually got um, into it for more than just ‘I need the damn hole in the sky closed so I can go play!’ it felt like, this is what I’m supposed to do. I mean I dunno if I wanna be like, a magey mage. But the way Mare was talkin’ about Solas explaining it, where magic’s just a part of life, how you light fire or protect yourself, do littler day to day things,” she shrugged. “I dunno, maybe that’s stupid-“

Oh. Kay. Solas could keep his head. Probably, anyway, execution…he didn’t destroy the Temple himself, but he gave Corypheus the means to do so and did nothing to stop him. People hanged for less.

She shouldn’t have to be making decision like whether or not her papi should be executed! Blah! Focus!

“Sera, it’s not stupid,” Ellie said, taking her hands in her own, “if you genuinely, one hundred percent want access to your own magic for yourself? There’s absolutely nothing wrong with that. I mean, as someone whose grown up a mage I think it’s bat-crap crazy to actually want- it’s not that it’s a bad idea on a personal level, but it’s sort of like…like if race was a choice—if you’d been born a Human and someone said ‘hey you can become an Elf’, while Humans are in no way better than Elves, based on the society we live in, on all the disadvantages Elves face socially, politically, it’s kind of better to be Human. The world is…might be changing? I don’t know how things will be for Mages after all of this, but Sera, it’s bad. I mean it’s really bad. I love my magic, and I wouldn’t change anything, but it’s not something I would recommend lightly. There are so many wonderful things you can do with magic but there are so many downsides to consider, and you have to consider them because if you pursue this, you’ll have to live with them.”

“I…didn’t really think about it, I mean we work with Mages and no ones throwing any of you into Circles or anything, but…there en’t any Circles to throw people in right now,” Sera sighed. “I’ll think about it some more.”

“And you will do nothing to pursue it until we can have an appropriate understanding of just how you would do so,” Marehis insisted. “Da’vehnan, if your bid with Lyrium hadn’t worked, if it merely affected you as it does non-mages- what would you have done? Tried again?” Sera shrugged and nodded, “That would have just led to another ‘again’ and another.”

“You could have become addicted, Sera. And that- there is no known- Templars struggle with Lyrium addiction eternal,” Cassandra took a deep breath she blew out slowly before reaching out to card a hand through Sera’s hair. “It is late, and it is chilled out here. Come,” she intoned, waving Sera forward and the Elf girl went to her and the Seeker wrapped her arms around her shoulder, rubbing her arm the way she did for warmth. “I believe we’ve cocoa in our stores. Lets indulge in a cup, shall we?”

“Ohh that sounds excellent,” Marehis agreed, coming and taking Ellie’s hand to pull her close, playfully conspiring, “let’s see if we can be sneaky.”
Huh. Yeah, cocoa with everyone would have been the nice thing to do…but there was something fun about trying to not get caught doing something innocuous, just to have a shared venture. Sera- oh it was so relieving, she was giggly which made Ellie giggle, and they kept shushing each other- but it was just a vicious cycle! They were not made to be covert assassins, but no one came out to disturb their ‘sneaky’ cocoa session.

“I’m real sorry, Ink,” Sera whispered when they were settled in their tent, Sera’d basically conjoined their bedrolls which was fine, it was very warm, and who was she to turn down snuggling? “for everything? I shouldn’t’ve lied or stole or gotten all pissy with you.”

Ellie hummed in consideration, before she kissed Sera on the tip of the nose, “I instantly forgive you!” she promised. She was going through a lot, and mami said something about Sera struggling? “Everything’s okay, right? Are you okay?”

“Been kind of anxiety-ish, for a while. Not as bad as when I was littler, but um, the mom-squad took me to see Elan. I’ll have potion around just in case, an’ I’m supposed to be mindful or whatever about ‘triggers’ n’ pish, do groundin’ and meditation and shite.”

“We can be twinsies!” Ellie quietly enthused, “I do grounding every morning when I wake up, and we meditate together. Does mami keep your potion for you?” she wondered.

“Haven’t got it yet, Elan’ll send it when she’s got it brewed up.”

“If you want, um, I mean, if you ever need potion,” panic attacks were kind of wild, it was hard to self-administer things when you were swept up in suffocating to death, or at least feeling like you were, “mami keeps my potion for me when I need it, you do too. I could keep yours—I’d be super careful and take care of it and help-“

Sera held her tighter, nodding against her shoulder, “Yeah Ink, I trust you. Thanks.”

The Hinterlands got so much more fun then! They had all of their business out of the way with the ‘retainer’ dealt with, and Mister Aclassi’s shopping done, so! Fun! They had a little bit more business but it was exciting and so great! They went to the Crossroads and Redcliffe, and took all of the toys Thom and Cyril had cobbled, and Cremisius’s stuffed nugs, and the sock dolls! She was so so glad they’d had more than enough to go around, and all of the kids! Sweet babies! They were so excited! And cute! The Iron Bull was literally a huge hit—it took all of five minutes for them to want to climb on him and ride around on his back. And Cremisius, gosh, he was worn out from how much he’d played—so many little girls had looked at him, and thought he was just the handsomest, and they cast him as the handsome prince or brave knight that would ‘save’ them from the dragon, and it was just so-

She’d never…gosh she’d never ever led a life where she thought she might grow up, get to be older full stop. Let alone things like marriage or…did…did she want children? To be a mami? She loved Anya loads, loved being a puppy mom, but like, for a kid? She…she wasn’t sure but something about seeing Cremisius being so very good with the children, playing and chatting with them, and just being so very sweet with them…did he want to be a father? He…might be really good at it. Should have it, if he wanted it. And she wasn’t exactly sure every role she’d play in that but if it was something they wanted in the future…that’d be uh…

She supposed that would be ‘cool’, as mami and papi termed it.

Blah! But that was like! Way way off! Way off!

Right now, it was chilly at night but Spring was on, and the Hinterlands warmed up pretty nice in the day time, so there was lots of splashing and playing around in the lake near their campsite, they played so much tag! And Anya loved all the open space to run around and play in! Anmmnd she kind of liked it too, all the tall grass. It was um…conducive to laying with someone you wanted privacy with. They got very bad at playing tag because Cremisius kept going after her and they’d go to the ground and um…kissing counted as tagging, right? So maybe they were good at it after all? Sera and Cole always left them be, Cole making it more fun for Sera because he’d ‘cheat’ a bit, poofing around and she’d have to listen and really hunt him down to find him.

But there was a thing as too much sun, which seemed crazy after so much wintry mess, but one afternoon found Ellie lying in her bedroll with Cremisius, reading in the cover of the tent for some shade, while Vivienne and Marehis were working together on making lunch and,
“Hey Boss-girl, you uh, got a minute?”
Yes! She had several minutes! All of the minutes! The Iron Bull! He was here, and he wanted to talk!
So she popped up, handing off her book to Cremisius, “I do! Whatcha’ need?” she asked.
They went to sit very dangerously—not really, but Mamis would pitch a fit—with the legs dangling over the edge of the steep drop by the dormant Occularm, Ellie kicking her legs a bit, just, excited and nervous.

Apparently, the Qun had come calling. They wanted to ally themselves with the Inquisition—however, in order to do so, they would have to help one of their agents on the Storm Coast. The Ben-Hessrath discovered a Red Lyrium shipment would be coming in for Venatori collection on the Coast, their demands for allegiance were that the Inquisitor, the Iron Bull, and his crew to help interfere with it's delivery, make certain it didn't fall into Venatori hands and was destroyed.

“I think this could be an incredible opportunity for the Inquisition. And gosh, I mean the Qun gave us you, and that’s the best! Of course I want to help!”
The Iron Bull blew out a sigh of relief. “You’re sure?”
“Positive! You and the Chargers are up for it, right? Is it cool to bring everyone or does it have to be just me?”

“Your people can come, and uh, they get that you’re Imekari. Young. They don’t mind you having protection, but we should be a little more selective, this'll be a delicate operation and we don't want to tip off the smugglers with our numbers,” he explained.

Ellie nodded. “Cool! So…Storm Coast? When do we need to leave?”
They left the following morning so they could get Mister Aclassi safely back in Skyhold and assemble the rest of the Chargers. The trip back was short but...interesting.

Sometimes Cassandra read things, these books she insisted Ellie never ever read, and there was one she'd brought along with her this trip she was super cagey about, always sneak-reading it, Ellie only knew about it because she'd come into the tent on more than one occasion to find Cassandra hurriedly tucking the book under her pillow. But Ellie got curious because of the cover! She was pretty sure-

"Eleanor!" Cassandra cried out in surprise their first night on the road. Ellie was sitting in Cassandra's bedroll, looking over the front of the book, and she was right! Varric Tethras was printed at the bottom of the cover!

"Why are you embarrassed about reading one of Varric's books?" Ellie asked, handing it up to her mami who snatched it in hand and then plopped down to sit alongside Ellie.
"They are horrible," Cassandra insisted, "and wonderful. It's utter filth and tripe but-"
"But it's your cup of utter filth and tripe?" Ellie supposed.
"You did not read any of it, I hope. It truly is, er-"
"Nope, doesn't sound like it'd be my thing, but if it's your thing, that's great! I'm glad you enjoy it."
Cassandra nodded, "I do...it is a pity, this is only part of the series, the last so far but...oh there should be more, and there was to be, Varric merely hasn't released it yet."
He hadn't, huh? Maybe...maybe that was the common ground they needed? Varric and Cassandra, to move forward after he brought Hawke to Skyhold. He'd been looking for a way to apologize to her, and breakfast food only went so far.

"Hey Varric?” Ellie asked quietly the next day while she helped him make lunch, Cassandra and Cremisius were off doing a perimeter check. "What ever happened to that book of yours? Swords and Shields?"

The Dwarf man froze mid carrot-chop, and then he looked to Ellie, absolutely horrified. "Fuck. I regret everything I've ever done. How bad's the damage kid? Oh shit, oh shit, Aveline fucking warned me if I published crap like that, if I ever had kids that read it I'd regret it, and I do, and I owe her a drink. You didn't get to chapter seven, did you?"
"The latest one," Ellie said, she couldn't help it, he was so freaked! She giggled and
assured him, "I didn't read any of it, honest, but I saw the latest chapter, your name on the cover, and wondered why you stopped publishing them?"

"Ahh, shit kid, Swords and Shields is the worst crap I've ever written, barely sold enough copies to pay for the ink."

"Really? Huh. Mami's a fan."

"Your mami's kind of going through a lot right now with her boyfriend being an Elf god. If she needs a little *tasteful* book porn to get through, more power to her."

"Not Marehis, Cassandra."

"Shit. *Seeker* likes Swords and Sheilds?"

"Loves it! She's super bummed you haven't put out another chapter."

"Huh..." Varric seemed to consider it. "Thanks uh, for the heads up."

She wasn't sure exactly what went down, just later that afternoon, Varric sent out something on a messenger bird, and then the following morning he had a package from Harrits with a note attached, 'I'm not running a bloody printing press', Ellie saw when it came in. All Ellie knew was when she and Sera came in from washing up in the stream, Cassandra was blushing, curled up in her bedroll, and holding a book with a freshly cracked spine.

"You are absolutely never to touch this, it is garbage. But you may lay next to me and read the Chant. Perhaps pray for my soul."

"On it!" Ellie said.

It was good, a relief really, to get Mister Aclassi safely back to Skyhold. And getting in a quick hug session in with Papi! It was great! And very squishy, Ellie was almost worried she'd be a little bruised!

"Here, take my hat, your armor is warm yes? And you have your scarf?" Cullen listed off like a checklist, Ellie nodded—she was double hatting it! He'd just put his on over the one Cremisius made her! Two hats and a hood! And her scarf! "If you become ill from the Coast again, I will lose my mind, and burn that place to the ground, I don't care how difficult the rain will make it, I will find a way."

"I believe you," Ellie assured. "I'll be safe. We'll catch up when I get back, um...would you...would some one please tell Solas my trip out got extended? I kind of promised him I’d come see him when I got back, but we need to get going if we’re going to make the meetup."

"I would be absolutely delighted to inform him," Cullen said, pleasantly, but kind of sinister like he was pleased he could go rub it in Solas’s face that he’d gotten to see Ellie and that she wouldn’t be in to see him until later than expected due to a mission he definitely wouldn’t be briefed on—she could only give him the heads up that she was heading out of range of the bond because she promised her advisors and Marehis that she would give him absolutely zero information about where she was going or what she was doing. "Be safe."

"Be nice," Ellie returned, popping up on her toes to kiss her papi on the cheek. And dipping into the bond a bit- gosh she felt badly at how much excited relief came from Solas’s end. She sent something that she hoped was apologetic for her sudden in-and-out and assurance that they were still on for when they got back...and maybe something that had been their way of conveying *I love you*. 

*I love you too.*

Papi’s needed to just be papi’s! Not dalish almost-gods and accomplices in terrorism!

"You all ready to hit the road, Imekari?" the Iron Bull asked as he rejoined them, the Chargers at his back.

"You bet!"
Well. Coast was raining all to shit, and this was nerve wracking as shit.

When he first got word from Par Vollen he’d…hell, he’d been dead empty for a moment, coming to terms with what might be inside, prepared for it, even though…well, he thought- he was supposed to have more time. He reported in. Any correspondence he got from back home was in response to his inquiries. Otherwise, nothing. The only thing he was expecting to get from them was change-of-orders—which meant moving on from the Inquisition…or moving on full on—returning home.

He was half excited and proud that the Inquisition was being deemed worthy by the Qun, and that…would help with shit, if certain things came to light. Them approving of the Inquisition, oh man, if they got more involved, actually saw what he saw out of Ellie—that she was Baslit-an—he might not be in as big a shit pile as he was making for himself out here.

Because this is where you get to the other half, where he was not excited, and ashamed. This was not how this was supposed to go down, at all—he was supposed to report in, maybe meet with the occasional contact. Always alone, always away from his crew. This? Was up close and personal, a Ben-Hessrath agent would be all up in his junk, and he…had more junk than he probably should. His job was to blend in, infiltrate, and report what he sees. But there was a difference between reporting in and being reported on. Now he was going to have someone from back home seeing him, seeing his ‘not at home’ shit. Crew he cared for. Tevinter lover. Tevinter Imekari…having Human Imekari, he’d gotten…he’d gotten too close—if roles were reversed, if he got a glimpse of an agent living their day to day the way he was, he’d get yanked out of the field so fast his head would spin.

At this rate, his tattoos were the least extreme of his worldly activities. And he was pretty sure he was in for a hell of a time over it when he reported back. So.

He was fucked. In none of the ways he liked. Wasn't gonna be for a hot minute—Sparky was back in Skyhold, him and Madam de Fer. Mages and the Qun were always a caustic mix, and he didn't need an agent looking too close at what Bull had going on with a Vint-ass mage, but he sure as hell didn't want to do something that hurt the guy, fuck, he was still raw after shit going down with his father. He wasn't about to drag him along into a situation where he couldn't openly lay claim to the guy. There was no real reason to, mid-battle, but if whoever the Ben-Hessrath sent asked the right or uh, wrong questions, answers that might keep Sparky safe might also hurt him in ways he sure as hell didn't need right now.

Madam had no interest in this mission or the Coast, she hated sending Imekari off without her, but it was best, the fewer mages, likely the better. Cullen got a lead on something about the Red Templars so Seeker was back in head quarters helping him, and Ellie left Anya with them, she wasn't sure the pup was cut out for covert operations. And uh, if mages were a risk, Cole definitely was. No way an agent wouldn't take one look at him and try to take him out or report in that Bull was batshit crazy. All in all, they had Tethras, Sarge, Sera, and Marehis, good size group to knock out this mission successfully, not so big it'd fuck it up.

Oh man. He just had to keep his cool. Keep his damn mouth shut, get through this assignment as quickly and cleanly as possible. Let them see he was infiltrating, not infatuated.

Because he wasn’t.

“The Iron Bull?”


Oh just- fuck! The kid stepped right up to him and wrapped her arms around his waist, hugged him as tightly as her little body could, shit she put effort into it. “You hugged me this morning, but it looked like you needed one for yourself. Are you okay?”

“Right as rain.”

She smiled up at him, “You wanna nap with me after this is done, or will you and Dorian be getting up to sex things? The rain’s making me sleepy. Gosh, you think it’d stop being so cold up here.”

“Yeah babe—we’ll get our nap on once we’re through. Thanks for looking out, always down for hugs but uh,” he pulled back careful, didn’t wanna jolt or jerk her around, rested his hand
on her head—the motion kept her in place while he took a step back, get some distance. “Now it’s time for work. You in, boss-girl? My contact should be here soon.”

“You got it! Inquisitor Trevelyan at your service!” she promised, standing tall, sporting her most serious, determined look.

They make it through this all good, he was gonna nap the crap out of this afternoon. Get his Vints in on it, have a big old worldly nap party. He was on the outside damn it! Outside life was different from inside life, they’d get that, wouldn’t they? He wasn’t fucking Tal-Vashoth, knew his place. When this was over, it was over, no questions asked, no resistance.

Heard someone, barely heard them—Ben-Hessrath, definitely—slipping through the woods, coming to join them at the meet up point. Huh…wait…oh shit, hell yeah!

“Good to see you again, Hissrad,” the agent that joined them said, oh man he had his same old swagger back and everything.

“Gatt!” Bull greeted, “Last I heard, you were still in Seheron!”

“They finally decided I’d calmed down enough to go back out into the world.”

“Boss-girl, this is Gatt, we worked together in Seheron,” he introduced him.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, Inquisitor. Hissrad’s reports say you’re doing good work,” Gatt said.

“Shanedan, Mister Gatt, I’m Ellie,” she greeted, bowing her head a bit, “It’s great to meet you—you’re a friend of the Iron Bull’s? I forgot his name was Hissrad,” she quirked her head to the side as if thinking, “I thought you said the Qun didn’t give you names, but numbers?”

“And titles, which bring about nicknames,” Gatt assured. “Hissrad—“

“Means ‘Keeper of Illusions’—” Bull started.

“Liar,” Gatt corrected with the accusation, “it means, liar.” Yeah well Gatt’s short for Gaatlock because of someone’s damn temper, so he could bite him.

“Well you don’t have to say it like that.” Bull growled. Kid got it, the work he did, and he’d always been upfront and honest with her when he could. Still, there’d been too many motherfucking liars in her party, he didn’t want her getting the wrong idea.

Imekari, damn it, she giggled at that, and he caught himself smiling. Wasn’t bad, smiling, just, shouldn’t get caught doin’ it so damn soft. Gatt…he was pretty sure Gatt bein the one they sent would be his saving grace here, but that still didn’t mean he could get by showing anything too genuine. “Liar huh?” she smiled to Gatt, “I look forward to working together.”

“Hopefully this will help both of our peoples,” Gatt said, “Tevinter is dangerous enough without the influence of this Venatori cult. If this new form of Lyrium helps them seize power in Tevinter, the war with Qunandar could get worse.”

Yeah. They’d already seen what this shit could do with Red Templars. “With this stuff, the Vints could make their Slaves into an army of magical freaks,” Bull said. “We could lose Seheron…and see a giant Tevinter army come marching back down here.”

Gatt nodded, “The Ben-Hessrath agree, that’s why we’re here.” He pointed to the coastline, and jumped right in to laying out the plan, “Our dreadnought is safely out of view, and out of range of any Venatori mages on the shore. We’ll need to eliminate the Venatori then signal the dreadnought so it can come in and take out the smuggler ship.”

Ellie nodded, considering, then looking up to Bull. “What do you think, the Iron Bull?”

Honestly? “Don’t know,” he had to admit. Guts had been twisting with equal parts excitement, and out-in-out panic at the idea of a dreadnought run anywhere near Imekari or his…his crew. Which was stupid, this was the mission. Still, “I’ve never liked covering a dreadnought run. Too many ways for crap to go wrong.” She met him with that steady gaze, told him to lay it out for her, she got it, this was work and if he needed her to hear something, even if it would freak her out, she’d keep her cool, keep her head in the game. “If our scouts underestimate enemy numbers, we’re dead. If we can’t lock down the Venatori Mages, the ship is dead.” He sighed, “It’s risky.” Not even his favorite kind of risky either.

“Riskier than letting Red Lyrium into Minrathous?” Gatt sniped. Asshole. “This is risky, yes, but it’s our best chance to destroy the shipping operation permanently. My agents suggest two
possible locations the Venatori may be camped to guard the shore.” He pointed East, then West. “We’ll need to split up and hit both at once.”

“I’ll come with you, boss,” Bull assured Ellie. Had her people with her but this was definitely part of what he signed up for, protecting her from the big and the bad, and after all the prep he’d put Krem through for this? The guy’d probably turn on him in battle if he tried going with the Chargers, he wanted Bull watching Ellie’s back big-time. “Krem can lead the Chargers.” Confident about that, his guys would be alright. He had them cooling their heels near by, didn’t exactly…even though it was Gatt, he’d feel a hell of a lot better about this going down without a hitch, without coming out on the other side being pulled from the field, if the agent the Ben-Hessrath sent had absolutely zero contact with his crew. “Let me fill them in, and we can move out when you’re ready.”

Kid nodded, “Got it, you’re good on potions, the Iron Bull?” and when he nodded, “Cool, I’ll touch base with everyone, be there in a minute.”

Gatt stayed close to Imekari, which checked out. The guy was definitely here to see if she was everything Bull was writing home about, see what the Qun would be getting into with her. Worked for him—he gave Krem and the guys a solid run down, and he…felt okay with this. Mostly. Scared as shit, but he trusted his guys and he’d given Krem as many playthroughs as he could come up with. They were ready. They were.

Figured he should wrap this up—he could hear Imekari asking, real sweet if Gatt had potion for himself, if he needed anything at all. Bull just about whipped around and went to—dunno, cover her? Throw her over his shoulder and bolt? Kid asked if Gatt wanted in on Barrier—promising she’d no intention of casting on him, especially not without his permission, but they would be fighting alongside each other, he could have the extra protection if he wanted it. Didn’t go too bad, guy was definitely uncomfortable with the question, did not like it at all that the Inquisitor was Saarebas, and dude wasn’t known for keeping his cool, but he had some restraint. Bull heard Marehis click the release on the knives she kept braced in sheathed to the inside of her forearms when Gatt stiffened and stopped breathing, ready to stop him before he started if he was going to take violent offense to the kid’s offer.

“I’ve no need of your magic, Saarebas. Focus on our enemies.”

“No problem!” Ellie cheerfully accepted, “I promise I’m good at avoiding allies in battle, you don’t have to worry about backblast or me hitting too close to you. Focus on defending yourself and let me know if you get hurt, okay?”

“You’ve miracle healing magic in the south?”

“No, but we have miracle healing knowledge,” she offered, giggling. “Miracle’s an exaggeration, but I’ve got lots of healing gear in my field bag and the know how to back it up—no magic, just good old fashioned potion and bandaging.”

Gatt chuckled, uneasy, but polite. “Noted.”

Better than him stabbing her.

Ellie came to join Bull and his guys, Gatt was…kind of in a stare-off with Marehis, just standing very still as if he pretty sure she was going to strike if he made to follow Imekari. Tamassran through and through, she did not like the guy’s attitude, at all, the wild-card he presented himself to be.

“Once they’re down, fire up the signal. That’ll let the dreadnought know it’s safe to come in,” Bull was saying when she stepped up alongside him. Krem favored her a quick wink and for him,

“Understood, Chief.”

Uh-huh. Yeah. They were ready. Still, “Remember, you’re gonna want a volley to start. But don’t get suckered into fighting at range. They’ve got mages.”

“It’s alright. We’ve got a solid archer on our side,” he quipped, wagging his brows at Dalish. Yeah yeah.

“Get in close and take their Enchanter down before he takes over the battlefield.”

“He’ll be dead before he knows it.”
Fuck him, this kid. “Just…pay attention, alright? The Vints want this Red Lyrium shipment bad.” Lost a shit ton of it between all the Lyrium they’d destroyed in the field, and Therinfal Redoubt. Hitting Haven hit the Inquisition hard, but Imekari hit Corypheus’s forces harder it sounded like—she got out with most of her people. Lots of his Red Templar freaks couldn’t say the same.

“Yes, I know. Thanks, Mother.”

_Bite me! “Qunari’s don’t have mothers, remember?”_

Krem offered him that damn cocky half smile, “We’ll be fine, Chief.”

Well they fucking better be.

“Alright Chargers. Horns up!”

“Horns up!”

He looked down to Ellie, “Ready when you are.”

She nodded, nervous as hell, heart was already thundering in her chest but, “Let’s do this.”

This, went off without a hitch. At first.

Held their own good against their group—they took out half the camp, catching them unawares, those farthest away, near their post watching the coast just barely got time to get their shit together to put up a reasonable fight. Still, fuck, he’d warned Krem about Enchanters but it took a minute to track all of theirs down, take them out—

Kid was between Barrier cooldowns, Bull was bare-ass, well, bare-armored so he knew she was too and damn it the Enchanter was beyond distracting. He’d made a move at Imekari and Marehis was going after him—left her open to a stray rogue to come slipping up quick and quiet behind the Human girl,

So Bull got double daggers against his arm as he wrapped himself around the kid and held her close, took the hit on his bracer, little slice just below his elbow where the armor didn’t cover as the rogue followed through, but uh, Bull whipping his war axe around lobbed his head off before he could do more damage and that was the last of their opponents, Sarge was just finishing off the final Enchanter. Still, shit, he- he’d gotten there right? Been a hot second she and the rogue had been in his blind spot, Bull felt the guy right up on her as Bull pushed him away and pulled Ellie to him. He took Ellie’s shoulders and got her right in view, looking up at him,


“I’m okay, are you?” Ellie asked, already taking his forearm in hand so she could examine the little thing, practically a cut on his arm, pout on her lip, “Ouch. Here,” she said, uncapling a bottle of her health potion must be keeping little rounds of cotton cloth in her potions stores on her belt because she covered the bottle opening with one before tipping it and then swiping the wet cloth along his injury, sealing in its wake. “Thanks for saving me.”

“Always got your back, boss-girl.”

Always…maybe…maybe not always. Fuck.

Gatt sent up the signal for the dreadnought just a half second after Krem sent up his teams—good, damn good. “Already sent theirs up, see ‘em down there?” he offered Ellie who breathed a quiet sigh of relief. Yeah, everything was cool.

“I knew you gave them the easier job,” Gatt accused—lightly, like a joke. But he wasn’t joking. Re-educators really did a number on him, huh? Damn. This…this might be bad.

Ignoring that, get him focused on their progress, how good Bull’s outside the Qun connections were panning out, and uh…it was a damn cool sight, he was excited to show Imekari, “There’s the dreadnought,” he said, leaning her way, and pointing to the water for her gaze to follow. She breathed in an excited gasp,

“Wowza,” she declared it. Damn straight.

“That brings back memories,” not all of them of bad. Dreadnoughts were a pain in the ass to cover, but amazing, made the job feel worth it, to see in action.

When the job went off without a hitch.
Drednought fired off her first shot, landed it solid on the smuggler ship, the boom reverberating through the air, even he could feel it, Imekari jumped, eyes wide with excitement and her heartbeat stuttered to the sound, little hand clenching at the baggy fabric at his left thigh.

“Friggin’ boom!” Sera cheered.
And then he heard boots crunching in the rubble on the shore below, gaze immediately drawn to it and, “Crap.”
Fuck. This couldn’t be happening, how the hell had they missed-
Who the fuck was sending them intel?! How had they missed an entire third Venatori patrol?

“We can signal them, they can fall back, right?” Ellie’s voice was tight with panic, breath hitching in her chest.

…”Yeah.” Shit shit shit, because,
“Your men need to hold that position, Bull,” Gatt insisted.
“They do that, they’re dead,” Bull made sure he knew this- they were part of his cover here, he…he couldn’t be expected to work with the Inquisition further, right? No point of a mercenary leader if he didn’t have a crew- come on, please, please.

“If they don’t, the Venatori retake that post and the Dreadnought is dead,” Gatt said, making sure he knew. “You’d be throwing away an alliance between the Inquisition and the Qun. You’d be declaring yourself Tal-Vashoth! With all you’ve given the Inquisition, half the Ben-Hessrath think you’ve betrayed us already! I stood up for you, Hissrad! I told them you would never become Tal-Vashoth!”

Half the Ben-Hessrath*…

*My agents suggest two possible locations for the Venatori may be camped to guard the shore.

We’ll need to split up…
Knew you gave them the easier job.

Hissrad means liar, huh?

So that was how it was. He’d shown his damn hand, given too much, and now his guys were meant to pay the price. He’d gotten too close, carried away, and the Ben-Hessrath fucking knew it.

He lost them, he was going to lose his crew because he couldn’t get out of his damn feelings for five minutes and think about the shit he was sending home. Somewhere, somehow, he got too revealing, and now it was coming back around.

And he could look to Imekari. She was Inquisitor, his boss. She said to call the retreat, it at least took some of the blame off of him, he might be able to back track and appeal to the Ben-Hessrath that he was following orders—theirs to get in and be close to Inquisition higher-ups, and hers, the highest higher-up the Inquisition had to offer. Alliance wasn’t going to work out smooth if she felt they were responsible for her boyfriend’s murder, would it? But there was another level of her being Inquisitor. It was her job not to let things like that—let her relationship with Krem, or anyone get in the way of doing what needed to be done, and it would wreck her, she would blame herself, blame her decision if she called off the attack and Bull was exiled from his people. And she knew, she knew the stakes. She knew part of this- she knew dating a mercenary might mean someday, he didn’t come home- to-to her or to his friends…his father…

And he couldn’t look to Imekari. Couldn’t let her make this call.
“Never say never I guess,” he offered Gatt, bringing the war horn to his lips, and blowing. It. This mission. His chances at ever going home.

“Their falling back,” he said. Relieved. Mostly relieved. He…he wasn’t sure.
Pretty sure this was the most collateral damage he’d seen a defeated dreadnought take out with it.

Gatt was breathing hard, way he did when he was about to lose his shit, “All these years, Hissrad, and you throw away all that you are. For what? For this?” he asked pointing Ellie, “For them? For some basra Saarebas dog.”
And he was Tal-Vashoth, nothing to lose. “Baslit-an. She’s Baslit-an, and you breathe another fucking word like that, neither of us will be reporting in, to the Ben-Hessrath. We’re done here.”

“His name is the Iron Bull,” Ellie said.

“Don’t be, Imekari. I’m not.”

“I’m sorry it’s going to sink-“

“Dreadnoughts don’t sink.” Pulled her to his side more to shield her eyes as he raised his arm to do the same for his own. Self-destruct protocol was a bitch. Really was.

“Come on. Let’s get back to our boys.”

Chapter End Notes

*There’s a mission in DA:2 called ”Night Terrors” where Hawke and friends help out an Alienage family because a young Elf named Feynriel keeps having horrific Fade Dreams but only because he doesn't understand how to use his own powers, he's a Dreamer, who can manipulate the Fade and control what goes on inside it when he enters it. Hawke goes into the Fade (no matter what classification they are) through a special Dalish ritual, and helps Feynriel wake up. I figure an untrained Elf continually Fade dreaming would be a concern for Solas because they might need specialized, more direct training for fear that they are a Dreamer and can accidentally get into all sorts of trouble they weren't expecting to get into.

*This comes from dialog you hear when traveling with Cole and Cassandra after moving into Skyhold (I think the move prompts it, I've only had Cole in my group before Skyhold once, and even then it wasn't until after the move that this conversation came up) where Cassandra thanks Cole for rescuing her locket with Anthony's picture in it, it was stolen by a rat (a very big one!) and he found it when she was hurting over it, and returned it to her.

*When Romancing Sera, you receive the quest ”A Woman Who Wants for Nothing”, where Sera says she got the Inquisitor a hat (a present) that she's stuffed and used as a dummy Corypheus to beat up on. This prompts Inq to get a present for her, but she can't think of anything and goes around asking all her companions for advice, when she talks to Sera in her quarters and confesses she's been trying and failing to come up with something, Sera picks up on the fact that she's gone around telling everyone in her party that they're together, Sera's her girlfriend, and *that* is the best present ever! So, this is an adaptation of fulfilling this quest in this story.
*Genevieve isn't canon, but the oldest woman modernly recorded both getting pregnant and giving birth naturally, was 59 at the time.

*When you first get to Skyhold, one of the Charger missions on the War Table is for them to go to Haven to see if anything can be recovered/leave a memorial for the place.

*Locate Rhys and Evangeline is a War Room mission Inquisitor gets after talking to Cole about his friends. Walker is the agent that locates them, and prompts the mission for their rescue because they've been captured by Templars. They can deploy any of the Advisors, if you use Leliana, she has Walker extract them and get them to safety. Upon completion the mission statement prompts letter from Rhys saying he remembers Cole and still considers him a good friend, and a message from Cole to the Inquisitor where he says he was very angry with them for trying to find Rhys and Evangeline, but now he's glad they did and is grateful they're alive.

*All of Gatt's dialogue about how the Ben-Hessrath feel about Bull, how they're supposed to carry out this mission, and the job Bull gives his crew is canon compliant, and comes straight from the game, and it's always made me think it's basically an intentional hit on the Chargers, not an accident or some misfortune that befalls them, but something that was always part of the plan Gatt's here to execute. The Qun is a little interested in an alliance with the Inquisition, and Ben-Hessrath are a lot interested in correcting and controlling Hissrad, reminding him he can't really have a connection with the people he works with, that it's a job and his duty, and testing him by making him prove he will choose the 'right' thing and abandon his Basra crew to secure an alliance for his government.
Here Lies the Abyss: Heading to Crestwood

Chapter Summary

Bull’s out of the Qun, so, some Dragon slaying is called for to cheer him up. Dorian plies some Tough Love, and Ellie Sits in Judgement over Fen Harel before going to meet up with Hawke and friends in Crestwood! Also Sera celebrates a birthday! I'm good at summaries.

Chapter Notes

I own nothing! Everything belongs to the creators of DA:I!

I'm back! Winding down Pride month with a new Chapter! Happy belated Pride everyone! <3

I'm going to be slowing down (I know, it's already super slow, I'm so so sorry!) with chapter updates, due to work, because I'm a person and I need food and shelter to survive, and money is required for both of these things. This fic will be finished, and I appreciate your patience! <3

Please enjoy! Thanks so much for reading!

ALSO if there's any interest—I posted a newish fic since the last time I updated this fic, a conversation in Chapter 15 of this fic between Thom and Ellie sort of inspired me to write a divergent story, a real short one that I'll be updating with the finalish chapter soon, that explores the idea of Thom going home to see his mother after his time in the military, before the massacre, and instead his life is set on a *bit* of a different course, after meeting a little stargazing Antivan on his way to Markham. So if you want some baby Ellie and younger Sera aka "Seda Emmauld" (introduced in the chapter I'm going to be updating it with soon) 'Under the Changing Stars' is where you can get some of that.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Krem was antsy the whole way through the woods, taking a back-trail Thom told them about, suggested they use if they did have to retreat, he- Bull called them off, so they ran, but the Dreadnought, that explosion rattled their bones, holy hell. The Qun didn’t exactly seem like the sort of people that would accept an earnest ‘we tried!’.

Oh shit! Krem’s stomach plummeted when they caught up with the others, Bull was trudging though the mud with everyone just giving him space, following after him, looking like a funeral procession the mood was so very dire and he- he was carrying Ellie- oh Maker what hap-

He just barely heard her voice speaking against Bull’s hear before he set her on her feet where she was for all of a second before she winded Krem, jumping up to wrap her arms around his neck, he could feel her tears on the side of his neck.
She sniffled, sounding like she was on the verge of sobbing, “I di-didn’t kn-know what to
do- are you hurt? You’re okay right?” she checked, chin quivering as she pulled back to look him
up and down.

Little sore, beat up but they’d gotten off pretty light, considering. “’m fine, El.” Well that
didn’t do anything but make her cry worse. She just started sobbing, oh man, it made his heart hurt
more than anything the Venatori’d come at them with. He rubbed circles on her back, resting a
hand on the crown of her head, “Shhh, honey hey. We’re all alright,” he promised.

Okay…yeah, sort of. Bull looked like hell, and everyone kept stealing glances at him,
looking for something but only for the barest moments and then they were full blown averting their
gaze. No one was saying much of anything as they made their way to camp, Krem kept an arm
around Ellie’s shoulders, she just shook and she wouldn't stop, and he wasn’t sure if it was from the
cold or if something spooked her, bad. No one spoke so much as a word while they made their way
to camp, and even then, dead silence as Thom built up a warm fire under the bit of cover the
Coast’s evergreens provided.

“Uh…”shit, no one was saying anything about what- what the fuck happened, what was
going on? He was Lieutenant, but damn it if he didn’t even know how to start and he felt shitty that
all he could think to ask was, “Chief? How did it go?”

“I’m Tal-va-fucking-shoth now. That’s how it went.”

Oh. Fuck.

Oh man, he could feel the sob working through Ellie's body as he rubbed her back, trying
to comfort. “I’m so, so sorry the Iron Bull,” she whimpered out.

“I made the call Imekari, I knew the cost, and I was willing to pay it. Benefit of that was
supposed to be you not beating yourself up for having to make the decision yourself—so cut it out,
 alright? Gonna break my damn heart and it’s not in the best shape right now.”

“Is there anything we can do?” she wanted to know, “I mean maybe we can find Gatt and
talk to him before he says anything-“

“Nah boss-girl. Today was a test of my loyalty to the Qun. I failed. End of story.”

“Cause I can murder him,” she continued right along, “I’ll jack him up and forge a letter
of recommendation to the Qun that you’re the Qunariest Qunari that ever Qunaried!”

“Love it, love your thinking there babe, but that’s not gonna do any good.”

“Well I mean they wanted you to prove you’re more loyal to them I-“ she gulped but, “the
Iron Bull, you can report in about Fen’harel if you think-“

“They wouldn’t accept a report from me if it laid out the perfect plan for world
domination, and no offense, but that craps so wild even if they did read it, they’d consider it an
insult, me just being a dick and sending them something ridiculous. No—Imekari, that just now,
was a set up. They’ve already tested me once with the lives of my crew. Pretty sure that’s what
they’d get around to if I got let back into the club.”

“But that’s so dumb! I don’t- I mean I understand dreadnoughts are important, but loosing
it shouldn’t be a reason for full-blown excommunication!”

Bull shook his head, “Imagine the Inquisition was facing Corypheus’s forces, and then all
of a sudden, I stop killing his guys and start killing yours and it turns out I was on their side all along. That’s the equivalent of what I did today, in the Qun’s eyes. You might be all about forgiveness, but the Qun doesn’t forgive.”

Ellie nodded, sighing. “Sorry, I don’t mean to poke at it, I just- if I could fix this for you, I would, the Iron Bull.”

Bit of a rueful grin twitched at Bull’s lips. “I know. I appreciate it,” he sighed tiredly, running a hand over his face. “Alliance is off. I’m out of the Ben-Hessrath. I’m still your guy as long as you want me, Imekari but I’m basically just muscle now-”

“Bull,” she declared it—bull crap—“You’re not just muscle! You’ve got a big beautiful brain—yeah, you’re not going to be Ben-Hessrath, but that doesn’t stop you from putting you spy skills to use for the Inquisition, you could even see if Leliana would put you in the field as one of her agents if you wanted that kind of work again. You’ve still put us in contact with a lot of Ben-Hessrath agents already from what you’ve done for the Inquisition—Leliana can keep those contacts up I’m sure.”

“I could send word to her right away,” Marehis offered, “to see about securing relations with the agents and informants you’ve put us in contact with.”

Bull nodded. “Yeah, yeah that sounds good—good thinking you two. I’ll give you a list-”

Marehis shook her head, rising to her feet, she went to Bull and out-in-out kissed him on the forehead, “No need, Leliana and myself can sort through correspondence, I believe you’d planned to nap?” she prompted,

The Qunari sighed, “Alright. You need me, holler.” Marehis nodded and went to the requisition table to get to work. “Come on Imekari—you hittin’ it with me?”

“Oh-huh!” she assured, asking, “You wanna be big spoon or little spoon?”

“Might squish you if I’m little spoon.”

She nodded eagerly, cheerfully declaring, “If that’s how I go, that’s how I go!”

Bull actually laughed at that, so that was nice, shit. This whole thing had gone all kinds of sideways. He lumbered to his feet, walked right up to Ellie, and Krem took his arm off from around her shoulders because, yup, big guy just slung her over his shoulder like a sack of potatoes as he said, “Come on, little spoon, let’s lay it on down. You want in on this Krem de la Creme?”

Really? “Sure, in a minute,” Krem waved them on and Bull headed for a tent. Huh, so that was the ‘mega-tent’? Cool. Once they were out of sight he waited a second and then signed *Follow me*, standing and the Chargers followed him, trailed after by Ellie’s party, Marehis abandoning the requisitions table and they walked down the slope to the beach, to the shore where they were out of earshot of Bull.

“What the hell happened up there?” Krem wanted to know.

“Oh da’mi,” Marehis whimpered, reaching out and- yup, another hug, and a kiss on the forehead, while she fuzzed, wanting assurance that he was truly uninjured. She gave them the run down—what happened with their side of the mission, how that Gatt bloke ordered Bull to let things play out, not call a retreat so the Venatori would be focused on killing the Chargers instead of sinking the Dreadnought. That Bull chose them, even when it meant being excommunicated from the Qun. Just- he could never go back, ever, he just lost his entire way of life, his future.
“The Small One’s plan was sound,” Skinner ground out, drawing her daggers. “I will hunt this Gatt and I will slay him. Krem will lend me use of his binder and I will impersonate him, and the Iron Bull will not be removed from the Qun.”

He'd be glad to, and he hated to burst her bubble, but, “That might not work out, Skin.”

“I will at the very least infiltrate Par Vollen and hold hostage their leading officials to instill in them the fear of me, until they reinstate Bull,” and then she sighed. “May I at least please commit murder against the Qun-Elf? The Iron Bull is already kicked out, we have nothing left to lose.” Well, at least she said please? …that was actually pretty tempting but their attempts at alliance had failed so spectacularly, the last thing they needed was open rivalry with the Qun. So.

This was bad. This was stupid, stupid bad. He was grateful that big bastard saved their lives but- but fuck! Was it seriously worth- he’d die for that stupid oaf, whether that meant physically or for his livelihood. They all would. If he’d thought it was important enough, that the Inquisition needed his country more than his crew…well hell, it’s how he’d always thought he’d go out since he joined on. Big bad fight, horns pointing up*

Well. There wasn’t anything they could do about it now. Except ‘lay it on down’. Krem shot off a few quick messages to Skyhold to update papa, just let him know he and Ellie were alright, safe. And uh...he didn’t get into specifics, but Dorian...he wasn’t sure if he ever said as much, but dude definitely loved the big lug. So he just gave him a little ‘hey we’re safe but things went to shit and Bull’s hurting’. Then he dumped his boots and cuirass outside the tent, and settled in next to Bull who had an arm wrapped securely around Ellie, holding her to his chest in a way that reminded Krem of a kid needing to hold their favorite doll to sleep. Though the second Krem laid down he was half-startled by the oaf blindly slipping his arm up under him, and hoisting him up and in so he was squeezed into the space left on the Qunari’s chest. Well. He was warm, and there was an embarrassing factor—it shouldn’t be, but it was—that he liked sleeping with Bull like this, safe, like there wasn’t an ounce of danger in all the world. And he was right up next to Ellie who hummed in her sleep, stirring just a bit, enough to snuggle against Krem, twining a leg with his. So, zero complaints.

And there were definitely no complaints when there was a bit of disturbance—a welcome one. After a minute, Chargers started filing into the tent, Marehis, Varric, Sera, Thom, joining them to lay all around their Chief, their friend.

They did, however, wake to loud complaining, shit how long had they fallen asleep? Three hours? Holy shit had the guy sprouted wings and flown?

“Fasta vass! My word, this is the most ghastly place in all of existence,” Dorian voiced his qualms with the Coast, feet splashing in the mud, “Where the hell is everyone?”

Ellie stirred, mumbling, “Guapo? Honesty time? Did you just hear Dorian’s voice or have I officially gone absolutely insane?”

“You’re all good for now—I hear him too,” he assured, pressing a kiss to her forehead.

She nodded and sat up a bit on her forearm, leaning so she could kiss the Qunari on the cheek. “The Iron Bull, someone’s here to see you.”

Bull grumbled tiredly, cracking his eye open to look at her. “I heard ‘im,” he sighed. “You brats wanna get off me?”

“No, but that’s ‘cause it’s cold. And I love you. But we’ll get up—Cremisius, would you
Dorian was drenched, but he’d been able to figure out ‘the hell’ everyone went was the tent, so he was coming in, brushing past Ellie and Krem on their way out and just flopping onto Bull like the Qunari was a mattress.

“I do not know what happened. Krem’s message sounded dire, so I came. You are to hold me until I regain feeling in my limbs it is freezing here.”

“You didn’t have to come, Sparky,” Bull grunted.

“And yet here I am, incredible, isn’t it?”

Bull sighed, bit of a smile just at the corners of his lips. “Yeah, yeah,” he drawled.

Marehis, Thom, and Stitches followed after Ellie and Krem, looking through their stores.

“What are you thinking of making, da’vehnani?” Marehis asked the girl.

“Cake,” Ellie said.

“Pancakes?”

“Cake-cakes!”

Uh…yeah. He wasn’t sure how to swing it without an oven, but apparently putting batter in a frying pan and covering it with a lid over the campfire worked just as well. She had a stash of cookies she broke out, and then they melted chocolate, mixed it up with some butter they warmed and let it cool which…was pretty damn good, made softer, sweet chews of the stuff.

Which was baffling enough to everyone that went along with it, let alone Bull who was one of the last people to emerge from the tent and lay his eye on the sweet feast.

“Uhhh…” was all he could manage as he tried to think of just what to ask.

“We’re having dessert for dinner!” Ellie announced.

“Dessert for dinner?” Bull parroted uncertainly.

“Uh-huh!” she enthused, explaining, “The Qun is dumb, it’s cancelled—they gave you up, fuck ‘em!”

“Imekari, don’t say-“

“Fuck ‘em!” she insisted. “They make dumb decisions like dessert not being important, and you not being a total psychopath being a character flaw. We’re making good life choices here in the Inquisition—celebrating that we get to keep you for permanent and eating cake!”

Bull rumbled out a quiet chuckle, shaking his head and shrugging. “Fuck ‘em,” he supposed, seating himself at Ellie’s side before he maneuvered her to sit on his thigh.

That was as much as they talked about it—Dorian didn’t look shocked out of his mind that Bull wasn’t a member of the Qun anymore, but Krem figured they’d been talking while everyone was working on dinner. Dessert. Which was good, almost stomach-ache levels of sweet, and Sera
straight up landed herself with a sugar high, but Bull was eating good, and smiling, and pretty content after such a shitshow of a day so, overall, it was well worth the extra elbow grease they put into brushing their teeth.

Bull was real quiet as the evening wound down, everyone started filtering into the tent to get some shut eye, and maybe give the guy some privacy. Ellie stood and stretched, kissed Krem on the cheek and wished him good night, hugged Bull with some extra effort, and she whispered something against his ear that had the guy rubbing her back and saying, “I’ll keep it in mind. Thanks boss.”

“I’ll leave it out for you, just in case,” she said before leaving them.

To their silence, it seemed. Krem wasn’t sure what to say. Varric had poured them all mugs of his bourbon, just straight up leaving the bottle at Bull’s feet, knocking back his own drink and heading for bed.

“Well, this is all well and good, but I’m knackered,” Dorian confessed, Krem would be too he supposed if he’d ridden at break-neck speed to turn the six hour leisurely jaunt to the Storm Coast from Skyhold into three. Though the Tevinter looked at him, hard, like he was trying to say something without *saying something* audible. But uh, he got the drift, he thought? Krem nodded and Dorian smiled and said, “You may enjoy the swing of my hips as I walk away, I assure you the sight is spectacular.”

Bull huffed out something close to a laugh. Did take the dude up on the offer though, so Krem stared into the fire and let them have their uh, moment, sipping at his bourbon as he tried to think of what exactly the fuck to say. Thanks for not letting us die? Sorry about the loss of your entire religion?

“You wrote him?” Bull broke the silence. Well, at least Krem could follow along.

“Yeah. Was that okay?”

Bull shrugged. “Not a bad idea. Kind of had me worried there though,” he admitted. “Heard his voice and thought it was just me. Madness setting in already,” he cleared his throat, awkwardly, tense before he said, “Cremisius.”

Oh shit. Krem took a few more burning sips of his drink before meeting Bull’s eye. “Yeah?”

Guy was tense in his silence and then, “I get bad, start going crazy—when I’m not me anymore, you kill that bastard and walk away like nothing happened.”

“I’m *not* going to kill you-“

“Not asking you to. I’m ordering you to kill this body if the mind inside of it losses it,” he said, like that was much better. “I’ll be uh…keeping my distance. I’ll go wherever Imekari goes, keep her safe, and I’ll still be your Chief but I’m giving you the heads up now—I’ll need you to be ready to take over, permanently. I’ll up your pay. If you’re not interested, I’ll talk to Sarge. In the meantime, I’ll make arrangements—mega tent is nice but I think I’ll hole up somewhere else tonight, and see about getting a place to sequester myself in Skyhold when I sleep.” Normal people would call that ‘getting a bedroom’ but okay. “Laying down for a while was fine-

“Because you weren’t asleep. I know.”

Bull nodded. “Can’t be too careful, I freak out or something, I don’t want to be anywhere
near Imekari, you guys when that happens.”

“When that happens, huh?” Krem asked. “So, what? You’re just throwing in the towel? You’re Tal-Vashoth now, so that automatically means you’re doomed to be crazy—“

“It’s how it works, Krem—“

“Bullshit! Literally, that’s total shit coming out of your damn mouth, Bull. Of course the Qun says everyone that doesn’t fall in line is automatically evil or crazy, that there’s some terrible consequence, you’ll just fall to pieces if you don’t have the Qun leashing you. Bull. Look at this—look at us. You stopped living under the Qun for way more than six hours ago. If you were actually going to suddenly go insane, it would have already happened—when you got your tattoos, started seeing sex as more than just a routine mechanic of being alive, eating what you like, drinking what you like. Sharing your Ben-Hessrath techniques with your men, with Ellie. Teaching her Qunlat? She’s Saarebas, and a Human one at that. But you sleep with her, protect her, you’re there for her way more than your job description demands. You’re there for all of us more than the Qun wanted you to be, that’s why we’re here today. You didn’t choose to forgo the Qun today, Chief. You made that choice a long time ago, Ben-Hessrath just wanted to verify it for themselves. If you’d made the choice they wanted, they’d have probably taken you back—you’d be free of the crew that was ‘leading you astray’ and rededicate yourself.” Krem sighed, “Look. You go crazy, sure, I’ll take you out in a heartbeat. But maybe just don’t go crazy.”

“Just don’t? Just like that?”

“Just like that.”

Bull nodded. “Okay then.”

“So no ’sequestering’ yourself or whatever the fuck. If you’re worried you’ll freak out in your sleep, take potion or whatever, shit, I get you might uh,” have nightmares, “not sleep well. Pulling yourself out of your life isn’t going to grant you stability, that’s like being afraid your house is gonna fall in on itself, so you rip it off its foundation.”

“Oh, I see how it is,” Bull accused, “you don’t want a promotion ’cause you’re thinking of switching things up, going into construction.”

“Yup, and you’re gonna fuck up my whole life plan if you go off the deep end and I gotta babysit your crew.”

Bull grumbled, sounded almost frustrated but he said, “You’re a good kid, brat,” then he sighed. “Alright. I’m gonna hit it. Imekari said uh, she’s leaving potion out, that I can try a couple bottles of what puts her to sleep, and if I want, she and Stitches’ll whip up some.”

“Sounds good,” Krem said. “We’re all here for you, Chief. Need anything, just say the word.”

Bull nodded, tousling Krem’s hair before lumbering to his feet, “Alright, that’s enough of that crap. You comin’?”

“Yeah, in a bit,” Krem said. Then, “Hey Bull?”

He stopped before the tent, looking over his shoulder. “Yeah?”

“Thanks.” Thanks didn’t even begin to cover it.
Got him a grunt and, “Right back at ya.”

Krem made sure camp was secure before heading to lay down, did a quick perimeter check, passed one of those weird ass glowing skull things and…huh. Okay, not laying it down just yet. There was someone down below, on the beach. Familiar someone, so,

She didn’t seem to notice him as he approached so he stepped a bit more solidly to make sure his footsteps were crunching in the stony shore, cleared his throat before prompting, albeit concerned, “Hey lovely, whatcha’ doin’ out here?” Alone, from what he could tell, unless Cole was along for the trip with Dorian, but the friendly Spirit wouldn’t have kept his arrival unknown. Ellie was standing just at the edge of the tide rolling in, in her night clothes, but at least she put her cloak and boots on before coming down here. He trusted her, trusted her to come to someone if she was thinking about throwing herself into the ocean or something but still, it was worrisome that he didn’t even see Marehis shadowing her, keeping an eye on her while giving her space or anything.

Ellie turned to look up at him, hastily wiping tears from her eyes, “Cremisius, hi. Just um, kind of needed to breathe? Think a bit. Today was hard,” she shrugged, sighing contentedly as he wrapped his arms around her, tucked her head up under his chin.

“I get that,” he said, rubbing her back.

She sniffled, “I- I was so scared Cremisius. I d-didn’t know what to do, I just froze. I didn’t want the Iron Bull to be excommunicated but I couldn’t just let you all die and I just- I was so scared that anything I could say would make it worse or-“ oh man, he pressed his lips to the top of her head when she started sobbing, “I was so afraid you were going to die and- and-“

“Hey, shhh shhh shhh shh, sweetheart, it’s okay,” he promised, “We’re all okay, alive, and we’ll get Bull through this. I’m sorry you were given such a scare. It wasn’t- no matter what went down, Ellie, none of it would have been your fault.”

“Kay,” she said, leaning back to wipe at her eyes.

“You uh…you know if anything-“

Oh man, her expression crumbled at that, “Don’t,” she begged, burring her face against his chest.

“C’mon El. Lovely, if anything ever happened to me, I wouldn’t- I wouldn’t want you to even be sad. Do you even realize how incredible these last few months have been? You, and Bull, and the Inquisition—you’ve given me so much, I wouldn’t’ve had any regrets. I’d want you to move on, find someone that makes you happy, treats you right.”

Ellie was pulling back but not away which was nice, he liked having her so close, warm against him as she looked up into his face. “I love you, Cremisius.”

“I love you too.”

She wrapped her arms around his neck and popped up on her toes to press her lips to his, something long and deep and fierce. Uhh…was it wrong to wonder if maybe he should request more hazardous working conditions? It was, it was terrible but she wasn’t even done kissing him and he was already needing to figure out just how to have it happen again, and again and again. Addiction, in the sweetest sense.

And then she’s lowering herself but he follows, not breaking their kiss even as she’s on her feet, her hands on his chest, pushing him but not away, she’s walking so he moves with her
until his backside meets an abandoned sailboat flipped over on the shoreline, he’s right up against the curve of it’s side and it’s low enough he can sort of lean back, sitting on it. Wasn’t sure how long it’d been there, but it seemed sturdy enough, which was uh, good considering the moment he was seated, Ellie straddled his hips, her knees finding purchase against the boat as she wrapped her arms around his neck again, so he brought his arms up to support her, hand on her bottom, the other slipping up under her shirt to support her back and relish in the warmth of her skin. She nipped at his bottom lip before pressing a kiss lower, on his jawline, leaving a trail of kisses along his jaw as she worked her way down to his neck.

“I’m ready,” she whispered against his skin, before taking some between her teeth, nipping, sucking the way she did so well he was pretty sure it had to be illegal.

“Ready?” for…for what? Were they doing something? Why were they down on the shore again? What was happening?

She giggled into his neck, “For sex?”

“Oh,” he said, “Cool,” he supposed as she kept up the good work of hickey making. Took a second. Maybe more than a second, his brain was only a little bit distracted right now, “Wait, wait wait, right now?”

“Is that okay?” she asked.

“Uhh—El, lovely, I’m always down for it, whenever you’re ready but we’re not doing anything, not here at least.”

“Oh gosh! Right, um,” she looked over her shoulder to peer up at their campsite and then, “I mean we just have the one tent, but we could get our bedrolls and go on a walk, there’s a cave—“

“Honey,” he offered laughingly, pressing his forehead against her own, “I mean not here as in the Storm Coast full stop. We are so not having our first time on the floor of some cave.” Especially not for her first first time. Wait, “Ellie, you had a big scare today, it’s normal to uh, want to be close, but I don’t want you rushing something before you’re really—“

“But I am!” she insisted, “I mean I’m not rushing—I am ready, I have been for awhile now, just, you know. We decided we weren’t going to do anything until after the Breach, and we’ve been just a little busy since then.”

Okay, that was better, but still, “Then you’ll still be ready when we get home. We’ll do things right—have a nice date, if you’re still in the mood there’ll be a soft bed, maybe a little candlelight? And uh, you should probably check out my uh…“

“Saartoh Nehrappan?” she prompted when he fumbled with his words. *Fuck him,* he still had trouble pronouncing the clunky Qunlat phrase for what Bull called a ‘strap on’ in Trade.

He nodded. “You know. Just to make sure you’d be comfortable?” it wasn’t like the thing was massive, he didn’t have some sort of crazy complex, it was a good size for getting things done. If she uh…still wanted to go that route, was cool with penetration, it should be something she has a say in, if he needed to get something different she’d be more confident handling or satisfied by, he would.

“Kay,” she said, biting her lip before she sighed, blushing, “I’m sorry.”

“Nothing to be sorry for, lovely. I mean I’m flattered as hell you’d get so worked up over me even a cave—possibly full of spiders—would seem appealing.”
She squeaked at that, hugging him almost like she was looking for actual protection from the action, burying her face against his neck, “I didn’t think about the spiders!” she half-shrieked in panic as he chuckled.

“Come on, pretty sure there’s no spiders back in camp and we should probably head that way before someone raises alarm you’re not there and Skinner starts cutting people in a panic to find you. She’d straight up stab everyone if she thinks you were lost.”

Ellie giggled at that, “She would not!”

She would. Skinner was straight pissed—Thom was the one who figured out Ellie wasn’t in her bedroll, he’d been checking on her before he laid down and saw she was gone, and Bull went looking, saw she was on the beach talking with Krem and left them be, told everyone they were cool.

“Crem-isius!” oh holy shit Skinner whipped out his name, “How dare you steal away the Small One without telling anyone! My heart—it hurts, it is exhausted, you made me feel fear!”

“Sorry, sorry!” Ellie chirped, kneeling down to sit with Skinner and take hold of her hands, “I was safe, honest—I went to get some air and Cremisius joined me, he made sure I was safe. I’m sorry I scared you.”

Skinner blinked at that, processing, before breathing a sigh. “If you need more air I will cut a hole in the tent. Do you wish that, da’len?” double holy shit, Skinner never used Dalish.

Ellie giggled at the suggestion, shaking her head ‘no’, “That’s okay, I’m fine now, but thanks, that’s really sweet of you.”

Skinner let out something like a frustrated growl and then she patted Ellie on the head. “I would destroy many things for you.”

“Awe, thanks Skinner!”

“That…was almost normal,” Bull said to Krem under his breath.

“The Small One is very precious to me!” Skinner snapped at him.

So much so Krem’s plans on getting to sleep alongside his girl were pretty well shot. Between Marehis and Sera on her left, and Skinner wrapping herself around Ellie’s right side, it was an Elves-only event. Dorian was laying with his head against Bull’s chest and he reached out and grabbed Krem’s wrist, pulling to get his attention and jerking his head to indicate Bull’s free side. Eh. Not a bad spot to end up in he supposed. Unless there was something to that whole ‘Qun madness’ thing, but he was on the oaf’s blind side, he could take him. Probably.

Though uh, might not have felt so safe when, Ellie fast asleep against Skinner, the Elf woman ran a hand through the girl’s hair and assured them all, “If anything were to happen to her, I would kill everyone in this tent, and then myself*.”

Bull sighed, “Yup, spoke too soon.”

They were just finishing breakfast and working on packing up to hoof it to the stables they’d left their horses at, when word came from Skyhold…which was almost funny, because it came from the Storm Coast, to Skyhold, and then back again. From the Blades of Hessarian. Their scouts had apparently caught sight of Red Templar activity on the Coast. The Inquisition had some
people look into it, and they found an operation working out of caves on the far side of the Coast, near this weird Dwarven door Ellie and her party had found but couldn’t get through last time they were here.

“Yay, we’ve more reason to stay in this wretched place, oh my heart is overjoyed,” Dorian offered with false cheer as they began the trek through the woods.

“That’s the spirit, Sparky,” Bull chuckled, clapping the Tevinter Mage on the shoulder.

“Watch your step here, Ellie-girl, it’s slick,” Thom cautioned as they made their way up a zip-zagging slope upward that had the most _comforting_ sign warning of rock falls. So, Krem was pretty glad Thom’s words had Ellie slipping her arm through Krem’s and keeping close. Helpful for him too, really—he’d woken up with a bit of a stuffy head from all this cold and rain, it wasn’t too bad and it cleared up as they walked along, sharing the Embrium steam from her necklace. That was uh, pretty damn good idea Sera and Wolfy had. Bastard.

They broke for lunch once they reached their furthest most camp, just about a half mile out from the reported Red Templar activity. Bull’s leg was bothering him and Ellie complained she was cold and tired, which led to him sitting and resting his leg instead of assisting with meal prep, while Ellie sat in his lap, reclining against his chest. Hand genuinely seemed to be hurting or something, getting to her, she rubbed at her Mark like it was sore—Sera was helping Marehis with getting food together and Dalish was out on patrol with Grim and Rocky to make sure the area was secure, but Sera looked to Skinner, “Oi, Stabby. Go hold Ink’s hand for a bit, kay?”

Ellie immediately stopped rubbing at her hand—like if she moved fast enough they’d think they hadn’t seen it at all—and Skinner came over, looked at the Mark and uh, Well, she didn’t hold Ellie’s hand, but she sat on the ground in front of her and then reached back, took hold of her wrist and let her rest her hand on top of her head. Which was technically contact with an Elf, seemed to help. He...he used to resent his parents’ wishes that he’d turn out to be a mage, the only appeal had ever been a boost in status and that paled with him. But he almost wished he were one, now, able to distract the Mark for her.

Parents...he really hoped Papa was completely in the dark about what went down yesterday, he was already worried enough about Krem’s job. He’d already been dropping hints that he’d be drumming up more business here soon, that he’d need an assistant, and if Krem wanted he was more than welcome to fill that role. If he found out how badly things could have gone on their end, he’d freak—demand Krem come to work for him, and he didn’t want to hurt his father’s feelings, but that just wasn’t going to fly. It wasn’t that he _didn’t_ want to, but he _didn’t want to_—he’d always be down for helping out around the shop on his down time from the Chargers, sure, but he...this was a big part of who he was now. Might not always be that way, but for now, it was, he didn’t plan on letting his contract run out at the end of the business year, that was for sure.

Lunch was good—they regrouped and came up with a game plan. With their numbers, they hoped taking out the Red Templar operations here would be something of a breeze. And it’d be good—they came here to stop a Red Lyrium shipment, maybe it wasn’t being sent to the Venatori—they were working in conjecture with the Red Templars, they had the same boss. So, the Venatori smuggled, and the Templars were processors of it or something, maybe they’d end up stopping that shipment after all. That’d for sure help Bull, he thought, and the Inquisition, turn yesterday’s failure into today’s victory.

“Be super super careful guys,” Ellie cautioned as they approached the Dwarven door, “Red Lyrium is dangerous—do _not_ touch it, and try to be careful breathing around it. We still aren’t entirely sure how everyone got so sick with it in the almost-future.”
“Got it, Imekari. We’ll keep sharp,” Bull promised.

Bull was able to get the first door open easy enough, let them into this cavernous area that led to a natural walkway around the mountainside, though their right was wide open to the ocean, waves crashing and Krem’s heart sort of pounded to the beat, shit—he could swim but armor wasn’t exactly the best swimsuit and he was kind of afraid Ellie’d fall in.

She nearly did, shit, he hadn’t meant to but he’d been flanking her and she stopped abruptly, bending over to pick something up and he—Maker literally murder him, please? Bull was chuckling—had to restrain himself, bury his face in the crook of his arm to keep his full-blown laughter from giving away their position. Because Krem knocked right into Ellie’s butt, and she’d started falling forward, splaying her free hand to catch herself as she stumbled and Krem just— he didn’t want her falling and getting hurt so his hands automatically went to her hips, pulling her back against him—

It-! He just-! Bull could bite him! Sera too—she turned bright red and shrieked. It was perfectly innocent, he wasn’t intentionally dry humping his girlfriend in the middle of a mission!

“Sera, shhh,” Ellie chastised as she rose, giggling a bit as she turned to face Krem, it was only then he realized he hadn’t taken his hands from her hips. She smiled up at him and showed him what she picked up, “Look—it—magic found a key. I wonder what it opens.”

Turns out it opened this huge-ass door*. Working their way through, taking out those Red Templar bastards, Maker, they were monsters—they found a few nodes of Red Lyrium Varric took particular pleasure in blowing to smithereens. And then there was one of those Elf Artifacts. Ellie bit her lip, paced in the corridor for all of five minutes thinking it over and considering what to do about it—it was right near a drop off into a ravine that emptied into the ocean, Krem would have been more than happy to dump the damn thing for her.

“Sera, Mami, come here a minute please,” Ellie said, “the Iron Bull, would you and the Chargers mind checking out the next chamber with everyone else?”

“You got it boss-girl,” the Qunari assured.

Wasn’t too sure what went down, but they cleared out the lower chamber and when they came back, the artifact was blazing wild with Fade light, Sera was kneeling, catching her breath, sandwiched between Ellie and Marehis, the younger girl asking questions against Sera’s ear, Sera nodded a few times and then she took a deep breath and popped up, offering her hands to Marehis and Ellie to help them up.

“Ready to finish these assholes off?” Bull asked.

“Everyone feeling okay? Any injuries need looked at?” Ellie checked first, bottom lip pouting out when she saw Grim’s face was bruised and his right hand looked messed up, knuckles busted and bleeding. She bounced her way to his side, pulling out a bottle of Elf Root tonic, uncorking it with her teeth before dousing one of the bandage rounds she kept in her belt and reaching out for his hand and carefully brushing potion along his knuckles—Stitches followed suit, looking over an injury on Thom’s upper arm, Skinner and Dalish both knocked back health potion for themselves. “Everyone all good? Cool! Let’s move!”

Cleared out the final chamber, this big cave mouth that led directly out onto the water, had a little dock set up and everything. Seemed wild they didn’t get their shipments in to this port, but Krem supposed that while the Venatori and Red Templars may work for the same people, it didn’t mean they knew that, or if they did, that they trusted one another to let them directly into their area.
“Da’vehnan?” Marehis questioned in Ellie’s direction, she was standing on the docks staring out across the water, hard, like she was looking for something through the fog.

“Magic feels funny,” Ellie said distractedly. Funny? Like sick or something? She was squinting and then she gasped, looked flat out excited and then she let out something like a squeal, which was definitely excited as she jumped in place, whirling about and declaring in sing song, “The Iron Bull! I know something that’ll make you feel better!”

“What’s up, Imekari?” Bull asked, coming to stand with her. She took his hand, and used her free one to point across the water, Krem could just make out the silhouette of a land mass through the fog, and Ellie announced, “We’re going to fight a dragon!”

Was it physically possible to think two complete, clear thoughts at once? Because Holy shit, yeah! A dragon! And Cassandra’s going to kill us zipped across Krem’s brain in perfect unison.

Because fuck yeah—a dragon! That’d put the pep right up into Bull’s step, and give them a damn good fight! But Cassandra was going to murder him—murder him dead, let Dorian resurrect him, and then murder him twice for letting Ellie go anywhere near a dragon.

“Dragon seems pretty dangerous, and we just came through a pretty big fight El-“ he- he started-he tried! He did! He wanted it on his damn gravestone—Here lies Cremisius Aclassi, son, boyfriend, Lieutenant: the handsome bastard tried.

Because Cassandra might kill him but Ellie was all big, beautiful, hopeful eyes—were they sparkling somehow? How was the light hitting them like that? Who made her this damn pretty- she was pouting! And then she said, “Please, Cremisius?”

And then Bull the ass that he was, he dropped to his knees to be Ellie-height, put his big dumb eye on him and pouted, “Yeah, please Cremisius?”

They were the bloody bosses! "I guess."

They both hooted cheers at that, Bull shooting up onto his feet shouting, "Hell yeah! Let's go make some Creme-brulee!"

Glad to hear that have Ellie gasping out, “Oh!” followed by, “If that bitch burns my boyfriend she’s so dead!”

The Storm Coast was, without doubt, the most wretched place on the planet, Dorian was certain. Atrocious. It took its own name far too seriously, all this rain, and it was freezing, and- and the events that passed there had hurt the Iron Bull, and that- that just did not sit well with him. No one got to hurt that man—he was a good man, terribly honorable, disgustingly compassionate, unrelentingly selfless- it was- he didn’t deserve to be kicked out of a bar, let alone his entire culture proper.

He did seem a good deal more cheery about it all, in the wake of their Dragon fight. Dorian didn’t think he’d ever seen him so satisfied—which was rather insulting mind, because he
was certain he’d more appeal than a dragon. Didn’t he? Hmm, he had put on a bit of weight since joining the Inquisition…of course he’d lost a great deal of weight in the past few years. And the only note the Qunari had made of the change was positive, an appreciative rumble in his chest as he gripped fistfuls of the Tevinter mage’s buttocks, said he was glad to see more meat on his bones. So yes, Dorian was certain he should be absolutely insulted by how very elated dragon slaying had made the Qunari.

“Hold still, would you?” Dorian chided, honestly. They were in for the evening, regrouped in their camp and patching up from their Dragon fight. Bull’d been clawed right along his back, up over his shoulders and they’d been able to get it to cease bleeding, but he was quite the bear to bandage—large enough it took two to do it, and Dorian was assisting Stitches with that as the Charger’s regular assistant Healer was rather preoccupied and…being held captive, after a fashion. By the Charger’s Lieutenant, he was seated with Ellie laying against him, Marehis and Sera were fussing over the Inquisitor while she sat, breathing copious amounts of Embrium and Elf Root Steam from a rag—this dragon had flailed a great deal of lightning, left smoking rubble in its wake, and there’d been one point she’d panicked because her Mark produced rather the spectacular Fade tear. Her new ability granted at the hands of Corypheus seemed to render the Dragon paralyzed, it got caught in the midst of it, thrashing limbs moving sluggishly and then stopping altogether. The tear itself seemed to inflict some damage upon the beast, and likewise they were able to take their swings at it without risk of being hurt. Between so much smoke, and surprise, and how very draining this ability was, her asthma was in a bit of pique.

“We beat a fucking dragon, Sparky! A Sparky dragon!” the Iron Bull defended his restless enthusiasm.

“I hate that horrendous nickname but you aren’t to give it away to some reptilian corpse,” Dorian snapped.

“Jealous?”

“Hardly.”

The Iron Bull chuckled at that. “Whatever helps you sleep at night.”

This great buffoon helped him to sleep at night, is what! Hopefully, with some luck, this dragon fight would sate his appetite for such adventure quite some time.

“Good job today guys,” Bull said, addressing the group once Stitches finished dressing his wound. “We took out some serious Red Templar business today, and managed to stop and destroy their red lyrium operations. And we slayed a damn dragon, got some damn good materials for the Inquisition—all in all…” he decided, “Storm Coast was a success.”

His men and Ellie’s party offered up little whoops and cheers.

“Think we’ll head out tomorrow, boss-girl?”

“Uh-huh!” she chirped, muffled, but cheery through the cloth she was breathing into, “We’ll hoof it into town and get our horses—you can tell Russel how our mission went!” she offered him the honor.

“You got it, Imekari. Hungry, babe? We’ll get some dinner goin’ and call it a night.”

It certainly was—half their members, Ellie included were out like a light before the meal was through, even Dorian felt himself dozing off, they’d had rather the taxing day. He was almost
jealous of little Ellie when she was spared the task of taking herself to bed as Krem took her up in his arms and carried her into a tent, who was going to carry him? He was tired! Not ‘a horrific Fade Power popped out of my hand by surprise and drained me of my worldly energy’ tired, but he was certain he was fairly close.

Of course, he hadn’t expected his idiot lover to hoist him over his uninjured shoulder, it was…appreciated, but absurd. And lovely, he didn’t have to lift a finger to make his way to his bedroll, or Bull’s bedroll, a large thing that covered nearly the whole of the floor of one of the small Inquisition tents, they were rather spoiled by Madam de Fer’s dearly departed tent, thankfully a replacement was underway…though this wasn’t too terrible. Cozy, it was the first time he’d said as much about a small space and truly meant it. The Qunari’s body heat alone made the space deliciously warm, bedding soft, and while the man had thrown Dorian over his shoulder like an utter barbarian, he laid him down with care, gently.

“I ever say thank you, for coming?” Bull asked as he laid behind him, wrapping his arm up under Dorian and holding him against his chest, a warm hand splaying low on Dorian’s chest.

“Hmm, no, you never do, and you really should—it is a gift after all, from me to you—“

That drew a smile from the Qunari, “You know what I mean. Thank you, Kadan. For coming here.”

“Ahh. Well. You’re welcome,” he certainly couldn’t have just lazed about in his library chair with a good book while the Iron Bull was er, hurting. Mostly because Skyhold’s library doesn’t have many good books to speak of.

“Man that was a good fight,” Bull breathed as he relaxed beneath him.

“Apparently. What was that you said, when we were fighting it? Tarsid annie halsim?”

His bungled pronunciation earned him a warm, quiet chuckle against his ear, “Taarsidathan halsaam,” the Iron Bull corrected, teeth nipping at the tender flesh of his ear lobe, “means: I will bring myself sexual pleasure later, while thinking about this with great respect.”

“Oh, how lovely.” But wait- that, that was almost famil-

“Mhmhm. You can watch if you want, I can make it worth your while.”

“Can you now?” Dorian couldn’t help but tease, smile pulling at his lips. “When I think on it, haven’t you said that before?” and then, “You’ve shouted it!” On at least three different occasions while they were together, “The Iron Bull…do you pleasure yourself while thinking back on our dalliances?”

The hand on his front slipped dangerously low, “Definitely, Kadan—if you’re quiet, I can return the favor…”

Hmm…he could stand a little…

Nothing. He could stand nothing at all, apparently. His next conscious thought was wondering what the bloody hell was going on with the damn moon—sunlight was pouring through the slack in the opening of their tent. He’d fallen asleep, the Iron Bull snoring against his face, drool on Dorian’s cheek. Not the bodily fluid he would be flattered to receive there, he needed a bath.

A bath! Not a shower! Maker this place was hell, wet, disgusting hell. At least the rain
assisted in cleansing his face as he plopped—gracefully—into the seat across the fire from Ellie who was assisting Thom and Varric with breakfast, a great many eggs sizzling in a pan, bacon in another, bread warming on a stone by the fire. There was some sort of hair chain—Krem, his hair in good form, was styling Sera’s for her, while she brushed Marehis’s who was more playing with Ellie’s hair than anything else, making quiet chatter with the girl while she cooked.

“Good morning, Dorian!” Ellie offered once he was seated, “Breakfast will be ready soon—did you sleep well?”

“I did, yourself?”

“Uh-huh! Gosh, Dragon slaying is hard but it should honestly be prescribed to help with troubles sleeping because I was out last night.”

He was glad to hear it, glad to see her consistently in genuine spirits. That…had been a level of motivation in his trip to the Coast. He wasn’t exactly certain what went wrong, but whatever it was, Ellie considered herself responsible for Inquisition operations, for the actions of her team and the like, and to some extent she was but she took it hard, usually found some way or another to lay the blame solely upon herself. He was pleased to see she was working through this, not punishing herself for the Qun’s utter foolishness. It was hardly her fault. She—she was ridiculously—she had a dangerous amount of empathy—that wasn’t an endeavor to be pithy, that was truth, it was dangerous. She’d been so sad when she learned the details behind Dorian’s departure from his parents’ home. Had felt so terribly he’d been hurt in such a way. But she was also…kind, perhaps wise. He’d been nervous, exposing that truth, admitting he’d nearly fallen prey to a Blood Ritual meant to alter his very mind, addle him, at the hands of his mother and father. Something about it felt pathetic, and there was a measure of fear that he would not be believed, he was sure there were many who wouldn’t. Maevaris only believed him because her father had railed against such practices—there were many in the Magisterium who came to Athanir when Maevaris came out, offering condolences and saying if he wished to do something about it there were any number of rituals that would change her mind, her thinking on her own gender. Dorian had fled, hidden, and then cowered in the face of meeting a ‘retainer’ that might return him to his parents and he’d feared Ellie would…would think him a coward. But he should have known better—Cole had already verified as much, granted it was back before they were wholly certain they could trust the Spirit that came to their aid in the Templar fortress.

“…why doesn’t he understand he’s so much more than circumstance? He can build better than what was broken because he is brave,” it almost felt like prophecy now, given,

“I think you’re very brave,” Ellie said, taking a moment to speak with Dorian in private—checking on him after his discussion with his father. Maker, this girl worried for him it was…annoyingly appreciated. “It’s not easy to abandon tradition and walk your own path. It took courage, to speak with your father, Dorian.” Kissed him on the bloody cheek. Made him feel proud like when he’d first woken his magic, been accepted to the Circle of Carastes*. That was ridiculous. Oh, he loved the girl, it was awful. Loved her, loved this life. Loved…

“Hell yeah, breakfast—Imekari, gimme a cheek girl, mwah,” the Iron Bull was awake, kneeling to kiss Ellie on the cheek while he snuck a piece of bacon straight out of the pan with his bare hand and tearing off a bite with his teeth, “You make the best damn bacon- hey!”

Apparently she did—the half of what was left of the strip in his hand was taken between the teeth of one Cremisius Aclassi and stolen, the Lieutenant agreeing, “Yeah, she does,” around the mouthful.

For whatever reason that had the girl blushing as she admitted, “I asked your papa how
you like it,” with a shrug. That got the softest smile from the Lieutenant and he leaned down to kiss the top of her head, murmuring that it was sweet of her.

More savory, Dorian thought—their meal, it was very good. And then they were off, walking, trudging through the yuck and mud, at least…well at least he wasn’t Varric or Rocky though the duo had formed a Dwarven alliance of sorts, supporting each other, an arm slung over each other’s shoulders as they synchronized their steps, one not taking a step without the other when they got to particularly treacherous mud they sunk into up to their knees. They’d pride to defend he supposed, Sera saw how far the shortest members of their group were sinking and shrieked that someone needed to ‘Save Inky!’ Thom was near and knelt so Ellie could ride piggyback, which sorted, she was still exhausted from yesterday, it took all of five minutes for her to go from chatting amicably with the Mercenary to falling asleep on him mid conversation. Thom was rather the good sport about it all, humming quietly—it was almost pleasant, he was flat just about every other note, but he had the spirit.

The horse Dorian commandeered for his impromptu trip to the Storm Coast was…a resentful creature, it was eyeing him, when they arrived, glaring. With the intent to kill. It was an emergency! The damn brat Lieutenant had been vague in his missive, ‘we’re safe but Bull is hurting’ what the hell did that mean? Was he physically hurt or emotionally? Was he sick, did he need help?! He’d admittedly run the horse rather harshly, and he was sorry, paid the stable hands extra to make certain the beast was cared for with specialty. But he supposed money didn’t mean much to the creature.

It did warm up to him after Ellie insisted Dorian thank him, and try feeding him a bit. He didn’t think he was going to be thrown any time soon, at least. Still, he did not like riding on his own, it was nerve wracking to say the least.

And that damn Qunari—too kind. He rode alongside Dorian’s steed, hands on the reins of Bitsy’s saddle but his elbow was sticking out further than what was necessary, far enough that should Dorian find himself unsteady or falling, he had something to take hold of…light as he was holding the reins, perhaps Bull was prepared to whisk him to safety. Which was ridiculous. And appreciated.

It was relieving to see Skyhold standing strong, waiting for them when they returned, passing across the bridge and through the gates where- oh goodness, Tonio Aclassi wasn’t exactly a young man but he could certainly move rushing down the steps into the lower courtyard.

“Bello mio! My boy!” the man was greeting as Krem chuckled and dismounted his horse, his father colliding with him to take him up in a crushing hug. “Let me look at you—were you injured at all? You must tell me everything—have you eaten?”

“I’m fine papa, not hurt no, I had breakfast-“

“Oh!” the man exclaimed like his child had just informed him he was dying this very instant of starvation, "You must be famished!"

“Yeah, let me settle some things,” returning and watering their horses, helping unload the great many resources they’d pulled from their dragon slaying, Dorian was glad he was merely bedding a Charger and not one of their crew, “and we’ll catch up-“

“Cremisius!”

Well the Lieutenant was a popular young man. Seeker Pentaghast was the next to assault him with a hug, followed shortly thereafter by Commander Cullen,
“Are you well, sweet man?” Cassandra questioned, taking his chin in hand and looking him over.

“I’m fine,” he assured laughingly.

“Good,” Cullen breathed with a sigh of relief, clapping the Lieutenant on the shoulder. “Now, if you’ll excuse me,” he cleared his throat and turned to look through the crowd of Chargers and Ellie’s party and their horses, calling out “Where is my child? Bring her to me!”

The Iron Bull was at Dorian’s side, had just assisted the man from his saddle and now he was chuckling, seeking out the Inquisitor and hoisting her from where she’d been just gotten out of her own saddle, and raising her high as she shrieked in delighted surprise, “Imekari’s incoming!”

“Excellent! Sera—I see you, do come here,” Cullen intoned as the Qunari set Ellie down before him, Cullen was hugging her when Sera approached and found herself wrapped in the Commander’s other arm before he pressed a kiss, one each to the girls’ temples, launching into questions about their wellbeing.

Although Ellie seemed a bit nervous to discuss one particular aspect of their recent questing, so much so she confessed to it almost immediately like it was some grievous wrong doing she wanted to apologize for and work through before she stressed.

And with good reason.

“You did what?!” the Nevarran woman shouted at the top of her lungs, whipping around and looking for the Iron Bull, “You! You took my children dragon hunting?”

“Uhh, it just kind of happened, and it was all around a success, no one got hurt and Imekari and Sera stayed out of the thick of it—Bull was hurriedly assuring, looking like he was genuinely contemplating running for his life…he’d taken several steps back and his hand was on the small of Dorian’s back now like he might throw the Tevinter Mage over his shoulder and run for the hills. How very romantic, but Dorian would kill him—a life on the run was not the manner to which he was accustomed in the slightest.

“I can see that!” she snapped, ahh, apparently the issue at hand was, “You took them dragon hunting for their first time, without me?! The absolute gall!”

Sera grunted derisively, “S’not like we really did anything, ‘sandra, Bull and Mare wouldn’t let us in on any of the fun,” she complained, “We was just watching mostly. ‘cept when her Mark popped off.”

That sent the Seeker low, crouching to be level with Ellie as she laid her hands on her shoulders, “Your Mark produced another rift?”

“Uh-huh, I didn’t mean to, I just- the dragon was so big! And I thought it was going hurt Marehis, and it just- pop!” Ellie explained. “It stopped the dragon in its tracks, sort of froze it or something? But I’m pooped—I’m sorry we went dragon hunting without you mami, but you’re free to join me for a recovery nap.”

Cassandra raised a hand to Ellie’s forehead, “It left you drained, as last time? Do you require assistance from Madam de Fer?” Bah! Dorian could kick himself! He should have- he should have thought to offer as much, much sooner! He’d been exhausted himself, but still, this girl she- she was his friend, precious to him, had been an ally of the best sort and was constantly taking care of him. Roles reversed, she would have passed out nursing his magic back to health!
But Ellie shook her head, “I’m not as in bad of shape as I was after Haven. I kind of want to see how long it takes to bounce back naturally? If it’s something I can recover from on my own, that’ll help with deciding if, how, and when I use it, you know?”

“That is sound,” Cassandra agreed, looking for Marehis and when the Elf woman approached, the Seeker looked to Cullen who nodded and looked like he was about to set off up the stairs while the Seeker wrapped an arm around Ellie’s shoulders, but Cole appeared, halting him with,

“I can do it!” the Spirit assured, and then he hugged Ellie and Sera, “I am glad you are safe. I’ll join you in the Fade when you sleep. Sera, Dagna has been working very hard today, caught up in her work—Lace asked me to watch out for her while you’re both away—she needs a break but doesn’t realize it, if you go to her she would stop and enjoy being with you, and it would make your heart lighter.” he said to his friends and then he vanished.

“As luck would have it, our schedules are clear;” Cassandra said to Ellie, or at least Cole was racing off to make them clear. Dorian had read a report over the Iron Bull’s shoulder at breakfast that said when they returned, he was to round up Ellie and her party and report to the Ambassador’s office for debriefing and then Ellie would be expected in the War Room.

The Seeker and Commander began leading Sera and Ellie away…well, Sera was sprinting ahead, rushing up the stairs fueled by the incentive of getting to woo a certain Dwarf when she reached the top. And Ellie let out a yawn and that was all the Commander needed to take her up in his arms, clearly if she was yawning she must be too exhausted to even consider using her own two legs to carry herself to her quarters.

Cole reappeared with his arms around the Iron Bull’s waist, brim of his hat bending back as it was pressed to the Qunari’s stomach, humming with effort, he did seem to be hugging Bull with the whole of his strength.

“Thank you. You are hurt, but you stopped so much more and this…this hurts you less.”

“Yeah, I know,” Bull supposed, patting the Spirit on the back.

Cole was very quiet for a moment, and Dorian wasn’t…entirely certain how to handle this situation but there were tears, great fat wet tears hanging in the Spirit’s eyes when he looked up into the Qunari’s face. “You saved my friends. Cremisius from dying, and Ellie and Sera from dealing with that loss. I- I’m-“ his chin quivered, and Bull rested a hand atop his head.

“Don’t sweat it, kid,” he said, carefully raising his other hand, wiping under the younger man’s eyes with the back of his index finger, “I’ll get through my shit, I got no regrets.”

Cole nodded. “I know you are scared. If you start to go mad, I will tell you, but it isn’t in you, the Iron Bull. They said it would be, but it isn’t—you’re just you.”

“Thanks, buddy.”

Cole pulled away, and then he looked to Dorian, eyes unfocusing as he spouted Spirit nonsense, "Glittering to gloss a hidden hurt. Unlearning not to hope for more. Stumbling steps where the wall used to be", and then smiled, “Don’t be nervous, he will like it.” Kaffas! “Ellie is going to be asleep soon—but I can do that in the Fade and be with Mister Aclassi in the waking world.”

“Something up with Krem’s papa?” Bull questioned, worried.
The Spirit looked to him, “You’re hurting—oh. Mister Aclassi just worries I do not eat, wants me to join him and Krem for lunch. I think I will, and I will eat—you’re very sad and I think it will make you laugh!”

“Uhh…” Bull seemed to be drawing a blank on just why the Spirit’s eating habits would make him laugh, but, “knock yourself out bud, have a good time.”

“I…I do not think I can knock myself out, and even if I could, it doesn’t sound like I could have a good time then—”

Bull smiled, assuring, “Just a saying—have fun.”

“Okay!” Cole said, vanishing from sight to catch up with the Misters’ Aclassi.

The Qunari blew out a breath, “Alright. I got shit to do,” he said, Dorian wasn’t sure what, his Lieutenant and crew had already abandoned them in the courtyard, returning their horses to the stables, their satchels at the ground by Dorian’s feet but Bull approached and took up the straps to both, slinging them over his own shoulders while he laid an arm across Dorian’s, leading him toward the steps to the upper courtyard…or Skyhold’s castle more likely, since, “Better touch base with Red. Might take a little off of Imekari’s plate.”

Oh, certainly, it also supplied the opportunity for him to walk Dorian ‘home’ after a fashion, to his alcove in the library. The Qunari’s arm slung over his shoulder, making solid eye-contact with Mother Giselle as they passed her in the Great Hall. Well then. That was…Dorian did not think the woman would be bothering him further—if not for fear of the Iron Bull, then fear of Ellie…though it should be Sera she was on the lookout for, he’d caught a glimpse in Sera’s things, of what looked like plans for sneaking pins for the Revered Mother to unwittingly sit upon when she led Chant studies and an ant infestation in her bedchambers.

It was wonderful to be back—he was not getting old but his bones did feel a great deal of relief being able to sit in a proper chair, soft cushions, pillows, and fuzzy blanket he did not need… but Ellie had kindly insisted he keep on hand because ‘gosh’ it could get drafty. Oh and Vivienne, she was a dear—there was a book awaiting him, sitting atop the stack he’d left abandoned on the little side table beside his chair, an older necromancer’s tome he’d been on the look out for but hadn’t quite the influence to find. Perhaps Skyhold’s library had a few good books.

And some interesting things to see. Like Sera trailing after the Inquisition’s tiny Arcanist. She seemed small even for a Dwarf, but she clearly had a big hold on the Elf following her around, giggly and giddy to help her search Skyhold’s library for texts she needed for reference. Sera carrying all of the books they collected, though Dorian supposed it was smooth of her—the Elf girl offered herself as something of support, setting the books aside while Dagna climbed the ladder for reaching the higher shelves, Sera would stand with her hands gripping each side of the ladder, it let her be very close to the Arcanist as she pursued her studies. And too there had been one point the Dwarf woman had been studying a text for so long, verifying it was the edition she needed while standing near the top of the ladder, and she seemed to forget she was up on top of a ladder and turned from it like she could just step away, letting out a surprised yelp as she started falling, slamming her boom closed on her thumb but that was a pretty mild injury given she’d been up nearly three times her own height—Sera shrieked and caught the smaller woman against her chest.

“Cripes! You okay?” Sera worried, Dorian lowered his book and looked to see if Sera needed help, an offer of Elf Root tonic for the girl she was sweet on—her field bag wasn’t on her and he’d his at hand.

“Yeah,” Dagna hissed quietly, shaking out her hand, she looked up at the Elf girl and
smiled, blushing slightly, “thanks for saving me.”

But Sera pouted at that, supporting the other woman with one arm while she took hold of her injured hand to examine it, “Oh, Widdle*, your poor thumb,” she fussed, pecking a kiss to the reddening skin and then she seemed to be taking something into consideration, looked about and saw Dorian and…he wasn’t certain but it seemed like she’d something in mind she didn’t want others to see, or maybe just him? He wasn’t sure. “C’mon sweets, that all the books you need? I’ll carry ‘em and walk you back,” she said, sliding the stack of books into one arm while she took hold of Dagna’s hurting hand in the other,

“Oh!” the Dwarf woman chirped in surprise, “Wow, that feels nice—I didn’t know you were a-“

“Hey, you’re working on somethin’ about Red Lyrium, right?” Sera…changed the subject, he supposed? “We just took out a bunch of Red Templars on the Coast, got real close to it, enough to make observations n’ pish, we can compare notes, yeah?”

Dagna’s giggles echoed up the stairwell as they made their way to the Great Hall, “Sure!”

That was admittedly strange, but his attention was garnered by one of the Inquisition’s scouts tentatively approaching his alcove, “E-excuse me, Ser Pavus?”

Dorian gave it a moment and then looked up from his book, raising a brow, “Yes?”

“The Iron Bull has requested you meet him on the southern battlements.”

…well that was new. Was the Iron Bull using Inquisition scouts—Leliana’s scouts—to request sexual rendezvous? How deliciously naughty. He…would not stick around for any retribution from the Spymaster if she found out and thought it an inappropriate use of her resources.

He was decently certain which were the southern battlements, but that could mean the entire expanse of Skyhold’s frontmost wall but when he exited the rotunda, the Iron Bull was easy enough to spot, in the little walk way to the left of Commander Rutherford’s office, he was certain Cullen wouldn’t mind him cutting through…and too, the man wasn’t even in his office, he may well still be with Ellie and Cassandra either napping or handling their War Room meeting—either way.

“You wanted to see me?” Dorian asked as he met the Iron Bull…he’d something more lewd in mind for greeting, but he guarded his tongue in front of the wall’s patrol. Huh, he wasn’t certain just how adventurous they were about to get—did the Qunari mean to risk being caught in public, or were they going for full-blown voyeurism?

Not voyeursim—kaffas! One instant the Iron Bull was grinning and raising his hand in a wave and the next, the Qunari was swinging around to deflect the oncoming assault of—just who were they hiring to guard their walls these days?! That was a knife! One of them flung a knife at the Iron Bull that embedded itself in his arm, and he threw it back at them, slicing their throat-

“Bull?!” Dorian called he- Fasta vass! He was a fool, he’d not even brought his staff—he hadn’t thought that would be the staff the Iron Bull required!

“I got ‘em!” Bull assured over his shoulder, grappling with the second traitorous guardsman.

“Erost issala, Tal-Vashoth!” oh- oh that was Qunlat, a phrase that got the man hoisted high and thrown over the battlements.
“Yeah, yeah,” Bull said, “My soul is dust. Yours is scattered all over the ground though, so…” he turned to face Dorian, “Sorry about that, I thought I might need backup, but I guess I’m not even worth sending professionals for.”

He-?! “You knew assassins were coming?!”

The Qunari shrugged. Shrugged! “Little change in the guard rotation tipped me off.”

“Well why the hell didn’t you warn me ahead of time?!”

“You go through years of Ben-Hessrath training to hide facial expressions when I wasn’t looking?” he questioned and at Dorian’s disgruntled expression, “See? Like that.” Bastard! “If I’d warned you or the guards, the assassins would’ve been tipped off.”

That…was fair, he supposed. Oh hell, his arm was bleeding, “You’re hurt, how bad is it?”

“Fine, Kadan,” Bull rumbled out, sounding almost embarrassed as the Mage took hold of his arm to examine it, assuring, “hurt myself worse than this fooling around in bed.”

“Those were assassins, the- the knife could have been poisoned!”

“Oh, they definitely used poison. Saar-qamek*, liquid form. If I hadn’t been dosing myself with antidote, I’d be going crazy and puking my guts up right now. As it is, it stings like shit, but that’s about it—hey. Stop lookin’ so damn dire. This wasn’t even a hit, it’s just a formality. Making it clear that I’m Tal-Vashoth.”

Don’t look dire?! It was Saar-qamek! It literally induced madness! Would have sent him crazed, and if they hadn’t had to kill him themselves if- if it hadn’t killed him on its own- “Amatus,” Dorian breathed, voice catching in his throat. He swallowed, “Come. We should see this tended and- and make sure- it needs cleaned immediately—and you’re to report this to Leliana, I swear-“

There was a softness in the Iron Bull’s face as he rested a hand on Dorian’s shoulder. “Don’t think they’ll come after me again, but I’ll make a note with Red to be on the look out-“

“You will, damn it! You could have died! Or been- Bull, what if they made such an attempt while you were with Ellie or- or Cremisius-“ oh the very thought that they could bear witness to something so horrifying, having to defend themselves- never mind that Ellie would hesitate to raise a defense against her beloved Bull for fear of hurting him, the Human girl was so very small, she couldn’t possibly even begin to stand a chance against a crazed Qunari, and while Krem at least had practice going against Bull, knew his weak points, he- he’d hardly be glad to use them, it would be nothing short of horror for him to have to slay his mentor- oh hell, he was not tearing up-

“Hey, I know—I know, Kadan,” Bull gently assured, raising a hand to cup Dorian’s face, thumb swiping under his eye, “S’why I called you. This won’t happen again—either because they won’t send another hit, or because Red’ll be on the lookout and another won’t ever get through. It’s all good.”

Dorian nodded, ugh. He was afraid if he spoke he’d do something horrifying like cry, so he pulled the Iron Bull along, through Cullen’s office and to the Charger’s quarters where he found an appropriate washbasin and cloth to clean out the injury as thoroughly as Humanly possible. He may well have over done it but the Qunari was patient, let him fret and fuss. Bull’s field bag was at hand and he- well it could have been serious! So the idiot was to sit and down a health potion and
let Dorian apply Elf Root tonic straight onto the injury proper, or so help him! *Saar-qamek, fuck!*

The Iron Bull received Dorian’s treatment without complaint, only let out the barest chuckle when the man made his attempts at bandaging the already healing cut. He was hardly a Healer, but he’d managed well enough, he supposed when he was done.

“All right, that’s okay,” the Qunari assured. “Thanks for patching me up, having my back.”

“Well you’re not welcome. Being welcome implies you’re free to do so again and you absolutely are not!”

He had the nerve to chuckle at that! H-hands on Dorian’s hips, pulling the Mage close, standing in the space between Bull’s thighs. “Not welcome, huh? That just applies to getting ‘assassined’ right?”

“Assassined?”

“Imekari used to call her own brushes with assassination. Before she learned ‘assassinated’—”

“My _god._” To his absolute horror, that sounded about right.

“I know.”

Dorian shook his head. “I suppose you’re welcome to everything save being assassined.” He certainly wasn’t saying ‘Katoh’, at the very least.

That brought a warm smile to the Qunari’s face, something warm and pure in his eyes mixed with something…that dangerous bit of something that spoke to the depth of desire that scared Dorian to a degree, just how much this man could _want_ him. Not that he was afraid of the Iron Bull, just— he wasn’t certain _how_ he could want— Dorian was not lacking in self-esteem certainly, but there was always something that said he wasn’t made for continuous consumption, he was divine as the occasional delight, but nothing consistent. Consistency seemed equal parts laughable and…and unobtainable. Perhaps that was why it was laughable—better to laugh off something that could be painful, than let it hurt, he supposed.

Bull’s lips were just a hair’s breadth from his…

And then the door swung open from the tavern, and there was a low, pain-ridden _moan_ that was so concerning it had Dorian whipping around to lay eyes on its source.

Cole, leaning against the doorframe, a hand clutching his stomach, clearly in pain.


“I have eaten and digested an entire meal, the Iron Bull,” Cole said, and it did not sound like it was sitting well with him, “I- I have to do th- that thing again. It hurts, but it made you laugh last time.”

That thing again?

Fasta vass. He was dating an entire imbecile.

“You are a terrible influence and you are no longer welcome to parent this Spirit child!” Dorian snapped. “He was _frightened_ and _ill_ and you _laughed_—“
“The kid doesn’t understand how taking a dump works, you look me in my eye and tell me that isn’t even a little bit funny—" the Iron Bull started.

“Horrible influence!” Dorian insisted. “We’d best get him to the facilities, I suppose.”

The Qunari sighed, “I’m sorry—oh man, buddy, honey you didn’t have to make yourself constipated just to make me laugh—come on, I’ll hold your hand, maybe teach you some knock-knock jokes.”

“Knock-knock jokes?” Cole questioned weakly as the Iron Bull went to him, let the Spirit lean against him for support to lead him to the nearest privy.

“Yeah babe, they’re classic, work every time. Next time I’m down in the dumps, whip out one of those bad boys and I promise I’ll laugh my ass off.”

“It…it will make you feel better?”

“Hell yeah it will.”

Utterly ridiculous. Maker, did he truly love this man?

Don’t be nervous, he will like it, Cole said.

Dorian certainly hoped so. “Go, handle your mess—I’ve important research to see to.” He should consult the blacksmith. Or maybe Sera, she knew something of homemade jewelry.

“Yeah yeah, go hit your books, I got this,” Bull assured, deciding to take the Spirit up in his arms, “Come on buddy. Let’s go take a massive dump.”

The Iron Bull was an utter imbecile. A sweet, compassionate, idiotic imbecile, and the Qun couldn’t have him. And if…if Dorian was lucky, he might just get to keep him.

Her body felt heavy when she woke up. She wasn’t sure if it was still ‘a whole-ass Rift popped out of my Mark’ exhaustion still lingering, or the fact that she had two Humans and a Mabari piled on top of her. Not on top of her, Anya was laying on her, and Cullen and Cassandra had an arm around her, and maybe she could just sleep for five more minutes…

She was back in Skyhold though, she probably had things to do. And she would get to them. In five more minutes.

“Are you awake now, Eleanor?”

Maybe. “Whose asking?”

She felt Cassandra smile against her hair, “I am, child.”

“Depends. Do I have to do anything?”

“…there have been certain developments in your time away we should discuss, you and your advisors—do you feel up for such a meeting? We napped instead of partaking of lunch—we could order dinner before considering how you would like to move forward, if you need to take the
rest of the day, you’re certainly free to do so.”

“Mmmm definitely dinner first,” Ellie voted, “Do you feel like putting the order in, mami? Just whatever they’re serving out of the kitchens today, but like, double. Maybe triple. And coffee. And I love you.”

“And I love you likewise sweet girl—certainly, I’ll see to it at once,” Cassandra assured, dropping a kiss to Ellie’s hair, a hand running through it, pulling a bit on a curl as Ellie snuggled against the woman more. After a beat, “Eleanor?”

“Yeah?”

“Do you plan on letting me rise?”

“Sure.”

“…that would mean relinquishing your current position. Unfortunately in order to send word to the Kitchens, I require the use of my extremities. The whole of my body, in fact.”

“Kay.”

“Cullen? Would you please either take our order to the kitchens, or our child—either will work.”

“Oh, my love, I would go to the ends of this world for you…” papi mumbled out, and Ellie giggled as he grunted, snaking an arm around her waist and pulling her along as he rolled onto his back so she was off the Nevarran woman and resting on his chest, “but not the kitchens. Not when I’ve the option to laze with my mija, while her beautiful warrior mami forages for our dinner.”

Cassandra snorted, shaking her head as she rolled out of Ellie’s bed, disappearing down the stairs.

“How are you feeling, papi?”

“Hmmm…well, I’m very glad you’re home, safe,” she poked him in the ribs—he knew what she meant! He smiled, chuckling as he stroked her hair, “I’ve had a lingering migraine the past few days, but it’s beginning to recede. Getting a little more rest certainly helped I think—I’m alright sweetheart, really.”

Ellie nodded, she wished…she understood why he was doing this, she respected it and gosh it was just incredibly brave, but she wished there was some other way, that he didn’t have to be in so much pain. “I’m glad.”

“How are you feeling, mija? You’re adjusting to Adan’s changes?”

“Yeah, it- it’s helping, I think? I feel better, and I’m actually feeling when I’m not, Cole can hear me better too, I’m not just either ‘happy’ or ‘numb’.”

Papi rubbed circles on her back, “That’s good to hear. I’m proud of you—we all are.”

That was nice. Being Inquisitor…she knew it would be hard, but she hadn’t been exactly prepared for ‘forming a historical alliance between the Qunari nation and an outside force, or let your boyfriend and his crew die a horrible entirely preventable death’ hard. She was really worried
about the Iron Bull.

She almost lost Cremisius. And Skinner and Stitches and Dalish and Rocky and Grimm. But if anything had happened-

“Sweetheart? Oh, Ellie, what’s wrong?”

She sniffled, “S-sorry I just- Cremisius- the Chargers, they al-almost- they could have died.”

“But they didn’t. I know that was scary, oh my girl—it’s alright, I understand. Maker, if anything ever happened to Cassandra, to you? I…I was not entirely certain how I would move forward after Haven, when we thought you were lost. Loathe that I am to admit it, somehow sealing away the entirety of the Dalish pantheon and nearly destroying the world feels almost reasonable.”

Yeah. She still…she knew what she was going to do, she just hadn’t done it yet so she kept going in circles with it over and over again in her head. “I think I’ll sit in judgement for him soon. I’d like to talk that over with the advisors…so, dinner, War Room meeting. We’ll catch each other up to speed,” she gasped, sitting up, “Oh crap! I promised Solas I’d be by to see him when I got back—“

“I saw to it he was made aware of your return—he knows you’re recovering sweetheart, you hardly owe him your time, he’ll see you when you allow him to.”

She nodded, but still, “Wake me up when mami’s back with dinner, please?”

He chuckled at that, sighing sleepily, “Good luck with that. I’m certain she’ll wake us.”

She settled in, focused on her breathing, how safe she felt now that she was back, everyone she loved was nearby. Cole had been with her in the Fade as she napped, he was still listening, worked with her Magic to help her fall back asleep…

Solas was in his cell, awake, reading one of his books. His cell looked a little more livable, he’d a proper cot, a lamp and- oh, oh wow, papi let him have the letters Ellie wrote him—she’d written to keep Cullen updated, assure him she was safe, how everything was going in the Hinterlands, that they’d business on the Storm Coast, and her most recent one that they were all alright and coming home—they were hanging up on the wall of his cell, that…was kind of sweet?

She hated this!

He looked up then, almost directly at her, and then, “Ellie?”

“I’m here,” she said…not that he could hear her, exactly, but she dipped into the bond a bit, as much as she could with her magic still being very dramatic about Rift making—it wasn’t nearly as bad as it had been after Haven, she could already cast a little bit and everything!

Solas set aside his book and bowed his head for all of a moment before his shoulders went lax and then he was in the Fade with her, looking back up, directly at her, rising to come to the bars…she was pretty sure he could walk through them if he wanted. But he kept his distance and that was appreciated, she almost wondered if he stayed in his cell even in the Fade all this time.

“Admittedly, I have not—I haven’t left Skyhold, mind, but I will confess to some wandering the grounds when I sleep, just…checking on things. I have not been given any boundaries with my time in the Fade, but if it would put you at ease, I would not stray from my cell
even when you are not with me.”

“Well, I mean usually when people are in prison they can’t just leave their cell whenever…but everyone can find escape in their dreams. So,” Ellie shrugged. “Would you mind coming with me for a minute?”

“Of- of course.”

She wasn’t entirely sure how he pulled off his Haven trick, but she’d figured out a little something of her own. “Follow me, it’s a bit of a walk.”

His cell door swung open in the Fade and he tentatively came to stand alongside her, hand reaching and then retracting like he was stopping himself from touching her. “I…I am relieved you have returned safely. You are well, I hope? The Commander sent word you were in recovery, were you injured?” he fretted.

She shook her head. “Not badly, anyway. We um…we kind of fought a dragon?” she said as she motioned forward for him to walk alongside her, up the stairs that lead from the dungeons to Skyhold’s courtyard. “Sera and me had to stay on the sidelines, mami put her foot down big time. But it really cheered the Iron Bull up I think—um, you know about us going to the Storm Coast to see about an alliance between the Inquisition and the Qunari?” he nodded, “That…didn’t go too great. There were more Venatori than what we were prepared for, and the Iron Bull um…he’s been excommunicated. It came down to letting the Dreadnaught do its thing and the Charger’s dying, or him sounding the retreat and letting the Dreadnought go down. The Chargers are safe, so,” she shrugged.

“That…that is good,” Solas said, “I am…I am sorry for his loss, but I am glad he made such a choice. And while I certainly don’t hold the Lieutenant’s good opinion I respect him, he…is an honorable young man, his care for you is genuine, as long as he makes you happy…”

Ellie blushed, nodding, “Yeah, he does.”

“Good,” he said, then, “…now what was this about fighting a dragon? You, Sera, and Marehis avoided the beast you said?”

“Mami made Sera and me promise to stay back. She went on ahead though, s’why um—I needed a nap because my Mark did the whole ‘Rift’ thing again ‘cause I was scared she was about to get eaten,” oh gosh, he blanched at that and she was quick to promise, “She’s fine though, the Rift stopped the dragon in it’s tracks, sort of slowed it down and paralyzed it a bit so she could get away and everyone could get some good hits in without risk of it fighting back…kind of mean, or unfair at least to hit something that can’t hit back, but it was a very big dragon—it could breathe these blasts of electricity I swear my hair is still staticy!”

He chuckled at that, his hand reaching out to card through her hair, “It does seem a bit more unruly than normal,” he said, Ellie giggling.

And then they sort of remembered the whole…he’s the Dread Wolf and she still has to parcel our just how you punish a supposed god for an Ages old crime against the whole of the world’s population, and aiding in a modern day act of terrorism in an attempt to undo you first act of terrorism. He seemed to choke on a breath, immediately pulling his hand away, almost falling as he stumbled back to put more space between them in the stairwell, but he caught himself on the wall, clearing his throat.

“My apologies, Eleanor.”
She nodded. She wanted to say it was okay. But that was mostly because she wanted it to be okay. She wanted to be able to have dinner with him again, hang out, learn from, just—she wanted to hug him and go on walks and all the things they used to do—a month ago she would’ve just giggled and hugged him, and probably gotten a super comforting really nice kiss on the forehead that made her feel safe and loved! Those were her two favorite things to feel! This was dumb!

She took a deep breath, and made her way to the top of the stairs, pushing open the door and—

It worked!

“…w-where are we, exactly, Ellie?” Solas wondered as he entered what was definitely not an open courtyard.

Gosh, it was just like she remembered it…which was kind of why it looked the way it did, it came from her memories. Dark wooden floors, large logs that made up the walls of the cabin, the ceiling was even leaking a little drip drip drip into a big blue porcelain bowl on the floor. Tattered grey rug covered most of the floor, there was a corner where the fabric frayed worse, probably because she used to sit there and tug at the strings nervously, habit, something that kept her hands busy. Big bed with a ginormous red quilt in one corner, little cot with a bundle of soft, grey knitted blankets in the other—closer to the fireplace…and the window, in case there was a need for quick escape.

“This is Ava’s cabin,” she said, taking a seat in her usual chair by the fireplace, gesturing to…well, this was just a Fade version, and it shouldn’t really matter anymore, so, she offered Ava’s rocking chair to Solas. That was…that was the only time Ava got very um…mother-ish? When Ellie got scared at night, sometimes Ava would let her sit with her, as she rocked, a hand on Ellie’s back to keep her from falling the woman would say. Sometimes she hummed, it was nice.

“Da’veh- Leth- you- you did so well, constructing a place from memory in the Fade w-well done,” he stumbled over the compliment, trying to reign in his enthusiasm, he looked like he wanted to jump up and start examining the place top to bottom just to see how she’d done in detail, but he sat down in the rocking chair, giving it a few test rocks since that seemed all the examining he felt he should do given their current awkwardness.

“Thanks,” she said, “I dunno, I always felt safe here, and I kind of wanted to see if I could do it, your Fade trick with Haven? I just couldn’t swing something so big.”

“In time I’m sure you could construct anything you care to,” Solas encouraged. “You wished to speak?”

Ellie nodded. “I’m back. And I’ve um…I’ve come to a decision about everything. I still have to talk it over with the Advisors, but I’ll be sitting in judgement over you soon. I’ve already written Leliana and Josie about it—it’ll be as private as we can possibly make it, no one from the public, or lower ranking in the Inquisition will be permitted to attend except the members of my party, and the Advisors. One of them will be walking you from your cell to the Great Hall, probably the Iron Bull? We haven’t made it common knowledge that one of our own um…you know. Only a few of Leliana’s most trusted people have been guarding the prisons since your incarceration, and Cole’s been wiping you from their memories of their time down here, as far as they know, they’re just standing guard over empty cells. It’d probably be a blow to the Inquisition’s reputation, not to mention moral if everyone knew we found a reason to lock up one of our core members, an even bigger blow if we couldn’t supply the reason.”
Solas nodded, blowing out a breath, “I am sorry, truly Ellie, to have put you in this position. I promise to respect any decision you must make.”

“I just wanted to kind of talk you through what to expect out of the next day or so, so you aren’t um…scared when you’re being brought to judgement. I also had some questions I guess?”

“Of course, you may ask me anything of my crimes.”

“Not your crimes, not really,” Ellie said, “we…while we were away Sera…wanted access to Lyrium, she thought if she drank some and slept she’d wake up in the Fade, be able to use her magic. It’s something she’s genuinely interested in pursuing, I’ve talked with her about it a lot since uhhh she made her interest known, “ she didn’t want to tattle on her or anything, and it wasn’t like Solas was super privy to family drama…even though he was currently the center of some major family drama. “So…she’s working on waking her magic up. She hasn’t Fade dreamed yet, but um…well we’re getting there we think?”

“…truly? She…she came to me for assistance but I refused. I’m cell bound for one, and she wouldn’t have been able to find any decent focus if she were to stay here while you were out in the field. Too I thought…she seemed panicked, terrified at the prospect of going out into the world without someone bonded to you and your party down a mage. I worried fear was her sole motivator, and did not wish to let her go forward with something irreversible when she might so easily feel differently about it given a bit of time.”

“Thanks, I’m proud of you for hearing that and not manipulating her or something, it must have been tempting to just say yes when you had her um…she made it sound like she pretty much begged for you to tell her how to wake her magic up.”

“I only regret that it sent her looking to do so on her own, tampering with Lyrium unguided can be so very dangerous.”

“It’s okay, mamis set her straight, and um…well, we’ve really talked it out with her—it’s not just life changing personally, but socially, you know?”

Solas nodded. “I regret I…I did not consider as much when I first endeavored to wake her magic. But I should have, goodness. The world I woke to is far more condemning of magic than the one I destroyed. Any girl her age would be celebrated for making a commitment to magical study.”

“I’m sorry it isn’t that way now—but I really do hope it can be like that, in the future. For now, she’s surrounded by people who wouldn’t condemn her for magic, and she wouldn’t have to make it a widely known thing—she doesn’t want to be a Mage even, she just…wants to explore that part of herself, something she uses the same way she uses anything else in her life, like her other abilities. Instead of matches, she can just call up fire for herself, it has a lot of application science wise, or for her pranks, or fighting even just using her bow—flaming arrows are always a catch—and she loves the idea of being able to cast things like barrier to help out in fights. Something she can use, but it’s not what she relies on entirely—sort of like I can fight with my sword but I more naturally go for my staff, she’s more likely to go for her bow, but she could use magic if she wanted or needed.”

“That’s perfectly normal for Elvehnan, many of us didn’t even study magic, it just manifested in our day to day lives as a tool we used,” Solas said, “So…you would like some assistance?”

“Maybe a little? We um…Sera told us about the way you tried to coax her magic awake,
so she’s been meditating with me every day and stuff like that, trying to reach out to the Fade. And when we were in the Storm Coast we found one of your old artifacts, so mami and I stayed with Sera and let her activate it herself. She did such a good job!” Ellie cleared her throat, “Um. Anyway, she’s had more control—last time she poked at her magic she was only able to call it up in an emergency and accidentally blast cold, but now if she focuses she can call cold into her hands—we haven’t tried a staff yet, I mean she tried holding mine for a bit but my magic’s grown since I joined the Inquisition and I’ve been working with it since I was little, so her magic couldn’t really do anything with it. I’m going to help her make a staff for herself, something for her to start with.”

“She hasn’t dreamed in the Fade?”

“Uh-huh. We’re not super sure why her magic is only representing with ice magic, but we’re pretty sure it’s just ‘cause that’s what her magic sparked as. I mean when I’m afraid or startled and casting out of pure urgency, I cast barrier—the first time I ever produced magic, it was um…well my magic was trying to protect me, so, my first time casting, it was barrier.”

“They feed me,” he assured her, “I am well. My own supper will be along soon no doubt.”

“Okay, good. Um. I’ll see you later then,” she said, “Do I…need to bring you out of here? You won’t be stuck just ‘cause it’s something from my memory, right?”

Ellie?

He shook his head no, that it’d be fine, but when she rose to her feet, preparing to wake up, “I am proud of you, Ellie,” Solas said suddenly and- oh Maker the bond was thrown open, like his every word was laid bare, honest and sincere, and she would feel the instant they were anything but that, “You…you are one of the most remarkable people I have ever known. I am sorry, more than I can ever say for the circumstances I forced that bore our meeting—but I am not sorry that I know you, know the Inquisition and the people in it. You were my first positive example of what Humanity had to offer the world, and you’ve given me so much hope for the future. You’re…you’re a beautiful, brilliant young lady, and I’m so proud of the woman you’re becoming. You deserve every happiness, ma’davhenan, and I hope you find it. I am sorry for the battles you will face because of my actions. But I know you will overcome them. I don’t have any regrets where you or Sera or Marehis are concerned, not in my love of you. You will do what you must, and you are not to have a single regret of it—I deserve everything that is coming for me, I’m sure any fate
you hand me will be far more kinder than what I deserve. Don’t carry your decision with you, don’t let me burden you further, do what must be done, and move forward knowing you did the right thing.”

…”Solas…do you think I’m going to kill you or something?”

“The Advisors have some instructions for my execution. If you wish to perform it yourself I understand, but truly, you needn’t even be there when it happens. I’m certain the Iron Bull can adequately see to it I am no longer a–”

“What instructions?”

“It’s best you don’t know, merely something that will ensure you do not feel anything unpleasant in the bond.”

He’d given her some things to think about, but…it was more like further validation for her decision…

He’d messed up pretty bad. And she wasn’t sure when exactly she’d think on this and stop being mad about it. So. She’d let him sit with the uncertainty of his future a little while longer— everyone else in her party would have to wait until his trail, so would he.

Da’vehnani?! Oh! Crap! That was Marehis, she really better wrap this up.

“I’ll see you later,” she said…mad, unspeakably, but still, “I don’t regret knowing you either.”

She woke to the smell of dinner, and a bit of ache in her shoulder as someone shook her with urgency, overlapping voices,

“Ellie? Sweetheart-“ Cullen’s voice again, but it wasn’t his hands on her, it was,

“Da’vehnan?” Marehis.

“Why en’t she waking up?!” Sera was screeching over Cassandra’s quiet, urgent,

“She took nothing, you’re certain?”

“Y-yes- oh Maker,” Cullen swore, voice wavering, “I’m almost positive, but I feel back to sleep too, damn it-“

“I’m up!” she promised, rubbing at her shoulder as she sat up, “Sorry-“

“Oh, da’vehnani you- you scared us,” Marehis said, half-reprimanding as she pulled Ellie in for a tight hug.

“Sorry—I got caught up in the Fade-“

“Were you stuck again, sweet girl?” Cassandra worried.

“No! I was just talking with Solas—I promised him I would whenever I got back from the Hinterlands. Um,” she looked to the Elf girl still staring at her, keeping a distance like she was afraid of getting in the way, “awe, Sera, I’m really okay,” she assured as she reached out and Sera took her hand, came to sit on the bed with her, “—were- did you think I’d done something?”

“Uhhh…” Sera droned.
“We were perhaps mildly concerned you were unable to be roused because you’d imbibed potion, not necessarily in dangerous amounts,” Cassandra confessed.

…kind of ouch? But a little fair? She’d been honest with them, especially mami—Cassandra. She had a lot of experience with lots of the things Ellie found herself struggling with, and it was helpful to hear her say what she was experiencing was normal, that she’d dealt with similar things. “I did promise I’d come to you guys if I needed help, if I thought I was going to do something…cr…drastic? I’d at least have woken papi up and talked to him about it before I knocked back something extreme. Or even just regular old sleep potion since we made dinner plans and that’d definitely have me sleeping through them.”

“I’m sorry, Eleanor, when you didn’t wake I panicked,” Cullen sighed, “I didn’t even think- I do remember now, you asked me to wake you because you intended to speak with Solas in the Fade.”

“Everything’s okay,” Ellie promised, “Sera, mami, you’re joining us for dinner yeah?”

“Indeed sweet girl,” Marehis said, “I was just coming to check on you and Cassandra already had Sera in tow.”

“Let’s dig in, yeah Ink? You’re hungry right?” Sera asked, cheerful.

“Uh-huh, starvning,” Ellie said, “let’s eat!”

She really was after having just a nap for lunch, and Maker, there was something about food from Skyhold’s kitchens that resonated as ‘home’ with her, it made it that much better.

“Oh! Sera, did you have fun with Dagna?” Ellie asked.

Sera turned pink! Ducked her head a bit as she picked apart another dinner role, “Yeah Ink, it was nice.”

“Ooohhh nice?” Marehis asked, teasingly.

“And what is this young lady’s intentions with you, Sera?” Cullen asked, “She has feelings for you, and your Miss Lace?”

“Sounds like it, yeah.”

“If she hurts Sera do we have to take it out on Lace too?” Cullen wondered, looking to Cassandra and Marehis, “Are they to be considered a unified pair, or is this more an ‘heir and a spare’ situation where if one of them must be dealt with, at least Sera will have the other?”

“Dealt with?” Sera asked, uncertain.

“Reprimanded. Possibly fired. At the very least we would shun them socially and speak ill of them if it made you feel better. I don’t allow anyone regardless of gender to hurt my mijas and simply get away with it, it would be no different than if the Lieutenant broke Ellie’s heart.”

Sera snorted, “I’m a big girl, I can handle my own breakups,” she said, overlapping Ellie’s,

“I wouldn’t want you to hurt Cremisius if we broke up.”

Cullen smiled, assuring them, “Vengeance will be mine.”
Ellie shook her head. “Oh, Ser’? Um, I talked to Solas, like you asked? You should see him if you want, he’ll check out your…”…she wasn’t entirely sure she should say as much in front of Cullen?

“Oh, my magic pish?” Sera asked, “Cool, I’ll go talk to him later then. Not too much later, I got plans with Widdle.”

“That’s good to hear,” Marehis encouraged. “Da’vehnan, what about you? I can stay with you tonight unless you care for privacy?” privacy…oh right, private time. That was sweet of her to offer she guessed? But,

“Unless you want privacy, space to just be on your own tonight sure, you can sleep here, any of you can,” Ellie said, she…was definitely still all about the whole ‘private time with Cremisius’ thing, that was happening as soon as possible, but um…she really was still beat after everything they did on the Storm Coast, and yeah it might be nice to fall asleep with him after everything, but uh, she definitely didn’t want to pursue their first time again and totally mess it up a second, more spectacular way—somehow falling asleep before or…oh Maker, during, seemed even more mortifying than ‘Hey you almost died and that scared me, let’s just go ahead and have sex for the first time in front of the Storm Coast’s resident Spider population’ had been.

Spiders were so gross!

Dinner, however, was delicious. And when they were done…she had zero pride left in her that instilled a need to change—she was holding an official War Room meeting in her pjs and anyone who had a problem with it could actually bite her. She still carried her staff though. It was an ‘official’ meeting after all, so technically she was on the clock.

In point of fact, the moment she had her staff in hand, Sera cleared her throat and said, “Hey Ink? Can I talk to you about something? It’s a uh, kind of official business thing. A Friend’s mission.”

“Sure thing, what’s up?” Ellie asked, and Sera took her hand, leading her out onto the balcony to the left of her bed, the Elf girl hopping up to sit on the balcony banister in a way that made Ellie’s heart sort of thump in her chest, Maker, she should be careful!

“So there’s some noble shite going down in Verchiel—real bad business, and the only people hurt is little people. I was wonderin’ if maybe the Inquisition could patrol through, just a walk-through, show a bit of ‘umph’ to put the noble pricks in their place.”

Ellie nodded, gosh, that did sound bad, “Of course, Ser’,” Ellie promised, “I’ll ask Papi to send some of his people through, no problem.”

“Thanks Inky, you’re the best!”

She got a big squeezy hug for it! She wished all of her Inquisitoring business could end like that. She’d get so much more done!...she got a lot done, but she felt like she’d be much more productive in the whole ‘hunting down and stopping Corypheus’ thing if it resulted in the great honking darkspawn man suddenly revealing himself with a change of heart and using his ginormous arms for hugging—he would probably be the best hugger if he wasn’t a great big evil scumbag waste of long arms!

Cassandra and Cullen walked her to the War Room, Marehis too—she’d been planning to walk Sera down to Solas’s cell but Sera complained she didn’t need the woman to follow her down to talk to ‘baldy’, she’d be just fine, she didn’t need babied…
Ellie might have sent Cole a thought to send Cremisius. She saw him meeting Sera at the top of the stairs to the Great Hall and the echo of his voice greeting her casually, jovially as he offered to walk the girl. It wasn’t babying, she didn’t think, just…she trusted Solas…to be untrustworthy. So, unless you were paying visits through the strange safety of the Fade, it was probably best to go in pairs.

“Bella!” Tonio greeted enthusiastically from…huh he had a little desk in the corner of the room by the fireplace, opposite Josie’s now in her office, it was just enough space to keep a business ledger, spare parchment, quill and ink. And a cup of tea it seemed, that was nice! She was glad to see he’d set up, expanded his business a bit more! He hugged her as she entered Josie’s office, “My Cremisius says your mission to the Storm Coast had some minor hiccups—you cast something from your Mark? You’re feeling better I hope?”

“Uh-huh, thanks for checking on me,” she replied…oh oh gosh there was- there was a new addition to Lady Josie’s desk, this little gilded ship and when Ellie peeked over at it it seemed to have an Orlesian family crest on it—the one Lady Montilyet had been looking for? Tonio said he could find as much, oh gosh! “I’m glad to see you’re set up here!”

“Indeed, I begin seeing new clients this week—you, of course, are my top priority, you’re free to order my services whenever you require my dear,” he assured her, “I completed your first order—everything is taken care of, but of course we’ll do a final fitting and make certain everything is to your liking—at your earliest convenience.”

She wasn’t sure when her earliest convenience was going to be…probably not any time too soon.

Hawke made contact! Outside of the few letters he and Ellie had exchanged. He was…really sweet, she felt badly for disliking him so much before, he’d checked in on her, offering advice and making sure she was okay. Like, getting enough sleep and eating, and things like that? He wrote the Inquisition, informing them he was currently in Crestwood, and his Warden contact was ready and willing to meet with Ellie and her party, so long as he didn’t fall into Warden hands—he was the Warden they’d been hunting on the Storm Coast all those months ago, he’d done a good job of evading them so far and he wasn’t about to go with them now.

“So, Crestwood, I take it we need to leave as soon as possible?” Ellie supposed.

“It would be advised,” Leliana seemed regretful to inform her.

Ellie sighed. “…I’m sleeping on the horse. The whole way. And possibly through this meeting. Cassandra, I give you permission to puppet me through the whole thing—just prop me up, swing my arms around, talk in a squeaky voice.”

“I will do no such thing,” Cassandra assured her.

Ellie slapped a hand to her heart, “It’s like you don’t even love me! Papi!” she complained, he had no problem with informality during official meetings.

“Sweetheart you stay here, just take the week off, laze around your rooms—get me a curly red wig and I will go in your stead,” Cullen went right into it, raising his voice to offer, “Hello! I’m Inquisitor Ellie! Good golly gosh it’s freezing here!”

“That’s perfect!” Ellie enthused, “I’m almost having Envy flashbacks—you’re like a thousand times better at impersonating me than they were!” she giggled, sighing. “Okay. We’ll head out…maybe tomorrow? Let me touch base with everyone and see who feels like going. The
Iron Bull might not be up for it yet, and that might affect whether or not Dorian goes, and it’s rainy so Madam de Fer might not be up for it—it’s a whole thing,” she shrugged, “I mean I’m sending Cullen in my place.”

Leliana fought the smile tugging at her lips, “Very good, my lady. Take what time you need to regroup and keep us appraised.”

“Will do!”

Lady Josie leveled her a warm, sympathetic smile that…was enough warning for what she was about to say next, “My Lady, we wonder if you’ve come to a decision regarding Fen Harel.”

Ellie sighed, nodding. “I have. I would like to sit in Judgement over Solas before we leave for Crestwood. Everyone um…feels okay with my decision?”

“Eleanor, the decision is yours,” Leliana said, “How we feel has little to do with us following orders. Your reasoning is…sound, and we understand it is tenuous…” her mouth worked a moment and the Inquisition’s Spymaster looked wholly uncomfortable before she said, “You’re certain this arrangement won’t cause you er…the last time there was discord such as this, with Rainier…I would not want you to be sick, as you were then.”

…awe! “Thanks, Leliana, but I’ve thought about it, and talked it over with mami—all the mamis!” Ellie assured her, “and Healer Adan. Um, it’ll be okay. With all the crazy things that have happened, this doesn’t feel super stressful. Stressful, but not ‘burn a hole through vial organs’ stressful’. But thanks for worrying about me!”

The Spymaster offered her a small smile, “Just…if it is overwhelming, if you do find you wish to recant your decision, I will gladly enact your whims.”

“…didn’t get enough of holding him over the dungeon hole?” Ellie wondered.

“…perhaps.”

“I didn’t even get a turn,” Cullen lamented.

“Me either!” Ellie giggled.

“I would have appreciated a turn,” Lady Josie confessed, teasingly snippy.

“Well, if you’d to, your window of opportunity is closing in…” Ellie sighed, “A few hours? Tonight, I’m thinking—it’d be a good time, easy to clear the hall, and you know, cover of darkness and all that.”

“Excellent my lady,” Josie said, “shall we reconvene in the Great Hall at midnight, then?”

“Ooohh spooky, I dig it,” Ellie agreed, “maybe the Maker will bless us with some fog tonight? Keep the candlelight low in the Great Hall, just, really set the mood for bringing an Ages old Dalish god to justice;” she gasped, excited, “I will actually pay every single person that wears a hooded robe to conceal their face and chants in a dead language. Tevene! It’s not dead-dead but its dying and Solas isn’t a fan.”

“We’ll see what we can do,” Leliana assured.

“Cool! Meeting adjourned?” she asked, and her advisors nodded. “Double cool! Cole!” she called to the air, “Send me my boyfriend at his earliest convenience please! Judgement’s gonna
be way past my bedtime, and I’ve gotta get my nap on! Open invitation, anyone that wants to come get snuggly!"

“Cullen,” Cassandra spoke the name like reprimand, “come, we’ve to prepare for this evening, and I need to check in with our Templars.”

The Commander sighed, “Of course,” he agreed, though he stopped to drop a kiss to Ellie’s forehead, “get some good rest mija.”

Cremisius was waiting for her in her quarters when Marehis...dropped her off. Gah! She’d been serious! She really did mean nap!

“You Cole’d for me?” he asked, amused as he unlocked her door and threw it open. “Sera’s still down with Solas, Cole joined them though, he’s helping with…whatever they’re doing. Ser’ had me cooling my heels in the hall.”

Ellie nodded, it was Sera’s business who knew and who didn’t and…yeah Ellie wasn’t entirely certain how the others would react to the Elf girl developing her magical ability. “Thanks—sorry for Coleing you all over the place, but she was going to go by herself. And the dungeons are so,” she waved like she was grasping for something far out of reach.

“That is an awful lot of stairs, and you’re still pretty beat, huh?” Cremisius sympathized, wrapping his arms around her and resting his forehead against hers when she nodded, “sorry lovely,” he sighed, “well then, naptime, come on,” he said, and Ellie squeaked in surprise when he crouched and slipped an arm under her knees before swiftly rising, carrying her up.

“Cremisius!”

“Hey, I’m just following your orders—you summoned me to avoid climbing the stairs, so, no stairs allowed,” he said with certainty, setting her on her bed, “fireplace all good—you warm enough? Good—Anya, come on baby, we’re napping.”

The pup just kind of looked at him like she was confused…she had just taken a nap afterall, but Ellie was already shaking herself to stay awake. But when Cremisius laid down with her, Anya got it in gear—little man stealer! She laid right next to the Tevinter man, curling up against his other side as he slid into bed next to Ellie, arm around her shoulders, letting her rest her head on his chest.

“Mmm, warm,” she sighed contentedly, snuggling against him.

Cremisius chuckled, smiling against her hair, “Sleepy, Inquisitor?”

“The sleepiest—maybe that’s what I’ll be known for! History’s sleepiest Inquisitor.

“Oh, most assuredly—I mean you take enough naps I’m sure everyone will forget all about the whole ‘saving the world from Time Magic’ thing, or sealing the Breach, kicking Corypheus’s ass.”

“He kind of kicked mine. More like swung it into a trebuchet, but still.”

“We’re talking about what you go down in history for lovely—books’ll be all about how you knocked him into the next Age.”

“And the tremendous record breaking nap I’ll take when I’m done!”
“The nap to end all naps, that’s what we aim for in this Inquisition.”

She giggled, he was the best. She felt really badly that, um, “...I’m kind of...leaving tomorrow? Hawke made contact so, I’m Crestwood bound!”

“Bring me back some rain—didn’t get enough of it in the Storm Coast.”

Ellie snorted, but, “I’m really sorry about um...I mean if I wasn’t absolutely positive I was gonna zonk out here in like two minutes—“

“Hey,” Cremisius reprimanded gently, pressing a kiss to the top of her head, “I said we’d make a proper date of it—you see me buying you dinner? We’ve not even gone for a stroll in the moonlight, and...nope, I don’t think you have any candles in here anyway. You gotta go to Crestwood? That gives me time to get things in order. If you’re still interested—“

“I’ll definitely still be interested.”

“-then, Miss Trevelyen, would you do me the honor of going on a date with me, upon your return from Crestwood?”

“It would be my pleasure.”

“Good,” he said, squeezing her a bit, “get some rest, lovely.”

He did not have to tell her twice. She barely heard him tell her once.

“Imekari?”

Ellie woke up to the Iron Bull crouching alongside her bed, which was fuller than it had been when she drifted off she was pretty sure. Cole and Sera had joined them. huh, she thought the Elf girl would still be with Dag- oh, awe! That was sweet! Dagna was there too, gosh she was tiny, Ellie almost didn’t see her curled up against Sera!

Oh! The Iron Bull, right, focus, what time was it? She fell asleep with her watch on, oh! Quarter till 11! “Time to get up, yeah?”

“You got it babe,” he confirmed, “Marehis is still working out some final details with Red, sent me up...down?” he wondered since...huh yeah she wasn’t sure if her quarters were technically upstairs or downstairs from Leliana’s...downstairs she was pretty sure. Yeah. “To get you. Need any help getting ready? Papa’classi’s coming with some of your new duds—not in the loop for what’s on tonight, he just knows you’ve got something important to do.”

“Sounds good,” she said as she sat up- and then she reached out for the Qunari’s forearm, “oh my gosh, what happened?” she asked, pulling his arm a bit closer so she could take a look at the um...interesting bandaging job on his bicep.

“Oh,” he said like he’d forgotten it was even there, “Just leaving it on so Sparky feels better—little accident with a knife earlier, Dorian patched me up, it wasn’t a big deal.”

Ellie pouted, but he didn’t say anything when she took a peek under the bandaging...yeah it was just there for show now, she couldn’t see anything at all, no indication he’d been hurt in the first place. Still, she pressed a little kiss to it and replaced the bandaging, poor Dorian had been freaked out huh? Just...just what kind of knife accidents were they getting into?

...ummm...on second thought, the Iron Bull was into some pretty wild stuff so...she
probably didn’t wanna know.

“Okay,” she sighed, “let’s get on with it then, shall we?”

The rhythmic thud of heavy boot falls down the uneven prison stairs told Solas it was time. The Iron Bull was coming for him, as Ellie forewarned. That had been…kind of her. To keep her word about speaking with him upon her return, and for using the opportunity to privately prepare him for what was to come. Through it, he’d gotten to spend his final hours with girls he loved as if he’d sired their being himself. Gotten to see Sera make genuine strides toward her magic, talk theory and give her…every last piece of advice he could instill in a child seeking to nurture their magic, he spoke until his voice was raw and he was glad of it, he just prayed there was nothing he had forgotten, it felt like…something he thought he might never experience, sitting with an Elvhenan child and teaching them of their magic. And he’d gotten to bear witness to Ellie make progress with her manipulation of the Fade—copying his own methods, it made him unspeakably proud, and he’d spent some time after just sitting in her creation before he…he’d spent a great deal of time in the Fade while the Inquisitor and her party were away, holding council, he held one more such meeting when Ellie took her leave. He was not certain if…if he was to be executed, he was not certain just where he would go, in his afterlife. Cole said that all non-Andrasten Elves went on to serve as members of the pantheon’s Spirits. But he did not align with any house, not any longer, neither was he wholly Andrasten—though he did believe the Maker to be real. He wasn’t sure if that would take him to the Maker’s side, or if his lack of allegiance to any Elvhenan leader would make him some outlier among Spirits in the Fade or if…if he would be considered a member of the Evanuris—there were many unknowns. So. He’d made certain of one thing—he’d not universal pull over those who resided in the Fade, but with those he did have alliances with, friends and enemies alike, those few demonic beings who avoided him to steer clear of his wrath—he’d called them to congress and made it clear that in his absence, Ellie and Sera were to be considered as they considered him. They were to be left alone—if Ellie sought to continue studying how to manipulate the Fade as he’d shown her to, they were not to raise a hand to stop her, disturb her. His friends would keep watch, and protect these girls whenever they were in the Fade. If Sera ever did follow through with waking her magic, he trusted Ellie and Cole would be with her, and his friends would gather discreetly, and make safe her time in the Fade, no demons would tempt her—not without getting through them first.

Through him, if he was one of their numbers.

...do you think I’m going to kill you or something?

Ellie’s question had given him some small reason to think perhaps what was coming wouldn’t be execution…but that hope was minimal. There were worse things than death, but some things…called for nothing but a swift end to someone’s miserable existence.

Ellie certainly wouldn’t do the deed herself. But she could hand down the decree.

“Sup Wolfie.”

“Good evening, the Iron Bull,” Solas greeted civilly as he rose to his feet, “I trust you are well? I am…sorry, to hear of your excommunication. But I do thank you, for the Lieutenant’s life. Ellie- He is very dear to her, and an honorable man, and it would be a shame for him to be reunited with his father only to be taken away so shortly thereafter. There…is no greater suffering than
losing a child, not that I have experienced, Mister Aclassi—the Elder, he sounds like a kind man who has already endured so much, I am glad you were able to spare him.”

“…uh-huh. yeah,” he scoffed as he fiddled with the key ring in hand, searching for the one that would unlock Solas’s cell, “You’re full of shit—you’re not ‘sorry’ I got kicked out of the Qun.-“

“I am, at least insofar as the loss you feel from it. While I have been deceptive of my connections to the Conclave and my knowledge of its unfolding, I have been true in my regard for I am glad you brought yourself to think outside the boundaries of the Qun. You do realize I detest that system because of the one I brought low? The Evanuris was the Magisterium with the mental machinations of the Qun. I distrust both modern governing bodies with equal measure. If you are to be here, guarding and guiding Ellie, be someone she looks up to, I am pleased you are wholly free thinking, honorable, and loyal to her.”

The Iron Bull grunted, swinging the cell door open and gesturing for Solas to turn his back, he complied, he was to be bound he supposed, “Right now, I’m guiding your ass to Judgement.”

Solas nodded as the Qunari…brought one of his arms up to pull the sleeve of a robe over it, apparently he was to dress up a bit for his hearing? Ahh. Then he bound his wrists in handcuffs, tugged the sleeves down so they covered them, he could walk without displaying he was a prisoner if there were any prying eyes about at the late hour. More privacy granted, given the Iron Bull pulled the hood overhead, given its shape, sloping as it did, it could be anyone walking before the Iron Bull…

Anyone. Including, apparently, Master Pavus.

Solas let out a slightly startled sound when the Qunari linked arms with him as they stepped out into the night air, he’d gone from relieved to breathe fresh air for the first time in weeks, to utterly confused.

“Dorian’s robe. Gonna burn it when you’re done with it.”

Ahh. further subterfuge…did anyone at all know he’d been imprisoned, outside their inner circle? Would his execution truly be held in such secrecy? That…would be wise, less shameful and embarrassing for himself, his loved ones.

He steeled himself, taking in the cool, fresh air in measured breaths. It was strange that millennia could pass and the winds that whipped through Skyhold still smelled just as he remembered them in times before. He counted the stairs as they walked them…56 individual stairs*, 58 foot falls to cross them and the landing in between flights…

The Iron Bull pushed him forward the moment the doors were closed behind them, and then put a hand on his shoulder with a bruising grip to usher him down the very vacant, very dim Great Hall. Even the fire that usually roared at all hours was doused, the only light came from the two candelabras that sat, one on either side of the throne.

Eleanor’s throne.

Around it, stood equal lines of those who would be in attendance. The entirety of Ellie’s party, her advisory staff. To the left of her throne stood Lady Montilyet, clipboard in hand, and to the right stood Marehis, on guard of her ward, Solas could feel her eyes on him…maybe he was already dying, executed by her glare. He almost wished it would kill him—he did wish it if it
would make the woman feel better, and Ellie’s job easier.

Oh. Ellie. For all she might be handing out death sentences, he thought her beautiful. She wore a warm green blouse that...he vaguely could recall Madam de Fer referring to such tops as ‘peasant’ style but it had never struck him as the stuff of rags, and it certainly didn’t seem ‘peasantly’ here. It was tucked into black, high waisted, form fitting trousers, shod in the grey, heeled boots she favored since Cullen ‘got them’ for her in Orlais. Had she gotten a manicure for his trial? Her nails had been clean when she visited him in the Fade, but now they were evergreen, silvery stars dotted on some, the Inquisition’s sigil on each index finger...

And she was wearing the most solemn expression on her face as the Iron Bull brought Solas before her, shoving him to his knees, and pulling back his hood.

Lady Montilyet stared at him a moment...somehow the gentle Antivan woman who had a kind word for everyone looking at him so very disappointed made his shame feel fresh. Then she cleared her throat,

“My lady Inquisitor. Before you this day is the Apostate Mage, Solas, formerly known as Fen’Harel. He has confessed to crimes of terrorism. He has confessed to not only destroying the world as he knew it once before, but delivering the means by which he would see it destroyed a second time—his Orb of Destruction made by his own hands—into the clutches of a mad man—our enemy Corypheus. He did so knowing in full the plans Corypheus had for the Orb, that he was going to go to the Conclave, take captive the Divine Justinia, lay her body sacrificed to activate the Orb, knowing very well that the ritual would likely resolve in some failure, Corypheus would fumble in his handling of power he did not understand, and the Conclave as a whole would be destroyed—the lives lost were expected, as they did, to power the Orb of Destruction, which this man before you intended to take ownership of again for the purposes of bringing down the Veil and destroying the world a second time. When he discovered Corypheus survived the Conclave and made escape with his Orb, he joined the Inquisition under false pretenses, in the hopes he would find his Orb through our pursuit of those responsible for the Conclave, and ultimately find it, powered and whole, to make use for his plans.”

Ellie let out a low whistle, “…those are some pretty serious crimes. You’ve done so much damage. What do you have to say for yourself?”

“There is nothing to say, Inquisitor,” Solas said. "I will not make this more difficult by muddling my crimes with motivation—you know all you need.”

“…you wanna make my job less difficult? I won’t ask again, Solas—What. Do you have to say. For yourself?”

Oh. He felt prodding in the bond then, almost violent like Ellie’s magic was smacking his upside the head. So he cleared his throat, and for the third time since he’d been caught for these crimes, he told his story, this time for the whole of her party to hear. Spoke of the world before, the Evanuris, their crimes against their people, against him from his own birth, to the death of Mythal, the woman he loved, for the fact she carried life they laid slain along with her. That she had been the only one who had ever been capable of reining in these disgustingly powerful Mages, that enslaved the whole of the Elvehnan population to serve their will, live and die by their word, at their leisure. And he brought them down...to the tune of so many innocents caught in the fray, he’d only wanted to lock the Evanuris away, seal them someplace they could not hurt their people...and they took those people with them, left behind only those he managed to free from house loyalty, clear of their Vallaslins before he constructed the veil. And when he did so, he cut off so much of their ties to magic—even his own magic had been weakened immensely—they lost
their immortality, and he’d no ability to undo what he’d done then. So, he slept, planning to build his strength and rise to a world where those surviving Elvehnan had cycled through generation after generation of magical progress, when he woke there could very well be a solution already performed, if not, a solution may be in reach. What he found were his people devastatingly demolished, spread far and wide, divided and conquered. He’d never dreamed of anything outside the realm of Elvehnan, and woke to a world of Humans, Qunari, and Dwarves. And then his first introduction to Humanity were things like discovering they’d subjugated his people, appropriated their culture to the point the Evanuris was essentially alive and well in the form of the Tevinter Imperium—and then Corypheus, with his Warden allies. Human men and women who knew the plans Corypheus had for the Conclave, understood the risk, and were willing to see their fellow man perish for his plans. Human life did not matter even to Humans—so why should it have mattered to him? He…hated to bring the fact up but…his time with the Inquisition had not started off much better.

“I saw people of all races clamoring for justice but not willing to do the footwork of it, running around looking for any who they could cast blame upon and ultimately it was, what turned into my first experience with a Human child. Ellie you were fifteen. Do you know the last time I met a fifteen year old? Never, and I have been alive since before your people counted Ages. I was of the youngest generation of Elvehnan, I was a babe of babies, I never met anyone younger than myself, and I certainly never met a child. And then here you were this impossibly young person…the prime suspect of the crimes committed by men. And the Inquisition was without question ready and willing to take you in for questioning. To interrogate you—no tracing down your kin, no offer of defense, I was ordered to keep a child alive long enough to be tortured by adults of her own race. I administered Lyrium to you, to prepare your blood so that it might boil at a Seeker’s command if you were not complacent in your questioning.”

Ellie nodded, “Yeah, that doesn’t exactly sound like the right foot to get off on with an honorary member of the ancient Elvehnan pantheon, planning on destroying the world. So. What happened?”

He scoffed, and he could not help the smile that tugged at his lips, “I met you.”

“It’s you! You’re the hands with the nice voice! She’d exclaimed excitedly, jumping up and hugging him with all her strength—he had not been hugged since…he almost wondered if he’d been hugged since before his father passed. This girl he did not have a single care for immediately cared for him—offered gratitude to him in his language when she realized he was ‘Dalish’*. Had nothing but respect and sympathy for the plights his people faced in the modern world, understood the nuances of the crisis, took expert care of when she used her Human privilege, and when she needed to step back and let he or Marehis handle whatever abuse was at hand for themselves. She was kind and compassionate and just, and over time he realized those same qualities resonated in people like-

“You were my first example of Human kindness, how much love and compassion there was to be found in Humanity. And through you I got to know others like you—the Seeker that I once qualified as yet another excuse to justify my plans for world demolition, she is incredibly brave and honorable, has kindness and humility, compassion, she knew true, genuine regret for how you were treated in her care—it took me weeks to feel truly guilty for having not cared for you in those first few days when I was trusted to do just that. Cassandra was contrite before you even faced the Breach for the first time.”

Oh, her magic warmed against his—a silent ‘thank you’ for not just laying out her own sin unjustly and leaving it there without spelling out that he understood she was not a monster.
“I joined the Inquisition to find my Orb and destroy the world. Instead, I’ve found every reason I was wrong—every reason I should cease playing pretend as a god and leave the world as it is, seek only to help its progress, not throw it all away in the hopes of replacing it with what came before. I have met Humans and Dwarves and…a Qunari, come to know them, grown respect for them—all of you. I am sorry, truly, immensely sorry for the harm I caused at the Conclave—if I could go back, explain to myself what there was to find in this world, if I could do things differently? I would.”

Ellie cleared her throat. “When we find your Orb, Solas, it will be destroyed. Is that clear?”

“Absolutely. I have made notes on every method I surmise will work to do so—they are in the Spymaster’s care.”

The Inquisitor nodded. “Very good,” she took a breath and then said, “I have considered all of the facts, your crimes, your motives, the work you’ve done in the Inquisition, and I have come to a decision.”

Solas nodded, hanging his head and closing his eyes so she would not have to look at him. It was alright. it would be fine. He steeled himself in the bond—all of them.

Marehis. Cool, quiet anger thrumming in her blood, icy rage and hurt-mixed-distrust, all directed at him.

Sera. His palms hurt like it might bleed—nails biting into flesh, she must be clenching her fists so very tightly. Oh, her magic may be presenting as ice, but there was nothing but fiery rage in her, angry and confused, conflicted and hurt.

Ellie. Nervous, so much so she felt ill of it, like she might be sick, and she’s so, so very tired. She grips the arms of her throne like a form of focus, grounding almost, squeezing them so fiercely the tendons in her hands ache from the strain, and she uses it to form her net words…

Underneath it all, love. They love him. And he will remember that, be grateful for that unto the next life.

The Inquisitor’s voice rang out with solid certainty, delivering his punishment in full:

“You will be indebted to the Inquisition for the rest of its days. You will serve as a member of my party in the field whenever I call upon you and whenever we face missions pertinent to the Corypheus investigation, you will guard and protect its members with your life. When we are not in the field you will be in the Hinterlands serving in any capacity the people you made refugees, need, helping them to rebuild. When the time comes—you will help us take down Corypheus, and obliterate the Orb of Destruction. Tonight is your last night in Skyhold for the foreseeable future.”

…She wasn’t sure if Inky was a the world’s biggest softy, or a total badass.

Either way, it was uhhh…pretty awkward, hoofin’ it to Crestwood.

Sera felt awkward, all the way down to the itty bitty bit of magic continuously present in
her blood that stuck around as long as she took the time to focus on it, meditate with it every day. That was real friggin’ weird…but really friggin’ cool. Like! Frick! It was stupid and scary and dumb and and and-

It felt the same way becoming a Friend had. Or when Marehis and ‘sandra made sure she knew they was her moms as much as Inky’s. Or when Ellie said they was sisters for the first time. Like she found something she’d been missing her entire life, but it’d always been out there waiting. And now she had it…kind of.

She was gonna wake it up all the way! She was! She just wasn’t…ready yet. Friggin’ dumb! But Inky was all sympathy when she talked about it with her, night of baldy’s trial. They stayed up real late after, Sera and Marehis had basically just been wired, she wasn’t exactly sure how they managed any sleep after that. Ended up keeping Ink up just, yammering away about her talk with Solas, and where she was with her magic pish.

“Well of course, it’s totally reasonable to be hesitant with magic, Ser’. I mean this is actively making a life changing decision—even more so than sex, I mean yeah between differing parts, there’s the concern of pregnancy which can be pretty life changing but even then, it doesn’t always have to be—case in point, me! You can get rid of a baby, a child any time, just up and abandon it somewhere if things are too much for you. You can’t abandon magic—once its with you…it’s with you. Every day for the rest of your life. If you commit, you’re committed, no backsies. Take the time you need—it’ll still be there whenever you’re ready.”

Compared it to sex! Like she was a ruddy virgin all over again! A magic virgin! Gross! …felt a little badly she kept her up so late though. When it was time to leave for Crestwood Inky was all squinty-eyed, dark circles under them, hands in her pockets as she hunched in on herself, walked right into Bull and mumbled out that as Inquisitor she was commandeering his horse and ordering him to hold her and let her nap all the way to Crestwood.

“Probably not gonna make it there in one day babe.”

Ellie groaned at that, “You know what I mean! Don’t be insubordinate! It’s no fun when its with me. I. am so. sleepy. I would kill a man for looking at me funny. And I’m on the verge of laughing at everything every five minutes. I- I need to sleep.”

Bull chuckled, resting a hand on her head, “Alright Imekari, sorry for the flack—I got you girl.”

Annnnyway. Things was awkward havin’ Solas with them. Bit of a relief—anytime a fight broke out they knew there was someone with a constant handle on if Ellie was okay, he called out the minute her barriers were down and reported if she was hurt…kind of seemed to make her feel like she was being babied—before she’d usually have the chance to speak up herself if she got injured, but part of the deal…at least as far as his presence being tolerated by Marehis went, was open lines of communication regarding Inky’s wellbeing. And…she couldn’t really begrudge the guy when ‘The Inquisitor is in danger!’ and ‘The Inquisitor is well/The Inquisitor has been injured, she needs blah blah blah blah blah’ was the only words Marehis would let him speak in her direction. Dude straight up stopped using contractions when he spoke just so he’d have more words to say, she was pretty sure, always called Ink ‘Inquisitor’ which seemed like…either distancing himself or making it clear he was respecting her, her authority over him. Other than that…no one really talked to him. ‘cept Cole ‘cause he’s a little dummy, he just can’t help it though—but he only talked to Solas when it seemed like his Spirit pish was just full-blown compelling him to…usually it was stuff that made the bloke sad, about how hurt everyone else was over the shite he’d done. Other than Cole? Occasionally Inky, she greeted him most mornings, sometimes just a nod of
acknowledgement, sometimes a full ‘Good morning, Solas’. Seemed like she made a point of making sure the man got addressed by name, someone talking to him while looking him in the eyes at least once a day—if no one else supplied that, she would. And she sure as hell was the only one checking up on him after fights. Varric and Bull seemed to be bonding over who could make more ‘Wolf’ references in relation to the man in a day, Madam de Fer usually tagged on to whatever they came up with, just, snootier—least twice already she’d wrinkled her nose when they settled into camp and complained she could smell wet dog and Dorian would laugh. Anya was back in Skyhold with Kremmy-boy, so, definitely wasn’t her. Thom…didn’t much associate with the guy but he’d pass him things when they ate as a group, or hand him his whatever if Solas was helping with the cooking or something, didn’t say a word to him but he also didn’t chime in with Bull or Varric’s jibes. Sera if they was all alone, would let him ask her how she was, answer him eh, nicely or whatever.

The trip to Crestwood though, that took a bit longer than originally planned—Cullen wrote to say he’d had a patrol go through Verchiel and her Friend said the reward would be waiting in this lil’ place just southwest of Crestwood. So, they was makin’ a little pit stop.

Just in time for her birthday! Frick! She…was pretty excited. Never really celebrated much—Lady always threw a little something, it was always unbearable though. When she was out on her own, she did it up pretty right—drinking, dancing, somethin’ sweet, celebrated with whatever friendly faces was around. She was already pumped about Ink’s present—Krem drew them up something real friggin sweet, and Bull…shite, that crap with the Qun had him down, but he promised he was up for fulfilling his promise to help with Inky’s idea for Sera’s birthday. It’d count as his present too, so.

…speaking of presents…the guy had a new bauble around his neck. Just all of a sudden-like. Dragon tooth split in half and hanging on a silvery chain, and Sera was pretty sure he’d done something like that for Ellie’s birthday—split a little tiny tip of a tooth to make the matching pinkie rings him and Ellie wore. Didn’t see anyone running around with a match until she caught Dori one morning, stumbling out of the tent, just finishing up tying up his robes, and there was this chain hanging loose around his neck, huge honking half a Dragon tooth hangin’ off it, that he tucked into his robes for discretion or whatever.

She was pretty sure that meant they was Qunari-married now, right?

Tooth…Dorian…Bull…Birthday! Right, her birthday! Anyway, she was looking forward to it, she’d already spotted ingredients to take another swing at campfire-cake-making which was just gonna be yum! And sometimes when she walked near the tent Cassandra and Marehis was talkin’ all hush-hush like, obviously trying to keep their voices down so Elf ears couldn’t hear.

But she definitely heard Ellie shushing everyone, bit of a commotion going on outside when she woke up Cloudreach 4th. Then Inky came crawling back into the tent to snuggle up to Sera…huh, she’d gotten to sleep in a bit, yeah?

“Hola chica,” Ellie chirped when Sera opened her eyes, “did you sleep well?”

“Mhmhm. Yeah Ink—you?”

Ellie nodded before she popped up, bouncing in place a bit, “Breakfast is ready, if you are?”

Frig, she was so cute, just excited! “Sure thing sweets.”

Ellie took her hand and rose to her feet, pulling Sera up after her and rushing out of the
“Happy Birthday Sera!”

Oh holy frick! Everyone—even Madam de Fer!—said happy birthday to her all at once as soon as she and Inky came out of the tent.

…well, almost everyone. Solas wasn’t to be seen…she didn’t think he got off anywhere, must just be keeping out of the way, which…part of her wanted him here? Mostly she was just glad he wasn’t sitting right there making it super awkward. Still…

She knew Inky well enough by now—bloke wasn’t starving or anything, Ink probably brought him breakfast already. So.

“Wowza, thanks you guys, shite, everythin’ looks amazing,” Sera said as she plopped down with Inky. Marehis sat down right next to Sera—hugging her real tight and kissing her on the cheek, and Cassandra was alongside the Elf woman, hand reaching out to pat Sera on the knee.

“Good morning da’vehnan!” Marehis said.

“Yes, Happy Birthday sweet girl,” Cassandra said, “Cullen sends you his best wishes, he felt badly he couldn’t come along and be here for your birthday but he did send his present along as well.”

…present? Seriously?

If it was a puppy Sera was gonna host a little rebellion against all this parenting crap! Loved Anya to pieces, so did not want the responsibility of her own pup. She was more a cat person, really.

“Tell him thanks for me, yeah?”

Breakfast was friggin’ the best! Great big breakfast sandwiches made out of buttery, pan-fried toast and thick portions of egg, bacon—it was a favorite for Sera, she didn’t like all the friggin’ rules that came with forks n’ knives n’ pish. Kind of felt the ghost of old anxiety, from days when she had to eat all proper or she got the cane for embarrassing Lady? Eating with her hands was stress free, just yum, and she loved it! …kind of loved how friggin’ hilarious it was, Vivienne eating a breakfast sandwich…she didn’t even use a knife and fork like Sera expected her to! She just! Went at it with her hands! Dainty like, but still!

“You full, Ser’?” Ellie asked after Sera finished scarfing down her third sandwich. And when Sera smiled and nodded, lickin a bit of salty grease off her fingers, Inky got real smiley, looked like she was absolutely up to no good and then she swatted Sera on the knee and shouted, “You’re it!” before jumping up and bolting! Just!

“No fair!” Sera laughed as she scrambled to her feet to chase after her! Friggin’! Fast little thing! Short little freakin’ legs—she had too much practice running around to keep up with everyone else!

Oh…oh frick—this was so cool! When Ellie tagged her it hadn’t just been…Sera didn’t realize it until she was running but Ellie’s magic? It reached out and sort of tagged Sera’s, there was this quiet thrill, an extra bit of giddiness bubbling in her blood her- her magic was having fun, boosting Sera’s own enjoyment and shite it- her magic felt love—loved, it loved Ellie’s magic! and Ellie’s magic loved it right back!
Ellie squealed when Sera caught up to her, even more when the Elf girl did more than tag her, she tackled her, taking her up in a squeezy hug that made the younger girl giggle, “Sera, we’re playing tag!”

“I just friggin’ love you, okay?”

“Magic’s more awake? Yeah that happens for me too but like, times a bajillion. Sometimes your magic’s going to feel conflicting things but it’s usually trying to help you.” It was gonna be even stronger? Holy crap, it already kind of made her feel like she was high or something. “I love you too!”

Sera hummed a bit…and then spun around real quick, startling Inky as she was abruptly put on her feet and Sera tagged her—on her good shoulder—before rushing off, “Oi! No fair!”

What was no fair was Cole! Ruddy little cheater! Friggin’ cute about it though—he loved playing tag, he’d just poof around after them, randomly pop up to get in the mix of the chase, but he always stuck around when he’d been tagged, running off and letting them chase him.

Solas was with the others when they returned to camp, sipping water from his canteen. Everything looked packed up one of the tents so Sera and Ellie could get armored up before heading out.

“Good morning, Solas,” Ellie offered politely before disappearing into the tent to Solas’s returned,

“Good morning, Inquisitor.”

“Morning,” Sera said, nodding his way.

Friggin’ she talked to the bloke every once in a while, she wasn’t totally ignoring him, but still he looked surprised, like the acknowledgement meant the world to him, his eyes got a little misty she thought, frick! “Good morning, Sera. I wish you a most pleasant, blessed Birthday.”

“Cool.” Felt weird saying ‘thanks’.

Ink was still working on her armor when Sera came in, finishing up the clasps of her armored tunic, “Do you have a preference for when we do presents? We were thinking we’d do cake and things tonight when we make camp if that’s okay with you—sort of celebrating after we get our work today out of the way.”

“It’s up to you guys—we can just do it tonight or whatever. Don’t need presents Ink, I mean breakfast and tag was a blast.”

“It’s your birthday! We have to celebrate! You were born, and that’s like, the best thing ever—I’m so happy you exist!” Inky enthused. Well. Sera’s ears was just permanently red, so, cool. “I just feel badly Dagna couldn’t be around for it—you’ll see Lace as soon as we get to Crestwood though,” she reminded Sera, shite, she missed Lacey.

…magic did too. Which made her sadder at first but then it kind of…helped? Like being sad about something with your friend. They was sad ‘cause you were, and sympathizing, assuring it’d be okay—they’d see Lacey real soon! Dagna and Lace made her magic all warm when she thought about ‘em, friggin’ cuties!
Day was pretty fun, they made their way to the place her Friend asked to meet, and everyone seemed pretty chipper—she got to ride with Inky again since the Human girl wasn’t so friggin’ sleepy, holy crap Rift magic really put her down, but it only took about four-ish days for her to start getting’ her pep back, so, hopefully that was the norm, and Solas had brought up the idea that magic in some aspects was like a muscle—you push them hard enough to tear, rest up, they heal up stronger. So, she’d be able to handle it even better next time, they figured. It was great riding together again, Cassandra and Marehis on either side of them, chattin’, asking what Sera’d like to do for lunch, if she knew this Friend very well—she didn’t, never met ‘em before, bloke seemed kinda new?

He…he was really new. Didn’t have a ruddy clue.

“…wait, this is weird,” Sera said as she led their group on foot to where she’d expected a freaking town or something. Magic sorta felt uneasy about it too, kind of like a little kid, hiding behind Sera for cover and comfort. Made her feel braver, like if Inky was scared, Sera’d step up and take charge, make her feel safe. So she did just that, stomping out into the middle of the freakin’ sloppy muddy middle-of-nowhere pisshole this ‘Friend’ told her to come get her coin at. What the fuck? What was on? Sometimes Friends wanted to make personal connections with each other, have a face-to-face exchange so they know who they’re dealing with in future, but most of the time everything was done through letters and rumors and pish, you drop off rewards someplace and the rewarded come to pick it up. But she could ruddy hear someone nearby but they hadn’t approached yet and that- blah! Made her paranoid as hell. Shite, Ellie was right alongside her, just following Sera’s lead. “I was expecting a village or something. The people that leave me stuff don’t trek out to places like this,” Sera said, “give me a city and I’ll give you a tour, but surprise surprise, I don’t know stupid woods or ruins.” Definitely didn’t look like the sort of place she’d be getting a Birthday drink in. Oh piss there was movement, Sera’s arm shot out in front of Inky to sort of put the younger girl behind her as some random Human bloke came stumbling out of hiding, “What’s that?” she snapped. Human bloke. Still—friggin’ what was going on?!

“Don’t hurt me,” he begged, “Harmond made me do it!”

“We aren’t here to hurt you,” friggin’ Inky! She was already stepping forward and resting a hand on the man’s arm, “Calm down—everything’s alright. Is something wrong? We’re with the Inquisition, I’m sure we can help.”

“Had enough help,” the man half heartedly snapped, “I complain about a fight and suddenly I’m an agent or something?”

 “…you were the one with the rumor out of Verchiel? My Friend?”

“You’re her? You’re the one he’s waiting for!” her magic sort of prickled up in her blood at that, like it was warning her to grab Inky and run-

Several things happened all at once.

The bloke wrenched away from Inky, turning tail so fast he nearly bit it, ducking low to catch himself as he shouted to someone—“It’s her! She’s here! Red Jenny!”

Sera felt barrier from everyone who could cast it in the blink of an eye—Vivienne’s freakin’ lightning fast, hit her even before Ellie, Dori and Sola’s all washed over her simultaneously.

And she was knocked back. Not down, but someone bodily got between her and whatever the fuck that dickhead was shouting for, a hand firm on her wrist as she was pulled behind them,
they reached out and pulled Ellie back in the same motion to have both girls safe from-

Two arrows. They shot out of nowhere and hit her ‘Friend’ square in the chest. Made her stomach turn hearing his heart puncture—he was dead before he hit the ground.

The person in front of them drew his staff, and a second boost of barrier came up over her before he rained down lightning on mercenaries ambushing them, it was a trap. She lead them into a ruddy trap. She led Inky and Marehis and ‘sandra into a freaking trap!

She led Solas into a trap. And he ruddy protected her. Heard that man announce someone was ‘waiting’ for her, thought it was Sera who was going to be getting arrows in the chest, and put himself between her and their unseen enemy. Her and Inky.

Was Marehis that got her hands on the archer—they came out of the woodwork with the rest of their mercenary friends and she was on him like…like a mother, yeah, ripped him a new one. Two new ones. In the throat. With her daggers.

Wasn’t too much of a fight, what with four ruddy mercenaries coming at their group, Sera barely had her bow knocked-

It was a good thing she didn’t, the thing was still limp in my fingers, not even to the bow yet, otherwise Solas might have impaled himself with arrow in his gut—the guy whipped around fast the moment the mercenaries were down, staff sheathed as he rounded on Sera and Ellie, wrappin’ his arms around them real tight, one of his hands resting on the crown of Sera’s head, she could hear his heart practically thundering out of his chest, breathin’ real panicky, as he leaned a bit, nose to Sera’s hair, and then he pulled back looking them over.

“Are you hurt, da’vehnan?” he worried, Sera, she guessed since he was probably ass deep in the bond right now making sure Ellie was alright.

“Nah, ‘m all good.”

He seemed to sort of realize how uh…informal he’d gotten? His hands immediately pulled back off their shoulders, put ‘em behind his back as he cleared his throat as everyone regrouped around them. “My apologies, Sera, Inquisitor.”

Ellie’s chin quivered a bit, and then she pulled him into another hug, squeezing him a bit before she pulled away and informed him, angrily, “Mad at you. Love you. You protected Sera and that makes me happy and love you more and hate this whole dumb thing—so hugs and snapping! Thanks for protecting Ser’ and me—jerk!”

…like mother like daughter Sera supposed—Mare was glaring at Baldy like she wanted to maybe knife him and bed him. Probably at the same time. Yikes. “You’re unharmed, sweet girls?” she checked with them, Cassandra was already in their space, hand on Sera’s shoulder as she looked her over.

“Yeah we’re fine, thanks everyone,” Sera said.

“Asshole over there seems like he’s in charge,” Bull said, bringing their attention to some Human git in fancy duds waiting in the wings, watching them.

“This is all a tragic misunderstanding,” the man called out, his voice like the vocal embodiment of a total wank. “Let’s all sheathe our weapons, you walk out, and we’ll discuss this like business.”
“The Iron Bull,” Ellie sweets said, “be a pal and break this asshole’s neck if he makes another move. I’d like to know what the hell this is all about.”

“You got it boss,” Bull agreed.

“Don’t believe a word this pissbag says, Inky,” Sera warned. She could be too forgivey sometimes. Case in point: Solas.

Though…yeah, he’d done bad, but he’d been doing better. Was a better person than the one he’d been when he did…all that. So letting him be the person he is now, the one that fought with them, protected them, loved them…might not be too forgivey.

‘Cause there was pish Inky just straight up didn’t forgive.

“There, that wasn’t so hard, was it?” Lord Asshole asked, friggin’ condescending as fuck. “We identified the confusion and we worked past it, I’m Lord Pel Harmond.” He looked Inky up and down, her staff, armor, the Mark. “I do hope, Inquisitor, that you continue to respond to reason. After all,” his gaze went to Sera, “your choice of company is hardly virtuous.”

She’d show him some virtue—shove virtue right up his crapper!

“Friggin’ user you are, another noble prick who punches down,” Sera snapped.

And then he looked to Ellie. “We’re the same, you and I,” Bull freaking shit! “Well, perhaps that is overstating it,” he corrected, but like his mistake was comparing someone lesser to him and not the other way around, ass! “You are nothing like me, but we both need people.”

“You’re all talkative now, but you attacked us—laid in wait for my sister, and you murdered her ‘Friend’.”

“Sis- you and this-‘ bet ‘knife-ear’ was teeterin’ real tempting on his lips. He cleared his throat. “It was my understanding, until this very moment, you had been tricked by this Red Jenny. I attacked them on both our behalves.”

“Arse-biscuit,” Sera muttered.

“Quite,” he drawled. “Inquisitor? Herald, I don’t want to be your enemy. I am barely invested in being hers,” he sneered in Sera’s direction. “If you are willing to recognize an opportunity. We could be exceptional partners.”

So. Maybe Inky wasn’t always so forgivey.

“I already have several exceptional partners,” Ellie assured him coolly. “Better than you, any day. Sera?”

Didn’t have to ask her twice.

Sera tossed her boot knife at him. Just clanked against his chest, blunt side, nothing that would hurt him, but that’s not what she was aiming to hurt him with.

Dumbass bent over to make a show of picking her knife up to mock her or whatever, “Now what was the point of that?”

Point was while he was busy posing, she’d taken the few casual strides it took to close the space between them, kick that fucker in the danglers, sending him to his knees before grabbin’ hold
of his head to send it into her knee. Heard the squelching crunch of his nose breaking off it, friggin’
sweet.

“Mother pissbucket frigging bastard shitebag pissface!” wanted to keep goin’ at his stupid,
ugly face but his nose was already broken, and…and Inky might’ve given her the go-ahead but she
was right there watching so Sera just- "Eat it, you lop-eared son of an arse-nut rot-suck piece of
shite!” she shouted, kicking him in the ribs till she was sure, while this bastard still got to walk
away…he got to with some broken ribs. Then she put her hand in Inky’s Marked one, gripping
tight. “Come on Inky. Let’s get out of here, yeah?”

“Go with your sister, da’vehnan, we’re with you,” Marehis said, coming up behind them
and pressing a kiss to the back of Ellie’s head, sending them off-

Ohhh. Sera walked off with Ellie, heading back to where they left their horses, just barely
cought the sound of Mare uhhh…well. Taking care of things. Sera hadn’t been willing to beat a
man to death with her bare hands in front of Inky, but she had no problem—neither did Marehis—
with his throat getting slit while the younger girl wasn’t looking, was out of earshot.

Well. That’d be fun for Lady Josie to explain…but uh, the bloke had been coming after
the ‘Friends’, not the Inquisition. So. No real reason for anyone to know what went down here, if
there was no one alive that would tell. Cool. Probably for the best, anyway—Sera’d…oh she’d bad
enough leading them into a trap, if Ellie’d gotten hurt or if this asshole went and- and tried to get
some kind of revenge or something for the Inquisitor slighting him and letting her knife-ear’d bitch
sister beat the crap out of him?

Some Birthday, huh?

Shite. That poor bastard. She felt bad, for the littler bloke that got killed for…for what?
He’d gotten a rumor to the Friends, sounds like it was on accident, but it happened, and this asshole
hunted him down, made him get Sera out here just to end up killing him. Friggin’.

Ellie was weepy about it as they walked away—best if they didn’t mess with anything,
bury anyone, and let people find the dead mercenaries, Lord, servant, come to their own
conclusions, so Sera kept her walking, feeling…pretty weepy herself. Frustrated crying. This was
supposed to be good they were trying to help that poor bastard. They had helped and then that Lord
got his dick in a wad over how embarrassed he’d been, chickening out and backing down like a
little bitch because the Inquisition sent soldiers through on patrol—would catch and call out any
bullshite he’d been pulling on his people. This was crap! And heartbreaking and humiliating and
just! Shite!

Magic…was quieter, she hadn’t sat with it yet today, she’d lose the connection she had at
the moment, have to get it back again if she didn’t do so soon. But it was still there, quiet and
reassuring, comforting her, like friggin’ an internal hug, sending soothing waves of calm that
tampered down the sort of- she’d kind of felt like she was on the verge of something panicky—
Inky could’ve gotten hurt or killed, or Cassandra or Marehis or- any of them! and it’d be all her
stupid fault! Sort of! They trusted her with this and it’d been a ruddy cock-up! She was
embarrassed and scared and ashamed and angry and-

And…magic helped. She’d been worried—Ellie said it made things stronger, if you was
feeling the same thing your magic was, it amplified that feeling, so that made Sera…scared, about
the whole ‘committing’ thing. Thought that maybe Inky struggled with things like depression
‘cause her magic was depressing her—making her double sad and double angry or whatever, but…
no, she’d been right and magic feelin’ conflicting things to help with whatever you was feeling.
Her magic didn’t make her sadder—it was doing it’s best, friggin’ running out on her even faster
because it was putting everything it had left in their connection to making her feel better.

“Sera? H-hey,” Ellie sniffled, stopping her as they reached their horses, “i-its okay, I’m sorry that went down like that, but it wasn’t your fault—everythings going to be okay,” she promised, pulling Sera into a hug. Oh. Sera’d started full on crying but-

“’m not sad Ink—I mean I am but not- I- my magic’s dy-“ she gulped, hugging the girl back. It wasn’t dying, she just had to get it back but still, she- she- “I wanna wake it up—for permanent! I don’t want to keep calling and losing it all the time, I wanna keep it! No backsies!”

“Really?” Ellie asked, kind of excited but like she was trying to stay neutral, failing just a little bit.

“Yeah, r-really.”

Ellie pulled back, reaching up to cup Sera’s face in her hands, thumb away her tears, “Kay. Alright. As long as you’re ready, I’ll support you a hundred percent. You wanna sit together and meditate when we make camp? Birthday-girl isn’t supposed to help cook dinner anyway.”

“C-can um,” the others were closing in but they hadn’t really caught all the way up yet, still, Sera made sure her back was to Bull and used the little hand-sign alphabet they’d learned for chattin’ up Grimm, just makin’ an ‘S’ with her fist, “h-help?” he- he was just friggin good at it, knew what he was doin’. The night she went to talk with him before his trial he’d sat her down, had her communin’ with her magic in a snap. She wanted it back now, damn it! But things was weird with Baldy so, checking with Ellie first. Cause if she was so pissed at him she didn’t want to associate with him for anything like this, dude would be dead to Sera, that’s just how it worked!

Ellie looked at her for a beat and then she subtly did the sign for ‘sneaky’. Sera wasn’t sure what that meant but she figured out it was the quick, private way Inky was saying to go along with her. The younger girl leaned against Sera a bit as the others joined them, like for support.

“Eleanor?” Cassandra asked immediately followed up by Dori—friggin’ worry wart he was, he hated it but he was a ruddy mother hen!

“Ellie? Did that scoundrel hurt you? I couldn’t see around my mountainous lover.”

“I’m okay,” Ellie promised, “but um, I dunno, that was all really out of hand and I’m still kind of recovering, strength and magic wise and that just kind of…” she shrugged, “I’m feeling pretty wiped. Um, Solas?”

Bloke looked full startled Ellie was even addressing him, it wasn’t even morning or anything! “Yes, Inquisitor?”

“Would you mind meditating with me? I know I didn’t want help before, but I kind of need a bit more pep in my step if I’m going to stay conscious for Sera’s Birthday.”

“Of course, d- Inquisitor. It would be my honor to assist you.”

Ohhhh frick, yeah, that- that was good. Sera…hadn’t thought about anything other than just getting her magic to work, like yeah, it’d be pretty outing to suddenly be all chummy with Solas and want his help meditating, and if the other Mages could tell he was doing something to prompt magic, help it wake up, they’d just go with the obvious assumption he was doing so for Ellie, ‘cause she asked, duh. It gave Sera cover so…yeah, she could take her time and figure everything out. She wasn’t even sure she wanted anyone to know about this, other than the people who already did. Oh, ‘cept Lace—she’d talked it over with Dagna, and that was only cause magic
liked her so much too, when it heard her fall and her poor little thumb was hurt, it just sort of reacted, wanted to help so it did. Dagna was keeping it on the down low but she thought…she thought it was really cool—sooooo amazing that Sera had natural magic in her asleep that she could work with and build on and grow, which was nice, she’d been kind of scared about that, what people might think, especially her uhhhh girlfriends. One down, one to go—Dagna said it was entirely up to Sera who she told and when, especially in regards to Lacey, but if she wanted, Sera could wait until they was all together again and Dagna would be there to support her and Lace both which…

Friggin’ everyone needed two girlfriends! Inky should try it, Kremmy-boy was supportive and he wasn’t the jealous type, she could have herself a handsome, devoted boyfriend and two girlfriends! That was so much ‘friends’!

Cassandra came and felt at Ellie’s forehead, “How poorly are you feeling?”

“Just tired, I’m okay.”

“You poor thing,” Dori sympathized, “Ellie, you’re aware I can be of assistance, yes? Co-magical meditation requires like magics working together, after all.”

“Yes my dear, you should look to your Human allies if you’ve need,” Vivienne said.

“Oh. I mean I still don’t want help—Solas can tell me how to do it all by myself without outside assistance, show me what I need to do, things like that. He’s already taught me cool stuff with the Fade that he couldn’t show me with his magic but could still teach me because I saw what he did and he explained it a bit. So. It’s really no offense to either of you, you’re welcome to join us, just,” she shrugged. Poor Inky really didn’t like all the fibbing but she…she did it for Sera. Friggin’ she was the best!

“Get off Inky’s dick,” Sera snapped, “If she want’s Wolfie’s help, she can have it—it’s not like he doesn’t owe her one. Or a thousand.”

“How are you faring, Sera?” Cassandra wondered then, turning to her friggin! Feelin’ at her forehead too what the fri- oh stress-fevers. Sera’d talked to her about them, she used to get them back in the day, ended up with one not too long ago ‘cause friggin’ everything on this fucking planet kept trying to come around and kill her- her- her kid sister! “You feel a bit warm—Marehis?” she prompted.

“Hmm,” Marehis came, felt at Sera’s cheek with the back of her hand before resting her palm against her forehead, “Uh-huh, oh da’vehnan, come—let’s get someplace suitable for camp and you can relax. Do you want to ride with me?”

…no. Yeah. Maybe?

Friggin!

“…sure.”

Marehis friggin smiled! Took Sera along to her horse and Bull tagged along like…nice, big dummy. Marehis could get into the saddle and then Bull helped Sera up—she wasn’t dizzy or sleepy or nothin’! But it was nice of ‘em.

Didn’t have to ride far…sort of back tracked a bit, got out of range of the rain—they could still make it to Crestwood tomorrow, but tonight, yeah if they could hold of on the rain a bit more, they would.
Adults got to cookin’, most of them anyway, Marehis sat nearby without any distraction, probably because Sera and Ellie were seated with Solas—the mom squad told Sera she’d probably relax more taking a nap or something, offered to help her bathe if she thought that might do something, but uh, nah—meditation was exactly the thing she needed to wind down right now. So, she sat with Ellie, Solas between them and…

It worked! Son of a bitch did it work! Solas’s magic reached out and prompted her own, got it to come back, be active again in Sera. She was relieved, she’d been kind of nervous that the second she finally decided she really did want magic around for good, that’d be the moment it up and quit on her. But it didn’t—it was back! And it missed her! Friggin’ boss!

Dori was there when they opened their eyes, like right there, seated in front of Sera. “How are you feeling, Sera? You aren’t falling ill I trust? My friendship does have its limits, I cannot possibly be associated with you if you’re both ‘hardly virtuous’ and diseased,” he teased.

“You don’t get your dick in a twist—I’m feelin’ better already,” Sera assured, looking to Solas and Inky then, “Uhh…thanks. For letting me join you.”

“It was my pleasure, Sera,” Solas assured, venturing further, “I am pleased you are feeling better. I am sorry, for how events unfolded this evening. Please do try to have a pleasant end to your evening.”

She would. It was gonna be yum! And then presents! And then a liiiiiiiiiittle ouch. But fun ouch!

Then possibly ouch-ouch because the mom squad might kill her.

Dinner was just about ready when they joined everyone, it was real good—real big beef sandwiches, these onions, what was it called? Caramelized onions on top. Didn’t taste like caramel though—but they was still friggin good she thought. Fried up potato wedges. It was the best!

Though as soon as Solas cleaned his plate he excused himself—he wasn’t the first to finish, but he was the first to call it a night.

Oh…because sandwiches and potato wedges might not be the best—close second, but not the best best.

Cookie cake.

She’d just started liking cookies again only to find out there was something even better out there—cookie cake! Holy crap!

“Eleanor’s idea—does it look correct, sweet girl?” Cassandra asked Ellie who nodded,

“Yes! Gosh, sorry I wasn’t any help but you guys did amazing!” Ellie encouraged, looking to Marehis, “Would you light the candles, mami?”

“Certainly, da’vehnan.”

Inky held her hand real tight, kind of bouncing in excitement alongside Sera before their party launched into ‘Happy birthday to you! happy birthday to you! happy birthday dear Seeeeraaaaaaa!’

Wild, everything that happened today, coming back and having some Birthday cheer but…maybe that’s just what a day like this called for. She felt like she messed up, it was nice
having all her friends, her um…family around, being all dumb and happy she was born and shite. Used to have birthdays she wished she wasn’t. This definitely wasn’t one of them.

She was pretty sure even Viv sang! Ha! Bitch could totally tolerate Sera now and she knew it!

“Presents!” Ellie declared it, “Me first!”

“Tumbles!” Varric complained. What, had dwarfy gotten her something?

“I’m Inquisitor! This is a direct order—you watch yourself Tethras, I’ll commandeer the whole order of things, pick people by favorites. I love you but like—you know you’d be in line a bit.”

Dwarf sighed and gestured for her to get on with it. Inky already figured out her present though, and it wasn’t something they’d be doin’ right here, so…

Oh. Oh she’d gotten Sera something else too.

A book.

Didn’t have a title, it was just a reddish brown leather journal looking thing, for a minute Sera thought that’s what it was—a journal for her to keep a diary in or something but uh, nope.

“It’ll only open up for you,” Ellie said as she handed it to her, and when she pulled open the cover yeah, frick, holy crap something zinged across her magic, felt like she’d used it a bit to actually get the thing open-

It was a lexicon.

It was a freaking handwritten Inky-explaining spell lexicon! With friggin’ notes and things inside it all about how certain spells might feel when she uses them, tips and things on cool down times and how to use different spells in day-to-day life, not just in battle n’ pish but for regular stuff! Sera flipped through it, it had a little bit of everything, seemed like, like Ellie was making sure she had a sort-of survival guide to navigating the world with magic—there was even some spells that came with little explanations underneath that Sera could use as cover if she found herself in a situation she had to use magic but didn’t want people knowing she used magic. When the hell had she even found time to do this?! Freaking!

Ellie grunted when Sera collided with her, just! Big hug! Full on tackling!

“Happy Birthday, sissy!” Ellie giggled.

“Inky! This is amazing! You’re the best!” she sat up, “I dunno ‘bout what you lot are thinkin’ but you’re pretty screwed.” Especially since Sera was pretty sure this wasn’t Ellie giving her something super cool to back out of her other birthday plans, it was just an kick-ass addition. Possibly more cover for their later plans—it’d look weird if it looked like Ellie hadn’t gotten her anything.

“Tumbles, what the hell? Stop trying to put me out of business! I’ve got chest-hair to feed!” Varric complained, “The hell she write this time?”

Sera stuck her tongue out at him. “None of your beeswax Dwarfy—friggin’ eat your chest hair!”
He chuckled, coming up to offer his birthday present…another book.

“This en’t one of your Sword and Sheild shite things, is it?

“Sort of but uhhh, it might float your boat. I’ll want your input before I send out the final draft, you, any of your uh, lady friends have anything to say about it, I’ll want to hear,” Varric said, “Tumbles and Mae-Mae’ve been on me about ‘representation’ and shit in my fictional works. I write what I know, but I know a lot of people and their experiences so…took a shot, if it’s crap, let me know, maybe I can fix it.”

Sera’s mouth dropped open when she looked at the cover and she peeked inside just to flip a bit to make sure…oh holy frig- “This one’s just about girls!” like! Girls meetin’ and goin’ on adventures and fallin’ in love with each other and shite! As more than friends! “Friggin’ boss! Thanks dwarfy!”

Frick, she ended up with so much books! Dori found one she’d been after—Chemistry text she used to have, hadn’t taken it with her when she gave over everything Lady owned, ‘cause technically it was something Lady bought, it wasn’t really Sera’s. Glad to have a copy of her own. Viv got her a scarf…silk shite, but it was bright yellow, real pretty and soft and Sera actually liked it! And Thom whittled her a bracelet to match the one he’d made Inky! Friggin’ sweet! Cole, sweet dumb-dumb, he made her something! He’d Lady Josie if she would get him a jar, and she’d found one for him apparently, spare from the kitchens but Cole hadn’t known where to look or how one went about getting things really—glass jar that he filled up with paper. Little slips of paper he’d scrawled on—it was a ‘Hurt Healing Kit’ so if he ever couldn’t get to Sera, like he was away or something, they were separated or she just didn’t want his company, she could just pop open the jar and pull out a scrap of paper at random and it’d have something written on it that might help her feel better. Like little complements or something-

“All of the things people love about you!” Cole explained, “All of the things that make you, you! Special and cared for and deserving of love! So whenever you forget those things, they’re in there to remind you! Oh!” he chirped surprised when Sera gave him a squeezy hug and a kiss on the cheek.

“Damn Kid, you really stepped your Birthday gifting game up,” Varric complimented.

“Oi!” Ellie snapped, “I love the birthday rocks from Cole! All of them! Cremisius saved them and they live on my bookshelf at home! You can fight me Tethras—stop testing me today!”

“Hey, you wanna go, Tumbles, we’ll go!”

“I will hug you! For so long! And it will destroy you!”

“Varric do cease provoking hug violence from Eleanor, honestly,” Cassandra chastised.

Cassandra…

Frick!

“This is from Cullen, Marehis, and myself,” she said as she seated herself alongside Sera. “Today held a rather offensive example—we are a strange mix of family, and claim to one another may fall into question. While we can do nothing—nor should we—about the visible differences that would make people like that Lord Harmond question your relationship to Eleanor…it might seem silly or foolish but Cullen thought of it and I found it sound…sweet. Assisted in its design. Though Eleanor was of some help.”
“I was?” Inky asked, confused. Huh, guess ‘sandra and Cullen hadn’t shared their present plans?

They hadn’t. ‘cause part of it was for Inky, and that was the best!

They got them this! This necklace! Two necklaces, but they shared a single charm—it split in half when you pulled it apart so they each wore part! A heart—one Sera’d recognize anywhere, it was the exact shape, familiar way Inky always drew hers, they always dipped in a bit more at the bottom on the right side—an inward curve that always ended up there when Ellie drew little hearts in her messages to people. S I S T E R S emblazon in it right down the center of the charm, where it split so it couldn’t really be read unless the pieces were together! It was-

“Cullen’s a ruddy genius! You too ‘sandra! Thanks!”

“You, Sera, are meant to wear this portion,” Cassandra said, taking the half of the heart with the curve near the tip, and helping Sera put it on, leaving Ink with the half that had a near-perfect straight slanted line from the tip up to the curve of the top, Marehis helped Ellie put her part on. “There is a piece more to it,” Cassandra said, pulling at something ’round her neck—Marehis was pulling at something around her own neck too-

Oh. Oh they meant something that would mean all of ‘em was family.

The little curve just before the tip of the heart? Marehis and Cassandra were wearing matching necklaces with arrowhead charms on them, but the tips was wonky—curved to fit perfect into the ‘imperfect’ dip in the heart that made it Ink’s handiwork.

Cassandra cleared her throat, “Cullen wears one now as well. So. Should any question our bond—we’ve a physical link after a fashion.”

Any one of them at any time could just whip out their little arrow head made to fit Sera’s half of the heart and bam—who’d have something like that they shared with some random acquaintance? Silly-ish but she didn’t give a shit, it was amazing.

“The Iron Bull?” Cassandra asked then, “Have you anything for Sera, or was Dorian’s present a joint venture?”

“Nooo, hate the kid, didn’t get ‘er shit. She’s a good friend to my Lieutenant, Imekari’s sister, just a real pain in the ass overall,” Bull prattled off, “I got something Seeker—Sera knows.”

“…when…?” Sera ventured carefully.

“Whenever you want babe,” Bull shrugged.

“…Inky?” Sera asked, looking to the Human girl. Was she still up for it? Did she want to wait or-

“Ready whenever you are!”

“Now work?” Sera asked the Qunari.

“Hell yeah it does—come on Imekaris,” he addressed them both as he lumbered to his feet, “Private Charger business—you losers aren’t invited.”

Hell yeah they wasn’t!
Though frick she almost wished she’d fessed up to ‘sandra and Marehis, gotten them to come along and hold their hands or something holy crap tattoos were more than a ‘little’ ouch! Lots of ouch! But...not too bad, especially once she got used to it—she hadn’t known what to expect, but Bull was consistent with his needle jabs, so, gave her a rhythm to get used to and deal with. Felt bad Inky was doing it too but over all?

It was freaking sweet!

“Alright babes, keep that shit clean and covered, you hear me? Least until it heals—you can use Elf root on it after you give it time to settle—day or so.

“Thanks!” Sera and Ellie giggled when they spoke in unison.

Overall she’d gotten some new books, new scarf, sweet jewelry, and a tattoo—Krem had drawn up this little circlet of Elf Root vines woven together with a few yellow buttercups in it, circle sat just on the inner flesh of Sera’s left wrist—Ellie’s on her right wrist, so when they stood facing each other the tattoos were mirrored. Bull did a banging job copying Krem’s drawing in friggin, different shades of green and yellow ink—ruddy thing had depth to it, it was freakin’ art!

Qun could actually fuck itself, Inky was right! They wasn’t about tattoos, and Bull was boss at them!

‘sandra had this bemused smirk on her face when the girls rejoined camp again. “Have you injured yourselves, my sweet girls?”

“Oh no,” Marehis offered false concern, “whatever could have befallen our most precious da’lens.”

They knew! Like! All along! “Shush! You was all pissed at Bull when he Inked up Inky—and her friggin’ nickname is Inky! That’s like, just meant to be! So—we didn’t do nothing!”

“Can we see this ‘nothing’?” Marehis asked.

“We are admittedly curious—and certain the Iron Bull did a lovely job as he did with Eleanor’s first tattoo.”

They let them have peeks under the bandaging Bull’d put on them, the women nodding their approval, “Very well done,” Cassandra said.

“I think it’s very sweet,” Marehis complimented. “Come—let’s get ready for bed, shall we da’vehnans?”

Sera nodded. “I wanna wash my face before bed, is that cool? I’ll be right back,” she said. it wasn’t a total lie—she’d wash her face good. and be right back. She just planned a little ‘in between’ thing she was omitting.

“Of course,” Marehis said, “we can join you if you’ve need.”

“Nah, you guys get ready for bed, I’ll just be a minute.”

They wasn’t real keen on letting Sera go off on her own, but it wasn’t like she was out of ear shot if she ran into trouble, and Cole was always around, they trusted him not to let anything happen to her.

She did too. Which was why she was paying someone a quick visit before sleep time.
“Hey, Solas?”

Dude hadn’t gone to bed…she didn’t think. Huh, it was funny how hard it was to tell on someone who didn’t have any hair to give away that they’d just been tossin’ and turnin’ or not. He popped his head out of the tent almost immediately. Solas had a tent all to himself, which might seem nice but uh…the way this Inquisition ran, it had to be pretty miserable, being sequestered.

“Sera. Ahh. I um…I apologize if you perceived my absence as rude, I felt you might enjoy less awkward festivities. But I did not forget the celebration of your birth,” he promised. "If you would not like a present from me, I do understand, but if you wish, I do have something."

...seriously? Hadn't he just been under lock and key? When had he gone present shopping? She kind of doubted they let him have much, he'd had books n' pish in his cell, maybe he did somethin' like Inky had. Umm, "Wasn't here about that, honest. You don't have to give me somethin' but I won't uh, turn down your present or whatever."

He nodded, "One moment," he said, pulling away from the entrance she could hear him digging around in the pack he always carried around and then he was back, extending something to her, a uhhh sort of wrist bracer or something, had two deep lines that split it into sections, ornately engraved with designs of flowers and herbs that Sera couldn't quite place, like she'd never seen their like before. "This...this was something that belonged to my parents, myself in my youth," he explained, pulling at one of the sections, oh, it was something that could be split three ways, before he snapped to together again. "It was something to denote a bond, either familial, friendship, romance. As my parents were born to a generation still allowed to reproduce, my father presented my mother with this when they began courting, and when they did eventually decide upon union, he presented her with it's third portion, for her to pass on to their progeny. When they passed I was left with the bracelet made whole, ironic as that is. I hadn't even thought of it since I woke but recent events had me reflecting on my life. Given...it is not something even in my youth I thought I might use for myself. I thought perhaps you might find use of it...given it can be used to denote even budding relationships, and is capable of being split thrice...while I have not been privy to group gossip as of late, it is my understanding you've two lady loves. If you're uncomfortable with the notion of course you may keep it whole for yourself, to present if and when you would like."

...it was kind of nice. Pretty, she wasn't usually one for flowery pish but yeah, being so ancient, she was pretty sure the flora represented on it was extinct and that was weirdly cool, like, you wasn't going to just find something like this anywhere else. "You're sure?"

"Certainly. I would not have offered."

"..cool. Thanks, it's real pretty," she said, accepting the offered bracelet, yeah she wasn't sure...when exactly, but she liked the idea of, er, sharing it. "I um actually came here not 'cause of birthday stuff though."

"Of course, how may I be of service?"

“No service, just uh…I’m gonna, um. I wanna make things be for permanent—you know?” didn’t wanna say what exactly, Bull wouldn’t be eavesdropping on her, but he can’t help what his ears pick up and he might be intentionally listening if he heard her come talk to Solas, looking out for her or whatever.

“Truly?” he asked, sounding pleased-surprised, “That is- I am happy for you, if that is truly what you wish.”

“I um…need potion.”
“Of course,” he said, disappearing into the tent and returning a second later with a vial of Lyrium he handed to her. “You’ve still food on your stomach? It helps, both with your body handling its digestion for the first time, and with how well it works within your system.”

“Yeah I’m good,” Sera assured.

“I would suggest taking it as soon as possible if you wish to do so tonight—you’ll find yourself restless for a time, it wouldn’t due to have you miss the whole of your sleep.”

“Oh, frig yeah, can I…?” she shook the bottle a bit and he seemed to get the hint.

“I will take care of the empty bottle, of course. You…are not making your mothers aware?”

“Inky knows. Cole too probably, and I’ll think it to him before I sleep—he’s promised to be with me, Ellie too. Cassandra and Marehis get it, support it, but…I just kind of want to get a feel for it? Before I tell more people.”

“As is your prerogative, of course,” Solas encouraged.

Sera nodded and she didn’t see anyone out and about so, she popped the cork out of the vial and knocked it back friggin tasted- she wasn’t sure really but it was this weird mix of burning and freezing and wowza! She shook herself a bit, frick!

“Be well, Sera. If…if you’ve need of me, of help, just call, I would come to your aid. I trust all will go smoothly, and I wish you and Ellie safe passage in the Fade.” A ghost of a smile tugged at his lips, and he left it on a lighter note, that the Fade could be fun, “Might I suggest endeavoring a game of tag? Ellie and Cole seem to enjoy as much there.”

“Sweet!” she said. Huh. She trusted Cole and Ellie with everything—wasn’t a single thing in the world she didn’t trust them with. Solas?…she trusted him to protect her. Put her and Ellie first. So. That was enough for, “Uh…thanks. I’ll have people, but um…yeah we run into trouble,” she shrugged.

“Dareth shiral.”

So. She washed her face…might’ve run to the stream, and back super fast frick she had energy! And she sort of popped around the camp a bit looking for Cole instead of just doing the ‘brain thing’ but he came to her, poofin’,

“I know, I will be there—it will fun, Sera, I promise I will keep you safe. I can help you with falling asleep if you like.”

…yeah she might just need that, “Thanks, Cuddly,” she said as she headed for her tent.

So.

Twenty years under her belt, Sera Jones fell fast asleep, with a mother on either side of her, and the person she was pretty sure she loved most in the world, ever, laying on top of her—and together, she and her sister entered the Fade.
Marehis was uncertain, just which place she despised more: the Storm Coast, or Crestwood. Both were equally dreary, though the rainfall in Crestwood was not quite as thunderous, it fell far less harshly than the downpour ever present on the Coast…

She found she preferred the Coast’s monsoon. Crestwood should, perhaps, burn.

It wasn’t as though they’d gotten off on the right foot after all, oh, that whole horrible affair with Lord Harmond—she was proud of Sera for walking away in front of her sister, and was glad to have ended his life herself, she would not have some putrid man seeking to bring vengeance upon one or both of her children, it was bad enough the threats they received on the daily toward their Inquisitor, Sera thus far had remained untargeted and she wished to keep it that way. The man had laid in wait for her, expected her to come alone, brought mercenaries to end her life—when the Human boy, Sera’s ‘Friend’ called out that Sera was this Red Jenny they were waiting for and Marehis heard the strain of a bow being pulled taut, her heart had stopped, brain flooding with just how to stop what she feared to be coming next and-

And Solas. He’d moved only a split second before she had, she’d been trying to rapid fire consider conflicting information, she heard the man shout that ‘its her!’ and it sounded like he meant Sera, and then she heard the sniper's bow string and habit and reflex had her brain perceive the threat being to Ellie, who was the regular target of such attempts. Solas hadn't given it a moment’s consideration, ran on pure instinct it seemed. Immediately put himself between harm and h-…

Their girls. He would die for them, had done all he could to ensure their safety, seemingly lost his composure to the fear- the threats to Ellie were continuous, something that had always been since they met her, they didn’t like it, but it was a norm. To have Sera suddenly and unexpectedly become a target? Some horrible person who abused his power, his people, angered because this girl put a stop to it, looked at their daughter and saw someone worthless, beneath him. Dared to rid the world of her the way one might swat out a fly. It was horrifying, and she well understood how Solas could lose his need to distance himself out of penance to hold close the girls he’d just feared losing.

Marehis and Cassandra had risen early to go take over the night’s watch from the Iron Bull. They could hear something of a chess game going on between he and Solas, after a fashion—there was no board before them when Marehis peeked out of the tent when she heard both their voices before resuming the task of pulling on her boots as she and Cassandra dressed for their shift, they were merely exchanging piece positions back and forth, an entirely verbal game, it seemed an exercise of sorts.

“You win again, congratulations,” Solas offered politely. “I am pleased to see Madness has yet to rob you of your faculties.”

The Iron Bull snorted, “You let me win again, Wolf boy.”

“I assure you I’m merely luring you into a false sense of confidence—I do promise to decimate it when the moment is right.”

“Yeah yeah,” the Qunari shook his head, and then there was some hesitation as he and Solas rose to their feet, the Qunari giving Marehis something like an apologetic look before he ventured, “Hey. Um. Good looking out today.”

It…certainly had been. Marehis bit her lip as she looked to her sleeping girls. So much went wrong tonight but it could have been devastatingly so much worse. She’d been so afraid Sera might suffer nightmares after everything, but it looked like she was deeply asleep, the girl was even
smiling in her slumber as she held Ellie close.

“I am grateful for his actions as well,” Cassandra quietly admitted. “Despite everything he is…still a strong ally. Dependable, where it matters.”

“…do you still have-“ Marehis started, but Cassandra nodded, already offering up what the Elf woman was asking for. It felt foolish but…she told herself it was necessary to display some gratitude, vital to reward good behavior out of the man prone to doing so much harm. And this was something the man likely deserved. Sera was reticent to show much comradery with the man since his betrayal but it was clear she still held regard for him, as Ellie did.

So. She paid a short visit to his quarters while he still kept the Iron Bull company.

And come morning…the man had a silvery chain that dipped down under his shirt, he pressed his fingers to the concealed arrowhead charm it bore, giving Marehis a grateful look, a respectful nod. Cullen had made such arrangements for this present their first week in Skyhold, well before the reveal of Solas’s origins. She was beyond grateful to Cullen—she felt badly, she hadn’t been able to think of what to gift the girl with, though she supposed even Ellie had struggled, to the point she’d gone and sought advice from all and sundry. Cullen provided something that could come from all those who held her in similar regard.

So. Crestwood had its pitfalls and highpoints thus far. Their day started out pleasantish enough. In fact it was very sweet, felt like a physical warmth to her heart to see her Sera so excited —rushing down the bank to collide with her girlfriend.

Girlfriends. The moment Sera was taking one dwarven woman up into her hold, the other —Dagna—came sliding out of a tent, striking a pose with arms out and hands splayed as she wriggled her fingers and announced, “Ta-daaaaa! Happy Birthday!”

Sera let out an excited screech, keeping one arm around Miss Lace as she reached out the other to swoop up Dagna into their hug, “Widdle!”

“Did you have a good birthday, Ser’?” Dagna asked.

“The best! I mean some bullshite went down with my Friends thing yesterday, it’s a whole thing—but my birthday was still bangin’! Even more now, I mean shite I was already excited to see Lacey but- you- how the frick are you even here??”

The Dwarven Arcanist giggled, “Lacey-doll gave me directions, short cuts and things I can take because I traveled all on my own—“

“Dagna, shite, that’s so dangerous—“ Sera breathed as she released her hold on the women taking a hand in each of her own.

“Oh I can take care of myself, it wasn’t any trouble. And I wanted to see you on your birthday, and I missed Lace loads!” she blushed when Miss Lace kissed her on the cheek.

“She was fine honey,” Lace assured, “I gave her directions along the route I took—I cleared it out on my way in. Now, uhh, please try to keep your voice down? Sound sometimes disturbs the um…undead.”

Sera slapped her hands over her mouth, letting out a shriek into them. ahh.

The first thing Marehis despised about this place. It’s undead. Furthermore, the reason for them.
Ellie had been giving the women space, now wishing to disrupt their greeting but she was here for business. “Undead?” she asked Lace.

“Inquisitor! Ellie, hi honey, I’m glad you guys made it in okay.”

“Oh my god! I forgot, duh, you’re going to be here!” Dagna enthused as the Human girl approached them, “Hey cutie! Where’s Boyfriend?”

“Back in Skyhold,” Ellie sighed offering a little pout at the thought, oh, their last mission out with the Lieutenant in tow had nearly ended in losing the young man, but even Marehis found she too missed Cremisius. That sweet man had sent along his own birthday present, in the form of a birthday well wish and a pair of warm brown fingerless leather gloves he’d made for her that she already adored—they came at breakfast, and Sera immediately put them on, they would assist in her archer’s grip, guard the knuckles at the base of her fingers, however the right glove was shorter than the left, it only covered down to the…er, Sera termed it her ‘thumb crotch’, leaving her palm exposed. For holding hands with Ellie, apparently—so Sera wouldn’t feel she shouldn’t wear them for fear of not being able to make direct contact with the girl’s Mark whenever they held hands. “I bet it’s at least not raining there. It rains constantly here, doesn’t it?” she asked Lace.

“…it certainly seems like it,” the Scout regretfully informed her. Marehis heard Dorian groan as he leaned his head against the Iron Bull’s arm, quietly complaining and asking his lover just why he decided to tag along on this mission.

“Rude!” Ellie informed the sky above in reprimand. Cassandra quietly snorted at Marehis’s side. “Kay, rain, undead? Anything else?”

“There is a Rift—Rifts plural all around but the main one they’re having issue with? It’s way out there,” Lace pointed to the great amount of water their camp overlooked. Ahh. Lovely.

“My Mark has done weirder things, maybe I’ll suddenly be able to breathe underwater?” Ellie tried.

“Miraculous as you are Eleanor,” Dorian complimented, “I do not recommend attempting such a feat.”

“Crestwood was the site of a flood, ten years ago during the Blight. After it appeared, corpses started walking out of the lake. Maybe someone from Crestwood who knows the area better could give you an idea on how to get to the Rift? Maker knows they’ll want help.”

“We will,” Ellie promised, “I’ll head that way now, touch base with the locals and see what we can do, ummm,” she turned to her party, “everyone feeling up to paying the town a visit?” the general consensus was yes, so, ‘Cool! Hey Ser’ you’re still technically the Birthday girl since you’ve got a Birthday visit from your girlfriend—everyone else is going, you can stay and have a nice visit and stuff before they have to leave, yeah?”

“As long as it’s cool with you Inky—you come get me before you go fighting any Rifts though, okay?” the older girl intoned seriously.

“You got it!”

“Thanks, I appreciate it.”

“Of course! Have fun and stay safe, okay? Use the war horn if you need us back here,” Ellie cautioned, popping up on her toes to plant a kiss to Sera’s cheek, “Mwah! Love you lots! It was great seeing you Dagna and Lacey!”
“It was great seeing you too!” Dagna enthused, pulling Ellie in for a hug. “You stay safe out there alright, cutie?”

“You guys too,” Ellie replied, clasping hands with Lace before returning to the adults. “Hiya! So everyone’s up for hitting the town? How are we doing on potion—everyone’s all stocked up?”

“I believe we’re all well, Eleanor,” Madam de Fer assured, reaching out and pulling the girl’s hood more securely overhead, “Are you warm enough, my dear?”

“Uh-huh, are you?” Ellie checked.

“Certainly,” the Grand Enchanter grinned, adjusting her own hood in a way that gave the girl a peek at what was underneath, she’d an ivory cloak she wore in such weather, but her head would not be bare without it, Marehis smiled when she realized her friend had indeed kept the white knitted hat Ellie had fashioned for her some months prior, was wearing it even now despite the fact it likely wasn’t silk.

Ellie led them on foot, down the hill and across the lake shore along the path to Crestwood.

Only to be halted by Wardens fighting undead. Of course. Well then, the enemy of my enemy?

Was apparently truly not my enemy—Marehis had been prepared to fight off the Warden’s assault once the undead were down, but that made no move against Ellie, except to thank their party ask her if she’d seen their fellow Warden, Stroud, who was wanted for questioning. To which she could, in full honesty, reply,

“I have not seen this Warden Stroud. But I’ll certainly try my best to find him.”

“They are scared,” Cole announced, subdued. “They think they are going to die.”

Ellie stopped and turned to look at the Spirit, “…like, right now? It doesn’t look like anything’s coming at them, are they scared the undead are going to overpower them? We…I mean the Warden’s have been up to something shady but those two didn’t attack us, should we walk them out of Crestwood?”

“They are not afraid they will die here. It’s…a call, it’s very strange—they both sound the same, or they have the same sound inside them, I don’t like it,” the Spirit said, fidgeting nervously with one of the clasps on his jacket.

“Like they’re thinking of the same thing—replaying a bad memory they share in unison,” Cole shook his head ‘no’, “or like a sound or something?” he nodded, “Both of them at the same time? That’s…really weird,” Ellie rested a hand on his raised forearm, “I’m sorry Cole.”

“Hey buddy, don’t sweat those assholes,” Bull sought to comfort the young man, laying his hand on the back of his neck, his grip big enough to give his shoulder a reassuring squeeze.

“Da’len?” Marehis questioned when Ellie closed her eyes for a moment—there was not much light to be had just now, this place was doom and gloom in exactness, she likely wasn’t shielding them from piercing light aggravating a headache. Was she tired, or feeling lightheaded? Her hand on Cole’s arm was rather firmly attached, perhaps for support-

Cole lets out a happy sounding hum, ”Ellie is thinking happy thoughts for me,” and then,
“The Marchands home is so very warm, covers of Cassandra’s bed soft, safe with she and Marehis on either side—it is because we love you, the Seeker says, no one has ever loved her before, or at least they’ve never put words to it, she’s so happy because she loves them too!” Cassandra let out a bit of a strangled sound, blushing at hearing she was perhaps truly the first person to express love of Eleanor. Cole let out a contented sigh. “Thank you. I can’t feel the Wardens anymore.”

“Brains might be messed up, but I didn’t hear them mention any new leadership, maybe Corypheus hasn’t gotten in real deep with the Wardens?” the Iron Bull offered the possibility as they drew nearer to Crestwood’s village, a ‘half-glass full’ view of Warden Corruption—perhaps they weren’t entirely corrupted yet?

“I’ll try to keep my toes crossed,” Ellie supposed.

… “Toes, Ellie-girl?” Thom questioned.

“Well yeah—I’m always down for optimism but my fingers are pretty busy what with all the undead.”

“Eleanor, honestly,” Cassandra huffed, amused.

There was nothing amusing about the number of undead they came upon assaulting Crestwood’s guard. Maker—she...she was tentatively Andrasten, working on conversion, step one: swearing to the Maker arbitrarily at any inconvenience—so, Maker, this was a miserable place. They needed so much and she could already see her da’vehnan working their circumstance over in her mind, thinking of what all they could do to help.

And it took all of two minutes for her to earnestly agree to trekking out even further into the mess and danger of the rain and wildlife to find some woman named Judith and check in on her for her friend. “We’ll make sure she’s safe. You stay safe too, okay? Is there anything else we can do?”

“You got a solution to the undead, we’d certainly appreciate it,” the man offered half-jesting.

“We’re trying to get to the Rift in the lake,” Ellie nodded, “is there any way to get out there?”

“You’re not serious?” and then she waved to him with her Marked hand, “O-oh. I-Inquisitor. Honor to meet you, miss. Mayor knows the area better than anyone—he just lives up the way.”

“We’ll touch base with him then, thanks so much.”

The man nodded. “Maker watch over you.”

The Mayor…was a very nervous man. The moment they arrived his heart was thumping out of his chest, only increasing as he described just how to get the dam up and running again—it had fallen into disrepair, but if they could get it up and running again, they could drain the lake and simply walk into what used to be old Crestwood. Unfortunately, the area had been claimed by bandits of the worst sort, he cautioned, otherwise he assured them he would have seen to it the dam was repaired and running again already.

He was lying. Marehis wasn’t sure about what, exactly, perhaps all of it? Or why, but the Iron Bull made the man very uncomfortable with his cool stare, like he was examining the Mayor’s soul and found it wholly wanting. Good. He deserved to be made uncomfortable, lying to
“We should be careful, boss-girl, something’s not right with that guy,” Bull cautioned as they made their way from the town.

“It has to be very stressful being mayor—he’s in charge of everyone, you know? He has to take care of them and there’s so much going wrong right now, I’d be nervous too,” Ellie found sympathy for him. He certainly better deserve it—Marehis would murder the next person to harm this girl’s trust. She already killed one man on this trip for one of her daughters, she’d gladly do so for the other. In point of fact, that was the new policy—people that came into their lives and hurt her girls were to be executed on the spot, by order of the unofficial rank over Inquisitor in this Inquisition—the Inquisitor’s mami.

“Cole, can you check on Sera please? Subtly—I don’t want to interrupt them if they aren’t finished yet, but I did promise Sera I’d go back for her before Rifting it up. It’s no rush we might have to swing back this way anyway depending on the lay of the land once the waters down.”

“You wanna take on bandits and go Rift fighting in one night babe?” the Iron Bull checked.

“I’m not leaving these people to deal with this another night, and I think everyone would sleep just a bit better if we could do so without fear of our brains getting gnawed on.”

“I will check on Sera,” Cole promised as he vanished from sight.

“Just let Sarge keep watch, guy doesn’t have enough brains to worry about,” Varric offered up.

“Oi! Thom’s the smartest, he- he- I don’t know he’s very good at picking out horses! And doing hair!”

Thom snorted, “Thanks Ellie-girl.”

“Whose the smartest in your party, Tumbles? Aside from you,” Varric questioned.

“The Iron Bull, hands down, all day, every day.”

“Hell yeah, Imekari, whoa,” Bull said as Cole reappeared…his face very very red, eyes wide. “Buddy, everything okay?”

“Sera…” Cole said slowly, “is busy. Very very busy.”

Ellie let out a screaming squeal as she slapped her hands over her mouth, red faced but excited, “Oh my gosh, really?!”

“Her talk with Lacey went very well.”

Talk? Marehis wasn’t certain what the boy meant but Ellie certainly did, she bounced in place cheering, “Yay! I knew it would, oh gosh that’s so great! Okay we’ll leave them to their Birthday sex—did it seem safe?”

“They were not using condoms, but I do not know what they would put them on,” Cole said, “Oh—should Lace be wearing one over her tongue if she’s going to keep licking Sera’s—”

Ellie slapped her hands over her ears screaming, “I meant from zombies oh my god!”
“Damn,” Varric said, “Buttercup knows how to do birthdays.”

“Oh!” Cole chirped, understanding then, “Yes, Inquisition soldiers are giving the camp space and protection on Scout Harding’s orders.”

“Cool!” Ellie said, “Let’s leave them to their fun and go kick some bandit butt!”

Though it wasn’t bandits they found, at first. They had to pass through what seemed like a closed down tavern, wholly abandoned save for…well, Sera was clearly not the only youth out and about in Crestwood seeking, er, privacy. The young couple startled as the Inquisitor and her party entered the space, apologizing profusely for occupying the space, and immediately vocalizing plans to move their get-together to a cave-

Ellie giggled, “Mmm trust me, Spiders and sex aren’t a good mix—it’s just dangerous out here is all, we’re passing through to go take care of the bandits up ahead so…do your thing, and then be about your business, alright? You two have um…everything you need? ’cause your parents will definitely find out you’ve been having sex if you wind up pregnant. And no, the pull out method doesn’t count—I’ve helped deliver so many pull-out babies.”

Ahh. Well then, apparently that bit of information was all they needed to send them returning to the safety of their respective homes where they could avoid such circumstance.

“Ava allowed you to assist in deliveries?” Madam de Fer wondered sounding almost aghast, it was an albeit…graphic area of medicinal care, but most Healer’s work was graphic.

“Uh-huh—I had two major life skills before joining the Inquisition—putting babies into people, and getting them back out.”

… “Putting babies in…?” the Enchanter stared at the girl like she was out of her mind… which in truth Marehis was a bit concerned with the phrasing, Ellie didn’t exactly come equipped with the means to impregnate anyone.

“Lots of people struggle with pregnancy and fertility issues—sometimes it’s just as simple as they just needed to try at a different time or a change of diet, or maybe they need another partner to step in—like a surrogate or a sperm donor…or just another partner, steam things up a bit. Sometimes people get so worried that they’re not going to get pregnant they basically shoot their chances at getting pregnant, it helps to stay in the moment and have fun with the process.” And then, “Soooo if anyone ever needs help—making, baking, birthing, I’m a professional!”

Well. Cassandra looked like she might be a permanent shade of red. It would be sweet, Marehis thought—there was a bit of a pang in her heart when for the barest of moments the thought of having Ellie’s help, at least be a hand to hold when she and Solas brought life into the world but that was certainly never going to happen, the thought was merely habit. But if Ellie could be of assistance in labor when Cassandra and Cullen pursued biological parenthood, that was just as sweet. Of course the prospect itself still embarrassed the Seeker beyond words.

Though her embarrassment seemed forgotten in the face of pressing danger. The bandit fortress was…a fortress. Large. Full of men armed and armored to defend their claim to it.

The doors were stout and sturdy, closed shut and barricaded against outsiders, though Ellie did try her hand at it, the girl charging at the doors and pushing on them with all her might—it was a valid effort she…she certainly did try, grunting with the effort before she let out a frustrated sigh and politely rapped her knuckles against the door.
“Hello! I know no one ever expects the Ferelden Inquisition, would you mind opening up please at your earliest convenience?”

Oh, her da’vehnan. The Iron Bull lent his strength to the matter, and his axe, breaking the doors down to gain them entry.

This place, Maker, they truly had been holding it hostage for quite some time. It was extremely well established for just another bandit post, their numbers were great, it seemed like they’d had charge of the place, indeed, the full ten years since Crestwood’s flood.

…due to mechanical failure of the dam?

“Huh…I guess maybe they…fixed it up?” Ellie wondered.

Marehis wasn’t about to say anything, at least nothing of the sinking suspicion that they were verging closer to the Mayor of Crestwood’s lies. It seemed none of the adults were inclined to. But the room the dam controls were in? It…it had not been entered in quite some time. Quite possibly since the flood, the air was so stale and- “Da’vehnan, stay here please, let us handle it,” Marehis instructed firmly, relieved that the girl nodded, she’d already pulled her scarf up to cover her mouth and nose, good. The room was full of dust, even she felt a little suffocated,

“I got it,” the Iron Bull said, “Mare’s right, you stay back Imekari.”

“I’m with you,” Thom volunteered in kind, assisting the Iron Bull in turning the large crank. Ellie squeaked, hand reaching out to grasp Marehis’s arm when the building rumbled and shook, the clank of gates in the wall being thrown open sounded and then, the roar of rushing water drawing from the lake.

“It’s working, da’len,” Marehis assured in case the girl’s ears weren’t sensitive enough to hear the water,

Ellie blew out a sigh of relief. “Kay, how’s everyone feeling? I understand if anyone is exhausted or done in, we can move forward in the morning, but if we can, I’d really like to get a handle on this whole ‘undead walking out of the lake’ thing.”

“Hey kid, if you can still hang, we’re right there with you,” Varric said.

“I’m still hanging, I mean the lake should be gone, so, it’s just walking down there and zip zap gone, right?”

…unfortunately, it was not that simple.

The lake was indeed fully drained by the time they made their way back to their infiltration camp…though they needn’t go all the way there to pick up Sera, she was on the shore, or what used to be the shore, in her armor, hair soaked, soap on her face,

“Oi! What the frig?! Girl can’t take a scrub without the ruddy lake disappearing!”

Ellie giggled, pouting sympathetically as she swiped her thumb along the bit of suds on Sera’s cheek, “Awe sissy, I’m sorry! If I knew you were getting your scrub on I’d have waited until you were rinsed off…but I mean it’s zombie water so…”

“Oh, pish, didn’t think about that, yuck! I need a bath from my freaking bath!”

“We’ll clean up real good once this is all over, promise. Did you have fun with Lace and
Dagna? Are they still here?"

“...They already started headin' for Skyhold—they told me to say ‘bye’ and love you n’ stuff. You guys were gone forever, what’s up—you drained the lake?”

“Uh-huh! And conquered a fortress for the Inquisition! Used to belong to bandits,” she rolled her eyes, drawling, “but like all of Human history—they’re dead now so it’s ours.”

“...tea,” Dorian said, like he had to admit it.

“Damn Imekari that was a self-burn and I respect it,” Bull said.

“Thanks!”

“Oh shite,” Sera breathed, looking the girl up and down, before spreading her assessing gaze over the rest of them, “I- you were supposed to come get me!”

“We are getting you—now, before going to the Rift, remember?”

“I just said ‘Rift’ cause that’s what I thought we was fighting! I didn’t know there was a ruddy bandit fortress! I meant fightin’ in general! You’re okay right?”

Ellie nodded. “Yeah, mostly just bruised egos,” mischievous grin on her face as she so blatantly lied, “the Iron Bull really struggled with getting the Fortress door open, I had to knock it down all by myself, it was a whole thing.”

The Qunari snorted, “Yup, Imekari showed those doors who was boss.”

Sera giggled, “Alright Inky—you’re okay? Kay—let’s go kick some Rift butt!”

There was a great deal of butt to kick, however, none of it was Rift butt.

Solas...she was not paying attention to him outside of the fact that she did not trust him implicitly and therefore kept aware of his movements in case he took it into his head to flee his service to the Inquisition, so she noticed when he stiffened, grew so very tense as they made their way through old Crestwood...admittedly this place made her feel wary, the hairs on the back of her neck stood on end. And that was before a spirit out-in-out passed by before her very eyes. And a second, shouting to them in hauty tones and demanding they take some sort of vengeance for her or some such nonsense.

“...umm, well, if we run into them, I promise we’ll take care of it,” Ellie offered, and then very quietly, “mami, do you think she can follow us?”

“I’m not certain,” Marehis had to say, this spirit had been loud, but not very mobile like her counterparts. She seemed affixed to the spot she floated in.

Ellie nodded, “Well, we’re walking away now.”

“You do as I’ve ordered!” the Spirit called after them.

“We’ll see!” Ellie called back, over her shoulder.

They did see another of Solas’s artifacts, Ellie took the liberty of lighting it...though perhaps Sera did while Ellie made a show of it to cover for her sister’s dabbling with magic, but that was about as close to the Fade as they got here—the Rift wasn’t to be seen, at least not from up here, but it was near, Ellie attested.
So they searched, there...there had to be a way to get to it, didn’t there?

Solas halted as they neared the last cabin near the cliffside their camp stood atop, the Spirits seemed even more restless here, following the path around the base of the cliff, so they followed suit but Ellie was already moving to investigate the cabin as they had the rest of the destruction of old Crestwood.

“Eleanor, stop!”

Marehis startled a bit at Solas’s demand, and Ellie stopped in her tracks at the bottom of the stairs that led up to the cabin, turning to look at the Apostate Elf, “…um…what’s up?”

“It- the Spirits- it isn’t safe,” he tried.

“It literally looks like the least scathed building in the whole place.”

“I mean it isn’t- Ellie I do promise I am trying to protect you, let’s just follow the path, deal with the Rift.”

She stared at him a moment and then walked up the stairs despite his advice, but it seemed she’d already come to some conclusions. She did not enter the cabin though, she only rose up the stairs enough to see the faded sign over the doorway, hanging open enough to see a great deal of the inside of the cabin…

“This was the mayor’s home,” she announced hollowly. “And um…” her voice waivered, “well, it…it seems his cabin is pretty empty. For a place that got abandoned in such a rush.”

Oh. Oh no.

“I’m not…I’m not totally naive. When we found the dam controls intact I thought the bandits had done it—assumed control of the dam, flooded Crestwood to get rid of the locals all those years ago,” Ellie turned to face her party gathered at the bottom of the steps, looking to Solas, “The undead. They aren’t trying to attack the town. They’re trying to get to the Mayor, huh?”

“That is the general consensus I’m perceiving,” Solas seemed regretful to inform her.

“You were hoping I wouldn’t find out?”

“Yes.”

“You just wanted to let him get away with it?”

“Of course not- da’vehnan I would spare you anything vile and painful in this world that I could, there is so much ugliness you’ve come to know. I’d planned to speak with the others later, privately, and handle it amongst ourselves without your having to know.”

Ellie’s chin had already begun to quiver. And then she was dashing down the stairs and-

And she went straight into Solas’s arms, shaking and crying, the man startled for all of a second before returning her hold, and resting a hand atop her head, the other rubbing circles on her back, “H-h-he- there are children’s bodies in- and their families and- he just- why?! Why would he do such a thing?!”

“I don’t know, oh ma da’vehnan, I do not know. I am so sorry, sweet girl shhh,” Solas
sought to soothe, “I’m sorry.”

“...yeah, you guys really need me for the Rift?” Bull asked quietly, “I just gotta go execute someone on behalf of the Inquisitor. Just real quick.”

He just might, this...Marehis had not thought there was anything that would send Ellie calling for an execution in her judgements but this...if this didn’t do just that, she wasn’t certain what could. The man certainly better have some way of explaining for himself.

“If we close the Rift, Ellie, it will help the Spirits here rest,” Cole spoke up. “And when we bring Crestwood’s Mayor to justice, they will know.”

The girl took in a shuddering breath, nodding against Solas’s chest. This...oh it was conflicting. But Marehis supposed sometimes you simply needed a proper hug from your papi, and Cullen was several miles away. Ellie sniffled as she pulled away and Solas kindly offered up one of his handkerchiefs, wiping at her eyes for her and saying, “Let us help them, shall we, Inquisitor?”

She nodded, agreeing, though she blushed as she wiped at her face with her hands, seemingly embarrassed to have lost her composure, to have sought comfort from the man in front of the others. “Thanks.”

“Of course,” Solas assured softly, taking a few steps back to allow her more space.

“I’m gonna put so much arrows in that Mayor sack of shite,” Sera muttered under her breath, going to join the younger girl and taking her hand, “C’mon, Inky. We’re followin’ the um, floaty ones, right?”

It was certainly macabre, Marehis had the distinct impression she was setting foot into some sort of horrific campfire story, following the spirits of the dead, down into a dark cavern, her girls were huddled close together, Sera held Ellie’s Marked hand so very tightly, putting the younger girl behind her a step as they led their group. Though not for long—the girls stuck together of course, but Cassandra drew her sword and took point ahead of them.

“Stay behind me, and stick together,” the Seeker said as she took the lead, heading down the darkened path, Dorian came up close behind them to light their way as they walked—long dimmed torches hung in sconces that lined their path, and the Altus called them to flame. It was greatly appreciated, the path was uneven and often steep, especially when they reached the series of ramps that led them further and further down into the dark—Sera’s grip on the younger girl only tightened, her breath hitching when she made the mistake of looking down and seeing the treacherous drop into the chamber below*

“Inky, you stay real close, watch your step, kay?” Sera gulped, pulling the girl closer so Ellie was secure with Sera’s body between her, and unguarded edge of the ramping.

“You too—this is so not built to code!” Ellie complained as if she was a great authority on the matter.

“I’m sure there’s a suggestion box here somewhere we can file a proper complaint,” Dorian drawled.

It was Marehis who needed to be more mindful of just where she was going—she’d been paying such close attention to the girls, making certain they were safe ahead of her, she did not see the place where the uneven boards underfoot had too much space between them, a space the toe of
her boot slid into instead of finding solid footing, and she let out a startled sound when her hands met only open air-

And then an arm snaked around her waist, a hand gripping her arm to pull her back to safety, feet on the ground, her body secure against another’s.

She pushed away from him, as much as she dared given there was a drop behind her.

“Are you Injured?” Solas asked quietly, his hand still on her arm, as if he were worried she might still step back far enough to be sent plummeting.

She slapped at his hand, “Do not touch me.”

“I apologize.”

“Well- just- keep your hands to yourself. If I fall to my death so be it,” she snapped, rejoining the group. She should be closer to the girls anyway, the other adults had been crowding them though, but she supposed they worried for them as she did. Still! She was their mother! There should be space reserved so she did not have to be so close to the likes of- of Fen Harel!

She was not grateful to him! And he did not smell pleasant In the slightest!

Ugh, the undead truly did not smell pleasant—there were several of the creatures roaming around the different levels they traversed, Cassandra, Thom and the Iron Bull backing her, made short work of them though. And then the scent of sulfur was almost overwhelming when they finally did reach what seemed to be the bottom of the cavern—they’d stepped into a very high layer of the Deep Roads, into Dwarven construction, Sera shrieked, pushing Ellie behind her when a…oh Maker, a demon of Rage almost the height of the Iron Bull rose up out of the ground.

The Qunari seemed to take great offense to the creature’s size, charging the thing before Barrier even swept across their numbers from their host of Mages, but once Madam de Fer cast fearsome ice to freeze the thing solid, his efforts in hacking against the beast sent it crumbling.

“I think…that was what that Spirit lady was so mad about before, so…cool,” Ellie supposed, her giggles trailed after by a snort, as she addressed Vivienne with a smile, “literally,” she said, holding up her hand for a high five the Enchanter bemusedly indulged in.

“Quite,” Vivienne supposed, “I’m pleased it amused you, darling. You’re uninjured? Excellent.”

“We’re really close to the Rift now,” Ellie spoke with certainty, “is everyone alright? All good on potions and things? ‘cause um…it’s really big.”

That…seemed almost understatement, given the great number of shades, Demons of Despair and the entire Revenant the Rift produced.

It was large, a head taller than their Qunari, and Marehis was certain she could beat the thing to death with her bare hands, her outrage was so raw when Ellie had been occupied attempting to manipulate the Rift with her Mark, in an effort to stun their enemies only to be interrupted by a great, ghoulish hand bigger than her body that the Revenant produced with some foul sort of magic to grasp the girl within and whip her through the air from one side of the chamber to slam her against the ground at its feet,

“Ellie!”
A loud, horrified, anger fueled scream tore from Sera’s throat-

And in the next instant, Marehis’s heart thumped panic in her chest as Sera rushed the great thing as it slammed its fists against Ellie’s back, there was a warning building up in Marehis’s throat to tell her child to stay back but then icy magic broke from Sera’s hands, blasting against the Revenant and freezing it solid where it stood, rearing back to strike again.

“Someone bloody break this bastard in half already!” Sera barked the order as she slid on her knees to be at Ellie’s side, “Inky? Shite, shite, shite. Sweets, are you with me?”

“Mm-hmm,” Ellie winced out, rolling gingerly onto her side and Sera supported her, pulling her back against her chest and moving backwards on her knees to scoot them out of the way as the entirety of their Warriors rained down blows on the Revenant, Marehis found herself torn between wishing to beat against the thing herself to defend her girls, and the need to protect them and make certain they were alright—Cassandra was assaulting the monster with enough fervor for both of them, so, she went to their girls, kneeling before them.

“Da’vehnan, oh sweet girl, here,” Marehis’s hands shook as they pulled healing potion from her stores and unstoppered it, guiding the bottle to Ellie’s lips, “drink, carefully,” the girl choked on the potion, coughing up more than she managed to swallow, face scrunching in pain, “Oh honey I know,” Marehis sympathized, oh she hated this, “Solas!”

“I am here,” the man said, dropping down on one knee, “Inquisitor, Ellie—let me help you,” he pled, taking her hand in his and then closing his eyes, dipping deeper into their bond and for a moment it looked like he himself might be in pain as Marehis endeavored to administer potion again, this time Ellie was capable of swallowing, breathing out a sigh of relief as she drained the last drop,

“I want a second in her system, Solas, can you do that?” Marehis asked quietly and the man opened his eyes and nodded, accepting potion from her which he began administering as Marehis turned her attention to, “Sera, da’vehnan, my sweetheart let me look at your poor little hands,” she worried, oh goodness, the injury to them the last time wild magic poured from them had sounded so severe. She took Sera’s hands in hers and peeled back her gloves, Maker, she was surprised the things hadn’t been destroyed in the wake of her magic- oh ouch, she- she’d been meaning to, to take a peek underneath and see how badly her child’s hands were injured but the things were so cold they burned Marehis’s fingers,

“‘m fine Mare, it uh, didn’t hurt me none, see?” Sera asked, holding up her right hand so Marehis could see the flesh of her palm in the space Krem had left ‘palmless’ in the glove on the hand that usually held Ellie’s Marked one. Oh there- there was a rune in the very center of each of her palms, she’d been so focused on getting the other glove off she hadn’t noticed it- had...had the Lieutenant sent her something meant to allow magic pass through? Sera examined the runes herself, eyes widening a bit and then she blushed, tips of her ears reddening. “Inky. You’re boyfriend kind of a genius. A dumb sweet genius—I’ma kiss him, is that cool?”

“Kay, I’m cool as long as he is, but fair warning, it’s a capital E Experience, might end up liking boys too,” Ellie warned. “Big guy down? What about the others?” she asked, looking about to verify their host of enemies were defeated.

“They are all down, Eleanor,” Cassandra assured as she sheathed her sword, “Can you stand?”

Ellie nodded, accepting Cassandra’s hand up, rising to her feet with a quiet groan, leaning against the Nevarran woman momentarily before raising a hand to the Rift and casting against it,
“Looks like it Imekari,” Bull assured her as everyone seemed to be checking in on one another, helping with bandaging or health potion. Madam de Fer even checked on Cole, asking if the Spirit was injured, the boy assuring her he was fine and he could help her with the gash on her forearm. The Qunari crouched before her with his back to the girl, “c’mon boss-girl, I got you.”

He did. Ellie leaned against his back, wrapping her arms around the Qunari’s neck, her legs around his waist and he brought his hands up under her thighs to support her as he rose to his feet, “Just rest yourself, to camp?” he asked.

Ellie let out a little whine and sighed, “No—gotta go yell at a murderous Mayor. Gonna yell at him so much. And punch him. And burn his cabin to the ground.”

“You’re the boss.”

“Arson! Arson! Arson!” Sera cheered as they made their way from the chamber, the adults all looking to one another as they tried to surmise an exit strategy.

They found the path through continued toward an exit opposite their entrance—fresh air wafting in from somewhere ahead, through a tunnel where they crossed paths with a family of nugs. Cassandra just beat Marehis by the barest of margins to the inspiration to tell Ellie of Leliana’s pet nug*. The girl was half-conscious where she rested against the Iron Bull, let out a tired huff of a giggle,

“She has a little portrait of him, she showed me at lunch one day…” Ellie spoke softly, was steadily falling asleep.

“She is exhausted,” Solas said, sparing her the need to address him herself, “Elf root helped a great deal with internal injury, if we can get more water in her system we should administer more health potion when we make camp tonight.”

“If we can,” Cassandra said, “I believe it would be prudent to make camp in the fortress we took back tonight—it is something we should claim for the Inquisition to keep others from reclaiming it and making Crestwood unsafe again, they’ve not the forces to run it themselves.”

“Good thinking,” Thom agreed.

Ellie’s slumber did not last very long, her heart thumped harshly in her chest and she startled awake, clenching her Marked hand as they came upon what looked like the inside of a cave, with a long cavern that fresh air was being drawn in from the outside through, their exit, “Rift. Close. Not too bad, but—and I mean this in the least suicidal way—kill me.”

“Sorry boss-girl, can’t do it, it’s like the one order I can’t follow,” the Iron Bull informed her.

“Traitor!” she declared him.

“S’why they kicked me out of the Qun babe, I’m an insubordinate bastard.”

“If you refuse to kill me you’ll be punished! Where’s Lady Josie? I’m sitting in judgement over you right now, your butt is my throne!”

“Hell yeah it is, my butts an amazing throne, just ask Dorian,” the Qunari wagged his eyebrows to the Tevinter Mage who turned an impressive shade of red, muttering a Tevene curse
under his breath. “What’s my sentence Inquisitor?”

“I demand you carry me the entire rest of the day! Unless you’re injured later or tired and then I’ll carry you! Either way, there’s carrying involved and we’re together because I love you!”

“So it is said, so it shall be!”

“You know if my throne in Skyhold could talk, Lady Josie could save her voice. Though my favorite thing she’s ever said in life was announcing that guy attacked Skyhold’s walls, with a...goat*,” she mimicked her Ambassador’s speech. Solas looked flummoxed at the idea someone had conducted an assault on Skyhold using livestock, he had missed a great deal in his imprisonment she supposed.

As he deserved to. Horrible man. Awful. Despised! She despised him.

And no, the way he stepped between Sera and the Rift that immediately greeted them upon their exit from the cave did nothing to change that. He no longer had the right to earn love for loving her children.

The Iron Bull hung back for the duration of the fight, which was almost like a break, some menial exercise compared to the one they just fought, though he closed his good eye when Ellie held up her hand to seal the Rift, shield it from the Fadelight.

“To the Mayor’s!”

Indeed. The abandoned Mayor’s home. And not the one still standing in Old Crestwood.

Ellie hopped down off of the Iron Bull to look around the cabin, going to the Mayor’s desk where the man had left a letter, apparently of confession, both to flooding his own town with his people trapped in their homes, all those who were sick or suspected to fall ill of the Blight soon enough. An effort to forcibly quarantine them in a permanent way. As well as to a confession of fleeing, just now, to avoid the Inquisition taking him in once they discovered his crimes themselves.

The girl let out a strangled scream of outrage as she slapped the letter back down onto the desk and walked away, pacing the length of the cabin a few times before, “We have to go after him-”

“Inquisitor you are angry now but you are also injured, and exhausted—we all are,” Solas offered up in reasoning.

“Fine!” she snapped, “I’ll go after him myself!”

Bull sighs, “Imekari-”

“Don’t ‘Imekari’ me! Move!” Ellie demanded when the Qunari stood between herself and the door.

“Eleanor-” Cassandra started.

“He killed people Cassandra! His people! Intentionally. He did something he knew would kill them and he- he just- he doesn’t think he deserves to live with the consequences of that! Solas accidentally destroyed the world—accidentally! He was only trying to lock away a bunch of power hungry crazies! And he didn’t run—not once! This asshole knew exactly what he was doing and he’s actively trying to get away with it and he can’t—I won’t let him, I’ll kill him myself!” she
looked up at the Iron Bull, “Now! Move!” she stares him down with so much determination that ultimately just crumbles with her expression and she rests her forehead against the Qunari’s stomach, shoulders shuddering as he rests a hand atop her head. “He can’t get away with this,” she whimpers out, miserably.

“Don’t worry Imekari. We’ll get him.”

“I can get him Ellie, I can bring him in for you,” Cole volunteers, “he thinks he can escape but they follow him—the Spirits, their hurt, they haunt him, I can follow them following him. I can bring him to Skyhold.”

“…really?” she asks, and the Spirit nods eagerly, “kay, thanks Cole—be safe, alright? Don’t let him hurt you. You’re okay to go by yourself?”

“Yes, I will be safe.”

“We’ll send his confession on to Skyhold then, Leliana will have a cell waiting for him. Thank you.”

“You are welcome!” the boy offered in return, and then he looks determined as he vanishes from sight.

The Qunari crouches and with an arm under Ellie’s knees, he swoops her up to hold her against his chest, her head resting on his shoulder as he carried her.

“Is Inky okay?” Sera worried quietly to Solas as they took their leave of the village, heading for the fortress.

“She’ll require treatment when we stop for the night, but she isn’t in mortal peril. She’s exhausted and angry, upset,” Solas accounted, though he cleared his throat, assuring, “I’m certain you’ll cheer her up—you are a good friend. A good sister,” he encouraged. Then, “You are well?”

“Yeah,” Sera said, nodding.

“…was that…you, who cast against the Revenant?” Madam de Fer questioned carefully.

Sera was quiet for a moment mouth opening when Dorian let out a haughty laugh.

“Oh my dear, you must truly be exhausted my darling Madam de Fer,” the Altus interrupted, “’t was I who cast against the Revenant, obviously—however could you not recognize my flawless technique?”

“Yeah,” Sera giggled, “I mean pfft, seriously, me?”

Madam de Fer shook her head, “Perhaps I need medical assistance as well, Maker, I could have sworn…well, I’ll certainly be getting a good nights sleep tonight, you are none of you to disturb me whatsoever,” the Enchanter intoned.

“Wouldn’t dream of it, Viv,” Sera promised, giving Dorian a grateful look and he nodded. Sera linked arms with her Tevinter friend, squeezing his arm as they walked.

Ellie was very much out when they returned to the fortress. Marehis was grateful that the Iron Bull had carried her all that way, but even more grateful when he passed the girl off to her, let her take Ellie into her arms, supporting her weight on her hips, the girl’s head resting against her shoulder as Marehis wrapped one arm up under her bottom and the other rubbing circles on her
back as she walked through the fortress they’d seized, Sera trailing after her as they looked for a suitable place to rest. There was a proper bed in the place it seemed had once belonged to the bandit leader. The sheets were…suspect. So, Cassandra stripped the bed and she and Sera unrolled their collection of bedrolls, between the four of them, there was suitable safe space to lay on, and Marehis let Ellie down carefully. The Human girl roused long enough to strip off the more constricting parts of her armor, essentially she sat in bed in her underthings and downed a full canteen of water, health potion, and then she flopped back and was fast asleep again.

“Poor Inky. Today was a mess,” Sera breathed, taking Ellie’s Marked hand in her own as she sat beside the girl.

Cassandra nodded in agreement. “Sera…did you cast against the Revenant? That was a remarkable amount of control.”

Sera looked about, listening for a moment to ensure they were alone before nodding, “Yeah…thanks.”

“It was a compliment, but I meant it was a remarkable amount of control given your current tentative magical state.”

“Ummmmmmm…” the girl hummed seeming guilty as she worried her lip. Then, “I kind of…’went all the way’ with my magic last night. Inky knows, Cole too, they were with me.”

Cassandra’s mouth worked for a moment before she found, “In the Fade? I…didn’t realize you were leaning so heavily towards making this permanent. I’m not displeased of course, as long as you’re content with the decision?”

“I really am,” Sera said. “I mean I’m nervous as hell for people to find out but…it just…feels right. I…I love my magic. Weird, after being scared of it for so long, but…after everything yesterday, when I lost my connection to magic again I just couldn’t imagine going through that again, wanted with everything to just get it back as quick as possible—that’s why Inky was all ‘I need Solas’s help meditating’ n’ pish, ‘cause he knows how to just pop magic right back awake.”

“So you took Lyrium?” Marehis summized, “Are you feeling any ill effects?”

“Nope! I don’t have a hankering for it or nothin’ though um…Inky thinks that now that I’m all ‘mage-ified’ I’m out of the woods of bein’ able to get addicted to Lyrium. Now it’ll just…do what it’s supposed to. I mean I only got a little bit high off it when I tried it last night, it mostly just went into my magic. I’ve gotten waaay more stoned off of—“ she halted that sentence, eyes wide as she retracted, “prayer. To the Maker. For He is so great n’ pish.”

“And pish,” Cassandra said as if seconding the ending to a prayer, bemused, though she smiled when Sera snorted.

“I’m proud of you, da’len,” Marehis assured, taking hold of Sera’s free hand. “You did so well today. Thank you.”

“Just wish I’d been…dunno, faster. I know I should probably just get it out already, with the others but—“

“We are all responsible for protecting one another, Eleanor’s safety is not your sole responsibility, young lady,” Cassandra intoned. “Your magical status is entirely personal, I pressed because it is something you’ve chosen to be open with me about—it is your business entirely who knows and who doesn’t. I am pleased Dorian aided you. He is privy to your recent developments?”
“Nooooot exactly, but he was there when we was in the Oasis, and he’s bangin’ Bull so I’m sure he knows about Solas trying to magic me up before, and um…I might’ve used a little bitty bit of magic in front of him back in Skyhold, tried to be inconspicuous but uh, he’s basically the shiniest, sharpest knife in the drawer. Doesn’t totally shock me he figured it out.”

“When did you use magic in Skyhold?” Cassandra questioned, worrying, “Were you attacked?”

“No! My Widdle got hurt! Slammed her little thumb in a book,” and at Cassandra and Marehis’s incredulous looks she defended, “it was bruising!”

Cassandra fought a smile she lost to, laughing a bit as she pressed a kiss to Sera’s forehead, “Oh my sweet girl. So, your Dagna knows?”

“Lacey too, I talked to her about it today.”

“Ahh, so, she took it well,” Cassandra said. Very well, according to Cole.

“Uh-huh,” Sera nodded, blushing furiously from the tips of her ears…quite possibly to the tips of her toes.

Marehis felt restless as they settled in for the evening. There had been a bit of regrouping for an effort at dinner, but everyone was so tired they essentially compared what food they had ready to eat in their packs and made a communal pile of fruit and bread and whatever snack food they had on hand and shared. Ellie slept through the somewhat-meal and Cassandra and Marehis did try their best to join her, laying alongside her while Sera went to keep watch with Varric and Thom.

She laid awake for hours it felt like before she sighed and rose up, Cassandra followed in kind, offering quietly,

“I cannot sleep either. Would you care for something warm to drink?”

“Mmm, maybe something stronger than tea?” Marehis suggested.

“We’ll see what we can find, I’m certain Varric has something that will suit you,” Cassandra supposed, resting her hand on Ellie’s forehead momentarily, checking the girl over before they left the room in search of something to drink.

Varric did in fact offer up his bourbon, Sera asking Marehis to save her some for when she got off watch duty…she supposed it would be alright, the girl was more than of drinking age and while she did have potion for her anxiety attacks, it was nothing she took regularly. Cassandra couldn’t imbibe but she did brew up some tea, the smell of chamomile was pleasant and Marehis was inclined to share a cup with the Seeker who eyed the bourbon bottle sitting on the table they seated themselves at. Cassandra took a sip of tea before looking from the bottle to Marehis and saying,

“Before you’re in a state of less-than-perfectly-clear thinking…I would like to propose something.”

“Is it something you think I’d be more inclined to say ‘yes’ to, once I’m drinking?” Marehis wondered.

“…yes, but I realize that would be rather unfair of me, and I would not appreciate such a manipulation were roles reversed, so, before even your tea laxes you…” Cassandra cleared her
throat. “I have seen signs of a Dragon’s presence, here in Crestwood.”

Oh! “Goodness. Are we safe here?”

“Certainly,” Cassandra assured, “it is further south of here, we are likely not even within the area it considers its territory. Her, territory, if I’m not mistaken.”

“You would know, I suppose. You are a Pentaghast after all,” Marehis offered.

Cassandra nodded. “Yes. I am. And loath as I am to embrace all the Pentaghast name implies…” she cleared her throat once more, and met Marehis’s gaze before she spoke to what was pressing her,

“I would like to take our daughters dragon hunting.”

Chapter End Notes

*I HAVE NEVER MURDERED MY CHILDREN, but I have read pages of in-game dialog, combing through for specific convos I wanted to quote without playing through the whole ass game again waiting to hear. If you let the Chargers die, there's a companion conversation that occurs as you're out and about with Cole and the Iron Bull, where Cole tries to assure Bull that Krem specifically didn't hate him, in the end. He quotes Bull's thoughts, because he thinks Krem must have hated him and been thinking about how he should have expected Bull to betray them like this, and Cole reveals that no. Krem was proud, and his dying thought was "Horns pointing up." so THAT destroyed my actual heart and I had to share the sadness.

*This be a blatant shoutout to Brooklyn Nine-Nine, the line belongs entirely to them, it's an iconic Rosa Diaz line that kills me every time I hear it!

*I swear TO GOD I have walked by the dead body on the Storm Coast that has the key you need to finish getting through the Red Templar's set up and I get to the door so many times, and I'm always like "where the hell is the key?!" deadass can't find it until I google the mission and I'm like "duh, it's literally right in there, it's the first thing you can loot when you come into this mission area, dummy." disrespect the personal space of corpses in video games, kiddos! They might have important keys on them!

*The Circle of Carastes was Dorian's first Circle, after he got kicked out for getting too rough in a duel with another student, he went from Circle to Circle. I mentioned his schooling in a previous chapter, but my resources for this fic just got an update, and they've given his Circle a name! So I threw it in!

'*stumbling steps where the wall used to be' this is a line of dialog that Cole says randomly when you're walking around with Cole and Dorian, and either Inquisitor or the Iron Bull is romancing him. It's a fav so I had to throw it in.

*Widdle is canon the nickname Sera gives Dagna--if you don't romance Sera, she always gets together with Dagna!

*Saar-qamek is Qunari poison that induces madness, and I'm 100% convinced that
they induce madness in all deserters, it isn't that living outside of the Qun makes Qunari's insane, it's the Qun being petty and bad at breakups.

*don't fight me on this, there are 56 steps on the staircases up to Skyhold Castle if you're coming at it from the prisons, you don't wanna know how I know (I counted, I am that bitch)*

'Dalish being in '', Solas doesn't consider himself Dalish because he's Elvehnan, he comes from before there were 'Dalish', and I've tried to be careful in this fic with having Solas not refer to himself as Dalish, in fact his first reference to the Dalish language is calling it 'Elvish' when he asks Ellie if she speaks it, because to him, it is, it's the Elvehnan's language.

*the ramps that lead down in the cave you fight the lake Rift in? I've fallen down the space in the middle, twice. Died the second playthrough it happened in because I wasn't as leveled up, but the first playthrough I fell in? I survived and the MOMENT my character hit the ground the huge-ass Rage demon you fight down there? It comes POPPING up out of the ground, I *screamed*, it was a time and a half.

*there is a family of nugs down in this chamber you pass on your way out and if you have Cassandra in your party she talks about Leliana's pet nug. If you kill the nugs, you earn disapproval from Sera. And me, because why would you kill that nice nug family, that's just rude.

*we discovered this man attacking. The building. With a...goat' is also one of voice actress Allegra Clark's favorite lines (she says in a fan interview at a Con I've seen floating around), it's one of the actual best 'Sit in Judgement' scenes.
Here Lies the Abyss: Return to Skyhold

Chapter Summary

This is another double-chapter update! We cover the last half of our heroes time in Crestwood. Dragons are slain, the Order is left in ruin, and that's before returning to Skyhold where Josie is having some loyalty mission drama, matchmaking plots are hatched and breakfast is served! Here Lies the Abyss, Promise of Destruction, An Ideal Romance, Happier Times, Of Somewhat Fallen Fortune, all coming at you! Enjoy! Next stop, Val Royeaux!

Disclaimers: all mission dialog pulled from Dragon Age Inquisition 100% belongs to Bioware and the writers and everyone that owns the rights and whatnot to DA:I. Implied sexual situations, but no heavy smut!

WARNING: Everyone is safe, but there is some delving into suicidal thoughts and reaction to that in this chapter, zero attempts are made, but there is discussion about the topic that's respectful and non-graphic/violent but I just wanted to be safe in case anyone just full-stop can't touch on the subject. I tried to set it up so it can be read cohesively while skipping those parts, and they're marked, beginning and end with numbered dashes —

Ex:
Everything's okay
1—1 (heavy stuff about to start)
SKIP
1—1 (heavy stuff over!)
Good to go!

Chapter Notes

I'm back! I'M ALIVE! Hi! Welcome! If you've read this far/still reading along with updates—I love you! <3 <-- that's my entire heart and it's all yours! I'm back with not one, but TWO chapters and I hope it was worth the wait!

IF YOU NEED TO SKIP (cont): I couldn't fit everything in the Chapter Summary. There are 3 places you can skip in the opening scene (until the first line break) and then after that, there's only 1 more in Ellie's Point of View a few scenes later (so 4 total). All scenes are marked with bolded and numbered — in the left hand margin where they begin and end. so 1—1 marks the beginning and end of the first, 2—2 the beginning and end of the second, and then 3—3 and 4—4 of course. I genuinely promise everything's a-okay and there's nothing graphic but if you have zero tolerance for touching on the subject of suicidal thoughts, it's marked off and can be read without it! I think! This bitch ain't beta'd so we're relying solely on the terrible organ I try to pass off as a functioning brain!

ALSO: The literal sweetest reader, RockingAndRolling has started writing their own DA:I fic incorporating a few aspects from To Seek the Truth that they enjoyed! RockingAndRolling has a chapter up so far of a fic titled: No Place Like Home. I'm
including the summary here, if ya'll are interested go show them some love!

"Jane Perkins did not live a normal life on Earth. She bounced around from house to
house, passed off between relatives like she was a toy to be shared between children.
So she never really knew what 'home' was. But she knew for a fact that home was not
this weird place with something called the Breach hanging in the sky. With a
mysterious yellow mark with no known connection to the Conclave on her right palm,
she'll have to figure out how to get home before she dies- either by slipping on her face
or by being torn apart by demons. That is, if she wants to go home."

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It was late when Cassandra finally found slumber, the day had been long to say the least,
tiring, droves of zombies, demon hordes, and back to back Rifts in the Fade? The stuff that makes
long nights of sleep, by the time she was horizontal, she was equally comatose.

Solas’s, “Seeker?” did not even stir her.

But Eleanor's, “Mami?” Comatose or not, the cry of ‘Fire!’ or scream of a Dragon could not
have roused Cassandra with such immediacy. She found herself haphazardly launching herself
forward in the bed she’d claimed in their recently acquired fortress, nearly colliding with the girl
already climbing into bed with her,

“Eleanor?” Cassandra asked softly, “Child what are you doing out of bed? You’re injured-" Maker, the girl was crying Cassandra realized as she pulled her in, holding her close to her chest. She…she was wearing Solas’s vest. She had gone to bed in her underthings, but her sleep clothes
had been in her pack, hadn’t they? Just what happened? “Did you have a nightmare sweet girl?”
Eleanor shook her head ‘no’. Oh, Solas was there, looking rather hapless, Maker he was ashen
actually, “Did something happen?”

Solas cleared his throat, “Eleanor, you will explain, yes?” the girl nodded, sniffling.
“Marehis is keeping watch of the fortress, I think I should let her know where you are.”

“Th-thanks, I’m sorry.” Ellie whimpered out.

“Do not apologize da’vehnah.” Solas breathed. “Speak with your mother. If you’ve need,
just…I am here, whatever comfort that may be. As are all of your friends.”

“Eleanor?” Cassandra asked once the man left them.

“I um…I woke up and n-no one was there and I um-“ the girl hyperventilated momentarily,
“I was having all these horrible th-thoughts-“ she shivered, pressing herself further still against the
woman as if for warmth, omitting whatever she'd intended to speak of and saying, "we can go back
to sleep, I’m sorry I w-woke-“

“Solas said to talk to me, you should, if you've need,” Cassandra gently pressed, rubbing the
girl’s back. She would hear her out before they endeavored sleep.

1 — 1

“What thoughts were concerning you sweet girl?”

“I um…I k-kind of,” she sniffled, pressing her face against Cassandra’s shoulder as she said,
“I don’t know! I just woke up and I was alone for the first time in forever, no mamis or Sera or anyone, C-Cole’s hunting down M-Mayor Dedrick, and I just realized…I don’t know my brain just immediately said…I- I could- there’s no one to stop me if I-“ she struggled for her words, and then, very quietly, like the idea had quite literally been put to bed and she did not wish to wake it, "if I put an end to things. That things like my Mark and Rifts and Corypheus, losing people I love, would be over for me. And that didn't seem like such a bad idea, I- I mean I even started thinking of h-how-" she word squeaked out over a sob and she did not seek to finish her sentence.

Sleep was now the furthest thing from her mind. “Alright,” Cassandra said softly, taking a deep breath as she stroked the girl’s hair, holding her more tightly, oh thank everything, thank the Maker she’d gone to someone, “Alright, thank you, Eleanor. Do you want to talk about it?”

“I’m scared mami, I’ve never- I mean I’ve felt so embarrassed, ashamed, or in pain that I've wanted to die, but I’ve never-“ she whimpered. “I’ve never felt like I’d ever act on it. And then tonight, when I realized no one could stop me, I had the thought that if I wanted to, I could. I don’t want to die mami, I don’t know why I would-” a sob tore from her throat, “I’m scared!”

“Oh my sweet girl, love of my heart shhh,” Cassandra held her as tightly as she dared, assuring, “You’re safe, I am here, and I am proud of you for coming to me. This is…well, depression is a terrible thing, but this is one of the worst symptoms…Eleanor sometimes your mind is not entirely your own. Not unlike possession, unfortunately.”

Eleanor sniffled, “Wh-what do you mean?”

“You know with certainty that you, in your heart, truly don’t want to die?” Eleanor nodded, “When you have an asthma attack, it is not you causing yourself to lose breath—it is your disease. When you have thoughts that don’t feel genuine to yourself? It is your mind’s illness. You did not perceive yourself to be alone and capable of committing suicide. Your mind, currently battling sickness, found you alone and its disease took the advantage. If an enemy found themselves capable of breaking into our fortress, slipping past those keeping watch, found you wholly alone, vulnerable, it would be the ultimate time to strike, they would not be your enemy if they didn’t take the opportunity presented to them. Unfortunately you're battling an internal enemy we cannot simply be rid of. And believe me sweet girl, if I could wring depressions neck? Slay your anxieties? I certainly would.”

“Thanks mami,” the girl sighed, “I wish I could scoop my brain out and dunno, put it in Elf Root tonic until it’s all healed up, slap it back in my head.”

Cassandra laughed softly, “That would ideal,” she offered the gentle jest, “perhaps you could try washing your hair with Elf root?”

“I do!” Eleanor chirped, sounding a bit more like herself, smiling slightly, “Vivienne does hair masks with me, Elf Root and Crystal Grace literally heals damaged hair, it makes it so light and bouncy and really helps it grow—she has to trim her hair immediately after,” Eleanor whispered then, as if it was a secret that required the upmost confidence, “she has the cutest little curls!”

There was a soft knock on the door…though part way through the knocking process, the door was essentially kicked open. Marehis and Sera respectively.

“Da’vehnann?”

“Where’s Inky?!” Sera demanded to know, and then, “Ahh! Sweets! C’mere!” she instructed though she was the one rushing to the bed, nearly winding Cassandra as she collided with her and
Eleanor before wrapping her arms all the way around the younger girl, rocking as she squeezed her tightly, “I love you, I love you, I love you! Mwah!” she pressed a kiss to her hair. “You’re the best, you’re amazing! Um,” Sera gasped, “I’ll be right back!” she…was gone just as quickly as she arrived, it was jarring to say the least.

Marehis was much gentler in joining them, seating herself on the edge of the bed, brushing Eleanor’s hair back from her face, “Oh ma da'len,” she breathed a sigh as she held her close, “What can I do?”

“Hugging is helping,” Ellie promised, “Um…I left everything in the room I woke up in, I just kind of…Solas told you everything?” the woman nodded. “I started thinking like that and…I dunno, I was scared I was really going to do something so I just bolted. Solas found me,” she blushed, fidgeting with the hem of the vest that fell almost to her knees.

“You truly did leave everything in your room sweet girl, I was wondering at your most recent fashion statement,” Marehis said humorously, smoothing the woolen fabric on Eleanor’s shoulder.

“I’m sorry um…that you have to talk to him all the time, because of me. I know it has to hurt you and I’m so so-“

“Da’vehnun, shush, any discomfort in this situation is Solas’s fault. Do not worry yourself,” Marehis said, “You were saying you left everything in your room, is there something you need?”

“Potion? My whole body is out to get me tonight, my brain, my back.”

“Your potions and a snack,” Marehis offered a bit of rhyme, nodding, “coming right up—it might cheer you and your potion will process more thoroughly. I have your potions on me sweet girl.”

“There are chocolate covered raspberries in my pack,” Cassandra said. The girl ate nutritiously enough she supposed it didn’t hurt to indulge in a sugary midnight snack. She leaned over the edge of her bed and pulled her pack up and dug out the little drawstring bag, of which made Eleanor giggly on sight, which was admittedly wonderful. Eleanor had taken the little tag attached to one of the drawstrings between her fingers,

“Oooohhh, they’re from papi! That’s sweet,” she said, “literally.”

“Indeed,” Cassandra agreed. The man was ridiculous. Oh she missed him…the chocolate did admittedly help, and it would cheer the man to hear Eleanor enjoyed the treat, that it made her smile after such a trying day.

…of course, hearing such a thing might send Thedas into a sudden lack of chocolate covered fruit that had only recently become popular, he might bankrupt himself showering the girl with it if it pleased her so much.

Sera was breathless when she returned, Maker, the girl had run all the way to where she’d left her pack in the room Eleanor had been sleeping in, and back, bearing…one of her birthday presents.

“You! Sit and friggin listen!” Sera demanded, pointing at Eleanor before she rushed to the bed again, twisting the lid off of the glass jar she had in hand, her gift from Cole. She pulled out one of the many slips of paper and opened it up, “Kay…you always say the funniest things!”

Eleanor giggled, “Sera, those are about you.”
“Well it’s true of you too, Inky! You’re always saying friggin’ hilarious shite!” Sera argued, tossing the little note aside before fishing out another, “And Lacey loves how your-“ Sera’s ears went bright red, cheeks pinking as she quickly refolded the note. “That- um. Nope. Kremmy-boy’ll probably like it-“

“Sera!” Eleanor shrieked.

“What! I’m just saying!” Sera defended, “Oh! You’re a true friend—you’re like, the truthiest friend!”

“I believe Cole means you’re genuinely a friend,” Marehis said, amused.

“Well freaking that applies to Inky too!” Sera reasoned, moving right on to the next, “And you’re a good big sister!”

“I’m younger than you,” Eleanor smiled, rolling her eyes playfully.

“Well friggin’,” Sera sniffled, chin quivering a bit as she teared up, throwing her arms around Eleanor who hugged her back, “I’m only a good big sister because I got a good little sister so- so I can’t be that without you!” she wailed against the girl’s shoulder.

“…and I would hope when the time comes, that you would be an excellent elder sibling,” Cassandra spoke up, running a hand through Eleanor’s hair. “I believe Sera’s sentiment is sound. You must remind yourself of the things you’ve to live for, reinforce those things to your mind when it tries to convince you should end things.”

“Thanks Sera,” Eleanor said softly against the Elf girl’s hair, ”I’m sorry-“

“Oi! No apologizing, just…don’t think like that, if you can help it Inky. I mean shite,” she backtracked, “I know you can’t help it, you’re brain sicky. But just…if you can, yeah, try to remember the good stuff. Because you’ve got good stuff Inky, you do. And I know all this shite with the holes in the sky and old Elf bullshit, and Cory-face is scary and hard but it…it won’t be forever. We’ll handle it, get through it, and you’ll still have all the good stuff from it left over! Cause you’ll have all of us! And you’ll be able to live however you want! You have ways out other than…other than that! You’ve got all kinds of people who love and support you, who would do whatever you needed to be okay, just…don’t let yourself think you’re trapped. Okay?”


Sera would not be removed from the girl’s side for the rest of the evening, Cassandra certainly didn’t mind sharing her bed with them, Marehis as well. Potion seemed to relieve Eleanor’s aches, further still when, well, Cassandra felt indulgent, wanted with everything to remove every form of suffering from this girl. While she could not strangle an illness, she could soothe physical ache—it was usually something Pentaghasts did after Dragon slaying, but Eleanor had been injured more than Cassandra believed she would be when they took on the…Northern Hunter. Cassandra was certain from the signs she’d seen as they trekked across the countryside—Cassandra uncorked a vial of Elf Root tonic and poured it into her hands, not too much that it would be a horrible mess. Just enough so she could massage the stuff into Eleanor’s back, while the girl lay against Sera, Solas’s vest pulled up to allow the woman direct contact, oh this poor thing. Cassandra was relieved to see the gradient of bruising up and down Eleanor’s back begin fading, and it truly did seem to lax the girl—she fell asleep in Sera’s hold.

“Da’vehnan?” Marehis whispered, brushing Sera’s hair back, “You should get some rest.”
“I’m twenty and two days,” was what the girl said in response, staring into space.

“You are,” Cassandra supposed as she finished cleaning excess potion from her hands with a rag, resting her hand on Sera’s shoulder, the girl seemed troubled by the matter.

“Lady had this cousin or something that died when I was littler. Like ten, eleven or something. He killed himself.”

“Oh da’len,” Marehis offered breathlessly, “I’m sorry. Were you close?”

Sera shook her head, “Didn’t know the guy. But uh, that’s when I figured out, yeah, you can do that,” she sniffled a bit. “I um…I decided if I couldn’t get out from under Lady alive, I could at least do that dead. So I picked a number, a deadline,” she snorted, “sorry. Bad pun,” she cleared her throat, “I picked twenty. Today I’m twenty and two days.”

“And we’re certainly glad of it,” Cassandra breathed, “sweet girl, if you need to talk—“

“I’m fine—I wasn’t brainy sick, not like that anyway, it was just…an exit strategy out of her House if I couldn’t find another way, it’s not something I’ve ever considered since. I just…I wanna make sure Inky gets here. Gets to the point where she looks back and says ‘wow I’m still here’ and feels good about it. That’s all I’m trying to say. We gotta do our best to make sure that happens for her. Starting with kicking Corypheus’s big Darkspawn ass.”

“Agreed,” Marehis said, pressing a kiss to Sera’s temple.

“Sera,” Cassandra swallowed, “I understand your situation was different, but if you do ever find yourself considering such an exit strategy again, know you can come to me and I will always help you.”

“Myself as well, da’vehnvan.”

Sera wiped at her eyes a bit, “Blah, I was just…my birthday coming up, it just sort of hit me how different everything is from how I was scared it’d be, so it’s been on my mind. Scares me that Inky feels the bad things I used to.”

It…and this was not a word she commonly used in reference to herself…but it frightened Cassandra, likewise. It was something she was familiar with. In her youth, the tender days after she lost Antony, she wished to die in the same way a child wishes to live next door to their dearest friend. All of the people she loved, were with the Maker, so that is where she wished to be. And then as she grew older, struggled with the cycle of depression, while she’d never truly in her heart of hearts wished to die, she certainly had felt like it. She understood what Eleanor was experiencing, but that was what was so frightening—Eleanor was strong, but she was so young, and more than that she was much softer and more tender hearted than Cassandra had been at her age, and the Seeker had truly struggled.

So, she held her girls a bit more tightly, thankful to the Maker she could do so, and fell back to sleep.

1——1

Cassandra woke to interesting chaos unfolding in the courtyard. Their people had arrived, Inquisition scouts and soldiers coming to secure and hold this fortress for them, a great crowd of their members scurrying around setting up tents and tables and cots all under the direct supervision of the Herald of Andraste, Inquisitor Eleanor, clad in Solas’s vest secured closed with Cassandra’s missing belt, staff on her back, hair wild as she cheerily offered directions and helped heft whatever
she could. Well, more so, she’d go to pick something up and Varric, Bull, and Rainier, even Dorian, ran around her beating her to the task and carrying whatever crate or bundle of bedding or tenting she’d been reaching for wherever she pointed. And Sera was trailing after her closer than the girl’s own shadow.

“Sandra!” Sera greeted as she heard the Seeker approach.

“Buenos dias mami!” Eleanor offered as the girls turned to face her.

“Good morning,” Cassandra returned warmly, “is there anything I can be of assistance with?”

“I think we’re just about good here,” Eleanor said, “everyone’s just getting in and setting up. Mami and Vivienne are working on breakfast, and Solas is checking on Cole. Hawke says hi!” she offered up at little slip of parchment for Cassandra’s examination, ahh, a confirmation of he and Stroud’s location. “We’ll head his way after breakfast!”

“I trust you’ll be armored for this meeting?” Cassandra saw fit to tease.

“What? I can make it work,” Eleanor defended, “Dorian says it’s ‘an entire look’.” Well, she supposed the vest did look something like a dress on the girl.

“It’s wasted on Solas honestly,” Dorian said as he rejoined them, “He wears it, and looks like a homeless wilderness vagabond.”

“Guy looks like that without it,” Bull rumbled out with a shrug.

“Some boots with an appropriate heel, matching handbag?” Dorian continued, “Our Lady Herald could walk the streets of Orlais setting the latest trend. Though admittedly olive is more a fall color.”

“I fall all the time, so I’m set!” Eleanor giggled.

“Imekari,” the Iron Bull groaned at the jest even as he grinned, shaking his head as he pulled Eleanor to his side, her head resting against his ribcage, the act sending the girl smiling as she endeavored to wrap her arms around his waist and hug him tightly, grunting with the effort.

“Inquisitor?” a familiar voice asked, as if unsure she should be interrupting.

Eleanor let out a little gasp, “Charter!”

The Elf woman looked surprised, “You remember me?” Cassandra supposed Eleanor’s initial interrogation in Haven was memorable enough for the girl to recognize all her then-captors who named themselves.

Apparently what was so memorable was, “I’d never forget a fellow redhead!” Eleanor assured, “What can I do for you?”

There was a scout, code named Butcher, missing. He’d yet to report in and Charter was rightly concerned—if Eleanor and her party wouldn’t mind keeping an eye out for him when they went out into Crestwood today, it would certainly be appreciated.

“Of course,” Eleanor promised, “I’ll keep you updated. Thanks so much for looking out for him.”
Sera didn’t seem quite so grateful. She linked arms with Cassandra as she followed after Eleanor and the Iron Bull, Dorian to breakfast, and let out a quiet, annoyed huff. “Need a friggin’ sign or something—no bothering Inky before breakfast. She’s gonna worry about that Butcher guy all day!”

Perhaps not all day. It was on their journey to Stroud’s hideaway that they were assaulted by Venatori forces and found their missing Scout’s body.

Eleanor knelt at his side, head bowed for a moment of silence her party respected before she said, “We’ll get word back to Charter and send someone for his body,” Cassandra thought for a moment the girl was holding the dead man’s hand as some form of post-mortum comfort, but she removed a bit of parchment clutched in it, “I swear to the Maker, if one more person- ugh!” she shot to her feet, stomping her foot in frustration before she whirled around to look over her allies. “Everyone in this party with a secret identity has been exposed already, right? Because I’m like, up to here,” she thrust her Marked hand high overhead, jumped to raise it further, “with all this double agent, betrayal bullshit.”

“You alright there Ellie-girl?” Thom asked gently.

“If that’s even my real name!” the girl lamented, “Who knows at this point!” she sighed, “We’ll need to get this to Leliana right away. Venatori tracked Butcher down because they had an inside connection he was pretty sure. He lost them but they found him. Because someone! Is! A jerk! If it’s Charter she loses her redhead status! Dying her hair! And prison or something I don’t know.”

“Charter seemed genuine in her concern,” Cassandra offered, it hadn’t seemed like the woman was up to manipulations in bringing the issue up to Eleanor, in fact it hadn’t seemed like something the woman did lightly. “I do not believe her asking you to look for the man was a way of evading suspicion.” Charter was craftier than that…if she’d done this, Butcher would have died none the wiser.

“Oh that is a relief,” Dorian said, “it would be a shame to lose such gloriously natural red locks to dye—I say that is the harshest punishment I believe you’ve come up with for a traitor in our midst.”

“Um I banished Thom for like four days and then I didn’t talk to him for like, I dunno, a week-“

“Tumbles, you talked to the guy every day once he was back in our camp,” Varric rolled his eyes, “You still suck at the silent treatment.”

“You suck at the silent treatment!” Eleanor eloquently rebutted. “And Solas totally would’ve gotten the hair dye punishment if he had any hair to dye.”

“Very good,” Vivienne approved.

Eleanor pouted a bit, “Is it weird I’m kind of sad it likely isn’t Charter responsible—just ‘cause that means she’ll be sad her friend is dead?”

“Oh my dear girl, do not fret,” Vivienne wrapped an arm around Eleanor’s shoulders, “Leliana will find the culprit and Butcher will be avenged.”

“Are you safe, mami?” Eleanor questioned Marehis, “Leliana’s not going to send everyone running again?”
Marehis looked over the parchment Eleanor found on Butcher’s body herself, “…no da’vehnan. My position is secure—he suspected someone in his inner circle, our network is large enough now there are several branches, each of them isolated from one another, but Charter herself should be careful. Leliana will have few suspects and even fewer to interrogate.”

“Good,” Eleanor nodded, pressing the palms of her hands against her eyes momentarily as she took a deep breath she steadily blew out. “Okay. Leliana will handle it, and it’ll be fine,” she dropped her hands and offered up a look of determination, “Let’s go meet Hawke and his friend.”

Considering Varric was Hawke’s best friend, that did not instill much confidence in Cassandra, the man’s sense in friendship.

Of course…it would seem he’d recently made another friend who…might tip the balance in favor of his sensibilities. She certainly had Cassandra’s favor.

“Hiya Gare!” Eleanor waved to the man as they approached the cave entrance.

“Half-pint, you made it!” Garrett Hawke greeted warmly, arms open wide before he took up the girl in a bracing hug. “How’s it goin’ kid? Eating all your vegetables?”

“Mm-hmm,” Eleanor offered, a bit strained like she hadn’t quite enough air, “Goin’ kind of ‘ouch’ right now though, you’re squishing me.”

“Put’er down, dingus,” Varric snapped, ”kid got whipped around all to hell yesterday—fucking Revenant.”

“Shit!” Hawke’s eyes widened at that as he some how set Eleanor down on her feet with equal measures of care and clumsiness, “Oh hell, honey how many toes am I holding up?” he asked as he splayed his fingers before her. Toes?

“None…” she said with some uncertainty as she took hold of one of his hands and carefully examined his thumbs, “…yeah, none.”

“Does my thumb looks like a toe?” Hawke wondered with some measure of concern.

“Just the one,” Varric assured him. “s’cute.”

Hawke grinned, “Thanks babe,” then to Eleanor, “Alright, holy hell kid, I’m glad you could make it—sorry you had such a rough time getting here. If we could’ve come to you, I promise we would’ve, but the Wardens are pretty antsy to get their hands on Stroud.”

Eleanor nodded, “We ran into some Wardens looking for him on our way into Crestwood, but it sounded like they were moving on to look for him someplace else.”

“Well, you ready to beat them to the punch?” Hawke asked.

“Let’s do it!” Eleanor readily agreed.

“Allright, little dark in here, stay close and watch your step,” Hawke advised, taking Eleanor’s hand in his own, arms swinging a bit as the duo entered the cave.

“What the hell? Am I chopped liver?” Varric wondered. “I call your toe-thumb cute and I don’t get so much as a hello? You’re just walking off hand in hand with your shiny new best friend?”
“Baby girl can’t help her hand’s shiny, she got fucked over by an ancient Darkspawn of old,” Hawke defended.

“Oh quit complaining, I’ll hold your hand, Dwarf,” Rainier said, stepping up and true to his word, holding Varric’s hand, much to the Dwarf’s chagrin. Though he kept the man’s hand out of sheer stubbornness as they entered the cave.

Personal differences aside…Cassandra was heartened to see Eleanor had a friend in Hawke. The man certainly took his responsibility seriously it seemed—he’d given Eleanor the offer to write him whenever she needed, to vent or for guidance, and Cassandra hadn’t pried…much, but the girl had offered up his letters to her of her own accord, and the man was always kind, thoughtful in his letters, giving her advice and sympathy. It was no small thing, the responsibilities Hawke held in Kirkwall, not wholly unlike Eleanor’s with the Inquisition, and overall she seemed to benefit from his advice.

And his quick thinking, Maker!

There was a makeshift wall ahead with markings from the Banner of the Blind Men painted across it…slavers. Comforting. Of course it’d already been cleared out. But that did not mean it was wholly safe—Eleanor and Hawke were ahead of the others, Hawke pushed the door open wide and led the girl in, the pair of them looking about like this Stroud wasn’t immediately in sight.

Because he was apparently lying in wait, so when the door opened it concealed him from those walking into the room. He walked out from behind the door, sword already drawn and pointed directly at-

“Eleanor!” Cassandra called out in firm warning.

Eleanor turned about as Hawke whipped around, putting himself between girl and blade and shouting, “Hey! Hey watch it! It’s just us, I fucking told you she’s just a kid, put that away, Maker!”

“I apologize,” this Warden said, sheathing his sword. “My name is Stroud and I am at your service, Inquisitor.”

“I’m always down for making new friends,” Eleanor offered breezily as if the man hadn’t just had a weapon leveled at her throat a moment ago, “you’ll be my new best friend if you can explain what the heck is going on with the Wardens and Corypheus.”

The man sighed a bit, “Hawke has informed you of his dealings with Corypheus?” he checked, and Eleanor nodded. “When Hawke laid the man slain, Weisshaupt was happy to put the matter to rest. But Archdemons, they can survive wounds that seem fatal, and I feared Corypheus might possess the same power. My investigation uncovered clues but no proof. Then, not long after, every Warden in Orlais began to hear the Calling.”

Oh. Oh Maker help them all.

Oh Maker! She must write Leliana at once! Neria!

Hawke looked as aghast at the notion as Cassandra felt, Stroud must have been tight lipped about that facet of this dilemma, “Maker, why didn’t you tell me?” the man breathed.

“It was a Grey Warden matter. I was bound by an oath of secrecy,” Stroud was remorseful to explain.
“Gosh, I’m sorry,” Eleanor offered with breathless sympathy, reaching out to rest a hand on Warden’s forearm. Then, “The Calling is um…what is it, exactly?”

“It en’t a disease or nothing is it?” Sera asked Cassandra quietly, “I’ll be friggin’ pissed if he gets Calling pish in Inky’s asthma.”

“It is nothing contagious,” Cassandra whispered against the girl’s ear, putting an arm around her shoulder, the Elf girl humming a bit, contentedly as she leaned into the Seeker’s hold and listened to the Warden speak.

“The Calling tells a Warden that the Blight will claim soon claim them. Starts with dreams. Then come whispers in their head. The Warden says their farewells and goes to the Deep Roads to meet their death in combat.”

Hawke paled, “And every Grey Warden in Orlais is hearing that right now? They think they’re dying?”

“Yes,” Stroud confirmed, “Likely because of Corypheus. If the Wardens fall, who will stand against the next Blight? It is our greatest fear.”

“Oh my gosh,” Eleanor whispered.

“So Corypheus isn’t controlling them,” Hawke spat. “He’s bluffing with this Calling and they’re falling for it.”

“Is…is the Calling they’re hearing real?” Eleanor asked, “Or is he just mimicking it somehow?”

“I know not,” Stroud seemed regretful to inform her. “Even as a Senior Warden, I had heard only the vaguest whispers of Corypheus. The Wardens believe it to be real, and they will act accordingly. That is all we know for certain.”

Eleanor’s brow furrowed a bit as she gently squeezed the man’s arm, “So…are you hearing it too?” and then she gasped, her other hand grasping at Hawke’s elbow, “Bethany! Oh my gosh, your sister—she’s a Warden right?”

“She hasn’t made mention of any of this, and I’ve made arrangements for her…she’s someplace safe, hopefully out of range of this mess,” Hawke assured.

Eleanor breathed a sigh of relief, looking to Stroud who nodded. “Sadly, yes,” he cleared his throat, “but do not let it trouble you. What matters is uncovering what Corypheus has done and end it. This cannot stand.”

“How is he even doing this?” Eleanor asked.

“He is a Magister as well as Darkspawn—and he speaks with the voice of the Blight. That lets him affect the minds of Wardens as we are tied to the Blight ourselves. It must be how he created the false calling.”

“So…the Wardens disappearing—they’re just going underground?” Eleanor wondered.

“We are the only ones who can slay Archdemons. Without us, the next Blight will consume the world. Warden-Commander Clarel spoke of a Blood Magic ritual to prevent any future Blights before we all perish.”

Apparently. “When I protested his plan as madness my comrades turned on me. Grey Wardens will gather in the Western Approach, there is an ancient Tevinter Ritual Tower. Wardens are meeting there and so must we, to find the answers we’re looking for and see just what Corypheus is trying to gain from all of this.”

Eleanor took a deep breath and nodded. “Alright. Of course. We’ll go, and we’ll get to the bottom of this. Is this thing like ‘we need to start running now to make it there in time’? Or is this an invite only shindig we’ve got a little time to go ballgown shopping for?”

"You needn't trouble yourself with a ballgown my Lady but yes, we've time. Their machinations require the moon be in some such state, there's a set date."

"Cool! There's a few more things to do here. Get us the details as you can, and meet us in Skyhold. You'll be safe there, and we can go to the Western Approach together! Is there anything we can do for you now?"

Stroud shook his head. “I should move—thank you, Inquisitor, for coming to meet with me. Maker watch over your efforts here.”

“Thank you, what you’ve done is very brave. Be safe,” Eleanor wished him, clearly uncomfortable with the man going off all on his own in such a state. The Calling. Maker. “You too Hawke—you’re going with him?”

“I’ll have his back,” Hawke assured, pulling Eleanor in for gentle hug, “you be careful out there honey. Keep in touch?”

“I will,” Eleanor promised, offering a small wave good-bye as the man nodded to Varric in farewell and then chased after Stroud.

It took all of a beat for Eleanor to round on her party, Rainier in particular, and launch herself at the mercenary, hugging him fiercely.

"So like, I'm always happy you're you, because that's amazing, but I'm extra relieved you're not really a Warden," Eleanor informed him, the man's eyes widening in a bit of shock as he blushed a bit, clearing his throat as he rested a hand on the crown of her head.

"I erm, I'm glad as well, Ellie-girl."

Though the girl did give him a bit of a playful swat to the chest and a shove when she pulled away from him, "If you had let me keep believing you were a Warden and I was worrying about you over this nonsense I'd kick your ass when I found out the truth! So that's for being almost an entire jerk!" she explained, somehow the reprimand relaxed him, like at the very least he could be glad he'd avoided letting his lie stand further still.

"I'd've deserved a good ass kicking if that were the case," Thom readily agreed, smiling as the girl giggled and nodded.

Eleanor joined Cassandra, bumping into the woman’s side, and the Seeker wrapped her arm around the girl’s shoulders as they made way out of the cave.

“The Western Approach...that’s like, out near the Forbidden Oasis?” Eleanor checked after thinking over the map on their War Table. Cassandra nodded, and the girl let out a falsely-appreciative hum. “That’s not very sexy of the Wardens, I hope they know that.” Oh goodness.
“I’m sure it embarrasses them tremendously,” Dorian assured.

“If you think you’re going to need a haircut Tumbles, just get one before we go,” Varric begged, “disappearing with half your body weight in hair and reappearing with 90% all of it missing was 100% terrifying.”

“My girl I’m sure there’s something we can do to keep your hair from torment in the humidity, you’ll let me work with it before doing something drastic?” Vivienne hoped.

“Oh gosh, really? Sure!” Eleanor smiled, “You know, I’m liking this more and more now—I’m gonna get my hair done! And maybe the Western Approach will be fun? Somewhere between the heat and the Blood Magic rituals and Rift sealing—Leliana has reports of them out that way.”

“Oh certainly, da’vehnan,” Marehis assured, trying to find the brighter points of visiting a desert wasteland where, unlike the Oasis, there would be precious little reprieve from just…sand, and unbearable heat. “We’ll take in some sun. And there’s certain to be potions ingredients we do not usually have the opportunity to collect fresh.”

“Yeah, you and me’ll go ingredient picking!” Sera promised. “And humidity isn’t fun for your hair but your lung’ll dig it, right? We can play!”

They did make play in their new fortress. Marehis convinced the girl to let the Elf woman speak to Charter as a coworker, break the news to her that Butcher had been found dead and there was a spy in their midst—Charter was off to report in to Leliana herself, Butcher’s missive sent on ahead so their Spymaster would be ready to put her to work when she arrived in Skyhold.

Cassandra called a meeting of sorts up in the highest most tower of the fortress where there was a spacious room, a large table for them to gather around—to handle the work of finalizing their claims to the fortress they were holding, and write up reports to Skyhold of what transpired since their arrival in Crestwood and their meeting with Hawke. It was admittedly comforting not to burden Eleanor with the work, it was even more so a comfort to hear the echo of the girls giddiness bouncing through the halls—Sera and Eleanor’s giggles and laughter, friendly smack-talk as they made chase of one another through Caer Bronach—as Cassandra cleared her throat and broached the subject of…well, Eleanor’s struggles in the night.

2 — 2

“The girl is suicidal?” Vivenne asked, aghast.

“Been suicidal, princess, keep up,” Bull snapped.

"I meant more pressingly, in a way we might be concerned she will act upon the impulse, Qunari," the woman quietly seethed in tones that concerned Cassandra she might lay waste to the man.

But the Qunari sighed, running a hand over his face as he sat back in his seat, "Sorry, that was rude, my bad. Just…fuck, I’m glad the kid went to you, Seeker."

That…was still something of uncertainty for Cassandra as she looked to Solas. “Was she? Coming to me when you…what exactly happened last night?”

Solas cleared his throat as all eyes fell on him. “I sensed something disturbing in the bond—her magic simultaneously calling out in urgency while also…distancing itself, growing quiet. Like her mental state was endeavoring to keep her magic from making me aware something was the matter. I ran, of course, as fast as I could, I nearly collided with the girl, I found her wandering
listlessly in a hall a ways from her room, breathless like she’d been running herself. She was crying and lamented she was lost, begged that I take her to the Lady Seeker,” he nodded, looking to Cassandra, “to answer your question in full—yes, she was coming to you.”

Varric’s fists pounded against the table top, the table itself scooting a few inches as he pushed up and away from it, a snarling sound breaking past his lips before he shouted, “Goddamn it! This is such bullshit, I fucking knew something like this would happen. Shit!” he swore, kicking at the wall as if it were the source of all his frustrations.

“She is sick, Varric, she- it is not that Eleanor truly wishes to die,” Cassandra offered, gesturing for the man to calm himself, Maker. “Her mind is perceiving problems she has no control over and is merely, in a disturbing, drastic way, trying to shield her from them—Corypheus, Red Lyrium, the Venatori, none of these things can hurt her if she is not of this world to hurt.”

“Well we have to do something!” Varric shouted.

“Which I am at present, trying to do!” Cassandra raised her voice back at him, slapping a hand to the table top, “Be seated and calm yourself—you’re hardly helping!”

There was the din of Sera’s voice rising in song, very loudly like the girl was trying to sing herself hoarse with a single verse—‘Maker loves me this I know! For the Chantry tells me so! You sing too Inky!’—echoed up the stairwell from the corridors below.

“I believe that’s Sera’s way of saying we should be more quiet if we don’t wish Eleanor checking in on our quarrel,” Solas offered quietly.

“You shut your fuckin mouth wolf boy,” Varric snapped. “All this shit is entirely your fault.”

“Indeed,” Vivienne agreed.

“Fault is hardly the pressing issue just now, Tethras,” Dorian snapped, speaking up. Oh. His eyes were glistening as he glared at the Dwarf, his words carefully measured, “What matters. is how we handle this. sit down.” the word pitching dangerously low.

And so he did. “…sorry.”

Dorian cleared his throat before proceeding. “Ellie has been on her own on plenty of occasions without incident, but we’ve had the luxury of having a resident Spirit capable of knowing when she is in need, who could be at her side in an instant. Cole will be back, and in the meantime, there are at least eight of us, I think somewhere between the whole of our party, one of us can be with the girl at all times. Have you consulted Adan?” he looked to Cassandra and Marehis.

Cassandra planned to, but thankfully, “I spoke with Ellie when we woke for the day,” Marehis said. “She agreed I should send word—it is a worsening of a symptom, a more active than passive thought.”

“That’s all we can do?” Thom asked, worried, “Just, watch her? Write a message to her Healer?”

“Oh there’s certainly more we can do,” the Tevinter Mage said with false cheer before, more seriously, “I’m hardly a functioning adult, but listen well,” Dorian Pavus warned coolly. “Amatus,” he said to the Qunari, “I am ashamed of you.”
…alright then. Did the man mean to occupy their time with a lover’s spat?

“…the fuck I do?” Bull asked.

Dorian ignored the question, going right along with, “You as well, Varric, and Vivienne. And I’m ashamed of myself,” the Altus assured, looking to Solas. “You…are a despicable person. You had your reasons, and I am sorry for your suffering, but motive does precious little to the harm you’ve caused. Personal tragedy does not undo the damage of the temple you scourged to the ground trying to ‘fix it’. That being said. You are a member of this team. Ellie…needs you. So that means she needs us to work with you.”

“We have worked together remarkably,” Solas offered, albeit confused. “I am grateful for the role I maintain, your ire is certainly deserved.”

“At you, yes. But we have been acting like children in front of Ellie,” Dorian looked to his lover, “making jests and mocking, the Wolf comments and the like. The decision she made to handle Solas’s betrayal was hard, but necessary and when we make hostile comments, even passive aggressively…well, it’s still a form of aggression. That has to wear on her, knowing we resent working with him, and it was her call to make that so. I’m hardly calling for friendship bracelets and hair braiding lines, but in front of Eleanor I suggest we borderline get there, and save our disdain for when we are not around a wide-eyed impressionable teenager.”

“…shit,” The Iron Bull sighed wearily, rubbing a hand over his face. “When the hell did you become a responsible adult?”

“Perish the thought,” Dorian scoffed, “I am merely…being a passable friend. Eleanor has shown fine example of it, I suppose it’s merely rubbing off,” Dorian look rather disgusted at the notion, “like some sort of horrible, infectious disease. I actually want to play nice with those I dearly dislike just so it might…make…someone who isn’t myself,” his nose wrinkled like he smelled something foul, “…happy. Ugh.”

“Dorian is right,” Marehis ventured, looking to Madam de Fer, “While I do appreciate the offence on my own behalf, on Ellie’s for what she has endured due to the actions of Fen Harel…we should endeavor to not rub our resentment in Ellie’s face, that we must still work with him in the field,” she sighed, looking to Solas, “with…you, in the field. I do appreciate…”she grew very quiet, a small sound in the back of her throat as she swallowed, chin quivering for all of a moment before she cleared her throat, “Thank you. For going to her last night. For taking her to Cassandra and making certain I knew what was happening.”

“I…I hope you know I would prefer you had no reason to be grateful to me,” Solas promised, “if Ellie could be safe, healthy, have no need of my aid, I would want that for her.”

Marehis nodded, worrying at her lip as she adverted her gaze like she’d reached her limit with looking at him. “We will do our best for Ellie.”

2 —2

The girl seemed lighter when they had Solas prompt her in the bond to join them, she and Sera racing one another, pushing open the door and practically falling into the room, giggly and breathless.

“Tumbles babe, come’ere,” Varric intoned, “I gotta get my hug on.”

“Sure!” she readily agreed, going to join him, it was somewhat amusing to see the Dwarven
man pull the taller girl into his lap, having her lean against him, his chin resting on her shoulder and her head resting atop his as they sat holding one another. “Is something the matter or did you just need a hug?”

“Nah,” Varric assured, “Touch starved all to shit my entire childhood Tumbles, I got hugged maybe once on accident, Bartrand trying to strangle me to get at my inheritance before he remembered he was the older brother. Other than that? Zero hugs for this guy. Gotta make up for it from time to time.”

Eleanor gasped, “Really?!” the girl pouted, squeezing the Dwarf more tightly, humming with the effort, “Oh my gosh! If I’d known you when you were tiny I’d have hugged you all the time! Baby Varric had to be just the cutest!”

“I was born the same way I’ll die—one handsome bastard, my mother screaming at me probably.”

Eleanor giggled at that, pressing a kiss to the top of the Dwarf’s head, content to sit with him as she joined their talk.

They made no mention of the previous night—if she wished to broach the subject in front of the whole of their party that was one thing, but to ambush her…well she may be embarrassed or ashamed, feel her confidence betrayed. Instead they were able to catch her up on the reports they’d worked together to write up, assure her their claim to this fortress was secure, that they would use it to help the people of Crestwood rebuild and secure their own lands, and that Charter was safe, heading to meet Leliana to handle the breach in security.

Eleanor nodded. “She came and said goodbye to me before she left, and we prayed for Butcher together. His name was Timmy!”

And his death had been delivered through the betrayal of Abernale Harish*, codename ‘Painter’, an agent of Leliana’s who found some promise of title with the Venatori if he betrayed his allies, according to his signed confession Leliana sent along for Eleanor to see. Now he was sitting in Skyhold’s prison, indefinitely, until Leliana decided to move further with him—Eleanor let the woman have discretion in how she handled her own agents.

They stayed in the area—sleeping in the fortress was safest, but in their waking hours…it seemed to help, Eleanor leading her party about, helping the people of Crestwood. It heartened her, the difference they made. They were able to assist in the uncovering of lost souls in old Crestwood, locating the bodies of those lost and reporting their locations to a Chantry Sister working to arrange proper burial for them. They checked in on the woman, Judith, the friend of that man who sought Eleanor’s help their first visit to the village. The woman was a naturalist of some sort, sent them hunting down a Wyvern of all things, an aggressive thing that was harassing the locals, going out of its territory to do so.

Likely, because of the Red Lyrium in its territory. The thing was driven mad it seemed, made more violent under its influence.

It was especially vindicating, to demolish the shards of it they could, a bit of vengeance for the nature it disturbed to destruction.

They also cleared several groups of bandits, slavers, that focused on the area for one reason or another, made Crestwood safer from future assault. Their work was satisfying and tiring, Sera had made it habit to sit with Eleanor at dinner, and more often than not the younger girl fell asleep against her sister, which seemed to be the Elf girl’s goal. Sera had been inseparable from the girl,
especially when she was asleep—the moment Eleanor fell asleep, Sera followed almost immediately.

Well, not sleeping exactly.

“Sera is meditating,” Solas informed them, the second night in a row the girls seemingly fell asleep in unison at dinner. He’d waited for privacy to voice the observation—he and Thom Rainier escorted Marehis and Cassandra to the room they kept with the girls, Cassandra had carried Sera, Rainier carrying Eleanor while Marehis kept guard as they walked, and Solas had made an excuse of going over something he observed in the bond with the women to linger after Rainier left them.

“You’re certain?” Cassandra asked. She’d considered the possibility in passing—Sera usually snored.

Solas nodded. “I’ve sensed it in the passing days, Sera experimenting further with her magic while in close proximity to Eleanor.”

Well the younger girl did have a great deal of experience with magic, and knew well of Sera’s recent access to it. But apparently, Eleanor was unaware of Sera’s experiments. Cassandra and Marehis asked after it, in case the girl needed guidance or some assistance, access to Lyrium or the like, while Eleanor still laid sleeping, allowing the girl to sleep in for as long as they could.

“Inky’s been fallin’ asleep without potion and I don’t want her to have nightmares. Cole isn’t here to keep her safe in the Fade, and Dori n’ Viv ain’t big on Fade Dreaming, and Solas is…Solas. So,” Sera shrugged, “I make sure I’m with her. If I hold her Marked hand, I don’t need Lyrium or nothin’ to get in there, and once I’m in, I’m there until…there’s kind of a skip, when I actually fall asleep I sort of fall out and then right back in, friggin’ head-rushy that is. And then I make sure Inky’s safe, give her a bit of warning when I feel like I might wake up.”

So, she became the recipient of a rather fierce hug—Cassandra nearly struck Marehis’s face on accident, both women opening their arms wide and lunging at the girl.

“Sera, child, I do love you,” Cassandra intoned, pressing a kiss to the girl’s hair.

“Da’vehnan that is such- I could not be more proud of you,” Marehis breathed.

Sera blushed, ears turning pink as she said, “Ink’d do the same for me.”

Cole was returned to them…the morning of their fourth day in Crestwood. He’d been gone scarcely two days when he reappeared in their fortress…in the breakfast campfire almost—Rainier cried out in alarm and reached out to pull the boy to safety before he could finish sitting in the fire properly.

“Maker, boy, are you alright?” the man worried.

“Oh. I am sorry, I did not mean to land in your fire—I’m not hurt, and I do not need breakfast, and I am not crazy,” he seemed to be addressing all the worries from those gathered, the whole of Eleanor’s party, “I poofed too fast,” and then he looked to where Rainier’s hands were still at the Spirit’s elbows and said, “…are you hugging me? I’m supposed to be hugging Ellie.”

“Oh gosh, I am glad you’re back,” Eleanor said, “and I’d appreciate a hug but you don’t have to—“
The Spirit vanished and reappeared at Eleanor’s side, sweeping her into a hug, tucking her head under his chin as he held her tightly. “I do, I promised Krem.”

“When the hell did you see Krem?” the Iron Bull asked. “Thought you were hunting down that Mayor prick.” Cole’s capabilities of travel were extraordinary, but had he truly been able to hunt Crestwood’s Mayor down, turn him over to their agents in Skyhold, and return to Crestwood so quickly?

Apparently not. “Near the Storm Coast—that is where I caught Gregory fleeing, trying to get to water and a boat. I sensed Dalish…she is an archer and she found me in the Fade with her archery, she says. She was looking for me, so I let her know where I was, and Cremisius came with the Chargers to take Gregory to Skyhold and send me back here, and I’m supposed to hug Ellie, so I am. Also Cremisius loves you—he told me to tell you. He loves you so much sometimes he cannot breathe because of it, like his heart is so full it takes up too much space and his lungs have no room—he did not tell me to tell you that but it would not embarrass him if you knew, now know.”

Well, Eleanor was blushing fiercely, a little teary eyed as she hugged the Spirit a bit more tightly. “I love him too…pretty much sums it up, kind of inconvenient with the whole asthma thing,” the girl jested a bit. “That was really sweet of him, I didn’t realize he was taking the Chargers out and doing something to get you back faster. Um…” she looked to the Iron Bull, “I hope you aren’t mad? I didn’t know he’d do that, but it’s my fault—I wrote him the morning after Cole left, about um…” she shrugged, “just personal stuff, that I missed him.” Not entirely a lie, she did love the Spirit, and it was her right not to disclose everything. “Cremisius wrote back that Cole would be back soon, I just didn’t realize he meant ‘taking matters into his own hands’ soon.”

“’Course it’s fine babe, the guy’s in charge when I’m not around,” Bull assured, “Usually runs things by me but uh…not mad that he didn’t, kinda him stretchin’ his leadership legs a bit more,” it sounded like he appreciated it, respected it that the young man moved forward without his Chief’s say-so.

“Krem’s a freaking badass!” Sera cheered.

It was certainly a blessing to have Cole returned to them—a relief that Crestwood’s Mayor was captured and ready for Judgement whenever Eleanor saw fit, and that she had all her allies in the realm of mental health.

3 — 3

“You just want it to be over—Corypheus stopped, the rebellion ended, for your friends and family to be safe,” Cole explained to Eleanor when they were in the privacy of their quarters that evening, the Spirit joining them, seated on the bed with Eleanor ‘criss-cross applesauce’ as the girl called it, Cole reaching out to take her hands in his. “Your mind just came up with the fastest solution for yourself to experience that—that is where the passive thoughts come from. When you were presented with the opportunity to really act upon it, those thoughts became more pressing, desperate, because it might be the only chance of you being willing to go through with it.”

Eleanor nodded. “That…yeah, that makes sense,” though she startled a bit, assuring, “Not that it makes sense to do that! I just mean it makes sense my brain doing that, mistaking that as a helpful solution because it’s what’s fastest for me.”

“Be patient with it, it is trying to help, it just doesn’t know what to do—it’s looking for an immediate way to fix things, you have to remind it that things take time, and that’s okay.”
Eleanor pitched forward in her seat and pressed a kiss to the Spirit’s cheek. “Thanks Cole.”

“Thank you, Ellie. You prevented so much hurt, stopping yourself and going to get Cassandra. It…” Cole seemed to consider his words carefully, “you are full of hurts because of the Conclave, and the bad things that have happened since. But your hurts can heal—that is how you get rid of them. Dying doesn’t get rid of the hurt, it only gives it to other people.” Then, softly, “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to make you sad,” he promised, reaching out to wipe at her tears with the back of his index finger.

“It’s okay,” Eleanor sniffled, “um…I think…that helped.”

“It did. Sometimes heals have to hurt.”

3 —3

Cassandra and Marehis were seated at a table in their room, working to finish their daily reports—the Elf woman still had need to document Eleanor’s day-to-day for security purposes, and Cassandra, their groups efforts in Crestwood…which seemed to be coming to a close, Hawke had made contact with them, he and Stroud taking a rather round-about way of getting to the Western Approach to evade Wardens on their trail, they would need to get moving soon in order to meet them, they’d secured their holds in Crestwood and helped the people as much as they could, directly.

Save for the resident dragon.

She’d been considering it their entire time in Crestwood. It almost felt foolish, or petty—Cassandra had never been one to subscribe heavily to the Pentaghast tradition, it was their duty to slay dragons, so she did, but it had never been something of sport, nor had it been something she considered a milestone. At least, she thought she didn’t. And then that damn Qunari came home to Skyhold with Eleanor and Sera and when she thought she’d missed their first Dragon fight, oh! It almost felt as if…well, granted, she did not meet these girls until they were well into their teens, but it felt similar to how she imagined being faced with the risk of missing her child’s first steps would feel. She still had the opportunity to guard and guide them through the event, if they truly wished aid in a battle against a dragon themselves. But still it was facing a dragon. While ideally they would walk away with sore muscles and perhaps a few burns, that was the ideal. So much could go wrong.

She’d had a hazy, nonsensical feeling dream that they went to the dragon’s lair, and after giving their group a dismissive look, it promptly gobbled Eleanor up whole and laid down to take a nap and for some reason they did nothing to aid or avenge the girl, Cullen was there for some reason and he merely shrugged and said ‘That’s fair’.

_I assure you I would never react such a way in waking life_, he wrote when Cassandra informed him of the matter in her last letter, allowing, _but you’ve every right to be upset with me—that’s perfectly valid, I was an utter fool in your dream and I apologize._

“He misses you,” Cole’s voice startled her. Somehow his addressing her so suddenly was more jarring than the way that the boy was now crouching on the table top, knees tucked to his chest, arms around his legs as he peered down at the Seeker, he had some affinity for being up high and she’d come to accept this about the Spirit. He smiled at that and said, “Thank you.”

Cassandra huffed quietly, grinning when Eleanor asked, “Who misses mami?”

“Cullen,” Cassandra answered over her shoulder, turning in her seat to face the girl. “I miss
That sent the girl gasping and flopping back in bed albeit dramatically, “I miss Papi too! So much! I just wanna-!” she made an unintelligible sound as she reached for Sera, sitting up again to somersault forward, landing with her legs around Sera’s waist, wrapping them around her securely before doing the same with her arms around the squealing Elf girl’s shoulders, pressing her cheek to Sera’s as she essentially hugged her sister with her entire body. “I’m hugging him! So much! For like an entire day when we get home after this mess!” and then, “Do you suppose Corypheus is the way he is because he doesn’t get enough hugs? Have we tried that? Put me in a catapult, launch me at his dumb darkspawn face, and let me get a good grip around him—if all else fails I can choke him out!”

Sera’s voice was a bit strangled as she assured, “She really can! This is great but I’m loosin’ air here Ink.”

“Sorry Ser’,” Eleanor giggled, pitching forward to send Sera laying on her back before loosening her hold on the older girl and just laying atop her instead.

Sera snorted, laughing as she ran a hand through Eleanor’s hair, “All good sweets. You cozy? This is snuggly, I vote mamis just throw a blanket over us and call it a night.”

“Already ahead of you—your boobs are good neck support,” Eleanor complimented sincerely…her head did rest on the girl’s breast bone, neck fitting just between the softer tissue of Sera’s chest.

“Thanks! Your boobs is cushiony—squishy Inky!”

“Da’vehnans,” Marehis giggled, amused at their antics.

“I can put a blanket over them,” Cole volunteered serenely, and then he leaned forward a bit…an act that seemed albeit physically impossible seeing as he maintained his crouched posture and just leaned with no viable ability to support the action save for, yes, the ability to float, Cassandra supposed. He did so to speak directly into Cassandra’s ear, “You should ask them—Marehis was worried but she still supports bringing them along,” before he vanished and suddenly reappeared on the bed armed with a blanket from…somewhere, that he draped over Eleanor and Sera before dropping uncertain kisses to each of the girl’s heads, “Have sweet dreams,” he wished them before disappearing from the room.

“I know you wouldn’t choose to do something that would be of detriment to our girls,” Marehis quietly assured Cassandra, she’d heard Cole of course and knew well what topic was on the Seeker’s mind. “I trust you have this in hand? I promised Vivienne I would sit guard with her tonight.” Cassandra nodded, smiling her thanks when Marehis took up her report as well as her own, to handle their sending for the Seeker.

“What’d’you wanna ask us ‘sandra?” Sera wanted to know, ahh. Yes, hearing.

Cassandra cleared her throat. “There is a dragon in the south-“

“And you want us to stay behind,” the girls droned in unison, Eleanor giggling,
“Jokes on them—when they’re gone, their snacks are ours!” the Human girl conspired.

“Hell yeah—Dori’s got that crunchy almond chocolateish bread stuff that’s just banging!”

“Biscotti?” Eleanor checked, and when Sera nodded. “Yes!”

“Well, you’ll certainly be free to snack to your hearts content,” Cassandra said, “it may be all the more satisfying after a dragon slaying—if you’re inclined to join us I can assure you’ll work up an appetite.”

Ellie let out a startled shriek when Sera sat up swiftly, the motion having the Human girl laying at her side now though Eleanor was sitting up, the pair of them staring at Cassandra, excited but cautious, “…really?” Eleanor checked.

“…you feelin’ okay ‘sandra?” Sera wondered.

“I’m in excellent health,” Cassandra assured, amusedly, “and I am sincere—I would not pressure you to participate, but if you wish, I would be honored to have you join us in our efforts to rid Crestwood of their dragon issue.”

…for girls who had just been about to fall asleep, they were wide awake now.

Eleanor bounced in place, she and Sera patting the space on the bed before them in eager invitation and the instant she was seated, Cassandra found herself pulled into laying on her back them, the girls settling in her arms.

“What kind of dragon is it?” Sera asked.

“Is it like a zappy one like last time or is it cold or fiery or…wait can what else can Dragons do? Are Dragons mages?” Eleanor wondered.

“Oh! What if it’s like a brain zappy one? Can use mind blast or whatever?”

“Oh ouchy, that’s gonna be so much headaches—I can make potion!” Eleanor enthused.

“It is a Northern Hunter—so their power is lightning,” Cassandra spoke warmly, amused at the outright enthusiasm as she sought to answer their questions. “Dragons are not mages, but they are inherently magical.”

“Ohhh, you know what I have spindleweed out my ears!” Eleanor informed them, “Rashvine too—there’s this super great recipe for Electrical Resistance in the potions book Adan gave me for my birthday!”

“Oh sweet!” Sera cheered.

“You wanna help me make it, Ser’?”

“Hell yeah!”

“Yay! We’ll cook some up first thing—enough for everyone to have a couple doses on hand! Oh! And regeneration tonic, gosh that stuff is a lifesaver,” Eleanor breathed. Though she seemed to be struck with something that bothered her, “Wait! The dragon doesn’t have babies, does it?”

“It does not,” Cassandra assured. It was admittedly too young to have had offspring*, Cassandra was certain, but she didn’t feel that fact would necessarily hearten the girl.
Eleanor nodded. “Kay. And it really needs gone?”

“Its current territory is rather contained but that is only because previously, they could only claim the land it had—now that the lake is drained and the land beneath it exposed, the dragon has been veering nearer and nearer civilization, I fear it will attempt to take Crestwood village, or our own fortress here if we do not act before we leave.”

“Just checking! You know,” she shrugged. “I’d feel badly just going out of my way to do something to someone who wasn’t hurting anyone…she will eat the people right?”

“Northern Hunters will eat anything, from nugs to Wyrvern—and yes, people.”

Eleanor’s eyes widened at that, “Nugs?! Oh gosh she might-“ the girl stopped, eyes darting between Cassandra and the ceiling like she was trying to advert her gaze and not look the woman directly in the eye as she said, “…not eat any nugs in Caer Bronach…because there aren’t any.”

“…there aren’t?” Cassandra questioned, playing along, admittedly fighting a smile.

“Nope!” and then Eleanor did meet her eye, and forthrightly assured her, “I can promise you there is not one nug in all of Caer Bronach!”

…meaning the very walls could be full of the things, there was just certainly more than one.

“Well…I would remind you that is a good thing, given that nugs do carry diseases and it would be unsuitable to risk something spreading among our numbers,” Cassandra said, “…however…any offending nugs found on the premises could be safely relocated to a more suitable habitat.”

“Really?!” Eleanor asked, eyes alight at the prospect. “…mami I might have found some nugs in the wine cellar,” she confessed.

Albeit more concerning than the secrecy surrounding the nugs was, “What were you doing in the wine cellar?”

“Following the nugs!”

“Ahh.” Of course.

“…can they stay inside until the dragon is dead?” Eleanor ventured.

Maker help her, if Cullen got word of this he would never let her live it down. Cassandra did not…hate nugs. But neither did she enjoy the things.

Be that as it may, “…certainly sweet girl, your nugs can stay.”

“Gracias mami! Mwah!” Eleanor pressed a very enthusiastic kiss to the Seeker’s cheek. “I’ll introduce you! There’s Nuggy, and Squeaky.” Maker help them, she named them, “—he talks with the cutest little squeak! Eep eep eep!” the girl demonstrated, “and then Pretzel Paws—cause she like pretzels—and Money Bags, and Cremisius. He’s got gorgeous brown eyes!”

…”Money Bags?” Cassandra wondered.

“Her nest is full of coins!” Well then.

Nuggy…as Cassandra came to discover come morning when Eleanor guided her to just where Caer Bronach’s wildlife resided…was a Fennec. Or at the very least, had the body of one,
“He’s a nug in his soul!” Eleanor insisted, as she held the creature in her arms, petting his fur and pecking little kisses to his head. “He acts like a nug, and lives like a nug,” Cassandra was not certain the vast difference in lifestyle between to two species, but that sorted she supposed. “all his family are nugs and he’s Money Bag’s son! So he’s a nug!”

“Ahh, I’ll make certain our scouts know not to separate him from his family then,” Cassandra assured the girl.

And she was rewarded with, “I’m definitely putting stevia leaf in your potion today—it sweetens without interfering with the potions integrity and it actually dulls the bitterness of Electrical tonic and makes it taste almost…spicy? Like what papi considers spicy, not the real definition of spicy.”

…it admittedly was, strangely enough. They gathered together as a group just outside the current standing boundary of the Dragon’s territory, taking pause to ingest potion and go over their plan just once more.

“I don’t like it,” Sera decided, smacking her lips, tongue licking at the roof of her mouth like she sought to rid it of the taste, “it’s purple, it should taste purple!”

“Whatever does purple taste like, my dear?” Dorian wanted to know.

“You know,” Sera eloquently explained, shrugging. “Purple.”

“Grapey with a sugar high,” the Iron Bull explained simply, rolling out like common knowledge.

Sera snapped her fingers, pointing to the Qunari, “Exactly!” and when Cassandra cleared her throat the Elf girl looked to her.

“Sorry ’sandra,” and Bull’s, “Seeker”, overlapped.

With everyone’s attention brought to bear, “Mages and archers—stay out of range of it’s wind,” Cassandra intoned. “She doesn’t have quite so wide a wingspan as some dragon’s might, so she cannot produce as great a gust to pull you in—you’ve a bit more safe standing to fire from, do bear in mind she’s a great deal of tolerance for electrical attacks, but a weakness to Spirit magic. Everyone else with me, try to flank her and stay out of range of her mouth…she will endeavor to consume you, and when generating lightning in her throat, sparks do stray. If for any reason you need to retreat, do so—call out if you can, we will draw fire and assist as we can. If I call a retreat—or if Eleanor, our Inquisitor does so, it is to be immediate, there is to be absolutely no argument or heroics. Eleanor will summon a Rift to paralyze the beast and we will evacuate the area and regroup.”

There was a chorus of “Right”s and “Of course”, everyone taking one last moment to stretch, hydrate before taking on the dragon.

Cassandra saw Marehis draw uncustomarily close to Solas, at least what seemed as such as of late, “Your connection is open?” she verified quietly with him, the man nodding. “I will be with the warriors.”

He nodded again. “I will make certain she is safe—she and Sera both,” Solas vowed, pleading quietly, “Do be careful ma’- Marehis.”

She nodded, going to Sera and Eleanor, offering them a reassuring smile and wishing them luck with warm kisses to the cheek. Cassandra joined them, doling out likewise and then asking,
“You’re certain you’re ready?” the girls nodded, both with matching looks of determination, so, “Very good,” she said, brushing Sera’s hair back to make certain it was holding its position, styled to stay out of her face, and then pulling Eleanor’s scarf up so it fit snugly and securely over her nose and mouth—regardless of their distance, the Dragon was certain to kick up dirt and dust, the air they fought in would be fouled. “Remember my instructions on how to breathe if you are pulled into the dragon’s wind.”

“Scream our heads off,” Sera offered, somewhat in jest, but only just so. Truly—it was more often easier to breath in, it was almost as if air was forced into your lungs, but getting that air out to pull in fresh and lessen the risk of passing out? The air had to be forcibly pushed from one’s lungs—the best method Cassandra found of doing so effectively, was through using the air in her lungs to scream*.

“Do not grab onto each other if one of you is pulled in, and do not resist its pull, you will only injure yourself. You’re to…“

“Get low to move faster and control your speed by rising to slow down,” Eleanor nodded.

Oh thank the Maker these girls had listened, “Brace yourself for impact with the Dragon’s limbs or one of our warriors or duel weaponed rogues,” it wouldn’t do to not credit Cole and Marehs, “—if we hear you coming we will certainly try to catch you, no matter what someone will come to you and you will follow their lead on how to proceed,” she intoned, satisfied as they nodded eagerly in agreement. “Maker watch over you both—I am proud of you, for joining us.”

“Thanks ‘sandra.”

“Gracias mami,” followed by a unified,

“Be safe.”

The Northern Hunter was napping in the mid-morning heat it seemed, lazing atop a stone structure that seemed to be the ruins of a fortress not unlike Caer Bronach.

Of course the moment the wind picked up, their collective scents carried with it? The Dragon was up on all legs with a screeching roar.

And Eleanor screamed—a small, startled sound, surrounded by Sera’s shrieked, “Frick frick frick frick!”

Reasonable reactions for first time Dragon slayers. If they did not wet themselves, they would...admittedly do better than Cassandra had, her first endeavor in Dragon slaying.

“Hell yeah! Come and get me! Big tasty Iron Bull comin’ at you—buttered up and everything!”

The Qunari truly had oiled his body with butter before leaving their fortress...he’d done similar in the Hinterlands. How the man survived, both dragon slayings and in life, was a wonder.

“I’m a jealous lover, mind, you wench!” Dorian called, at the Dragon in warning.

Dragon fighting with the Inquisition was a world apart from the rigorous, religious practice that had been passed down the Pentaghast line.

And Cassandra admittedly did not mind.
Neither did Cassandra mind Sera cheering, “We slayed a friggin’ dragon!” directly into her ear as she carried the girl on her back, arms bracing Sera’s thighs, the girl’s arms around her neck. “’sandra did you see?!”

The Seeker chuckled, grinning wide, “I do believe so.”

“That was so cool!” Eleanor was giddy, riding on Marehis’s back.

It was…ugh, the phrase was one to ring eternal in Cassandra’s life of late…very cool. Oh! Her girls had done it! And they were safe! Cassandra could not be more grateful—they’d listened to her every instruction…with some minor creativity. Sera, in an effort to keep Eleanor back, ended up getting just within range of the Dragon’s ability to kick up wind to pull her in, and while Eleanor did not grab on to her sister…neither did that keep her from walking directly into the Dragon’s pull and follow after, drawing her sword when she caught up to Sera and screaming at the Dragon to ‘not even think about eating my sister!’

It put her girls in position to assist her in the final blow, their hands overlapping Cassandra’s on the hilt of her sword, which was genuinely of assistance—it took a great deal of effort to thrust a blade through Dragon skin—even if one is precise beyond measure and lands such a blow right between plates of scaling, into the tender webbing between…what is considered tender on a Dragon is the equivalent of a thin layer of stone, and that is over several thick layers of leathery flesh and muscle before reaching a vital organ.

“I am proud of you Sera, Eleanor. Thank you for joining us today,” Cassandra said.

“Killin’ it boss girl! Sera—serious moves out there. Have I mentioned I love the Inquisition?” The Iron Bull wondered. “cuz I didn’t kill no three dragons in a row under the Qun.”

"The lack of dragon slaying sounds like the most compelling argument I've ever heard for joining the Qun," Vivienne drawled, exhausted, brushing a glop of dragon blood, something that looked like a clot of the stuff, off of her armor. “I need a bath.”

“We’ll take like, the bathiest bath when we get back to base!” Eleanor guaranteed giddily. “Do you want help? I’ve got your back—in battle and the bathtub!”

“Darling, I do so appreciate you, but you should not belittle yourself to bathing your compatriots,” though it did give her the thought, “Hmm, Dorian would you lend me the use of your lover for bathing purposes?”

“Oh certainly,” Dorian agreed.

“I’m not a library book,” the Iron Bull half-heartedly complained.

“Of course not—Skyhold’s library hardly has such an interesting collection as the one you would be permitted in print,” Dorian assured.

“Dori, you should join them!” Sera insisted…for some reason.

“…I should?” the Altus asked.
“Yeah. Just leave all your pish in your room or whatever and go take a soak with your bestie and your boy!”

“…are you wretched results of differing-sex intercourse planning to steal my biscotti?”

Eleanor scoffed. “Bold of you to assume either of us was born and not hand placed here, fully formed, by the Maker.” The Tevinter Mage was a horrible influence, honestly.

“Yeah!” Sera was on board, “We’re the Maker’s gift to Humanity, and Elf-ity, and Qun-ity—all the itys!”

“The itty bitty ity committee!” Eleanor declared them.

“Give ‘em the damn crunch bread—that craps hard as shit, and look at ‘em,” Bull appealed to his lover, "Cute as hell, little Imekaris off their first Dragon fight—you want a cake Imikaris? I’ma bake you a cake.”

He did. He truly did. Maker bless that Qunari, he was truly beyond enthusiastic about his Dragon fighting.

All told…it was excellent cake he managed to bake in a cast iron skillet. Though Cassandra admittedly lost her appetite when word came in from Leliana.

There had been…

There was the fact-

Bah! It was two fold*. Their time in Therinfal Redoubt had left Cassandra…with a mild obsession in figuring out just what went wrong when, when had the Lord Seeker been replaced. How? Upon full examination of the situation, Envy was, at the end of the day, a shape shifter—a demon who possessed a person to learn their mind, and then used that knowledge when they took the shape of that person, moved forward in their own body. So…was he still alive somewhere, consorting with the enemy? Been in on the plan from the beginning and willingly allowed a demon to steal his identity for Corypheus’s plot? Or had it been horrific, as Eleanor’s encounter with Envy—the demon forcibly entering Lord Seekers mind and taking what he needed to move forward as the man, leaving him dead in it’s wake? If he was alive, where was he?

…which lead to the thought…where were the Seekers? Any of them, save Cassandra herself. Had they vanished? The attack on Haven had held Mages and Templars both who fell in line with Corypheus, corrupted by him—had he stolen the minds of the entirety of the Seekers of Truth? Were they working with him, or were they in hiding, biding their time before joining the Inquisition’s cause? Or were they ignoring the world’s issues in full, waiting for the dust to settle like spineless cowards?!

She’d asked Eleanor if she minded Cassandra asking Leliana or Josephine to look into her fellow Seekers whereabouts, the girl of course was immediately agreeable.

Of course, mami! Let me know if I can help!

Well. Perhaps her assistance would be necessary. Maker.

Inquisition agents were dead, because of her investigation.

Assumed dead. But…most likely dead.
Leliana sent agents to track the Seekers, there was documentation, reports, leads that told them the host of the Seekers of Truth had each separately been heading to Ferelden. And then her agents picked up on the rumor of a Bann heavily tied to the Seekers—Bann Loren. He’d disappeared, not been heard from in months, he’d not set foot out of his seat of power, Caer Oswin.

And Caer Oswin, was where all communication with their scouts died. Presumably them, with it.

They were seated around the fire, out under the stairs in their fortress walls, gathered together celebrating their successful slaying, chatting about their move forward, to Skyhold and then the Western Approach, when word came, Cassandra reading it over, hoping…well certainly hoping for better.

“Mami?” Eleanor asked curiously, sitting up—she and Sera had been seated at her side but once they finished consuming their feast, the girls laid on their backs, exhausted and ‘friggin stuffed!’. The Human girl scooted to be closer to the Seeker, eyes alight with curiosity and a bit of concern. “Is everything okay?”  

She didn’t…oh Maker she did not want to tell Eleanor their people had perished.

_Cole._

_I understand. It will be okay—you can wait._

His voice in her mind was disconcerting to say the least, but she was glad of it. So, Cassandra cleared her throat, smiled for this sweet girl and said, “An update came from Leliana—I will read it in full in the morning.” she brushed a curl behind the girl’s ear, earning a smile in return as she rested her forehead against Eleanor’s, “tonight—let us enjoy our victory. I am so proud of you.” As a daughter, and an Inquisitor. Tonight she would be the former. She should be allowed that much.

“I’m proud of you too!” Eleanor enthused, snuggling against the woman, “Thanks so much for today! I feel so much better about leaving tomorrow, the Rifts are all gone, there’s less Red Lyrium, the undead situation is under control, and there’s no more big hungry creatures looking for people to snack on. They’ll actually have a shot at rebuilding, recovering from what Mayor Jerkface did.”

“I believe so as well.”

“Well then what the hell we sittin’ around for?” The Iron Bull wanted to know. “Shots!”

“Yeah!” Varric cheered.

“Where the hell’s the apple juice—you want apple juice right Imekari? Looks like whisky…”

“I love whisky!” the girl blanched a bit, “…not that I’ve ever…had…whisky. Because underage drinking is…bad?” and then she looked to the Iron Bull, “And I love apple juice too!”

“Da’vehnan,” Marehis giggled.

“My word darling,” Vivienne breathed, announcing in lofty tones, “you are as horrible at lying as you have taste in alcohol—my dear when you are capable of imbibing again, I will introduce you to white wine.”
“I would love to meet her!” Eleanor agreed. “But for now—shots! Apple juice! Hit me, the Iron Bull!”

It was admittedly fun, in its silliest form, to ‘knock back shots’ of apple juice with the girl, Sera joined them for the most part...though she did imbibe a few genuine shots of whisky, growing giggly and exuberant, though Eleanor was sober and just as giddy as she was pulled along into Sera’s tipsy dancing...Cassandra found herself dragged into the fray. Which meant Marehis must subject to it as well—Cassandra was not...shimmying around the camp fire to no music without another adult being made part of the fun embarrassment. Though even Madam de Fer allowed Eleanor a dance—proper Orlesian waltz with the Grand Enchanter taking the lead, perhaps it was a bit of practice, Bloomingtide was approaching, after all and Lady Josephine had successfully secured them invitations to the Empresses ball at the Winter Palace. A party posing as ‘peace talks’.

What was peaceful was their evening. A bit of drunken singing, dancing, celebrating their successes in Crestwood before a restful nights sleep to prepare for their journey tomorrow.

Of course...it would be most wise to detour to Caer Oswin on their return to Skyhold. So. Morning meant informing Eleanor.

But after breakfast. Immediately after breakfast. Yes there was discussion of the rout they were taking that would no longer be relevant but...

Oh, she hated this.

“Would you care for more oatmeal, Eleanor?” Cassandra offered when the girl seemed nearly done with her meal.

“Awe thanks mami, but I’m okay,” the girl cheerily declined.

“More coffee then, sweet girl?” Eleanor liked the beverage! She was not stalling.

“I still have some,” she shook her half-empty mug so Cassandra could hear the slosh of liquid before taking a sip.

Maker help her. “It needs topped off, I believe,” Cassandra sighed, frustrated. Mostly with herself. “You should remain hydrated. Have you taken your potions? It wouldn’t do to fall out of schedule.”

The girl seemed a bit confused, staring as Cassandra poured more albeit uninvited coffee into her mug. “I took them just before breakfast like normal mami,” Eleanor said softly, and then, “Is...something wrong?”

“There is a matter I must bring to your attention but I am somewhat reticent to do so, and I am stalling—toast?”

“Like toasting to something or are you offering to make me toast for the stalling thing?”

“I would accept either at this point, my uncle was notorious for his long-winded toasts.”

“...here’s to your matter and handling it together!” Eleanor cheered, raising her mug, “And...you making me toast, because I gotta feeling it’s bad news, that always goes good with carbs.”

That worked.
She carefully buttered two slices of bread before dropping them in the still warm pan and placing it over the fire. And sat in silence.

“Soooo…” Eleanor said as…well, no one was speaking, the whole of their party simply staring and waiting for something. “Is it bad?”

“Potentially,” Cassandra allowed.

“Is it about papi?” the girl worried, eyes scanning their surroundings like a question of if Cassandra needed to speak with her privately of some complication with Cullen's Lyrium addiction.

Oh! “Of course not, Eleanor. Cullen is well.” Suffering a continuous migraine for the better part of a week, ever since he'd reviewed reports from Therinfal and Haven's demise. He'd yet to say just what stressed him to the point his symptoms flared, but Cassandra was patient, he would come to her if he'd need.

“I love you, totally don’t wanna rush you, but one of my super powers right now is chronic anxiety—in my brain, you’ve found out you’re dying, the Inquisition has gone bankrupt, Skyhold is burning, and Corypheus has actually taken over the world already, I’m just in a coma and you’re about to tell me I need to wake up.”

“Damn Tumbles. Those individual scenarios or an ‘all-at-once’ thing?” Varric asked.

“Mmmm,” Eleanor hummed as if it were a decadent treat, “somehow it’s both at the same time.”

Ahh. Well, that certainly wouldn’t do. “Leliana sent word on my investigation into the Seekers disappearance…”

Eleanor listened intently as Cassandra explained Leliana’s findings…that their people had not reported in since heading for Caer Oswin.

“Well,” Eleanor decided, sipping gingerly at her coffee, “I suppose we’re off to Caer Oswin—Varric, start the books! I want to put ten silver on us…” she hmmm’d thoughtfully, “you know what, I’ve had enough negative thoughts this morning—I’m choosing to be positive. Ten silver on us not disappearing!”

“I could do with a vacation,” Dorian said, “I’ll match—ten silver we do disappear.”

Eleanor nodded, smiling as she rose to her feet, “Let’s go check it out,” she said, stretching as she stood and then, “Just a note: it’s going to be like, tremendously disturbing if every single f*cking branch of the Chantry has been conspiring and corrupted by Corypheus. I’m sorry Mami, I know they’re your co-Seekers but if they’ve gone rogue for Corypheus I’m hand kicking their traitor butts. Personally. With my sword! No magic just me,” she feigned holding her sword in hand, assuming proper form as she beat down on invisible foes, “Bam! Raaa! Hyah! ”

“You’ll show ‘em Ellie-girl,” Rainier encouraged before he looked to Cassandra, offering her a solemn nod. “We’ll get this sorted, Lady Seeker. I will pray this is all some great misunderstanding, that your comrades are safe and uninvolved.”

So did she.

Cassandra had prayed often in her life. There were times the entirety of her waking thought was one great continuous communication to the Maker, never-ending prayer, over her future, her
fears, her loss. She prayed the night Haven burned, with everything, for Eleanor’s safety and it had been granted.

So she had already been granted mercy beyond measure. Asking yet another impossible thing to be provided was admittedly selfish. She did not begrudge whatever His Hand had done in this, she was sure He’d been merciful further still, even if it was not visible.

She…she walked away with her allies, with her children, and what was left of their Order in her hands.

Caer Oswin, while in the exact opposite direction of Skyhold, was at the very least close to Crestwood…not ‘exact opposite’. Eleanor did see fit to point out on their map that while it was east—it was at least ‘south east’

“So we’re already getting some of the south part down!” the girl explained as they rode along, “I can already feel my mattress! I mean I dunno if we’ll be staying the night in Skyhold, but I’m laying down for like, at least five minutes—that’s an official Inquisition mandate!”

“I’ll make certain Lady Josephine takes note, da’vehnan,” Marehis warmly assured.

They earned more than a measly five minutes in their beds.

Caer Oswin was not unlike hell. In fact it was exactly that. It was hell.

Lord Seeker was not dead.

He had betrayed them all. Led the entirety of what had been left of the Seekers to Caer Oswin, and turned them over to the Order of Fiery Promise. They’d been…oh Maker she hoped their deaths were swift. But if Daniel was any example…they had been defiled and tortured to death.

Daniel, had been tortured to death.

*We Seekers are abominations, Cassandra. We created a decaying world, and fought to preserve it even as it crumbled. We had to be stopped. You don’t believe me? See for yourself.*

The man had handed her their Order’s most protected writings, meant only for their leader—their highest Lord Seeker—to read.

And apparently Lucius read it, and it sent him to madness.

So it sat untouched on the floor of Cassandra’s tent. The Iron Bull and Rainier had set up their camp, and the first words Cassandra found herself capable of speaking since they left the Caer were, “I would like to be alone.”

She could not bring herself to look at any of them, even as she felt Eleanor’s lips against the side of her arm, “Go on mami, get some rest.”

She did rest, she supposed. She sat straight down on the tent floor, and laid the cursed seeming book before her. It was hardly an active afternoon.

She was thoroughly demoralized. Felt empty, like someone had taken barbs and used them to scrape every last thing in her, lines of agony torn in their wake.

What…what did this mean? What was she- was she still even a Seeker? A lone Seeker, the
entirety of the Order in one woman? What was she to do with that?

“’sandra?”

Her fists clenched on reflex as she snapped, “I do believe I said I wished to be alone!”

Oh. Maker, what was wrong with her? She’d- she’d not even heard the girl come in, and Sera was standing before her, flinching at her tone, a plate in hand.

“S-sorry I um…” she fumbled with her words, panicky, ”w-w-we tried calling you for dinner- I’ll just leave this-“

“No!” Cassandra plead, though given her initial reaction, her meaning went unclear, Sera was already bending to set the plate down on the floor, ducking her head a bit as if to hide her face and Cassandra reached out and rested her hand on the girl’s forearm, “you do not have to leave, sweetheart, I- I apologize. Thank you for bringing me dinner I- I did not hear you call. Have…have you eaten sweet girl? Oh! Please sit.”

Sera nodded slowly, taking a seat on the ground. Ugh, her eyes were puffy, as if the girl had been crying earlier, just the barest bit of moisture shone along her eyeline but she was able to blink it away, oh the woman felt just…just awful she’d taken such a tone with the girl unjustly. “We already ate, food was gonna get cold and you should eat, I mean frig that…was a lot of fighting. Inky was worried.”

“She may come in as well, Maker, Sera I am sorry, I should not have snapped at you.”

“s’fine,” Sera shrugged. “Been a long day, hard. Ink’s out, passed out in her dinner, Bull and Dori got her.”

“Where is Marehis?”

“Around,” Sera shrugged. “Not a hot lung day—dusty gross fortress place full of who knows what in the friggin’ air, lots of hard crying. Breathing’s real raspy so Bull wanted to make sure she stayed warm, laid out by the fire with her, with Dori, he’s complaining ’bout how ‘domestic’ it is.”

“Eleanor is unwell?” Cassandra worried.

Sera shrugged. “Little bit, baldy says she’s okay,” the girl snorted a bit, “…he’s been givin’ Mare updates like every ten minutes.”

“If she wishes reprieve I could have words with him.”

“She’s um…kind of asking him for them half the time? So…”

Oh. Goodness. Well, that was Marehis’s prerogative. “Thank you, for bringing dinner.”

“’course,” Sera nodded. “…um…everything’s gonna be okay, you know? You’ve got us, and the Inquisition, and you’ll…I mean you’ve done a kickass job with the Templars.”

“I could rebuild the Order,” Cassandra supposed, her voice came out hallow sounding so she cleared her throat.

“You peeked at the leader book any?” Sera wondered, head jerking in the direction of the damned text.

“No.”
“Well…maybe you don’t need it,” Sera said as if it were that simple, in a way that made it feel as if it were. “I mean you can do anything you want ‘sandra. You look in the book and don’t find nothin’ worth using? Throw it away, we can friggin’ toss it in the fire or something, all that old dry paper? It’ll burn real nice. Anything useful? Use it. You can rebuild the Seekers better than they was, or start something new if you want, or just keep going with the Inquisition, go off on your own path when that’s over—fuck an Order. You’re amazing—a friggin badass warrior mum. You’ve been doin’ spectacular things all your life—nothing’s going to stop you from keepin’ on doing that. I mean shite, when I’m all ‘fully-formed grown up’? If I’m half as incredible as you, Baldy’s gonna have to grow hair and rip it out of his scalp ‘cuz the Elveh-na-na-na-na’s old fake gods people done broke out of the Fade and are blessing me for some reason.”

Oh, Maker, “Sera, I do hope you are aware that I love you. I mean truly,” Cassandra said, taking the girl’s hand. “You are already a remarkable young woman, and I am so very proud of you.”

“Oh friggin’ whatever!” the girl half heartedly snapped, blushing fiercely. “I just- I’m supposed to be cheerin’ you up!”

“You’ve accomplished cheering me a great deal.”

“You’re still not eating,” Sera complained. Ahh. She supposed lacking appetite was a symptom of melancholy.

So, Cassandra took up the offered plate, fork already sticking into a roasted potato she raised to her lips and took a bite of, offering up a small smile of thanks for good measure.

She did smile more, in good humor, when she joined the others outside the tent—for one thing there was no tomfoolery at hand, as though they were all endeavoring to be on their best behavior as to not irk the Seeker. Vivienne wasn’t one to cause issue, though she usually made some pithy comment about Cole’s proximity and the boy was currently seated practically over her shoulder as he watched with fascination the process through which Marehis was assisting the woman in a manicure. Varric? The man had taken it upon himself to sit and play chess with Thom Rainier—there was not even coin on the board and the man liked displaying just how much was at stake, so Cassandra could assume there was none, it was purely a game…just…to play the game. Solas was sitting apart from them all, meditating. And then of course, by the fire there laid the Iron Bull and Dorian, the two speaking quietly, in hushed tones as to not wake the utterly exhausted girl sprawled out on the Qunari’s chest.

“Is Eleanor well, Solas?”

Everyone kept being about their business even as Cassandra joined them, spoke. Their eyes went to her, she was certain, but it was Solas alone who answered, opening his eyes to say,

“The Inquisitor is fine—fatigued, sore. I am holding congress as I can with her magic, as is Master Pavus more directly, ensuring it is well.”

“…something wrong with Inky’s magic?” Sera asked.

“It would be wise for…Cole, or any who would join her in the Fade,” Solas spoke ambiguously as to not announce Sera’s ability to do so to the rest of the group, “to avoid doing as such until we’ve given the all clear.”

“She reached out with her magic to help that—” Dorian sighed, frustrated and his lover gave him a nod so the Tevinter man rose to his feet and stretched, drawing nearer to Cassandra and Sera
to speak so he did not rouse Eleanor. “She thought she might be able to rid that Daniel fellow of the
demon tormenting him. She did…ease its hold, how painful it was for him, to some degree. The
demon died or, er, returned to the Fade, once the Seeker passed, but it left something dark latched
to Eleanor’s magic.”

“Shite,” Sera breathed, “is that bad? That sounds bad!”

"It’s the equivalent of a magical sore or battling a cold,” Dorian assured as if that were some
point of relief. And true, Cassandra supposed it could be worse but she did not like the girl having
an actual cold, never mind a magical one.

It meant the girl relied on her other areas of fighting experience as they made the return trip
to Skyhold, tired more easily with her magic still expelling its own energy ridding itself of
whatever darkness had clung to it. And she was…well, she was normally around Cassandra more
often than not, but she rode with the woman on the way home, was constantly with her, idly
following her wherever she went…which meant Dorian and Vivienne became more present in the
Seeker’s orbit, the pair of them taking every available opportunity when the girl was still to sit with
her and commune with her magic, assist it. She was not very talkative in the slightest which…

“Okay. It’s quiet as fuck around here,” Varric complained their second afternoon on the road
to Skyhold. Eleanor had fallen asleep in the saddle before Cassandra, “is the kid possessed or
something? She’s acting weirder than Cole—no offense bud,” the Dwarf assured the Spirit.

“I am not offended,” Cole assured serenely from the saddle he shared with Sera, seated
before her, her chin resting on his shoulder so she could see to steer their steed. “I am weird and
that is good!”

“HECK yeah it is, Cuddly!” Sera encouraged, hugging the boy to her a bit more tightly.

“Has she said jack-all today?” Varric asked. “She didn’t even say good morning!”

“She is concentrating, Dwarf,” Vivienne drawled snippily, “It is no simple thing, she is not
possessed, she is keeping herself from as much, a feat which requires her full focus. Do forgive her
for not dropping that focus for pleasanntries.”

“I’m not complaining to be a dick about it!” Varric snapped, “I’m worried.”

So was Cassandra, admittedly. It was disconcerting, to say the least, having the girl mute and
dazed, her attention only garnered during the occasional attack from bandits or wildlife, wandering
almost listlessly after Cassandra like some somehow lifeless animated doll. Solas assured them
Eleanor was well—of her own mind, and would be soon rid of any trace of demonic poison on her
magic, he could do little more than monitor her, and Cole was capable of doing that. Still,
Cassandra hoped the girl was more herself before the Elf man left them—they would be in
Skyhold tomorrow. Solas had already broken off from their group, to report to the Hinterlands to
aid the refugee effort there for however long it was until next he was called into the field once
more. Given they were uncertain just when that would be, there was the possibility the man may
not even make it all the way to the Hinterlands before he was called back, but inconvenience was
part of the punishment, after all.

And then that evening, as Cassandra prepared for bed, the shadow she had in Eleanor fell
into her bedroll with her, the girl snuggling up against her, eyes closed as she hugged the
Seeker. Cassandra sighed softly, content as she ran a hand through the girl’s hair, and while she
didn’t expect a reply,
“Good night, sleep pleasantly, sweet girl,” she murmured, dropping a kiss to her hair as she settled comfortably with the girl’s weight against her.

“He loved you very much mami,” Eleanor said quietly, her voice so very small, “Daniel. He was glad he saw you before he died and he thought about you celebrating after his Vigil. You said it was one of the best moments of your life—going through your Vigil, the moment you made it through. His was the moment he came out of the Vigil hall and you were there waiting for him—you were so proud of him and that made him proud of himself. You helped him to his room, and he was exhausted but so excited he couldn’t sleep and you stayed up with him, talking. He thought you were amazing, looked up to you, kind of like how we look up to you? Sera and me,” she sniffled, chin quivering a bit as she pressed her face against Cassandra’s shoulder.

“Eleanor, what—how do you—”

“It’s just stuff I saw,” she shrugged. “I thought maybe if I could get rid of the demon in him, he’d be able to get help, we could stabilize him with potion and get him out of there, but um…” she sniffled, “I couldn’t. I tried, but all I could manage was to kind of…quiet the demon. Make it so Daniel could think without feeling what the demon was doing to him. He died thinking about how you smiled when he came out of his Vigil. He wanted you to know that*.”

Oh. Oh Maker. Mentoring Daniel had been struggle, not unlike her initial time with Eleanor—their time together made her feel closer to Antony in a way, taking on similar a role of guidance as her brother once had for her, it pressed pain that made pure her resolve to see him complete his training with success, become a Seeker of Truth. She’d never grown quite so open as she’d come to be in her time in the Inquisition—she’d never spoken to the man of her pride, her regard for him. She was relieved that even if she never said the words, that knowledge still got through to him, and it felt like a balm soothing an ache knowing his final thoughts, that he did not die regretting his decision to become a Seeker, regret knowing her. Cassandra cleared her throat, eyes stinging with tears as she sniffled and said, “Thank you, Eleanor.”

“Inky?” Sera’s voice sounded as she came into the tent, rubbing at her wet hair with a towel, she smiled when Eleanor shifted a bit, looked upward to her, a sign she was present and engaged, no longer dazed, “Hey sweets, you feeling better?”

Eleanor nodded, yawning, “Yeah, my magic feels like it’s all mine again.”

Sera let out a happy whoop at that, sliding on her knees to join them and laying on her stomach, on top of them, Cassandra huffed as the Elf girl buried her face partially against the Seeker’s neck and partially against Eleanor’s hair, “Good! Friggin’ missed you, Ink!”

“I missed you too,” the girl said, sincerely, “gosh, that was kind of crazy. We’re…are we on the road to Skyhold? Or are we already on our way to the Western Approach? Is Corypheus dead? What year is this?”

Mildly jesting at the end, but the girl genuinely had precious little recollection of their time since leaving Caer Oswin. She seemed startled but relieved they’d be in Skyhold come morning.

“I’ve been really out of it—I promise I’ll go to bed soon mami, but there’s some paperwork things I should really catch up on first.”

“Would you care for assistance, Eleanor?” She’d made great strides with reading comprehension, writing on her own, but she did still sometimes seek guidance in expanding her vocabulary—either to say something she wished to say ‘fancier’ or to understand words she’d not encountered before that she couldn’t figure out from context. Cassandra would gladly stay up with
The girl just smiled, leaning forward to press a kiss to the Seeker’s cheek and said, “Nope! I’ve got it—you get some good sleep!” before she rocked back to somersault backward to land on her knees and rise, leaving the tent, passing Marehis on her way out and hugging the woman in greeting and farewell before wishing her sweet dreams.

The women admittedly did not sleep until Eleanor rejoined them, but whatever work Eleanor had found so pressing must not have been that great a task—she was gone all of an hour. She was out of their tent for ten minutes before Marehis whispered she could hear the girl offering pleasantries to a messenger bird, wishing it safe flight, and then Cassandra felt herself drifting off when she heard the flutter of wings, a bird crying to get Eleanor’s attention…and then it was sent off again before Eleanor was tiptoeing back into their tent, tripping on the edge of the entrance and catching herself on her hands and knees,

“Shh!” the girl hissed quietly…at the offending fabric she’d tripped over, Cassandra supposed, before she crawled back into Cassandra’s bedroll. The woman kept her eyes closed, feigning sleep, though she did pull the girl closer to hold as she fell asleep. Sera had made a point to sleep alongside her since Caer Oswin, and she snuggled against the Seeker’s back.

Cole…did not forthrightly say he’d influence on Cassandra’s dreams, but she found that at any point, if her sleeping mind did take her to back to the courtyard of Caer Oswin, when she reached the crimson doors that led to the hall where Daniel perished, they always opened to reveal Skyhold, or snow-filled Haven, some pleasant memory of time with Cullen, or making play with Eleanor in the snow on her birthday.

She still had not so much as turned the cover of the Order’s book by the time they rode into Skyhold. She would…eventually. She would need to, certainly to more accurately report on just what happened, why Lucius was sent to madness.

But she should settle in, a bit. They would regroup and assess when and how to move forward with the Wardens, and she really should see how the Templars fared in this last bit of absence, and Cullen—she should make certain he was well.

She’d a great many things to do! She would get to it. She would.

Eleanor had finished the streak of riding with Cassandra, though the moment they were within Skyhold’s walls the girl was out of her saddle, startling Cassandra, Maker, she would have slowed down! She wasn’t sure if she appreciated or could curse Rainier for his training Eleanor to safely drop from a steed in motion—such a feat was meant to used in emergencies!

“Papi!” the girl called, rushing forward the meet the man, “I love you! I missed you! Corypheus is ruining, like, the entire world, I have to go fifty-bajillion-thousand miles away again soon so I’m already pre-missing you and I want to hug you so prepare yourself!”

…perhaps it was an emergency of a sort.

Cullen looked weary but relieved, grinning as he opened his arms for the girl and readily accepted her as she jumped up, wrapping her arms around his neck, her legs wrapping around his middle as she enacted her full-body hug. The Commander wrapped an arm to support her, a hand carding through her hair,

“Oh sweetheart, I’m glad you’re home safe,” he breathed, “I am sorry Corypheus is ruining, like, the entire world. We’ll set it right,” the man promised, pressing a kiss to her hair before he
pulled back, Eleanor maintaining her hold even as she leaned back to look up at him as he said, “Your orders were received and will be enacted in full this evening.”

“Did the supplies come?”

“Yes—they’re…the same kind they use in Chantry, should I feel strange about using them?”

“Nah, she’ll like them even more I think?”…’she’ who would like what? “Chantry was just the fastest place I could think of that would take ‘hey! Herald of Andraste, I need like a hundred of these yesterday, thank you and be blessed’ on such short notice. You found the book you wanted?”

“I did. I appreciate your planning.”

“You’re the one who planned everything, I just helped a bit because I love you and support your goals,” Eleanor said, dropping off the man and saying, “I’m going to see Josie—Hawke and Stroud are in, right?” Cullen nodded. “Good! Mami! I’m going to mi Tia’s office and I may or may not also be on the look-out for my boyfriend so I can kiss his face—you’re welcome to join me or shadow or whatever, I’m just keeping you appraised to my schedule.”

For a moment Cassandra thought the girl was speaking to her, but of course, her bodyguard ‘mami’ was the one she was referencing. “Certainly da’vehnan—if I see your boyfriend I will certainly point him out to you so you can stay on schedule,” the Elf woman giggled as she followed after the girl already ascending the courtyard stairs.

“Tall daughter! Sera!” Cullen called, “You’re alive and well I trust?”

The Elf girl snorted, handing Russel’s reins over to one of the stablehands collecting their horses before she rushed to Cullen and gave the Human man a bracing hug. “Hiya! I’m still kickin’. Sorry um…that you sent those soldiers to Verchel and it sort of blew up with that Lord bastard.”

“You’re hardly to blame,” Cullen said, brushing the girl’s hair back out of her face, “Lord Bastard was entirely at fault—you wanted to help those people, and we did, hopefully things will be better for them moving forward. I’m pleased to have helped you, sweetheart.”

Sera blushed at that, seeming embarrassed at the man’s open affection, though she smiled, “Thanks.”

“Anything for my most wonderful child—you’re not abandoning me to go kiss some boy’s face, are you?”

“’course not…” Sera breezed, “I am abandoning you to go kiss my girlfriends faces though.”

Cullen sighed with put-upon disappointment, “Oh if you must,” he lamented, kissing the girl on the forehead, “Go on—have fun with Miss Lace and Dagna…do try to make certain your newer girlfriend does not cheerily blow up Skyhold? She was working on something earlier when I was in the smiths and it looked over-all concerning.”

“Can’t make any promises,” Sera cackled before bounding up the stairs toward the tavern in search of Harding, Cassandra supposed, the woman could often be found there when she was in Skyhold.

“Lady Seeker,” Cullen greeted with warm politeness, smiling as he turned his attention to her, “I would ask how your trip went but I’ve received two…three? Possibly five different letters on your more recent developments.”
“Possibly five?”

“Eleanor wrote me just last night, and Sera twice before her, Marehis, and there was also… Madam de Fer has never made it a point to write me, but a few days ago she did see fit to do so, casually reporting on your time in Caer Oswin—base facts we needed, that you arrived, discovered the fates of our Scouts and the Seekers, and Lord Lucius was alive but now currently isn’t—so we aren’t to pester you for the finer details unless you care to share them.”

Huh. That was…unexpectedly kind of the Grand Enchanter. “Of course…I am always here, to listen, whenever you are ready,” Cullen quietly assured, taking her hands in his as he drew near.

“Thank you,” she offered back, not quite certain just what to say beyond that. She would discuss it, certainly, just…she was still on the precipice between numb acceptance, and unrelenting grief, and there was likely a healthier peak she should endeavor to reach before spilling her truth on the matter.

But she needn’t say anything she supposed, the man dropped his voice to conspire, moving on to, “Eleanor may have dropped a hint or two you could do with a break. I would hope you’re capable of clearing your schedule this evening?”

Truly? Had this ‘hint dropping’ and mysterious ordering of candles the important work Eleanor just had to see to before bed? “…I suppose that could be arranged,” she allowed. It was easy, in fact, her schedule was wholly cleared.

Ugh, it should not be so very impactful, make her vital organs flutter of all things, just because he smiled warmly, one that met his eyes as he said, “Excellent. Would you cross Skyhold’s bridge around say…six o’clock?”

They would be leaving the premises? She would make certain Eleanor knew they would be gone, that she’d no need of them, but, “Certainly.”

“Dress warmly—it will be chilly. But I’m certain we can stay warm, and there will be sustenance where we’re going.”

“Which is…?”

“A surprise of the highest secrecy,” he assured her, “you’ve not the security clearance I’m afraid.”

That sorted she supposed, she’d business to attend that would keep her mind occupied. She’d several reports from Barris waiting for her on the desk in her quarters—Cassandra, at Eleanor’s leave, had the man run point on several missions since their time in Skyhold, two of which had been handled in her recent absence, as well as updates from Leliana, Josephine. A note from the elder Alassi, Tonio, a polite welcome back, wishing her well and hoping her journey had been safe.

There was also a small plate from the kitchens, with a single blueberry pastry atop it, and a note—Heard you were incoming and they just so happened to be making these for dessert in the kitchens—Cole said a while back, that they were your favorite so I snagged a few. Welcome back. – Krem

Snagged a few? He’d left her one, and perhaps eaten the other himself, there was just the faintest thumbprint on the edge of the note, made by a hand with blueberry filling clinging to its fingers. They were not necessarily her favorite but…they were delicious, held a bit of sentimental
value she supposed. The Spirit had caught her once when she passed through the kitchens when they’d made such a treat before and the scent reminded her of Antony’s smile—her brother sharing a similar pastry with her. She’d been on her way to a meeting and when it was through, there’d been none of the pastry left, Cole offered to retrieve some for her, she’d refused at the time. It was heartening, that the Lieutenant had thought of her. Sweeter still to have somewhat shared the dessert with him.

And it tided her over, gave her a boost of sugar to put to use seeing to her correspondence, crossing Skyhold to lay eyes on her Templar recruits proper, hear from them directly, about their recent successes in Ansburg and Jader, getting a feel for...the bit of politics that might come to bear in future. From what she heard from Barris’s fellow Templars, the man was well respected, idolized...and she supposed that was reasonable.

There had been Demon Horrors rampaging in Ansburg, and a rumored Abomination in Jader—what a horrible mess that was, it could have been so much worse without Barris’s cool-headedness, he’d calmed the masses claiming some poor boy was an Abomination and realized he was merely a Mage, newly coming into his powers, the Templars made rescue of him and Barris gently explained just what was happening to the young man, and offering him a place with the Inquisition—he could train with their mages, learn to control his powers under their guidance.

And before Ansburg and Jader, there had been Val Colline—Venatori assaulted the place, raiding it, and Barris led their Templars, took the town back and initiated the relief effort the Inquisition was still enacting, helping Val Colline rebuild.

All in all...she’d a letter of recommendation heading for Eleanor’s desk—for Barris’s promotion.

One she penned very carefully, letting it consume her focus for the better part of an hour...

It should not bother here there were still two entire hours before she was to meet Cullen. Rediculous! She- she could read! Or pray, or train, or- there was any number of things she could occupy her time with other than a man!

Oh she wanted to know just where they were going and what he had planned and she wanted to already be spending time with him. What was he so busy doing?

Likely something important. It was foolishness, the impatience she felt, it not unlike some hormonal teenagers whining, honestly!

...truly.

Cassandra had no further duties to attend, so, she decided to stretch her legs further, hand deliver her letter of recommendation to Eleanor’s quarters herself, guards were posted which meant Eleanor was in and Marehis may be off elsewhere...the girl had not been alone since their first evening in Caer Bronach, so worry did tick in the back of Cassandra’s mind, in her chest, that Eleanor may be alone now...would she be alone this evening?

...perhaps, but she was not alone now, apparently.

There was just the faintest sound the Seeker could hear, of Eleanor giggling just before Cassandra knocked on the door, and once the woman did knock there was something of a ruckus—a gasp and then a crash and Eleanor shrieking which was alarming enough to send the Seeker throwing open the door and calling, “Eleanor?” as she began ascending the stairs.
“Guapo!” Eleanor hissed in quiet, giggly reprimand before calling down, “Hola mami! Como estas?”

...she wasn’t sure but she’d been around Eleanor and Lady Montilyet enough that she was vaguely certain it was a form of pleasantry, “I’m well,” Cassandra said as she came to the top of the stairs...to find Eleanor grinning and mischievous, blushing or...perhaps it was more she was flushed, recovering her breath. She was seated on the bed, legs criss-cross, hair partially out of the bun Marehis had worked it into earlier.

“Lieutenant,” Cassandra greeted, albeit amusedly, the young man trying so hard for nonchalance, casually leaning against the fireplace, a great distance from his girlfriend...who had recently found a love of moisturizing lip balm that tinted her lips just a slightly darker shade of pink than they were naturally—Cremisius Aclassi was not one for makeup, and his lips were currently looking a bit more shiny, faint lip prints on his neck just beneath his jaw and trailing down. Well then, “I trust I’m not intruding?” she asked.

Eleanor’s chirpy, “Nope!” overlapped Krem’s, “Of course not!”

“Certainly,” Cassandra chuckled. “I apologize—I was just bringing something for Eleanor’s consideration when she has the time.”

“Oh, don’t mind me, I was just about to get going myself,” the Lieutenant said, and at Eleanor’s giggle he defended, “I was!” before he crossed the room...again...to capture Eleanor’s smiling lips in a chaste kiss, “I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“It’s a date!” the girl enthused, bouncing a bit in place with her excitement as the young man left her.

“Have a pleasant evening, Cassandra, I’m glad you’re back safe,” he offered sincerely as he came to the stairs, Cassandra stopping him just a moment,

“Thank you,” she said, raising her empty hand to wipe the bit of lip stain—just that which was on his lips—in case...well, it might be discomforting for him—Dorian was very much a man and he dabbled in the use of eyeliner, lip balm, and she was certain she’d seen him applying some sort of shimmery something or other to his forehead, his cheekbones so they shone when the light struck him just right—but Cremisius didn’t, to her knowledge, and from what he’d offered up of his past, it may be disconcerting if he caught himself in the mirror with any semblance of being made up as he used to be forced to.

He blushed a bit, smiling, “Thanks.”

“Thank you for the pastry—I do hope we’ve time to catch up this stint in Skyhold.”

“Father was actually hoping you and Cullen, Ellie and Marehis would join us for breakfast tomorrow.”

“I would be glad to,” Cassandra assured, “I’m not certain of the Commander’s schedule but I’m sure—“

“You and papi will be back!” Eleanor volunteered cheerily, smiling even wider somehow, Maker.

“Will we? From where?”

“Uhhh...I dunno!” Eleanor insisted.
“You don’t?” Cassandra questioned, doubtfully.

“Gosh, you know I think my Conclave amnesia is bleeding over into all the C’s in my life, I can’t remember a single thing about my papi Cullen’s plans tonight or yours or,” Eleanor looked up to the Lieutenant, “oh my goodness! Who are you, you devastatingly handsome stranger, and what are you doing in my room?!”

The young man chuckled, shaking his head, “I was just leaving—no worries, I’m sure you’ll have your memories back by tomorrow... of the people in your life with C-names at least,” he blithely assured.

“You know,” Eleanor said, “I haven’t the slightest clue who you are or what you’re talking about, but you’re so dashing I believe you!”

“Have fun with her,” Krem offered Cassandra, patting her on the bicep as he passed, descending the stairs, “Cullen too!” These children!

Ugh. She would. Once she knew where they were going and what they were doing.

Which it seemed, she would be discovering, as it happened. Ahh well.

“I’ll not interrogate you further,” she promised the girl.

“Good! You have something for me?” Eleanor wondered.

“I do.”

The girl gasped in delighted surprise, going for theatrical as she asked, “Is it another puppy? Oh Anya will be just jealous!”

“It is not another puppy,” Cassandra assured, waving the sealed letter she held in hand, “It is nothing you need to look at right away, just whenever you’re doing paperwork next, do try to give it notice.” Though she did wonder, “Where is Anya?”

Eleanor thrust out a hand, beckoning for her to, “Gimme, gimme!” so, Cassandra passed off the letter and took a seat on the edge of the girl’s bed, which admittedly felt warmer than she’d expected- oh, huh. There was a blanket Cassandra didn’t recognize, silken evergreen material with runes she did recognize as those for fire enchantments uniformly embroidered along it in golden thread. When the woman smoothed a hand along it Eleanor beamed, offering, “It’s a gift from Cremisius!” she explained first as she slipped her thumb under the sealed edge to brake open the letter as she explained, “Anya’s with Noam*.” ...Noam? Cassandra’s confusion must have been visible, “Noam Willit—our newest mage! Anya warmed right up to him, started following him everywhere and so Delrin wrote me and asked if it was okay that Anya was hanging around him so much, if I minded her sleeping in the mages’ quarters and things like that—he’d make sure she was being fed and stuff. Noam was so withdrawn when he first got to Skyhold, he’s so shy and scared, being a new Mage, he’d a rough time of it, figuring it all out and everyone in his life turning on him because they thought he was an abomination, but having Anya around makes him feel safer, calmer, and she likes him lots! I met him today—he’s sweet.”

Ahh. The Mage who had been declared an abomination their Templars had rescued. It was certainly understandable the young man would be suffering anxiety from such an event. “It is sweet of you, to lend him Anya’s assistance, I know you miss her.”

Eleanor shrugged, “She’s a strong independent woman—if she wants to sleep with him now that I’m back, she can, I don’t mind, she knows where I am when I’m here,” she said, looking over
Cassandra’s letter, she felt mildly silly sitting here while the girl did so, but it was the appropriate channel—the letter of recommendation would be part of what certified his promotion if Eleanor deemed to give him one, which, “Oh my gosh! Of course!” Eleanor answered immediately, “That’s so great!”

“You approve, I take it?” Cassandra asked.

“Uh-huh! Yeah, I’ll sign off on this—there’s like a ceremony or something right?”

“Certainly, it would be similar to when you seat yourself in judgement—we would call Barris and the Templars into the Great Hall and Cullen and myself will speak, announce the promotion, and then you will speak to your approval, anything you care to say about his service, and then swear him in.”

“I can use my throne for promotions? I should do that more often!” Eleanor enthused, “Do you want a promotion mami?”

“I believe I’ll pass.”

“Ookay,” Eleanor said, as if to say ‘if you say so’, smiling as she said, “Do0oo you want help getting ready?”

“You will not tell me where I am going?”

“Nope!”

“Very well,” Cassandra sighed. “Cullen advised me to dress warmly.”

“Your armors good but maybe drop the metal plating? You won’t need them, Cremi—” the girl slapped her hands over her mouth.

You won’t need them Cremi—Cremisius what? “…Eleanor?”

“Cremisius…is a wonderful and handsome boyfriend. I just, you know, love him so much I talk about it randomly—“

“Eleanor! You haven’t the slightest clue where Cullen is taking me,” Cassandra accused, in almost proud disbelief, “you- you misdirected me so I would not interrogate your ‘wonderful and handsome boyfriend’. Honestly!” These horrible, terrible sneaky children! The sentiment included Cullen!

“He didn’t tell me where, but it’s close by, and Papi asked Cremisius to help him make sure it’s cleared out of, you know,” Eleanor shrugged, “bandits, wildlife, anything that might interrupt, and help him set everything up.”

Cassandra shook her head. “Very well. I shall go without metal plating this evening then, I suppose.”

Eleanor nodded, a hopeful smile at her lips as she asked, “…can I do your hair?”

… “I suppose that would be appreciated.”

“Yay!” the girl cheered, rising to her feet on the bed and taking bouncing steps off to go fetch a hairbrush she meticulously cleared of hair before racing back over to Cassandra, sitting behind her on the bed and unpinning her braid so it fell from being wrapped around her head.
“You’ve got the prettiest hair! I love it!” she enthused as she ran her hands through Cassandra’s hair to loosen it out of its braid, combing lightly at the tips to rid it of tangles before pulling back a portion of her hair on either side of her face, binding it at the back of her head with a hair tie.

“So your hair’s all flowy and down but like, out of your beautiful face! Mwah!” she adorned Cassandra’s scarred cheek with a kiss as she scooted off the bed and stood before the woman, “Do you trust me? I promise I wouldn’t burn you, Vivienne taught me this little trick for styling hair with magic—calling the warmth of fire into my hand and using that to manipulate your hair’s shape and making it stay put. Can I use that on your bangs?”

“Of course,” Cassandra allowed, Eleanor’s hand did seem to be radiating warmth as she took the end of Cassandra’s bangs between her middle and ring fingers, pulling gently to press the back of her index and middle finger against the hair she was pulling taut, and after a moment she released it and then ran her fingers along the hair so it spread evenly. When she was permitted to rise and look in a mirror, her bangs no longer lay flat against her forehead, but curved softly over it, her hair in loose waves around her shoulders, down her back…it was certainly a much softer look than what she was used to sporting. And it was…nice. a different sort of fierce, there could be strength and power in softness, she’d learned.

“Gosh mami, you’re always beautiful but papi’s going to be like—super wowed!”

“Well, he’s endeavoring to surprise me, I suppose it’s only just I do the same likewise,” Cassandra said, pulling the girl against her, “Thank you, Eleanor. You will be well, this evening? Do you have any plans?”

“Girls night!” Eleanor informed her. “Lady Josie needs cheering up so Leliana and me, we’re all getting together.”

“Is the Ambassador alright?” Cassandra worried.

“She’ll be okay, she’s just got some personal things going on right now—we’ll have a meeting tomorrow to discuss our itinerary but I’m going to Val Royeaux this week.”

“Val Royeaux?”

“Uh-huh! For Lady Josie.”

Goodness. To think the girl once balked at the journey to Orlais for fear of it being ‘like a million miles away’. “Well, we’ll discuss everything tomorrow then. I trust you’ll have a pleasant evening—Cremisius knows where we are, as does Cole, I’m sure, if you’ve need of us, send for us, is that clear?”

“Si mami, I’ll be fine—don’t worry about anything, go have lots and lots of fun!” Eleanor, upon checking the time, started pushing at Cassandra gently, ushering her toward the stairs, “Enjoy yourself!” she smiled mischievously, before swatting—she swatted the woman on the behind! Encouraging, “Bring me home a baby sibling!”

“Eleanor!”

“What-anor! I’m just saying—get it!”

Get- Maker most high, help her, preserve her, and guard this horrible, precious child.

Bring home a- honestly!
She might not even— it was not as if they were insatiable, wanton, maniacs. They did not have
to carry on at every available opportunity like teens mimicking heat! Even if she and Cullen were
so inclined to make love, it would be safely done! Like adults!

Though… if they made love ventured ever-nearer to, *if Cullen was so inclined she would bed
him in the wilderness,* very quickly.

The sun had all but set, the last glimmers of it disappearing as Cassandra, dressed warmly,
hair ridiculous but pretty (Varric Tethras approved, whistling and doing some nonsense shooting
motion with his fingers when she passed him on her way out of Eleanor’s quarters), crossed the
bridge from Skyhold’s gate. Alone, unescorted. Which was certainly no trouble, but she did expect
the man to meet her at the bridges end…and that was not so.

What awaited Cassandra, was candlelight. Round, white, sweetly scented candles lit a path
into the darkness, off of the road from the bridge, so she followed it. It would either lead her to
Cullen, or someone with his boots who walked this path setting candles in their wake.

…a path of candles that led to a circle of candlelight that Cassandra was surprised and albeit
confused to find empty.

And then it was full of Cullen’s voice, as the man stepped out from behind a tree, an open
book cradled in the palm of his hand from which he recited,

“On aching branch do blossoms grow, the wind a hallowed breath,”

…it is, is it?

“It carries the scent of honeysuckle, sweet as the lover’s kiss.”

The woman raised her hands to cover her mouth, uncertain if she were shocked, or about to
grin unbearably—she gently pushed the man as he passed her, making a spectacle of himself,
pacing as if he were on some grand stage as opposed to some stretch of woods he’d made private
for them. Maker help them the man was reciting poetry. About- heavens! She would never!

Once! When Cullen was very tense and she thought it was adequate reward for his own
generosity with her just the morning before.

“It brings the promise of more tomorrows, of sighs and whispered bliss!” he proclaimed, a
hand raised high as he went on with his dramatics,

And then he swept around and knelt before her and Cassandra would slay the man if he
dared so much as think of producing anything resembling a ring, Maker help her nervous-pounding
heart.

“You can’t be serious,” she offered, finding her voice.

“I can, and I am.”

“And *that* is the poem you chose?”

The man smirked! Returned her snark and sarcasm with, “Do you have a better one in
mind?”

…perhaps, perhaps not. She took the book he held out, in her own hands, examining the
page. Huh, perhaps it did suit, just not from Cullen’s perspective. “*Carmenum di Amatus?”* she
questioned, impressed for the fact that, “I thought this one was banned?” most Tevene literature was, in the south.

…of course there were a number of Tevinters at hand. One in particular, with a penchant for the literary-

“Dorian’s recommendation.”

Hmm, well the Altus would enjoy the Commander’s reading such a thing aloud. An attempt at a bit of mean fun at Cullen’s expense, like a prank—recommending Cullen read an albeit smutty poem written from the perspective of a man about his male lover. Tonight however… Cassandra found it fitting, so long as she stepped in, the found purchase, leaning against a tree, holding the book comfortably in one hand, the other resting at her breast—returning the Commander’s favor for an earnest performance as she read, “His lips on mine speak words not voiced, a prayer,” her eyes followed Cullen as the man passed her by, winding a path around the tree, she listened for him as her gaze returned to the page, “Which travels down my spine like flames that shatter night. His eyes reflect the heaven’s stars, the Maker’s light. My body opens, filled and blessed, my spirit there.”

Just the barest sound of his footfalls behind her, warm breath on the back of her neck,

“Not merely housed in flesh,” he recited from memory, whispered, “but brought to life.”

Well then.

“Shall we read another?” Cullen wondered quietly playful, eyes alight with amusement and something Cassandra only saw there when he looked at her, something that wanted and waited for her to satisfy it.

And so she did, casting the book aside in poor fashion she may feel badly for later if it is damaged, but that was not her most current concern. Cullen had no Eleanor to recommend he leave metal plating for the field of battle, not the field he converted into something of a bedroom, clasps seemed all the more tricky when you desperately wanted them undone.

The man had not been lying when he spoke of sustenance before. He did intend a picnic, once they got around to it—Cassandra had not found herself ravaged on the forest floor…there was a blanket, thick and warm they laid upon, nearly fell asleep upon all said and done. Maker, she’d not- she had never before indulged in such a relationship—one with quite so much open closeness, and certainly not one that…she’d had clear, concise lays, in the past. ‘We will meet here, at this specific time, for this exact amount of time, and go our separate ways’. This was…walking into a situation with the resolve that they might not do anything more than be in each other’s presence tonight, and all of five minutes later all bets, and clothes, are off. It was admittedly terrifying, in its own respect, to want someone in such a way that it was all consuming when it wished to be, logic and forethought be damned. It was…

The very sort of thing she had read about, in her many books. It was the very thing she’d sought, wanted from a relationship if she so chose to commit to one. If she was going to pursue such a thing—a continuous, committed, romantic relationship—it had better be the ideal romance
and nothing less.

This felt very ideal, and something more.

There was a gentle tap of index finger against her forehead, Cullen’s eyes peering into hers as he smiled warmly, amusedly, “You…are thinking way to hard about something. Whatever is on your mind?”

“I am not thinking hard,” she assured him. “I’m merely thinking.”

“Intensely,” he argued.

“Actively,” she corrected. “Would you prefer me capable only of the occasional passive thought?”

“Perish the thought,” he whispered, chuckling lowly before he smiled against her lips, a gentle kiss he pulled away from with, “Anything you care to share?” he wondered gently, brushing the back of his hand down the line of her cheek, she indulged in pressing a kiss to the palm of his hand before drawing closer to settle in, resting against his chest.

“I love you.”

“I love you,” he returned sincerely, dropping a kiss to her hair before saying, “…you seemed mildly panicked earlier, when I knelt? That I might be offering you jewelry?”

…”I was not panicked-“ she defended, ugh, his laughter shook her slightly, and he pressed his lips against the top of her head as if to hide his smile, though she could very well fell it as he took a moment before assuring,

“I’d not a ring in mind…not presently. But I would like to gift you something.”

“…is it a puppy?”

“Mmm…no, but do not tempt me,” he warned, offering like conspiracy, “I find Skyhold’s mabari-cat ratio disconcerting,” he grinned when she huffed, and pressed on, “No, actually, what I had in mind…was this.”

…she was not certain where on his person he’d just retrieved the item was, they were both wholly naked, and yet he had some sort of coin in his hand, showing it to her.

“Do you presume to pay me for my services?” it did not even look like proper currency.

“Oh, Maker- I did not mean to insinuate-“ he sighed when he realized she was teasing, ”I’m not even sure it’s of any worth,” he explained, “save sentimental.”

“I did not mean to make mockery,” Cassandra quietly assured, raising a hand to trace a finger along the token in Cullen’s hand, “it has sentimental value?”

“I love my brother and sisters but…they can be very loud. I used to escape to this dock on a lake near our home, this perfect, peaceful place I could always go to clear my head. No matter my anxieties, whatever burden, I could go there and for a time, everything could fade away,” a rueful grin quirked at his lips as he drawled, “of course, my siblings always found me.” Ahh. “The day I left for Templar training, I went to that place, one last time in the event I may not get the chance to return to it. My brother found me, and he gave this to me,” he explained the coin, “It just happened to be in his pocket, but he said it was for luck. Templars, as you know, are not supposed to carry
such things. our faith should see us through.”

Cassandra could not help her smile, “You broke the Orders rules? Why Commander, I am shocked.”

“Until Kirkwall, I was very good at following them, most of the time. This was the only thing I took from Ferelden that the Templars didn’t give me,” he said, “You…you walk into danger every day, guarding Eleanor in the field. Every time you leave…well, it is hard, and it is always a blessing to have you safely return, but I do worry. I thought…perhaps, if you cared to indulge me, you having this, the token I’ve had on me—through…Kinloch Hold,” he spoke the name carefully. “Kirkwall, the Conclave, Haven’s fall. Well…”

“It has kept you remarkably safe, I should say,” Cassandra said, taking the coin in hand and examining it before closing her hand around it, “I’m certain at Eleanor’s side I’ll more than test its miracles.”

“Do your worst,” Cullen permitted, pressing a grateful kiss to her lips before he breathed his, “thank you. I know it isn’t real, but it is still a comfort to me.”

“Perhaps there will be a break of pace, and you’ll be able to journey to your peaceful place, that lake, find some reprieve from your worries.”

“Perhaps,” Cullen allowed, “though there is little need. I’ve rather a similar place here, to go to when I’ve need to clear my mind.”

“…you come here? To this clearing?” the place did seem well tamed, but they’d only just made certain of that, Cassandra thought.

“I’m speaking of the woman in the clearing, Cassandra,” the man assured, “you…are my peaceful place.”

“You…are utterly ridiculous,” Cassandra assured him likewise.

“Oh most certainly. That does not make it any less true,” he said, “…if I could ever offer you the same…just know, Cassandra that if you need me, I am here. I am always here, to listen, whenever you are ready.”

Ahh. ”Thank you, Cullen. Caer Oswin was difficult. I will decide how to move forward, and I appreciate that I can rely on you.”

“You are an incredible woman, and I’ve no doubt you will take this downfall to build something amazing. The Inquisition was ruin, the Divine who ordered it, dead, our only semblance of hope a strange mark on a young girl’s hand. We have all done our part but you, Cassandra, you did this. You kept the Inquisition together and moving forward in the face of Chantry backlash, and you have been there every step of the way, building what we have today. You, are unstoppable at whatever you put your mind to. So take the time you need, arm yourself with knowledge, and when you see what must be done, you will do it.”

“You will stop this instant, or I will…become emotional,” cry, embarrassingly enough, and she would not have it! “and you will have to be punished for it, and that would be poor, but necessary reward for your kindness.”

“It is not kindness. It is truth,” the man insisted as he sat up, Cassandra with him, and he pressed a kiss to her forehead, hand carding through her hair, “But it wouldn't do, to see you emotional,” he teased. “I wouldn’t want to risk falling out of such a beautiful woman’s good
graces. Have I told you that you look ravishing tonight?"

“You’ve expressed the sentiment in several ways this evening, save for words.”

“How neglectful of me—you are breathtaking,” he whispered, smile on his lips as he rose to his feet, leaving her momentarily as he sauntered, naked as the day he was born, to fetch a basket he’d left nearby, returning and armed with it, and another blanket he draped over Cassandra’s shoulders as he resumed his seat at her side. “And likely hungry, so, dinner is served,” he informed her, opening up the basket, first and foremost, handing her a…very lovely bouquet of pink roses. Andrasten, like the candles, though that did not mean they came from the Chantry—they were—they were costly, ridiculous things! *Beautiful*, and she was wholly flattered but- Maker!

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“Cullen!”

“Eleanor has a gardening friend from Val Royeaux—who just so happens to apprentice under Empress Celene’s Royal Botanist*. She wrote him, and he set me up in rather generous fashion.”

Well then…she supposed that sorted. She indulged in breathing in their sweet fragrance, petals soft against her nose before she favored the man a smile, teasing, “They are gorgeous, but they’re hardly an appetizer—dinner was served, you said?”

“I did, and it is—proper Orlesian style where the first course is always meant to merely be viewed and not eaten. Adapted with my Ferelden sensibilities—I find it a terrible waste to use food for it,” he pulled a covered tray out from the basked, “your second course, milady.”

Ahh. Cheese on points of toast, that Cassandra could certainly eat. “Wonderful,” she said, and she reaching out to rest a hand on the man’s knee, “Cullen—thank you.”

“Just wait ‘til you see what’s for dessert.”

“I am serious,” Cassandra insisted, curling up against him as they settled more comfortably for their meal, “this has been a welcome reprieve. Thank you, for thinking of me, arranging all of this.”

He wrapped an arm around her shoulders, pulling her closer, assuring, “You’re most certainly welcome.”

She’d missed Skyhold—she missed her family and her friends, her boyfriend, her puppy!

Papi was off getting ready for tonight probably, and mami had work to catch up on, Sera was chasing after her girlfriends and her boyfriend and her puppy were no where in sight…but she had mami Marehis! The ultimate bonus of having double mamis! There was always one around!

And double Aclassi men! Cremisius might be off in the wind, but that was fine—the Aclassi men got even better with age! Tonio Aclassi was better any day! At least until Cremisius was back in kissing range. But for now, Ellie could hear Tonio’s voice through the door from the Great Hall—the inner door to Josie’s office was wide open and Ellie just caught,

 “…troubling you, my lady. You have my ear—if I can be of any help whatsoever, I would.”
So she stopped right in her tracks, Marehis bumping into her and raising her hands to rest on her shoulders, but she so was not interrupting because she heard sniffling and,

“That is generous, Mister Alassi,” Lady Josie said, “you’ve been very kind. I apologize, I did not mean to— it has been a trying week.”

“Oh, do not trouble yourself—everyone deserves a good cry now and again.”

“Oh,” Josie sighed with some effort, through a sniffle, wiping at her eyes with her hands before fanning at her face, “I really must compose myself—Eleanor is set to return today and I would like a moment of her time if she can spare it. Oh, I cannot allow myself to be seen like this.”

“You are lovely as ever Lady Montilyet, you needn’t fret so.”

“You’re much too kind.”

“You’re much too hard on yourself.”

“Inquisitor!” a cheerful voice chirped, oh crap! Well not crap—Molly! She was the sweetest! But crap for getting caught—who put stairs to the basement and kitchens in this little nook between the great hall and Josie’s office?! Mythal, probably. Well Ellie was going to have some prayers for her later!

“Hiya Molls, I just got back—like just now, just got here, just this instant! Hi! Wow, you look super pretty today!”

The serving girl blushed at that, ducking her head shyly as she hugged the bundle of folded sheets in her arms a bit, “Thank you, my lady. I’m so pleased you’ve returned—do you need anything at all? I’m just running these up to Madam de Fer’s. She ordered it done before her return and she…scares me.”

“…then I’d run like, run! ‘cause we just got in and I’m not sure how long she’ll be chatting up people in the library—turn right at the top of the library stairs and go that way, she won’t see you if she’s talking to Enchanter Fiona.”

“Oh, Maker bless you,” the girl said, dipping a curtsy, “Have a wonderful day,” before scurrying off.

And then Mister Aclassi…after it sounded like he’d landed on his feet and crossed the room, like he’d been sitting up on Lady Josie’s desk, appeared in the doorway, blocking it more like, like he was trying to stall. “Eleanor! Oh bella, you’ve returned!”

“Hola Mister Alassi!” Ellie greeted cheerily, hugging the man—he was a good bit taller than her and she went along with giving Josie a bit more privacy so she didn’t tippy-toe it, just hugged him right around his middle, her face pressed against his chest before she pulled away, looking up at him, “How’ve you been? I missed you!”

“Oh my dear girl I missed you as well,” the man assured, looking flattered at the thought she’d missed him, awe! “I’ve been well, business has been growing splendidly—I’ve assistants now. Paid assistants whom I did not have to bring into this world myself and wait until they were higher than my knee to put to work!”

Ellie giggled at that, “Oh gosh, that’s so great! I’d love to meet them!”

“Certainly—please, do feel free to stop by my workshop any time my dear,” Tonio invited.
“Marehis, I’m pleased to see you’ve returned as well, you were safe?”

“As safe as my sweet girl,” Marehis answered truthfully, wrapping her arms around Ellie’s shoulders and swaying a bit as she smiled, “I’m glad to hear things are going well for you Mister Aclassi.”

“Oh do please call me Tonio—you’ve insisted I call you Marehis. Lady Pentghast is returned as well, yes? Cremisius is running an errand for her right now. Or, for the Commander I think…” he said as if he weren’t quite sure. “He rushed off from breakfast this morning after filling me in on the details but he was rather hurried about it.”

“Mami’s back too, yeah,” Ellie nodded. Gosh, that was so sweet of Cremisius! Boyfriend points he lost for not automatically knowing the instant she was in-range and impatient to kiss his dumb, handsome face were re-given, with bonus points! Helping papi! Helping papi woo Cassandra!

“Excellent! I was hoping perhaps the four of you would like to join Cremisius and myself for breakfast tomorrow morning?”

“Oh gosh, that sounds great!” oh! “Can we?” she checked with Marehis- oh, she might not feel like it’s polite to refuse to his face if she didn’t want to, but she seemed genuine as she said,

“Certainly da’vehnan—thank you, Tonio.”

“Of course,” he said, smiling wide, gosh! He looked so handsome—he was starting to look a lot healthier than he had when he first got to Skyhold, his color returned, hair seemed a bit thicker, and he had more fullness in his face.

Oh she wanted him and Josie together so bad! There was no way he was secretly a Dalish god!

…okay so much crazier things had happened since the Conclave, there was always at least a minor chance he could be. Heck, he could be the Maker incarnate at this point and it honestly wouldn’t faze her.

“Is that Eleanor?” Lady Josie asked, ready to be seen, Ellie supposed, there was the soft click of her heels against stone and the woman appeared at Tonio’s side, her eyes were just a little bit red but other than that, there wasn’t any sign she’d been crying as she smiled warmly, reaching out for Ellie, “Oh my Lady, I’m so pleased you’ve returned!”

“Hiya Josie! Gosh I missed you!” Ellie insisted, hugging the woman tight, little bit more effort because she was sad! And Ellie was going to, in the least nosey way possible, figure out how to help her! She pressed a kiss to the woman’s cheek before pulling away and saying, “Gosh you look so beautiful today!”

“Thank you, Eleanor, you’re lovely likewise,” the Antivan woman assured, blushing a bit at the compliment. “Are you here to see me by any chance?”

“Uh-huh! I just got in and I missed you! So I thought I’d stop in and catch up—is that okay?”

“Oh! That’s…that’s actually excellent my lady- I mean that would be excellent all of the time, but it’s particularly-” Lady Josie shook herself, restarting and explaining more calmly, “I was meaning to catch a moment of your time—would you care to join me?” she invited Ellie in.

“Of course!” Ellie said, taking Josie’s arm and giving it a squeeze, trying to be reassuring.
Josie seemed…gosh she seemed so nervous as they sat down at her desk.

“I just need to grab my ledger and then I’ll be out of your hair,” Tonio assured as he scurried over to his desk and took up the wide leather book laying atop it, tucking it up under an arm as he offered, “Shall I send for anything for you ladies? Something to drink—to eat?”

“Oh! Yes, mijita, have you eaten?”

“We had breakfast before we set out—“ Ellie started.

“You must be famished! Oh, Tonio, would you send for refreshment? It’s hardly in your job description.”

“It’s no trouble, I would not have offered if I was not pleased to do so,” the man assured, “It was wonderful to see you bella mia—if I see my Cremisius I will send him your way.”

“Gracias!” Ellie said, “You just got promoted to my favorite Aclassi!”

“And I cherish that promotion, however long it may last,” he chuckled, taking his leave and closing the door to Josie’s office behind him.

“Gosh, he’s the sweetest,” Ellie giggled, “has everything been going okay—you two sharing workspace?”

“Oh certainly,” Josie nodded, “he’s more often in his workshop, and Mister Aclassi has been very considerate, and his services have appealed to many of my guests, and he’s so very polite, he’s been an excellent help in hosting our allies, making a good impression. Just last week I was at my wits end with Lady Cordelia and Tonio stepped in—asking her about her gown and talking a bit of shop with her to give me a moment’s break from her…trying nature.”

“I’m so glad—not that you had to deal with a trying ally, I don’t know how you do it constantly, seriously you’re an actual saint—but it’s great Tonio’s been such a great help! He seems to be adjusting well.”

“He’s thriving, I’m…I’m very proud of him,” Lady Josie confessed, blushing a bit.

…she wanted to smoosh them together so bad!

Molly was back! This time with a big tray laden with a pot of tea and cups, a platter with a pile of neatly stacked finger sandwiches they munched on, chatting politely while Josie seemed to collect her thoughts.

But between the three of them, the sandwiches disappeared and the tea was drained. Josie cleared her throat, hands fidgeting momentarily before she looked to Ellie, mouth working like she was just prepared to speak.

“You’d something you wanted to talk to me about?” Ellie offered gently.

Josie gave her a grateful smile, though she sounded embarrassed as she spoke—as if confessing, “I…must explain something first, about the Montilyet’s fortunes.

Her family’s fortunes? Hmm… “You’ve mentioned they used to have ships—that they’re into trade?” that was all Lady Josie had ever said about her family’s money to Ellie. She was Lady Josie, so Ellie figured she was well off, she was always dressed nicely with her jewelry and everything.
We are—in trade. However my family has been forbidden from trade in Orlais for quite some time. It..." she seemed like she felt awkward to talk about this with Ellie, “it devastated our finances. The Montilyets have, in fact...been in debt for over a hundred years.”

Oh...oh gosh, “Debt? Is it bad? Gosh, I’m so sorry, I had no idea, Josie if you need a raise—”

“Do not trouble yourself, I’m not asking for such—there are precious few outside of our family that know our situation,” Josie explained, “for generations we’ve done everything to keep creditors at bay. Sold our lands to stave off interest. It is...it’s just infuriating to see my family reduced to this!” she vented, sighing, “I’m to become head of our house. If I sell any more of our land, my family will become destitute. That cannot be my legacy to them.”

Ellie gasped, “Destitute? J-Josie gosh I- Tia! Why haven’t you said anything before?! Do they...I mean they’re eating, right? Is this turning into a ‘we don’t know where the next meal is coming from’ situation like now, because they...I know Haven became dangerous but we’ve a solid fortress here in Skyhold—you’re family would be safe, they can come be here with you for however long they needed.”

Oh, crap—she hadn’t meant to make the woman feel badly or embarrassed, but Josie’s face went bright red and she ducked her head-

“I do not believe you share the same definition of ‘destitute’, da’vehnan,” Marehis said quietly...she kind of sounded angry about it?

“I am not- I’m not blind, I understand there are worse- I realize to whom I am speaking,” Josie said, half-heartedly defended, “that is part of why I am remiss to bring it to Eleanor’s attention,” she looked to Ellie again, “We would not be paupered, Eleanor, but my family...has a certain manner to which they are accustomed and to take them from that...I worry. My sister is...” it seemed like she wanted to say something a bit more harsh, but she settled for, “young, flighty, lost in her daydreams. My brothers are trying to rebuild our fleet with their own hands,” her eyes misted with tears, “is it wrong to hope they never know hardship?”

Well...no, Ellie wouldn’t want any of the people she loved to struggle, it sounded like Josie had taken so much on herself with their welfare, it had to be stressful and scary. “I understand this was difficult for you to open up about, Josie. Thank you. If...if there’s ever any way I can help, please, just say the word.”

“I did not fumble through all this for ventings sake,” Josie assured her, seeming frustrated as she said, “I’d almost solved our problems, for a while. I negotiated a chance to reinstate the Montilyets as landed Traders in Orlais. We could rebuild with that. But when I dispatched paperwork to Val Royeaux—” she closed her eyes, bowing her head a bit as she said, “I’ve just learned my carriers were murdered, and the documents restoring my family’s trading status destroyed.”

“Like- like they were murdered just so the documents could be destroyed?” Ellie asked, aghast. Maker. “Who would do such a thing?”

“Leliana made inquiries that bore success. A Comte Boisvert, a nobleman in Val Royeaux, reached out to me personally, and claims to know who killed my messengers. I wrote to him and he refused to speak on the matter through correspondence, so I arranged to meet with him but he...has a request,” Josie awkwardly confessed, “That you come when I meet with him, so he’s seen publicly conferring with you.”

“Me?” Ellie asked. Oh. Inquisitor, duh. And then she and Marehis spoke in unison, just
Ellie’s, “Of course!”

Opposite, Marehis’s, “Absolutely not!”

Oh. Oh whoops.

“I understand it is not ideal—” Josie started.

“Not ideal?!” Marehis raised her voice! “Da’vehnan, sweet girl, stay. You are no longer a part of this conversation,” she said…very firmly, her tone sort of made the hair on the back of her neck stand on end, “—allow me to assess a few things before you give your word to something, it is a matter of security. If you’d just stay right here? Lady Montilyet—a moment?” Marehis rose, gesturing to the door to the left of her desk that led to the hall to the War Room.

Which is where Ellie thought they’d go to speak but when Josie nodded and followed after the Elf woman, the moment the door was closed behind them Ellie could hear,

“Have you lost your every sense?!” Mami! “I’ve heard nothing of this request from Leliana so correct me if I’m wrong—you’ve not checked with her before bringing this up to Eleanor! This Comte you don’t even know is claiming some knowledge as to who murdered your messengers demands you meet with him in person—what if he murdered them himself?! He could be connected to anyone in the world—to Gaspard who has, on more than one occasion, directly set assault upon my child I- I cannot believe you would make this request to her face without so much as- Josiphene! This is reprehensible! This could endanger her—I do not know we could approve such a journey and you’ve presented it to her! Now, she will be dead-set on assisting you! If Leliana and myself feel she should not go, she will be guilt ridden if we do not permit her to go for fear of her safety or she will go despite our warnings, compromise what precious little security we can provide her in this life! You, have compromised that!”

“What am I supposed to do, it is my family, Marehis—this was an attack against them! People who worked for me are dead, I am aware this could be a trap but I do not believe he would do so publicly- but I- I do understand- I am sorry. I should have run this by you before bringing it to Eleanor’s attention.”

“You should have run it by me, allowed me to properly investigate the matter myself, waited for my approval or lack there of, and proceeded accordingly with whatever my verdict was!”

“The assault was on my families affairs I did not perceive this to hold a possible threat to Eleanor-“

“I did not sleep with the Dread Wolf because I was enticed by the threat he so obviously was to my child! I do believe we’ve well learned enemies can come from anywhere!”

“I’m sorry. Marehis, truly. I’ll rescind my plea to Eleanor, and if you would be so kind, do please investigate the Comte for corruption, and if you are unsatisfied with her safety I…I’ll figure something out.”

Mami sighed, gosh, she sounded tired. “You’ve met Ellie, yes?” she offered a bit of a laugh, “Right now she’s likely thinking of seven different ways to help you,” three! Two of them involved different ways of sneaking around behind Mami’s back to help so…if she was on board, those were out! “you’ve spilled the pot, there’s precious little we can do but mitigate the situation—you will have appropriate security and I will not stand idle by while you take Ellie to meet some stranger—I
am sitting in on this meeting and that’s final.”

“Of course, absolutely—thank you, Marehis.”

“I hope this is worth it.”

“I do understand this seems frivolous. I assure you I’m wholly demoralized for coming to Eleanor of all people for this. ‘Please help me regain my families vast wealth so we do not have to downsize from our illustrious lifestyle’ on its own sounds materialistic, to make the appeal to a girl who has known poverty and homelessness the bulk of her life? If I did not believe this was what was best for my family, I promise you, I would not be going to such lengths.”

‘Our’ illustrious lifestyle? Ellie…she didn’t think Josie was leading that illustrious of a life. She worked really hard for the Inquisition, like…constantly. So much she was worried the woman didn’t sleep or eat nearly enough. And she…she’d seen to it Ellie had been outfitted, gotten a wardrobe, but Josie wore more or less the same thing over and over again, alternating every once in a while, and she never smelled or anything, kept her clothing clean and tidy. And she never did anything…for herself. Ellie wasn’t sure what she did with her paycheck but she had a good idea now, every penny went to keeping her family afloat in one way or another.

“I didn’t mean to sound judgmental before, your problem is not frivolous, Josie. I apologize if I insinuated otherwise.”

Mami seemed a lot more calm when she and Josie returned, resuming their seats while Ellie did her best to look like she hadn’t heard a thing. Because she hadn’t! She didn’t even have ears!

“So…when does this Comte want to meet?” Ellie asked.

Josie sighed as she sat, “As soon as possible.”

“Cool! Oh gosh! We’ll be in Val Royeaux together! That’ll be so much fun!”

Josie offered a small smile at that, it even reached her eyes a bit! “Oh, certainly. I would be pleased to take in the city with you, mija. Thank you for assisting me with this, I’m truly grateful.”

“Mmmm I wouldn’t be too grateful,” Ellie warned, fighting a smile as she informed the woman, “Between you and Madam de Fer and Leliana, I’ve gotten a decent idea of how the Game works. I’m already in it, and this is just another play as far as I’m concerned. You need this from me, so now, you owe me a favor.”

“Oh! Of course, Eleanor.”

Ellie hopped up from her seat, hands splayed on the Ambassador’s desk as she leaned across it to press a kiss to the woman’s cheek, “I’m cashing in! I want a girls night—no arguments ‘cause it’s my favor so you gotta! You and Leliana meet me for dinner in my room—bring jammies! Prepare to be pampered!”

Josie raised a hand to her mouth, a few giggles escaping before she began full on laughing, “Oh, Eleanor. Sweet child—I did not think you would ask anything untoward of me, but Maker,” she wiped at her eyes a bit, “Alright. This will be something of a genuine favor—persuading Leliana to join us will be quite the task.”

“I believe in you!” Ellie assured. “Was there anything else you needed? I wanna check in on Gare and Stroud, and I’m on the look-out for my boyfriend if you see him.”
“Oh, Ser Hawke and Stroud have been holding congress in the tavern since their arrival,” Josie said, “Cullen and Cremisius have been in and out of Skyhold all day doing something that is, to quote our illustrious Commander: none of my ‘beeswax’. If the Lieutenant comes this way I’ll certainly send him along.”

Cremisius was the best!

“Thanks!” Ellie said, Marehis rising to follow her out.

“Certainly, Eleanor,” Josie said, though, “I would…I would appreciate if what we’ve discussed here remained between us as much as possible? I…truly, there are precious few who know my family’s situation.”

Oh…oh! “So…Leliana…does she know?”

Josie’s gaze dropped to her hands, seeming shy, embarrassed, “She worries for me enough as it is. It was by the grace of Andraste that she did not discover just what business I had my couriers handling, she assumes it is Inquisition business as usual, that the attack was nothing personal against my family’s interests. If she knew…if she knew the pressures on me to right this for my family- I would just prefer she didn’t, if that were at all possible.”

“Easy peasy!” Ellie chirped, because she! Had! Ideas! “Mami and I’ll set up security things—they won’t be in the know about your situation either, promise! And if Leliana asks…well…do you trust me?”

“Certainly.”

“I’ve got a plan—leave it to me!” she assured, holding out her unmarked hand, pinkie finger extended.

Josie breathed a sigh of relief, wrapping her pinkie around Ellie’s, “Thank you, Eleanor.”

Ellie nodded, but, “Um…just- I would never ever go back on my word, but…maybe you should tell Leliana? I know she worries, but she only does that because she loves you—you’re her best friend. I know if I had a problem like this, I could go to Sera, and yeah she’d worry, but she’d probably feel a lot better about it if…well if she found out later, once it was resolved, she’d be happy for me, but she’d probably feel like I don’t trust her, or I don’t feel like I can rely on her, and she’d wish she could’ve helped me, and the same goes for me if roles were reversed. Just think about it, okay?”

The Antivan woman grimaced a bit, but nodded, “…I will consider it. Gracias, mija. Do have a pleasant day—I will see you this evening.”

Ellie nodded, taking Marehis’s arm as they left Josie’s office. “Okay—Tavern! You feel up to it mami? Um…I mean Cole’s around, and we know just about everyone in Skyhold if you need a break~”

“Oh, do you wish privacy da’vehnan? I would merely shadow you~“

“Oh gosh, no, it’s not like I want you to follow- or that I don’t want you here, it’s just…I dunno, you work all the time too. If you needed a break, that’d be understandable. You seem kind of um…tired.”

“I’m well sweet girl,” the woman sighed a bit, “I was merely concerned, I do not appreciate negligence of your safety,” she said, hugging Ellie’s arm a bit, “I am perhaps experiencing a bit of
You can have time off whenever you need it mami. I mean I know we’ve talked about this before and you don’t mind being with me all the time, but just because you don’t have to go places with me, doesn’t mean we can’t still spend time together! I mean there’s lots of people who can step in to follow me directly—you’d still be my favorite though!” she promised.

“I’ll think about it, da’len. Just…oh, if anything happened I would never forgive myself for not being there. And too…I worry so, time would hardly be a break, I would merely be worrying.”

“Cole can always give you updates—whenever you get worried, he’ll come tell you I’m okay! Or he can come get me and I’ll come assure you myself!”

“I’ll consider it, sweet girl. Thank you, for thinking of me.”

Well of course! “You’re always thinking of me!” So was,

“Oi! I was just thinking of you sweets! Get over here Inky, join the party!” Sera invited loudly as Ellie and Marehis entered the Tavern. Sera and Dagna were over at the bartop with Garette and Stroud, “Mustache here’s finally starting to loosen up!”

“I laughed at Hawke’s jest, I’m Human afterall,” the Grey Warden softly defended, sipping at his drink before he startled, “Oh! My Lady, Inquisitor- ahh. Inky?”

“S’not short for Inquisitor!” Sera complained, though she snorted, “Inky is short for an Inquisitor though.”

“Hey!” Ellie argued playfully, “You come down here and say that to my face!” she giggled, hopping up onto a stool next to Hawke, “Hiya Gare.”

“Hiya half-pint—buy you a whole pint?” he offered, slapping coin on the counter.

“Mmmm if it’s orange juice, I’m in!” Ellie agreed.

“Changing it up on me today huh?” Cabot asked from behind the bar, wiping out a mug, “Oh the excitement. I do live for the days your preference in juice changes—what’ll it be tomorrow.”

“My foot in your ass juice if you don’t play nice with the kid,” Hawke warned.

Sera snickered, “Ass juice.”

“Da’assan, that’s disturbing,” Marehis complained.

“So…what’s new with you two? I’m so glad you made it here safe—are you liking Skyhold?” Ellie asked Hawke and the Warden.

“We’ve been made very welcome, thank you,” Stroud said, raising his mug to her.

“This was way hotter when I was Varric’s dirty little secret though,” Hawke said.

“Not that secret—mami knew you were here like, two minutes after you got here last time,” Ellie said.

“Hmmm mami…Seeker Pentaghast?” Garette checked to make sure, “Opposite Cullen who you call ‘papi’?”
“Uh-huh! Don’t cause them any trouble today okay, they’ve got a date tonight, mami really needs it.”

“Oh my god he’s dating Seeker Pentaghast and he’s got a kid. What the hell? You think you know a guy—if you told me the day I met Cullen that he’d one day up and turn his back on the Order, bag a woman like the Lady Seeker and be a father?” Hawke whistled, pitching low.

“Maker.”

“I get up to take a leak and the brat steals my seat!” Oh! Varric! He was approaching, er, returning, Ellie supposed.

“Whoops! Just keeping your seat warm!” she assured, hopping down and patting the stool in invitation.

Of course, once he was seated, “Oof!” he grunted as Ellie climbed back up to sit in his lap, though his arms went around her middle to hold her securely, chin resting on her shoulder, “so, what were you gabbing about?”

“Gare’s last visit here—though I was politely working to…when are you leaving?” Ellie asked their guests, “Not that I’m sick of you or anything, just, it’d be cool to know when I have to go to the back-assward Western Approach.”

Stroud filled her in while she sipped at her drink. There was some kind of moon cycle nonsense—they needed to meet at the ritual tower on a day the moon was rising in some such house with some such fullness. Which would be the 18th of Cloudreach, a week and a half away. So…cool! The planets were literally aligning for this!

“Hey mami? Would it be okay to stop by Mister Aclassi’s shop really quick?” Ellie asked Marehis.

“Certainly, da’vehnan.”

“Oi!” Sera called, ”Thank ‘im for the sweet duds! I got in to this bangin’ wardrobe upgrade waiting in my room with a birthday letter from him! Thanks to you too, Mare’!”

“Of course sweet girl, you’ll have to let us see sometime!” Marehis insisted.

“Woah woah wait—you’re- are you with Cul- does that bastard have two-?” Hawke…didn’t seem capable of forming coherent sentences just now. Oh gosh! Did he think Marehis was with papi?

The Elf woman giggled, offering a wink as she said, “The Commander is a very handsome man,” and simply left it at that, wrapping an arm around Ellie’s shoulder’s as she ushered her from the Tavern to Hawke’s bellowing,

“What?!”

Ellie giggled, oh gosh that was fun! She was pretty sure Hawke’s jaw was on the floor! Her papi was very handsome!

And so was Mister Aclassi! He looked so happy in his workshop! Wowza he could work a sewing machine, foot rhythmically pressing the peddle as he smoothly guided fabric under the needle, he could do that without looking! Cause he looked up as Ellie and Marehis entered, smiling in greeting before he brought his machine to a stop as they approached.
“Hi! Sorry, I don’t mean to interrupt,” Ellie apologized.

“Oh think nothing of it my dear!” he greeted warmly. His sewing machine was next to a work table and it was mostly clear so Ellie hopped up to sit atop it, peeking over her shoulder—he did have assistants! They were busy though, packaging orders, so they were busy.

“Do you have a minute? I wanted to run soomething by you, but it’s a little private.”

“Is everything alright?” he asked, albeit concerned as he stopped his sewing.

“Oh yeah! Mostly. It’s um…it’s to help Lady Josie.”

“Lady Montilyet spoke with you,” he assumed, sighing with relief, “Good. I’ve been worried about her. I…can help her, you said?” Ellie nodded. “What can I do?”

“Well, you have suppliers from the Hinterlands which is super super great, but maybe you’d be interested in taking a look at materials and things in Val Royeaux?” it wasn’t fibbing, exactly, “We’ll be attending Empress Celene’s ball at the Winter Palace in Bloomingtide and Josie wants us to be dressed to the nines!”

“Oh! Why did she not merely say so?”

“She’s got other business in Val Royeaux that’s stressing her—an alliance meeting we’d be attending there, and she wanted to run everything by me first before consulting you.”

“Well, certainly.”

“It’s a little short notice, we’ll likely be leaving in the next few days.”

“I’ll make do,” he assured, unbothered. “After all, I’ve a bit more help now—would you care to meet them?” he smiled when Ellie nodded, taking both her hands in his and she hopped down off the table as he rose to his feet, calling, “Johnathan, Audrey, this is Inquisitor Eleanor—my Cremisius’s Ellie.”

Mister Aclassi’s assistants! Right! Oh they seemed sweet! And they were pretty excited for the job—Johnathan had apprenticed in a tailor’s shop in his hometown but it’d been in Kirkwall, the shop was burned to the ground so he’d been out of that line of work for a while, didn’t expect to get the opportunity again so soon, especially under the Inquisition, and Audrey studied fashion at the University of Orlais! She had family that died in White Spire and she joined the Inquisition when she heard they were working on the whole ‘stopping the war between Mages and Templars’ thing.

“It’s really great to meet you both!” Ellie said.

“It’s an honor to meet you, Inquisitor,” Audrey said, Jonathan nodding in agreement. “I don’t mean any disrespect of course, it’s kind you’ve come to see us, but we just finished Madam de Fer’s order. W-w-we should really get going!”

Was everyone scared of Vivienne? Should she be scared of Vivienne?

…she had frozen a man solid in the first two seconds they knew each other. So. Maybe.

“Mami…don’t hate me?”

Marehis looked startled at that, “I could never!”
“Tavern again—just a second, then checking on Anya, and then I promise, I’m all done running around.”

“Ahh. Is this…sweet girl what are you planning?”

“I’m devious! I’m evil! I’ve got plots afoot mami—I’m a menace!”

“Somehow I think the world will survive your maniacal influence,” the woman supposed as she escorted her back to the Tavern.

For a purpose! A big, sexy purpose!

“The Iron Bull!” Ellie called as soon as she walked in the door.

“Usual seat Imekari,” he hollered over the crowd, “—you need me to come to you babe?”

“I’m comin’ to you babe!” she called back, weaving her way through to his seat at the back of the Tavern. “How would you like a job?”

“Got a job—remember? Sent my smartass Lieutenant to Haven, you came and met me on the Coast?”

“I mean like a Chargers mission—you guys busy this week?”

“Depends on if we’re doing something for you or not Boss-girl.”

“Cool! Well I’d really appreciate it if you guys could escort Lady Josie and Mister Aclassi and Marehis and me to Val Royeaux! Keep everyone safe, work a little bit of security detail during a meeting I’m going to be having with a potential ally, maybe squeeze in a little more helping me shoe shop? Josie and Tonio are going to be looking for ideas for things for the Winter Palace.”

“Sounds like a good gig, Imekari. I’ll let the boys know.”

“Thanks!” she turned to Marehis, “Okay…last thing on my list, I promise—I miss Anya, and Delrin wrote me to say she’s been hanging around some fellow named ‘Noam’. I want to meet him yesterday and make sure he’s got nothing but good intentions for my baby.”

“Reasonable,” Marehis agreed as they wove their way through the Tavern again, out into Skyhold, hugging Ellie proper, arms around her shoulders as they walked, pressing a kiss to the top of her head, “Thank you, da’vehnan. I would have handled getting you a proper security detail for your trip, but the Chargers are more than adequate, and I suppose they’re unlikely to be spying for Leliana.”

“Yeah, if they do see or hear anything about Lady Josie’s you know, thing,” Ellie shrugged, “they won’t be obligated to tell the Spymaster. I’d feel badly separating Tonio and Cremisius.”

Gosh, Cremisius would worry sick about his father out there traveling—being there with the Iron Bull and everyone around looking after one another was so much wins!

Noam was sweet! Shy and quiet like Delrin had said, nervous when Ellie approached him once Cole let her know Anya was with him in the mages barracks, but that was either because she was a stranger or Anya yipping up a storm and running off from him to come greet the girl, or maybe a mixture of both things, gosh, the Mabari did seem to make him feel more secure in his surroundings, he did relax after Ellie knelt and Anya started climbing on her, licking at her face real excited and he realized the barking was just ‘Yay! Mami’s home!’ and not ‘get back evil doer here to hurt the next Apostate they see!’.
“Hi baby! Hi hi hi! Mwah mwah mwah mwah Mami's home! I love you! I missed you! How are you my pretty girl?” Anya let out a happy sounding bark, pawing at Ellie and in constant motion trying to get maximum contact, spoilt little baby! She was so eager for pets and kisses!

…Ellie kept looking over her shoulder every two minutes trying to spot Cremisius, so…she didn’t have much room to talk.

Noam was standing by a tall bookshelf, staring wide eyed at her, a little weary, "H-hello. You're er, Anya's yours?"

"Anya belongs to herself, thank you very much!” Ellie cheerily informed him, smiling as she rose to her feet, "But yeah, she's my baby, Cullen introduced us on my birthday! Thanks so much for taking such great care of her, Delrin says she just loves you. So you must be pretty great! I just wanted to check in on her and put a face to a name—I’m Ellie—you're Noam Willit, right? Our newest mage?” he nodded timidly, "Oh wow! Thanks so much, I really appreciate you joining the Inquisition. How is everything? You know your way around Skyhold? Everyone’s treating you right?"

"Y-yes miss. Everything is…good, here. Everyone has been kind. Your Templars they… saved me, Ser Barris and his men."

Ellie nodded, "I read his report to Seeker Pentaghast, I'm so sorry for everything you went through,” she cleared her throat feeling a little uncomfortable but, "You didn't do anything wrong, you know? Being a mage. I kind of had a similar experience when my magic was discovered, and just- if you ever needed someone to talk to I'd be glad to."

"You’re a mage?” he questioned and when she nodded. "I'm sorry you've similar experience. It might be nice speaking with someone who understands. Most people here, they are kind and they mean well, but it is…different. I- I appreciate the offer."

“Anytime!” Elle assured, "I mean I'm not always around but feel free to write me, I'll put you on the list to send through so Leliana would make sure your letter got through to me in the field, and when I'm in Skyhold Cole usually is too um…I don’t know if he’s introduced himself or if you’ve been told about him—he’s a Spirit of Compassion? I able to find you if you need him and he’d get me, or let me know you’d like to talk and I’ll make time for you—to talk about anything that’s on your mind.” gosh, he seemed kind of young, not quite in his twenties yet like a lot of the mages in Fiona’s camp. “If you want I could introduce you to my friends! They’re all really great, and you’d have more familiar faces around Skyhold.”

“Really?”

"Uh-huh! Yeah! I’m busy tonight, but hmm…lunch tomorrow?"

Noam nodded, "We break for lunch noon hour.~” he stopped himself, blushing, “of course, you know that, you’re a mage.”

She supposed so? That was a normal lunch hour, she wasn’t sure what being a mage had to do with it, but she shrugged, “That sounds great! I’ll make sure everyone can come! You know where the Tavern is?”

“Ser Barris saw me around when I arrived.”

Did Barris need a raise? Because he was getting a raise! And an invitation! “Well, meet us
“O-okay,” he agreed.

“Great!” she said, looking about to see where Anya was, awe, she was already right back to standing at Noam’s side, against his leg, his hand was able to rest atop her head, scratching gently. “Anya baby, watch after Mister Noam, okay?”

“You’re certain?” Noam asked, surprised.

“Uh-huh! My schedule’s been so crazy and it hasn't been safe to take her out into the field with me lately,” Ellie hadn’t been certain taking the Mabari to someplace ridden with Blight in the last decade was healthy, so. “I really appreciate it, someone's been looking after her for me!”

"I'm glad to, th-thank you for letting me.”

"Of course!” Ellie said, “I'll see you tomorrow—have a great day, okay?”

“You as well.”

Anya offered a little happy yip as Ellie waved ‘bye’. Okay she checked in. With everyone… where was Cremisius?

A young man did approach her, but it wasn’t her boyfriend. A soldier of Cullen’s met her as she and Marehis got down into the courtyard, heading for the stairs up into the castle but, “Inquisitor, the Commander would like a moment, if you could spare it.”

“Sure thing!” Ellie said, “Is he in his office?”

“Yes miss.”

“Thanks!” she said, looking to Marehis, “you wanna go down and up? Or up and over?”

Skyhold's layout was a kind of insanity, really.

“Up and over has fewer stairs,” the woman reasoned, as they continued up the stairs into the Great Hall. Sound reasoning, Ellie was just always a little nervous walking through Solas’s old ‘room’ sort of set up he’d had in the rotunda at the base of the library tower. Was it dumb she kind of missed him and…hoped he was doing okay in the Hinterlands? If it was, fine, she was dumb!

“Eleanor, sweetheart, please, come in,” Cullen waved her in once she and Marehis got to his office, “Thank you for coming—I was meaning to catch a moment of your time more than just our hellos at the gate. Marehis, you’re well I hope?”

“I am,” the Elf woman assured.

“Excellent,” Cullen nodded, gesturing to the chairs before his desk, “please, have a seat.”

Oh…he seemed kind of nervous or pensive about something. “Is everything okay, papi?”

“I wished to discuss a matter of importance with you privately, before bringing it to discussion at the War Table,” Cullen said. "The Templars in Therinfal—many of them, when their corruption was complete...went on to follow Samson. He was a Templar in Kirkwall, until he was expelled from the Order. I’ve…” his eyes darted to Marehis and then back to Ellie, “handled Lyrium addiction in my own way, and he his, apparently. But Maker. Red Lyrium is nothing like Lyrium given by the Chantry,” he shook his head. “As you know, I’ve been working on trying to
find their source—Red Templars require Lyrium just as often as their normal counterparts. They’re using trade roads to transport shipments of Red Lyrium, many of them passing through the Emerald Graves.”

“Oh! That’s one of the places we have reports of Rifts from.”

“Yes, a refugee leader—Fairbanks? He’s asked you come to the area for some time now, given there are Rifts in need of sealing and the potential for a lead as to where Samson is, how to stop Corypheus’s Red Templars? If you could investigate this, Eleanor, I would appreciate it and I believe it benefit our efforts against Corypheus greatly.”

Ellie nodded. “Alright. I’m heading into Orlais this week anyway—we’ll talk over everything at the meeting tomorrow.”

“Thank you, Eleanor. This…is dangerous, you may come in contact with Red Templars, just—be careful, sweetheart.”

“We will be—everyone will stick together, and we’ll all be safe!”

“I’ll pray for as much. Thank you, Eleanor,” he nodded.

“No problem!” she said, then, “Do you need any help for tonight?”

“I believe I’m all set, thank you again for all your help,” Cullen said, “but I should prepare—brush my hair.”

“Brush your teeth! Mami really likes your cologne just, you know, don’t go overboard?”

The man chuckled as he rose from his desk, dropping a kiss to the top of her head, “I’ll certainly be careful.”

“Have fun tonight papi! Oh! Do you wanna have breakfast with me and mamis and Cremisius and his papa?”

“You had me at ‘breakfast with me’.”

“Yay!” she cheered, hopping up from her seat, and pressing a kiss to his cheek, “Hasta manana, papi!”

“Hasta manana,” he nodded.

“I know you love them, but da’vhenan,” Marehis sighed as they made their way from Cullen’s office, back into the castle, “you really must stop meeting with your advisors—they give you such perilous tasks.”

“Only like once every four or so get-togethers. The other times I get like, cake, or dinner, or to cuddle. That’s like…only 25% danger! That’s so much less danger than 100%! Which is how many dangerous get togethers I’ve had with Corypheus!”

“Somehow I don’t find it all that comforting that the people in your life bring you 75% less danger than your mortal enemy.”

“Corypheus wishes he was my mortal enemy!” she smiled as they passed Varric, done with the Tavern, sitting at his writing desk in front of the Great Hall’s fireplace. “Varric’s my mortal enemy!”
“Damn straight Tumbles—keep your enemies closer,” the Dwarf commended, giving her a thumbs up without looking up from his work. Marehis giggled, shaking her head.

Marehis stopped just outside the door to Ellie’s room, smiling as she said, “Sweet girl, if you’ve no need of me, I should touch base with Leliana on a few things—I’ll arrange for guards. Does that suit?”

“Sure thing—try to get some rest tonight okay? You’re totally invited if you want to come be with Leliana and Josie and me, but if you’d rather have the night off, I mean, I’ll be with Leliana.”

“I do think I’ll take the night for myself,” Marehis said, pressing a kiss to Ellie’s forehead. “If you need me, da’vehnan, you’re to send for me, come to me, immediately. Alright?”

Ellie nodded. Yeah, she got Marehis was…not super comfortable leaving Ellie all on her own. She hadn’t been alone, she didn’t think, since that um, night in Crestwood.

Maybe she still wasn’t—she’d just made it to the top of the stairs when she figured out just where Cremisius was!

Poor guy was laying on her bed, it was a tunic day! He looked so handsome! He was sweaty, kind of catching his breath like he’d just run around a lot, he lifted his head to look up and see that it was her before dropping it and rasping out,

“Hey, lovely…you…here…cool.”

Ellie smiled, “You being here is cool too, Cremisius, um…you okay?”

He sighed, pushing himself up on his elbows, “Been all over the place looking for you! Stable hand that brought in Russel said you were headed for Josie’s, got there and she sent me to Hawke in the Tavern—he sent me to father’s workshop, he sent me back to the Tavern to talk to Bull, and then that asshole didn’t know where you went so. I came here.”

“Guapo?”

“Yeah?”

“…you’ve met Cole, right?”

He just stared at her…kind of seemed like a little bit of the light left his eyes before he flopped back onto the bed. “Fuck me.”

She giggled, shrugging as she plopped down on the bed next to him lying on her side, “I thought you wanted to have a big fancy date night first, but okay,” she shrugged.

“That’s not- I- you know I didn’t mean-“ he huffed indignantly; gosh he was the cutest! She pressed a little kiss to his lips, earning a smile. “Missed you, ‘m glad you’re back.”

“I missed you too,” mmm, another kiss, ‘cause, “thank you, for bringing out the Chargers and getting Dedrick from Cole.”

“Yeah well…sounded like you needed him. How um…how’ve you been feeling since then, lovely? You need to talk about it?”

Gosh, that…that’d been scary. She worried at her lip, nervous, not entirely sure she knew how to begin explaining but Cremisius wrapped an arm around her, pulling her in close. Mmm he
was warm, and he always smelled so good just, he always made her feel safe. So…she just started talking.

She’d just woken up and her brain skipped right over grounding to just…hyperfocusing on how she was so tired of trusting people who—she’d felt really badly for Mayor Dedrick! So sorry that his town flooded and his people died! And it turned out he’d done it to them himself! She loved Solas and he hurt her! Hurt Marehis and everyone! And even Thom, as much as she loved him now, was so proud of how far he’d come…he’d done something horrible, run away instead of facing it, pretended to be something he wasn’t, Maker, what if she hadn’t known still? Would he be pretending to this day? So meeting Dedrick, wanting to help him, thinking he was a respectable person, she just felt stupid, embarrassed. And then that just sort of funneled right in to thinking about all the awful things that kept happening, and scaring her because what was next? So many horrible things had already happened, and each one seemed worse than the last—losing Max, time magic, Envy, losing Haven, finding out the person responsible for all of this had been right under their noses all along, someone they trusted more than anything. And she still loved him and she hated that, and she hated that they still had this stupid, weird bond thing and that Marehis was reliant on that and- and she hated how miserable that had to be making her. She hated how miserable everything was. These things just kept happening and…

And they didn’t have to. Not anymore. At least not to her, right? And maybe they’d stop happening for the others too—maybe the Mark would go away if she died? And Corypheus wouldn’t come for the people she loved anymore, maybe his plans would be totally foiled? That was a genuinely stupid way of thinking about it she realized after the fact, but in the moment it felt like the perfect solution. And then she realized that yeah, she could do that, maybe it was for the best, and there was no one around to stop her if she-

Wait! She didn’t want to die! Yeah, there’d been some awful things that had happened but there was so much good too! She loved her life! She had so many amazing people in her life that she loved! And the Inquisition had done so much good and she was proud to be Inquisitor! And she wanted Corypheus stopped—she wanted to stop him! Beat his dumb Darkspawn face in and then skip off into the sunset with her party!

You ever start feeling like I used to—apathetic about your own survival or uh, looking to end it, imi-kadan—little heart—you gotta come to us.

Maker. She had promised the Iron Bull. And she’d never felt like that before, felt so certain she should do something like that so, she ran and…she’d promised the Iron Bull, but she’d just wanted her mami, but- but- it wasn’t Marehis's fault but Ellie always felt like absolute dirt breaking things like this to the woman who did everything for her, just making her worry more, and Cassandra seemed like she’d be the one to really understand.

Kind of embarrassing she just ran for it, especially with Solas finding her, but he’d been nice about it, just wrapped her up in his vest and made sure she wasn’t hurt, took her to Cassandra.

"Marehis wrote Adan for me and he wrote me back," she said, "I did my best to describe everything in writing and he actually cut my depression potion in half? It sounded crazy to me but it seems like…dunno, it's helping, and I have an appointment with him sometime here soon while I'm in Skyhold," she shrugged. "He said it might be my depression fluctuating? That taking too high a dosage can cause suicidal thoughts as easily as too little a dose*. Cassandra said she's
experienced the same thing before,” gosh it sounded scary when she talked about it—she said she'd had compulsive suicidal thoughts for like, a week straight before she could get in contact with a Healer at the time and it'd been because it was time to take a break from potion. "Which, I hate she's gone through all this too, but she's been just amazing help.”

“I’m glad you went to her,” Cremisius said.

“Me too. Cole helped to, explaining it, that it’s not...me, it’s my brain being its extra sexy self.”

He chuckled at her making light, offering, “You know, that happens again you can always come to me," in all sincerity, gently teasing, "...with clothes, without clothes, I’m not picky.”

“Cremisius!”

“What?” he laughed, pressing a kiss to her cheek, “Seriously though. I know I can’t always go out with you in the field, but I’m always here.”

She nodded, humming contently as she snuggled against him, here...felt warmer. Not just normal I've got the toastiest boyfriend second only to the Iron Bull' warm, it almost reminded her of the soothing warmth like Dalish's warming-bandages or Vivienne's old tent...Oh! "This...isn't my blanket.”

"Hmmm, yeah it is,” Cremisius said as if he was confused, "You don't remember? You've had it for..." he seemed to be counting in his mind, "word you were arriving today got in at six so...since six o’ five. Made up your bed with it, got the fireplace going to make sure it'd be warm in here when you got back," and then he smiled, "Do you like it?"

"Cremisius! Where- it's- it's so beautiful and toasty and I love it!” she assured, reaching behind her to pull the blanketing up around her as she rolled to lay stomach to stomach atop Cremisius, gosh he had the handsomest smile as he laughed softly, brushing a hand along her cheek before pressing a kiss to her forehead.

"I'm glad. Papa says the material is soft but durable," awe his Papa! He made this? Gosh it was beautiful! This warm green color she just loved, golden thread making up the warming runes all across the fabric, Maker, little blossom shapes decorating the space between runes. Oh she could kiss him! "It'll travel well if you take it with you,” Cremisius said.

"Mmm good, then we'll be nice and toasty!” Ellie giggled, “Did the Iron Bull tell you about your newest assignment?”

“...no? Someone hire us?"”

“Me! Your papa and Lady Josie need to go to Val Royeaux for Winter Palace prep, and I have a meeting with a Comte so...I figured, why have one Aclassi when I can have both!”

“Papa hasn’t said a thing about needing to go to Val Royeaux,” Cremisius said, his confusion genuine that time.

Ellie shrugged, casual, “Josie brought it up to me, and I brought it up with him.”

“Uh-huh,” he said doubtfully, smiling as he shook his head. “You want them to smoosh?”

She sighed, groaning as she leaned into him, “I want them to smoosh so bad!”
“They’re cute together. Papa doesn’t seem quite ready to make any moves on anyone, but I think it’d be good for him, once he is. A gentle push in the right direction might not be amiss.”

“…booking them a carriage ride from Skyhold to Val Royeaux and back is a gentle push?”

“From you? Yeah. They’re just lucky you haven’t convinced her to let papa tailor her a wholeass wardrobe.” Ellie smiled sheepishly, and he sighed, “Maker help us.”

“Josie really needs new things!” Ellie defended, pouting a bit, Cremisius chuckled, kissing her until she smiled which took maybe half a second, and she was going to explain…um…she was going to—there was something. She was sure about it before he moved on to kissing her neck. Wardrobe? What had they been talking about? Cremisius was distracting! She could be distracting right back!

…she was about halfway down his neck, trailing kisses when he put a hand under her chin to guide her back up to his lips, the Tevinter man kissing her soundly before nipping at her bottom lip. Bottom…pants…wardrobe…Josie…

“Varric!”

Cremisius’s eyes went wide as he just stopped still and stared at her, thankfully seeming amused because her face went bright red. “Uh…babe I’m not sure what to do with that.”

“I didn’t- I wasn’t- I-” she swatted at his chest, “You distracted me! I forgot what I was going to say and then I remembered! I need to talk to Varric before I meet up with Lady Josie for dinner tonight!”

“You want me to grow mad chest hair, Bull insists he’s got a drink that’ll do that,” he assured.

“I’m serious!” she complained, “It was brain babble—I was about to ask if you’d send Varric my way whenever you leave, just to come whenever he has a minute.” She smiled, “I like your chest just the way it is,” she assured, pressing a gentle kiss to the bit of breastbone his binder left exposed. He sort of went very still at that, oh! Crap! She looked up at him, worried, “Sorry, was that—“

“Uhhh that was good, nice, good,” he sort of rambled.

Ellie giggled at that, “So it’s in the ‘good nice good’ category?”

“Uh-huh,” he nodded, kissing her, “I suppose I can get Varric for you,” he agreed, kissing her again, “In a minute.”

…it was more like five minutes and they only stopped because there was a knock on her door oh! Ellie let out a startled squeal—what if it was Varric?! Had Cole heard and sent him their way?

“Eleanor?”

Cremisius moved back, back and away! He practically flew off the bed, he almost fell! “Guapo!” she hissed quietly in warning as she sat up, smoothing the blanket back behind her before she scooted to sit against the headboard, straightening out her tunic as she called out, “Hola mami! Como estas?”

Cassandra relaxed the moment she reached the top of the stairs and saw Cremisius, looking
to Ellie as she said, “I’m well.”

At least the woman seemed amused. And excited for her date with papi! Oh gosh! Ellie was excited for her! She hadn’t even gotten a chance to ask Cremisius for details…which was probably good. She was good at keeping fun or important secrets, but she wasn’t great at keeping things from her Seeker of Truth mami. So. Probably best she didn’t have any clue about tonight. Aside from the whole “flowers and candles and where can I find a good poetry book?” Ellie’d asked Dorian and he asked what for, she said papi was planning a date for Cassandra, and he said he knew just the perfect poem! Papi could find it in a book in Dorian’s alcove—he picked it up from a vendor in Redcliffe the last time they were there, surprised to find a Tevene text so far from home, though given their recent Tevinter invasion what with Alexius and time magic and all that, one of the Venatori had apparently pawned off their poetry collection.

And speaking of poets—Varric! Cremisius remembered to send him! He came ‘round just after mami left. Oh, she hoped he hadn’t embarrassed her-

“Seeker’s got a smokin’ new do’ tonight.”

He…probably embarrassed her.

“What’cha need, Tumbles? Boyfriend said it was important.”

“It is!” Ellie assured him, patting the space before her on the bed in invitation for him to sit down and get comfortable because, “I need help writing a contract!”

“Lady Josephine? You're feeling better now that you've discussed things with Ellie, I trust?”

Oh, sweet man. Josephine smiled as she looked up from opening the return missive from the Comte, Tonio was standing in the doorway to her office though when she looked up to him, he entered, bearing a saucer with a cup of tea atop it that he placed carefully on her desk within reach without it sitting on her paperwork. “Your favorite,” he offered quietly.

Oh, Jasmine tea—bless him, “Thank you,” she said, taking up the tea cup and sipping—it was just the boost she needed to parcel through the last of her work before she should be heading to meet Eleanor, Leliana. “Yes, I feel much better.”

He nodded. “My Lady…if you wished for me to accompany you to Val Royeaux to prepare for the Winter Palace, I would not have denied you—it’s truly no trouble and I’m incredibly honored to assist in designing what Ellie and her party should wear.”

…Josephine had just barely the slightest clue what he was talking about. Of course, he would be assisting in—why did—what?

“I’m sorry?”

“You needn’t apologize—Ellie explained everything, that you wished to discuss the decision with her before having her ask me. And I’m admittedly enticed by the idea of travel with my son again—it scares me half to death but Maker can that boy put up a fight—we had dinner before his evening shift and he informed me the Chargers will be providing security for our journey.”
Oh! Oh Maker- had Eleanor truly-?

If she had it- it was utter genius. Brilliant! Oh Leliana, the others, no one would question their journey to Val Royeaux at all! Cremisius would- the Chargers! They would guard them—Eleanor—with their lives there, during the meeting with the Comte, and none of them…save perhaps the Iron Bull…would feel compelled to tattle to Leliana for any reason and perhaps the Qunari could be persuaded to keep the matter in confidence or at the very least, stay back and guard their rooms while his subordinates protected the Inquisitor and Ambassador. “Oh I’m so glad!” Josephine said, relieved, “Truly, I’m pleased you would join us, I understand travel is not necessarily in your job description, and you just came off of a hard journey to get to Skyhold, and you were so tired when you returned from the Hinterlands. I did not wish to push you if Eleanor did not think it wise. She’s a mind for Healing, I trust her judgement if she…agrees with me, that we should…” why did his work take them to Val Royeaux?

“Find design ideas, materials that may better suit a ball. My suppliers from the Hinterlands are excellent, but you can’t exactly get Orlesian silk from Ferelden,” he supposed.

“Ah, yes, exactly,” Josephine nodded. Maker, bless that girl the whole of her days, that was sound alibi and…truly, something they should do, this trip would not merely serve to keep her family’s collective heads above water, but to truly service the Inquisition properly and that…helped, with how terribly selfish she feared the endeavor might be.

She might have arranged a fruit basket be delivered to Marehis’s quarters. She still felt the sting of this disagreement, like she’d been slapped, she hated that she’d had to go to Eleanor. She just prayed the woman did not hold it against her, or believe her to be wholly uncaring for the girl and her safety above her own financial prosperity. She had not even considered the Comte may take advantage of Josephine’s situation to lay a trap for the Inquisitor.

"Though my lady, if-" Tonio struggled with his words, brow creased with worry. Oh, what was the matter? "I hope I have not given you reason to think I would react abhorrantly to such a request. It concerns me you were sent to tears over the notion of asking this of me."

…ahh. She was still embarrassed for having gotten upset so openly, but she'd only just received the Comte's demands, that he would not speak to her of his pertinent information as to why such an attack was made on her family's attempts to do business in Orlais without first speaking to the Inquisitor herself, when she was faced with having to lay this out for Eleanor of all people? She'd shed a few frustrated tears that Tonio had witnessed and immediately set about voicing concern and endeavoring to find out whatever was the matter, what could he do, was she feeling unwell? His concern had turned her few tears into open weeping and now…he perceived it to be from fear of making a demand of him, oh. Goodness. He was such a gentle man, she was certain she could make the most uncalled for demands, be openly rude about it, spit in his face and he'd merely wipe his face, invite her to sit at his desk and talk her through whatever inspired such a tantrum. She wasn't scared of the man in the slightest, grateful as she was that Eleanor had provided a solid alibi for their trip to Val Royeaux, she felt badly he feared as much because of it.

"My upset had nothing to do with my nerves regarding requesting your company, I assure you."

Oh, that did not seem to be of much help, while it seemed to quell one worry, it rekindled another, "My lady, what troubles you so? If- if it was not something Ellie could help you with-you're certain there is nothing I can do? I'd be glad to listen, if you need someone to talk to."
She could not even speak of this to her dearest friend. But that was of no matter, goodness.

"There was no trouble, I-" Blah! "I admittedly am coming upon my er…” she hated to do so, it
took almost pathetic but she could not fabricate some horrible lie that would be convincing, nor
could she tell him the truth, so she cast blame upon, "I am having the painters in."

"The painters…” he seemed unfamiliar with the phrase but her blushing and dancing around
the subject, trying to assure him she had been crying over nothing at all, "oh! Oh Lady Josephine, I
apologize, you needn't say a thing more. I know well the er, discomfort and discontent one can
experience at this time. If ever you find yourself in need of bandaging I keep some in my desk for
such a thing."

"Truly?" Josephine wondered, surprised.

"Of course. I happen to know a great many people with uteruses who occasionally need as
such. So I keep some on hand. The drawer on the left, there is coincidentally a small bowl full of
wrapped chocolates along with them," he said, his smile mischievous, oh, he was sweet.

"Thank you, I'll have to remember that, if not for monthlies, then for a midnight snack," she
said, finding herself giggly at her jest, smiling when his expression warmed at that and he offered
his own amused chuckle. She cleared her throat, "Thank you, Tonio," she said, endeavoring to get
back onto topic, “truly. I’m pleased you were agreeable to a trip out of the country. And it’s so
fortuitous you’ve the chance to travel with Cremisius—you must take the opportunity to do
something fun. There are a great many attractions in Val Royeaux—you should take in a show or
the opera—there’s several museums. Oh! Cremisius may find himself inspired! His own works are
just beautiful. When the Iron Bull asked me for recommendations to secure a Wintersend present
for his Lieutenant I directed him to a shop in Val Royeaux—he may like to look around for
himself.”

Oh, the man truly was handsome when he smiled, “That would be splendid. You needn’t
trouble yourself…but if you do look up entertainment for myself and my son, you must include
yourself and Ellie—won’t you? Cremisius would relish the chance to take her out and I enjoy her
company—your company as well, and I would feel better about your efforts to secure tickets and
plan such things if you were included in the fun. Too…Cremisius may find himself distracted, it
would be pleasant to have company to engage with when he’s otherwise preoccupied with his
girlfriend. Won’t you please join us?"

“I wouldn’t wish to impose,” she wouldn’t…if she were imposing. If it wasn’t however…
well it truly did sound wonderful, she was admittedly excited at the prospect that the trip could be a
bit of fun in Eleanor and Cremisius’s schedules.

“You could never be an imposition, my lady. You’re more than welcome—I insist. Unless of
course, it would be an imposition to you,” he amended.

“It wouldn’t be I…well I would be delighted, truly,” Josephine assured. “It will be excellent
—have you any preference for our schedule?”

“Anything you believe may be enjoyable is sure to be a treat. Thank you, my lady. I do
appreciate this.”

“Well, I appreciate your agreeing to this trip. And the tea,” she nodded to the cup on her
desk, “thank you.”

He nodded. “Well, I shouldn’t keep you—you’ve work still?” she smiled, nodding. “Do try
not to work too hard, should I send for your dinner?”
She shook her head, “No, I’ve plans with Eleanor this evening.”

“Ahh, I should leave you to it then—have a pleasant time.”

Josephine was certain she would.

_Leliana_ was perhaps, doubtful.

“Josie, honestly—if I must endure a sleepover of all things, you must at least suffer with me on time.”

Leliana’s voice startled her, Maker! Oh!

Josephine sighed, blushing as she carefully folded the return missive from the Comte and slipped it into the drawer of her desk and folded up her final reply to confirm their arrival, sealing it. Goodness. She suppose she let the time get away from her again. “I apologize—thank you, Leliana, for indulging her.”

“Why is it, exactly, you owe Eleanor a debt of favor?” Leliana wondered, eyes alight, the sort of look she got on her face when she was in pursuit of some truth.

Thankfully, Josie was not subject to interrogation, regretful though she was, to mislead her friend. “That is the Game, I’m afraid,” was all she offered up, smiling to soothe the Orlesian woman’s concern. She needn’t. it would be fine. They would go to Val Royeaux, and it would all be sorted out.

She hated going to Eleanor for this. She hated going to _anyone_ for this, but to sit before that girl and- ugh, she used the word destitute! It was certainly poor phrasing on her part. But that is what it felt like, if mama and papa couldn’t be taken care of in their old age, enjoy the things they did after working so hard for so long? If Yvette had to support herself? Perhaps she would, one day, but it was certainly no time soon, not of her own ability, and Josie…did not wish circumstance to force her to grow up too soon. Not if she could help it.

“Do we truly require sleeping garments?”

“Eleanor requested as much,” Josephine said, “I’ll need to stop by my quarters-“

“Already done. I packed for the both of us from your things,” Leliana said, “I sleep in the nude.”

“Leliana, honestly,” Josephine giggled. Goodness. She'd not expected such a thing.

Likewise, she wasn't expecting the first words out of Eleanor’s mouth when the girl swung her bedroom door open to invite them in,

“Josie, I’m so glad you’re here!” Eleanor greeted, followed immediately by, “You’re fired! From the Inquisition! Effective immediately! Hi Leliana!”

“Eleanor?” Leliana questioned, alarmed.

“I- I’m sorry, I’m confused,” Josephine admitted…wholly uncertain the level of authenticity brought to bear. “Eleanor I- I understand if you are upset with me but surely we can talk this-“

“You don’t gotta fire her Tumbles. It’s just an addendum,” …Varric Tehtras’s voice sounded from above. Likewise confusing.
“Oh!” the girl chirped, “Varric! Jerk! I’ve been steeling myself for like twenty minutes preparing to fire Josie for nothing! You saw me! I’ve been all solemn-faced silence!”

“Sorry kid, thought you just needed to take a shit.” Oh my.

“That’s scrunchy-faced silence and you know it mister!” Eleanor shouted up at him before returning her attention to her guests, “You’re un-fired! Please, come on in! Varric will be leaving in just a minute!”

The Dwarf man was seated behind Eleanor’s desk, pouting when Josephine and Leliana reached the top of the stairs on Eleanor’s heels, “I don’t get to stay for your slumber party?”

“Girls only!”

“Bianca’s a girl! I’m her plus one!”

“Bianca’s a woman!” Eleanor argued, “And she’s free to stay—you make with the legal mumbo-jumbo and hit the bricks!” she pecked a kiss to his cheek, “I love you with like, all of my heart.”

“Awe shucks Tumbles, not in front of Bianca,” the man complained half-heartedly, “Ruffles, c’mere. Got something for you to sign.”

“Because I’m un-fired? Why is my occupancy called into question?” Josephine worried.

“Because I’m like, sixteen and I don’t know how contracts work,” Eleanor shrugged. “I thought I needed to fire you so I could re-hire you with a new contract—I forgot about addendum thingys!”

“I know babe, figured it’s what you wanted so that’s what I’ve got written up here,” Varric assured, “ready for Ruffels to sign.”

“Yay!” Eleanor cheered.

… “An addendum to my contract?” Josephine asked, “Eleanor, honestly I- what is going on?”

“Ummm, I had a peak at your contract with the Inquisition and realized you’re grossly undervalued! See, you were hired as our Ambassador, right?”

“Yes, I was,” Josephine said…still confused.

“So as Ambassador, it’s your job to negotiate relations between the Inquisition, allies, and potential allies.”

“It is.”

“That’s it.”

“Pardon?”

“That’s it!” Ellie insisted, “That’s your entire job description! But for months you were my etiquette tutor—you still are whenever I need it! And you’ve taken care of every aspect of my schedule, day in, day out, every time I’ve been in Haven or Skyhold. You balance my time between schooling and field work and important meetings—you screen people before I meet them, you send countless letters on my behalf, you schedule my every Healer’s appointment. When do I see
Adan?

“Tomorrow morning, straight after our meeting,” unless the girl needed him sooner, Maker, she seemed rather wound and Josephine hadn’t the slightest idea what was going on.

“See! You’re not just our Ambassador—you’re my personal assistant—you’re pulling two entire jobs missy! And we’ve been barely paying you for one! And I mean you’ve hardly had the benefits that should be afforded an ambassador of the Inquisition, let alone the Inquisitor’s personal assistant! I mean I have a clothing allowance—why don’t you?”

“Eleanor you represent us to noble allies,” not to mention the child hadn’t a scrap of proper clothing to her name when she was thrust into her position as Herald.

“So do you! Way more than me—not only do you have your own meetings but you’ve always sat in on every single one of mine! That’s double meetings! You see everyone twice! So you should have like, double clothes!”

“Mija—”

“So, fixing it! I mean we’ve upped hazard pay for basically everyone—except for you, and you’ve got just as much on the line—being in the Inquisition makes you a target, and you were in just as much danger whenever Haven fell. Skyhold is secure but there’s always a bit of risk, and you don’t even have hazard pay. So. Somewhere, you’re overdue a boost.”

“…Eleanor—”

“Is correct, Josie,” Leliana said, “and I agreed—she sent a message run her decision by me, and while Cullen and Cassandra are occupied this evening, I trust they would not dispute this.”

“If they do I’ll never talk to papi again—two seconds and he’ll cave. And mami isn’t technically an advisor so…her vote only counts if she says yes. That’s the rules.”

“Official Inquisition bylaws?” Josephine offered quietly, jesting, earning an enthusiastic nod from the girl. She- she did not- this was not at all what she was expecting to happen tonight. “May we discuss this more privately, mija?”

“Sure! Varric—bricks! Josie will need time to read everything before she signs, so we don’t need your notarizing skills.”

“First time a woman’s ever kicked me out of her bedroom over no longer needing my notarizing skills. Gotta say tumbles, it hurts the same,” he sighed wearily as he dropped from his seat.

“We’ll have a guys-only Skyhold sleep over sometime,” Eleanor promised. “Not tonight…or tomorrow night—but some night! As soon as she’s being paid properly for it, Josie will put it on my calendar!”

“Sounds like a plan,” Varric affirmed, waving the girl down to crouch so he could kiss her on the cheek. “Have a good one, ladies.”

“We can talk outside—Leliana if you wanna get changed feel free, and there’s cookies and cocoa by the fire—Varric helped me move the couch! There’s blankets! Get snuggly,” Eleanor ordered the Spymaster, who stared wide eyed at the girl before turning that same gaze to Josephine.

“I suppose I’ll get snuggly,” she said, sounding discontent with the term, “Have a pleasant
chat,” though the Orlesian woman did draw nearer to press a kiss to Josephine’s cheek and whisper, “you deserve this, Josie, hear her out,” she intoned before slipping away, the pack she’d brought slung over her shoulder as she made use of the little dressing room they’d erected in the closet to the left of Eleanor’s bed.

The girl herself took Josephine’s hand in hers, and a stack of parchment from her desk, and led her out onto the balcony, past the fireplace. “It’s toastier out on this one.”

“How, I- I was serious before, I wasn’t requesting a raise, and while I certainly appreciate the sentiment, my family cannot be supported on my salary alone—“

“It’s not for your family, Josie—it’s for you,” Eleanor insisted. “We’ll go meet with the Comte and get your family’s affairs sorted—you’ll be allowed to trade in Orlais soon! This isn’t charity… and I mean if you want to think about it that way, then the line starts behind me. I wouldn’t have anything if it wasn’t for the Inquisition—you work hard and you genuinely deserve something for that work, and I’m sorry I never considered that before all this, but I never saw your contract with the Inquisition—that’s not the best excuse though, I’ve thought about people needing benefits because of their kind of work for other members of my party, and my Advisors,” her hand squeezed Josephine’s, “I’m sorry, Josie, really. I should have done this sooner. So…let me make this right, okay?” the girl quietly pled, so sincere and hopeful. Oh.

Josephine sighed, taking the parchment Eleanor offered in hand, “I will…consider it.”

It felt like some reward, how the girl’s expression lit up with relief, “Great! Take your time and read it over when you get the chance, okay?”

“Certainly.”

“Great!” and then, turning toward her room, “Dinner will be here soon!”

Josephine caught Eleanor’s hand to halt her from returning to her quarters, “My lady- Ellie.”

“Yeah Josie?” the girl wondered curiously.

“Muchas gracias, mija,” Josephine sniffled, speaking past a lump that formed in her throat, just- “Mister Aclassi stopped by my office to discuss our trip to Val Royeaux—that is perfect, and Marehis, she is…agreeable to the Chargers securing us?”

“Ohh-huh! Mami was with me the whole time I was talking to Mister Aclassi and the Iron Bull, she didn’t have a problem with it!”

Oh! “Oh sweet girl, you must be exhausted!” the girl did not operate as Josephine would have—sending missives with proposals and awaiting replies, she’d run about Skyhold securing what she needed! She’d just gotten in from that horrible Crestwood place and then she barely had a half hour to sit and relax before Josephine unloaded her personal strife onto her shoulders and then she- she’d been running around and making arrangements and working up contracts and- “Come mija, let’s get comfortable, rest for the evening. I’m not sure what one does at a slumber party, but please, don’t keep yourself awake on our account—we would all benefit from a good nights sleep.”

“It’ll be great!” the girl was agreeable, “Let’s get cozy with Leliana!”

And so they did, Eleanor believing it to be ‘just the cutest!’ that Josephine and Leliana were wearing matching pale pink nightgowns, the girl joined them, trading her tunic and trousers for a large sleep shirt that looked…well, Cremisius had frequented his father’s workspace at odd hours to check in on the man when he used the space late at night, since it was so close to his quarters…
too, it was admittedly nice, Josephine often worked late hours so the company was welcome. Cremisius would stop in and wish them good evening, occasionally bringing something to eat or drink, and sometimes that happened out of armor, in his sleep clothes. Eleanor seemed to have procured a shirt from the Lieutenant’s collection, it fell to her mid-thigh, though Josephine made certain she was…warm, and admittedly covered, with blanketing gathered in her lap as she before Josephine on the couch, when their meal was delivered.

“This is delicious, Eleanor,” Leliana said from her end of the couch, wiping at her mouth with a napkin once they set aside their bare plates. “I’ll have to brag to Varric that you throw a spectacular slumber party.”

Eleanor giggled, “He acts like our entire life in the field isn’t just one big continuous sleepover.”

“You can have your promised sleepover tomorrow evening if you wish—we won’t need to leave Skyhold until the day after, I’ve just received confirmation of our meeting with the Comte,” Josephine informed the girl.

“Oh! That works—I mean I still can’t get together with Varric and the others tomorrow night um…” the girl blushed a bit, shyly sharing, “I’m kind of having a sleepover with Cremisius.”

A sleepover…oh.

Oh!

Oh goodness!


“I see…that is- is- would this be…your first sleepover with the Lieutenant?” Josephine wondered and when Eleanor nodded, “Are you nervous?”

“A little,” the girl supposed. “I mean I know Cremisius would never um, that I’m safe with him, and I’m ready, just…” she shrugged. “I’m kind of scared I won’t be any good? I’ve um… never had a sleepover before.”

“Why Eleanor I’m honored,” Leliana gently teased. Oh, she was even smiling as she reached out to tickle at Eleanor’s side.

“You know what I mean!” the girl laughingly defended.

“There’s no shame in being inexperienced,” Leliana assured, “miraculously, even the Iron Bull was born a virgin. He kept that status until the tender age of fourteen when he had a night of exploration with a lifelong friend.”

“Leliana honestly, how do you know such things?!” Josephine half-shrieked, scandalized.

“It is my job.”

Somehow that did not seem to fit her job description and if she was not careful, Eleanor would seek to give her a raise for knowing the minute details of her companion’s sex-lives. Gracious. Well, Josephine was hardly an expert with such things but, “If you are truly ready, I’m certain…Cremisius is a sweet man, and he loves you, genuinely. He would not do anything you were uncomfortable with, and I’m certain he would be patient.”
“You’ll find what feels right for the two of you—it is not something you can be ‘bad’ at, no one is grading you, it’s a joint effort. It is not so much the act, my dear girl, but who it is with,” Leliana assured oh, that was almost heartbreakingly sweet to hear from the woman. Though, “…in this case, when it is an act of love. When it’s purely a physical thing, yes, some proficiency should be brought to bear.”

Josephine’s face burned bright at that as she covered Eleanor’s ears as if she could keep her from hearing the words after the fact, “Leliana!” The Spymaster giggled like an absolute child!

“What was your first sleepover like?” Eleanor asked the Orlesian woman.

“Let’s see… it was… wonderful, with someone I love dearly to this day,” Leliana offered, without graphic detail. “Did you know my lady love is the Hero of Ferelden?”

Eleanor gasped at that, eyes wide as she excitedly launched into, “Oh my gosh oh my gosh oh my gosh! Really?! Oh! That’s how you knew about the tunnel thing in Redcliffe, right?”

“Yes.”

“The Hero of Ferelden… I um… I’m sorry, I’ve read Varric’s book about Hawke—is she in a book? I haven’t heard of her, except that one time you mentioned her. What’s she like? What’s she do? Does she work for the Inquisition?”

“No, no, she’s currently on a quest of her own at the moment,” Leliana chuckled warmly, “Neria,” she spoke the woman’s name as if it were the loveliest word in spoken language, “she is a mage—Dalish.” And a Warden, but the Orlesian woman would not be offering up that information for the girl if she didn’t already have it herself. It would only burden the girl if she knew someone Leliana dearly loved was in peril that pressed the need for them to stop Corypheus’s current plot.

Josephine worried after the woman given what they’d just learned of the Calling—they’d had a sleepover of a sort, staying up late in Leliana’s tower, waiting for word back from the Warden. She’d apparently not yet confessed to Leliana, her struggles with the Calling, believing it genuinely to be her time and not wishing to inform her lover until it was absolutely necessary… given she was questing in the West, and Leliana was performing her own duties in the Inquisition… such a thing would mean the two would not see each other again, in this life. Leliana was able to inform her that this Calling was likely false—Corypheus’s doing, telling her to resist it and stay where she was and stay her course. They did not find rest until Neria wrote back with confirmation that she understood.

“A mage! Oh gosh,” the girl worried at her lip a bit, the bit of flesh slipping from her teeth as she said, “I can I ask something kind of personal? It’s something I’m worried about, moving forward with Cremisius. Does Neria… do you… um…” oh goodness, she was blushing. “Do you feel anything from her magic, when you’re together?”

“Eleanor, honestly it’s a bit of a rush to just jump right into magic play—“

The girl’s face blazed red as she shrieked! Hastily assuring, “Not that! I meant like… emotionally or whatever!”

“Hmm…” the Spymaster thought on it, “yes, actually. I do.”

“Did it scare you? Is it something I should warn Cremisius about? I wouldn’t want him to be afraid but um…” she blushed, ducking her head shyly as she leaned back, against Josephine, snuggling against the Ambassador a bit, oh, this was nice—she was so excited and overjoyed to arrange and provide these quarters for the girl but there had been some mourning that Eleanor
would no longer have need to stay the evening with Josephine as she had so often when they first found Skyhold. She—she saw Haven burning every time she closed her eyes in those first few weeks and she could not sleep for fear she would wake to Skyhold in utter ruin, and Eleanor found her up late their first night there, taking the night air when she’d felt suffocating fear, took a single look at her Ambassador, took her by the hand and said she did not wish to sleep alone, *gosh, I hate to be a baby, but would you mind if I slept with you Tia Josie?* Eleanor slipped into the bedroll Josephine had to use at the time, warm and content and—*Duermete mi nina, duermete mi amor, duermete pedazo de mi corazon.* Eleanor’s quietly singing lullabies Josephine had sang to her younger siblings when they were babes, had brought the woman to tears, but sent her to peaceful sleep for the first time since Haven. Josephine indulged in making play with the girl’s hair, dropping a kiss to the top of her head. “My magic loves him too, you know? A lot. Like I’m sure Neria’s loves you.”

“It was not frightening for me, but I’m rather at comfort with magic. It could be startling for some—you should discuss it with the young man, though from experience, it is pleasant and…if you’ve been in passions without delving into an out-in-out…slumber party,” the woman grinned, “Neria’s magic would make itself known to me when we expressed physical—when—when we merely kissed or ‘made out’, as the youths call it.”

Eleanor giggled. “Cremisius hasn’t said anything about it, so…yeah, we’ll talk about it, beforehand. Thanks,” she offered sweetly, before leaning her head back against Josephine’s chest to look up at her, “What about you, Tia?”

“What about me, mija?” Josie wondered, confused.

“What was your first sleepover like?” the girl questioned.

Sleep…

Oh. Oh! Oh. Josephine’s mouth worked to find appropriate words…

“Josie?” Leliana asked softly, intrigued. “We’ve discussed this—we have haven’t we?” the woman wondered, looking as though she were trying very hard to think back over the entire course of their friendship for some discussion that…well, likely never occurred. “Not even with Cecily?” Leliana asked, utterly dumbfounded. "You always spoke er...passionately about your relationship."

“Oh goodness, no!” Josephine assured. "I mean we were in love but we were never together in that way!" The woman—well, they had been girls at the time—had been Josephine’s first ‘crush’ so to speak, but they’d done nothing more than kiss, charm-school sweethearts after a fashion. It was something that ended immediately upon Cecily’s betrothment to the son of a Ferelden Bann. “It…may seem strange or embarrassing but I have…maintained my purity the whole of my life.” She’d only one other relationship in her life, with a man who took up interest in her when she first started as an Ambassador living in Orlais, but months in…once he wished to pursue a more physical relationship and she informed him she would not be doing as much, they’d decided to resume being nothing more than friends.

“Oh!” Ellie chirped, wide eyed as she assured, “Oh Tia—I didn’t mean to make you uncomfortable. Are…I mean it’s so totally okay if you’re not um…I mean do you not want to have sex? Like in a general sense, is it just something that’s never appealed to you? Or is it like, you’re only sexually attracted to people based on personal things and not outward appearance.”

Josephine blushed, “Goodness! I— I mean I’m only—of course I’ve…desired people in the past, er, I find people physically desirable of course, regardless of personality unfortunately, is that not what sexual desire comes from?” she wondered, tentatively. She wasn’t certain this was a
Eleanor shrugged. “Not for me! Everyone’s different Josie, some people don’t like sex—some people like all of the sex! And then some people fall in the middle! The first time I saw Cremisius I thought he was very handsome. Um…” she seemed to consider it. “I wasn’t… I liked him as a friend and he had a crush on me, and my interest was kind of… people around me saw a girl being interested in being friends with a boy and heard wedding bells I guess, ‘cause that’s the norm. I didn’t see him giving me my hat or sending me paper flowers as flirtation but just offering genuine friendship, which, is what it was, he wasn’t pursuing me yet even though he thought he might like me that way. The way sexuality works for me? I have to know a person first, really, truly know them. Like I know Cremisius is handsome, so is Varric and Dorian and papi, and Gare, and Papa Aclassi, and the Iron Bull—just like how Sera and my mamis and Vivienne, and you and Leliana are gorgeous. But sexual attraction just doesn’t spark in me until I know about who a person is.” She blushed, “Then I really got to know him once we were back from the Storm Coast the first time. And the more I got to know him, the more I started liking him as more than just my handsome new friend. I mean as I saw him being such an amazing friend to me and caring about me so much? Protecting me? I started kind of crushing. When… when that assassin Gaspard sent? The one who tried to poison me when Cremisius was my bodyguard?”

“Ahh,” Leliana hummed, “that was a rather dashing display of bravery, even I might have swooned if I were you,” she supposed.

Eleanor shook her head, “No—I mean that was like, super brave—but when he went to make sure that Flissa was okay? Big wow,” she breathed as if still impassioned by the act, “I could’ve kissed him on the spot if, you know, it would’ve been appropriate. The more I learned about how kind and compassionate Cremisius is… well,” she smiled, shrugged. “Tomorrow night has been kind of a long time coming and if anyone interrupts us I will for real be doling out actual firings.”

Josephine smiled, “I’ll make certain any who wish to contact you at the time are screened by me and told to come to you at a more convenient time,” she promised.

“Good! Oh, but my point is—that’s normal tia! I’ve always found attraction in people regardless of what they have going on on the outside, but it comes entirely from me knowing them well enough to see what they’re working with on the inside, in their hearts and souls and minds. So wherever you fall on the spectrum is normal too!”

Ahh. “Well…I’m…I’ve no prejudice, insofar as gender is concerned. It isn’t that I fall on the, er, spectrum in the same place that you do, Eleanor, I… have had relationships with people I’ve desired greatly and haven’t laid with them,” Cecily, Raul, Daliah, Ton- oh! She-! Mister Aclassi was hardly a past romantic interest. Neither was he a present or future one! Bah! Why had he come to mind? She supposed he was… she was only Human! The man could wear a suit well! He was handsome, and kind, and gentle-spirited. But they were- it would be wildly inappropriate for her to seen liaison with someone who worked just the literal stone's throw away from her own desk! “…that is rather the point,” she pressed on, “I’ve…it would be albeit improper for me to lie with someone before marriage a- and…well,” she blushed, embarrassed, but, “I’ve always found romance in that notion. Saving oneself for someone you’re intending to be the only person you share as much with. So while I desire, I…” while she had been assured the idea was prudish and made her boring, unappealing to some, “choose to abstain.”

“Oh! Gosh! Duh—that’s a thing!” Eleanor seemed to remind herself, like she should have thought of that to begin with instead of assuming Josephine was wholly adverse to sex itself, “It’s not a sexuality I don’t think but it’s a perfectly normal sexual-decision!” she assured, sitting up and
wriggling about to face the Antivan woman, sitting on her knees, taking Josephine’s hands, “A perfectly wonderful, valid thing! That’s really sweet and beautiful!”

Was it? sometimes she did worry that she’d allowed love to pass her by in her life simply because she did not give in on her conviction. Sex was an incredibly intimate, vulnerable thing—it would be hard enough to allow herself to become so revealing, let someone know her in such a way. She…wanted that to be with one person—them and them alone.

She hadn’t realize she’d been sitting in silence until she felt lips pressing a sweet kiss to her cheek, arms around her neck as Eleanor hugged her tightly, practically snuggling with the Antivan woman as she said, “You’re so beautiful and wonderful and if you want love, you deserve it and you deserve to have it in the way that best suits you! Don’t ever let anyone make you feel otherwise!”

Josephine sniffled, hugging the girl back. She’d not meant to grow emotional, but she had—this was incredibly ridiculous, she hardly set out tonight thinking they’d discuss such things but…she was glad they had, it was…well it was the first time such a discussion ended pleasantly, without mockery. “Gracias, mija.”

“She’s such a sweetie, Josie! The girl enthused, wriggling a bit until she was resting with her back against the couch, laying on her side against Josephine, an arm looped over her waist.

Oh, it was truly comfortable, warm by the fire, and they spent the rest of the evening chatting as they sat together, Eleanor convincing them to let her do their nails, cleaning and painting them as they discussed their upcoming trip, their trio wearing masks of clay Madam de Fer had gifted Eleanor that smelled heavenly, like lavender and mint, and left their skin feeling clean and fresh. And oh, Val Royeaux sounded more and more exciting by the minute as they talked. She was thrilled the girl was agreeable when Josephine spoke of her and Tonio’s plans, and Leliana did not call a single aspect into question—she was immediately bored at the prospect of them going to Val Royeaux for mere fashion’s sake, and lost all inquisitive interest when she learned the Chargers were in charge of their security. She wished them well, that they would have a pleasant time together. Josephine hoped they would. They so dearly deserved it.

She only realized they’d fallen asleep on the couch before the dying fire when she was roused by someone pulling blankets more securely around them, adjusting the cushion under Josephine’s head so it would be more comfortable and she wouldn’t wake with a crick in her neck. She almost thought it was Leliana—the woman wasn’t on the couch, Josephine and Eleanor were stretched out along it entirely—but she could hear the woman ‘not snoring’ somewhere else…probably stretched out herself, across the Inquisitor’s comfortable bed.

“Marehis?”

The woman startled a bit and raised a hand to softly press her index finger against her own lips before whispering softly, “Are you comfortable? I didn’t mean to wake you, I was just checking on her,” she explained, carding a hand through the girl’s hair.

Josephine nodded, inviting, “You’re welcome to stay.”

The Elf woman shook her head, “Oh no, I promised I would take an evening for myself,” she rolled her eyes. “Still, I woke up and just,” she shrugged, “needed to lay eyes on my girls, I just came from Sera’s.”

“You’re an amazing mother, Marehis,” Josephine complimented softly. She admired how well the woman had taken to her role in Eleanor’s life. Oh! Maker—how could she have forgotten
Marehis? Thinking upon it, Eleanor had been speaking of the fun they would all have together—five tickets for everything, maybe six if…well Solas may be out of the question. Perhaps Vivienne or Dorian Pavus would join them? The Iron Bull found some enjoyment from the opera. She just…worried the Elf woman wouldn’t find Josephine’s company interesting. Though Tonio would be there as well. She would figure everything out when she didn’t have a sixteen year old sleeping on her, half-asleep herself. She’d been talking to someone just now, hadn’t she?

Oh. Marehis, the woman chuckled and pressed a kiss to the Ambassador’s forehead. “Get some rest, have pleasant dreams,” before she dropped a kiss to Eleanor’s hair and took her leave.

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“Cremisius.”

...Cremisius Gistin Aclassi—might as well whole name him, ‘cause the whole first name rolling out of Bull’s mouth had the same affect—stopped dead in his tracks, his hand on the doorknob of the Charger’s quarters, about to step out into the top floor of the Tavern.

“…The Iron Bull,” he returned not moving a single inch, keeping his back to him.

“I’m going out with the boys today—Thom’s guys—to clear out some people causing trouble on the road to Skyhold. Not gonna be back ‘til late. So. Anything you wanna share?”

How did he know? Ellie hadn’t told him. How did he know?!

“Red keeps me informed.”

The fuck did Leliana kn- girls night.

“You uh…got a problem with it or something?” Krem wondered…worried, stepping back from the door and turning to face the Qunari seated on the edge of his cot. Was mostly just them—Grim was out like a light, Rocky was snoring away in his cot, Stitches was probably bunking with Adan, and everyone else out doing Maker knows what. “She- I’d never if she wasn’t down for it, you know that right?”

Guy nodded, looking grim as he lumbered to his feet, crossing the room to put a hand on Krem’s shoulder, and stared him right in the eye.

And then, shit eating grin on his face.

“Good fucking luck having breakfast with her papi.”

…

“You’re an asshole.” Bastard was cackling! People were trying to sleep!

“Shuddup!” Rocky called from his cot, somehow still snoring as he spoke. Grim had a damn good arm—he hit Bull square in the shoulder with his pillow without getting up.

“He-ey!” Bull growled at them, halfhearted menace, before returning his attention to, “I’m just messing with you Krem-puff. You uh…need anything before tonight? You’ve got everything?”
“m’all set, thanks.” He had everything he needed—got damn nervous when Cullen came to him about ‘candles and flowers’, literally was ready to shit himself up until he realized he wasn’t getting busted for the orders he’d just gotten in, but the Commander was asking his help to set up his own date-night things for Cassandra. He’d already put in orders for dinner, dessert, bottle of sparkling apple cider as sort of a tip of the hat to their first date. Ellie’d been a little wide-eyed when she got a sneak peek of his harness before she left for Crestwood, but after a moment she decided she would be comfortable with it, it was, er, a good size and ‘very handsome’ she assured. Still he uh…we’ll he’d had it a while, and…dunno, just felt this was a different chapter of his life he was in, no more bedding strangers or having one-night stands, so, new chapter, new piece. Same size, same padded leather, just, it felt like the right move.

“Want it engraved?” Bull’d asked when Krem asked he put in the order.

“Pretty sure it’s not gonna get mixed up with someone else’s here,” Krem’d said.

“You’re so certain?” Skinner spoke up from her bunk as she carved a sharper point to Dalish’s arrows. Woman did genuinely shoot from time to time.

“Didn’t mean your name,” Bull said to him.

... “I swear to god, you put my girlfriend’s name on my dick, you’re dead.”

Guy scratched out something he’d written down on the order, “I wouldn’t dream of it.” Ass.

Had the key to Ellie’s room so he’d set everything up for tonight while she was getting ready. War Room meeting, mage lesson with Vivienne, then lunch which he was under strict orders to attend, and then she’d have one final sit down with her advisors before doing out judgement on the Mayor of Crestwood, then she’d be at Marehis's getting ready, and that’s where he’d pick her up. There was this weird conflict where he felt like there wasn’t nearly enough time in the day, just wanted everything to slow down…but if he opened the door to the Tavern right this instant and it was dinner time already? That’d be cool too.

“Bello! My son has arrived!” Papa greeted warmly as Krem rushed down the stairs to the second floor of the Tavern, little bit of skip in his step—nervous, but it was gonna be a good day, already was one—Papa had this huge grin on his face as he met Krem at the bottom step, taking his face in his hands, and pressing a kiss to his cheek, “Isn’t he handsome? I swear every time I turn around I find my boy’s gotten handsomer!” Maker, it was just breakfast, he wasn’t being auctioned off or anything.

Wouldn’t mind being auctioned off if the winning bid was placed by, “The handsomest!” Ellie agreed, oh. talk about ‘every time I turn around’ someone looking better, she was just- she’d clearly slept well, bright eyed, smiley, hair loose. And it was his shirt she was wearing, just tucked into her own trousers, looked like a sneaky way of wearing pajamas out and about Skyhold. Hung off her shoulder just a bit in a way that was uh…well the seat across from her was empty and clearly meant for him which was probably a good idea, if he got too close he’d do something stupid like kiss her on the shoulder in front of their parental figures, the Maker, and Andraste. She was seated between Cullen and Cassandra at a table on the Tavern’s middle level, dining area next to the windows, same wall the door to Sera’s room was. Huh, would she be joining them?

…she’d been knocking back shots with her girlfriends at 2am when he’d been heading to bed after his shift, so…probably not.

Cullen leaned back in his chair, Cassandra mirroring him as if she knew he was seeking to speak with her behind Ellie’s head, “I thought I was the handsomest?” he quietly complained
which had the Seeker rolling her eyes and sighing exasperatedly, like she’d expected he was going to share a private, genuine concern and not his, er, ‘nonsense’ she’d call it.

“You’re the handsondest papi,” Ellie said without missing a beat, “It’s the Iron Bull, and then you and Mister Aclassi, and then all the other fathers in the world in descending order until… huh, do you suppose Corypheus is a father? He’s on the bottom if he is.”

“Let’s hope for the world’s sake that thing has never procreated,” Marehis lightly drawled, as she joined them—mother and daughter sharing a similar look, chestnut hair was loose and wavy around her shoulders, sleep shirt tucked into her trousers like she’d just rolled out of bed and made her way here.

“Hola mami! Did you have a good night?”

“I did, Lady Montilyet gifted me dessert and I made good use of the oils and clay mask you had sent to my quarters, sweet girl, it was truly relaxing,” Marehis said, sliding between Cullen’s and the chair to the table behind him to put her arms around Ellie’s shoulders, press a kiss to her temple, “how was your evening, da’vehnan? I trust you, Leliana and Josephine had a pleasant time?”

“Uh-huh! We talked for like, hours! And Leliana let me paint her nails and braid her hair this morning! And Josie and I slept on the couch but it was sooo comfy, she’s the snuggliest!”

“That’s good,” Marehis said, squeezing the girl a bit before letting go and coming around to sit on the other side of Krem, pressing a face smooshing kiss to his cheek as she sat and offering, “Good morning, da’mi.”

“Morning Mare’.”

“I’m glad to hear you had such a pleasant evening,” Papa said, “I was worried Lady Montilyet would work until she’d forget to join you.”

“Oh we had just the best time, she really got a chance to relax! And we’re super excited about Val Royeaux.”

“Val Royeaux?” Cullen asked.

“We’re going shopping—just because Corypheus is trying to end the world doesn’t mean we can’t look good stopping him!” Ellie giggled. “Mister Aclassi-“

“Papa or Tonio please, bella mia,” Papa insisted.

Oh man Papa loved this girl and that just…upped the love factor Krem already had for her too, impossible as that felt. Asked about her every day when she was away in Crestwood, even after Krem convinced him Ellie would absolutely love it if he wrote to her himself—she had, Krem’d just gotten a letter from her when a second one came one day with her excitedly gushing that his Papa wrote her, making sure she was doing well, asking if she needed anything. She assured him herself she was fine. The guy knit her socks anyway, thick woolen ones he had to knit himself instead of just cutting and sewing already woven material—sat down with Krem, learned how to knit, and sent her socks. Because she mentioned the weather, unsure what else to talk about—she didn’t exactly want to scare the man with ‘we were attacked by a horde of bandits’ or ‘I was manhandled by a Revenant and flung around a Deep Roads chamber like a ragdoll’—and once he heard it rained almost non-stop in that part of Ferelden and he was worried she was cold.

“Papa Tonio and Tia Josie need ideas and materials for the Inquisition’s debut at the Winter
Palace! So we’re making a bit of a vacation out of it! I’ve got a meeting with a potential ally, and then the rest of the time is free game until their done or I have to go to the Western Approach. Fair warning—if I’m having an amazing time and have to go kick some Corypheus-lacky’s butt in the middle of it, it will be a butt kicking of epic proportions.”

“Oh, poca amore, do not even think of such things when we are in Val Royeaux,” Papa pled, reaching across the table to cover her hand with his, “enjoy yourself. Lady Montilyet will be making arrangements for us to have a pleasant time.”

Maker help them all, Ellie looked like she was about to shoot through the roof she was so excited, damn these match making schemes—if the Heald of Andraste wanted people to smoosh, they were getting smooshed. The Lady Ambassador was sweet, gentle and kind, and if she liked his father, could love him? Well…mother certainly moved on well enough—his father deserved that and more.

“So! Anyone who wants to come,” Ellie shrugged, “it should be fun!”

Sounded like it, he hoped it would be, damn did she deserve some actual substantial fun, a decent break. He’d been…Maker, petrified when Ellie wrote from Crestwood, tear stained parchment that said she missed him and she was scared and struggling…he straight up started heading to Crestwood, was gear up to just bolt and go to her but by the time he’d gotten his horse saddled it sort of clicked in his brain—he had responsibilities of his own and he could help Ellie better living up to those responsibilities than shirking them to do the ‘dashing boyfriend swooping in to kiss everything better’ move. He got the Chargers together and they went and got that bastard Mayor from Cole so he could get back to Ellie as soon as possible. And Cole just about hugged him breathless, and Ellie was relieved to have the Spirit’s take on what was happening to her, so all in all the better move.

“You’ll be meeting a potential ally?” Cassandra asked, nodding her thanks as Cabot brought their drinks, water and coffee all around. Ellie pouted when the coffee mug before her hadn’t been filled quite as much as possible, lots of room for cream, but Krem’s was pretty full and he wasn’t real big on black coffee so…kind of nice he got a big smile when he switched around their mugs.

Though uh, apparently a smile wasn’t all he got for his trouble—he just about died when his father choked a bit on his water and then he felt the man’s ankle brushing against his as the elder Aclassi quietly, nonchalantly as possible, guided Ellie’s foot to meet Krem’s, the girl’s eyes widening as she blushed big time oh man. Wasn’t mad about the resulting session of ‘footsies’ though, they couldn’t exactly hold hands the entire meal what with all the plates and cups uh, parents, so it was a good substitute for all she’d accidentally foot-handled his father.

Cullen thanked him for about the dozenth time for all his help the other day and Cassandra was uh…kind of rosey cheeked, the gentlest bit of a consistent smile in her features so, yeah, he was glad to help, the Seeker…she’d been through a lot lately too, he couldn’t imagine…it probably wasn’t the same but he was sure it’d be pretty close to what she’d went through if he came back to Skyhold one day and found all the Chargers, tortured to death. She gave everything to the Seekers, it was her life, sort of like Bull losing the Qun. But…he had his friends, his family, his mouthy Tevinter lover. And Cassandra had them—Sera and Ellie, her friends and family she’d made out of the Inquisition, and she had Cullen.

Poor bloke looked beat though, ate as much as he could manage and then he was sitting back in his seat, arms crossed over his chest, head lulled forward as he dozed. Cassandra’s arm was angled like the woman was reaching over Ellie’s lap under the table to rest her hand on his knee as she ate, everyone chatting quietly.
“Will you be joining us in Val Royeaux, Lady Cassandra?” Papa wondered.

“I hate to disappoint but given recent developments...I’ve much work to do here;” though when Ellie opened her mouth, likely to refute that—insist the woman deserved a break of pace too, “your papi and I may take a day trip in your absence. Some place he’s always found peaceful, for a bit of respite before I must join you in Orlais.”

“Oooh fun! Dale, mami,” Ellie giggled, snapping her fingers.

“Honestly child,” the woman shook her head, fighting a grin.

“Da’vehnan, leave her be,” Marehis gently reprimanded.

“Do you know what your child said to me last night?” Cassandra asked the Elf woman.

“Oh dear—my child?” Marehis questioned, amused that she now had sole claim to the girl apparently.

“Yes, entirely when she behaves as such,” the Seeker assured, “she swatted my backside,” she whispered the last word, motioning Marehis to lean forward so she could lean and whisper the rest against her ear...which turned bright red.

“Eleanor Liana!” Marehis gasped out in delighted shock.

“What?!” Ellie defended, “She’s the one that wore papi out!”

Cassandra looked like the single most frightening tomato Krem’d seen in his life—and he hadn’t been a fan of the fruit-maybe-vegetable as a child. “I did no such-!”

Papa was laughing hard into his napkin as he did try to rein it in, Krem was just basically losing it, wheezing as he rested his head on his arms on the table to hide his face from the Nevarran woman.

“Mija,” Cullen’s voice had Krem looking up—the guy’s eyes were still closed, looked like he was asleep even as he smiled and offered the amused reprimand, “you wear me out—leave your mami be.”

“Rude!” she accused, pressing a kiss to the Commander’s cheek, “You wanna go halvesies on headache potion papi?”

“You got a headache, lovely?” Krem asked, concerned. Shit, it wasn’t like one of those bad ones she had after Envy did a number on her mind, was it?

“He’s getting the whole thing, I’m being sneaky—Papi doesn’t like taking potion,” she stage whispered to him as Marehis passed her a bottle of potion across the table, “Stop being such a sweet considerate boyfriend and help me here!”

Krem snorted, relieved, though he stage whispered back, “Part of the job description El, can’t just turn it off.”

“Hey! I fired Tia Josie last night, I can fire you too mister!” she teased, though she startled the hell out of Papa.

"Y-you fired Lady Josephine?” he asked in startled shock.

“No worries, I un-fired her! I was just trying to give her a raise! You two are okay with it,
“Ahh. I have been informed my vote does not count if I say no,” the Seeker said, “it is fortunate I believe your reasoning to be sound though we will all be-” Cassandra stopped as if she stumbled on something she shouldn’t say in front of others, confidential. "supportive, of her raise, not just you, Eleanor, though it was very honorable of you to put forth as much." Supportive? Oh. Money had to come from somewhere, right, everyone chipping off a bit of their own pay to boost the Ambassador. "Lady Montilyet has taken on rather a heavier load than what she was initially signed on for, and she’s done so from day one, unasked."

“Oh!” Papa said, “Oh, that’s wonderful, yes, she does so much deserve it.”

“When did you talk to Varric?” Ellie wondered.

“He and Hawke were waiting up for us,” Cullen complained as he downed the offered potion, nose wrinkling as he gulped it. “Though for all their mockery they were, underneath it all, being considerate.”

“There were reports of attacks on the road to Skyhold that came in last night,” Cassandra said, “he heard stayed up to await our return at dawn to make sure we got in safely, were not subject to ambush.”

“You stayed out all night?!” Ellie squeaked.

“We fell asleep,” Cassandra said, sipping at her drink, cheeks just…possibly permanently pink.

“Was it ‘cause of mami’s hair?” she wondered, Seeker scoffed but Cullen gave a series of big nods, and the girl’s smile doubled, “Yes! I knew it! My master plan is working!”

Krem huffed a laugh, “You do realize they’re together already, right?”

“My mija’s matchmaking schemes know no bounds,” Cullen said, approval ringing in his voice.

“Ahh, bella mia, you’re a matchmaker?” Papa asked, sounding amused.

Wouldn’t be amused if he realized the little sparkle in her eye was that of a predator in observing its prey as she smiled at him, more like showin’ her teeth. Maker preserve his Papa. “I am!”

“That is beautiful, to see the potential for love and to nurture it,” he sagely commended, reaching across the table to pat her on the hand.

“I think everyone should have someone if that would make them happy! Love’s important, I mean anything at all in the world could be happening, everything could be lost, and it would still be there because its one of the few things…maybe one of the only things that’s truly infinite. You can have so, so much, and there’s always more!” she enthused sweetly, light in her eyes just genuine joy and just- Maker she was pretty, and proving her point cause-

“Maker, I love you El,” Krem breathed without thinking about it, taking her Marked hand and giving it a squeeze, earning a giggle and,

“See?” she said, “I love you too!”
Cassandra was grinning, shaking her head, “Sweet girl you’ve had too much caffeine—we’re cutting you off.”

“You can do that—caffeine, coffee, they’re both finite. I still have love!” she declared rising to her feet—standing on top of her chair—and thrusting an index finger to the sky, and with heartfelt enthusiasm, “It, and it alone will power me through another horrible Advisor meeting! To the War Room!”

“Are our meetings horrible?” Cullen worried.

She continued to smile, enthusiasm and mirth never slipping even as she announced the assurance, “They’re awful! We always decide I should do something terrifying I’ll eventually go through years of therapy to recover from if I survive—if I didn’t love you all, you could never trick me into going to them, they are, in fact, the worst! Someone’s gonna have to carry me! ‘Cause I don’t wanna go! The Western Approach is far away and hot, and my boyfriend is here and hotter!”

The Commander seemed bemused as he stood, wrapped his arms around her thighs and the small of her back, hoisting her as he said, “Perhaps our final War Room decision today can be upon a dessert to treat ourselves with afterward—no terror required.”

“Let’s do it!”

“To the War Room!” Cullen declared, hefting the girl over his shoulder and carrying her off.

“Bye Papa Tonio, bye Cremisius! Have a great day!”

“Farewell Ellie, do mind your head!” Papa cautioned as he waved back, Ellie relaxing to hang over her father’s shoulder so she didn’t bonk her head on the floor overhead as he descended the stairs.

“You’re absolutely certain you’d like to make a child with that man someday?” Marehis teasingly asked Cassandra.

“Somehow that display only affirms my decision,” Cassandra drawled as if that were concerning, sanity-wise. She looked to Papa, “Thank you, Mister Aclassi, for inviting us to breakfast.”

“Oh, no—thank you for joining us, we really must make certain we take a meal together when we can,” Papa insisted, rising when they did and nodding his head respectfully. “Have a blessed day, Cassandra, Marehis.”

“You as well,” Marehis said, going to catch up with Ellie. Cassandra took pause as she passed Krem, resting a hand on his shoulder.

“Thank you for all your assistance yesterday sweet man, and for keeping guard of Skyhold last night,” she said, massaging his shoulder a bit, as she intoned, “get some good rest. You’ve the day off I understand it?”

“I do.”

“Perhaps we could train together this afternoon? I understand you’ve a lunch date—after?”

“Got some date-night prep of my own but yeah, that sounds great,” Krem agreed.

“Excellent,” she said, dropping a kiss to the top of his head, “sleep well.”
Papa looked wistful as the Seeker left them, his arm slinging over Krem’s shoulders as he pulled him in, pressed a kiss to the side of his head, “Well bello, are you full? Do you need anything at all?”

“I’m all set—you need anything Papa?” he checked, “You look very handsome today.”

“Thank you, I’ve a meeting with a potential client this morning,” ahh. Which meant a meeting hosted by Lady Josephine…but the guy always made sure he looked his best for clients, so.

“Knock ‘em dead papa,” Krem encouraged, pecking a kiss to his cheek, “I’m gonna hit the hay.”

“Sleep well my boy,” Papa wished him, heading down stairs though Krem stopped a moment cause the guy didn’t head for the door—he went to the counter and asked Cabot something. Guy was usually a dick to everyone, but Cabot actually smiled, Krem could hear the happy din his voice made when he greeted his father and shook his hand over the counter, ignoring the customer already trying to get his attention to ask Tonio what he could do for him, nodding and disappearing into the little back room and coming back with a platter of…burnt muffins? Oh, not burnt just brown—chocolate. Huh. If he was still hungry Krem would’ve sat with him, but he picked out a muffin and smiled, thanking the barkeep who…honest to the Maker Krem had never seen him say the words ‘not a problem’ he made asking for a glass of water feel like you asked him to run ten laps around Skyhold to pour his sweat in a glass for you to drink…ended up usually tasting like you’d done just that honestly. Anyway, Papa was off and out the door, muffin in hand, a skip in his step. Okay, cool, time to sleep.

He did. Hard sleep, so much he couldn’t recall even dreaming when he did wake up, weight against his side and chest, something pressing against his cheek. Ahh, brim of a hat.

“Heya Cole,” Krem greeted groggily. Brim was making his cheek sore and suddenly the hat was…pretty sure Cole sent it flying across the room. “Mmm, thanks.”

“There was so much hurt when I got in,” …in his cheek? “Stroud’s mind is full of it from the Calling—it is loud.”

Oh. Oh shit, sounded like the poor Spirit was in pain from it. “Hey, I’m sorry buddy,” Krem went for soothing, rubbing circles on the boy’s back, “What can I do?”

“You’re very happy, content, that helps. Sera let me lay with her and her girlfriends—they were all very happy earlier but now their heads pound with ache from their fun. I heard you sleeping peacefully and came here.”

“Well, you can hang with me all you want today, just uh…well, all day if you need it,” didn’t wanna cancel on Ellie, but they wouldn’t have to cancel exactly, they could eat with Cole? It’d just be a normal date, maybe they’d get to just sleep in the same bed which was-

“Oh no, I would not want to interfere—I will help you set up if you let me, and then I will leave,” Cole insisted, smiling softly, “I have so many friends in the Inquisition, there are many places I can go. You are just my favorite.” And then he smiled bigger, “Oh! That makes you happy!”

Krem laughed a bit, running his hand over his face as he tried to wake up a bit more, “Yeah bud, that makes me happy. Wanna come to lunch with me?”
“Ellie invited me! She’s a favorite but she has so many things to do today, and I’m…hurts hurt me less when I’m more corporeal. Stroud is not so loud when I sit like this.”

“Then you do what you gotta do—I’m sorry there’s no turning off his um, hurt. For you and him.”

“I have tried to help, he thanked me but it’s something I cannot do—I tear to untangle and there is only more to cut, catch, caught,” he shuddered, though his voice verged on seething as he quietly admitted, “I…I hate Corypheus, and that makes me feel darkness. I do not like it.”

“We’ll get that bastard, don’t think about him,” Krem said, “He’ll get what’s coming to him. Focus on your friends,” pressed a kiss to his forehead, “you’re okay, everything’s gonna be okay.”

The Spirit hummed a bit, before, “You should get ready for lunch—I can help you with your strings.”

“Thanks bud.”

Guy didn’t do too bad of a job helping Krem lace up. Hadn’t shaved after he got in from his shift, he’d just laid down until breakfast so, quick, careful shave, just in case he didn’t get a chance to later. Ended up helping Cole a bit too when the Spirit got curious and wanted to try cleaning up the faint whispy fluff he got under and around his jaw.

“It does feel clean!” he was delighted to find, face upturned as he rubbed at the now smooth skin under his jawline.

“Lookin’ good—you wanna see if Maryden'll join us? I know it’s lunch but she’s gotta eat too, and we can sit nearby if Stroud’s stuff isn’t getting to you so bad.” With any luck, maybe the guy wouldn’t be in the Tavern? And it’d probably do Cole some good to get to see the songstress —she’d be glad to see him too.

Oh, guy’s eyes widened at that, “She will think I am so handsome?” and Krem nodded, so, “I will ask her! Would you walk with me?”

“Just gotta put on a shirt—too early and too sober to be topless in a bar.” What would Papa think, afterall, he mused.

“He would laugh, be pleased you were so comfortable with yourself, but worry you were cold.”

…that checked out.

Tavern wasn’t overly crowded—most people ate lunch wherever they were working, or outside more often since they were nearing Bloomingtide and they could at least pretend it was getting warmer what with the more consistent sunshine overhead. Stroud and Hawke weren’t at the bar, they usually had something—meetings and things with Leliana or Cullen—seemed like they slept odd hours too. So, for now, Cole seemed okay as they reached the first floor, and he greeted Maryden excitedly, showing her he shaved and earning a smile and a little kiss to his now smooth skin as she voiced her approval. Seemed like he had it in hand and Krem could hear the lilt of Ellie’s voice, cheerily chatting with someone.

Oh—Anya’s boyfriend, Noam something or other. She’d been hanging around him since he arrived with Barris—guy stopped by the Charger’s quarters to check with Krem if it was okay. Anya was Ellie’s so he was fine with it as long as she was, and he checked with her first to make sure she’d be cool with him passing along how to reach her in the field to the Templar so he could
check himself—she was fine with that, and with Anya Mage-sitting their newest recruit, so, that sorted.

Oh, he was here too. Barris, alongside Ellie as she went on about a mile a minute, the Templar nodding to Krem with a smile, who offered a nod back, grinning as he wondered if Ellie realized she could talk faster than most people could keep up. Maker, Papa did an amazing job on her new clothes, she was wearing one of the nicer vested off-shoulder blouses and leggings he’d made for her, dark purple blouse, black gloves, vest, and leggings—tucked into what looked like brand new black boots, he supposed pajamas wouldn’t fly for a lesson with Madam de Fer.

“-good, Enchanter Fiona said to Madam de Fer you’re catching up so well!” she was enthusing, letting out an excited gasp as her gaze shifted from Noam to, “Cremisius! You’re awake—yay!” she greeted, reaching out her hands for him to take, pulling him to her as she popped up on her toes to press a kiss to his lips before turning her attention back to Noam, “This is my boyfriend, Cremisius! Cremisius, this is my new friend Noam!”

“Nice to see you again,” Krem said, offering his hand to shake, which the other boy took tentatively before returning his hand to where it’d been resting atop Anya’s head, scratching a bit as she panted contentedly, offering Krem a little ‘wuff’ in greeting, and he gave her a little wink and a nod of approval—pup still got excited whenever he came around but she was doing a good job of sitting still and comforting their new Mage friend.


“Sopporati—no magic here,” Krem assured.

“Mmm, I wouldn’t say no magic,” Ellie giggled. Smiley as she caught him up, “We were just talking about how Noam’s coming along with his magic—he just got out of lessons.”

Noam nodded, “I didn’t see you—you don’t train with the rest of the Mages?” he asked her.

“Sometimes I help Enchanter Fiona if she asks me to, but my schedule can get pretty crazy—I had lessons with Madam de Fer today.”

“Oh, are you um, an advanced student or a teacher or something?”

“Oh gosh, I’m just a student, nothing advanced or anything! I’ve just known my magic for a long time so,” she shrugged, “So if you have any questions or feel like you’re just not getting something, I’m always down to talk magic!”

“The In-“ Barris started.

“Del-rin!” Ellie sighed out the complaint, rolling her eyes theatrically.

A smile tugged at the Templar’s lips, “Ellie,” he amended, ‘is modest. She’s hardly ‘just a student”—I’ve seen her thwart possession by a demon of Envy,” he looked to the girl, sounding almost concerned, “And Seeker Pentaghast reported your recent struggle against demonic influence—you tried to rid a person of a demon who was, er…physically injected into their bloodstream? Her reports said you battled some sort of ailment to your magic the endeavor left, you…you’re feeling better I trust?”

…a demon physically what into someones what? Ellie- Ellie fought something like that? Her magic had been ‘ailment’ed? “El,” Krem breathed, hand resting against her back.
“Oh! Oh gosh!” she gasped, remorseful, “I’m sorry! I wasn’t like, hiding it or something—I’m fine, all better now magic and all, I was pretty wiped yesterday but two good sleeps in a row and I’m a-okay,” she promised, “I was out of it for a few days, that’s all, I didn’t really come around until the other night, and I got caught up making sure papi had something planned to cheer mami up after everything.”

Maker. His mouth worked for a moment, just-

“I’m completely ridiculous aren’t I?” she asked sympathetic, he nodded, shrugging. “You still love me?” she hoped.

“Big time—no more experimental demon fighting.”

“No promises.”

“Huh…try not to get into fights with experimental demons?”

“Oh! I can try—I’m like amazing at trying! I spent ten entire years trying not to get caught for Apostacy and…I mean honestly to this day, I’ve never been apprehended for that specifically so…” she looked to Barris, feigning concern he might interfere with that.

Templar shrugged, raising his hands in defeat, “Hey, we’re a post-Circle society. Seen the Lietennant spar against the Iron Bull…seen him spar against Seeker Pentaghast, I’d rather not test him trying to arrest you.” And then he regarded her a moment, “…don’t much care to test you either.”

“Awe Delrin,” she smiled, “I’d like, destroy you,” she assured sincerely…for all of a second before, “Or at least confuse you a lot if you don’t speak Antivan—it’s my go-to move when getting arrested! Well, almost getting arrested, which is why it’s my go-to.”

“Antivan?”

“No hablas Trade!” Ellie snapped, Antivan accent on the loose, “Conozco mis derechos! Apartate! Soy un ciudadano Antiva! Exijo que me lleves a una Embajada!”

“…yeah, I give up, you’re free to go,” Barris chuckled.

Noam started…giggling? Quiet spurts that bubbled into full blown laughter as he pressed his hand against his mouth as if he could catch the sound as it escaped him.

“Damn El, what’d you say?” Krem asked.

“Sh-sh-she-,” stuttering ‘cause he was breathless not scared, which was a nice change of pace, “you used to demand to be taken to an Embassy?!”

She giggled, shrugging, “It’s not like they understood me most of the time, but if they did I mean…hey, why not?”

His laughter calmed and he wiped at his eyes with the back of his hand, sighing, “I’m sorry.”

“Oh gosh, don’t be,” Ellie said, “You look so handsome when you smile!” she sweetly encouraged, the mage boy blushing and ducking his face at that, so she said, “You guys ready? Everyone’s here, Cole’s inside, I can’t hear her, but I can feel it in my heart that my sissy’s awake and getting ready to come clomping down the stairs ready to eat because she’s starving.”
“Let me guess—you’re double hungry?” Krem supposed with a grin.

“Got it in one! We’re not twins but we’ve got conjoined hunger!” Ellie insisted as she led them inside, the moment they crossed the threshold there was the thunder of six feet slapping down the stairs and then,

“Inky!”

“Sissy!”

And now she was off to hug Sera, big jump, arms around the Elf girl’s neck and just hanging there.

“…they’re sisters?” Noam wondered, bit confused.

“Warned you they weren’t twins,” Krem joked, smiling and getting a smile out of the timid mage.

“Noam! This is Sera!” Ellie introduced them, “And these are her girlfriends—Dagna and Lace!”

“It’s a pleasure to meet you,” Lace said.

“Awe hey Noam-y!” Dagna greeted cheerily. “Noam’s a cute name!”

“It’s very nice to meet you all,” he answered shyly, Anya gave an encouraging sounding yip, licking at his hand.

“C’mon Noamy,” Sera said, “let’s grab a table and get something to eat—you can tell us how the Inquisition’s goin’ for you so far.”

Maker he was shy, but surrounded by the resident welcoming committee, they coaxed the basics out of him—he wasn’t entirely comfortable yet, with being a mage, but he was growing to enjoy it, he liked his lessons, liked most of the people he had lessons with, the Mages instructing them were patient. He seemed to grow more comfortable, started asking about everyone else, earnest to know about them.

“I mean, I know Ser Barris is a Templar and…” he looked to Krem, “you’re a Lieutenant but not a Tempar I take it? You work w-w-“

“With the great honking Qunari?” Krem offered, smiling and it put the boy back at ease, “The Iron Bull—don’t let him scare you, he’s a big softy.”

Sera snorted real loud at that, “Frig yeah—I seen him holding Inky, singing her lullabies when she’s sicky. Well, when she got sick bad on the Storm Coast anyway.”

“He runs a mercenary crew—the Bull’s Chargers. I’m his Lieutenant, so, second in command,” Krem explained. Noam nodded.

“That sounds exciting, you must be very brave,” he acknowledged.

“Cremisius is one of the bravest people I know,” Ellie assured sweetly, she was seated… almost in his lap, their chairs were right against each other so they sat with legs touching, her hand squeezing his where he’d rested it on her thigh, fingers interlocking. At least until she let go a bit to trace little patterns along the palm of his hand.
“Miss Dagna, you’re the Inquisition’s Arcanist?” Noam checked.

“You bet’cha!” the Dwarf woman was pleased to say.

“You must really like magic—to choose to study it.”

“Oh gosh, I love it. and I’ve learned so many incredible things while working for the Inquisition I mean between the Red Lyrium and all the demon samples and gol-ly, I just, I could stare into the Inquisitor’s Mark for forever studying it if I could,” Dagna sighed, though, “I mean, she’d probably let me but her boyfriend might want her hands for himself,” she giggled, winking at Krem.

Noam chuckled nervously at that, and then, looking to the Dwarf woman seated at his side, “You Miss Lace? What do you do?”

“I’m a Scout,” Lace said, gently slapping Sera’s hand away when the Elf girl tried to take her girlfriend’s distraction as an opportunity to sneak a potato wedge off her plate, Sera sighed and got up from her seat at the end of the table to go put in another order for more—Ellie raising her free hand to wave to the girl to get more for her too, she smiled sheepishly when Krem chuckled at that, pressed a kiss to her temple while Lace explained, “I usually scout ahead of the Inquisitor’s party, make certain there’s a clear, safe way for them to get where they need to go, and lay down a good idea for them of what’s in the area—things they should investigate, dangers to avoid, that sort of thing.”

Noam nodded. “That sounds dangerous.”

Lace shrugged, “I enjoy it, and it’s worth it when our Lady and her party make it safe,” she said, smiling to Ellie who beamed back at her.

Sera wasn’t back just yet so Noam moved onto, the Spirit seated at Ellie's side, oh, that was sweet there was like a little chain sort of, Ellie's Marked hand in Krem's, and once she finished eating she'd slung an arm over Cole's shoulders, a hand in his hair scratching and massaging a bit like she knew the Spirit needed a little extra love today. Maryden had been able to take a bit of a break and eat with them, peppered a few kisses to the top of his head and promised she'd be thinking pleasant thoughts for him. Noam tentatively addressed him now, "Um…what about you, C-Cole, is it?”

…who smiled serenely and informed him, “I am Cole!”

“Yes you are, Cuddly,” Sera said as she plopped back into a seat…which was Lace’s lap now, apparently, the Dwarf woman grunting before she wrapped her arms around her girlfriend’s waist, could be heard giggling as Sera went on, “Cole’s Spirity, he hears when people Hurt inside, like in their hearts’n’pish and then he helps them heal. ‘cause he’s like, Compassion. So he’s a real sweetie and you don’t gotta be scared of him none if he comes poofing around to help you, alright?” Noam nodded, timidly, but he nodded, so Sera smiled, “Good!”

“What about you Mis-“

“Jus’ Sera’s fine,” Sera cut him off. “Me and Cole got the same gig here—I mean not Spirity gigs, but people jobs—we party it up with the Herald of Andraste. Last week we slayed a Dragon! It was friggin’ sweet!”

“You slayed a dragon?” Noam asked, wide eyed.

“Hell yeah, didn’t we Ink?” Sera asked Ellie.
“Like…” Noam looked to Ellie, “y-you went with them? You’re er, part of the party too?”

That got him a bit of a confused look. “um…yeah,” Ellie said simply with a shrug. “I mean gosh, I’d never make my team go out without me. Sometimes I have to stay behind, for my safety, but I mean I’d be a pretty bad leader if I just said ‘hey that’s cool, looks deadly—you guys go on ahead I’ll catch up’ when we come up on big fights.”

“Leader,” Noam laughed like she’d made a joke or something—not meanly, just, like he thought she’d said something she meant for him to laugh at but uh…everyone just sort of looked between one another, not quite sure where the disconnect was and he realized she wasn’t kidding about the leader bit, “Y-you lead the Inquisitor’s party? Inquisitor Trevelyan doesn’t do that herself?”

“Oh!” Ellie said, going to explain but,

Cabot could be heard sighing tiredly as he dropped a few platters of potato wedges onto the table, and Noam startled a bit when the guy clapped him on the shoulder, “Kid. She is Inquisitor Trevelyan.”

“…is…was he serious?” Noam questioned.

“Uh-huh. Ellie ‘Eleanor’ Trevelyan,” she let go of Krem’s hand and ungloved it to wriggle the fingers of her Marked hand in a wave.

“It’s out! Gimme!” Dagna implored, grabby hands, so Ellie obliged, leaning over Krem who…eyes up, he- there were people present and if the Maker loved him even a little, he’d get a much better view later. She offered her Marked hand to the Dwarf girl sitting across from Sera and Lace, “Sera said you had a nasty Rift fight in Crestwood, I wanna see if it did anything…pretty pretty,” she cooed over the Mark, Maker.

“Thanks!” Ellie said, waiting patiently as the Dwarf looked.

“I…I’m so sorry I didn’t- oh Maker, please, forgive me,” Noam rambled out, ashen.

“No one’s upset with you hun,” Ellie warmly assured, “it’s my bad—I kind of thought you knew already and I didn’t want you thinking you absolutely had to come to lunch with me or anything so I didn’t whip out my title when asking you, and I don’t usually go around introducing myself that way on my own anyway. I forget, and I’ve had like two or thee name and title changes since the Breach and just as many concussions so,” she shrugged, ”you get what you get.”

“But why would you want to have lunch with me?”

“The same reason I want to have lunch with everyone—I’m hungry and I want to be friends, lunch is an efficient way of getting both. I like hanging out and having fun, but I’ve got things to do so a girl’s gotta multitask ya know?”

“Hey kid, you know how you ask me to do stupid shit and I tell you I don’t gotta do jack?” Cabot called from the bar as he cleaned out a glass, and Ellie nodded. “…st’n till the top of the hour.”

“Thank you for reminding me! I love you, you beautiful rebel!” Ellie said, using her free hand to blow him a kiss he swatted at. “I really really did enjoy this Noam, and I’m really sorry, but I’ve got a meeting with my advisors before I pass judgement on something this afternoon. I hope we can do this again sometime.”
“That would be nice,” he agreed softly, “Thank you.”

“No problem—Dagna, love you, die for you, but I need both of my hands for important Inquisition business right now.”

“Awe, okay cutie, go on with both your hands,” Dagna supposed, releasing her hold.

Important Inquisition business was unsnapping these two leather pouches that were at her hips, almost like little hard cases meant for carrying potion or something but uh…they were empty. At least until she used both hands to grab fistfuls of potato wedges, and stored them away for later.

“Have a great day,” she offered the table, and Krem thought she was gonna scoot out and go around, but she just stood up, turned on the ball of one foot to straddle his lap and press a quick kiss to his lips and his brain was still playing catch-up, just barely heard her ask, “Walk me?”

“Walk?…oh! Through Skyhold. Cause assassins and stuff. “Sure lovely.” Did he say words? Yeah, he said word, good job.

“Gracias!” she chirped, unstraddling him to stand on his other side, heading for the door and he only just barely remembered to at least offer a wave to the table as he shot up and followed after her. She called over her shoulder, "Cole! He'll be right back, okay?’

“Okay!” the Spirt called after them.

Yup, yeah, it was okay. More than—Ellie’s giggling echoed through the entrance to the Great Hall as she pulled him aside, through the doorway that led into the Chantry Gardens though she stopped there—doors closed on either side of them as she pulled Krem into a kiss he gladly obliged.

“We’re still on for dinner tonight?” she asked as she pulled away.

Uh, hell yeah. “Of course.”

“Great!” she said, though she worried at her lip a little, “Um…so, this is just like a heads up in case it would bother you or be a deal breaker or something—because I’d never ever ever want to do something that made you uncomfortable or not feel safe.”

He raised a hand to cup her face, thumb brushing along her cheek, “El, honey, whatever it is it’s okay to talk about,” he promised. She…did she want to get experimental or something? He hadn’t really planned to do anything too wild for her first time. He wasn’t…uh…he didn’t necessarily have the same appetites as Bull or Dorian but uh…he also couldn’t imagine her being into anything too crazy either.

“Ummm when we’ve made out and stuff, have you felt anything?” Probably whipped out the incredulous look too fast but it made her snort raise a hand to her mouth as she giggled, “I mean from my magic, silly.”

“Have you uh…been casting or something when we make out? Not getting enough practice in in the field?” he teased.

“No you goof, it’s- um. I mean it’s my magic so I feel it, obviously, it sort of um… responds?” she tested the word carefully, “when we um. Are together. Leliana said she can feel her girlfriend’s magic when they’ve kissed and things, and then again when they’ve had sex so, if you feel stuff from my magic too…that might be a thing? And if that freaks you out I totally totally-mmf!’” she startled a bit but smiled into their kiss as he cut her off, just- that’s what she was
nervous about?

“S’long as it’s your magic? I’m cool with it,” he assured, “I trust you, lovely—you and your magic both. I mean I love you, and I can’t love you and feel something different for your magic—it’d be like loving only half of you. Which I mean, if I had to pick half, I’d go with the left,” he said, “cause you know. The power and all that,” he smiled, their hands were intertwined and he raised her Marked hand, shaking it a bit before pressing a kiss to her knuckles.

She nodded, like that made sense, “And my left boob is just a little bit bigger than my right one so…”

Huh, “Is it?”

“Maybe it is. *Maybe* that’s a red herring. You’ll just have to find out,” she shrugged, smiling mischievously. “The art of seduction, Cremisius, is mystery!” she informed him laughingly as she squeezed his hand and started pulling him back into the Great Hall. “Have fun with Cassandra—no getting hurt or anything, kay? I mean that goes for in general but the art of seduction also requires not being too beat up to seduce. It’s in the rule book.”

He snorted a bit, “You’ve read it?”

“I wrote it!”

…this was either the absolute worst…and absolute best conversation they could be having as they passed Mother Giselle. She looked a scarred, uttered a quiet, startled, ‘Oh, good Heavens!’ She’d pissed off Ellie, been vile to Dorian so…he was going with best.

“Hola Tia Josie!” Ellie greeted cheerily.

The woman startled a bit, “Oh! Oh goodness! Hola sweet mija, oh I had just the most wonderful time last night—thank you again,” she said as she set aside the paperwork she was reading over and rose from her seat, “Cullen and Leliana should arrive momentarily. Hello Cremisius, I hope you’re having a pleasant day?”

“I am—your days been pretty busy huh?” Krem supposed, offering, “I can put in a lunch order for you.”

She blushed at that. “Both Aclassi men have made such offers today—your father beat you to it, I’m afraid.” For a second he thought that meant she’d already eaten but, “Something is coming. I’m hardly starving, the sweet man had a muffin waiting on my desk when I returned from the War Room this morning.”

Ellie’s hand squeezed his almost painfully hard as she endeavored to suppress a happy squeak—would’ve been ear-drum bursting. Krem figured, but she managed to keep it down at non-wild levels as she said, “That’s so nice of him! And only fair, mamis, papi, and I went for cake after our meeting! Huh...should we get something for Leliana?”

“Oh she made the mistake of teasing Tonio for not providing enough muffins for everyone and the poor man immediately went and brought one back for her, she shook her head, “your father is far too kind, Cremisius, but I suppose that is where you get it from.”

“And my strong chin—wonderful to see you again my boy!” Papa greeted as he entered, carrying a tray, “your lunch my lady.”

“Tonio, honestly-” she started.
“They’re rather swamped in the kitchens, your meal was prepared and waiting with no one available to bring it, it wouldn’t do to let it get cold and you must be famished,” he insisted, setting the tray before her on her desk.

“I- I did think it would take awhile for it to arrive, I haven’t the time to eat just now I’m afraid, I have a meeting with the Inquisitor and her Advisors presently,” Lady Josephine apologized.

“We’re just chatting in your office Tia—you can eat!” Ellie said, plopping down into the chair in front of her desk, “I’ll be eating! I brought potatoes! Here, you want some? Papa Tonio?”

Lady Josephine broke out in a smile, giggling as she gently reproached, “Oh mija, goodness, surely Mister Aclassi did not work so hard on your wardrobe to have you filling your potion cases with greasy snacks.”

Papa looked confused at that. “Why ever would I make her potion cases? It was my understanding Marehis carries Ellie’s potions, I quite assure you they’re being used as intended— they’re snack pockets, my Lady.”

“I wasn’t messing around when I hired Papa'classi—the man knows what he’s doing!” Ellie informed her, taking a bite out of a potato wedge.

“I’m pleased my designs serve you well bella,” Papa said, leaning down to drop a kiss to her hair, “I hope you have a pleasant meeting.”

Ellie wrinkled her nose a bit, “Kinda have to decide what to do when I preside over a Mayor who murdered his own people in like, an hour or so.”

“How horrible, I did hear something about that,” Papa sighed, and then he knelt at Ellie’s side, taking her Marked hand in his, “Would you be opposed to a moment of prayer bella?”

“…not at all!” Ellie chirped, pleasantly surprised. Krem uh…wasn’t sure what- okay, praying? Lady Josie folded her hands and bowed her head, and Papa and Ellie bowed their heads as he rubbed circles on the back of her hand with his thumb and brought his other hand to rest on the crown of Ellie’s head so…Krem bowed his head and closed his eyes.

“Holy Maker, we thank you for another day together, to be with those we love. We ask you pour your guidance and wisdom upon her as she deliberates over this decision, bring peace to her with the choice she must make, and lift the burden of it from her heart. May she find relief from the deeds this man has done as she delivers her judgment, and may he find peace when he is returned to you at the end of his days. Bless this beautiful girl that brings my son so much joy,” he asked… “…and bless Cremisius, my most precious child, bless the Iron Bull and the Chargers and all of the Inquisitor’s party, bless the Inquisition and all who serve it. Amen.” Oh man, couldn’t end his prayers any other way, huh? Maker bless his papa—Krem sent up the prayer himself before opening his eyes. Oh, Ellie was a little teary eyed, wrapping her arms around his father’s neck.

“I love you so much,” she mumbled against his shoulder.

Papa chuckled warmly at that, “Oh bella, I love you,” he assured, patting her on the back. “Be well my dear.” She nodded, pecking a kiss to his cheek before he rose up. “I’ll leave you to it.”

“I’ll be on my way too,” Krem said, he said he’d meet Cassandra and then he planned to wash up and get ready for tonight…though uh, he should check, “Marehis is coming ‘round right?”
“Oh! She’s with Leliana—they’ll be here soon,” Ellie assured. “There’s guards right out in the hall, and Lady Josie’s got a pretty mean swing with her clipboard.”

“I can stick around until they get here,” Krem shrugged.

“Goooo you promised mami—you’re supposed to train right? And you love training with her!”

“I love you breathing more, if only by the barest of margins,” he assured.

She held up her Marked hand, “Cremisius, on my honor as both a person and a redhead, I absolutely promise not to get assassinated before mami gets here.”

“…promise?”

“Absolutely!” she smiled, "Go—have fun! Be safe!"

“Will do,” he said, giving her a little kiss goodbye and waving to Lady Josephine before he left the room with his father…closed the door behind him and then stood to lean his back against the wall across from the stairs, arms crossed over his chest as he waited. Papa chuckled, patting him on the shoulder as he left him.

Marehis did show up a few minutes later, Leliana at her side and Cullen behind them though when the Elf woman opened her mouth to greet him he raised a finger to his lips before patting her on the shoulder and pecking a kiss to her cheek and he whispered, “I’m not here,” before moving aside to let them through.

“Hello da’vehnan,” Marehis said as she opened the door to Lady Josephine’s office, Krem was almost out the door into the Great Hall with Cullen and Leliana as good cover if Ellie could see around Marehis.

“Hola mami!” and then, “Buh-bye Cremisius!” Damn! She was giggly about it though, so.

Cassandra…didn’t really do giggly, but uh…she seemed a whole other level of tense…pissed off as he approached her on the practice field with Cole at his side—she was beating down on a pair of practice dummies with her sword like they deserved being chopped to bits and sent straight to hell when she was through. Maker.

“Oh, she is upset with Him but she’s more upset with herself,” Cole said quietly. With herself?

“Cassandra?” he greeted tentatively. From out of swinging distance, just in case.

The woman finished the blow she was on before stepping back and turning to face him, catching her breath. “Ahh…Krem…come, shall we spar? Greetings Cole.”

“You don’t need me, I’ll just watch,” the Spirit serenely offered. Kay. Yeah, Krem had this…maybe? “You do!” he assured before he uh…vanished. Nice.

“He does what?” Cassandra questioned, confused.

“Want to spar with you,” Krem said, “but uh, only if you’re finished working out whatever that was, ’cause I got a date tonight I’m trying to be chipper for, I’m not looking for a deathmatch.”

She sighed, sheathing her sword. “I apologize, I was perhaps working out some frustration—
I would do no such thing upon you in training sweet boy.”

Instinct was to ask if everything was okay but uh, she’d been through a thing or two lately so. “You need to talk about it?”

“No,” she shook her head. Though she sighed again, “I- I thought I would make progress today with…” she cleared her throat. “I have been entrusted with an important tome, the writ bestowed upon the highest Seeker in our…now demolished Order.”

“Dwindling.”

“Pardon?”

“Dwindling—if you wanna stick with a d-word. I’m used to offering words to El,” he shrugged. “Seekers aren’t demolished, Seeker. You’re still here.”

That got a bit of a smile tugging at her lips, “I suppose that much is true. Unfortunately that means I must decide how to move forward and I’m…struggling.”

“You…I mean you still feel the Seekers should be a thing, right?”

“I do, I’ve dedicated everything to the Order, I believe in it, but…so did Seeker Lucious. And then he read that damned book and apparently…found it wanting. I am admittedly fearful of what I might find when I consult its contents.”

“You know when I got landed with a book I thought looked like a bad time in school I always just took a peek at the table of contents and skimmed the important looking chapters.”

She huffed a bit of a laugh at that, “This is hardly a school assignment.”

“…a superior gave you a book that’s supposed to teach you how to run the Order, and that’s left you with an assignment: to run the Order. You’ve been putting it off for almost an entire week and it’s due…” he bopped his head side to side as he thought it over, “honestly a reformed Order was due Ages ago, at least if you ask most people. It’s technically a group project but you’re stuck doing all the work yourself. So yeah, it’s basically just like every school project I’ve ever had to do.” he offered her a sympathetic smile, “I understand this is hard. But if you’re just going to keep beating yourself up about it, and you really wanna tackle this? I say baby step it.”

“Baby step?”

“You know. Little itty bitty steps? I wasn’t totally kidding about that table of contents thing—I mean it’s got something like that, right? If it’s got an introduction, try that out. If it’s got a chapter dedicated to how to move forward if the Seekers face a set back like this, or something about…how the founding members got everything rolling? Go for it. Avoid anything that looks like a world-view-crumbling secret in it until you’ve put the effort in—gotten to a place where you feel confident that you’ve armed yourself with the knowledge you need to get the Order started back up…and then arm yourself with the knowledge that will test whether or not it really should be. I mean you’re starting over from scratch—if you read the worst of the worst and think it can be rebuilt without it, go for it. If you come to the conclusion it isn’t worth saving, know you’ve absolutely done your best and absolve yourself of the responsibility.”

The Seeker regarded him with quiet surprise. “That…is devastatingly sound advice,” she said.

“Yeah well you’re pretty devastating with a sword so I figure I gotta cheer you up or die
training with you.”

“Oh, the Iron Bull is correct when he terms you a ‘brat’,” Cassandra assured him, warmly, bemused smile on her face. “That will be three laps along Skyhold’s walls. If you’d care to join me?”

Oh cool, she didn't always run with him, but, “Be glad to.”

It was fun, running the walls, pushups, a little practice sparring the Seeker before a scout approached to inform her it was time for Ellie’s ruling.

“I promised her I would attend,” Cassandra said.

He nodded. “No worries, me too.” Well, it was an unspoken thing but he was pretty sure he was supposed to attend his girlfriend’s important career events? “Cole, you good to come along buddy or do you need me to hang with you someplace else?” Judgments could uh, hurt and he was pretty sure the Spirit was still with them.

Cole reappeared before them, “It will be fine, Ellie is lighter for having prayed with your father and she feels good about her decision.”

She looked like it, serious but confident as she sat in her throne, offering Krem a small smile when she saw him in the crowd next to Cassandra who murmured greeting Cullen as the man approached to stand with them.

“Ahh, I’ve not missed anything?” Papa asked quietly as he filed in just behind Krem.

“No, just getting started,” Krem whispered back.

“I’ve not seen her hold congress before, and it seems like such a harrowing thing, I wished to show support, ahh,” he raised his hand to wave a bit when Ellie saw him, Maker.

Guy was sweet. Little embarrassing sometimes…but sweet.

“Inquisitor,” Lady Josephine said, “we bring before you today Gregory Dedrick—“

“Oh, Lady Montilyet plays a part?” Papa whispered. Krem nodded, refraining from pointing out that this wasn’t a school play or something and just smiling and nodding, though when the man opened his mouth again,

“Yes, you are talking too much,” Cole cheerily assured the man's internal concern.

“Oh! Of course, thank you my boy,” he said, patting Cole on the shoulder, kept it quiet as Lady Josephine laid out the asshole’s crimes for all to hear.

“Have you anything to say for yourself?” Ellie asked. Good job, her voice carried well. It wasn’t a play but still, projection was important and she did a good job!

“Th-there’s no cure for the Blight!” the man pleadingly insisted, “And I- I couldn’t convince people to leave a sick child or loved one behind.”

“So you herded the infected into once place and flooded Old Crestwood?” Lady Josephine questioned him, "Were no innocents caught in the waters?”

“Nearly everyone in the village was infected—I swear it! Have mercy, I couldn’t tell the survivors I’d drowned their own families to save them. I-I couldn’t.”
Ellie nodded as if she supposed that much was true, but, “Well, you’ll have to. Gregory Dedrick it was the people—your people—of Crestwood® that you wronged. You will be returned to them and confess your crimes. They can decide what to do with you. It was not just Crestwood citizens in the village—there were refugees fleeing, trying to get help. The Inquisition won’t be funding a confession tour for you to go around Ferelden admitting to every area affected by the Fifth Blight what you did when refugees came to your town seeking sanctuary, but everything you have left in this world—your home, all the shiny possessions you made certain would be safe from the flood waters so you didn’t have to start all over like every single other survivor you ‘saved’? Everything you own will be sold and the money donated to agencies that assist in the rescue and aiding of Blight Refugees.”

“No- no no no please—” he started begging as guardsmen came to lead him away, “Maker. I should’ve drowned with them.” Yeah dude, that’d’ve been pretty ideal. Bastard.

Seemed safe enough to talk now, everyone was dispersing or moving to get a shot at talking to Ellie as she stepped down from her throne, so, “That seemed a just decision,” Papa said. “Are… are we supposed to clap?”

“Nah. People mostly show up to either play kiss-ass or keep the betting pool alive.”

“People place bets?” he rasped out, shocked.

“Kind of is—not on specific culprits, just er…how many judgements before she doles out an execution.”

“That is a terrible thing to bet upon!”

Yup. Krem wasn't sure it would make his father feel any better telling him he had an entire gold down on Ellie never opting for execution…girl was just a bit too creative for that.

And now…he needed to go make with the creativity. Ellie was occupied until tonight so he was off—wash up, set up, pick up his date!

Cole was brilliant help…for one, it was faster to wash up with the Spirit boy helping with his back. Skinner came around wielding a straight razor, thankfully it was to offering neatening up his hair a bit. Which was nice of her…sweet, the woman even pecked a kiss to the back of his head when she was finished, and wished him,

“Have a pleasant evening with the small one,”

"Thanks Skinner. Ouch!” she was twisting his damn ear!

"You will remember you are not finished until you are both finished."

Maker! "Yeah, of course!” knew his basic bedroom etiquette, didn't need his ear twisted off over it.

Papa’d made him a few new things, tunics and trousers that fit amazing, were lined for warmth and…too, the man had taken painstaking care to make it so the lining of his tunics matched up perfectly with his binder—an exact cut out in the lining so he didn’t have to er, feel self-conscious about the potential for the outline of his binder being visible through his tunic. Made it so uh, he could wear a tunic fitted tight across his shoulders and chest and it just…looked entirely like any other guy wearing it. New underthings were a bloody lifesaver—no more socks! Or more like he had a shit ton of socks now because none of them were going into his pants anymore, they were packed by design, the stuffing sewed into just the right place, he didn’t have to
think about it anymore. So, evergreen tunic with silvery buttons, black trousers, black boots… yeah, he felt pretty good.

“Oh you feel handsome!” Cole was pleased to enthuse, informing him, “And Ellie will think you are so handsome!”

“Thanks bud.”

“You are welcome!”

Maker it was a lot easier to get everything ready when the person you were working with could read your mind. It was almost like working with a mirror—Krem setting one side of the table a Friend on the servant staff had been good to set up in Ellie’s room, while Cole set the other. Lady Josie was kind enough to tack a few extra white candlesticks onto the order for Skyhold’s candelabras and chandeliers, helped him find spare silver candle holders for them to put on the table, and the Ambassador got him names—a chandler for some nice, thicker scented candles he set up on the nightstands, and a botanist for some roses, red, just a few of ’em in a little vase he set in the center of the table. And Stitches had been a real pal and gotten him fresh, whole, Embrium blossoms he placed around, on the table, the nightstands, scattered around and on her bed. Ellie genuinely found the blossoms to be pretty and it didn’t hurt to have them around the girl, they were good for preventing uh, respiratory issues and he uh…well he’d had one of the top three most uncomfortable conversation he’d ever had with Stitches, trying to er…sort out if uh- what sort of complications might come up with um, asthma and- and uh, having er-

He so did not wanna risk Ellie’s night ending with an orgasm-induced asthma attack. Not happening. Nope.

Krem was just about to grab a few logs to put in the fire place to get it going but Cole gasped excitedly, just about startled the crap out of him because…huh, they’d been working in silence the whole time, hadn’t they? Maker. But it was understandable, ’cause Krem got damn excited too when the Spirit announced, "Ellie is ready! She's excited and nervous and she feels so pretty! Do I need to go tell her she's pretty?" he wondered.

"You can, but you don't have to, I'm pretty sure that's my job," Krem said. Maker, what a job, easiest gig he’d had in life.

"Oh good! You should go then. I can make fire, everything will be perfect! There will be guards outside and I will be watching for danger but I promise not to watch your date! Maryden and the Iron Bull said I should not!"

"Thanks bud, I appreciate it. You're feeling better?" Krem double checked.

"You would let me stay if I wasn't, and Ellie wouldn't be sad or angry or jealous," Cole informed him, deciding, "that makes me so happy! I feel better, I will be fine! Your papa wants to make me new things, I do not need them but he worries about my body being comfortable and clean. We are having dinner and he will use the tape that tells him how big my body is! The Iron Bull wants to compare measurements but he said it the way he says his sex jokes, does he want to have sex with me?" the Spirit wondered, "If he needed to, I would, he's so nice and full of healing when he does it with Dorian, and the kitchen hands before him. He helped Adrian heal the hurt her ex-husband left, she started dating again because the Iron Bull reminded her of gentleness and control, that she never has to be scared again, no one is allowed to make her feel that way."

"…I think he's good Cole but that's uh, sweet of you?" Krem said. Maker, Bull was a good guy…obnoxious though, last thing he needed to hear was his sexual prowess being 'healing'. "I'm
gonna pick up Ellie. You have fun with papa, okay?" he intoned, clapping the boy on the shoulder, pecking a kiss to his cheek, "Thanks for all your help, seriously."

"You are welcome!"

Felt pretty welcome when he got to Marehis's room, the woman answered the door, smiling as she greeted, "Good evening da'mi, you look very handsome. Da'vehnan, your date is here."

"Oh yay! That's so much better than assassins!" Ellie could be heard cheering, heels clicking across stone and Marehis ducked behind the door to press a kiss to Ellie's cheek and offering an exchange of 'goodnights' and the order to 'have fun' before moving out of the way so the girl could step out, closing the door behind her before she turned to face him as she said, "Mami wouldn't let me answer the door just in case, but gosh, wow. If you were here to kill me, I'm like, pretty positive I wouldn't even be mad about it."

Was…was she talking? Neat skill, great skill, he'd have to pick it up sometime. Papa was the one who really taught him how to talk he was pretty sure, maybe he'd be down to help a guy out re-learning the ability 'cause- well, he'd put just as much effort into making his son speechless to begin with. Ma-ker. "W-we- I just- we're only going to be at your place tonight you- Maker. I might be the only person that actually gets to see you," he was pretty sure there was something wrong about that, something selfish. Tonio Aclassi could make a damn dress, and whoever the hell Ellie's birth parents were? They could make a damn daughter. Illusion neckline hit high around her shoulders with thick dark blue embroidery all around that dipped down to a point in the center just below the dip at the base of her throat between collarbone, and then a few dangerous inches of sheer, dark blue material before the uh, solid sweetheart neckline that only just kept the mystery alive, covered her to her waistline, and then the skirt- Krem's heart just about lept into his throat, because for a moment his brain just saw the sheer material again but it couldn't be seen through, the skirt of her dress was made up of several layers of silky, sheer material that fell to her knees, at least in the front, hemline dipped a bit lower in the back, down to the middle of her calves. Feet were slipped into matching heels with a bit of leather-lace along the back of her ankles. "You…you look amazing El."

She blushed at that, oh, hair was loose except the left side was pulled back a bit, held that way by the hair combs she'd gotten from Madam de Fer, lips a bit darker than usual, red, pretty. She was just so pretty, gorgeous and, "You're the only person I really want to see me tonight so, I'm glad you like it," she said, smoothing her skirt a bit under her unmarked hand.

"The dress? Yeah, I like it," he supposed, "It's that its you whose in it that I love." Did that make sense? Had he said it right?

Ellie was beaming and blushy and shyly taking his hand as she stepped forward to press a feather-light kiss to his lips before linking arms with him, so uh, yeah, he was pretty sure he said something right.

"Eleanor!" Madam de Fer called as they passed by her quarters, partition's half-open. The woman had been seated in a high-backed chair reading but she set her book aside and looked up at them, "My darling girl," she breathed, "you look absolutely divine! Oh I do hope our trip to Val Royeaux gives you proper opportunity to dress up, Mister Aclassi has done miracles with your wardrobe."

"Thanks Vivienne!"

"Certainly," the woman gave a regal nod. "And Lieutenant, I daresay you make for quite the strapping escort for our Lady this evening, very handsome. Your father's work as well?"
"Me and my clothes, he's a very talented man," Krem offered with a grin.

"Quite," the Enchanter agreed, somewhat amused. "Oh darlings do have a splendid evening."

"You too!" Ellie wished her, hugging Krem's arm a bit tighter as they continued on into the library. Practically empty this time of night, Enchanter Fiona offered Ellie a warm smile and a polite nod as they passed her by where she was restacking the books near Dorian's alcove, likely because the Tevinter mage wasn't around to complain about the titles inhabiting the shelves near his chosen spot. Bull was probably back by now, the guy was likely off uh, welcoming him home.

He was nervous, once they were at the door to her quarters, he knew everything would be just as he left it but Maker, he just- wanted everything to be perfect, was afraid what he'd done wouldn't nearly be enough. He just slapped some flowers and moodlighting on her room, that was it!

You'd think he completely re-did the place top to bottom and shifted the heavens or something, Ellie looked so surprised, gasped as her mouth dropped open and she stepped away to look around, turn about to take it all in before she looked to him, breathing, "Cremisius," she sounded amazed, "it's beautiful, gosh, you did this all for me?"

"Cole helped with set-up, but uh yeah. You like it?" he made sure, bit of nerves left over just 'cause, he could be, and uh, well there was still plenty of light but the overhead lamps were out, just candle and firelight, moonlight pouring in. He hadn't thought about it until they were standing in the middle of it all that fire and night didn't always end well for them and it might hit home with Ellie.

"I love it," she said softly, looking at him…like he was what was so amazing about it all, sort of a head-rush really, and that was even before Cole's gentle assurance that silenced the last bit of anxiety in him.

When she thinks of fire and night now, she will think of this, of you. Enjoy it.

Chapter End Notes

Antivan:
No hablas Trade! Conozco mis derechos! Apartate! Soy un ciudadano Antiva! Exijo que me lleves a una Embajada!=I don't speak Trade! I know my rights! Back off! I'm an Antivan citizen! I demand you take me to an Embassy!
Duermete mi nina, duermete mi amor, duermete pedazo de mi corazon= "Sleep my girl, sleep my love, sleep piece of my heart" these are the opening lyrics to a Spanish (Antivan) Lullaby Durmete mi Nino(a)/Sleep my Child

End Notes:
*Abernale Harish=this is the canon name of the person who betrays Butcher, and his code name is Painter (so I assume he falsifies documents for Leliana). This can be read in the War Table mission end-note when completing Expose the Double Agent

*Crestwood Dragon=the dragon in Crestwood is the easiest dragon to slay in-game, it doesn't drop other enemies and it also doesn't fly around too much during your fight. Being low level and not having any babies to throw at you, and also being described as smaller in the DragonAgeWiki page, leads me to assume she's a young dragon who
hasn't had a clutch yet because she's just barely not a baby herself

*the screaming to breathe thing=when you're being pulled at high windspeeds with a great deal of air being pushed around that can mean air being pushed into your lungs that's hard to push back out to do the whole 'breathing' thing, you can only get so much air in you before you *need* to breathe out and get new air in, and the easiest way I've found to push forced air out of my lungs (while riding Rollercoasters, not slaying dragons, unfortunately) is to use the air to scream

*Cassandra's loyalty mission is affected by observations made during In Hushed Whispers and Champions of the Just, and since we do both for this fic, both their contributions to Cassandra's worries about the Seekers are accounted for

*Cole usually comments on the other's loyalty missions, especially when it covers trauma, but there's zero dialog between him and Cassandra about Promise of Destruction, so Ellie pulling some things from Daniel's final moments to help Cassandra cope is sort of a fic-fix for that

*Noam Willit is a canon mage character pulled from the War Table missions you assign to the Templars and his backstory comes from that!

*Carmenum di Amatus, okay, "on aching branch do blossoms grow" is 100% phallic, the point of view is that of the poet (a Tevinter man) about another man, which is why Cassandra is bemused in-game at the choice of poem and probably too why she takes over and reads it to male Inquisitor. You pick the book up in Redcliffe which, yeah, was just invaded by Vinatori, and I could 100% see Dorian suggesting the poem in the hopes the Inquisitor (or Cullen, in this case) is standing in the moonlight rhapsodizing about another man's penis to Cassandra

*Ellie meets a gardener in CH 5, I have him being connected to the woman you can go to in Val Royeaux for flowers and she offers flowers she makes special for Celene. There's tulips but then she mentions rare flowers that would be perfect, so I assume that's what Inquisitor ends up with, we don't actually see the flowers in the Romance cutscene, so, after some research I decided to make Andrasten Roses based off of Juliet Roses 'cuz they're pretty and a *bit* fancy/rare

*Guard yourselves my babies! Be patient and gentle with yourselves and be mindful that when you suffer mental illness, your actual brain is sick, and from our brains come our thoughts which means...they're not necessarily *our* thoughts 100% of the time. I learned this the hard way about two months into writing TSTT, dealing with near-constant compulsive thoughts like that even though everything in all other areas of my life was going 1000% awesome, I was genuinely petrified over it and couldn't figure out what was going on, and I unfortunately had *just* been to my doctor and couldn't afford a non-insured visit. SO my ass had to research some things on my own and I did the DUMB RISKY thing of cutting back on my medication, and while it worked out for me PLEASE NEVER DO THAT, go the Ellie route, *always* contact your medical provider, via Inquisition raven if you have to! Take care of yourselves my neuro-atypical guys, gals, and non-binary pals!

*Mayor's of Crestwood's judgement is fanon, in canon you can give him to Ferelden or the Wardens the wardens if you're done with Here Lies the Abyss (both which just play 'pass the prisoner' to people he didn't directly hurt which is 'meh'), or you can execute him and that's just a bit too easy. He provides inspiration for the best type of
punishment when he cries about not bearing to confess to his people, and that's exactly what he should be made to do, he made a decision for them and now he's got to live with it.
Chapter Summary

Next Chapter! Of Somewhat Fallen Fortune ended up getting it's own entire chapter because reasons and I'm sorry but also you're welcome.
Josephine Montilyet arranges a bit of a reprieve for the Inquisitor and friends in Val Royeaux, planning to handle her family's misfortunes swiftly, surely there was some confusion and her couriers were targeted in the hopes to destroy documentation important to the Inquisition. Unfortunately, even the most meticulous plans run awry,
Here lies shenanigans: false romances turning into real romances, the foil to the 'sharing a bed' trope, Minister Seduction, Orlesian Theatre, and the Iron Bull introduces Ellie to Espresso.

Chapter Notes

As per usual I own nothing. I reiterate this because I reference the play Tartuffe by Moliere in this chapter and...this may be a surprise...but I'm not a 397 year old Frenchman. So I own nothing of Tartuffe, or DA:I.

Here's part two of this update! Fun Fact: I...have never, ever, in the history of this fic pre-Chapter 24, spelled the name 'Josephine' correctly on the first try. Every single time it has been written in this fic up to this point, I have misspelled it horribly and had to go back and correct it. Don't know why, my brain just entirely Refused to spell it right, I always put "Josiephene" or "Josiphiene" or some such horrible cock up of her beautiful, beautiful name. Until this chapter: Friends, I finally did it, I finally learned how to spell Josephine correctly and I swear I will scream if I ever accidentally misspell it again.

Heads up that we do get a little risque with nudity and whatnot, but there's no explicitly written out sex scenes, just glancing/passing references to sexual encounters and a bit of couples bathing. I will likely be bumping this fic up to an 'M' rating in future, since we do get pretty wild with language and mention a great deal of sex and we might be getting full on smut, so if you eventually have to click 'proceed' to read this fic, no worries you're still in the right place and I promise to mark sex scenes off with warnings so any readers who might not exactly wanna read that can skip around it easy peasy. I wouldn't be concerned with it until we begin approaching "Wicked Eyes and Wicked Hearts", which won't be for a few chapters yet.

Also, there's a lot of end notes so I'm putting a translation of a Tevinter (Italian) Lullaby used in this chapter, here:

Fa la nana bambino/Go to sleep my little one,
Fa la nana bel bambin/Go to sleep my lovely son,
Fa la nina, fa la nana/Close your eyes and go to sleep now,
Nei braeceti della mama/In the warm arms of your mother.

The next time I update: Adventures in the Emerald Graves/Empress Du Lion/Shrine of Dumat
The journey to Val Royeaux was incredibly pleasant.

Mostly.

It had, admittedly, gotten a bit more complicated than Josephine expected. Minorly.

Eleanor was- oh Josephine could never be grateful enough for the efforts the girl had gone to, she’d arranged everything splendidly! The Chargers were more than capable of protecting them, their time in Val Royeaux would be a delight, and they would certainly be some of the best dressed attendees at the Winter Palace come Bloomingtide if Josephine and Tonio had anything to say about it. And they certainly did—Eleanor knew well Josephine would have work to attend, and Tonio may well need to as well, and doing so from horseback was not necessarily possible. She arranged a covered carriage to draw them to Val Royeaux while the Chargers and those who joined them from Eleanor’s party, save, er…well, that Rocky fellow was their carriage driver, accompanied by the Charger Grim? Their duo was apparently knowledgeable in the task of guiding horse-drawn carriages…or at the very least,

“Those assholes are the best damn get-away drivers in Thedas,” the Iron Bull had assured.

“I do hope we’ve no need of their evasive maneuvers,” Tonio had quietly jested to Josephine, or at least he offered it up with some amusement in his voice, seated across from her with his sketchbook in hand as their carriage pulled away from Skyhold's courtyard. “I worry it would mean Ser Rocky has vandalized something of import and incited the local authorities to give us chase.”

The Ambassador offered a bit of soft laughter, “Oh certainly, we wouldn’t want that.”

“Hmm,” the feminine voice at Josephine’s side sounded, “that might be the most excitement we see on this trip.”

Leliana.

Which was where Josephine’s complications arose.

Oh, she did not begrudge her friend joining them…she didn’t, did she? She’d- she had not felt disappointment when she learned the woman would be joining her and Tonio on their trip. Not outside the realm of…well Leliana had ways of figuring things out despite every effort to keep as much from happening, and having her along only further guaranteed that. She was only grateful….oh she was worried for the woman, her gratefulness was selfish! But she was glad that the woman had business of her own she would be attending in Val Royeaux whilst Josephine and Eleanor met with the Comte.

“There is an agent of Corypheus, Eleanor and Dorian’s time in the future bore some insight to her role, and Enchanter Fiona made mention of her more than once. The Mage Calpernia, working with the Venatori. I will be investigating leads on her whereabouts and involvement, at an estate in Val Royeaux.”

So. The Spymaster was along for the journey. Hopefully she would be too preoccupied with her own business to trifle with Josephine’s.
Oh, she hated this! Leliana’s initial breaking of the news she would be joining them had been handled poorly, on the Ambassador’s part. She’d been so nervous, waiting for the other proverbial shoe to drop—Eleanor’s plan seemed so seamless, it felt like some trick, of course somehow, someway, something would interfere. And then Leliana approached her in her office with,

“Eleanor informed me in full of your plans. I’ll be joining you on your little adventure to Val Royeaux.”

She…she’d meant that Eleanor had shared their itinerary, and that there would be a group handling their security during an alliance meeting so…Leliana wouldn’t need to, meaning her scouts would be free to do their Spymaster’s bidding, which suited, because they had a mission.

Without that context, however, Josephine heard, ‘Eleanor broke her word and told me every excruciating detail you’ve shared with her of your family’s financial failure and now I’m getting involved’.

“El-Eleanor told you?” Josephine had asked with quiet shock, throat drying up, heart pounding in her chest as Leliana nodded. And then, well, not so quietly at all, “She’d no right to do such a thing!”

“Josie?” Leliana questioned, startled at her tone.

“I have everything handled Leliana, I do not need you to interfere- you do not need to go to Val Royeaux! My family's issues are our own, I’ll deal with them and Tonio and myself will make the trip bear progress for our efforts at Court.”

“Josie calm down, Maker. I’ve no plans to ‘interfere’, I’m merely…well I was intending to join you in your journey as I’ve business to look into in Val Royeaux- what's this about your family?”

…

“You- I-“ oh Maker, she’d truly blundered this, hadn’t she? “I apologize.”

“Are they pressuring you about marriage again?” Leliana worried.

“N-no!” Josephine was still trying to catch up, think, curtail the damage she’d just done, oh Maker! She’d been furious with Eleanor when it was she herself that went and started railing about her family!

“You’re lying,” Leliana accused, though, “…wait,” she gasped, looked irritatingly excited about something, and got the most mischievous smile on her face as she, to her mind, ‘put it all together’. “You…don’t want me joining you…and Mister Aclassi, on your journey to Val Royeaux.”

“Of course I do,” Josephine insisted.

“You just burst a blood vessel insisting I shouldn’t!” Leliana laughingly informed her, “Josie- oh my word, I apologize, I didn’t realize I would be intruding. You like him don’t you? Oh, I know well your parents expectations but…perhaps they will understand?” the woman offered sympathetically, “You haven’t told them yet, have you? I mean the two of you aren’t even in courtship yet. You should at least test the waters before seeking their approval.”
They weren’t to be in courtship period! Oh! Josephine- well she did open her mouth to deny the woman’s claim but- “Oh my word. Josie!” Leliana exclaimed, sounding almost scandalized, “Have you tested the waters? Come now, you needn’t be so shy with me. I’m no fool, Josephine Montilyet—why else would you react so, passionately?” Leliana seemed amused with herself.

Josephine felt her face flame, ducking her head shyly. Why else would you react so, indeed? “I-” oh Maker she hated this! “I suppose I’m nervous, yes er…I was looking forward to my time together with Tonio on this journey,” that…was truth, she did enjoy the man’s company. “but yes, it is nerve wracking that um…such a dalliance might displease my parents. If I…truly came to love him and they would not approve, well…” she shrugged. “So er…for now, we are keeping a professional appearance, my parents, no one, needs to know.”

“I completely understand.” No, she truly didn’t. “So…I’ll just be riding alongside Eleanor’s party I suppose, you’ll still have your time alone. I’m sure Eleanor will be delighted-“

“No!” Josephine…well she certainly didn’t- oh she detested Leliana being under the misconception, she certainly didn’t want Eleanor under it as well! “She- she isn’t aware. My outburst over her informing you of the details of our trip was solely derived from the fear you would discover my er…infatuation,” this was overly complicated but she muddled through, “As you’re now aware there’s no harm in you joining us, in fact it’s likely for the best—we wish to keep things professional, I said, no one will assume we’re doing anything untoward in your presence.”

“You’re certain?”

“Of course.” Not in the slightest but at this point…well, she suddenly understood Eleanor’s appreciation for naps, she needed one just to process what damage she’d done and un-done only to create more elsewhere during this one messily conversation.

Leliana was a wonderful, blessed…exhausting friend.

Even more so as, upon Leliana disappearing from Josie’s office, the Ambassador rose from her seat…

And she did not run, exactly. But she did set a swift, jarring pace, the rapid *click-click-click-click* of her heels echoing across Skyhold’s stone floors, through the Great Hall, up the stairs, and around the library until she was passing her own bedroom to go directly to the door at the end of the garden-hall and not exactly pounding, but knocking on the door with urgency- oh. she knew he would be in, given the late hour but she flinched when her mind caught up and informed her he would be in at this hour…because the man was trying to sleep.

The door swung open in just as much urgency as she’d knocked, the man seeming alarmed as he peered out, “Lady Josephine? What is the matter? Has something happened?”

“I need to speak with you, privately,” she cast her apologetic gaze along his sleep clothes, feet bare against the cold stone floors, “I’m sorry, truly, to disturb you.”

“Do not concern yourself, please, come in,” Tonio invited, stepping back and holding the door for her to enter and she nodded for him to close it when he made to leave it ajar. This was wildly inappropriate but she’d just had a wildly inappropriate conversation. And now she needed to have another.

“Please, you’re welcome to sit, my Lady,” he said as he straightened the covers of his bed straight, smoothed them before gesturing for her to find purchase there while he moved across the
room to seat himself in his desk chair so she could sit in the more comfortable seating he’d to offer without making her feel uncomfortable. Well, more uncomfortable than she already was. “Whatever is the matter? How can I help you?”

“I- I don’t even know how to begin,” she confessed, sighing, “I suppose…first and foremost…I should apologize.”

He immediately insisted she’d no need to apologize—she was always to come to him if she’d need, he did not mind her intrusion. But that was not necessarily what she was apologizing for…so she explained, face ablaze as she informed him of her discussion with Leliana.

“I meant to correct her but- I- I admittedly…there are personal things I have to handle in Val Royeaux. Private family business I do not wish for anyone else to know about, especially Leliana.”

Tonio nodded as he listened, “I understand, you’re nervous, keeping something from your dearest friend. You…overreacted when she informed you she would be too close for comfort on a journey you’ve secrets to deal with, and now…” he seemed a bit confused, “I’m not entirely certain how a supposed romance with me was her immediate conclusion to jump to. But I do understand your reticence to risk her treading closer to your truth whatever it may be. I’m not angered with you, for lying about such a thing—I assure you, it’s an incredibly honoring notion,” he offered kindly, a warm smile at his lips. He…he was far too kind. “What is it exactly you need me to do?”

“Nothing. Er, I’ve assured her we do not wish to be public. But um…well, Leliana will be with us, watching, and likely…” she clenched her eyes shut wincing with embarrassment, “she will likely have us being watched.”

“So…nothing, but…enough to satisfy the idea we’ve a secret liaison?” the man supposed, Josephine sighed, nodding.

“Yes, if- if that is understandable.” Of course it wasn’t!

“Of course it is. We’re secretly not in a secret relationship,” he shrugged. Oh Maker her head hurt. “I would do nothing to embarrass you, my lady, I assure you. We will merely work together, as we’d planned. And we’ll be attending social outings together—we…we’ve customarily offered you my arm when we’ve similar destinations in Skyhold and walk together, it is an action natural to us that could be perceived as romantic by your friend without seeming so to anyone else. Leliana will believe we are…how did she put it? Testing the waters? And then you can inform her you’ve done so and found them wanting, that you’ve graciously dumped me, and lo that I am heartbroken, I completely understand and respect your decision and wish to resume a professional relationship—and I do hope we can still be friends.”

Oh, goodness. “Of course. I do promise to let you down gently,” she jested lightly.

“I certainly appreciate it.”

She certainly appreciated him. Such a horrible, childish scheme to be caught up in! The man hardly needed such drama. The very instant their ruse was no longer needed, she would end it and treat the poor man to dinner for his troubles.

As friends! Friends dined together!

Now she felt nervous about the whole thing. She did not…dislike the man. She found him handsome and kind and interesting. But now she sat, Leliana at her side smugly observing them, overthinking anything and everything.
“Are you alright, Josie?” Leliana gently questioned.

Josephine startled, oh! Oh goodness, she—she’d not been paying attention. “I apologize, I was distracted, thinking,” she cleared her throat, reading over the schedule she’d written up and placed to be seen first and foremost on her clipboard, “we’ve much to get done, in Val Royeaux. Several appointments with suppliers and I’ve only just finalized a schedule for shopping, looking about for ideas and inspiration,” she cleared her throat again, what—oh. She would blush, she was certain if she wasn’t turning green, she felt—was she truly so stressed she felt ill of it? She’d something of a headache, small but present since she’d woken that morning, and now it worsened several fold.

“Do you get motion sick, my lady?” Tonio wondered.

She swallowed, releasing hold of the clipboard in her hand to steady herself against her seat, “I—I’ve traveled perfectly fine before.”

“Do you often read when you travel?”

“…no, I suppose not?” She’d sat in shocked silence as she mourned the Conclave, weeping the whole of her initial journey to Haven, when Leliana called for her aid with the Inquisition. And before that, “I usually travel with family, friends, we chat or rest.”

Tonio nodded. “I’m unsure as to why, exactly, but reading while traveling can make you experience motion sickness. Do you need potion?”

“Should we call for a stop and uh, pull over?” Leliana worried, raising a hand to rub circles on Josephine’s back.

Possibly. Oh, that would be devastatingly embarrassing. “No, I-I am fine.”

“You should lie down,” Tonio advised, “keeping your head still will help, close your eyes and rest.”

Leliana was kind enough to lend her lap—let Josephine lay on her side while the Spymaster continued rubbing circles that soothed. She felt overwhelmingly dizzy when she first went horizontal but that dissipated and it did help, Leliana’s legs offering support under her head while the woman carded her other hand through Josephine’s hair and kept it still, she did not feel the motion of the carriage quite so fiercely, and she heard Tonio open the window in the carriage door—she worried for a moment he meant to call out but no, it was merely to let fresh air in that— that was much better though it did let in chill-

Oh. Josephine did crack an eye open to peek because she felt material draping over her, the soft fabric of Tonio’s suit jacket.

“I apologize, Leliana, I’ve nothing else on hand—I could call for something if you’re chilled.”

“I’m fine, thank you,” Leliana said, sounding pleased.

“Do let me know, my offer stands,” Tonio assured her. And then there was the rustle of parchment as he settled back in his seat.

“Does it not bother you to work?” Leliana wondered quietly, her voice just above a whisper.

“I’ve no trouble with the task but my mama always got on to me about it—would insist I
shouldn’t do my homework while riding, that I’d get sick that way,” Tonio replied in hushed tones, “but it’s never bothered me. Though perhaps that was born of necessity—it was the only spare time I had, usually, to do such work.”

“How much schooling did you attend, if you don’t mind my asking?”

“University, if you can believe it,” he said. Truly? Tevinter did not have non-magical modes of higher education. “My family farmed but I’d always had an interest in artistic ventures, and ultimately clothing. My mother made certain I was allowed to complete my schooling, and I began an apprenticeship under a tailor in the city, a connection from my er, uncle in-law. From that my interest and abilities grew but my master was…a difficult traditionalist, while I’d a mind for design, he discouraged me from it to the point we rowed so much I respectfully declined further tutelage from him. Which meant I would not be inheriting a place in his shop, or the business itself eventually—that suited, I wished to start a place of my own but that required some certification, if not through apprenticeship, then I had to find some other way. A friend encouraged me to apply to a program offered to Sopporati citizens through Markham University, he’d done likewise to become an accredited tutor to non or pre-magical Altus children. I completed courses by studying the materials and submitting work through university courier. At semesters end there were examinations proctored by volunteer staff from local Circles,” he chuckled softly, “I spent the whole of my childhood doing homework on the wagon ride home from school, and the first few years of adulthood completing assignments as I commuted between home and the library and work and back.”

“Work?”

“Two…three jobs,” he said with more certainty as he thought about it, “in the mornings there was the fish hatchery, and then I served as a line cook at a restaurant up the street from the library I frequented and then nearer the end of my education I took on a third job as janitorial staff at a Circle.”

“Maker, three jobs?”

“Hmm yes, and still unable to keep our heads above water. I was able to make enough to support my wife…we’d no children the first few years of marriage, but a great deal of medical debt. And then she became pregnant with my Cremisius in my final year of University, and I was to be graduating and opening a shop of my own. I only barely remembered to seek out my diploma—Cremisius was born to us earlier than planned, but then he’s always been one to make an impression.”

Oh, good heavens, truly? “That must have been terrifying,” Josephine spoke up, opening her eyes, finding focus in their voices had helped her steady herself. Mama and papi hadn’t planned upon having further children when Claude came along and then it was topped off with the boy arriving earlier than expected, it had been truly frightening, mama was so scared, she’d already been concerned having another child at her age, they were terrified babe and mother would be lost, the woman had clutched Josephine's hand tight and wept, speaking of how proud she was of her and instilled the promise that she was to take care of her father and siblings. She felt a pang of sympathy for poor Cremisius's mother to have gone through that, to have been so young and just becoming a parent, to have that adventure start with such struggle.

Tonio nodded. “We were fearful, but Cremisius…oh, he was so small, but strong. I remember holding him—he could fit just so, his body in the palm of my hand, head cradled by my fingers, and I reached out with my other hand.” Oh, as large as his hands might be, that was such an incredibly too small a size for a baby. Tonio held out an index finger and then he snatched it with
his other hand, giving example that despite the Lieutenant's small beginnings, “he just reached out and grabbed my finger so tight,” he smiled, proud. “Like he was letting me know he was the man in charge now,” he chuckled softly, “though he got motion sick regardless of what he did when we traveled. I’m amazed he can ride so proficiently,” he looked to Josephine, smiling warmly as he informed her, “It always comforted him, to wrap him in my coat...though he always returned the favor by inevitably being sick in it.”

Josephine breathed a laugh, assuring, “I’ll try not to follow his example.”

“So long as you try,” Tonio supposed with a warm grin.

His amusement only grew when they broke pace for lunch, stopping and being able to stretch their legs a bit, Tonio assisted in her decent from the carriage, allowed her to lean on his arm as he walked her nearer to the stream they’d decided to make a bit of camp by for now, when Cremisius approached, pointing an accusatory index finger at his father.

“Heard you been telling stories about me old man,” ahh. The Iron Bull must not have been able to resist teasing the boy. "I haven’t gotten motion sick in almost an entire decade!"

“Cremisius, my word son,” the man spoke with false concern, “Stitches should examine your head trauma—you’ve seemingly forgotten every summer trip to the countryside from the ages of seven to fourteen.”

“If you wanna fight, we’ll fight!”

“Cremisius, leave Papa’classi alone,” Eleanor’s sweet voice chided as she joined her boyfriend, slipping an arm around his back as he wrapped an arm around her shoulders to pull her close. Oh, the two seemed in good spirits, there was less…shyness in how they expressed physical affection for one another in front of others, it was something entirely comfortable for them now, Josephine hoped that meant things had er…gone well, during their sleep over. “Are you okay, Tia?”

“I am, I was a bit unwell before but I’m feeling better,” she assured.

“Awe, your poor body thought it got poisoned, huh?” the girl sympathized, lower lip pouting out a bit.

“…poisoned?” Leliana questioned. Josephine was confused likewise was that…a turn of phrase she was unfamiliar with? Something the youths were saying? There was a word Eleanor had become delighted with as of late. Josephine had needed assistance in revising an official document the girl had penned—their mission statement to be put to print in informative literature and in their declarations of peaceful intent with the nations of Thedas, assuring they were not endeavoring to take on any government bodies, they merely wished to seal Rifts…and ‘yeet* Corypheus off the face of this world’. She’d found the girl in her quarters under the tutelage of the Iron Bull, using their psychology lesson to play chess and when she made question of the word, the Qunari had groaned in embarrassment of her lack of knowledge.

“We can show you!” Eleanor insisted, excited at the prospect, “Yeet me! Yeet me, the Iron Bull!”

To which the Qunari responded by hoisting the girl up, crying “YEET!” and throwing her across the room. To a bouncy, but safe landing atop her bed but still, Maker! It’d given Josephine an awful fright. She…was admittedly fearful now what action a slang term involving ‘poison’ might incite.
Apparently none save Eleanor’s giggling as she explained it wasn’t slang at all, “One of the common, recognizable symptoms of being poisoned is feeling like you’re moving when you really aren’t, which is precisely what you feel when you’re in a moving carriage—you’re sitting still while it’s moving you and your body gets sick in response, thinking you’ve been poisoned and trying to make you throw it up. You were sitting with your back to the driver, right?” Josephine nodded. “You should switch seats if you can—if you sit facing the direction your moving in, maybe try to keep looking out the little window facing out the front of the carriage? Your body will realize you’re feeling real movement and stop being so dramatic.”

“Bodies are strange,” Cole spoke up as he materialized at Cremisius’s side. Oh! Josephine hadn’t realized he was joining them! Boy looked to her then, “Oh, I promised Sera I would come and stay with Inky, watch after her and Kremmy-boy and his Papa and Bull and Marehis and Dori and Viv,” he listed, as he’d likely been instructed, “when she and Lace leave.”

Ahh. It was only Marehis, Madam de Fer, the Iron Bull, Dorian Pavus, who were joining them in Val Royeaux. Solas would remain in the Hinterlands until such a time as the Herald was preparing to move on into more of an official mission field. Cassandra was in Skyhold making headway in how to move forward with the Seekers, making progress with her Templars though they answered more directly to Knight-Commander Barris now, oh it had been delightful to use their Great Hall for his promotion ceremony, Eleanor had certainly been more pleased to do it, and Mister Aclassi thought it a much more splendid time than prisoner judgements, though he’d complimented Josephine’s role, that she’d done well questioning the former Mayor of Crestwood before the Inquisition.

Oh, yes, the Inquisitor’s party. Hawke and Stroud were still preparing in Skyhold but they would be making their way to the Western Approach ahead of the others and report back on any sign of Warden activity—Varric was joining them, he was apologetic to Eleanor and sought her blessing which she readily gave even before he explained he quote ‘can’t risk Hawke leaving my chest hair for Stroud’s kickass ‘stache’. Stash of what? Hopefully nothing illegal. Oh! Mustache…well, it was a bit much in Josephine’s opinion, but yes it was a rather large amount of facial hair. Sera was assisting in other ways—Cullen had a mission for Eleanor in the Emerald Graves, they would be going on to there from Val Royeaux and Sera was going on ahead of them, with Scout Harding and Thom Rainier backed by his portion of the Charger’s to clear some sort of group terrorizing the area—the Freemen of the Dales—before Eleanor arrived to seal the Rifts. Val Royeaux held little interest to the Elf girl, and she’d been excited at the prospect of going someplace warm and green with life and adventure with her girlfriend.

Lunch was pleasant, the Iron Bull was admittedly quite the chef “he puts the ‘chef’ in ‘chief’!” Eleanor had been pleased to inform them, oh, sweet mija, she brought Josephine fresh water to drink and some crackers to make certain her appetite was in hand before she attempted the heavier meat and potatoes the Iron Bull prepared for them, and pressed a soft kiss to the Antivan woman’s cheek.

“If you need you can always try riding with me or mami—Russel’s very gentle, he’d be careful for you. I’m so sorry you can’t get any work done but don’t let it bother you, okay? Just rest and relax, we’re making good progress. Do you want to bunk with me tonight, Tia?”

“That would be wonderful,” Josephine said, delighted at the prospect. She did not necessarily enjoy…camping, and her experience with it was that of their journey from Haven, but she’d a feeling it would be a much-improved encounter with the act, this trip. Though she wasn’t certain just how much she would sleep, she really did need to get things done.

And so she did. Leliana…ugh. The Spymaster took Eleanor’s instruction to ‘switch seats’ to
mean she would have the whole of the seat to herself—she got into the carriage and stretched out, lounging on the front seat of the carriage so no true switching could take place, Josephine had thought to swap places with Tonio, but oh! The woman was smirking as she was insisting she was going to rest her eyes for a while.

Tonio merely assisted her assent into the carriage and allowed her her choice of window seat. It was rather conducive to getting work done after all—Josephine was able to sit and take in the view as they rode along, listening to the soft timber of Tonio’s voice reading her paperwork aloud. It wasn’t wholly appropriate…but the man spent quite a lot of time in her office, had overheard matters of confidence on more than one occasion and nothing had come of it, he’d not gone about shouting sensitive information from the battlements. The rest of their time riding that day was spent with him reading aloud, interrupted only by her requesting revisions on things she’d written herself, the man neatly crossing things out and writing in things to be amended later, and then the occasional need for her signature on things, the man holding the parchment still against the surface of his sketchbook cover, prepared to immediately point wherever she needed to jot down initials or signature so she did not have to risk scanning the page herself.

“Thank you, Tonio, truly. I did so need to get through these documents…oh goodness—was that everything?”

“Unless you’ve more elsewhere,” he said, riffling through the documents attached to her clipboard to make certain, “I believe we have.”

Josephine huffed in disbelief, “I thought for certain I would be going through all of this for days.”

“Perhaps this process was a bit swifter? You’re far too hard on yourself my lady, I’ve seen you pore over a single-page document for hours trying to catch mistakes. You trust I am reading correctly, and you’re markedly more decisive it seems in making correction being able to hear your work aloud.”

Huh, perhaps she should- it would be unreasonable to have the man read her every work but perhaps she would begin reading aloud when she could. “Well, thank you—you reading was accurate and well paced.”

“I’m rather the professional—I’ve read Cremiusi bedtime stories until he was fourteen.”

“Was he so slow to grow out of it, or were you?” Leliana asked with some amusement.

Tonio smiled a bit ruefully at that. “He grew out of it for a time when he was seven. But uh, after his tenth birthday…he learned just how dire our circumstance was, was under a great deal of pressure, expected to grow up far sooner than should have been asked of him to keep our family from slavery. So, I suppose we resumed the bedtime ritual to be something of a comfort for him, hold firm to a bit of his childhood.”

“I apologize, I was merely teasing I did not mean to bring up something unpleasant.”

She seemed genuine in her contrition then. However the following day she maneuvered the conversation around to ask,

“Do you miss your wife at all?”

How the Spymaster worked them to that of all things from a conversation that started, ‘we’ve splendid weather today’ Josephine was amazed and shocked.
“Leliana!” Josephine chastised, appalled. Maker! They’d been speaking pleasantly up until that point, it was rather a nice day—Josephine hadn’t a thing that needed her attention, she could take the time to enjoy the view of the world passing by, having a nice conversation to the soft scratch of the Tailor’s charcoals against sketchpad. He’d work aplenty, Josephine admittedly felt badly she’d monopolized his time the other day—he’d a growing client list to satisfy, needed final designs to present to Lady Forsythia of all people. It had been…unpleasant but relieving to have the Lady visit Skyhold proper—she’d only done so to have Josephine apologize to her face for daring to reach out to both the Lady and her estranged brother to support the Inquisition. Which had unfortunately…well, ultimately fortunately occurred when Tonio Aclassi was in search of his ledger—he had left it in his desk and she’d not made her meeting known to him, Lady Forsaythia was the last person she wished to unleash upon the poor man.

“Lady Forsythia, please, I ask you forgive me. I apologize sincerely for connecting the Inquisition to your brother—“

“Do not even mention that waste of a trifling pissant.”

Josephine cleared her throat. “Of course. My apologies. I am sorry, for wronging you and betraying the allegiance you offered us by accepting the allegiance of your…” she opted for “enemy. The blame resides solely with myself, it was an egregious error on my part and I hope you won’t reflect poorly upon the Inquisition and its cause.”

“That is what you call an apology?” the woman sneered, in tones that implied she wished nothing short of kneeling before the Lady and begging her forgiveness with gnashing of teeth and rending of clothes.

“It certainly sounded like one,” Tonio’s voice sounded from the doorway, “Perhaps you’ve not the understanding of how apologies work as you owe one to the Lady Montilyet for your rudeness—I’ll gladly show you; I apologize for the intrusion—I seemed to have forgotten my ledger.”

Josephine had been horrified, borderline humiliated—she wasn’t sure if it was because the man had overheard their conversation or because he’d spoken so brazenly to Lady Forsaythia of all people. She expected the woman’s wicked tongue to come into play—her “And just who the hell are you?” had been met with a calm, polite “Tonio Aclassi, Tailor to the Inquisitor.”

“I thought I saw something about that in the quaint little newsletter Lady Montilyet scribes. You’ve a bit of backbone, do you? Excellent. I’ve sent every designer in my employ to tears since I was capable of speech. You might be fun, if you prove a challenge—you’ve a thicker skin than most, don’t you?”

Apparently, he did. “It is fine, my lady,” Tonio said softly…and sharing a look to make certain they were on the same page as he carefully reached over to lay his warm hand over hers where it rested on the seat at her side. Oh! “It’s my understanding that Leliana is your dearest friend, she’s every right to be curious about such things.”

“You needn’t answer,” Josephine insisted, “I apologize—“

“You needn’t fret, it’s a reasonable concern,” Tonio supposed, looking to Leliana, “I will always have a type of love for Liviana for having given me Cremisius. But romantic love was never something we shared, and she lost all appeal as she’s continually rejected and tormented the precious life we made. I’ll never wish her ill, but neither will I ever feel anything more than I would for a perfect stranger. To answer your question: no, I do not, nor will I ever miss my ex-wife. I could never feel something for anyone who couldn’t love and accept my son the way he
Was...was Cremisius’s mother truly that terrible of a person? Whatever could she not love her own son for? “Cremisius is a wonderful young man and you deserve to be very proud of him. He’s compassionate and brave and the sweetest boy I’ve ever met.” Save perhaps Cole, a literal Spirit of Compassion.

It was admittedly heartwarming, made Josephine smile when Tonio looked to her, expression warm as he gently squeezed her hand, “Thank you, my Lady,” he said with sincerity, and then to Leliana, “I do hope my answer was satisfactory?”

The Spymaster looked between them, then to their joined hands before raising her gaze to meet the man’s, “And then some,” she assured as their carriage rolled to a stop. There was a gentle knock on the door not a moment later and Cremisius popped his head in to announce,

“Hey Papa, Sera’n’Lace are heading out if you wanna say goodbye. Should probably take your chance before Ellie gets ahold of her.”

“Ahh, yes, excuse me ladies,” the man said, setting his work aside and releasing Josephine’s hand to join his son, and the moment the carriage door was closed behind him,

“Josie,” Leliana half-whispered in delighted accusation, “my word, you’re blushing,” she giggled at her friend’s embarrassment as Josephine realized yes, she just might be and the observation only made her blush more.

“That was incredibly rude of you Leliana, honestly,” Josephine reprimanded, “Tonio’s previous marriage is entirely his business, it’s an incredibly personal, possibly painful subject.”

“Excruciatingly so if it turned out to be something that would ultimately bring a potential relationship with you to ruin. He can hurt all he likes—he can rot in hell if he breaks your heart—I’ll not abide you entering into something doomed from the start.” She sighed, “if you fear he will be upset with you because I am your friend and I’ve offended him...I will apologize,” she allowed, put upon, rolling her eyes the way Yvette did when Josephine reminded her that regardless of her status or her ideals for the future that changed with every passing whim—her school marks mattered! Maker, if she got one more dwindling grade from her tutors Josephine was going to rip her own hair out or suffer an ulcer, possibly both! That girl just lived to see her elder sister bald and dead, she was certain of it some days! “He seems...slow to anger. Which is a quality I can appreciate for someone endeavoring to woo you. I must say, thus far, I approve. He’s gentle, considerate.”

“He is,” Josephine softly agreed.

“And Maker the way he looks at you—“

“He does not look at me inappropriately!” Goodness! She would not have brought the man into this if she realized Leliana was going to be giving cause to defend him at every turn!

“No, in fact the way he looks at you is entirely appropriate as far as I am concerned,” Leliana agreed, “I was not accusing him of leering Josephine.”

“...then what are you accusing him of?”

“Nothing save for him looking at my ‘dearest’ friend like she is the most precious, cherished person he can lay eyes upon,” Leliana was more than pleased to inform her, “of course his only other company at the moment is my charming self, so perhaps it’s merely a result of your being a
form of salvation from my pleasant company.”

He- he did not- “Do-! Shut up.” Ohhh she did not like saying that, it was terribly- it was mean! “Please.” That was better. “I believe I’ll see Sera safely off, Eleanor may be in need of comfort,” she decided. Some air was in order and-

He didn’t look at her like anything! Other than a friend. Maybe he did look at her as such—friends were precious and to be cherished!

Case in point…Eleanor was cherishing her most precious friend as Josephine joined them. The younger girl was something of a permanent human-shaped attachment to the young Elf woman’s frame, her arms around Sera’s neck, thighs form-fitting the dip between ribcage and hipbone like perhaps the girl was truly meant to just sit there for the rest of her life…which it seemed she was fully intending to do.

“What lots of fun,” the girl mumbled somewhat miserably against her sister’s neck.

“You too, sweets.”

“And be super safe,” she sniffled, hiding her face against Sera as she pled, “please please be safe.” Marehis was near and she rubbed circles on the girl’s back.

“I’m gonna write every single day, and I gotta turn in reports n’ pish and- and you write me too, okay? You’re going to have so much fun you won’t even be worried about me-“

“Jokes on you, I’m super talented—I can have fun and worry at the same time! s’why I’m Inquisitor I think.”

“Probably—no worrying allowed! Just have Kremmy-boy….” she began whispering something against the girl’s ear that had Eleanor’s skin flushing and Marehis flinching…the Iron Bull was grinning and shaking his head, walking away from the road a bit like he’d some excited energy he was putting into his stride.

“Sera,” the girl complained, “I’m gonna miss you saying stuff like that and getting to go ‘Sera’!”

“I got some doozies in the ‘dirty joke’ catalog—‘s even funnier in writing, little doodles? I’ll have you feeling like I never left!”

“Kay. They’ll be super penis-y?”

“It’s the only shape I know how to draw,” Sera assured.

Eleanor nodded, sighing as she pulled back, hands resting on the Elf woman’s shoulders. “I love you.”

Sera smiled, pressing an exuberant kiss to the Human girl’s cheek, “I love you too.”

“Be well, da’vehnan,” Marehis wished her, hugging her tightly, “if you need me—if the area is too dangerous and you need to leave I will come at your call, you understand?”

“I’ll be okay, promise—Lace’n’me’ll stick together. Take care of yourself and Inky.”

Marehis nodded in agreement. Though it wasn’t the Elf woman Eleanor sought comfort from as Sera and Lace broke off on their own course, south.
“The Iron Bull!” she called in distress.

“I’m comin’ Imi-kadan,” the Qunari announced in a voice that carried all the seriousness it did on the battlefield from what little experience Josephine had witnessing the Inquisitor’s party in the field, and he swept the girl up into his arms. “Gonna be okay, you wanna ride with me? That make you feel better?”

“…maybe.”

Oh, mija. It had been hard on her to leave Cullen and Cassandra in Skyhold, Sera…Maker, Josephine couldn’t think of a time since the girl signed on with the Inquisition that she’d not gone into the field with Eleanor.

Though Dorian Pavus seemed to feel he was the wounded party in this scenario. Admittedly, he did lose his seat with the Iron Bull, but he got to join them in the carriage, which took all of two seconds for him to enjoy.

“This is delightful,” Dorian decided, “Maker, why ever haven’t we traveled by carriage before?”

“It isn’t conducive to field work and our destination is a proper city,” Leliana supposed.

“All such ventures should be to proper cities, honestly this camping and constantly running about the wilderness business is ridiculous.”

“You’ve a comfortable place in Skyhold, no one makes you follow Eleanor into the field,” Leliana amusedly informed him.

“The brat takes my lover from me if I stay in Skyhold and whatever am I supposed to do then? Read a book? In that library? I’d be more likely to take up the thickest tome I can find and bash my own head in.”

“I have tried but I’ve yet to hear back from any Tevinter’s Circles,” Josephine promised, “I apologize, I’ve not many Tevene connections.”

“…you are in charge of securing things for the library?”

“After a fashion. I process the orders, and requests for things come to my desk before they’re sent out. Specialty texts usually require reaching out to universities or noble allies who collect rare tomes.”

“Ahh. You get…all specialty requests?” Dorian asked, albeit nervous…Josephine smiled encouragingly, nodding. It was…understandable, for him to be so er…impassioned about acquiring the caliber of magical text he was used to, but the requests had been becoming a bit more…crude.

“I…feel like a garbage human being. I do sincerely apologize for my er…latest sentiments.”

That she could, quote ‘take the newest copy of Divine Galatea’s autobiography* and shove it up-’ well, her privates. She wouldn’t have to continually order the thing if someone wasn’t…the book was never checked out, but it had notably been destroyed, repeatedly. Understandable, she supposed, given er…the woman’s contributions to society. She didn’t necessarily like having the book in the same building as Eleanor, she prayed the girl never read it. If she went the whole of her life and was never made aware that such a thing as the Right of Annulment existed, that would be a blessed thing indeed. It was…Josephine didn’t like thinking of the moral complications of such a rule it was inherently disgusting that a Chantry Mother of all things could give license to Circle authorities to slaughter the whole of their mages…but- death never felt like something there should
be ‘buts’ about! The right existed for a reason, but it was horrible and the fact that a mind could conceive a things such as that was sickening. It was such a horrible amount of authority that could be—had been—grossly abused in the past five years.

“It’s quite alright,” Josephine assured.

“It’s incredible if you can get anything out of Tevinter these days,” Tonio spoke up, “I er… well I overheard things in my time in Magister Tilani’s home. What little isn’t banned or illegal to have in the South has been discouraged from foreign circulation.”

“Suppressing knowledge in the South in case they’ve a mind to use it for their little spat or create issue on Tevene soil? Oh how do they come up with these things?” Dorian drawled.

It was not a terribly unwelcome intrusion. Dorian and Leliana struck up debate over non-magical techniques for evading magical protections…likely in preparation, on the Spymaster’s part for whatever mission she was about. Josephine was minorly concerned—there had been some mention of breaking and entering Comte Vinicius home. She had a feeling the less she knew about it, the better she’d feel, so long as Leliana returned safe and sound. Tonio worked steadily all the while, smiling a bit amusedly when he caught on that Josephine was looking over his shoulder trying to get a peek.

“You’re free to sit closer if you’d like, I don’t mind if you look. In point of fact I would appreciate your input.”

…well, the man did offer. So Josephine rose a bit, side-stepping and smoothing her skirt under her once more as she sat alongside the man and watched his progress as he added color to his sketches.

“Do tell me if you see anything you believe will warrant complaint from Lady Forsythia.”

“It is Lady Forsythia, she will always complain. Your work is lovely, think nothing of it.”

“I’m glad you approve,” Tonio said. “It’s my understanding you’re in the market for a tailor. I wouldn’t offer undo pressure but if you were interested I would gladly take you on as a client. I’ve the time and it may be more convenient for you. Unless of course you wish to tailor shop in Orlais, they’ve a great deal more variety and talent greater than mine.”

She wasn’t sure about their talent being greater, but certainly…er…priced as if they were. Josephine had considered getting one or two new things, clothing she could alternate through for important meetings so she didn’t appear to be unclean—she wasn’t, she kept everything laundered and pristine, neither did she often do much roughing about—but she…was reticent to drain the funds the Inquisitor had set aside for her to do so. She did not want to wholly…abuse wasn’t the word…she didn’t want to use it needlessly. So she had been thinking to ask him once she saw a lull in his workload. It would be…more convenient, and there would be nothing to consider insofar as shipping costs she doubted the man would charge her postage from his desk to hers…

The was the matter of taking measurements, but he was incredibly professional, made his clients feel at ease and she’d…she would be nervous but she had no doubt he would make certain she wasn’t uncomfortable.

“I was actually planning to ask you, when it seemed you might have the time.”

“I’ve always time for you, cara mia,” he insisted. ‘Cara mia?’ Leliana mouthed to Dorian who silently supplied what looked like ‘my dear’ though after a moment’s consideration he
shrugged 'darling'? “I would be pleased to assist you in expanding your wardrobe.”

“I need only a few things,” she assured.

“Whatever you need,” he said, “at the friends and family discount, of course.”

“Absolutely not!”

“It was my understanding I’ve free reign in how I conduct my own business?”

“Of course you do,” she did not mean to insinuate otherwise.

“Then my pricing is at my discretion. You can pay the amount I prescribe…or you can refuse to, but I’d hate to see you the subject of one of Ellie’s judgment sessions for theft.”

…neither did she, truly. Even if it was the more pleasant sort like the morning they left—Eleanor called session to order and together they celebrated the promotion of Ser Barris to the Inquisition’s Knight-Commander, oh, that had been so wonderful! The young man certainly deserved it. While she was grateful for her recent promotion she would not have wanted any such ceremony, she blushed her way through Eleanor proclaiming her ‘Super Ambassador, Reina of Personal Assistants!’ and witnessing Josephine’s signing the bit of parchment that made it official.

“Well, I wouldn’t wish to incite Eleanor’s wrath,” she teasingly supposed.

“Wise as always, my lady,” he approved.

She did not feel very wise, all told, once they met with the Comte.

The supposed Comte. Maker.

Their stay in Val Royeaux started pleasantly enough. They’d arrived in the evening, and Josephine had taken it to heart to stay with Eleanor, while Marehis slipped off to do some last minute recognizance before their meeting with the Comte. She didn’t want Eleanor worrying about the Elf woman’s mission, she was already fretting about Leliana taking her leave to Vinicius’s estate, so Josephine…returned the girl’s kindness she’d shown when they first moved to Skyhold, asked to spend the night with Eleanor—it would be a bit of fun and it wasn’t as though the girl would otherwise be occupied, her boyfriend wasn’t to be distracted, he was to be on guard first thing come morning, lead the Chargers as they played the role of security in tomorrow’s meeting while the Iron Bull rested—the Qunari would be awake the whole of the night keeping guard over the estate and Madam de Fer would see after the place while the others were away during the day.

It was a wonderful evening, fun that there was some routine this week to getting into soft, clean sleeping clothes and climbing into a bedroll, or in this instance a proper, absolutely incredible bed, alongside the girl. Eleanor was warm enthusiasm as Josephine began brushing out her hair before bed and allowed the girl to take over for her. It was…soothing. Relaxing to have her hair brushed as she sat on the bed before Eleanor, legs tucked up beneath her, seated on the heels of her feet while Eleanor sat up high on her knees behind her to carefully brush the Antivan woman’s hair, sweetly complimenting how soft her hair was, “It’s thick like mine but smooth and silky like my mamis’! I love it!”

Josephine blushed, smiling softly, “Gracias, mija…do you need any assistance with your hair?” the Iron Bull had sat down with the girl their first night on the road and assisted in cleaning and conditioning it—Josephine was uncertain if it was for love of doing Eleanor’s hair, or if the exercise was meant to spare her discomfort with reaching overhead, she wasn’t certain just where the girl was with regaining mobility of her left shoulder.
“If you want to you can but I’m kind of um…” she shrugged, “letting it go for a few days—it’s good for it and um, Cremisius says he wants to learn how to do my hair so I was planning on letting him help me next time.”

Oh that…that was incredibly sweet. Oh! If Cremisius and Eleanor- oh it was such a precious thing! Was the young man considering it because he’d like to take up the task for the girl whenever she couldn’t or…was he perhaps thinking to the future? That someday there might be a little girl with her mami’s curl pattern or- oh a sweet baby boy with such beautiful hair? The idea was heart melting!

Though…though that future was at constant threat. Josephine always feared as much—prayed never-endingly for this girl when she went into the field, for Cremisius when he was on-mission. And now she’d threatened them both, she discovered, when Eleanor, Josephine, and Marehis made their way, Cremisius and the Bull’s Chargers alongside them to keep guard during their meeting.

She’d not expected such trouble.

_I did not perceive this to hold a possible threat_, she’d said.

And the moment, the very instant Josephine and Eleanor made to sit down at the Comte’s invitation? Marehis’s hand was on her daughter, pulling her back and away as she ordered,

“Lady Montilyet get back.”

Her voice had such stern urgency Josephine responded immediately, nearly tripping over the chair legs as she backed up, standing with Marehis, just a bit behind the Rogue as she put her own hand on Eleanor’s wrist to make certain the girl stayed behind them what-

“Marehis?” Josephine prompted. She trusted the woman but she was just a bit confused.

“I investigated the Comte myself,” the woman said, “as per our agreement. And unless he’s lost twenty years and fifty pounds in the twelve hours since I laid eyes on him last night…you are no Comte Boisvert.” And then, as if listening for something, “Maker, do you have the man restrained?”

“I mean the good Comte no harm, as I likewise mean no harm to yourself or your Inquisitor,” the…man assured her. “I’m a representative of the House of Repose.”

“An assassin,” Marehis snapped.

“Professionally? Yes. Socially, I do tend to let my acquaintances live. And that is what this is—a social encounter, making your acquaintance. Please do sit—we need only come to blows if you truly wish to.”

“I’m not like, super dressed for fighting and I smell cake, I’m sitting!” Eleanor decided smoothing her hands along her skirts oh—_Tia Josie! We’re twinsies today!_ The girl had excitedly informed her when they dressed for the day, Eleanor debuting a purple dress Josephine had delighted in assisting her securing the ribbon in the back, it was incredibly precious fun, a sort of compliment that the girl was so ecstatic to match the Antivan woman. She slipped her arm out of Josephine’s as she pecked a kiss to Marehis’s bicep and side-stepped between the two women to sit across the table from the Comte’s imposter. “Hola! I’ve never actually talked to an assassin before…well, Leliana kind of counts…but like, not one that hasn’t tried to or wanted to kill me at some point, so! Hi! I’m Ellie. Is there a reason you wanted to speak with me in particular other
than murder? Because I’m not going to lie, you’ll be my favorite assassin if you just brought me here to chat and eat cake and drink…is that tea?”

“Black tea, it complements the cake I’m assured,” the man spoke pleasantly as if there was not a thing in the world amiss and he’d truly invited them here for a tea party.

“Yum! So, what’s up? If you’re here to threaten mi Tia I’ll fight you, dressed for it or not—my tailor’s in town with me so, easy peasy to get it fixed!”

“I’m not here to threaten your…Tia, but to bear her fair warning given the circumstances.”

…the circumstances.

Josephine’s stomach plummeted, she’d no appetite for any of the assassin’s offerings, cake, tea, information. Eleanor blanched the moment he revealed he did truly know why Josephine’s curious had been murdered and her documents destroyed.

_There was a longstanding contract between the Du Paraquettes and the House of Repose to eliminate anyone from the House Montilyet in the event they endeavor to conduct trade in Orlais._

“…isn’t there an expiration date on assassin contracts? I mean the people who ordered it…the people they had in mind when they ordered it are all dead by now!” Eleanor insisted. “You can’t hurt Lady Josie—she didn’t do anything wrong! Her family really ne-“

“That’s enough, Eleanor.”

Marehis’s look was fierce as she regarded Josephine with sharp rebuke. “Your tone, Ambassador. The Inquisitor is here because she is helping you.”

_She is sitting across a table from an assassin and it is your entire fault!_ Josephine understood her words to mean. It is what they felt like and oh, they were right she- Maker this was a mess. And ugh, she’d truly spoken out of turn it…it was patronizing to hush her Inquisitor. But it was Eleanor who offered up a,

“Sorry,” the girl said, reaching out and laying her Marked hand on Josephine’s knee and squeezing gently before she looked to their host, “What I mean is—why does this contract from so long ago even apply today? And what…I mean you’re here, warning us, which is nicer than just outright murdering Josie, but it’d matter a little more if you could explain what we can do to stop this.”

“As long as the contract still exists with the House of Repose, we may only cease following it to the letter if a member of the Du Paraquette’s House cancels the contract, or your Lady Montilyet rescinds her interest in reinstating her family’s business with Orlais.”

“…there’s like, not a chance I could say ‘pretty please’ and you’d go rip up that contract and make it cease existing, is there?” Eleanor wondered.

“I’m afraid not. This meeting was a courtesy, I’m afraid—once this interaction is over, do not expect further kindness.”

“You’re still being nice right now though?” Eleanor checked.

“Yes,” he supposed.

“Cool! So like, can I have the key for that thing?” she nodded in the direction of the- oh
Maker! Was true Comte was in the cabinet?! “Before you leave. I’ll let you get a head start before I let the Comte out if you want.”

He regarded her for a moment with quiet amusement, before he retrieved the cabinet key from a vest pocket, “It has been a pleasure dealing with you, Lady Trevelyan.”

“You too—mami…we don’t have to fight him, do we?” Eleanor implored her bodyguard, “I mean Cremisius and everyone is right outside and they’ll totally kick his butt for us, but I really appreciate him coming and warning us first, and he hasn’t hurt any of us.”

Marehis’s mouth was ground in a firm line, expression grim as she glared at the man, assessing and considering before deciding, “Leave, if you ever harm a hair on my child’s or Lady Montilyet’s heads, I will decimate you.”

“Of course,” the man nodded, rising from his seat and bowing a bit, respectively, “Good day.”

“You too!” Eleanor replied—Marehis’s hand was low, on her arm to keep her from rising from her seat momentarily until the assassin was clear from room. Then the girl was up and dashing over to the cabinet to free the Comte, “Don’t worry! If you’re hearing a voice that isn’t mine, that’s just Cole—he’s a friend! He found you!”

“Are you alright, Josephine?” Marehis asked softly, hand resting on the Antivan woman’s arm now, though the act was more for comforting, than restraint.

She felt ill, and frightened, and mortified—horrified! She’d brought Eleanor headlong into a meeting with a member of the House of Repose!

And her response was tears, apparently, horrible things welling in her eyes as she hastily wiped at them with the back of an index finger, “I’m- I’m so sorry, I swear to you Marehis I did not kn-“

“Oh lethallan, sweet lady—of course you didn’t know,” Marehis offered, soothing. Oh, perhaps the woman was being more forgiving than she was with herself. “Ellie is safe—you are safe, I swear to you, I will make certain you’re unharmed while you figure this out. Leliana-“

“Oh please no- Leliana will be furious with me, and if she would worry for my family’s financial state, this will certainly send her to her wits end.”

“I would prefer her at her wits end than you at the wrong end of an assassin’s blade, Josephine, and she will only be concerned because she should be—you’re in danger.”

She was. Oh Maker how had this happened?

“I- I will tell her then,” Josephine vowed, “whenever she returns from Vinicius’s estate.”

…though that was apparently unnecessary.

The true Comte was…pleasant—he’d initially threatened to sue the Inquisition for his distress but Eleanor reasoned out that he wasn’t just some random victim*—he’d talked to Josie, hadn’t he? Written her to join him in Val Royeaux for information about her couriers? No, he hadn’t—that had entirely been forgery on behalf of the House of Repose…but she’d danced so close to the truth of things the man confessed he owed a debt of favor to that particular league of assassins, that he’d been restrained and tied because he kicked up a fuss whenever their representative came to collect on his debt, the true Comte wasn’t necessarily for or against the
Inquisition, but he certainly didn’t wish their ire, he’d not wanted to be involved at all. Unfortunately that is the price one pays when…well,

“You didn’t have to have him killed,” Cole had announced, serenely, “You could have told him you loved him, that you were afraid he wouldn’t share or too much pride would keep you from asking when you needed money. But that’s just money, he was your brother—you can get money from anywhere, I have some in my pockets and I don’t even need it, but I cannot fit your brother’s life in my pocket. His wife doesn’t forgive you. That’s why she won’t sleep in the same room with you—she knows and she hates you for it. She could have loved you if Geoff died some other way, you seemed so kind to keep her, take her as your own wife when she could have been cast out. But she found the things you leave in boxes locked and low, beneath the loose tile in your bed chamber.”

It…got a touch personal and the man forgot his grievances, at least with the Inquisition.

The inquisition had grievances enough.

They’d been tight-lipped about the whole thing—Eleanor merely offering up that there’d been some complications in her meeting that would be discussed later, asking the Chargers keep their guard up around the Marchand’s home. Josephine would prefer Skyhold’s walls but this place was a bit of a foretress all its own, just, an unfamiliar one. But she’d allies all around—Cremisius stood in the hall outside the room Josephine claimed, a small sitting room with a writing desk…in the middle of the home…with no windows. Yes, she was certain she would be safe there.

From all assassins…save one.

Her heart leapt into her throat as the door banged open—gilded doorhandle slamming into the marble wall with thunderous sound.

And Leliana stormed into the room, eyes wide with rage.

“Josephine Cherette Montilyet!” the woman spoke at a near-roar, hands slapping against the desk as she leaned over it to rail at the Antivan woman. “How dare you keep such a thing from me!”

“Whoa whoa hey—everything good here or should you maybe back off?” Cremisius wondered firmly, standing in the doorway. “You alright Josie?”

Not in the slightest. “I’m fine.”

“She’s a liar and I could kill her,” Leliana assured over her shoulder, “but she is safe from me, Lieutenant…thank you. Do please close the door.”

“Are you okay with that?” the young man checked with Josephine.

…no, not entirely. But at the same time, also, yes. She’d rather the whole of the house not hear what was happening just now, “I’m well, Cremisius—please close the door. Perhaps you could check on Eleanor? I’m sure she would be delighted to see you before she retires for the evening.”

“Alright. Cole’ll get me if you need me.”

“Thank you,” Josephine said. Truly. She…she may need to, oh Maker, Leliana was livid. “Marehis told you, I presume?”
“I have sources, Josephine, outside Marehis and the Inquisition, and I received word not an hour after I escaped Vinicius’s estate with- it’s been a trying night and now I’ve been informed your family is in debt, and you are the subject of an assassins contract!” the woman growled in frustration. “I have people who can be in the House of Repose within the hour—they’ll go, and destroy this contract, and that will be the end of things.”

“No Leliana please- they will not simply let your people waltz in and destroy documentation. Your people could kill or- or be killed!” Josephine cried out, reaching to grasp at Leliana’s wrist before the woman could attempt taking leave to do such a thing! She- she wouldn’t- couldn’t have people dying for her! “I have already come to an agreement with Eleanor—the Du Paraquettes can rescind their contract with the House of Repose.”

“And why ever would they do that?! You’re not thinking Josie-”

“I’ve done nothing but think, thank you!” Josephine refuted, voice straining as she insisted, “The Du Paraquettes have lost their noble status some years passed. If I return them to their former standing, I’m certain they will agree to revoke their ancestor’s ill wishes against my family.”

“Returning their status will take time Josephine—time you already don’t have-“

“Please,” Josephine pled, “Eleanor has already agreed-“

“Because she is a child and she trusts you and you’ve not presented her with all of the facts with- with this dishonest streak you’ve suddenly taken up!”

“Marehis suggested the very same—she offered herself to lead your people into the House of Repose to destroy the contract but I,” begged, “convinced her to see my case. She has an appreciation for bettering the lives of those my ancestors feuded with, turning an unpleasant situation into something that benefits us all.”

“Your death benefits no one-“

“Neither does another dying for me!” Josephine's conviction poured up from her throat, tears welling up in her eyes, it was enough to give the Spymaster pause. Which only agitated the woman further, she redoubled her decision to be incised with Josephine until this was resolved.

“This is nonsense, you-“ Leliana let out a frustrated sound, “Cole!”

The Spirit materialized…the same as always but there was something timid in his landing the barest bit of pause between his feet softly broaching the ground as he stared at the women with wide-eyed…oh dear, was the poor boy afraid?

“Very,” he assured aloud.

“What?” Leliana asked, though she shook her head, physically swatting the matter away, “Nevermind! Cole, you will tell me this instant every last thing Josephine has been lying about!”

“She lied when her Abuelita asked her who ate all the chocolate meant for the Miguelitos and she insisted she had not, and when her mother asked if she looked fat when she was pregnant with Antoine-“ the boy started. Maker! She’d been a child! And she had not eaten all of the chocolate!...Laurien too, had played culprit to the crime.

“I mean recently!” Leliana snapped, “Since organizing this farce of a trip!”

“Oh!” the boy chirped, thinking. “She lied when you came to her office—she didn’t want
you to come because she didn’t want you to find out her family was in debt and her couriers were murdered and she was meeting a Comte for information and he wanted to meet Ellie…though she didn’t lie about him wanting to meet Ellie. and he wasn’t really a comte—but Josephine didn’t know about that. Does that count as a lie?” he wondered. “It wasn’t truth, but it was Josephine’s truth at the time? My body’s head hurts.”


“The Chargers are here to protect Josephine and Ellie because Marehis was afraid the Comte wanted to hurt the Inquisitor. Mister Aclassi is here as cover, but he is truly here to go shopping—it was not the original plan, but it became the plan. And to go to the theater. And museums. And to hold Josephine’s arm because that’s what a gentleman does. She makes him feel like sunlight, and he makes her feel safe and at peace, warm like when you return to your home and the hearth is ablaze and you might never be cold again.”

“…so they are dating?”

“Yes.”

“Good,” Leliana sighed. “I will go speak with Eleanor myself—this isn’t over Josie. I will respect Eleanor’s wishes but I’ll see to it myself she’s fully informed, and we will do everything to make you safe.”

“Thank you,” Josephine said, breathing a sigh of relief as the Spymaster took her leave. Then, “Thank you, Cole, for…being discreet.”

“Discreet?” the boy wondered, confused.

“For er…lying about Mister Aclassi and myself. Our…agreement to start dating.”

That only prompted further confusion. “But…you did agree to start dating. In his quarters, after you told Leliana.”

“Falsely—mutual deception. We are not truly in romance. It is fake,” she reminded him.

He just stared at her, uncertain about her words, but wholly certain in his own,

“But it isn’t fake.”

Val Royeaux was lovely—he’d not quite enjoyed the place when he was there last, though this was rather a different circumstance. It was beautiful, dare he liken it to Minrathous? It wasn’t quite as expansive, but just as extravagant…perhaps more so. His homeland did admittedly go for a more menacing air with their superiority. And it was a wonderful experience he was excited to share with his child!

His child…and the whole of the Chargers…and great many Inquisition scouts. The latter two were not persistently present but they could be seen all around as they made their way throughout their day, some attempting to casually blend in with the market place while others were visibly standing guard.
It was strange, though perhaps it shouldn’t be? Just…Lady Montilyet had been so very grave when she and Ellie returned from that Comte meeting. Whatever ‘snag’ had been caught must have bothered the woman, oh he hoped she wasn’t beating herself up—whatever it was, it most surely wasn’t her fault, the woman was unfailingly compassionate, polite and graceful even in the face of utmost disrespect. Ahh, but the point was…the woman was rather cagey about the whole thing the following day and…their security was increased, doubled by his guess, Inquisition scouts pouring into the Marchand’s in droves. Just, overnight. When he made to question it, concerned, Lady Montilyet had insisted it was mere precaution, they were traveling with the Inquisitor after all, and she was to be enjoying the city unarmored, often in formal wear. Was there some greater threat to sweet Ellie that had risen during their meeting? He’d yet to bear witness to any such attempt or threat upon her life but oh he could— he could dole out a sound-

He was not one for violence! But he would slay a man with his bare hands—he was known to be agile with fabric shears! Any who dared harm a hair upon that girl’s head could see just how very much so!

He was certain Cremisius would handle it splendidly…but should his son be having an off day…Tonio would be keeping his shears concealed in the deep inner breast pocket of his suit jacket. Just in case.

After all, if someone was after Ellie, Lady Montilyet may well be in danger as well. They would be spending their days together, after all. Perhaps that was what had the woman on edge was…was she fearful?

They were just leaving the…oh what were their names? Marchand. The Marchand’s home, Ellie spoke highly of them oh, those poor people, losing their daughter at the Conclave. He- if anything befell his son, he was uncertain just how he would carry on. Ahh but—as they were leaving the Marchand’s home Josephine seemed…tense, despite the pleasant schedule they had ahead. He’d only just overheard Ellie offering something like reassurance—quietly speaking to Josephine in the front corridor as they prepared to leave, “…be in public all day, and everyone’s on guard. Everything’s going to be okay, we’ve got the ball rolling with the Du Paraquettes. We’ve already heard back from Countess Dionne and I pinky promise I’ll do my absolute best talking to her today. Cole will let us know the instant Judge Auld gets back with us, everyone’s got something they want and we’re pretty resourceful—his signature’s as good as got! Try not to worry, okay? Have some fun today.”

“Gracias, mija,” the woman had said, her voice just a bit tight before she cleared her throat, tucking a loose curl behind Ellie’s ear as she pressed on, “I’m certain we’ll have a wonderful time —do enjoy yourself, please.”

“Is everything alright?” Tonio questioned softly as they walked along, offering the Lady his arm as they began the rather perilous descent down the spire’s winding staircase to reach the lower level of the Bazaar.

She stared at his arm momentarily, hesitating for some reason as if she were nervous to take it, but she accepted it, hugging his arm a bit with her own as they followed Ellie and Cremisius… who were descending the stairs arm in arm but hopping a bit—skipping steps together and oh, it was precious to hear his bello mimo chuckling softly as he indulged his girlfriend in a bit of nonsensical fun as they followed Madam de Fer down the stairway. Marehis brought up the rear of their party with Dorian and the Iron Bull flanking her, apparently a point for keeping guard—Tonio had held the door open for the woman but she smiled her thanks and motioned for him to go on ahead, she would be following while they made their way through the city.
“I am fine,” Josephine breezed, convincingly for most, perhaps but he was certain something was amiss. “You’re well, I hope?”

“Oh certainly,” he said, though, “Concerned but content—I understand if you’ve something private you’re dealing with, but if you need to speak about whatever is troubling you, know you have my ear.”

“I-” she started, as if she were about to reiterate her ‘am fine’ point. But, “Thank you, Tonio.”

“Of course, cara mia,” he gently assured as they stepped out into the Bazaar. “Bella,” he called to Ellie who twirled about, to face him, walking backward with her arm looped through Cremisius’s as the young man guided her steps, “where are we headed?”

“First stop—shopping!” she giddily announced, “Tia says you’ll get to meet a few suppliers directly! And I…might get more shoes.”

“And so it begins,” Cremisius said with a put-on sigh, assisting the girl in whirling back around to face the road ahead, wrapping an arm around her to hold her to his side, “my girl’s gonna be a shoe fiend huh?”

“Not a fiend,” Ellie gently defended, “just…I like shoes. I like dressing up and being taller and there’s just so many different ways to do that!”

“Hey, I’m not complaining. I think heels were commercialized for women for sexist ideals but uh…as long as you like them,” he smiled, leaning closer and it was only through being directly behind them Tonio was able to overhear as the young man spoke against her ear, “I’ve got zero issues with how those ideals look on you,” which sent the girl giggling. Good heavens! Well, that was hardly an appropriate way to speak to a young lady in front of all and sundry…but it didn’t seem unwelcome and it wasn’t as if he were shouting; it was a private flirtation.

“Hands where I can see them, Lieutenant,” Marehis gently chided from behind them, ahh, his hand had been slipping—cupped the girl’s backside through her dress for a brief moment before he returned it to rest at her waist. So, perhaps not an entirely private flirtation but the boy was trying, Maker preserve him.

“Sorry Mare,” Cremisius called back. The Iron Bull snorted…and subsequently startling a couple passing by, alarmed that the Qunari might…what? Be preparing to go on a rampage? …that might be entertaining, the Iron Bull running through the streets of Val Royeaux, inciting panic in his wake. It would serve them right, honestly, Tonio was prepared to take it to blows when their first discussion with a supplier started with him insisting that while the ‘knife-ear’ was welcome to stay if she didn’t touch anything or pester his customers, the ‘Oxman’ would need to stay outside. Like a dog!

Little Ellie nearly did take a swing at the man for referring to her mami with a racial slur but the woman in question had already come up behind the girl and hugged her tightly, wrapping her arms around her so the girl’s arms were pinned to her sides while her mother pressed a kiss to the top of her head and told her not to pay it any mind, and Madam de Fer had a hand on Cremisius’s arm, low on his wrist like she’d only just caught the boy’s arm before he could strike the man for his insults, speaking in low tones against his son’s ear, her warning earning her small, appreciative smile from his son as he nodded and settled for glaring at the shop owner. Tonio…found an even more satisfying form of vindication.
“Well then, thank you for not wasting our time—I assume a man’s work is only as worthwhile as the man himself, and you’ve done us the courtesy of revealing you’re utter garbage up front,” Tonio said in gracious tones, turning away with Lady Josephine on his arm the woman’s eyes were wide with shock as she heard him speak what was quite possibly the rudest thing he’d found it in himself to say to another person, but thankfully she seemed impressed, as it was certainly deserved. He announced…projecting his voice to be heard throughout the shop, if not by passersby on the street as well, “if it pleases you, Inquisitor Eleanor Trevelyan, I’ve absolutely no wish to bring the Inquisition’s business to this establishment. Shall we try next door?”

Ellie beamed at that. “That pleases me greatly! Come on mami, let’s take the Inquisition’s business elsewhere!”

And so they did, thankfully, without further incident. Their next venture into a store offered a polite young man who greeted them all respectfully, and the only thing he had to say to the Iron Bull was to call to him, ‘good sir’ that he might prefer the side entrance—it was open to the marketplace and had no low doorway to pass through in order to enter the shop proper, so he needn’t risk his horns.

“They’ll be on mission—the Inquisitor and her party,” Josephine spoke softly to Tonio as the shopkeeper allowed them the run of the place, browsing without him over their shoulder, but waiting in the wings in case they had questions or needed assistance. “While it is purely investigative work there will also…they are there to protect someone of great importance Corypheus wishes to bring to harm. So…”

“You fear they’ll need to be battle ready?” Tonio surmised.

“Exactly. Which…”

“Doesn’t lend much in the way of high fashion. But, we’ll make do—appropriate colors and ornamentation, while being able to conceal armor and weaponry as needed, easy to take off and replace at a moments notice without suspect?”

She smiled, blushing a bit though she seemed amused, “Yes. I appreciate we’re on the same page.”

“Always,” he assured with a warm chuckle. “That’s a shame—I was looking forward to providing Ellie a proper ballgown…though I am uncertain how well my son would survive.”

“Oh,” Josephine breathed, wistful, “my sweet mija attired for the ballroom—everything you’ve made her thus far is absolutely breathtaking. She dressed to match with me yesterday and I do believe my heart is still in liquid form, it was entirely precious.”

Ahh yes, he’d not seen much of Ellie yesterday but he was most certain he knew precisely the dress she was speaking of, “I showed her the material as a sample from our time in the Hinterlands and she was absolutely delighted with it—asked specifically for a dress to compliment your usual attire.”

“Oh truly?” the woman asked, seeming incredibly honored, “That’s- oh goodness. I must admit I love that.”

“You’ll have to keep an eye out as we look around today—point out anything to me that you may like for your own wardrobe. Even if you would prefer our suppliers in the Hinterlands, having an idea of what sort of material, colors, patterns you might enjoy will be a great help to me.”
"So long as we do not get the materials confused," she agreed, "It would not do to have the Iron Bull showing up at the Winter Palace wearing a silk dress."

"Ambassador, that's exactly what the Winter Palace needs and you know it," the Qunari saw fit to point out over his shoulder from where he stood examining accessories with Ellie and Cremisius. "Imekari, babe. Your ears pierced? These’d look cute with your little get-up today."

Josephine made a soft sound, almost like a laugh as she murmured, “The child is Antivan,” as if that guaranteed her answer.

“Oh! They’re so pretty! Earrings are cute but I don’t have anywhere to put them—the only holes in my head are the ones the Maker put there.”

…but not, Josephine looked up from the bolts of fabric they were looking through, “Truly mija?”

“Huh?” the girl questioned, turning to look to the Ambassador, “Oh! Piercings—yeah, it’s just not something I’ve ever done?”

Josephine’s mouth worked momentarily before she found, “Oh,” like that was something unfortunate. “Well carina…if- if it were something that interested you, I would be honored to arrange as much for you. It wouldn’t er…would it be an issue for you?” an issue? Ahh. Blood.

“No issue at all I don’t think it’s just um…jab and done, right?” Ellie checked, and Josephine nodded. “Um…yeah actually, I’ve never really thought about it before but I like earrings—yours are super pretty, and Vivienne’s!”

“Gracias—oh I’m certain you’ll love it, it’s a minorly painful procedure, it will heal as it should almost instantly once your earrings are in, it is traditional your first set be dipped in Elf Root tonic before wear so they maintain your piercing while healing the skin around it. Actually mija there’s a jewelry store near here—if you would like we could stop there and see if there’s anything there you’d like as your first earrings?”

“Oh yeah!” Ellie chirped, nodding, “I think I know where you’re talking about—it’s where I got mami’s birthday present!”

Oh. Lady Montilyet blanched, eyes wide as she looked about to make a bit of panic-mixed-apologetic eye contact with the Elf woman. “Your mami, yes,” her mouth worked a bit like she wasn’t certain just what to say.

Marehis offered the woman a kind smile, “It sounds like a marvelous idea, unless you wish to go to a professional, it is something we can handle ourselves.”

“Oh wow, could we mami?” Ellie wondered excitedly, “That’d be so cool!”

“Leliana is capable, unless Josephine wishes to do as much herself?” the woman informed her, “If the Iron Bull has the sort of needles he uses for tattooing? They will suit just fine,” she said to be heard by Ellie and then, coming closer from where’d she’d taken point at the shop entrance, nearing Lady Josephine and Tonio she spoke more quietly, a hand on Josephine’s arm, “My Lady—the Inquisitor is a young woman, I trust she’s fully capable of making such decisions about her own body for herself, she needn’t her parents’ permission,” she assured, “I suppose it’s a bit difficult to be the fun auntie that whisks her precious niece off for little adventures when her ‘mami’ must always be in attendance…I apologize if my unrest about our trip to Val Royeaux made you assume I’m anything less than pleased with your relationship with Ellie. She adores you
and you’ve been nothing but wonderful to her.”

For some reason the words sent Lady Montilyet nearly to tears, “I’m- I was wrong to ask her to meet with the Comte and I’m- I’m so sor-“

“It was fine, Josie. Oh, lethallan—you’re…more affected by our visit. I know you would never do anything you thought might bring ma’da’vehnan harm. I’m sorry if I insinuated otherwise when you proposed this trip. Everything is fine—I’ve seen not one single threat since we’ve departed our quarters.”

“Truly?” Josephine asked, sighing with relief when the Elf woman nodded and gave her arm a gentle squeeze. “I-“

“The Iron Bull?” Marehis called over her shoulder, “Would you watch over Ellie for me? I’ll just be a moment. Da’vehnan you are to stay in The Iron Bull’s sight at all times,” she intoned.

“Si mami, is everything okay?” the girl asked, looking between the Antivan and Elf women.

“Yes sweet girl, just taking a minute,” Marehis assured, leading Josephine away—the Ambassador mouthing ‘my apologies’ to Tonio as she stepped off in the middle of their search but that was…that was fine, Maker, it seemed like…like perhaps the woman needed a moment to compose herself.

“Hey Imekari—you’re supposed to stay in my sight, keep it out’my blindspot.”

“I’m holding your hand!” Ellie complained, reasonably enough, though,

“You…or the very friendly assassin that knifed and replaced you while you were in my blindspot?”

“That’s fair,” she conceded. “I don’t wanna hold your hand right now anyway.”

“Ouch—babe, Sparky’s just keepin’ my seeing side hand warm, I’ll drop him right now if you wanna switch.”

“I beg pardon?” Dorian scoffed with mild offense though, “She said she doesn’t wish to hold hands with you brute—did it perhaps occur to you she wishes to hold hands with me and you’re the one being ‘dropped’?”

“Awe Dorian, I love you with like, everything but I was actually talking about—Madam de Feeeer!” Ellie called, getting the Enchantress’s attention, “Hi! Wanna hold hands and help me shop? I’m looking for accessories!”

“For fashion or to a crime my dear?” the woman wondered as she joined the girl, bemusedly taking her hand and leading her into the Iron Bull’s line of sight.

“Hmmm…I haven’t totally decided yet but you’re my go-to for either, obviously,” the girl assured to Vivienne’s amusement, “I’m leaning toward fashion. Dorian says they have to match or compliment my outfits and/or shoes? But there’s so many different colors of things I’m not sure what goes with what.”

“Oh never you worry darling, let’s see what we can find,” she invited warmly, wrapping an arm around the girl’s shoulders and keeping her in view of the Iron Bull as they browsed.

“I apologize for leaving you,” Josephine’s voice spoke softly at his side, oh! She returned,
Marehis had an arm around the woman’s shoulders and offered her a gentle squeeze, whispering something quietly against the Ambassador’s ear she nodded to, and then the Elf woman was off, leaving them as she set a casual pace around the store, a bit of a patrol. Lady Montiyet, oh, it looked as if she might have been crying—she’d just the barest bit of moisture in the corners of her slightly-reddened eyes.

“It was hardly any trouble,” he quietly assured, offering up his pocket square, it was what the accessory was for, after all. She smiled her thanks before carefully dabbing at her eyes, sniffling a bit.

“I don’t mean to look a sight, I’m-“

“Fine?” he finished for her, “And lying, which is your prerogative. My lady if you need anything at all, you need only ask, I would not press you for details you’d not wish to give.”

“We’re handling something of a delicate matter—more I cannot say in public—I…became just a bit overwhelmed, needed air,” she sighed, lamenting, “I should not have distracted Marehis so.”

Tonio was quiet as he considered it a moment before breathing the offer low enough not to be overheard, “If you need, you’re more than free to distract me,” he assured her, saying, “Whenever my Cremisius found himself overwhelmed as a child, I instilled in him the idea he could always come to me no matter where we were. He need only squeeze my hand thrice, and I would know something was the matter, and if he cared to endeavor to put it to words later, I would gladly listen. The same could be said of you.” He offered his arm.

The Lady took his arm, side brushing against his as she leaned into the contact a bit, giving his arm a single squeeze, some of the stiffness leaving her frame as she sighed with quiet contentment. “Have you found anything to your liking?” she wondered.

“For the Winter Palace? I was thinking Inquisition colors, this fabric is traditionally used in military uniforms—for parades and the like but I know well there are ways to...weave the raw materials with reinforcement, thin metal threading that will offer some protection and assist in its durability,” he dropped his voice a bit out of politeness for their current shop keeper, “and I’m assured there are suppliers in this city capable of getting us just that if we cannot get as much here.”

“That sounds splendid,” Josephine said, “appropriate uniform, everyone wearing the same thing, any who go in armor will be unsuspected.”

“If it is so very dangerous should you not all go in armor?” Tonio wondered...worried. “I could see to it your uniform has a more protective inner layer. It would be entirely comfortable—at least Eleanor assures me it is.”

“...her clothing is armored?”

“Appropriately,” he said, “the bodiced vests she’s taken to wearing are inlayed with bone for support and protection, an internal layer of insulation before the comfortable cushioned lining. They serve as protection for the vital organs in her abdomen. Her cloaks have a layer of leather between the outer cloth and inner lining, at least around her shoulders and chest—I’d like the girl safe, not er, trapped because she can’t move about in her cloak.”

“You truly arranged for as much?”
“I spent the week she was on the Storm Coast with the Iron Bull and the Chargers...” huh, he’d not many details on it. All he knew was the Qunari was technically considered Tal-Vashoth now. “in the forge with Master Dennett, making certain it was just right.”

She hugged his arm a bit tighter, some emotion passing through her features like gratitude that almost moved her to tears—was the woman truly so distressed or was er...perhaps her monthly still at hand? Though he understood perhaps she was moved, “Thank you, oh Maker bless you—the cloak she wears now? It is protective?”

“As well as warm.”

“P-perhaps her dresses could be made more er...be protective in the same way her vests are?”

“I believe she’s wearing one now under her dress,” he said, the lines had been albeit noticeable when she turned to face them before and her skirts had been slightly trapped between her hips and Cremisius’s thigh, pulled the top of her dress more tightly against her body.

The woman relaxed several fold, entirely from how tightly she’d been holding herself. The change was so drastic it startled him for fear the woman had found herself collapsing—he unwound his arm from hers to splay his hand high on her back, making to catch her, his free hand grasping her arm just below her elbow, Maker, she’d given him a bit of a fright but she was alright, in fact she seemed wholly relieved as she breathed out a staggering breath, “That is excellent. Oh,” she sighed, “I worry for her so. You understand, of course. Thank you, Tonio.”

“Of course,” he returned, “if I didn’t worry likewise, I’d not have thought of such things,” he supposed with some mirth, offering it up humorously in the hopes she might...ahh, yes, she smiled at that. Good. Perhaps she truly would enjoy today.

She seemed to. They found materials for the Winter Palace and the woman did open herself up to questioning for her own wardrobe. She was insistent she would rely on their Hinterland suppliers, so...they would. Mostly. He might have...it was important to order a bit more fabric than necessarily needed—it wouldn’t do for a misstep leading to having to make a separate order after all, shipping fees, and time constraints were the stuff of nightmares. It was only appropriate to adorn their uniforms with something that represented Orlais and the Winter Palace in particular, so while it would clash minorly, it was a necessary mode of respect to adorn their uniforms with sashes made of sapphire blue Orlesian silk...and the color was so very striking when the Lady held some in her hands. So, if he just so happened to have material left over from their uniforms...well whatever else was he to do with it? It would have already been paid for by the Inquisition, it would be a terrible shame to let it go to waste so, he intended not to. Too, he’d been mindful as they came to a shop that was exclusively dedicated to the trimmings of outfits—decorative cording, buttons, lace. Lady Montilyet’s eye was caught by golden buttons molded to look like rose blossoms—while that wasn’t what exactly what they were looking for uniform-wise, and they did eventually settle on gold buttons the shop would have sent to them emblazon with the Inquisition’s seal—Tonio quietly made purchase of enough of them, enough to use for the closure of a dress if not for decoration. Oh, Josephine was so relieved when they concluded their search for materials for the Winter Palace—finished off with Tonio making arrangements with the owner of the shoe store Ellie seemed rather fond of, for appropriate footwear, the poor shoemaker looked bedraggled by the time he finished taking the Iron Bull’s measurements.

Josephine was beaming, oh, she was absolutely elated as their group made their way to the jewelers. She stepped out of his hold only slightly—resuming their former arrangement, of merely walking arm in arm. He hadn’t realized they’d been walking with his arm around her and a hand
gently resting on her arm until then, Maker, that was…likely too familiar, inappropriate. But perhaps it had lent to the cover of er…it was his understanding they were still presenting themselves a budding couple in Leliana’s eyes? Josephine had yet to call the gambit off, so he assumed so. They walked arm in arm though the jewelry store, Magister Tilani had favored this place when last he visited with her, though this was a markedly better experience. Oh, Lady Josephine was simply- just radiant with her delight as Ellie sidled up to them and took the Antivan woman’s free hand to walk around, looking in every case of the jeweler’s selection earrings.

“Studs or very small hoops are traditional for starting out—it can get uncomfortable the larger the earring you wear mija, so it is best to start out with a more palatable size, something that will acclimate your ears to wearing ornament.”

“Ohh,” Ellie nodded, “that makes sense! Gosh, these are all so pretty, I really don’t even know where to begin.”

“What do you think of these, mija?” Josephine wondered, “Yevette had similar when she was pierced, oh she was so precious, I used to pester mama constantly to let me hold her,” though, “And then we taught her how to speak and I’ve not had a moments peace with her since.”

Ellie giggled at that, looking over the pair of earrings Josephine pointed out—holding them up to the girl to show her how they would fit when she looked in one of the mirrors hanging about the shop. Oh they were lovely—tiny hoops that would just leave a breath of space between the silvery loop and the bottom of her earlobe, adorned with a tiny dangling pearl.


“Oh they’re beautiful,” Marehis sincerely encouraged. “Do you like them, da’vehnan?” the girl nodded.

“Excellent choice darling, they’re simply precious,” Vivienne assured.

“Think they sell nipple rings in this joint?” he…albeit unfortunately…overheard the Iron Bull asking his lover from where the couple stood idly waiting, at the counter just behind them. Good heavens.

“…are you asking out of amusement or are you entertaining the idea—“ Altus Pavus let out a bit of frustrated growl, “it’s too late I hate how much that appeals, we’ll browse shall we?”

He was approaching old age, was he not? There came some promise of a loss in the hearing department, didn’t there? It would be…appreciated at times such as these.

Though he found himself wishing he’d the Iron Bull’s capabilities to hear. Ellie broke away from their party, Marehis at her back as they neared the fountain before the open-air cafe.

“I’ve got somebody I need to speak with really quickly—I’ll be right back. You guys can go ahead and see about lunch maybe? If everyone’s hungry. I’m always hungry,” she elaborated, “What I’m saying really is: I love you Cremisius, please get me food? I’ll make it worth your whiiiiile,” she sang and Tonio wasn’t certain this was necessarily appropriate in front of everyone… though the girl seemed to make some fun out of frightening her elders with near-impropriety.

“Oh yeah?” Cremisius wondered drily, well learned in his girlfriend’s antics.

“Uh huh—you can sit with me while I eat! See the whole process go down, hand me napkins, tell me I’m pretty with food on my face.”
“You are pretty with food on your face—it’s a look you never cease to make work.”

“That’s why, out of all the people I might marry, you’re like top three in the running.”

“Who’s number one?”

“Lord Woolsley.” Was the young lady expected to marry a Lord? Oh Cremisius—W asn’t bothered in the slightest. “Oh yeah, him. Saw him in his pen in Redcliffe—that’s fair,” he acknowledged.

“Lord Woolsley is a vibrantly colorful Ram who lives on a farm in the Hinterlands,” Lady Montilyet quietly informed him. Ahh. Good. He did recall spotting such a thing when they were in Redcliffe—if all else failed…Ellie would look splendid in a sunset-schemed fur coat. He might arrange for it otherwise that ‘One-Eyed Jim’ fellow did shear his special ram to make yarn and the like, Tonio just felt it more a summery look, he’d be in contact once the season was upon them.

As it stood, while he could not overhear her conversation with whoever it was she’d gone to meet, it seemed their meeting had gone well. She was all smiles and offered a thumbs-up to Lady Montilyet when she joined them at their table in the cafe.

“Countess Dionne is really nice and I got um,” she tapped a finger to her temple, “Cole’d. Um…on a scale of one to a thousand, how terrible is it if I ask Inquisition soldiers to do something I might not actually do myself…because like…if I had to, I would do it…I think? I just really really really would not want to at all, in the slightest.”

“What did Judge Auld request of you?” Lady Montilyet asked, concerned. “If he was inappropriate—“

“Oh gosh nothing groady…at least not that kind of groady, I’d never ask someone to take one for the team for that! Unless the Iron Bull was into it or something. No, he wants people to go with him hunting for—” oh the girl looked like she might be ill, she buried her face against Cremisius’s shoulder, “for…”

“It’s spiders, isn’t it?” Cremisius assumed.

“Uh-huh,” she said a bit miserably, the young man chuckled as he wrapped an arm around her, pressing a kiss to the top of her head.

“Scale of one to a thousand? Solid one. Not everyone’s as er…cautious—“

“Terrified!”

“Of spiders as you are,” he assured, “it’s okay lovely—they’ll be fine, he wants some soldiers or something for a hunting party? Cullen knows his men, he wouldn’t send anyone incapable of squaring off with some spiders.”

“But it’s spiders—they’re supposed to be as big as horses Cremisius! I didn’t need to know there are spiders that big!”

“Oh, pica amore—do not fret,” Tonio offered, “Spiders that size sounds improbable, I guarantee it is mere bragging. When he returns from his hunting, successful or not, they will be said to have been the size of dragons.”

“You promise?” she asked, offering up her unmarked pinkie finger from across the table.
He was certain enough…and too, there was little chance of the girl discovering otherwise if he was wholly inaccurate and there were truly such monstrous spiders. And it felt like a precious bit of fun to intertwine their pinkie fingers “I promise.”

“Kay! I’ll write papi when we get back—or I can run up now if—”

“No mija, please, put it out of your mind for now,” Lady Montilyet insisted, “eat, enjoy yourself. We’ll work on it together—I’ll write Judge Auld to inform him of our agreement while you write Cullen.”

“That’ll be fun!”

“I suppose it might be,” the woman agreed, smiling warmly. “We’ll do so when we freshen up before we’re due at the museum?”

“Oh yay! That sounds great!” Ellie enthused. “Um…so like I get we go and look at stuff but that’s what people also do at theatres and hi—I’m uncultured, gorgeous swine—I don’t really know what museums are? Do I clap? More importantly—can I clap? Are there snacks? Is there fire involved?”

Oh…oh good heavens. Had the child truly never gone to something of the sort? Would this trip hold her first ever visit to a theatre as well? Oh, that was a bit exciting in a way—he’d loved introducing Cremisius to theatre in his youth, at least in the ways he could afford to. There were plays held during holy days in Chantry, and free puppeteering at a local library, the occasional performance at the amphitheater, they usually caught by slipping in after the ticket collectors were off counting their bounty, and finding seats in the back row just after curtain’s raised.

“Museums are usually…you can speak freely,” Josephine started, “unlike in the theatre, though there is a bit of assumed volume control, it is polite to not disturb others enjoying the museum so…I suppose clapping would be permitted if you’re quiet about it but it is not wholly traditional. There’s no performances—it is a place that displays art and historical relics for us to see and learn about.”

“Like walking through a book?!” she asked excitedly, oh, that was an entirely precious observation, Cremisius nodded as if to say he supposed that was true, burying his amused smile at her exuberance against the girl’s hair.

“…that…is accurate,” Josephine supposed with surprise.

“That’s so cool!”

“There likely won’t be any fire and it’s best to keep foodstuffs out of museums—it wouldn’t do to risk anything getting on the art.”

“…do I need to unpack my snack pockets before we go?”

“So long as you do not leave a trail of crumbs mija, your snacks can stay in your dress pockets.” And then, after a moment’s consideration, “…there are pockets in your cloak aren’t there?”

“Uh-huh.”

“They are likewise for snacking?” she surmised.

“Tia, if there’s a pocket I can put my hand in, it’s got a snack in it,” Ellie said. "Cremisius
keeps crunchy pretzel bites in his pockets for me!"

“Didn’t even have to tell her I started doing it—day one she just went right for the pretzels,” Cremisius snorted, half-complaining, “not so much as a ‘hello’, just comes up from behind me, a hand fishing in my pocket—I thought someone was making a pass at me.”

The boy’s eyes nearly fell out of his head when his girlfriend cheerfully informed him, “I was! The pretzels were just a nice surprise.”

“Mija,” Lady Montilyet smiled even as she gently reprimanded the girl, “we really should make time for a few more etiquette lessons before the Winter Palace—you must at least exchange pleasantries and ask nicely before reaching into someone’s pockets.” That…was quite possibly the closest Tonio supposed the Lady could dare bring herself to something akin to a dirty jest, it was beyond mild but still caused the woman to blush brilliantly, a mischievous smile on her lips as she ducked her head a albeit shyly. Oh, and it was…there was something heartwarming, to see her giggly after such a trying time she’d been going through, whenever Tonio outright chuckled at her teasing.

Their group did return to the Marchand’s for a few minutes while Ellie and Josephine saw to their letter writing, affording time to change and wash up—Cremisius joined Tonio in his quarters as the young man had been going about in his armor that morning, apparently on the job as he escorted his girlfriend around, and now he’d the afternoon to…escort his girlfriend around.

“Oh, I weep for you—your job must be unbearable,” Tonio teased as he finished cleaning his face in the washbasin, smiling to his son’s reflection in the mirror while the boy finished buttoning up his tunic.

“Yeah, it’s an awful gig I’ve got going here,” he lamented. He smiled saying, “It’s kind of the best. I mean I get there’s lots of people who aren’t down with working with their significant other but when your girlfriend’s job is being a walking target for the single most powerful Chantry body currently presiding over Ferelden if not the entire South and she's got an ancient Darkspawn maniac out to get her? I feel a lot better having her back.”

“That’s certainly understandable.”

“…what about uh, you, papa?” his boy wondered gently. “You…got anyone you might be interested in?”

…oh. He wasn’t certain- he didn’t wish to say something that might be overheard by Leliana’s…Josephine warned the woman was crafty and could have ears anywhere. Neither did he wish to upset his son with feigning a relationship of that nature. But they had said they were ‘keeping a professional appearance’ before others—it would be perfectly reasonable for him to include his son in that equation given it was mere ‘budding’ romance. So, he deflected a bit, “Why do you ask?”

“No reason,” Cremisius assured. “Just…you know, if or when you’re ready for something like that, I’ll be happy for you. S’none of my business, as long as you’re happy.”

“Well, there’s nothing to speak of just now. If or when,” Tonio returned his words to him, “it would be entirely your business. Cremisius. I could never love someone you didn’t approve. If ever I did invite someone into our lives…it is our lives.” He would not stand for a repeat of Liviana—he’d hardly consider giving into interest unless he was absolutely certain the woman’s stance on such things. Cremisius had never disclosed to Lady Montilyet and while she was nothing but kind, outright caring for the boy, Tonio wouldn’t dream of daring for something more until he knew for
certain the woman would accept his child in full. He, and his son deserved nothing less.

Oh- but- that was ridiculous to think of, they were not truly in romance. It was false, a mere favor for his friend while she handled…something she’d yet to disclose. Goodness, this deception business was certainly not in Tonio’s wheelhouse. Maker, he’d taken it a bit too seriously just then.

“It isn’t false!” Cole’s voice complained as the boy materialized.

“I uh…trust my papa to be honest with me, no worries,” Cremisius said in reply.

Oh, it was wonderful to see him—the Spirit had been keeping scarce this trip and Tonio had been concerned, worried for the boy when he was er…incorporeal? “Oh, I am fine!” Cole announced. “I am happy and safe. I really do not need to eat. Thank you for worrying about me—I have been watching and keeping Josephine safe! Leliana asked me to. But she has asked me to do something else now, it is important, a ‘test run’ for something she might have me do later. I am supposed to practice being secretive—it is hard. Am I doing a good job? I need to do a good job.”

Oh goodness, for Leliana, certainly, the Spymaster required secrecy for most of her occupation it seemed. “…I’ve no idea what this important ‘something else’ is so yes, Cole, you’re doing wonderfully,” Tonio encouraged. “You will be safe while doing this secret thing?”

“Yes! I will try. I am supposed to practice not getting caught. I cannot be hurt if I am not caught, I think,” he said, giving the matter serious thought before nodding, “Yes, I should be safe.”

“You’re heading out now?” Cremisius wondered, and when the other boy nodded, his son placed a hand on his shoulder, giving a few comforting squeezes, “Be careful—things go south you poof to safety. This is just a test, it’s not worth getting hurt over, if you run into trouble, port out and call in the reinforcements,” he intoned. “Thanks for handling this—don’t beat yourself up if you can’t, the uh…situation’s being handled pretty smoothly so far, seems like, so we might not even need the ‘non-test’ run.”

“I will be careful with myself,” the boy promised serenely before vanishing from sight.

“Is it very dangerous, his er, mission?” Tonio questioned tentatively.

“Most I can say is Cole’s seeing if he can sneak into enemy territory*, take or leave something, and get out without alerting anyone to his presence. If he can do that, there’s something Leliana wants to get out without detection, if she sent her own people in it would…almost definitely end in enemy casualties and that’s a no-go this time.” Tonio supposed he looked the surprise he felt, but it was…strange to hear the Inquisition’s Spymaster’s name, and her intentionally seeking for their enemies to survive her plans for them. “It’s something she wants to do for Josephine—a backup plan for one of her Ambassador-ing things, if her more polite options fall through, and they have to do thing’s Leliana’s way, she wants to see if she can do it in a way Josie will approve.”

Ahh. “I will pray for his safety and the success of Lady Montilyet and Leliana’s endeavors.” That must be what she is so very stressed over—worried her er, more polite options will fail and Leliana may have to get involved in some potentially violent way. He could certainly see the sweet, compassionate Lady not wishing death even upon their enemies.

All told…Tonio was albeit ashamed to admit he wished death upon those enemies she wished to spare.

Their arrival at the museum got off to a bit of a rocky start. The Iron Bull was on patrol with
Dorian—neither of them finding an interest in enjoying the place themselves, so...there was no Qunari for the guards to be concerned with, but upon their arrival, there was a bit of protocol in place. The Museum had certain standards for just who could enter its halls, only people of status and their guests were permitted. Cremisius was of course, Ellie's guest, Lady Trevelyan, Inquisitor. And Tonio would be considered a guest of Lady Montilyet. Marehis, however, when she made to enter, a member of security staff stopped her...rather rudely—Ellie and Cremisius were ahead of them by some distance as they'd entered first, but now that distance was growing too grate for Marehis's comfort and when she made to follow them, the security guard placed his hand upon her forearm to halt her.

"Excuse me-“ Marehis started in tones of quiet outrage.

"I apologize Ambassador Montilyet, but is this Dalish with you?"

"The woman you're so rudely manhandling is Marehis,” Lady Montilyet firmly offered back. "And you will unhand her this instant."

"Ahh. I mean no disrespect, but as a safety precaution we take into account all of our guests, make certain they are here to enjoy our exhibits and not er...well, there's a great many valuable items in here you understand. Mare-iss?” he pronounced the syllables of woman's name slowly as if making certain he was getting it right and while the woman herself nodded, he released hold of her arm and continued addressing Josephine, “Is she...servant staff? We do not normally allow more than a single guest to our esteemed visitors.” Tonio was certain they'd had no issue with the Lord that entered before them, a woman on each arm, neither of them seeming to be his wife.

"Oh do desist with this,” Vivienne snapped, stepping forward and taking Marehis's arm in her own, “Marehis is my guest.”

"Madam de Fer!” the man...cried out in fright, that suited. “You are...friends?"

"Lovers," the Grand Enchanter corrected. Oh goodness. Tonio nearly began to laugh, he had to restrain himself for fear of er, bringing question to her claim. Lady Montilyet took in a breath, catching her own mirth in her chest as she hugged Tonio's arm more tightly hiding her smile against his shoulder, her own shoulders shaking with unspilled giggles.

"I- I'd no idea to whom I was speaking,” the guardsman insisted, looking to Marehis “I apologize madam, please er, enjoy your visit.”

"However could I not, on the arm of my lady?” Marehis wondered, grinning before she doled out a kiss to Madam de Fer’s cheek.

"I recall the last time I was here their powder rooms locked?” Madam de Fer pondered, as she led Marehis forward, entering the Museum, “We’ll simply have to see if that is still so.”

Lady Montilyet nodded politely to the guardsman as they passed, following after the others, murmuring quietly to Tonio, “I’m not certain if this day will end with my sending the museum a note of apology or a missive railing against their racist practices.”

“Could you not do both?” Tonio wondered, and as they caught up with the women, “Marehis, are you alright?”

“It’s...not fine,” Marehis supposed, “but thank you, sweet man. I’m fine—and while it’s trying...well...” she was smiling as she nodded her head in the direction ahead, ahh. Yes, he supposed he understood it being well worth it, to give their children such a pleasant time. Ellie and
Cremisius were the picture of youthful enthusiasm…Maker his son looked just-joyous, soaking in every ounce of this as he found more interest in seeing Ellie so carefree, absorbing the sights around her in wide-eyed delight, mouth moving a mile a minute as she spouted off...probably questions, Tonio hadn’t the hearing to be certain, but Marehis seemed amused as she asked him, “Is the Lieutenant very knowledgeable in higher art?”

“Oh, he’d a great deal of interest in his youth. He lacked a formal education on the subject but he was always looking at illustrations for inspiration, trying to copy different styles while he worked on his own. I recognize some of these names,” he realized as they neared the wall displaying a large oil painting of a field of wildflowers, “artists he followed or learned of after their time.”

“He’s so very talented,” Lady Montilyet breathed, “I wouldn’t wish to burden him—I’d not expect something overnight, it would be in his own time, but if he’d interest, oh, I would love to have his work in my office, if not around Skyhold—he’d certainly be compensated for his talents.”

“Cremisius enjoys illustration in his down time, I’m certain if you asked him he’d gladly hear your request,” Tonio assured. They’d yet to go searching for art supplies but...well, he’d a bit saved up—he hoped he could indulge his child in something he might enjoy using, and too he was watching rather closely as they went out and about, trying to decipher if there was anything catching Cremisius’s eye, something Tonio could use as a birthday present. Justinian followed Bloomingtide and oh, he was excited beyond words to be able to be with his son—prayed daily that this year the Maker would bless them and there would be no mission calling the boy out into the field so he could celebrate the day proper. He’d broached the subject with the Iron Bull—asking if there was anything in particular they did on Cremisius’s birthday. They usually marked the occasion with a drink and a good meal and…er...well, the Qunari had chuckled albeit awkwardly, unsure if it would displease Tonio but “Kid uh...he was sixteen turning seventeen and uh...shy but interested, it was something he needed to get out of his system, a uh, fear to face. Being with someone without fear of rejection. Guy hadn’t played the field any so I set him up. Nice girl—tavern waitress, pretty, sweet, cool with everything.”

“Oh. Cremisius has had a girlfriend before?”

The Qunari snorted, “Noooo, it wasn’t even a date, just...uh, mutually consenting adults getting together and uh, blowing off some steam.”

“You arranged for Cremisius to argue with a young lady on his birthday?”

He had not—he had, however, arranged for them to...engage in the vulgar word for lovemaking, assuring Tonio that his son had been ready at the time, it was not something he would have set up otherwise, it had apparently been something he’d needed. The Qunari seemed reticent to inform him of as much, but Tonio was hardly offended. Once upon a time, Cremisius’s purity had been something of a requirement but that was more a precaution, Tonio making it clear to Cornelius that he would not be laying so much as a finger on Tonio’s child during their engagement. But it was none of his concern now—so long as his son was behaving as a gentleman, not taking advantage or being taken advantage of. It was strange, the subject had come up more than once recently—with the Iron Bull while they were still in Skyhold, and then on their journey...Leliana. In alarming fashion. She’d not said anything in front of Lady Montilyet, no, she saved the conversation for...well. She caught Tonio alone. When he’d woken in the night...and had need of a chamber pot. Or, well, a bit of shrubbery or tree...thankfully the Spymaster had let him finish buttoning his sleep trousers before she announced her presence, startled the daylights out of him—had she just stood by watching and waiting?—before she asked him his opinion on sex. Or...er, lack thereof, he supposed. “What if you were with someone who was utterly in
romance with you but...was chaste. Did not wish to consummate your relationship until you were wed?"

"I would never wish to lie with someone before they wished to—if they want the security of marriage before the vulnerability of the marriage bed? I’d certainly have no complaints. I’ve never laid with someone outside the bounds of matrimony."

"Good. I suppose I’ll see you alive and well come morning then." He...was pretty sure she smiled at him.

Falsely dating the Lady Montilyet seemed rather a perilous role. Something told him if the woman were truly in courtship, did wish to be wed Leliana would be putting her loved one under such scrutiny she may well arrange their death the eve of their wedding. Which...well, he supposed was her due, she would not do so without good reason, to spare her friend, and the danger was well worth it, if someone worthy enough came along, they would be glad to endure it. He was—not to say he was worthy, hardly, just...Josephine was a woman well worth such efforts.

"Oh!" Lady Montilyet said as they toured the museum, already thinking ahead it seemed, she wished to inform him, "There is a show, tomorrow evening, that I have reserved us tickets for to be picked up upon our arrival to the theatre—I was concerned Eleanor and Cremisius might not enjoy outright Orlesian opera, it is not for everyone and there are a select few that bore even myself to tears. I do hope you are a fan of satirical comedy? I thought it best not to take them to something terribly dramatic or dark but neither did I wish to er...go with something too childish that might make them feel patronized. This play in particular has smart comedic enjoyment with a bit of edge given it has technically been banned for the last decade and only recently has its production been reapproved."

"A formerly banned work of art? How scandalous," Tonio chuckled, "I’m certain your selection is sound, we’ll have a marvelous time. How much are our tickets?"

"Two silver each—it is best enjoyed in a private box and too, more secure. I will be couriering our payment along later this afternoon so those two do not get any ideas about paying for the whole of our group, let alone themselves."

"Oh certainly, perish the thought," Tonio said, "the five of us? Or is Marehis bringing her esteemed lover?" oh, his teasing earned him a bit of distant giggling from the Elf woman who overheard him, throwing him a smile over her shoulder he returned with a nod.

"It will just be the four of us who require tickets—Marehis would prefer a bit of acting herself—she’ll be working security for Eleanor as a theatre attendant," Lady Montilyet shared quietly. Ahh. Well, that would be a bit less tight then—eight silver wasn’t as dear as ten after all. Josephine had done so much for them in her careful planning, he wished to repay her. Too, it would be something of a ‘date’, would it not? In fact,

"Have you plans for dinner tomorrow evening?"

"Cremisius has already asked Eleanor on a bit of a date and we will meet them at the theatre. I’m certain we’ll have dinner—either in the Marchands or out before our theatre excursion."

"I was thinking ‘out’," Tonio offered, "if you would join me—it would be my treat, as thanks for this wonderful trip you’ve done so much to plan."

The woman blanched at that, looked almost shamed-faced as she turned her attention to the flooring ahead of them, while the ornate rug underfoot was a marvel, it didn’t seem to be why she
suddenly couldn’t look him in the eye as she spoke with soft sobriety, “It…I assure you, this has all been poor repayment for the help you and Eleanor and Cremisius have been to me.”

He brought them to a halt as they rounded the corner, facing the woman as he loosed his arm to take her hands in his own, thumbs rubbing gently against the backs of her hands as a light prompt for her to look at him and when she did, “Cara mia, you truly mustn’t be so very hard on yourself.”

“I have caused nothing but trouble for you with Leliana…the last person you wish for trouble with. And this- I’ve personal problems I have gotten Eleanor involved with and it- it has taken a turn I didn’t foresee and I’m- it could bring about repercussions.”

“They’ve taken a turn…you didn’t foresee? Meaning things happened, outside of your control, that you had no knowing influence upon?”

“Well yes,” she said, albeit confused.

“Tesora,” he breathed, “Then it is none of it your fault,” he insisted, “you cannot blame yourself for the actions of others. I do so hate you’re struggling with something so hard, I only wish I could help you. But this has been a wonderful trip for the others involved, myself included. For that, of course I am grateful. Ellie hardly seems to begrudge whatever has happened—you must be more forgiving with yourself.”

“You are being far too kind to me.”

“Well, someone has to be, if you insist upon doing otherwise, my Lady,” he said, there was a scout…someone he recognized at least, from Leliana’s people currently attired in the uniform the museum required of their attendants. The young woman was blending in well but clearly watching after them or…was she spying? Josephine had warned of as much. Lady Montilyet seemed upset, and he did not wish risking the Spymaster hearing as much and thinking he’d been unkind. Neither did he care for how very worried she still seemed so, he offered the Antivan woman a gentle smile and pressed a kiss to her forehead, the crease in her brow diminishing immediately, the woman was blushing a bit as he pulled away. He hoped he hadn’t made her uncomfortable—they were excellent friends, and it was not an action he wouldn’t do with his own son or Ellie, he’d kissed Cole on the forehead whenever he saw the Spirit before bed…he assumed the Spirit did something like sleep? To wish him sweet dreams. He certainly wished Lady Montilyet sweeter thoughts.

The woman cleared her throat, smiling as she looked up at him, “So…you wish to dine with me tomorrow evening, Mister Aclassi?”

“I do, I insist cara mia.”

She gave it a moment of consideration, blushing as she nodded, “I would be delighted.”

“Excellent.”

“What is…tesora, if I might ask?” the woman wondered as they walked to catch up with their group.

Huh? Ahh, “It is…a bit of a colloquialism the Tevene equivalent of ‘sweetheart’, it translates directly as ‘treasure’.”

“And cara mia is ‘my dear’?” He nodded. "What is it you call Eleanor? Pica—in Antivan that means ‘little’.”
“Tevene and Antivan do have similarities I suppose—picca amore means ‘little love’, ‘a’ denotes the feminine. Bella is beautiful while bello is ‘handsome’.”

“Ahh! That is—there is yet another similarity, ‘o’ and ‘a’ denoting gender. Mija or mijo is the informal way of saying ‘mi hija, mi hijo’ it means daughter or son in the masculine but can be used to refer to any young person you’re close to. Cremisius, you call him ‘bello’…mimo? Dorian said that means mime? The boy does have quite the sense of humor.”

Oh. “I suppose it is a bit of a homograph—mimo in the context of speaking of a child not in the miming profession, is slang, a shortening of ‘bambino’ which…well, I suppose he’s a bit old for me to be calling him such, but it means ‘baby’. It cannot be helped I suppose,” he smiled as he spoke a bit more loudly, to be heard by the young man as he and his girlfriend were currently just across the hall now, at the opposite wall, “he’ll always be my bello mimo!”

“Oh! Keep it down,” Cremisius reprimanded.

“Yeah, you’ll wake the art!” Ellie insisted, leaning toward them in Cremisius’s hold, the boy chuckling as he stepped with her to stand behind her, keeping his arm around her waist as the girl stage whispered, “And that piece I’m pretty sure is about corruption in the Chantry is already woke!”

“…did she mean awake?” Lady Josephine asked him quietly.

“…no…I don’t think she did. I believe it is something to do with being awake to the reality social and political injustice?”

“Ahh,” Josephine said, nodding. “…are we woke?”

“I would like to think so?”

Ellie was particularly excited about their trip, but she was ecstatic to get back—she was expecting a letter from Sera and she wanted to write her mami and papi about their time while it was fresh in her mind and Vivienne had apparently promised the young lady she would teach her Crema Catalana before Eleanor could be ‘corrupted by the Orlesian bastardization*’ and the girl was thrilled that the Enchanter wished to cook with her, prepare dessert together for all of them to share.

“We’ll need to be mindful ladies,” Madam de Fer cautioned, “We’d hardly any workout in the way of fights at all on the journey here, all this leisure and eating, if we are not careful we will put on…vacation weight,” she said, as if it were a ghastly thing, juxtaposed by Ellie’s reaction to the prospect,

“Vacation makes you gain weight?!” Ellie asked, sounding excited. He supposed as much was true—lounging around, eating all the locale had to offer.

Cremisius grinned, pulling the girl into his side, “Uh-huh, nothing to be ‘mindful’ about in my book,” he said, hand slipping lower on her back and Tonio couldn’t quite see out of his peripheral vision but the girl squeaked before giggling, murmuring a very soft, teasing reprimand of “Papito!” as her arm around his back squeezing a bit tighter as she snuggled into his hold.

“This is a body positive inquisition!” Ellie declared it. “Only size that matters is the size of your heart!”

“Hear hear,” Tonio seconded her decree.
“Shall I write up an official mandate, mija?” Josephine wondered laughingly.

“Yes p-lease!”

Maker, it was such a wonderful day, Tonio was admittedly prepared for a nap before dinner, they’d been on the move all day...he wasn’t certain just how they all handled constant fighting and travel and adventure when a day of mere shopping and a museum was perfectly exhausting all on its own. But, Tonio Aclassi had one mission more. Of the most covert sort.

Lady Montilyet had arranged for a courier to take get their payment for the tickets she reserved for them—she’d been so reticent to accept his offer of dinner, he wasn’t certain she’d allow him to pay for the theatre as well, so, subterfuge. He would intercept.

It did not start off quite as he’d planned. First, there was a scout that approached...rather tentatively, even as Tonio offered the young lady an encouraging smile, he wasn’t about to bark orders at her or anything of the sort. She was Leliana’s—the woman who was watching he and Josephine while they were at the museum. She was just in time to answer the door when a knock sounded, and she invited in a gentleman dressed in appropriate attire for a footservant, mask over his eyes and nose as expected of most Orlesians, she startled when Tonio addressed him, but when Tonio made to offer his coin and told him he could be on his way to the theatre.

“Ahh, I apologize monsieur, but I require Lady Montilyet’s signature, she’s to give me payment herself. Security protocol, you understand.”

“Sir,” the Scout said before taking her leave and heading along the corridor toward the space Leliana had claimed as a ‘control center’ during their stay in Val Royeaux.

The man had just turned the corner down the hall when there was another knock on the door Tonio answered to a young man, eyes masked, a white linen satchel hanging across his torso that appeared to be heavy, the boy seemed to need to catch his breath.

“Can I help you ser?” Tonio asked.

“Are you with the Inquisition?”

“Tonio Aclassi, how may I assist?”

Relief washed over his face as he smiled pleasantly, “Oh excellent—you wouldn’t believe how turned around I got getting here. Thank the Maker, your name’s on my list! One of the ticket reservations is yours right?...oh wait no, Cremisius...oh! Tonio as well,” he realized as he read over his clipboard before looking to Tonio and introducing himself, or well, his business, “Val Royeaux Messaging, here to collect from Lady Montilyet to the Odeon Theatre?”

“Oh,” he held out the clipboard for Tonio to look at oh- extending a quill for him to sign, “Someone else just arrived from your company—they needed a signature from Lady Montilyet?” he wondered as he signed and handed over the coins he’d been holding in his hand for this…transaction...

“We deliver a great many things monsieur,” he supposed with a shrug. “I only know my own route.”

Was Lady Montilyet expecting something else today? Tonio had asked if he was a courier, the man that came before...

“Have a blessed day!” the courier wished him.
“You as well.”

…something…something did not feel right.

He was already heading for the room Lady Montilyet had claimed as an office, when- oh Maker- a quite literally blood curdling scream pierced the air and Tonio had not gone running so fast in his life.

…he wasn’t certain just what he expected to do, he’d- he’d hardly any experience in fighting, it made him wish- he always wished he’d done more to stand up to his own father, perhaps he’d know more about throwing punches than taking them.

But he was not the only Aclassi in the building—in the room, even, when Tonio threw open the door. Just seconds before he reached the office he heard Josephine scream out in utter fright and panic,

“Cremisius!”

He’d thought it a call for his son. And it was. In a way.

The man he’d stood idle by as he waltz right into their quarters, was…rather dead it seemed, unmoving, lying on the ground, his neck at quite an unnatural angle—it was a wholly horrific sight.

But what was more horrifying for Lady Montilyet was the slash across Cremisus’s arm and chest and- oh Maker he was only in his tunic, not his armor oh-

It seemed they’d had the same concern—Josephine was at Cremisius's side, a hand on his uninjured arm and the other on his chest, trying to lay eyes on what devastating injury might lay there.

“Cremisius you-” her breath caught in her throat and she blinked a few times as if amazed, her hand reaching out to touch the leather she found beneath his tunic. “You…”

“Uhh…it’s leather, yeah. Pretty thick. Keeps my chest in check and uh, protected.”

Josephine looked into his son’s face, her eyes glistening with tears before she threw her arms around his neck and hugged him fiercely, hand cradling the back of his head to pull him to her as she cried out “Oh thank the Maker most High you are exactly as he made you!” her shoulders shuddered as she shook, “If you- if you'd been wholly unprotected- oh Cremisius I thought he hurt you, you blessed boy!” she declared him, pressing a kiss to his cheek before she pulled away, “Are you injured at all, mijo?”

“Barely a scratch,” he insisted.

“Your arm! Oh, carino,” she cooed out before crying for, “Oh- Cole! Eleanor!”

“Cole isn’t in—bello, I believe Ellie is in the kitchen,” Tonio spoke, “Stitches is around, I can walk you—“

“Tonio!” Josephine startled, only just realizing the elder Aclassi was there, “You- whatever are you doing here?”

“Something seemed amiss and then I heard you scream, of course I came.”
Which only seemed to upset her further, “You— you could have been injured! Or killed! You or Cremisius or— or anyone!” her expression crumbled before she pressed her hands to her face, chin quivering as she wept, “oh Maker this is such a mess!”

Oh, oh this had to be terrifying and upsetting. He wasn’t certain— the man had clearly meant Lady Montilyet true harm or Cremisius would not have taken such drastic measures— had he done the man in with his bare hands? He’d no sword at his hip— whoever would wish to do this woman harm?!

“Shhh, cara mia,” he sought to soothe, pulling her in for a hug— oh, she was so distraught, crying into his shoulder as she tried to regain her composure.

“Uhh…someone should stay here with Lady Montilyet, I’m good,” Cremisius assured, patting the woman on the back as he passed, “everything’s going to be alright,” he promised before leaving them. They were not alone for long— Tonio could hear the thunder of the Iron Bull running through the halls of the estate, he’d clearly come when he heard the disruption and he was swift but oh Maker, it was blessing Cremisius had been close at hand.

“Shit, is she hurt?” the Iron Bull shot out as soon as he bound into the room, gaze assessing as he took in the scene, wholly concerned as his eye fell on the Ambassador.

“Are you injured at all?” Tonio wondered quietly, her head shook ‘no’ against his shoulder as she sniffled. “She is unharmed.”

“Josephine!” the Spymaster’s voice was somehow fierce and frightened as she stormed the room. “Oh…Maker. Josie you could have been killed. We’ve tried things your way— please let me handle this!”

Josephine looked…incredibly conflicted, pale and wan from stress, “I— Cr—Cremisius could have been killed—I do not want any to die for my sake b—but I— oh I would certainly preserve his life over— oh I never meant for this!”

“Leliana stop it, right now!” Ellie’s voice… well, goodness, she was taking quite the tone with the Spymaster, it almost made him fear for her life, but the woman fell silent and tore her stare from Josephine to look to the…Inquisitor, he supposed, the girl was speaking in her power. “you’re not allowed to come storming in and make demands while she’s down! Give her a little time to process and breathe before she goes making decisions on whether or not to compromise on her convictions. If there’s another way we’re not sure yet, until Cole gets back. We’ve made amazing progress with Josephine’s way— this was serious, I know you’re scared, they got someone through, but it’s been handled— everyone is safe. We’ll lock down the house for the rest of the night— no one in or out— and regroup in the morning. Hopefully we’ll have more to go on and we’ll give Josephine the help she needs to decide on how to move forward. Have I made myself clear?”

“Yes, Eleanor,” Leliana said, addressing Josephine more subdued, “I am sorry, Josie.”

“Good,” the girl popped up on her toes to press a kiss to the Spymaster’s cheek as she passed her by, before drawing near and resting her hand on Josephine’s shoulder, but addressing Tonio, “Cremisius told me his side of things and said you just showed up right at the end of it—that you felt something was amiss?”

Oh! “Yes I was there when he entered the house—I was by the front entrance when one of Leliana’s scouts…” he… was reticent to speak against one of the Spymaster’s people, he certainly didn’t want to throw false accusations about but, “One of your people—a woman that was shadowing us at the museum— opened the door for him and told him where Josephine’s office
“…Marehis?” Leliana questioned, confused.

“No! Good heavens no—the other woman, a Human? Short, middle-aged. She’d a scar just here,” he gestured to his own cheek.

“She she was here just before Cremisius showed up.” Josephine spoke up, “she said she was switching off with the man you had standing guard outside my office, Leliana.”

Ellie shook her head, “Guapo said he was making rounds to check on you and he only dropped in—came into your office to chat with you a while because he noticed no one was standing guard, he thought maybe there was a gap between people or something.”

“She was just with you, wasn’t she?” Tonio asked the Spymaster, “this scout woman we saw? I thought she was headed to speak with you after letting someone into the house.”

“No,” Leliana said, stone-faced as her fists clenched at her sides, “But I know precisely of who you speak and she will be dealt with.”

Ellie nodded. “Papa, please walk Josie to her room and let her have a minute, okay? We’ll get this all cleaned up—it’s going to be okay Tia.”

Josephine did not look up, Tonio was almost worried she hadn’t heard, but when he rubbed circles on her back to gently get her attention and the woman nodded, replying, “Thank you, mija. Cremisius is alright?”

“Devastated—that was his favorite tunic, but I’m sure Papa can work his magic on it,” Ellie teased, “He’s already healing up and he’s living the dream right now. My dream—him, cooking shirtless. I mean Dorian’s in there too, and I’m bringing him back a clean tunic so soon it’ll just be the cooking part, but I guess a girl can’t have everything.”

“…Sparky’s cooking?” the Iron Bull questioned.

“Never!” Ellie insisted, as if scandalized before assuring, “He’s supervising.”

Josephine moved with him when he made to step away and offer his arm to walk her to her quarters so he opted for wrapping an arm around her shoulders, still trembling just in the slightest, but she finally raised her face, offering up a smile that took…well, it took a great deal of effort to produce, “Thank you, everyone.”

“I’m sorry I had to get yell-y at you,” he heard Ellie saying to Leliana as he began leading Josephine from the room. “I love you, big time. You’re ma Tatie! But you’ve got a rep to protect and me saying that all the time isn’t going to help that. Our only witness comes pre-dead so,” he did not look back over his shoulder but he could hear the soft smack of the girl’s lips peppering kisses to the Spymaster’s cheek. “Je t’aime beaucoup!”

Ahh, the Orlesian woman scoffed softly. “Je t’aime. Awful child.”

He was not entirely certain just where Lady Montilyet had claimed quarters, but she’d stayed her first night in Ellie’s room as a bit of a sleepover and…Cremisius had been present in the room he was bunking in with his father last night, as opposed to keeping guard, so he assumed that meant Ellie had been otherwise occupied with company. His son was a gentleman, he’d not gone into detail but…Tonio was relatively certain the two were…wholly intimate. The morning before they left he’d been just getting ready to go into the corridor before Josephine’s office to run downstairs
and get a quick bite of breakfast before heading to his workshop and he’d seen his son. His son, who wasn’t one for heavy drink or staying out until all hours of the morning, so it took Tonio by surprise to find Cremisius in a giddy, seemingly drunken daze, rosy cheeked as he staggered…or perhaps it was swaggered his way through Skyhold’s Great Hall, barefoot, trousers rumpled and his wrinkled tunic entirely unbuttoned, heading in the wrong direction—Tonio had seen him leave the Inquisitor’s quarters, and head for the forge, stop, swing around on the ball of his foot, not even noticing his father standing just before the door he was likewise intending to use until he bumped into Tonio—looked to him with a…he would term it ‘goofy’ grin on his face.

“Papa! Hey, how’s it goin’? Isn’t it a great day? Maker it’s a great day. You hungry? Lovely’s up, I’m getting us breakfast.” His breath hadn’t smelled of booze so. Love-drunk, he supposed.

A pity that in a city as renowned for romance as Val Royeaux, the young couple hadn’t been afforded opportunity to at the very least lie in the same bed, all of their dating activities involving their elders. But…well, apparently there was good reason Ellie was sharing her room with the Ambassador, staying so close with so many supervisors at hand.

Lady Montilyet was apparently, the focus of a league of assassins. Outside the realm of her dearest friend.

There was a small seating area immediately upon turning right as you entered the rather elaborate bedroom—cushioned chairs, a loveseat, surrounding a low table. He led Josephine to sit in a chair though he’d not wanted to be out of reach of the woman while she was so upset so he found purchase on the low table before her, holding her hands in his once they were seated.

“My Lady? What happened?”

“Cremisius came in to ask if I needed anything. He’d only just agreed I could commission pieces from him when that man came in, saying he was a courier, he-” a squeak escaped her throat and he released hold of her hand to offer her- oh. His pocket square was gone, but that was because it was already in the possession of the Lady from this morning, she withdrew it from her dress pocket, crumpling it in hand as she wiped at her eyes, “When I invited him to my desk so I could sign, he came around the desk and Cremisius just…oh I do not know if he saw something amiss but it must have just struck him oddly, he’d risen from his seat and was already moving- in the same instant I realized there was a knife at my ribs, Cremisius’s hands were on him, pulling him back over the desk. He struggled for the knife and when Cremisius lost hold of the man’s arms he was injured, n-nearly worse. But thankfully he-” she took a deep breath, clearing her throat and saying, “was able to defend himself.”

“He is safe,” thank the Maker most High, "and I am proud of him for defending you.”

“He could have been killed. And Eleanor had only just left my office, if she had been- oh if- if anything happened to either of them-“

“Ellie is rather capable of defending herself,” he reminded her. He might like to see someone even consider to bring harm to the Ambassador. “You are telling yourself scary stories. Eleanor wasn’t in your office, and Cremisius is alive and well, and you are safe. Leliana will uncover just why that man was sent here to bring you harm and it will be handled.”

He’d been endeavoring to console the woman not- not send her bursting into tears anew, hiding her face in her hands. Oh, Maker-

Truth poured from her lips then. Every facet of her private personal peril. The Montilyets
financial issues, the apparent grudge with the Du Parraquettts that outlived their ancestors and was now afflicting Josephine Montilyet as she endeavored to save her family from financial ruin.

“I…I understand wishing to spare your family in this way, but Josephine—“

Her chin quivered and she ducked her head in repent, rushing to cut him off as she expected, “I understand it must sound materialistic and selfish to you- I’m so ashamed—“

“My lady you’ve nothing to be ashamed of. I was not about to speak in reprimand, but offer what I can of advice.”

She offered what she could of an appreciative smile, sniffling before she said, “I…would gladly hear it.”

“I do not mean this to patronize you but perhaps consider sharing this burden with your parents? You are to be head of your house, but you are not so, yet—if they knew the risk you were putting yourself to, Josephine I can assure you, from my own personal experience, different as our circumstances are…they would not want you to do this to yourself. I can promise you. Cremisius was once the bearer of the burden of our financial futures, and that situation nearly led me to burying my child. My wife and myself we were not quite so quick to accept our son as…well, the swiftness of your acceptance is second only to perhaps Ellie’s immediacy.”

“…his mother she- does she- is that why she does not accept Cremisius?” Josephine rasped out, horrified at the notion. When Tonio nodded she looked nothing short of outraged, “He’s- he is one of the single most incredible people I have ever met and his mother- I can only pray to someday have a child as wonderful as he. I would claim them before the world, there is nothing to find shame in! If he was anything else—a boy by the definition that suits the likes of Liviana he may well be dead—his shirt was torn for the man trying to stab him! I will pay to repair or replace his tunic, it would be such a shame, its so very handsome on him. And too, what he wears beneath his tunics?”

“A binder.” he offered up the phrasing.

Which she nodded as if committing the term to memory. “If his binder has been damaged, please, I wish to replace it.”

“That will all be handled In due time,” Tonio offered gently, taking hold of her hands in an effort to refocus on the more pressing issue. Too, binders were quite a bit more expensive than tunics, Tonio would replace it if there was need. “Once the burden of our financial futures was on Cremisius. We arranged a marriage that would secure our family from slavery, and I have never regretted a decision so much all of my life. When I realized the threat to my son’s happiness was so great I might lose him altogether? Foolish as it was for me to let it get that far, it is why I made the sacrifices required to keep that from happening. Your parents, if they had to choose between your precious life and their current lifestyles? They would chose you, cara mia, a thousand times over.”

Josephine released a shuddering breath at that. “I-I know. But if I cannot prove I can handle such situations…my parents will not have any peace of mind in my future leadership. They have worked so hard the whole of their lives, they deserve to enjoy themselves now. I have promised to manage our affairs and- if it is not myself who fixes this for my family, who will? My own children? It is risk, but it is also necessity, if we are to keep the Montilyet name from shame.”

“My Lady—you’ve kept so much of this entirely to yourself. Tried to handle it all on your own but no one was built to bear so much of their own singular strength. You went to every effort to keep this even from your closest friend, share the pieces only after they are revealed to those
around you by force of circumstance. This is— it is entirely unhealthy. You must allow yourself to confide in someone. Even if it is just for the sake of allowing yourself the release of venting— sometimes such things lead to the solution being revealed in the moment, or your confidant seeing things about your situation you’re too close to it all to see yourself.”

“You are correct—if my parents were aware of the situation, they would interfere, forbid me to do what I am doing and that… I refuse to get them involved, they cannot know about this… possibly ever, I would not wish for them to worry for me. I confided in Eleanor first and foremost but only when it was absolutely required and she is just- she is only a child, she has so many responsibilities, I would not add my troubles to her own anymore than I already have. Leliana- she means well but she worries so and her immediate response is to handle things swiftly and violently, she does not… she does not understand my conviction to get through this without needless death.”

“And what about Tonio Alassi?” he wondered. “I certainly wasn’t having children at the age of five so there is absolutely zero possibility I am your parent—you’ve no reason in the world to listen to any advice or concerns I have, if I demanded you do something you don’t wish to do… you’ve no pressure at all to listen to it. While I’m too young to be your father, I am in my thirty-sixth year of life, so I’m no child. Neither do I have a host of assassins at my disposal, nor am I one to offer violent advice. Cole insists I am a good listener.”

“…you are,” Josephine nodded. “But I wouldn’t wish to burden you.”

“Cara mia I would hardly feel any burden knowing it is something shared with you so you might carry it more easily, please,” he implored, “let me be of help to you.”

She breathed something like a sigh of relief, nodding, but she had to confess, “I don’t even know where to begin.”

“Eleanor brought up options? Leliana wished for you to do things ‘her way’, but you’ve a way of your own you’ve been attempting to handle this situation with?”

“Yes. Um. The contract with the house of Repose can either be canceled, or destroyed, and I would be free to arrange for the Montilyets to begin trade in Orlais once more without incident,” she explained. “Leliana insists I allow her to let her people infiltrate the House of Repose and destroy the contract, but I cannot- I will not have further death from this, not on my behalf, from her ranks or theirs. I’ve been endeavoring to arrange the contract’s cancellation—the Du Parraquettes fell from power, so they’ve not the station nor reason to cancel their ancestor’s arrangement. We’ve made all the arrangements we need to sponsor their return to their former station—Eleanor spoke with a noblewoman who has agreed to sponsor them, and a judge has agreed to sign off on it, she need only speak with one person more—who will ratify the decision, and it will be final.”

Tonio smiled his relief, “Well that is splendid—I am scared for you,” that felt like understatement, but he’d little intention of allowing a thing to happen to this woman, and more capable people than he were already set to the task,” but… well, if this can be settled quickly? It sounds like you’ve nearly met your goal,” he encouraged. Too… it seemed a thing of confidence, Cole’s mission, so he wasn’t about to go into specifics, but, “And… Leliana is doing what she can to respect your ideals—you must believe that. She loves you, if she could find a way to do things without violence, she would do it, and she is trying to.”

“She is?” Josephine asked, soft realization dawning in her features, “Truly?”

“Of course—tesora who would not move mountains for you if not Leliana?”
“I have not…we’ve argued so much over this, I’ve given her poor reward for her efforts. I really should apologize, I’ve made this beyond difficult. I just…”

“What is it?” he questioned gently.

Her chin quivered as she gasped out the softest sob, “I…I just- I’ve never…discussed this with Leliana, I fear she would feel I am judging her for her station, and too I am so ashamed. If Eleanor ever knew? Oh Maker. Oh and she dislikes—has hated herself for having to defend herself, lay enemies slain, I'm not certain if it is more horrific she might think badly of me, or that she might think I would judge her for her duties as Inquisitor. My convictions do not derive from basic decency I—” she looked…albeit frightened, steeling herself before meeting his gaze, though Maker there was utter shame in her eyes, “…did I ever mention, I used to be a Bard?” she asked softly.

…there was certainly nothing to be ashamed of, it was rather a lovely profession. “ Truly?” he asked, “You’ve a lovely voice,” he supposed.

That sent the woman blushing, “Oh heavens no, I- I did not sing, I mostly entertained with playing the lute, making charming conversation—telling stories and the like.”

“You hum when you’ve no guests in your office and a great deal of paperwork, I’ve always found it pleasant. What is that…duermete pedazo…de mi corazon?” he spoke the words he’d heard her sweetly sing under her breath, he darn’t sing them, Maker! He was not one for singing. Unless his audience was young Cremisius—he’d been informed babies were always absorbing everything around them but would have precious little specific memories from infancy, so…it was a safe admirer, the man seemed no worse for wear now, for having spent his first few years of life being lulled to sleep by heinously out of tune Tevene lullabies.

“A sweet little song that gets stuck in my head courtesy of Eleanor I- I did not realize I was even sing- that is not the point,” she insisted, shaking her head as if to clear it before she pressed on, “You are sweet Tonio but you must spare me kindness until I’ve gotten to my point, I assure you it is entirely undeserved.”

“I apologize—do please continue,” he implored.

“…point of being a bard, was to spy. Many young nobles put on a mask and practice playing the Game in such a fashion. I was attending University in Val Royeaux when I learned of Bards. There was such an air of romance about them—stories of secrets, trysts, and fascinating people,” she informed him. “A group of us—young gentry from Antiva—decided that this exciting life was for us. During one particular intrigue, I encountered a Bard sent to kill my patron. We fought,” she said. ‘Or perhaps ‘scrapped’, is the better word, both of us terrified. We were at the top of a steep flight of stairs—the other Bard drew a knife and I pushed him away from me,” she looked down, like she could not bring herself to meet his steady gaze any longer and instead stared at their joint hands, her own growing lax like she thought he was about to release them as she said, “You can imagine the result.”

“Josephine,” he breathed, “my word. You were so young and you were only defending yourself—it was he too who was fighting, and he’d drawn weaponry, would have cut you, seen you thrown down the stairs just as easily and somehow…I doubt he would be sitting here this day lamenting the life he took from you.”

“But it was such a waste!” she lamented, “When I took off his mask, I knew him! We’d attended parties together! If I had stopped to reason, if I used my voice instead of scuffling like a common thug—” she took a breath to collect herself. “I’ll always wonder who that young man
would have grown into.”

“Well, people can change cara mia, but…that man—he came with the intent to kill where you sought only enjoyment and a bit of excitement. He could have killed you, and certainly your patron—took something meant for fun and escalated it to an entirely different level. What would have happened if you’d spoken up? Would he have stopped fighting you? I hardly think so, he’d violence as intent from the start. You may have convinced him not to harm you, but he would have done what he came to do and you would have born witness to it or interfered and either been killed or had to kill him regardless.”

“Maybe. We will never know,” she said. “That is why I cannot abide my family’s fortune be wrought from bloodshed. I will not participate in the taking of lives, not when it can be helped.”

“I understand,” he assured her, rubbing circles on the back of her hands with his thumbs. “Josephine—have faith. Ellie and Leliana, they are on your side, and they will help you make this right. You will be safe, and no further bloodshed will be required—I have spoken that truth into the world for the Maker to manifest, so I am certain it will be so.”

She smiled at that, huffing a bit of a laugh. “You are certain? Well, that is actually reassuring,” she breathed a weary sigh. “Oh, I- I am frightened, Tonio. That Cremisius h-had to take another’s life for me- oh Maker I am so sorry.”

“My son has never been one for cruelty—he used to clear out infestation of creatures that endeavored to take up residence in our home, in my shop by taking them into his own hand and carrying them away to safe haven. If he could have done the same with an assassin, I assure you he would have—as he could not diffuse the situation? I assure you, we are none of us upset that your life was preserved—that man came here to do harm, that was his choice, you cannot blame yourself.”

“Can I blame myself for my own actions at least?” she wondered, almost snappish. “I’m…I despise the danger I’ve put Eleanor in. I love the time we are getting to spend together but I hate that it only puts her in proximity of the danger befalling me. I’ll not be able to sleep tonight for the fear someone will come for me then and- and Eleanor might be harmed, the Inquisitor fast asleep in the same bed as myself.”

Well… “Perhaps we can serve all plots you’ve afoot this trip,” he suggested. “You’ve still some need of our gambit as um…potentially courting?”

Josephine’s mouth worked momentarily, like she meant to say something but could not. Was…oh, perhaps she feared they would be overheard? He supposed someone might be shadowing them now. He scooted a bit closer, knees softly knocking against her own as he smiled encouragement, lowering his voice further to speak in a hushed whisper, ”You could join me in the quarters I share with Cremisius—Leliana will not find such a thing suspicious, and you could inform Ellie you’ll be sleeping elsewhere and I’m er…certain the young man will join her, so we would be alone. We can have guards posted and I sleep rather lightly.”

She still seemed a bit at a loss for words but finally worked out, “That is extremely generous of you, but I’d hardly like putting you to harm.”

“I am volunteering, it is a decision I have made knowing full well the danger, and accepting it—anything that happens is my choice. I do not have fear—I’m hardly their target, nor am I something as tempting as the Inquisitor, they’ve no reason to kill me.”

“…true. But um…well, Leliana erm…she actually would find it suspicious if I joined you in
your quarters. I…” she blushed fiercely, “She knows well my conviction to remain abstinent until marriage. I would not be love making and sleeping alongside a man I was unwed to.”

Tonio grinned, expression warm as he was pleased to inform her, “Well, that is excellent then—there are two separate beds, cara mia, on walls opposite one another. Leliana’s guards will certainly see as much, so…”

“Oh!” she gasped, “that- well…yes. I suppose…I would not object to something of the sort. I might…I do not like the potential danger but it does…soothe me, make me feel safer that you would be in the same room.”

“I’ll certainly sleep better knowing you’re safe in bed…across the room from me,” he assured.

“I do think that will work splendidly*.”

She’d never had much opportunity for cooking—not in her schooling, or adult life—but in her youth? Some of Josephine Cherette Montilyet’s most cherished memories was standing on a stool alongside her abuelita—her namesake—at the kitchen counter making Conchas. Abuelita Cherette had…oh she had been such a beautiful, kind woman, a wealth of wisdom. She’d taught Josephine so much about compassion, responsibility, instilled so much excellent advice about love and business and life and…

Now, when Josephine needed it most? She could not for the life of her recall a thing her sweet abuelita had taught her. she lived a great many of Cherette’s lessons in her daily life but…oh Maker, what would she say, if she knew the troubles Josephine found herself facing now. She…well…

If there was anyone in Josephine’s family capable of calmly and collectively accepting that her mija was the subject of an assassin’s contract, it would have been Cherette—she likely would have laughed, kissed Josephine on the cheek, accuse her of being her danosa chiquita, and immediately having some wonderful insight to share that would give Josephine absolute peace about her situation. But more so…

Oh! She just- she didn’t know what to do! Tonio Aclassi was the single most- he was kind! And oh, he could make Josephine laugh—he’d such a gentle sense of humor, the barest bit of bite to it that spoke to cleverness over cruelty. He was sweet, and kind-hearted in his every action. If…if they were truly…in courtship? Nothing would please her more. But they were not. They were merely pretending.

And yet…Josephine had neglected to inform him that was no longer necessary. Not really. She’d only requested as much when it placated Leliana’s curiosity at Josephine’s reticence to have her join them in Val Royeaux, a cover to keep her friend from discovering her financial troubles. Now that Leliana was well versed in the Montilyet’s downfalls, their spiral into debt and their only hope for recovery was now blockaded by an assassin’s blade.

Oh it was so wrong of her! She should have told him the very instant Leliana found out their true reasons for visiting Val Royeaux! And she certainly should have done so the moment the topic came up organically, she meant to but then he- he drew so close and he was so kind and something
short-circuited in her mind when he started talking about spending the night together and only redoubled when he respected her convictions and somehow that sent her momentarily considering throwing them away which was entirely nonsense! And- Cole had- he’d said such confusing things! Confusing and…true—every word of what he said Josephine felt, was accurate. Except for the…the ‘real’ part.

But then she didn’t tell Tonio. And they went about their trip and…nothing changed. She realized not a single thing had changed since the moment before Josephine made such a ridiculous request of him to falsify a relationship with her. They still spoke as they normally did, walked together without discomfort, enjoyed one another’s company without…any change whatsoever. Except…it felt different. Before…Josephine had always felt a bit nervous, being so close to the man, scrutinizing her every word and action because she feared coming off as engaging in impropriety. Now…as much as she had making her nervous, her time with Tonio was effortless. She no longer feared her behavior coming off as if she might be interested in the man more than just her coworker and friend, because she was supposed to be behaving as such. Which brought her to the realization that she only feared looking like she might feel something more…because she did feel something more.

And she hadn’t the slightest clue what to do! How exactly- should she say something? Confess her feelings to the man? What if that was wholly inappropriate? The man had only- he’d—

...he’d been with the Inquisition scarcely more than a month! Nearly two…but not quite! Before which he was enslaved! Enduring trauma! He’d been married for more than a decade before his time in House Tilani and surely there had to be some baggage there, some reticence to desire courtship. He had his business and reunion with his son to occupy his time! He needn’t- he needn’t concern himself with—

With…behaving as normal. Conducting business as usual, socializing and taking meals and escorting Josephine about Skyhold as…as usual. So…perhaps…

Oh this was all so confusing! Even more when- when their ruse led to them sharing quarters. It had been…it had been so pleasant! He escorted her to his room, informed her he’d claimed the bed on the left wall and she was free to take the one on the right, and she was to tell him if she needed anything at all in the night. Then he pressed a kiss to her forehead as he wished her sweet dreams…and then gave her the room. Allowed her to change into her sleep clothes wholly in privacy, and she was not certain just what to do but he had wished her good night so, she went to the bed that formerly belonged to Cremisius, pulled back the covers, and settled in. She left the lamps lit, and she’d admittedly some reading. Nothing for work—a book Cassandra had recommended. She’d…a taste in books that the titles alone could make Josephine blush, but this was a novel she’d even recommended to Eleanor, so, thus far it was rather tame, a short fictional work about a young girl coming of age and discovering a hidden world laying locked within the family’s grandfather clock. While very whimsical, perhaps that was what made it so very pleasant to read. She’d only turned the page when there was a soft knock on the door and Tonio’s voice sounded and she called that he could come in. There was the briefest moment she was nervous she’d gone about this wrong—should have stepped out and offered him the room, surely the man would need to change? But he had already, it seemed. He’d just done so elsewhere, walked the halls in his sleep clothes and carried his neatly folded clothing to the wardrobe where he hung it in swift precise motions before turning to address her,

“You’re comfortable I hope?”

“Yes, thank you.”
“Excellent—sleep well cara mia, I’m only just there—if you’ve need of anything, you are to wake me,” he smiled when she nodded her agreement. And then she realized he’d carried something in with him.

Tea. He’d brought a warm teacup of what smelled like lavender and chamomile and perhaps cinnamon?

And he only drew nearer to her side of the room to set his offering upon the nightstand next to her bed before going to his own.

His…own. Which…had Cremisius’s trunk before it—the Charger’s seal emblazon on the faceplate while the trunk at the foot of the bed Josephine occupied, bore the Inquisition’s seal. Tonio’s trunk, it dawned on her. He’d told her to sleep in this bed, had he not—

This bed, which was the farthest one from the door. So if there was an intruder in the night, she would be further from reach and- and perhaps Tonio might wake, be able to do something to defend-

“I’m turning out the lamp by my bedside now, my Lady,” he said, assuring, ”but please do not take that to mean you must do so with yours—enjoy your reading as long as you please. Sleep well.”

“You as well,” Josephine found her voice, had to clear it, “Thank you, Tonio, for everything.”

“Think nothing of it.”

She…admittedly stared into the book she brought unreading, and thought everything about it. For how long, she did not know. It wasn’t until she heard a distant clocktower ringing in the top of the next hour and it startled her slightly, made her realize she’d been sitting there with her lamp on when, well, he’d insisted it was fine but it was still rude to make so much light when there was another seeking sleep. And she should likewise—it was well beyond time to go to sleep!

Which was admittedly a bit easier, not only was the albeit cooled tea calming all the same once she got around to sipping at it, there was something about knowing the man was just a few feet away that made her feel more secure in closing her eyes and going to sleep. She did so far more easily, not only was the albeit cooled tea calming all the same once she got around to sipping at it, there was something about knowing the man was just a few feet away that made her feel more secure in closing her eyes and going to sleep. She did so far more easily than she had when trying and failing while in Eleanor’s quarters, where she admittedly lay awake and utterly terrified that the moment she closed her eyes her own problems would bear an assassin taking Eleanor’s life in her stead.

And ultimately…a nightmare that such a thing might happen startled Josephine awake just as the barest bit of greying light peeked in through the curtains in their quarters.

“Josephine?” Tonio’s voice asked, husked with sleep as he sat up in bed. “Are you alright?”

“I’m well,” she insisted, smiling as she said, “please, rest some more, we’ve quite the day ahead.”

He nodded, oh, he looked almost endearingly sweet, sleepy as he was, and he settled back against his pillows, eyes drifting closed. Which secured the privacy she needed to gather her things and well, she wasn’t about to go through the estate in her nightgown, ‘boring’ as Leliana insisted it was, so she opened the wardrobe a bit—the door would shield her if she accidentally woke Tonio. Though she wondered why she was so very concerned—he was hardly a scoundrel and too he’d agreed to tailor a few pieces for her. He would be taking her measurements for that. Still—the door
stayed propped open until she was dressed, and then she carefully straightened up her bedding, and took the empty teacup on her nightstand and quietly left the room, nodding to the Elf woman she recognized from the Iron Bull’s team er…Skinner? Yes, Skinner.

“Where are you going?” the woman questioned, squinting a bit as if scrutinizing Josephine like she must be up to absolutely no good.

“I’m…merely waking for the day. I thought perhaps I would go to the kitchens?”

“Perhaps, or you are?” the woman bitingly requested clarification.

“I…I am,” Josephine supposed.

“Then I will escort you. And I will kill any who cross you.”

“…thank you, Miss Skinner, for keeping guard.”

“I am pleased to kill shem’s. To defend the Small One’s aunt is an honor.”

Hopefully there would be no need for that. But she was decently certain the woman would be truly upset to hear as much so she merely smiled politely and headed to the kitchens.

Where she stood now. Seeking her abuelita’s guidance. By making a mess of the place under Skinner’s…mildly alarmed stare…as Josephine opened every cabinet in search of the ingredients she would need, and then proceeded to make up dough, for Conchas.

“Tia?”

Oh, “Eleanor!” Josephine greeted the girl standing in the kitchen’s doorway, hair wrapped in a silky blue scarf, clad in one of Cremisius’s sleep shirts and her own sleep bottoms, feet bare, rubbing sleep from her eyes while she leaned into Skinner in greeting, the Elf woman’s face still held it’s stony expression but she let out something like a…pleased, happy hum. “Good morning mija,” Josephine said, “what…what are you doing up this early?”

“Is that dough?” the girl questioned sleepily. “M’ pretty sure my body sensed the preparation of carbs happening in a kitchen I have access to.”

“It is. I thought I would make Conchas for everyone, a nice treat for breakfast.”

“Que? Conches?” she questioned, confused, “Like…the shells? I didn’t know you could eat them.”

…you could not—not proper seashells, but, “The pastry? They are Antivan—small, sweet pastry that are made to look like seashells.”

“Ohhh that sounds pretty,” she said.

“They are,” Josephine assured, “And delicious. Would…would you care to help me?”

“Asi?!” Eleanor asked excitedly, enthusiasm infectious, it had Josephine giggling as she assured,

“Certainly, if you’re up for it—you’re rested? Your ears healed up without incident?” Josephine checked as the girl drew nearer and tilted her head to offer her right ear for Josephine’s inspection. Oh! Her sweet earrings were so precious on her! Just adorable—she’d sat alongside Eleanor last night while Leliana took up the task of piercing the girl’s ears cleanly and without
incident, oh, it hurt her heart a bit that there was a bit of pain in the process but the girl bore it well, and Marehis dipped both earring darts into Elf Root tonic before handing one off to Josephine and allowing her the opportunity to help put in Eleanor’s first set of earrings. They should have healed immediately but still there was a level…Josephine irrationally feared that anything wrought from her decision making during this trip was bound to end in utter, wholly unforeseen, improbable levels of disaster. Thankfully the girl nodded, smiling as she said,

“Oh yeah, they aren’t sore at all or anything!” she was pleased to inform her, “And they’re just the prettiest! I really really love them! Madam de Fer says I’ve opened up a whole new world of accessorizing and she’s very excited…and proud, I think?”

“I’m pleased you like them so well, it was a pleasure to arrange for you mija. My own ears were pierced when I was dedicated to Andrasten church in my youth, as is traditional in Antiva.”

“Oh that’s sweet! Gosh I’m learning so much cool stuff this trip! I’m excited to help you with the…Conchas?” she tested the word pronounced appropriately.

“Yes, please, let’s get to work then shall we? Wash up and I will show you what to do.”

The girl did as she was told, washing her hands before joining Josephine at the counter and it was…oh it felt special being able to impart this knowledge on someone so dear to her, and Eleanor was so eager to learn. It hurt her heart, what precious little of her Antivan heritage the girl knew, though that was certainly no fault of her own. She…the girl had never spoken of it plainly with the Ambassador, but that did not seem to be because of a lack of trust, but a desire to spare the woman’s feelings, but she knew enough to know the girl had been violently ousted from her home in Antiva, had not found peace in returning once she moved on to the Free Marches. She’d an excellent grasp of the language, and she grew more and more comfortable with Josephine sharing things with her—the first time she asked the girl if she was Antivan, or perhaps descended from as much, after she’d giggled over Josephine oathing in Antivan after slamming her thumb in a ledger she’d been consulting and setting aside as Eleanor came to speak with her, she’d been cagey about answering, said she was from the Free Marches.

“Ahh, that is a shame. Oh! Not a shame you are a Marcher, Lady Herald. It is just…well, I was admittedly excited that you might know Antivan.”

The girl had stared at her for a moment, eyes shining with some unspoken concern as she worried at her lip before shrugging, “Yo se Antivan. Prefieres eso?” I do know Antivan. Would you prefer it?

“Oh! Um…si. If you’re certain you can keep up—do stop me if I say something you’re unfamiliar with.”

Looking back, that had one of the least…halted conversation she’d had with the girl in her earlier time with the Inquisition. She’d often needed to ask what something meant or it took her a moment to figure out an unfamiliar word with context—she’d not nearly the vocabulary then that she’d now developed under Dorian’s tutelage. But in what was apparently her first language? She was perfectly capable, and she grew more comfortable speaking in it around Josephine, some days it was what they conducted the entirety of her etiquette lessons in. Which was inadvertently a bit of culture she could offer the girl—if she’d been given a proper Antivan upbringing, young ladies and gentlemen were given such lessons, and it was often the transitional period that assisted their learning Trade, lessons began conducted entirely in Antivan, before eventually children were taught how to introduce themselves, pleasantries in Trade.

Conchas…were a bit more fun than etiquette lessons. Oh, it was such a joy—messy but that
was what aprons and wash basins were for. They washed up a bit after preparing the dough and sat chatting while they allowed it to rise—Eleanor offering to use a bit of heating magic to prompt it to do so faster.

“It shouldn’t hurt it, it just helps speed up the carbon-whatever reaction that results in the dough rising. Sera would know how to explain better than me,” Eleanor admitted.

“There is no harm in trying,” Josephine supposed, it was not unlike leaving dough to rise in a warmed pan. “It would be nice if we could extradite the process.”

Eleanor nodded, smiling as she pulled heat into her hands, splaying them on either side of the covered pan. Though, “Sometimes,” she said, as if in thought, “faster doesn’t always mean better…” she looked up to Josephine then, “I’m really proud of you, you know?”

…”Th-thank you, mija but…whatever for?”

“How well you’ve handled everything. I mean this has been a pretty scary situation for you but…you’ve stuck by what you believe, even at the risk of your own life. And I mean…you could have just let Leliana fix this for you but you’ve chosen a route that fixes things for yourself and…helps someone else too.”

“I have?” she wondered…truly confused. All she saw was inconvenience and danger upon those she held most dear—none of this helped them in the slightest, all it did was cause worry and strife and put—put their most cherished lives in danger!

…so it had not occurred to her in the slightest, “The Du Paraquettes?” Eleanor prompted, pointing out, “I mean…the thing you’re trying to save your family from, their family has already faced.” Oh. Oh dear—Josephine hadn’t considered that. “But this is their second change to rebuild!” the girl cheerily observed, “So I’m really proud of you for sticking it out, even though it’s been so tough, and finding a solution that helps others instead of hurting them—I know the plan would be to only hurt any assassins that got in the way but our people could’ve gotten hurt too. And I mean I’m not mad we’re sparing the people who work for the House of Repose—Leliana’s kind of an assassin and I love her a bunch, she’s still a good person. And the man that came to chat us up about this whole thing to begin with, he didn’t seem like he goes around in his free time kicking puppies,” she shook her head like she was reprimanding herself, getting back on topic, “My point is—you’re a total badass for sticking up for what you believe to be right and finding a solution to your problems that lifts people up instead of tearing them down. I’m really proud of you and I’m glad you’re my tia!”

She did not necessarily feel like a…um…’total badass’, she almost thought she might cry but she managed to clear her throat and suppress the impulse, “Gracias, mija.” Though she found herself feeling a bit guilty. Eleanor did not know just how often she’d lied on this trip, and she felt admittedly terrible how much subterfuge she’d had the girl herself arrange. She’d handled everything rather well, all told, been swift to assist Josephine, shown wisdom of her own in her decisions regarding this situation. She’d handled their conversation with an assassin of all things with all the confidence she’d had in any of her diplomatic affairs, when an assassin threatened Josephine's life, laid injury upon Cremisius the girl had tended his wounds and come to handle the aftermath, made certain Josephine was well, stood her ground against Leliana who spoke not one more word of pressure toward her since. Josephine had yet to set foot in that room but Leliana did seek to speak with her again last night, only to assure her another assassin would not slip through and Eleanor arranged the body's removal and the girl herself had cleaned and tidied her office to rights.

...Eleanor...had exercised wisdom and care, as she often did. Josephine had started this
process seeking her abuelita’s wisdom. Perhaps her Mija had some to share.

“Eleanor…how…” she shook her head, she wished to do this carefully so she started over with a vital clarification, “I do not want you to think I am speaking against your relationship—that is entirely what I am nor doing—but how exactly…did you decide to allow Cremisius to pursue you? Him…being someone you work with—you subordinate even.”

“Huh…well…” she seemed to give it a bit of thought, “I did worry about that, really. I would never ever want someone to feel pressured to be anything to me—friend, more-than-friends, familia,” Josephine huffed a laugh as the girl gently pumped her hip with her own with what seemed to be an affectionate move. “So, I’ve always let people take the lead—I didn’t call you tia until you started calling me ‘mija’. Mamis and papys happened after they said they made it clear they love me that way. The same goes for Sera even! I wouldn’t have ever pursued Cremius unless he expressed clearly that was something he wanted from me, which meant—he had to make the first move. Why do you ask?” and then, mischievous smile on her face, “Tia? Do you have a crush on someone?”

“No!” …she was a grown woman. She did not have a crush! “I was merely curious, I…if I were interested in someone, I would not wish to risk impropriety or to pressure them in that way.”

“Well…is it someone you work with? You…I mean I know you’re kind of ranked in the Inquisition but you’re not like, directly over anyone—you’re our Ambassador, you work with outside people on outside things. You might help with finalizing contracts and things but you don’t really…no offense but you’re not really the boss of them? I mean I listen to your advice and input but if I thought you had a conflict of some sort, I’d take everything with a grain of salt, maybe consult Varric or someone. So you don’t really hold any kind of position of power over anyone in Skyhold,” she shrugged, “so, it’s up to you, you know? I trust you tia, you’d never hurt someone—use your best judgement, it’s pretty great! You’re a genius when it comes to the Inquisition’s relationships with outside forces, so, I’m pretty sure you’ll be the best at personal relationship decision making. Test the waters and see what happens—worst case scenario, you’re like, super good at apologizing I mean you apply food to the solution and everything—I wish you would cross me!” the girl insisted. “Imagine the chocolates!”

Josephine could not help but to grin, “You believe I would apologize to you with chocolates?”

“Proper Antivan chocolate would literally be the only way to pave the smooth road back to my heart!…or just saying sorry and meaning it and giving me a hug! Dealer’s choice!” she supposed, though in seriousness, “Tia—if you feel comfortable, I think you should be honest with whoever it is you’re interested in, and if they aren’t interested? They’re a big dummy! And I know you’ll respect that, just make sure they know that too! Kay?”

“…kay,” Josephine returned her precious sentiment.

The dough rose up nicely, and Josephine instructed her to allow it to cool. In the meantime, they whipped up streusel that they might not have gotten to use if the Ambassador hadn’t found it in herself to chastise the girl to keep her from eating it at the same rate they were preparing it. And once the dough was broken up, there was something relaxing about rolling it between one’s hands making it take shape—Eleanor watching intently before copying Josephine’s movements to make perfect rounds of dough they spread along their pan before topping them with flattened rounds of streusel they carefully drug the non-serrated edge of a butter knife through to score it so it looked like the lines along cockle shells. that was meant to be baked and Eleanor thought the fruits of their labor were so cute! And she declared them yummy—Josephine heartedly agreed, they turned out
splendidly! She had admittedly worried the experience would turn out like her first unassisted endeavor into making Conchas…she’d attempted as much one day in university and it had resulted in what came out more like bread. Hard, tooth-chipping bread. Thankfully it had not been a tooth of Josephine’s…*unfortunately* it was the tooth of a boy she had been admittedly trying to impress.

“These are the best! Don’t tell Vivienne—it was fun making dessert with her, but these take a lot more fun work!” more playing with messy ingredients was involved certainly. “And you can dip them in coffee! I’m not even supposed to have coffee with dinner!”

“That didn’t stop you from having coffee at dinner, lovely. Wondered where you went, now what’s this?” Cremisius wondered as he joined them, leaning in the doorway, yawning and shaking himself a bit—he was dressed for the day, armed and armored, but he looked like he was still waking up, and apparently it wasn’t his hunger that brought him to the kitchens but his search of the girl he’d expected to find sleeping alongside him, “Should’ve figured I’d find you with your other lover.” Other lover?

Eleanor smiled to Josephine as she informed her of the romantic sentiment that, “My heart belongs to Cremisius—my body belongs to pastry.”

“Mmm, *that* sounds like a wonderful arrangement *da’vehn*,” Marehis hummed as she joined them, arms stretching overhead as she crossed the kitchen before she wrapped them around the girl, “Good morning sweet girl—what’ve you gotten into?”

“Tia taught me Conchas! So, so far, we’re basically just having the best day! I’m calling it now—nothing but great things today! Yummy breakfast! And I have a date with Cremisius tonight! You’re coming to the theatre with us, right mami? In disguise, but like, you’ll get to watch and stuff?”

“I’ll be more so paying attention to ‘and stuff’ but yes *da’len*—I’ll have a pleasant time.”

“Offer still stands if you wanna double date,” Cremisius assured the Elf woman.

“I don’t know that my tagging along on your date with Ellie is a double date.”

“Yeah it is—I’d be pulling double duty—Maker gave me two arms for a reason Mare’, escort a lovely lady on each, pull out your chairs, fight off other people’s unwanted advances. I even got two cheeks on my face for a goodnight kiss, you know, if I’m lucky and you ladies have a nice time,” he winked.

Marehis waved him over and when he came to her she revealed he’d already earned such a kiss to the cheek, “I do appreciate the offer, sweet man, but no thank you. Please, enjoy yourselves tonight.”

“What about you Ambassador?” Cremisius checked with Josephine, “You and papa are going with us right? You’re welcome to join us for dinner too.”

“We’ve plans of our own this evening, mijo,” she said, “but thank you.”

“You and papa Aclassi are having dinner together?” Ellie asked, wide-eyed, backing up from the counter a bit as her hand reached ever so slightly in Cremisius’s direction.

“Yes. He invited me—an all too generous ‘thank you’ for my hand in planning our outings on this trip.”

Eleanor made an almost alarming, near-squealing sound she caught in her throat and quieted
almost immediately, Cremisius taking her hand and letting her squeeze seemed to help somehow, before the girl smiled wide and said, “Oh gosh, that’s so sweet of him! I hope you two have a wonderful time!” she said, leaning into her boyfriend, her head resting against his bicep. Oh-

“How are you, Cremisius?” Josephine asked, “Your injuries are healed?”

He gave her a confused look before realization dawned in his face and he gave his arm, Eleanor’s along with it, a few test swings as he grinned reassurance, “Oh yeah, almost forgot about that, honestly. Good as new—seriously, don’t sweat it, I’m just glad you’re alright,” he said, leveling her a warm smile. Oh, this sweet, handsome boy.

“Likewise,” she assured him. She had been petrified! She thought that man might have dealt something deadly against this boy! Praise the Maker he’d been wearing something protective, that shielded his sweet heart from harm. She was admittedly relieved to see him in armor today.

She certainly was not the only person relieved to lay eyes on this boy today, “Bello!” Tonio greeted with warm enthusiasm as he joined them, “And my Ellie—I followed the scent of something sweet and found my favorite children!” he rejoiced as he came to the counter and wrapped his arms around their shoulders.

“Tia and me made Conchas for everyone,” Ellie informed him.

“How wonderful—that was very kind of you—they smell delicious!” he complimented, “Oh and they look just beautiful, it is almost a shame to eat them. You’ve been cooking all this time?” he wondered, “You must sit, please,” he gestured to the kitchen table, Skinner…had been standing just behind it but she’d apparently slipped out, Marehis was here and apparently the woman had been pulling double duty of her own, ensuring Josephine’s safety as well as Eleanor’s. “I’ll pour the coffee—would you prefer tea, cara mia?” he checked with Josephine, “I can get some brewing shortly.”

“Coffee would be wonderful,” she assured, smiling her thanks.

“Then coffee you shall have—get comfortable,” he insisted as she and Marehis, Eleanor and Cremisius took seats around the table, oh—Cremisius let Marehis take whatever seat she wished first and then he pulled out chairs for Josephine and Eleanor before seating himself opposite the Elf woman who sat where she could keep an eye on the door—his back to the door while he sat nearest to it, he pulled his chair out a bit so he was…Josephine supposed he would be able to see anyone entering in his peripheral and rise up in defense more swiftly. Josephine and Eleanor had already had coffee underway, brewing, but the kettle of finished product was poured by Tonio before he brought a tray to them oh- sweet man, he’d placed a concha on each saucer, neatly served alongside their tea cups full of warm coffee…Josephine’s was topped with frothy milk. Cafe con Leche*, was an admitted favorite, and it only just occurred to her—she’d never ordered as much in Skyhold, but any time Tonio appeared with a cup of coffee for her, it was always prepared as such. Maker she’d said she preferred her coffee that way on one occasion when Tonio questioned if it was common for Antivan women to take their coffee black—Eleanor did so—and she confessed it was a bit of an atypical order opposed to cream or sugar, and she didn’t wish to make a further step for the kitchen hands just to make the beverage for her.

“Thank you,” she echoed the others as they all thanked the man placing beverages before them,

“Of course,” and instead of seating himself, he clapped his hands together and began rolling up his shirt sleeves, he lacked his suit jacket but she supposed that was because he’d been prepared for needing to cook—he was turning to move on toward the wash basin as he declared, “Bello,
you’re armored—you’ve work today? You must eat first! Eggs and bacon? I’ll make enough for everyone, I’m sure the whole of the house will be up and about soon enough.”

“Thanks papa,” Cremisius said, “Day off technically but something came for Ellie,” he reached in a thigh pocket on his armored leggings and retrieving a bit of parchment he handed off to the girl. “From Minister Bellise? Didn’t read it but I dunno, the ‘You’re cordially invited’ bit on the envelope implies my girl’s got a mission, so…”

“Oh! Gracias guapo!” Eleanor thanked him, taking the envelope in hand and slipping a finger under the seal to break it open “Maaami! Pretty please braid my hair? Should I wear a dress? Cremisius, will you be very jealous if I try to persuade Minister Bellise with my body?”

“Gotta do what you gotta do,” the boy shrugged.

“Right now, I gotta eat breakfast. And then yeah, we’ll need to get ready to head out before noon—I’m officially invited to a party at Marquis Wiscotte’s estate. Minister Bellise will be there and I’ll chat her up an see if she’ll ratify everything and bingo! All done!” she looked to Cremisius, “Cole’s okay, right? He was so sleepy, he said I should go to uhh…he said I was needed in here,” had the Spirit sent Eleanor Josephine’s way? “But I felt badly, leaving.”

“Wasn’t a problem lovely, guy got his cuddle on with me. Not sure if he’s actually sleeping but he said his body needs to rest so,” he shrugged.

“Cole will need more water I think, when we check on him,” Eleanor said, “I got him to drink some more before he laid back down but potion uses so much and he doesn’t really do the whole ‘consistent hydration’ thing.”

That got Tonio’s attention as the man came to stand at the island, a bowl in hand he was cracking eggs into, “Cole has returned? He needed potion—is the boy ill?” he fretted.

“Got banged up running a mission for Leliana—she sent backup but the guy really did try to do it all on his own, kept getting spotted and had to keep making people forget they saw him, but then more people came, it got real complicated. He got it though, reported in last night—just about gave us ruddy heart attacks, he just appeared at the foot of the bed,” he seemed to recall something and leaned closer to his girlfriend to say more quietly, “I reported to Leliana for him while you were doing your thing,” the girl nodded before the young man addressed his father again, “Ellie patched him up, he’s been laying with us since he got back in. Bull’s laying with him now—I’ll take them a tray.”

“Ahh, bello—that is very sweet. I’ll assist you if that suits,” Tonio volunteered, “I wish to check in on Cole, poor mimo.”

Oh, poor Cole indeed. The Spirit was kind, she felt terribly he’d had such a rough time of it. The boy did not eat often, but he’d a fascination with different tastes—it made her wonder if he might delight in…oh what were they? Tiny multi-colored candies, small and sweet and easy to chew, did not fill one up terribly and each color represented a different flavor. Ah-ha! Jelly beans! They were neither jelly nor beans but…bean shaped Josephine supposed. They originated in the Free Marches, but had become popular in Orilais, especially as they grew nearer to spring, the colorful confections were something of a common treat for Summerday and she’d plans to stock up while they were in Val Royeaux—send some home to Yvette who adored the sweets and Claude* who was reportedly eating them out of house and home as he neared his fifteenth birthday, Laurine would balk at the gift, claim he was hardly a child but he and Antoine both had notorious sweet teeths. She also intended to have some to keep in her desk, gift some to Eleanor and Cremisius, Sera and Cole. Perhaps she’d arrange something of a ‘get well’ present for the Spirit boy, gift him
his portion sooner rather than later.

She decided she would certainly do just that upon visiting the dear boy, Maker. Marehis and Eleanor slipped off to ready the Inquisitor for her meeting...oh, she prayed that went well, that this would all be over soon and all their efforts were not to waste. Josephine joined Cremisius and Tonio in carrying a few trays to the room Dorian and the Iron Bull had laid claim to. She’d been...a bit concerned what they might find there, the men were...very...engaged. Often. But she trusted they would be doing no such thing with Cole in their midst, she was just worried there might be...artifacts, lying about. Perhaps paraphernalia was the better word? Ugh. She hoped if they had been up to anything...graphic, there was no evidence lying about. She did not need to know the contents of the several oh-so-discreet, sometimes alarmingly large, packages the Iron Bull received billed under...nothing like what the Iron Bull would need, last Josephine checked, the Qunari would not subscribe to a service called ‘Chantry Monthly’ and what he received hardly seemed to be pamphlets on Andrasten religion.

Thankfully, the room was tidy enough, a bit dark as the curtains were drawn, but someone had gotten the fireplace going strong enough to offer light to see by. The Iron Bull laid with Dorian tucked up against his side and Cole laying atop his chest, the Spirit boy was dressed in what looked like a borrowed set of Cremisius’s sleeping clothes—they themselves weren’t stained but the material was white and thin enough to see the outline of bandaging wrapped around his chest and left shoulder, the bandaging itself was stained, a dark blotch low, where it wrapped around his ribcage. He’d a bandage on his cheek, another wrapped about one forearm and his ankle was secured in a splint—good heavens! What in the world had Leliana put this boy through?!

“I tried, I really really did. I am sorry. I can do it—I can,” the boy was hoarsely insisting as Josephine approached, Cremisius and Tonio at her back—she’d a tray with warm drink in her hands while Tonio carried a tray of breakfast and Cremisius had his hands free to keep guard. “But this body has to be done being broken. And then I can use it to do it again, I know how to now, I figured it out! I can get in to the House of Repose.”

Josephine found herself struck speechless. Had...oh Maker was this because- had Leliana entrusted him with a test of skill to see if he might be capable of infiltrating the House without bloodshed? Not without bloodshed, Cole was certainly worse for wear, oh mijo.

“Cole, love you buddy, shut up,” Cremisius said in...gentle, soothing tones, like loving reprimand as he took a seat on the free edge of the bed, reaching out to brush the Spirit’s hair out of his eyes, “Focus on resting up and getting better before we discuss moving forward with any of that, you’ll be in pretty rough shape for a few days Ellie says. But we’re here, everyone’s going to help take care of you, okay? Ellie’s going to go see if she can settle things without having to go to the House, and I’ll be tagging along to have her back for Marehis—she’ll be hanging around running security while we’re gone, but if you need us just,” he tapped his own temple twice as the boy smiled gratefully. “Dunno how far range that goes but the estate we’re headed for isn’t far.”

“I...there’s so much hurt in Val Royeaux,” the Spirit fretted.

“And now you’ve hurts that need helping,” Tonio said, setting his tray on the bedside table before kneeling beside Cremisius and carefully taking hold of Cole’s hand, oh, his knuckles were scraped, and the Tevinter man turned his palm-up to press a kiss against the inside of his fingers, like the action might heal the broken skin on the other side. He rubbed circles on the Spirit’s palm with his thumb as he intoned, “There will always be hurts to heal—I promise you, when you are feeling better you’ll be free to go about tending to them as you please, and I’ll keep an eye out myself. If I see anyone I can ascertain to be feeling distress, I’ll certainly endeavor to brighten their day—sometimes a kind word can make all of the difference. You cannot be of help to anyone if
you are not first and foremost of help to yourself. I know it is strange for you, having a body to take care of but you must take care of it. Your needs are different than most people, but that does not mean they can be ignored entirely. Ellie suggests making certain you are hydrated—do you feel up to sipping some water for me, dolce mimo?"

Cole nodded, sighing a bit tiredly. “It has to sit up to do that. I don’t know why.”

“You’ll spill all over yourself and my bed, for one thing,” Dorian informed him, rather pleasantly, like he didn’t wish his usual sarcasm to scathe, “and everything goes a bit more swimmingly when one is sitting up to swallow.”

The Iron Bull huffed a laugh, “You gotta trust Sparky when it comes to swallowing.” Oh good heavens!

“The Iron Bull—honestly!” Tonio reprimanded, as the Iron Bull began sitting up to help Cole do so as well, “Folly that mouth of yours—there is a Lady present, apologize to Josephine.”

“Oh shit- uhhh shoot, sorry Ambassador, didn’t see you come in,” he apologized, “What you got over there? Thought I smelled coffee.”

It had been rather mortifying but, all told, she’d expected worse. She smiled and moved on with, “We did bring coffee—there is also water, here,” she’d not yet set her tray down but there was room on the free nightstand on the side of the bed she stood on, oh—it was the side Dorian lay on, lazing against the Iron Bull’s blind side, there was something sweet about that, that the Iron Bull kept Cole in sight and…found comfort in the man he loved—trusted—laying against him, even if he could not see him. Dorian gave her a bit of a wry look as he patted the empty space at the edge of the bed at his side in invitation and she nodded her thanks, carefully seating herself there with a glass of water in hand. “Do you need assistance?” she wondered as she offered the glass to Cole.

He was delivered assistance, regardless. He just- he was injured, and Josephine felt just horribly the poor boy had gone to so much effort for her. She held the glass to his lips for him to sip, Tonio smiling as he offered gentle encouragement, “There we are bello, sip carefully—excellent, you’re doing just splendidly my boy.”

Oh, Josephine pulled the glass away when she feared the boy might have just a bit too much water in the back of his throat, gave him a break, and Tonio plied a handkerchief to the boy’s lip.

They sat chatting quietly, it seemed to soothe Cole—everyone making pleasant small talk, not speaking or thinking on anything unpleasant while Dorian and the Iron Bull partook of breakfast. And the Spirit was just precious when Dorian offered him some his own concha—Cole nibbled at it, he did not like eating great quantities, but what he did consume sent him smiling and offering up,

“You made them with so much love—you were worried you couldn’t recall everything she taught you, but that was the most important thing your Abuelita said! In all things, do them with love!”

Josephine’s mouth worked for a moment, she…oh, goodness. Yes, she’d not forgotten that, not entirely she supposed, and that helped a great deal. “Thank you, Cole. I’m pleased you enjoy them.”
They did—even more so when the door swung open and Eleanor popped inside, swung a bit, her hands on the doorframe and outer handle as she leaned forward into the room and informed them, “Dip your concha in your coffee and you’ll be able to die with zero actual regrets—they. are so. good.”

“Inekari! Now it’s a party,” the Iron Bull decided, breaking the concha he had in hand in half and soaking up a bit of coffee, humming his approval, “Mmm man, yeah, that’s banging—Cole, babe, you wanna bite?”

“It makes it taste different!” the boy was pleased to find, smiling to Eleanor as the girl perched herself on the foot of the bed. “You are worried about leaving—don’t be. You will do well, and Lady Josie will be safe.”

“Thanks! I brought more potion for you—if you take it you can lay down, okay?” Eleanor assured, she apparently used her pockets for potion today. Oh she was simply precious! Tonio had fashioned her a silken dress in Inquisition red—Josephine was albeit concerned the girl truly was prepared to seduce a favorable sentence from the Minister, the neckline was rather a plunging one a V that stopped low between her breasts was she wearing—well, Josephine hoped it wasn’t too, er, chilly out, goodness. Could the girl go about that way comfortably? Josephine would be sore if she hadn’t…support. At least the dress bore long sleeves that met her wrists, a long skirt fell cleanly to the floor, just barely hovering off the ground when she wore her heeled boots. Oh, Tonio’s work was just exquisite. And she did like that the man was truly dedicated to plying pockets to his designs, Eleanor pulled a few vials of Elf Root tonic out of her dress pockets which she passed off to the Iron Bull who in turn passed the excess to Dorian to place on the bedside table for later, “Try to take another dose every four hours—get some good rest today and stay hydrated, that’ll really help. You mind if I take a peek at how your leg’s doing?”

“You can look however long you want to,” Cole assured, nodding.

Eleanor smiled, scooting to sit on her knees before him, “Thanks!”

Cremisius took Cole’s hand in his, an offer of comfort while Eleanor gingerly took his splinted foot in hand to unwrap her bandaging and check it’s healing progress. “Your bandaging is a little loose now—the swelling’s gone down, huh? That’s really great—your bruising’s getting darker but that’s just your body doing its job, Elf Root’s helping to heal up faster.” Oh Maker—it was Josephine who peeked at the young man’s injury—it was rather grotesque, his foot looked an angry sort of purple-nearing-black, it just- looked incredibly painful and Josephine could not abide the sight for more than a mere glance before she looked up, Tonio offered her a sympathetic smile. “Cole, this is serious, so you need to listen good okay? I do not want you on this leg for the rest of the day, got it? No poofing and landing on your feet, keep your weight off it entirely for at least…” Eleanor checked her wristwatch, “Hmm…the next twelve hours? Keep the poofing down entirely, you’re not to leave bed unless you need to, and if you do, ask someone to help you get around.” She gave him a reassuring pat on the knee, “I’ll check on you whenever I get back. You’re absolutely sure you still want Cremisius and me to go out tonight?” she seemed to be double checking.

“Oh yes please—you would not mind staying in, you’re so—” oh goodness, the Spirit swallowed like maybe he was moved to tears and endeavoring not to cry as he smiled, his entire expression lighting up, “you’re so worried about me, you love me so much you wouldn’t regret staying with me to make sure I feel better—that on its own makes me feel so much better!” he assured, “You’re all so happy and excited for your dates tonight, it would make me so happy that you get to go enjoy them. Have fun—I promise I will not hurt my leg.”
“Thanks, I love you a bunch,” Eleanor said sweetly.

“You do!” Cole said as if it was a joyous matter of fact. “I love you too.”

“Get some good rest, think happy thoughts, and I’ll see you when I get back,” Eleanor assured, pressing a kiss to her fingertips she blew to the Spirit before looking to Cremisius, “We need to get going if we’re going to be on time. Well, fashionably late—but on time to be fashionably late. Socialites are loco,” she complained as she bounced in place a bit to assist in popping up off of the bed, the Iron Bull whistling approval of her efforts as she bowed. Oh Maker, Josephine couldn’t help giggle at the sight.

The young man huffed an amused laugh, nodding his agreement, “Yeah they are,” he said, looking to Cole and leaning forward to press a kiss to his forehead, “Feel better buddy, I’ll see you in a few.” Cole nodded as he closed his eyes and relaxed against the Iron Bull…and truly did appear to be as asleep as the Spirit could be. Cremisius- oh, she thought he was getting up but he was merely leaning to his father and…oh that was so sweet, the boy pressed a kiss to Tonio’s cheek, “Stay out of trouble old man.”

“Likewise bello mimo. Have a pleasant time—you too bella mia,” Tonio called to Eleanor.

“Yes,” Josephine said, somewhat pleading, “Be well and safe—Mija do not entertain favor with the Minister.” Bellise could be…she was rumored to be ruthless. Which was exactly the sort of thing they needed on their side, but Josephine shuddered to think what she might ask of Eleanor if today’s conversation led her to demand something of the Inquisitor. Josephine had done her upmost to word their correspondence to imply any such thing would fall to the Inquisition as a body and should be delivered through Josephine herself.

“We’ll be super safe—it’s just a quick ‘hey, hi, hello’ and then voila,” Eleanor snapped her fingers “All of this is as good as settled! C’mon guapo—oh! This is like a pre-date! A roleplaying pre-date! It’ll be like you’re my dashing bodyguard and I’m the beautiful Inquisitor you’ve vowed to protect!”

“Lovely…I am your dashing bodyguard and you are the beautiful Inquisitor I’ve vowed to protect,” he said as he joined her.

“Yeah,” she said as if that much were obvious, accepting the arm he offered as they took their leave, “but we’re like, resisting the attraction—we have to keep things professional, there can’t be anything going on between us, it just wouldn’t be right! But oh man do we secretly want to sneak off behind a statue or a fancy shrubbery or something.”

“Magister Wiscotte better have some fancy shrubbery, then,” Cremisius supposed.

“Good god, they’re just going to get worse, aren’t they?” Dorian wondered once the young couple had taken their leave, “Just…being…so…” he flapped his hand like he was drying to flick some sort of disgusting gunk off of it.

“In love?” Josephine offered laughingly…quietly, mindful that Cole was trying to rest—the Spirit let out a contented humming sound as the Iron Bull began making gentle play with his hair. She smiled as she said, “They are sweet.”

“Deadass though—if I could have anything in the damn world,” the Iron Bull confessed, “it’d be for Krem to uh, you know. Have been born with a set up he’d never struggle with? But I’m pretty sure in some convoluted way the Maker’s lookin’ out for the guy because damn I’m glad we don’t have to worry about little Tevinter-Antivan babies running around, ‘cuz potion’s swell but
Imekari’s got it bad, I mean Krem’s a responsible guy, but the poor kid’s only Human, and he’s pretty much uh…dude can’t say no to that.”

“It’s hardly his fault,” Dorian drawled, “I’m almost positive that girl has stayed out of Circles the whole of her life by bat ting her eyes and pouting her way out of Templar confrontations. She talked me into dessert last night, it was horrible. Delicious but I should not have—was not going to but then…” his nose wrinkled like he smelled something foul. “She said ‘please’ and insisted I’m handsome and deserve to ‘treat myself’ to my heart's content. Lieutenant Aclassi is doomed.”

“Oh if they wish for children it would be the most precious thing,” Josephine enthused, assuring, “in the far future of course.”

“It would be quite the beautiful combination,” Tonio supposed, “oh but Maker bless sweet Ellie, between the two of them? The hair on such a babe will be the stuff of legend.”

Dorian scoffed, “It would be a shock for all the Ages if their progeny was born bald headed.”

“Imekari aren’t allowed to have Imekari until- dunno. Ellie’s gotta get taller or somethin’ and Krem’s gotta…dunno,” the Iron Bull struggled, settling for, “Stop being Imekari!”

“Ahh, my friend I am sorry—I was just discussing with Lady Josephine the finer points of Tevene and we came to the conclusion that Cremisius…will always be my handsome baby. It is the doom of all parents—your children grow and grow and you see all of the wonderful person they’ve become…and yet, your first impression is permanently ingrained in your mind at all times. I swear to you I startle at least once a day because I realize my bello mimio walks about armed with a sword of all things—what babe wields weaponry? I think, he could surely injure himself! And then I’m reminded he is not the tiny thing I held…Maker, I think a week straight, his first week of life, small and precious child I had to protect, who needed absolutely everything from me.”

“Shit, that level of parenting crap doesn’t apply to me right?” the Qunari checked.

Tonio smiled ruefully, knocking the back of his fist against the Iron Bull’s bicep, “I’m afraid it does.”

“Damn. At least my first impression was ‘this kid can put up a hell of a fight and take a hell of a beating’, but uh…needing to protect- fuck.”

“Language,” Tonio reprimanded.

Josephine smiled, reaching out to dole a sympathetic pat to the Qunari’s shin, “I’m unoffended, the man is coming to the realization he is…the word would be ‘screwed’, yes?” though…oh, she wasn’t sure it was her place to say anything but, “The Iron Bull…it is sweet you wish for Cremisius not to struggle but…he would not be the strong brave boy so full of fight, so strong he could withstand whatever he faced when you first met, if he’d not the experience of bravery and strength he’s had to live in his life to be who he is. He’s such an incredible man because of the man he is.”

A near-beaming smile spread across Cole’s face even as he kept his eyes closed, “She wouldn’t change him for the world!” he said…as if he were affirming the notion to someone.

“I would not,” Josephine agreed.

Dorian tapped his elbow against his lover's ribs as if to prompt his attention and the Qunari rumbled out a laugh for some reason.
"You are thinking very loudly," Cole quietly commented, eyes closed, though she supposed that was his polite method of announcing they were disturbing his finding rest.

"Ahh, shhh, I apologize bello," Tonio said, carding a hand through the Spirit's hair, and apparently something in the Tevinter man's thoughts prompted,

"Oh, yes, that might help. It always helped Krem."

The elder Aclassi chuckled softly, offering an apologetic glance across the other adults in the room before he quietly began to hum and then, very softly, "Fa la nana bambino*, fa la nana bel bambin. Fa la nina, fa la nana, nei braeceti della...mamma."

"I think that's you," Dorian whispered to the Iron Bull.

"Yeah yeah," the Qunari grumbled. "I'm the mama."

Oh it was sweet, once more did the Tailor repeat the gentle lullaby and then he pressed a kiss to Cole's forehead and wished him pleasant thoughts, and then he offered his arm to Josephine who felt rather certain if they did not get out of range of Cole, the poor Spirit would be subject to several loud thoughts over just how incredibly precious she had found the exchange—had—he used to sing to a tiny Cremisius? Oh goodness! She did try to put it from her mind.

…though their conversation did inspire a bit of concern for Josephine, and she found focus in that as they left the Iron Bull's quarters. Did the boy struggle still? She would not change him for who he is, but if he had things he wished to change for himself? Well, she would certainly support him. Tonio had spoken as if he and Cremisius’s mother had not been supportive of their son’s gender in his youth, that woman maintaining her stance even as her son had grown into a remarkable man oh— that- the very thought made her blood boil! She was not one for violence but she could understand the desire to— to deliver a slap to someone’s face for their foolheadedness, she certainly wished to write a strongly worded letter railing at the woman. She would refrain but the sentiment stood!

She’d a bit of work to do still, a few things she wished to check on with this concern in mind, so, she sought out her office. Tonio asked to join her if she wouldn’t mind. He’d no claimed workspace and he’d a few designs he wished to review before presenting them to a client. Too…it did seem like the man was reticent to let her out of sight after yesterday’s intrusion. So, he joined her, arm in arm through the estate, and he seemed to understand…oh she’d just a bit of reticence in returning to the room, but it was nonsense. Still, he waited until she nodded before he opened the door for her, the man stepping foot inside first and looking about, goodness—he wasn’t even armed, nor could she imagine he raised a hand to hurt anyone, but he had let go of her arm, had a hand splayed and raised behind him as if he were prepared to push her from the room if there were any unwelcome guests inside but it was clear. And clean—there’d been a mess made of the things on Josephine’s desk when Cremisius pulled the assassin over it but Eleanor had left the rug spotless, no longer bore signs of blood or ink from her overturned well—everything was returned to its proper place, full inkwell and fresh quills waiting at her desk, all of her paperwork in order. Too there were even flowers—a note before the vase in Eleanor’s hand with a wish of a good day and the promise her troubles would be over soon, oh.

Tonio took a seat in one of the chairs across from her desk—she offered him space upon it but he insisted he’d no need, he sat with his ankle crossed over the opposite knee, his sketchbook propped up in his lap, oh, he must be nervous, he was fidgeting with the charcoal pencil he had in his hand, making it wave back and forth in a rapid blur as he reviewed his work.

“T’m certain it is lovely,” Josephine offered as she set about her own work, searching through
the center most drawer in this desk, it was deceptively shallow, holding pens and ink, spare parchment—the bottom could be raised to reveal its true bottom, and in that space is where she stored all their important documentation for this trip. Ahh.

There had been a bit of a discussion, when the crossed the border into Orlais—the Iron bull and Cremisius speaking with the patrol they met with that allowed them to enter the country. She’d not known what about, she supposed the two heads of the Charger’s were merely talking through all of the Charger’s differing points of origin so they would be allowed through without further question but now she saw just what had caused concern. Cremisius’s identification papers, they’d gender indicators on them, marked rather unfortunately with an official ‘F’ which meant likewise his birth certificate must also still appear as much.

Well. That couldn’t stand. Josephine was uncertain Tevene law on the matter, but Magister Tilani could not marry her deceased lover from clan Tethras because same-sex partnership could not be concreted and she was considered, legally, a man, and she was a Magister. If she’d not been able to change her identification officially, Josephine had little hope Cremisius could go that route just now. For now, she’d enough connection to Orlais, Antiva, one of them would bear what she needed—the boy would not be questioned on their return trip, that was for certain. Not if Josephine had anything to say in it—she spent the better part of the next hour drafting letters to a few Judges she knew from her time as Ambassador in Orlais, a few connections she had in Antiva, Ferelden… she did not know many people from the Free Marches but when Leliana investigated Thom Ranier after his reveal on the Coast, there was…oh she could only just barely remember, but there was someone connected to him recently elected to office in Markham on a pro-magic political platform. A non-traditionalist at the very least, perhaps they might be of assistance in this matter—securing Cremisius a more security-sensitive form of identification that would give him an expedited process when he was stopped at ports of entry. She would not use Cremisius’s gender identity opposing his government identification as her reasoning for her request, she’d no right to speak of it with those who did not know, not without Cremisius’s permission, if she absolutely had to say as much she would wait for the boy’s return and discuss it with him before taking action. As it stood, she could get by merely detailing his accomplishments in his career under the Iron Bull, his service to the Inquisition and insisting he was a valuable agent, and he required unencumbered travel. That would be one concern addressed.

…there was…another concern. Did…did Cremisius struggle with self-image? He was always so confident and charming when Josephine saw him, but that did not mean he did not struggle privately. Was there something to be done? It seemed…it sounded like some culmination of mental and physical health…were there Healers knowledgeable on the subject? Adan, Elan… even Ser Stitches, they were all general practitioners or more so trained in battlefield tactics.

So. While they awaited Eleanor and Cremisius’s return, Josephine set focus—she’d many a letter to write.

It was easy work when it was for something she felt so important, was so pleased to do, and could do so in the quiet contentment of Tonio’s company, the soft scratch of quill and charcoals filling the silence with what she thought might be the most soothing of sounds.

Orlesians were bloody weird.

It’d been a bit nerve wracking, going to some Marquis party with Ellie on such an important
mission—he was damn scared for Josie, Maker, whatever had a sweet woman like that done to deserve so much bullshit? Thankfully, Minister Bellise was…

For a woman who was “well positioned” enough on her own without the Inquisition’s help, and “much too old” to be charmed, she uh…was pretty easy to charm, didn’t seem to mind the position Ellie offered.

“What can you possibly provide that will make your petition worth my effort?”

Ellie smiled, mischief twinkling in her eyes as she drew nearer to the Orlesian woman, hands clasped behind her back…Maker her gown was something sinful—she’d been joking when she asked if he would be jealous if she used her body to persuade the Minister but uh…he…he’d been pretty sure she was joking.

But her, “I don’t think we’ll be missed from the party for a while…” sounded pretty…suggestive.

Orlesian’s were ruddy weird with their masks—this Minister wearing one that covered her entire face but could not conceal the utter shock in her voice as she shot out, “Are you quite serious?”

“For the pleasure of your company, Minister? Absolutely.”

…and then Ellie offered the Minister her arm.

…and began enthusing about the beautiful gardens around Magister Wiscotte’s estate.

…and proceeded to escort the Minister through the rose bushes and regaled her with the tale of her Tia Josie and the beautiful Montilyet family and oh, yes, raising the Du Paraquetts up would muddle the lower nobility—but not the Minister’s ranks, it would just be one more family spreading-thin the regality of being a minor noble and perhaps making it even more elite to be considered high—and too, wouldn’t it be simply wonderful, stylish even, for the Minister to have the benefit of a returned—renowned—Antivan trading house favoring her? Lady Josie’s family conducting business in Orlais would be the Minister’s chance to jump into the trend of purchasing Antivan fare-

Oh. Oh Maker. Because the Inquisitor and Herald of Andraste was Antivan. Shit, Krem’d not even noticed but yeah, when they’d been walking through Val Royeaux, he’d overheard people shopping around for Antivan silk, roses, teas—the little Cafe even started offering some piss-poor rendition of Antivan rice. The Inquisition was becoming increasingly popular and what was more, their Inquisitor was—and whose to say if entertaining the Inquisitor might earn you more favor with her if you were able to offer her things from her homeland? Orlais had a lot but they weren’t exactly a meltingpot—they were exclusionists among exclusionists, the only reason Josie could even dream of resuming trade in Orlais was because if you go back far enough, before her family fled to Antiva, laid down roots that spread until their children were full-Antivan? The Montilyets were an Orlesian household, nobility. That was the only reason they’d the right to trade in Orlais. They would be an exclusive sort of merchant, bringing in merchandise no one else could get their hands on that was about to be trending big time in Orlais.

And the Minister? Was all about being on the cutting edge of that trend.

“I will expect a list of vendors before their merchandise is available to the general public, and given first look over their wares.”
“Oh gosh Minister Bellise, you drive a hard bargain—but I believe that can be arranged. The Montilyets will be honored by your patronage.”

And then when the Minister was safely returned to the party, Ellie took her gracious leave… and the very moment the great double doors to the Marquis’s home was closed Ellie was squealing jumping excitedly before she wrapped her arms around Krem’s neck and kissed him like he’d just sweet talked a Minister out of her coin purse as a favor in return for her ratifying the Du Paraquette’s rise to nobility.

It hadn’t been the roll in the rose bushes Krem had been expecting, but Maker did it turn out great.

And uh…there was a bit of loitering in the Marquis garden Maker he’d known Ellie had little grabby hands but how she managed to only just unbuckle the belt of his armored leggings and slip her hand into his trousers and just-

Probably not what the uh, designer had in mind when he made packed underthings but Maker help them all Cremisius Aclassi left a Marquis prize rose garden lips near-bruised, bitten, the bite thoroughly kissed to soothe, the recipient of through-the-pants hand job that uh…legs were trembling all the way to the carriage.

…he was damn glad Leliana’d had a few of her people planted at the party and tagging along running security because uhhh, personal bodyguard got distracted. Wouldn’t’ve, but Ellie’d whispered assurance against his throat when he opened his mouth to inform her—loved everywhere she was heading except the timing—but “Guapo, love you—feel a lot safer with you here—but Mister Bruce is taking point with my security today.” Ahh. Carriage driver—Leliana’s scout but Krem just about checked him right out the gate—would have taken him out because he’d seen it, the guy was an assassin. Just, not there to kill any of their people—he was Leliana’s, a regular face Krem saw all the time, he’d been part of the team of Leliana’s people that regularly protected Ellie, ever since Haven. It just took a second to observe through the initial ‘oh shit there’s an assassin’ panic for it to click that he recognized his face, this whole thing had him on edge.

So, Maker bless Bruce. And carriages—comfortable as hell, they claimed one side, Krem stretching out with his back against the carriage’s side, Ellie resting against his chest, legs between his as she put her feet up with a contented sigh as she relaxed against him, interlocking the fingers of her unmarked hand with his, tilting her head back to smile up at him, eyes alight with relief.

“You think it’ll be okay? Tia will be safe soon?”

“You did amazing El, don’t even sweat it—Josie’s safe and she’ll stay that way, and this’ll all be over soon,” he assured, she closed her eyes, humming contentedly as he pressed a kiss to her forehead. “Proud of you, Inquisitor.”

That earned him a warm, nose-crinkling smile as she giggled, “Gracias, Lieutenant,” she thanked him, though she let out a small, startled squeal when the carriage began rolling and they swayed a bit in their seat with the motion. But he wrapped an arm around her waist to secure her against him, smile pulling at his lips as she snuggled in, resting her head on his shoulder, softest smile on her lips as her eyes drifted closed and he was a relieved when he felt her breathing change, soundly asleep. Oh, good, damn did she need it. He pressed the barest, feather-light kiss to her hair to wish her sweet dreams.

She’d barely slept last night he was pretty sure. She was exhausted—worried at her lip and apologetic as she said she was glad he would be joining her, but she had things she needed to look over and she was waiting to hear back on some things and- he cut her off, kissing her soundly and
then flopping onto the bed and rolling onto his side of the mattress and said he was beat anyway, stretching out, arms behind his head as he lounged, closing his eyes. Though he did find himself cracking an eye open to look at her and make sure she knew uh…just because they’d introduced sex to their relationship, it wasn’t a requirement for their every bit of alone time. Just because they could, didn’t mean he was expecting it at every turn—he wasn’t expecting anything, if they were both in the mood for it? Cool. But he’d never make that a demand of her—ever. The least sexy thing in the world would be sex as an obligation.

“I don’t feel obligated,” she’d explained, “I just feel badly. We’re on a nice trip and I’ll be leaving for the Emerald Graves soon—rude of them to use my favorite color with the word ‘grave’.”

“Absolutely, what were they thinking?” he certainly didn’t care for the name either ‘grave’ was not the kind of word he wanted in the name of a place his girlfriend was going.

“So…I dunno. I was hoping we could spend the night together, and I, you know,” she shrugged, “planned on it being a bit more fun than laying around bored while I do paperwork.”

“Uhh, I’m incredibly entertained lovely—working my shirt, showin’ off your bangin’ reading and writing skills? Hot. This is…” he shrugged, “a normal night. Maker willing, we’ll have nights like this the rest of our lives-

“Ai, papito!” she complained, pouting at him as she took up the stack of parchment before her and swatted him with it, “Don’t go praying to the Maker I have to do paperwork every night for the rest of our lives!”

He chuckled at that—“I just mean normal nights. Being together, wrapping up the day, settling into bed, going to sleep.”

“Mmm, sleep. That does sound nice,” she agreed, leaning over to peck a kiss to his forehead, “Okay guapo—pray away, it’s officially Herald of Andraste approved!”

He had—said his prayers, drifted off to sleep, woke up when Ellie’s weight left the bed a few hours later and he blearily realized she was cleaning off her side, putting everything she’d been working on away before climbing back into bed to snuggle against him and get some sleep. and then maybe an hour later he was wide awake when Cole came falling into bed with them—appeared out of nowhere bleeding and drenched in sweat as he gasped in harsh breaths of air he used to inform them his body was having trouble breathing. That had Ellie casting to throw on all the lights in the room and launching into action—telling him to lie flat on his back and Krem took hold of his hand while Ellie carefully lifted the boy’s shirt to check at his ribs—skin was bruised maybe the bone too but nothing was broken, he’d taken a hell of a blow to the liver. Apparently that shit agitated your nervous system into hyper-protecting your brain and that meant hyperventilating trying to get air in and the heart pounding to course blood to the brain and…he would be fine from that, he just needed to lie on his back awhile. So, he did just that. Krem did his best to try and comfort the poor guy while keeping him conscious, talking him through his mission, Maker. Ellie made quick work getting potion in his system and patching him up, and she didn’t want him going anywhere for a few hours until she was absolutely certain he wasn’t going to go into distress, or she’d missed something—she asked Krem to go get Stitches for a second opinion and he sent the guy running while she stopped by Leliana’s. Spymaster was…she wasn’t heartless, but people didn’t always…think like they were looking at a person when they were looking at Cole. And she was intense and serious about her operations—this being a test run for something for Lady Josie was uh, another level of intense—so, Krem reported in for him and then got back in time to greet Stitches on his way out. Lay it on down with Cole in between them and
uh...he was pretty sure Ellie hadn’t slept after that, staying awake to watch and listen for anything going wrong in the Spirit boy’s body. Then she’d been gone entirely when Krem woke up again so.

A nap on the carriage ride home was more than called for. Bruce was kind enough to take a few extra laps when they got to the massive roundabout that led to the gates Val Royeaux, just... Ellie’d done her part—if Josie didn’t trust that, she wasn’t paying attention.

She was—absolute attention as they returned to the city. Ellie was pretty much down for the count at the moment, hadn’t stirred in the slightest when Krem made with the careful work of sweeping her up and carrying her from the carriage, nodding to the guards as they let them pass through the gate, and the moment he entered the Summer Bazaar to head for the spire to the Marchand’s Josephine was there—waiting out in the damn open! With papa but that was just him tagging along with a woman marked for assassination until the Du Paraquette’s were in position to cancel their ancestor’s contract! Marehis and Leliana were masters of holding it down with security but still, Maker, Krem felt about as panicked as Josephine appeared when she rushed forward to meet them.

“What happened—was she injured?! Were you attacked mijo?” Josephine questioned immediately, hand ghosting over Ellie’s head like she was afraid to agitate something but wanted to stroke her hair or check her for fever.

“Everything’s fine,” Krem quietly assured, “meeting went off without a hitch—Ellie got the Du Paraquette’s ratification secured and bagged you your first customer once you’ve got operations rolling in Orlais. She’s just beat, fell asleep on the ride home and I’m not inclined to wake her unless its an emergency or something. Didn’t get a lot of sleep last night.” Josephine sighed in relief, smoothing Ellie’s hair back.

“Maker oh, bless this girl a thousand times over,” the woman breathed, words dropping from her lips almost like a prayer as she pressed a kiss to the top of her head. “Thank you for watching over her, Cremisius.”

“Yes bello,” Papa commended quietly, it shouldn’t feel so overwhelming hearing two words ringing with so much pride, but it did. “You’re well? Did you enjoy the party? Have you eaten?” he asked as they made their way to the spire.

“It was nice, but we didn’t exactly join the party.”

“Are you hungry sweet man?” Josephine fretted, “Your father and I made lunch for everyone not too long ago, there is still plenty left I can warm up for you. Soup, a sandwich?”

“Sounds great—I’ll take a tray for Ellie too if you don’t mind? If she wakes up and finds I’ve cheated on her with lunch she might break up with me.”

Papa chuckled, patting him on the back, “Make yourselves comfortable—I believe it is your turn to be catered to in your quarters yes?”

“Oh yes—please, go relax and enjoy the rest of your day, I truly appreciate all you and Eleanor and everyone have done for me this week,” Josephine intoned, “Think nothing more of it and enjoy every bit of the remainder of our vacationing in Val Royeaux—I was able to secure dinner reservation for you and Eleanor at a wonderful bistro across the Bazaar from the Marchand’s. It means going down one spire and up the other but I assure you the dining is worth the stairs.” Hey, so far Lady Josie’s recommendations were amazing—the museum yesterday? Maker, he saw works he thought he’d only ever see micro recreations or read piss-poor descriptions
of. Seeing the real thing? He might’ve er…gotten a bit caught up in it all, it felt like Ellie spent more time watching him take everything in than she had actually looking at the art herself, she insisted he was ‘so cute’ and kept feeding his high about it all, asking him all sorts of questions about the art, what he knew about his favorite artists.

He’d been a total dork and he was fine with that. Ellie’d insisted he was ‘just the cutest!’ so it was a win-win situation really—get his high-art jollies, endear his girlfriend, zero complaints.

Krem offered a reassuring smile and a nod to the Lady telling him to indulge in the rest of his day off. He was gonna check in with Leliana first though just to make sure he wasn’t still needed in Josie’s guard rotation, but uh yeah, he planned on enjoying the rest of their trip. They were in Val Royeaux. A year ago if someone said he’d be enjoying a night of fine dining and theatre in a place like this with his girlfriend and his papa? Probably would’ve decked ‘em, taken it as some sort of sick mockery. Maker. Wasn’t sure exactly what he did, but he felt a little more than blessed.

Bit of a change of plans as they got into the Marchand’s—not for Krem, but Lady Josie. There was a scout there waiting with missives for Josephine from a Judge Moreau and a Senoria Diaz—it sent Josephine wide eyed and very excited and he wasn’t sure what they were bringing to the party with her Du Paraquette’s problem but he was grateful, Lady Montilyet seemed relieved and insisted she would respond to them immediately though that had her looking to Krem,

“Oh! Wait, your lunch—I’ll see to that first, certainly—“

“Nonsense cara mia,” Papa smiled even as he offered up a put upon sigh, ruffling Krem’s hair a bit, “I spawned this child and am therefore responsible for making certain he eats for the rest of his life so long as I still draw breath,” Krem snorted quietly, shaking his head. Papa took Josephine’s hand in his and squeezing it gently before raising it to his lips, kissing her knuckles. “I’ll see to their lunch—go, handle your letters,” he insisted, enveloping her hand in both of his as he patted her hand in a motion that seemed like assurance.

“Gracias,” Josephine said, smiling warmly as she squeezed his hand before releasing it and stepping away, heels quietly clicking down the hall as she headed for her office…cheeks definitely blushy.

Maker help them all was that- were they-?

Papa was smiling…like he had been, all the time—ever since he joined the inquisition he’d just been so…so damn happy—with work and the friends he was making and with his family. And…on more than one occasion, Josephine had been part of the ‘work’ and ‘friend’ equation that directly put that smile on his father’s face so…

If she was in the running to work her way into the ‘family’ part of that equation? As long as she made his papa happy…he was down. She was sweet, had a real sense of compassion, treated everyone equally with respect. She uh…definitely reacted a hell of a lot cooler than the last person that caught sight of Krem’s binder—well, bandaging at the time—and put two and two together. Oh thank the Maker most High you are exactly as He made you! were the last words he ever expected to hear from someone just on-the-fly getting to know that personal detail about him. Kind of struck him…like it tore at something that ached—which felt stupid, it was an incredibly…now when eh thought of it, it was soothing, but he only got to realizing it was soothing when Cole helped him piece together what it soothed.

“This is nonsense—foolish nonsense! I swear, Cremisius! Sometimes I wish you were never born!”
Cole uh…brought it up when Krem first woke up that morning and Ellie was busy with pastr...y fault, Cremisius—you father won’t last a month in slavery. He’ll be dead before the year is out! Cornelius would have saved us from debt and you threw it all away over utter foolishness —and—Out! I want you out of this house or so help me, I will not be responsible for what happens! Great times that’d been.

Cole shook his head as if saying ‘no’. “It’s not that they were the last—it is that they were the first.”

“Huh?”

“You’d never put it to words with your mother before—you tried to explain, just like you had with Papa, but she wouldn’t listen, didn’t care why you were so miserable. She didn’t even care that you were so miserable. You told your mother that you are a man, finally found it in yourself to confess that truth, and she the first thing she said was she regretted making you,” Cole’s chin quivered and he raised a bruised index finger to poke at Krem’s cheek, “I’m glad she made you. Papa is too. It felt strange for you the first time you realized the Iron Bull accepted you as a man without dispute, even more strange when Ellie did the same, no explanation needed—confused until you realized they had context. You disclosed to Cassandra but that was careful, concise, you offered telling information because you felt safe enough to share it. You could have taken the time to put on armor or your binder when you went out into the cold to check on Cullen when you saw him fighting fear in Haven’s night, but you felt safe, that you would not come to harm from a man like him knowing and you were right, that was willingly displaying something you usually keep secret with strangers. Josephine has no context, no lead up, you did not build up conviction to tell her—you never had a reason to tell her so you never expected her to ever know. But then the unexpected happened and without your will in it, she saw—she saw the fullness of the kind of man you are and she loves you more for it…and she has no reason to, while your mother has every reason to love and accept you and you’ve given her time and space to get there and she still hasn’t, might never. That’s why it hurts.”

“…huh,” Krem nodded. That uh…yeah. Okay, that tracked.

“Josephine didn’t mean to make you hurt, she would never want to hurt you. Ellie is hearing to heal some of her hurts right now—if you go and see her she will feel so happy to see you! Oh, Ellie too, but she is always happy to see you…” the Spirit gave it some thought, “well…Josephine is always happy to see you too. I am too! And Sera. And the Iron Bull and Cassandra and Cullen most of the time he just worries—if you hurt Ellie’s heart he will have to be ready to turn on you—and Varric and Dorian and Skinner and—“

It uh. It was quite the list, and he’d already un…well he hadn’t sat down and thought about who was happy to see him, but he uh, figured as much anyway. He had amazing people in his life he was glad were there, and uh…they felt the same about him.

Anyway—if uh…something was going on with papa and Lady Josie? That was alright in his book. She was already important to Ellie, being important to papa didn’t change much for him—Lady was important and he made careful sure Leliana and Marehis didn’t need him for her security protocols today once he got Ellie in her bed—she stirred a little when he took her shoes off and massaged at her feet a bit, he didn’t know how she hung in there with ‘stylish’ footwear, he always hated heels, mostly because the whole ‘mother making him wear them’ thing but also because son of a bitch they hurt like hell to wear! So he plied a little gentle pressure to anything that felt painful tight in her soles before indulging in tickling the tender skin just on her insole—sent her gasping


and smiling even as she softly complained “Anya, no tickling, mami’s sleepy.”

…wasn’t sure how he felt about his fingertips being mistaken for a mabari’s tongue but uh, he was wearing leather gauntlets so that was fair. He’d get washed up and lay it on down for an afternoon nap once he was back—Leliana was satisfied with how Ellie’s meeting went and she was confident her uh…security problem had been handled. She was down a few…three…more people—apparently there had been a mole in her ranks uncovered while Ellie was in Crestwood, some bloke code-named Painter betrayed one of Leliana’s agents to the Venatori. Unfortunately, Painter had friends—people in Leliana’s ranks that couldn’t believe he’d ever betray them and were resentful of Leliana ousting him after an investigation she launched on the words of a dead man in the middle of red-Templar-filled bandit territory. She laid waste to their friend, so they were trying to return the favor Krem supposed, Maker. He was relieved she was alright, that this crap would be over soon.

He popped by Bull’s room on the way back just to check on Cole…Ellie was apparently checking on him too, in the Fade, Bull and Dorian were out, taking full advantage of getting to lay around all day with the injured Spirit who peeked an eye open and smiled serenely before relaxing again, eyes closed as he offered the mental message, I am okay, my body is healing. Ellie says your mission went well! I am glad you are back and safe.

Me too buddy—good job resting, you’ll be good as new in no time. You take more potion? Anything I can get you?

You can rest and eat—I’ll be glad you are taking care of your body too!

Krem huffed a quiet laugh, closing the door carefully before he dropped by his father’s room—it was empty as he expected it to be, he still had the bulk of the things he’d brought with him in there and he stripped off his armor, Ellie got on to him about the importance of keeping everything clean…down there, after uh, sex and…yeah. So. He washed up a bit using a rag from his trunk and water from the basin before dropping the rag in his laundry bag for later, quick underthings change for good measure, he was changing out of his armor so he’d need to put on trousers anyway. Made sure his trunk was locked up and everything was at rights in the room before heading out, chestplate and gauntlets grasped tight together in one hand, armored leggings over his arm as he made the trek back to Ellie’s.

“Mijo?” Josephine’s voice called from her office as he walked by—the door was left open and he stopped, backed up a few steps to lean inside.

“What can I do for you? Everything okay my Lady?” he checked.

Josephine smiled at that, “Oh, nothing at all but thank you for your concern—I do need just a moment of your time,” she said, waving him in so he went and took a seat across from her at her desk. She nodded it was alright to put his armor down on her floor as he sat. “I apologize if I’ve interrupted you but I’ve something for you and it’s a bit sensitive—I should place it directly into your hand and then you must promise to safeguard it, Cremisius.”

“You didn’t have to get me anything—seriously, Josie yesterday wasn’t a big deal, I was just doing my job—the Chargers are here to protect you and uh…last time I checked I was still their Lieutenant. Been a minute though, Bull might’ve shaken things up while I was out with Ellie.”

She huffed a bit of a laugh at that, “It is not—it is not something I have gotten because you defended me yesterday. Cremisius…” she held up an index finger and rose up from her seat, going and closing the door to her office. “Marehis is with Eleanor now—one of Leliana’s Human associates is guarding me for the moment.”
Krem nodded, “Yeah, I laid eyes on your people as I walked by—everything was as it should be,” he assured.

“I was speaking to assure you—that we are speaking in privacy,” Josephine said as she returned to her desk, clearing her throat. “Cremisius, I am sorry something so personal was revealed to me without your intent, yesterday—if others saw and have risen issue with you, you are to let me know and I will- well it will certainly be corrected.”

Oh! “Didn’t run into anyone who doesn’t already know, and it wasn’t super noticeable,” he assured. She only realized anything because she was right up in his space looking for injured skin and found a knicked up binder. Only person he ran into was Skinner who…got in his space, sniffed him, and then grunted as she…poked him in the cheek with raised index and middlefinger, softly smacking her lips…like it was some weird substitute for kissing him on the cheek? Total weirdo, and he loved her to death. “It wasn’t a big deal, you don’t have anything to apologize for—pretty sure you weren’t the one with the knife.”

“I did grasp hold of my envelop opener,” oh shit, he did his best not to smile but damn if he couldn’t picture Josephine shanking an assassin with a delicate silver envelope opener without it looking entirely ridiculous, “I… I do not abide violence, but—” she shook herself, breathing out a shudder. Yeah, definitely wasn’t a laughing matter, “I just- when I thought that man might hurt you it felt imperative, that I should protect you—you’re more than capable in battle but…mijo you’re so young, not that much younger than my brother Antoine, my brother Claude turns fifteen in August. I look at someone as young as you and to my mind you are a child, someone to be protected because you’ve the whole of your life ahead of you left to live. I… I care for you very much on my own as it is—you are also a son, you’ve so many friends, you’re my mija’s boyfriend so your life is very precious, especially to me. so it is, in fact, a very big deal to me that you were in danger. However, that is not the point I was getting to.”

“Oh, sorry uh…so why are you giving me something for what happened yesterday?”

“It isn’t for- until yesterday I did not previously have the understanding that your gender indicators on your identification might be different from the gender you actually are. I realized that might make it difficult whenever you travel internationally, having to er… explain. You should not have to do so, and I apologize you haven’t had as much afforded to you sooner,” Josephine said, fishing something from a desk drawer she slid across the desk toward him, waiting until he took hold of it before releasing it-

It…was a very small leather-bound almost-book? It was thin, a piece of leather folded over and sewn to a tight crease as its binding, the Inquisition’s heraldry emblazon in gold on the front cover, and inside were just a few pages—one with the Inquisition’s seal stamped on the bottom of the page, Lady Josephine’s signature alongside it—then there were as many pages as there were countries south of Par Vollen, the next page had the heraldry of Anderfels stamped on it in ink, the signature line blank, but on the following page? The ink stamp was covered up by Antiva’s heraldry wax seal emblazon on it with the signature of a Judge Diaz. Then Ferelden, wax sealed, with the Arl of Redcliffe’s signature, and then the Free Marches with… huh, Rainier? A Judge Margret Rainier*, her name on the signature line. Orlais was sealed and signed by Judge Moreau, and Nevarra…was sealed and signed by a Duke Tythas Pentaghast*. Even bloody Rivain was sealed, signed by a Lord Luca Zeyase*. Tevinter was the last, just an ink stamp, no seal or signature.

“I’ve no connections to the Anderfels, though I suppose that is not so much of an issue. I did try but I’ve likewise no connections in Tevinter that could be brought to bear and they’ve very much closed off outer contact—I will keep trying, I’m certain I could get someone to sign it is just
a matter of the Tevinter government allowing their leaders to sign such a thing—"

“Don’t uh…don’t sweat it I…don’t really have a reason to go back there, you know?”

“If you ever needed to I would want you to have the ability.”

“I can get in with my identification as it stands uh…what…I mean this looks neat but what is it, exactly?”

“Oh!” Josephine chirped, “I apologize, I should explain—carino, when next you find yourself crossing into another country, like our return to Ferelden, when we reach the checkpoint you can present that instead of your identification. It is a form of extraditing the travel process—if you display the booklet alone you should go unquestioned as you pass through, and at the very most, they will merely check to make certain the country you are entering is signed and sealed appropriately and you can go on your merry way.”

“But it…I mean my name’s not even in it?”

“It does not so much represent you but the body you represent—the Inquisition. it is a writ that means you are an Agent of our institution we require to travel internationally and for security reasons your identity does not need confirming. I have something similar,” she said, pulling out her own identification- oh, it did look kind of like what she’d given him only had Antiva’s, “but it is only legal for me to use when traveling on business as an Ambassador from Antiva, representing my government. Still, it does not hurt to keep on my person, I just use my formal identification for travel otherwise. You, however, are constantly on Inquisition business as of late, so there is no occasion you cannot use that as identification—even in legal circumstance. You’re a good boy, but if you were to ever get into any legal scrapes and found yourself detained by city guard, you would need only present that as your identification—they would make contact with the Inquisition and it is through that we would secure your release, they need not even know your name, your personal information, they would say they’ve detained our agent and provide your writ’s serial number, and we would proceed accordingly,” she smiled, “I would secure your release, and your father may see fit to ground you. Or are you too old for that?”

“…dunno. Papa actually gets mad enough that he says I’m grounded…I’m grounded,” he was pretty sure. Though uh…technically, grounding meant being banished to the confines of your home and Skyhold…was his home? Even if he got specific about it go to your room! you’re not allowed out except for work and meals—and that is if you’re good! technically Ellie’s quarters counted as his room now…

Damn. Maybe he wanted to be grounded? He should get grounded. Sorry Bull, can’t go out drinking tonight—I’m grounded.

Josephine was chuckling at his acceptance of being groundable at seventeen, “Very good. In all seriousness mijo, I hope it serves you well—you are to guard it, you can understand why such a document would be beyond dangerous if it fell into the wrong hands?”

Oh shit, yeah, fuck. Some asshole running around representing the Inquisition able to pass through without question? “Yeah—yes ma’am. I- wow I mean you didn’t have to do this for me—”

“Nonsense. As Tevinter does not have the laws required to acknowledge your true gender on your identification or birth certificate, I found an alternative solution. You cannot- it isn’t right that you must defend yourself while you’ve done nothing wrong merely to set foot in another part of the world you’re completely free to enter. I…understand disclosure can be an intimate thing, it is unacceptable that you must do so with strangers who have no business knowing something so
personal. It is none of their business what my body looks like underneath my own clothing, neither
is yours.”

That uh…yeah, it was really sinking in he- Maker, there was always…this horrible fear that
came with having to show his identification. In the military he’d been given identification, that was
part of the whole ‘forging official documents’ charge he got landed with so uh, he’d had to return
that to the government to be disposed of once he started settling that mess, was finally able to pay
off his fines thanks to Bull. Had to go back to using his legitimate papers and yeah, it was always a
little panic-raising to have to address it when his identification came into play—something kind of
died in him when he knew someone looking at his identification, saw ‘F’, looked up at him and…
didn’t question it, saw ‘ahh, just a tomboy’ and not ‘boy’. And then it was an altogether,
sometimes-worse fear that cropped up when they saw his gender marker and looked at him and
thought something was off—why was he trying to conceal his identity? They had to look through
warrants, question him up one side and down the other. It…went faster when he spat out his spiel,
him and Bull explaining he was aqu-anthalock, no one wanted to spend a lot of time questioning a
Qunari, he just got…usually a funny look, occasional outright mockery he just had to take on the
chin or hold their business up for forever dealing with the aftermath of responding to rudeness from
an authority figure with defense or correction. To…be able to avoid all of that? Just, full-stop?
That- that was…

“Oh Cremisius—if I have caused offense- I assure you I had no intention,” Josephine was
apologizing. For what? Oh- oh, his uh, eyes itched big time, tears welling up in them, yeah he
might be crying a little. “Sweet boy I promise you if you are concerned I’ve disclosed your
personal information to the persons who helped me secure this document—do not. I wrote them of
you, yes—a young man who serves the Inquisition unfailingly in crucial roles without which we
would suffer in our mission, and we need you to be capable of traveling unquestioned. I
would never betray your confidence—in general, but especially in this matter—”

“Sorry, it’s stupid,” he sniffled, shit, he swiped at his eye with the back of his hand, “I’m not
upset with you, far far from it—I wasn’t assuming you said something you shouldn’t’ve, the
thought didn’t even cross my mind. Just uh…this means a lot Josie. Big time—thank you.”

She relaxed at that, nodding, “It was my pleasure. I apologize I did not arrange as much for
you sooner.”

“You uh…didn’t have any reason to,” Krem shrugged, though, “I hope you don’t think…it’s
because I don’t like you or something. I like you—I mean I love you for everything you’ve done
for Ellie, for my father? I don’t think he’d have adjusted to life in the Inquisition so well so fast
without your friendship,” he smiled, laughing a bit, “I mean, when you think about it…you’re kind
of the only reason he’s here?”

She startled at that as if it was news to her. “Pardon? I don’t know what you mean?”

“Weren’t you the one who got her clothing whenever she first fell into this whole Herald
thing?” when he mistook her for nobility when they first met she insisted her clothes were all
Josephine’s doing. “She could have just run around in her armor all the time, gotten plainclothes
for sleeping in but uh, you made sure she was appropriately outfitted for her station. If you hadn’t
done that, she might never have thought of hiring a tailor for herself as a way to hire my father.
And I mean you were the one who suggested he might tailor for the inquisition as a whole—
servants uniforms and things like that, offering his services to nobility—that was all you, Ellie
said.”

Josephine was blushing, ducking her head shyly, “That…it was merely a suggestion, a
product of bouncing ideas off of one another once Eleanor informed me she wished to replace her former tailor with one from Tevinter using the agreement she struck with Magister Tilani.”

Uh huh, yeah yeah, Lady was way too humble sometimes, Krem would always be grateful for her help getting his father back. He shook his head, let it be, “My point is, me not disclosing to you—it had absolutely nothing to do with you. I mean I like Cabbot fine, but I don’t have any reason to disclose to him so I haven’t…to my knowledge—he serves some killer booze,” Krem couldn’t help but grin, huffing a laugh when Josephine smiled at his jest. “I have nothing but respect Madam de Fer but I’ve never said ‘hey, by the way, this is what I’ve got going on under my clothes’—Sera’s one of my best friends and I haven’t done that with her either…that’s probably why she is one of my best friends, really, things like that don’t even matter to her. Everyone who knows only does because either I’ve had a reason to tell them or they’ve figured it out on their own because of circumstance or knowing someone else like me. I mean, I fit makes you feel better—I’ve never disclosed to Ellie. Granted her magic told her what was up, but still. It applies kind of—I’ve never had a reason to sit her down and tell her what was up, so I haven’t. There was never any reason to disclose to you so…I didn’t. That doesn’t mean I don’t love or trust you.”

“Thank you, Cremisius—I understand, truly, it’s entirely your business, and I’m grateful for your trust now.”

“And uh…honestly? You reacted…really well. It meant a lot to me, what you said?”

“Well, I meant it, I assure you…Cremisius, if there is anything I can ever do for you—if you ever need to talk or um, need support, I would always listen.”

Krem had to stop himself from laughing—Lady was being sweet, it was just…Maker he felt like he had his choice of adults to go to for guidance and support—Papa, Bull, Cassandra it wasn’t that it was funny it…was a good kind of overwhelming. “Thanks, I really appreciate it.”

Josephine smiled warmly, though that slipped as it looked like she just remembered something, “Oh mijo! Lo siento—lunch! Your father should have it ready by now and you must to be famished—come, oh you’ve not had a moments respite since you’ve returned,” she fretted as she rose from her desk, coming around to see him out or, well, he just realized what she just realized—he had his armor to carry and the writ was small but he didn’t really have anywhere to put it at the moment, so, “here, I’ll carry this shall I?” oh, she took the little leatherbound writ in hand, and made to follow him, she smiled when he offered his arm. “Thank you, Lieutenant.”

Though uh, guy couldn’t please every Antivan woman in the building he supposed—he could hear Papa’s voice as they neared Ellie’s room, Marehis’s offering some laughing reply as Ellie giggled. Which came to an abrupt halt as he and Josephine stepped into the room,

“Oi!” Ellie complained, “Tia! Hands off my Aclassi guy—get your own!” Mmm, subtle as always.

“Mija, I’m appalled—you’ve always been one to share…”she took a moment to look the girl over, seated with her legs curled up underneath her on the bed, hair falling out of its braid, still wearing the dress she picked out for partying it up that morning, half eaten sandwich in her hand. “I’m genuinely appalled you’re eating in bed in your lovely dress.”

“I’m hungry and sleepy and changing is soo,” she waved her hand toward the partition her robe and sleep clothes were hanging over, like it was so far out of reach and she had no strength to get up and go all the way over there, change, and come all the way back “It was either eat naked or eat in my dress, tia. I mean I’m cool with it but mami says its rude when I have guests.”
Krem smiled as he crossed the room, kissing her on one cheek as he raised the other the other to brush crumbs off the opposite corner of her mouth. “Thanks for not traumatizing Papa—I mean I’d get it, but he’d feel real improper. Some rot about ‘manners’ or ‘decorum’ or something.”

Ellie giggled as she patted a bit of empty space on the bed beside her, “Come on—get comfy and eat, Papa brought us food! He’s the sweetest and I love him! So much!”

“Oh, it was my distinct pleasure bella mia,” Papa assured warmly, tweaking at her nose a bit before dropping a kiss to her hair. Oh man it was…

…he was pretty sure his heart was never going to not threaten to burst when moments like this crept up on him. Like the realization sweeping over him again—the one he’d had the moment he got to the top of the stairs and saw his father alive and well for the first time in years followed by the realization his father wasn’t just here he was staying. His father was here, and he was proud of him and loved this life they had—loved the girl he loved. He didn’t realize it, how much it would mean to him, his father approving the life he was living but every time there were these pure moments of acceptance?

He…Maker he loved his damn life.

He had a key to the nightstand while they were using the Marchands—Ellie’d given him the key so…well, first night it was just in case they did ever have a moment to themselves, a place to secure his harness so it wasn’t just somewhere anyone could find it and it was close at hand. When he came to bunk with her last night he’d added his shaving kit and things so—double locks, a locked nightstand and a locked box, hopefully that would keep the writ safe. He’d take it with him when he went out, there was a sturdy pocket in his belt for things like that, parchment, important documents. Maker, he still—it felt crazy the Ambassador had done something like that for him and he was more than a little nervous it might backfire on them somehow. This was…a lot, and she trusted him so, he definitely wasn’t going to let her down. Josie followed him to the bed, offered the stack of letters she brought along for him and he smiled his thanks, putting them in the drawer before closing it up and putting his armor away in the mostly empty armoire Ellie showed him to when he joined her last night. He was in his plainclothes, worn one of his nicer tunics under his armor since they had such a fancy location to go to, Ellie smiled when she realized he was wearing red too,

“We’re matchy!” she squeaked, leaning forward and pressing a kiss to his cheek as he sat beside her on the bed, “Mwah! I love it! I’m wearing green tonight if you wanna match on our date!”

If it pleased her so much? He’d match her every day of the week, damn…actually now it struck him that yeah, Papa’d been making him tunics, dropping them off in his quarters every once in a while since he got back, each one a different color that…yeah, were the same colors of new things in Ellie’s wardrobe. “I’ll see what I can do,” he said, smiling when she nodded enthusiasm and then…huh, she checked her watch and then looked up at him, tapping the clock face discretely like she was only trying to get just his attention on what time it was…nearly two in the afternoon? What was important about-

Mouth dried up a bit when he went to ask her—she just stretched her arms overhead, twisting a bit, looking him directly in the eye, giving him a bit of a look like there was something he should catch on to—oh! Yeah it’d been a few hours since he last stretched so yeah, he followed suit, arms over his head, copying her as she lowered her arms behind her to stretch some more—had to lean forward to do so while sitting down so, it worked for pecking a little ‘thank you’ kiss to her lips for reminding him.
“Did you have a pleasant time at the party, da’mi?” Marehis asked, she and papa were seated on the bed before them, Josephine had joined them, sitting on papa’s other side. Mare’ was right in front of Krem so she was able to reach out and stroke his hair a bit—was sweet, she did that sometimes.

“Yeah, it was pretty nice—garden was pretty amazing,” he offered up, trying not to smile too much when Ellie leaned in, giggling into his shoulder as she sat more on her hip to sit against him while they ate. Wasn’t sure if it was just wanting to be close to him…or to more easily sneak bites of pickle off of his plate when they fell out of his sandwich like that made them fair game—though he put his sandwich down for a minute to sip at his soup and when he picked it back up there was a bit more meat in it than there’d been when he put it down so…that was fair. They ate their fills, chatting with the adults as they ate—Josephine offering to get them more if they were still hungry, saying she could return their tray to the kitchens but Papa beat her to it,

Josephine sighed, “I will be joining you and helping clean up,” she insisted before turning her attention to Krem and Ellie, “Do either of you have need of anything else? You’ve time to rest and relax before your dinner reservation—Cremisius, your father and I will meet you in the Summer Bazaar at a quarter until eight so we may head to the theatre together—“ Josie gasped. “Oh dear—the theatre never did send a courier, I’ll have to contact them.”

“It’s been handled, my Lady,” Papa assured, the woman looking up at him, confused.

“What do you mean?”

Papa shrugged. “The Courier came to the estate yesterday afternoon…as a recipient of one of the tickets, I was able to sign what he needed and send him on his way.”

“But I- you didn’t have the payment I prepared- Tonio Aclassi!” uh-oh.

“I’m sorry cara mia, is there a problem?” Papa was…smiling at the prospect that he might’ve just ticked off Josephine.

“Yes!” she informed him, “You- I demand you-! You cannot just-!” she seemed at a loss for words.

“I’m sorry, but I’m a free man, am I not?” Papa wondered, “I’ve money I’m free to spend as I please?”

“I- you- I cannot even- “ Josephine blustered, stomping her foot before she declared, “My wits end, Mister Aclassi! I’m at my wits end—furious! You- you can do such things, but you should not have!”

"Why ever not?”

“Because I have said so!”

“Hmm…” Papa seemed to consider it, “Now, I’ve not Cole’s innate ability to quote thought or memory with accuracy, but…I do not recall you laying down such a boundary yesterday. If you had, I quite assure you tesora, I would have discussed it with you beforehand. You’ve my sincerest apologies for my unwitting transgression-“

“I-! You’re not allowed-oh! You are allowed to do anything you please within reason and the law but I would ask that you cease speaking for- for a moment! Allow me to compose an articulate argument, honestly! You are the most- you’re infuriating!”
“Apparently.”

“Do not laugh at me!”

“I assure you I am not—I’m smiling but not laughing. How could I not smile when in your company tesora?”

“Do desist being so pleasant we- we are- this is not a pleasant conversation!”

 “…are we having a disagreement?” he wondered.

“Yes!” Josephine informed him.

“Have we met an impasse?” Was this…was he flirting? Was this what he and Ellie looked like when they argued? ‘cause Josie looked a half-hearted sort of miffed, where yeah she had something she was genuinely upset about but she was having a hard time staying upset about it… and papa looked absolutely delighted, like he enjoyed the woman’s reaction and he was pleased to rise to the challenge of figuring out just how to set things to rights.

“Absolutely!”

“May I offer a compromise?” he asked. Josephine nodded, albeit reluctant. “You’ll allow me this indulgence—treating yourself and these wonderful children we have the company of to a night of the theatre—and I will allow you to treat me in kind when we’ve returned to Skyhold.”

“We have dinner regularly in Skyhold and our meals are compensated!”

“Oh my Lady, I assure you, I’m no cheap date. We’ll dine in Skyhold’s finest establishment, and nothing less.”

“It does not matter where we eat in Skyhold! Oh! I am taking you to dinner tomorrow evening and you will order the most expensive thing on the menu so help me!”

“I see your counter offer, Ambassador. Once more—you may take me to dinner tomorrow evening and I will have my choice of meal—I’m not cheap but neither am I one for fish eggs or snails.”

“That is…fair. This was exhausting.”

“There is time to nap—you should lie down.”

“I will. After we do the dishes! Do not distract me!”

“Oh, I wouldn’t dream of it.” Holy. Shit. Papa was flirting.

…did Papa have game? Papa might have game.

Josephine sighed. “I apologize for losing my temper—do forgive me, Tonio…Eleanor, Cremisius, Marehis,” she nodded to the Elf woman who sat watching with wide-eyed delight, a hand over her mouth to hide her amused smile. Ellie’s was currently pressed into Krem’s shoulder, he was pretty sure she was holding back a scream of joy after watching such an encounter. They uh…yeah, something was up.

“Nothing to forgive,” Krem spoke up for them, shrugging. Found a bit of fun in being the one to say, “Papa, stop giving Josie so much grief.”
Guy didn’t look super sorry but, “I do apologize—I hope my Lady can forgive me?”

“I will take the matter under consideration,” Josephine supposed.

“Is there nothing that might serve in my favor?”

“I could be swayed,” she allowed, “Have you plans before dinner?”

“To earn your forgiveness, of course.”

“Then you will pay penance in that tea you make and the use of your reading voice. We’ll have an afternoon of leisurely reading.”

“I’m to read aloud?”

“Yes. You do so well, I wish to continue my book but I might truly nap,” Josephine halted in the door, “Eleanor—it is a book Cassandra thought you might also enjoy. I’m not far into it if you wish to join us?”

“…will there be proper cuddling space? Ideally for three to four people.” Ellie wanted to know, “Follow up question—tea and…?”

“The sitting room just down the hall with a wonderful fireplace—there are multiple couches, the one for ‘fainting’ is particularly wide but any one of them would be suitable I believe. And I’m certain we can find some sort of appropriate accompaniment for the tea,” Josephine assured.

“Does that sound okay to you, Cremisius? Mami, you’ll come be cuddly?”

“Certainly da’vehnan…three to four people?” the woman wondered.

“Ellie, me, you and Cole,” Krem supplied, earning a kiss on the cheek from Ellie for knowing just where her thoughts went, “We miss the poor guy, and he likes listening to people read.”

“Plus the Iron Bull and Dorian might need a break.”

Krem snorted. “They’ve been in bed all day entertaining company they can’t get up to much around except thinking about what they’d like to get up to. Cole’s probably the one who needs the break,” he smiled as he pressed his lips against the top of her head before he assured, “I’ll go get him—you get comfy. Sleep shirts are in the top drawer.”

“That’s why you’re my favorite boyfriend.”

Hell yeah he was!

Lazy afternoon felt like just what the Healer ordered. Cole was looking a lot better, more color in his cheeks, and the guy definitely had some of his strength back—no pressure meant no pressure so Krem carefully took him up in his arms—Cole wrapped his arms around Kerm’s neck, had a pretty solid hug the whole way to the sitting room the Spirit directed him to since uh…place was pretty big and he was pretty sure there were exactly, no exaggeration at all, a hundred sitting rooms and at least a dozen of them were on the same hall as Ellie’s quarters. Josie was already pretty comfortable, reclining on a loveseat, pillows at her back she could really just fall asleep against if she was in the market for a nap. Papa sat in a wingbacked chair alongside her, near the fireplace with a book in hand, reading glasses perched on the tip of his nose. Ellie was sprawled out on the fainting couch, hair loose and he was not sure what the pants situation was because she was
in one of his sleep shirts, thick knitted blanket pooling in her lap…with an empty plate she was handing back to Marehis, with just a dusting of cookie crumbs left as evidence apparently there had been something to go with the tea. Girl looked equal parts mischievous and apologetic and that was enough to just- Maker she was cute, was she allowed to be that cute? Once Krem got Cole situated, seated on the edge of the couch while Krem laid it down next to his girl, pressed a kiss to her lips, caught the barest bit of flavor left from her snacking and whispered a soft “Thanks, cookies were good—chocolate chip, right? Yum.” sending her blushing as she waved Cole on. Let the Spirit—oof—get his full-body cuddle on, guy liked either being little spoon, or laying directly on top of you, there was literally no in-between, today’s position of choice was the latter. Ellie settled against Krem’s side and Marehis joined them after a while—woman had paced around the room while papa started reading, but she eventually laid next to Ellie, wrapping her arms around her daughter’s waist, fingers tickling at Krem’s side in a gentle heads-up her hands were about to be sandwiched between them. It was a pretty cozy set up and he had zero complaints.

“Me neither,” Cole hummed out contentedly, awe. Guy loved getting the hair at back of his head scratched, Ellie’s Marked hand was obliging as the girl half-dozed against Krem’s shoulder listening to Papa read. Few hours just laying around, being warm and comfortable listening to Papa read over the sound of his pocketwatch ticking—he left it out and open, resting on the arm of his chair while he read, eyes drifting to the clock face every few page-turns.

“…I believe this is as good a place as any to stop, would you agree, my Lady?” Papa wondered, smiling wider when he realized the woman was fast asleep. Krem uh…might’ve closed his eyes then because he was pretty sure everyone was on different levels of zonking out—Marehis was probably technically awake just resting her eyes, and Ellie’s hand was lax on the back of Cole’s neck, and uh, Krem was decently sure the wetness seeping into the shoulder of his shirtsleeve was drool, and the Spirit was doing his best to rest. So…no prying eyes…until Krem heard the soft rustle of fabric as his father rose from his seat, and he peeked his eye open to…not spy. Just. Recognizance. Papa was up, and then down, on one knee at Josie’s side, smiling softly as he brushed a loose tendril of hair out of the Antivan woman’s face and murmured softly, “Cara mia? It’s nearing five, you instructed I keep track.”

“Hmm…” Josephine hummed a bit as she woke up, “Oh. Oh, Tonio I apologize, you needn’t’ve kept reading,” she sat up, raising a hand to papa’s cheek, “you’ve been reading aloud for hours—your throat must be hoarse.”

“Hardly—too, was I not serving penance for crossing my Lady? I hope I’m forgiven.”

“Oh I did not mean to genuinely allot true punishment—let’s get you some tea, come along sweet man,” Josie took Papa’s hand as she rose from the couch, smoothing her skirts. Krem stopped his peeping just a split second before she cleared her throat, “Mijos? Eleanor, Cremisius, it is time to prepare for tonight. Cole, carino, how are you feeling sweet boy?”

“Oh, it does feel nice when she calls you that!” Cole was happy to announce oh- Krem kept his eyes closed, hiding his face against Ellie’s hair because he uh…yeah, it was nice—same way it was nice when Cassandra or Marehis called him ‘sweet man’ or ‘da’mi’. Did he have mommy-issues? “Yes.” Oi! Mind your own conversation! Josie just asked you something bud you should talk to her—it’s rude not to, remember? “Oh! My body feels a lot better, it doesn’t hurt so very much. It still feels tired though,” his brow furrowed a bit, “I’ve been resting all day, I promise. I think I did it wrong.”

“Awe, no honey—you’re doing a really great job,” Ellie let out a sleepy sigh as she opened her eyes and smiled to the Spirit, “You’ve been resting just fine—your body’s been using energy all day for processing potion and healing up, if you hadn’t been resting you wouldn’t feel any
better at all! It takes a lot to heal—Dorian and Bull are going out tonight so you can get cozy their beds, I’ll have you get a little more potion in your system before we leave tonight, apply some fresh Elf Root cream to your ankle—would you feel comfortable trying a few sips of my sleeping potion? You’ve been doing well with potion that has similar ingredients—it might coax your body into a few hours of actual sleep—Stitches will be checking in on you to make sure you’re your body doesn’t react negatively, and you should be perking up again by the time we get back and Cremisius will help you test your ankle out to make sure it’s healing how we think it should. If sleeping potion works well you can try a little more if you want to get a good night’s rest and come morning you’ll be back to happy healthy Cole!” As opposed to happy but hurting Cole, yeah, that sounded better. “Mwah!”

“You heard the lady,” Krem said, “Lets get you set up.”

Pretty sweet set up—he and Ellie made sure the Spirit was comfortable, stuck around a minute, each of them holding his hands to comfort him as he relaxed and his body fell asleep. Breathing was normal and he reached out to Ellie’s magic she said, nothing concerning, just warm assurance that he was alright.

There was something kind of homey about getting ready for their date together? Ellie helping him with his binder, pressing a little kiss to the leather over his shoulder once it was secure. And uh…well Maker, he wasn’t sure what the hell but his throat dried right up when she stepped out from behind the partition and turned her back and asked him to help her button up. Hair was gathered high on the back of her head in a big fluffy ponytail which was a look but it also helped with keeping it out of range of his task. Lots of buttons, pearls that lined her spine, but most of them were done up except for the top ten, the highest most where her collar stopped just below her hair line, yeah, might be a bear for her to get to on her own. This opaque lace emerald green number with a high collar, long sleeves that tapered at the back of her hands, floor length skirt that fell clean from her hips. She smiled her thanks when he got her buttoned up and waved her to seat herself on the edge of her bed legs swinging as she waited.

“Black ones pretty please!”

Ahh, boots…kind of fun to help put on, Ellie blushing as he raised her skirt to her knees with one hand as he slid the zipper closed, lip tugging between her teeth as she smiled and smoothed her skirt once he was finished.

“Feeling shy, Inquisitor?” he wondered gently, teasingly.

“Not shy at all, Cremisius, just…after this morning I just want to make it perfectly clear—you’re the only person I truly wish to seduce,” oh…oh Maker, he rose up to his feet when she did, boots gave her just a bit more height, smile closer to kiss but not…quite yet, breath warm against his neck as she quietly assured him, “When…I wear more revealing things—just any one can see what I’m showing off, anyone who sees me, if they’re not you? They’re not getting anything special.”

“…and uh…when you dress like this?”

She smiled her approval, “This means there’s a more private viewing in store, for a specific audience with a single member—you. This morning any old person could’ve been able to tell I wasn’t wearing a bra. Tonight? Well, you’ll be the only one to see for yourself,” she raised up on her toes a bit, lips just a breath away, “are you curious Cremisius?”

“Can you blame me?” he played along as he wrapped his arms around her, hand on her back for uh, support as she rose up on her toes to kiss him…other hand just—left hand, wasn’t as
dominant, didn’t get as much attention from his brain so it was a bit of a simpleton, didn’t know any better than to just automatically rest on her bottom- oh. Maker.

Dress was skin tight, smooth beneath his fingers.

“Care to make an educated guess?” she teased.

“My guess is you might risk feeling a little uh…cold tonight, lovely.”

“Well, the Inquisition’s nothing without a little risk, huh?”

Val Royeaux was turning out to be pretty spectacular. Maker—Lady Josephine knew how to plan a good time. Restaurant she got Krem and Ellie set up in had been spectacular—great food, no weird stuff or bizarrely tiny portions…so much so Krem almost didn’t have it in him to move except to recline in his seat and stare at the ceiling, his attention only captured by Ellie cautioning,

“Cremisius…don’t freak out.”

Yup, that had him sitting upright in his seat and looking to his girl who uh…was seated with her arms crossed on the table top, resting her head on them, wait shit, was she sick or- she sighed, “I’m pretty sure I’m pregnant.”

Oh. Maker help them all, he snorted, laughter bubbling up in his throat, “Food baby?”

Nodded her head, without looking up “Uh-huh.”

“Alright—I’ll get the check, dunno if the courthouse’ll be open this late but I’m sure we can find someone willing to get a judge for the Herald of Andraste—you’ll set a new trend for green wedding dresses, unless you wanna wardrobe change?”

That got her looking up at him, eyes alight with mischief as she accused, “Cremisius Acassi are you trying to make an honest woman out of me just because I’m with your food-child?”

“S’only the right thing to do.”

Oi! Girl poked him in the face as she leveled an accusatory finger in his direction, “No proposing to me just because you feel obligated—marriage is also the last thing you want out of obligation, tied with sex!”

“Agreed,” he smiled, taking her hand and rubbing circles, “Just teasing. No worries, lovely,” raised her Marked hand to his lips, “You’ll know when I’m serious.”

Yup, that was fun, sent her cheeks burning red before she leaned to press her lips softly to his cheek. And she left her hand in his like a permanent thing, the whole way to the theatre…Papa and Josie looked pretty cozy too. Nothing inappropriate just, Lady was walking hip to hip, arm in arm with the Tailor, and uh…Krem got a bit distracted when Ellie apparently found her seat wanting, decided his lap was more suitable, sighing contentedly as she settled back against his chest, gave him a more up close view, Maker she was excited it was almost more entertaining to watch her watching the play so…he almost—almost—didn’t notice when Josephine’s hand slipped into Papa’s about ten minutes in. Though that hand went to her mouth as her expression broke out in
startled surprise, she uh…hadn’t expected…the play* was about this well-off family that opened
their home to boarders and ultimately a conman—guy pretending he was this holy man, a false
‘Priest’ playing a devout and pious Andrasten, whose love for the Maker inspired the man who
owned manor to write him into his will, take the Priest in as a part of the family and only a few
members suspected the man wasn’t all he was made out to be. Josie apparently hadn’t anticipated
the er…Priest would attempt to seduce the lady of the house and uh…they got pretty into it. Guy
was open-mouth kissing his castmate on the neck and the actress was…pretty vocal. Ambassador
startled, slapping her hand over her mouth while the other, armed with a fan she snapped open to
block Krem and Ellie’s view while she clenched her eyes shut. Didn’t do much to stop the
screechy-moans or somehow amplified wet sucking sound that smacked off the walls of the theatre
for what was probably less than a minute but felt like it dragged out five before papa’s chuckle-
laced,

“I think we’re safe.”

“Goodness—my apologies mijos I hope you are not scarred.”

“Insulted—what was even the point?” first time Ellie used the little opera binoculars Marehis
in an attendant’s uniform had slipped them when they entered the private box, the Inquisitor raised
them to her eyes now, squinting down at the actors on stage, “he just got her neck all slobbery—go
big or go home!”

“Carina, shhh,” Josephine gently reprimanded though she was blushing and smiling like
she’d found some amusement, still, “do mind your volume.”

“Me?” Ellie offered a giggle whisper to Krem, waving a hand in the direction of the stage,
“she’s the one screaming her head off over getting drooled on.”

Krem snorted softly, smiling as he quietly supposed, “Guess that’s why it’s called acting.”

Play was right stressful when member after member of the family got disowned because they
decried against the con Priest in their midst—but eventually, once the lord of the manor himself got
screwed over by realizing the guy was after his wife and his fortune the whole time when he got
booted from his own home. Ellie’d sat all the way forward on Krem’s lap—out in out gasping
when the Priest revealed the document the lord of the manor had signed himself signing over his
estate to the Priest. Krem couldn’t help but laugh softly when Ellie heaved a sigh of relief and
relaxed entirely against him as the Emperor of Orlais showed up to save the day and cast the priest
out, return the home to its rightful family. His laughter earned him a pout he indulged in kissing
away. Peeped over at the adults to make sure they weren’t giving them a show or anything but
uh…Josephine had her arm looped through Papa’s like she’d hugged it when the happy ending
began unfolding, the Ambassador resting her head on the Tevinter man’s shoulder and uh…oh
man, Papa was smiling as he dropped a kiss to Josephine’s hair.

Felt like he was about to spill over as he held his tongue the whole way back to base—
though he just about forgot what he was keeping quiet when they went to check on Cole.

Guy had a visitor.

Madam Vivienne de Fer was seated primly in a chair at the Spirit’s bedside, tome poised in
her hand as she crisply turned the page before lowering her book to look to the young couple.
"Ahh. Lieutenant, Eleanor, my treasures—you’ve had a marvelous evening I hope?"

Ellie nodded. "Si Tia. How was your night?" she wondered, sounding almost cautious.
Confused, because uh…what exactly was the Enchanter here for?
"I was meditating to clear the last bit of Lyrium from my system before finding my bed this evening."

Ellie gasped at that, "Oh gosh, did something happen? Was there an attack?" she worried. Oh yeah, Madam wasn't big on Lyrium unless she absolutely had to take it.

"Do not fret so, child. I'd an experiment this afternoon that required intensive, continuous use of magic, I took draught to ensure I would be able to work uninterrupted. As to my being here, whilst I was meditating the...Spirit was in the Fade. Nervous, as it is apparently his first time with a sleeping body, he apparently became discontent to stay within his sleeping form and escaped to the Fade only to wander the Marchand estate until he could not find his way back. I allowed him to follow me. I...was merely keeping him company, making certain that he did not endure further duress. As he is an acceptable ally and...your friend," the woman cleared her throat, snapping her book closed in one hand while the other brushed at her thighs before she rose from her seat. "As you have returned, I trust he is well at hand? If you'll excuse me."

Ellie and Krem shared something of a wide-eyed look as the woman left them, that had been...strange, but sweet they supposed? Maybe Madam wasn't quite so put off by the Spirit as she liked to let on.

Cole was drowsy as all get out when they woke him, Ellie gently pressing different places on his foot and ankle before she tested guiding his foot to tilt forward and then back and when that went without incident Krem got an arm up under him, supporting his back as he sat up and looping the Spirit's arm over his shoulders to help him rise up off the bed an tentatively test putting pressure on his ankle.

"It is sore but I can walk on it," Cole affirmed, and he unwound his arm from around Krem's shoulders to test that theory, letting out- oh Maker, a giggly squeal as he fell into Krem who caught him quick, it didn't hurt to put pressure on his foot, he was unsteady on them, "my feet work but they don't want to."

"Yeah buddy, lets take a lap and get you back in bed."

"Great job!" Ellie encouraged, as she helped him get Cole horizontal again—Spirit flopped onto the bed, it took a little bit to get him laying with his neck supported, feet at the foot of the bed, and she pulled his blankets up, made sure he was—in her medical opinion—snuggly before she doled a kiss to his forehead, brushing his hair out of his face, "Okay carino—you did so so so good today. Do you want more sleeping potion or do you just want to let it wear off? I still want you resting the rest of the night—your ankle healed up perfect, your body will feel good as new getting to fully rest without having to process anything heavy from tonic or ointment, and you should wake up without any soreness and all of your energy back."

"I was scared, at first it was strange to be in my sleeping body. Madam de Fer read to me, her voice is honey when it doesn't harm. I was able to get more comfortable with going inside my body while it slept," the Spirit blushed as he softly confessed, "I...I think I liked sleeping. I would like to try again."

"Then sleeping potion it is!" Ellie announced, fetching the bottle from the night stand and helping him sit up to drink it before he laid content and comforted under his blankets, "Dorian and Bull will be here when you wake up and we'll be excited to see you in the morning! Tomorrow's free and clear so once you're all better we can go Hurt Hunting okay?"

"Oh...that would be so nice," the boy breathed oh man, a few tears slipped down his cheeks, "thank you for loving me so much, for being my friends. My body being so hurt was scary, but you
made me feel safe.”

“You are safe,” Krem promised, raising the Spirit’s hand to press his knuckles to his lips before giving his hand a few solid pats, “don’t worry about a thing. Think happy thoughts and get some good rest.”

Guy was out like a light in no time so they left him to sleep. And it was a little fun to have a bit of a swing in pace—one second of Krem and Ellie sighing in relief before…an admittedly, dare he say devilish? Smile broke out on his face and he whisked the girl up into his arms, arms supporting her knees and back as he started the walk back to her quarters, Ellie letting out a surprised squeak,

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“Would you like to take a bath with me, Cremisius?”

He uh…definitely liked the implications of Ellie and bathing. And she did have a pretty amazing tub in this room and…they’d never bathed together before but that was a thing people did, right? First thought that flashed across his brain was, he couldn’t bind, at least it wasn’t the best thing to sit and let his binder soak, but that was dumb— it wasn’t dumb, just, he’d gone around without his binder on under his shirt lots of times around Ellie, and he’d taken his binder off the first time they were together and uh…that’d gone well, really well he…hadn’t gone that route before, he’d always left it on during uh, sex. He’d never been with anyone he felt like he could risk being that open with and it…it was her first time, something she’d never done before and…she’d never done before, Ellie was making herself vulnerable and trusting him completely with it, so he felt it was only right to meet her half way with that, trust her in return and that trust had been rewarded—there wasn’t even a moment of trepidation in him that followed his binder hitting the floor. So…this shouldn’t be a problem. He wasn’t sure why the question that somehow hit him like it was perfectly reasonable request and like she’d just asked if he’d like to go fight a dragon in his birthday suit.

Oh. Cuz he…couldn’t wear anything in a bath. Every other situation there was always…he’d never had every single part of himself entirely bare—he’d gone without his binder but he’d had his harness that first time. He hadn’t considered that as a form of covering until now and-

“Cremisius?” Oh Ellie was sitting up, his hand in hers as she brushed his hair back, “What is it, carino?”

“Uhh…”

“Hey,” and she smiled, gently, closing her eyes as she pressed a soft kiss to his forehead. “It’s okay if you don’t want to.”

“I want to, definitely,” he promised, just, “Just nervous.”

“Then we’ll figure it out,” she promised in return. “Whatever you need, okay? If you want to work through it together, we can. Or I can give you privacy and you can get in first if you think that will be more comfortable. If it’s something we can’t get to tonight, mi amor, that only means that maybe we’ve something to look forward to in the future.”

Maker that was…he’d known she’d get it but damn.

“Can’t think of anything in the world I can’t work through with you, El.”

Her nose crinkled up with her smile at that, “Me neither, guapo. I’ll follow your lead, whatever you need. Say the word—this is just like any other situation with our bodies, we’ve got every bit of say in what does and doesn’t go on with them, you need to stop, we stop,” she fanned herself a bit, “I mean I might need to stop—I’m serious Cremisius I just barely caught my breath, and I mean you getting all sexy and sudsy in the bath- seriously I might have an asthma attack just thinking about it.”

“…just like all situations with your breathing, say the word and I’ll get you potion,” Krem returned. “C’mere, turn about—first things first; buttons.”

That was something he could handle no problem. Start off easy with something that would take him a bit of time—might not of had to but he undid every last button from the nape of her neck to her tailbone, pressed a kiss to the back of her neck when he was finished, let her tug at her sleeves to pull the dress forward, down her arms before she turned to face him, blushing softly as she held out her hands for him to take—yeah, she might need off the bed to get her dress off,
pushing it down and stepping out before laying it out on the bed, offering up a cheeky smile as she put her hands on her hips and announced,

“Record time!” real proud of herself, and then she was close, rising up on her toes as she pulled on his tunic a bit so he ducked his head so she could capture his lips in a kiss, “I’ll run the bath,” then, “Cremisius….the entire future of our relationship relies solely on your answer to this next question,” she intoned with grave severity, staring him right in the eye. “Bubbles…or no bubbles?”

He blew out a breath, that uh…that was a tough one. But, after some careful consideration, “Bubbles.”

“Lord Woolsley lives to see another day as a single man,” she informed him, patting him on the shoulder before slipping away to set about getting the bath ready, her back to him as she crouched at the side of the sunken tub. Smile tugged at his lips when she sat down at the edge of the tub, bottom meeting the cold marble floor sent her letting out a little squeak as she shivered, extending a leg to turn the faucet with her foot, legs swinging as she waited for it to fill, humming quietly to herself. Giving him a minute. Cool.

Socks, boots, shucked them no problem, threw his tunic on the bed next to her dress started in on the laces of his binder and uh, “You wanna help a fella out?”

Little bit of a splash as she pulled her knees up to her chest and spun around on her bottom, rocking forward onto her knees and then back to rise up, arms shooting out to steady herself when she nearly slipped and fell before beaming a smile his way and giving him a thumbs up like she hadn’t nearly bitten it, every aspect of her rise was intentional.

“You know lovely, you should consider a career in ballet.”

“Right?!?” she agreed, coming to him and meeting his gaze before she began undoing the laces under his left arm while he had a go at the ones on his right before slipping it off over his head, Ellie setting it down carefully on the bed, her finger rubbing over the scar in the leather from his assassin encounter the other day before she turned to face him, smiling softly as she asked, “Alright handsome, how do you wanna do this?”

He sighed, taking her hands in his, bringing her Marked hand up to kiss her Fade-lit palm. “I uh…if you want to…”

Unmarked index finger went to his lips to hush him, “There are exactly zero situations in which I don’t want to, I literally only need your permission. You’re cool with me undressing you, where, when, why is inconsequential—I’m down, it’s done. Here, in the street, in the Great Hall, at Mother Giselle’s funeral,” girl leaned to her left to rap her Fadelit knuckles against the mahogany bedpost. “Done!”

Snorted softly at that. Maker help him, alright, “Alright lovely. Healer way—battlefield tactics.”

“Meticulous and quick—you got it guapo,” she nodded, and then her hands were low, unbuttoning his trousers and then her thumbs- he definitely didn’t have a problem with the way her thumbs slipped between the fabric of his waistband and his skin. She had a solid grip on his trousers and underthings, meeting his eye as she said, “On three. One,” tip toeing it to press a kiss to his jaw, “two,” another at the base of his throat-

Before she was dropping, dragging his clothing down and letting him step out of it before
tossing them over her shoulder as she knelt before him, looking up at him with eyes alight. “Do you trust me, Cremisius?” He found himself nodding dumbly. For a moment he thought- he wasn’t sure what he thought, Ellie’d…taken to sex with as much enthusiasm she had with anything else she learned so he’d had a half-panicked, half-rejoicing split second thought she might be about to return his earlier efforts but uh…it was still a half-panicked thing and Ellie didn’t half-anything—she wouldn’t do something like that unless he was entirely, vocally on board. All she did was rise to her feet, and then her hands were on his shoulders and he had caught her against himself when she pushed herself up to wrap her arms around his neck, thighs on his hips as she wrapped her legs around his back and he had a handful of bottom and her hair and her lips were on his and-

She uh…was skin to skin with him, so it would be hard not to feel where she sat on his lower stomach and she- she’d seen, that- it felt like there would always be a difference between knowing something on an intellectual basis and knowing from seeing. Lots of people could be cool with the idea of something but when they got down to actually seeing that something? There was always the chance they’d feel differently and she…she had just as much of a positive response as she had that night in Skyhold…maybe more of a positive response. She wanted him, was wet and warm and she definitely couldn’t blame the bath on that just yet.

So he pulled back a bit, pull his lips from hers before pressing a kiss to her forehead, and she squeaked as he held her more securely, arms around her back as he started walking toward the bath…careful to side-step the patch of water she’d dragged up, gave her bottom a little smack to prompt her to get down so she could get in the bath but that just had her legs tightening around his waist and she giggled and let out a pleasantly surprised, approval-laced, “Papito!”

That- was she- would Ellie be into being span-

That…was not conducive to the current objective.

“Set it on down, lovely—bath time.” He’d answered correctly with the serious ‘bubbles or no bubbles’ inquiry so, there would be other nights to address other things.

Maker bless the Marchands—they knew how to pick a damn bathtub. Deep enough to sink into, be comfortably submerged and he wasn’t feeling so self conscious any more but that didn’t take away from bubbles helping with that comfort. And Ellie in his lap? Reclined, relaxed…there wasn’t a single bad thing about bathing together and he wished they’d done it sooner—it was definitely becoming a thing when they got back to Skyhold. Comfortable as hell, he would’ve dozed off if he didn’t have the sudden panicked realization Ellie’d dozed off when the girl nearly slipped under the water entirely, her hand lax in his—he snaked an arm around her waist pulled her tighter against him with a bit of a jostling motion that had her startling awake with an apologetic, ‘Whoops!’ But the rest of their bathing went without incident, helping each other scrub up, wash each other’s hair—he got a decent head massage out of it, and once they were out of the tub, seated before the fireplace to warm up, dry off and Ellie…Maker help her, for some reason she let him have at her hair. Reason was he’d asked. And they got through it well enough—got more coconut oil on her than her hair the first time he got a glob in hand and tried working it into her hair and missed, but at least it worked as an in general moisturizer so, his girl got a bit of a shoulder massage out of it, and his efforts got him a grateful kiss before they climbed under the covers.

“Any paperwork tonight lovely?” he wondered as he settled in next to her.

She shook her head, “Nope! I already wrote mami and Sera back earlier. Oh!” she gasped, smiling as she handed him an open letter that had been sitting on her nightstand, “Noam wrote me, it was sweet—Anyah scared him half to death and he felt badly and wrote to keep me in the loop, I
feel badly he was so scared but it was honestly funny.”

Oh, it was marked as an emergency, poor guy—it was a page long apology basically, but bloke had nothing to apologize for. He’d been leaving the tavern and Anya’d gotten real excited seeing Cullen for the first time in few days—the Commander and Seeker Pentaghast had taken a little time off, gone on a little trip to the area Cullen grew up in, they’d written about it—but all Anya knew was her papi was home so. Like mother like daughter? She picked up the Commander’s scent, saw him riding into Skyhold’s gate and wham! Right down the stairs she went, tumbling the whole way, ass over teakettle, rolling onto her feet at the bottom of the steps and bolting for Cullen before Noam could so much as register if she was okay or not. He was so incredibly sorry, sounded wrecked but he promised—he’d looked her over and Cullen had too and he’d taken her to Adan and Elan and…apparently was insistent both Healers examine her for injury, even Enchanter Fiona had been consulted…and everyone was certain the pup was unharmed, not so much as a scratch or sore from her tumble, Anya wasn’t limping or anything though he promised he was carrying her the rest of the day and he’d try to keep up with her from now on.

Felt bad for laughing but Maker, he could just picture Anya doing something like that, scaring the crap out of everyone and just popping back up like it was no big deal, wholly unaware of the potential danger she just scraped by and bolting to get pets from the Commander. “Poor dude, you wrote him back already, right? Mabari’s are tough and it wasn’t his fault—Trevelyans girls are excitable and hyper focused on physical affection.”

She nodded, “Yeah, I promised him I wasn’t even mad and I thanked him for thinking to write me anyway. I hope it makes him comfortable with it? I told him he could write me if he ever wanted to talk about his transition but he hasn’t taken me up on that, so…hopefully this was sort of a push in that direction? It’s hard—not knowing what’s going on with you and everyone being so scared of you and being just…one day everybody’s okay and the next everyone you love is just throwing you away? He seems so scared to open up, but it’s not…it’s not easy to just deal with that on your own.”

“You don’t…you don’t still worry about that ever happen um…with us, do you?” Krem ventured. “Any of us I mean. Not just between you and me, but with er…everyone? I’ve been kind of meaning to try and bring it up since the Dread Dick.” He really had, just…Maker, he knew it was hard to talk about er…abandonment. Used to get his dander up in a flash when Bull made his first attempts at playing Re-Educator with him, figure him out—what brought him to military work? What was his mother like? Danced around the idea of Papa’s existence like he wasn’t sure if he was dead or not and if that was gonna bring up something he shouldn’t risk—deadass Liviana Aclassi huh? Bull’d squinted at the envelope once…probably more than once before, but that was the first time he’d been able to successfully read the smallish handwriting with his good eye once Stitches got the bastard some glasses. Li-va-na…sounds like the name of a stone cold fox. Your mom taken or do you think I have a shot? Think she might dig the eyepatch?

“Might. Just don’t let her know you earned it saving her waste of a kid.”

That had shut the guy up about it for a hot minute…now Krem knew he could trust him, that the oaf really did mean well, and yeah, opening up more about it had helped. Looking back he could see it all more clearly—they’d appreciated how hard he worked but he hadn’t needed to knock himself out proving himself. Part of how hard he worked when he first got signed on with the Chargers…a lot of it had been guilt driven, trying to make it up to Bull, make up for Bull. And Papa always instilled in him, that if he found something that put a spark in him he should give it his all and that’s what the Chargers had done, and he felt like…somewhere out there, his father was working his ass off for his family—had always worked his ass off for his family, and now it was
Krem’s turn to step up and be a damn man and do just that. But underneath it all…yeah, there had been this fear that if he didn’t push it, couldn’t be everything for everyone in any way possible, he would be found expendable and they’d give the snot nose brat that lost Bull his eye the boot.

Ellie blew out a breath, sent one of her drying curls flying upward to rest atop her head, “Well…I mean yeah, when we first learned Solas was lying the whole time it felt like ‘yeah, that makes sense, of course he didn’t mean any of this—he said he loves me after all’,” she shrugged, “but…well his entire problem became that he does love me and mami and- and lots of people he’s come to know through the Inquisition. But uh…” her head rocked a bit like she was physically sifting through the thought. “I guess…I don’t really worry that everyone will cut me off all of a sudden if I can’t live up to who they want me to be but um…I kind of still expect it?”

Oh shit, seriously? “Honey that…I mean expecting it and worrying about it kind of sound like the same thing?”

“mmm…I don’t lie awake at night terrified it’s going to happen—if I got into a fight with someone, I still have a sort of ‘knowledge’ on a level that they might decide to be done with me but I just sort of…it doesn’t hurt? And in a way that’s kind of nice but…I mean is something wrong with me? I-I was so heartbroken when I thought Varric was going to leave because of our fight over Thom but I dunno, Solas made me angry but the thought that he never loved me just sort of hit like I should’ve expected it all along and I was okay with it? And then um…well I kind of had a fight with Sera,” she danced around the topic-

“Yeah lovely, she talked to me about it.” She’d kind of been worried Krem already knew she and Ellie had had it out—that Krem was going to be pissed at her over it. She’d come at him apologizing for it and Krem hadn’t a clue what she was talking about. Girl forgot her sister might be honest, but she wasn’t a damn snitch.

That made her smile, resting her head against his shoulder, “I dunno, I offered to give her space if she needed it and I…felt like yeah, this might be where she finally gets sick of me. She’s my sister! I love her with my entire heart and I just felt like I wouldn’t be sad if she didn’t love me anymore which…I mean gosh when I say it out loud it sounds horrible!”

“Hey—you’re not horrible. Honey…this has all been since Haven fell—before you got back from Crestwood?” she nodded against his shoulder. “Lovely, you went all that time with your whole system messed up hormone-wise, and you hadn’t had a consultation with Adan since before Haven and you came home from Crestwood and babe, he’s changed up your potions regimen for a reason. You needed an entirely new formulation for your depression. Not feeling strongly about something that would usually devastate you while yeah, that almost sounds ideal—it’s a little nice when bad things don’t hurt, right? It…sounds just like loosing interest in something you love doing—sadness is a normal healthy emotion just like happiness, your brain not producing those uh chemicals?” that uh, that sounded like the right words? “Just sounds like…nothing wrong with you, just a symptom of your depression. One that might be dealt with soon—you’ve just gotta be patient with yourself. You’ve only been on new potion for maybe a week? Takes time for it to really start doing its thing in your system enough for you to notice a change positive or negative.”

“Oh…” she breathed, sitting up a bit and wiping at her eyes, oh, he hadn’t meant to make her cry but uh…maybe it was a healthy response to sadness? Oh. Relief more like it, but that worked too, he didn’t exactly want to make his girlfriend cry because he’d made her sad. “Yeah I- I didn’t even think about it like that.”

“There’s nothing wrong with you lovely. Sera could never hate you and want nothing to do with you, but if she suddenly did? You? You’d be devastated whether or not your brain is up to the
task of responding that way. Just like you still love her even when you’re not necessarily feeling that in your system.”

Ellie took a deep breath, and sighed, nodding. “You know, you’re like, the smartest? Maybe Noam should write to you?”

“Guy’s welcome to, I’m always down for more friends. But you’re the one whose been in his shoes, it’s your experience that’ll really help him with his if he lets it. You’ve learned a lot, and you’ve got so much compassion. You just need to direct that compassion at yourself every once in a while, okay?” he intoned, resting his forehead against hers, “Be nicer to my girlfriend.”

She sniffled, smiling at that, “Or what?”

“Dunno... didn’t think this far ahead. But don’t think you can get away with it just ‘cause you’re cute.” Pressed a kiss to her forehead and wrapped an arm around her shoulders, let her rest against his chest as she dozed off. Waited until she was asleep though, before he checked in on his own paperwork.

Lamp light was low, but enough to see by as he broke the seals on a few reports he wanted to lay eyes on before going to sleep.

Sera had checked in. He’d gotten letters every other day or so from the Elf girl, checking up on him but and keeping him updated. She was off with her girlfriend in the middle of heavy Rift territory and he wasn’t sure if that Fairbanks fellow would still be keen on the Ellie heading his way after a week of Sera and Lace scouting—they were either saving the actual world or wreaking total havoc, it was hard to tell from Sera’s reports. They were erratic, swear-laden complaints that there were too many fucking Freemen of the Dales! Shite! They were working on fixing that—Thom reported direct to Leliana and Krem to pass along to Bull as needed—it sounded like they were making great progress, and he seemed proud, that they were making the area safer for Fairbanks people and cutting down on direct danger Ellie would have to encounter, but he was also concerned. It...Thom and his men had joined Sera in the Emerald Graves to have her back while she helped with securing the Inquisition’s foothold there—they could’ve seal any Rifts without Ellie around as it was dangerous going what with demons and Red Templars. And then there were the Freemen—deserters from Orlais’ civil war and trying to claim the Dales for themselves and they did not appreciate the Inquisition’s interference in that. Which complicated the Charger’s mission.

Thom and his men, they were just supposed to be a defensive detail but uh...they’d gone more on the offensive, making it their mission to clear out Freeman influence, borderline going rogue but Thom sent in a report to explain the situation and Cyril and Klaus had each taken it to task to damn the risk of pissing Bull off by chancing a show of disrespect and write the Charger’s leader to basically say if he had a problem with them hunting down the Freemen and getting them the hell out of the Emerald Graves before Ellie could set foot there, he could shove it, fire them, they didn’t care, they’d go back to prison, whatever, they were cool with that—at least this time they’d be locked up for something worthwhile.

There was talk from the Freemen of capturing the Inquisition’s young Inquisitor, holding her hostage to force the Inquisition to back off. And with that talk came...they’d heard threats, seen them in intercepted reports—between notes on the weather and the safety of their holds from the nearby Rift, there were pitches, ideas for how to get the Inquisitor—which was helpful, kind of told them what exactly to look out for—and just what to do with her while they waited for the Inquisition to move out of the Emerald Graves, hell, anywhere else in Orlais the Freemen wanted their influence gone from. Which was enough to give Krem nightmares, or at least the sort of
horrible worries that bred them. So…yeah, Bull signed off no problem on finding every last
Freeman of the Dales and eradicating their movement from the area before Ellie arrived to meet
Fairbanks and his refugees, seal up the Rifts. Latest report looked good, they’d gotten rid of two
Freeman bases so far—

He’d be sending this report on to Cullen. Apparently they’d discovered just how the
Freemen got such a large foothold in the Emerald Graves—they had a sponsor. The Red Templars
—led by an ex Templar bloke named Carroll. Red Templars and Freemen bastards working
together. That’s what the world needed.

Might’ve left the lamp light as it was, tucked his reports away in the nightstand and just…
held on to the sound asleep girl for a bit, steadily breathing in the scent of coconut oil and lavender
as he rested his chin on her head. He’d forgotten to wrap her hair, damn, but she hadn’t wrapped her
hair last night either—everything on the bed was silk so she figured her hair would survive and that
was fine by him, it was soft, warm, smelled like his girl and he could fall asleep knowing
—knowing that in this moment, right here, right now, she was safe.

…soft…warm…her hair also got in his mouth. At least it was there when he woke up. Ellie
was a blanket hog but that wasn’t so much of a problem when the person hogging all of the
blankets slept directly on top of you, made him part of her sleep cocoon, her hair in his face,
snoring directly into his chest. New bruise there…had she bitten him in her sleep? Had she gotten
snacky in the Fade? Girl was apologetic, pressing a sweet little kiss to the bruise before peppering
kisses all the way up to his lips and wishing him good morning before casting their blankets off
and bouncing off the bed to announce it was time for breakfast…and he had a hell of a time
swinging out of bed, making a blind grab for a robe hanging off the back of a chair and chasing her
to the door to wrap her up before she went traipsing out into the hall in her birthday suit, girl was
giggly about it, donning her robe and staying in his hold the whole way to breakfast. Cole was
waiting for them. Papa too, teaching the Spirit how to make breakfast—Papa insisted he might like
the ability for himself or to perhaps impress Miss Maryden, he offered with a mischievous wink.
Boy had all his color returned, the faintest bit of bruising clearing up here and there, but over all?
Good as new and excited for the day ahead—they promised him a day of healed hurts, and that’s
what they were gonna do.

So…they spent the day in the Summer Bazaar. Bull joined them as extra security…and the
poor bloke was likely bored since Dorian was off with Madam de Fer for a spot of what they
termed ‘serious shopping’. They got a table at the cafe and let Cole go to town. He could get the
job done well enough on his own but sometimes it helped having back up—knowing if things went
super sideways Ellie and Krem were there to help him out, and sometimes they could help either
because Cole felt like they would know what to say or because whoever it was might be more
comfortable being approached by one of them—especially if the person hurting was a girl, having
a random guy appear out of nowhere to chat you up could be concerning enough on its own, it was
another thing for him to start accosting you over your private personal problems, so Ellie usually
tagged along, walking arm in arm with the Spirit boy as he scurried around Val Royeaux
addressing everything burdening the minds of the social elite. Turned out…everyone’s got shit to
deal with. Krem mostly just hung out, saved their table, sipped some kind of warm, sweet, cream-
riddled coffee drink, and spent some time sketching. Lady Josie’d asked him for some art for her
office—she’d given Papa the name of an art supplies store and he was going to meet up with them
in the cafe after a meeting with a client he’d somehow managed to pick up at the theatre the other
night, some Comtess that apparently adored the dress Ellie’d worn and been delighted to discover
her tailor was available.

Meeting must’ve gone well, Papa was in high spirits as he joined them. Dude kissed Bull on
the cheek in greeting, thanked him for watching over Ellie and Cole while he borrowed their mimo.
“m’not Bull’s mimo,” Krem groused.

“Hey—watch how you talk about your tamassran,” Bull snapped back, “I did not carry you around for…how long does it take to cook a human? You’re little as shit. A month? Two tops?” he shrugged and settled on, “I didn’t bring you into this world to disrespect me.”

“…you didn’t bring me into this world, period.”

“S’what I said,” the oaf smirked, “Hey—tell my girlfriends the Iron Bull’s thinking about them,” he instructed with a wink.

Papa laughed, slinging an arm over Krem’s shoulders as they made their way to the little shop, nice little place tucked away in a corner on the next level of shops above the road to the cafe—owned by this sweet older couple, kindly ladies who…apparently did have a thing for Bull. Got excited when Krem introduced himself, ‘Cremisius Aclassi’ and they recognized his name because a huge…’gloriously handsome’…Qunari had apparently graced their shop a while back shopping for his Lieutenant Aclassi the last time the Herald and her party were in Val Royeaux and the ass had gotten him art supplies for Wintersend, they were disappointed Bull hadn’t come along with him today.

Huh. Ladies left him and Papa be as they browsed—canvases and their assortment of oil paints, getting fancy with it for the Ambassador’s office—so… “How are you, papa?”

“Well I’m wonderful my boy,” the man assured, sniffing at a jar of Orlesian blue paint and offering a soft, surprised, ‘huh’ like he could tell what they’d gotten the pigment from and hadn’t quite expected it before capping and setting it back down. “I’m in this beautiful city with my bello mimo—I could be no better.”

“Sorry, I guess…I just…last time you were here probably wasn’t that great? For the most part, anyway. So I guess I’m just checking in with you…making sure um…you’re doing okay? Being here…being in the Inquisition? It seems like you’ve adjusted really well but I’d hate if I didn’t make sure everything’s really okay?” It had been a lot, Papa’s time in House Tilani. He’d opened up with him about it his first week in Skyhold, apparently Bull’d suggested he should. It wasn’t as big of a nightmare as Krem’d feared—his absolute worst case scenario for how his father might be living if he was even still alive was…darker than what he could really stomach considering. But Papa sat him down and laid it out for him cleanly enough, the day to day being a slave in House Tilani wasn’t exactly sunshine and rainbows but it was survivable. Still, it was a pretty drastic change, going from being a slave to his life in the Inquisition.

Papa smiled warm, hand massaging at Krem’s shoulder as he nodded, “I…actually thought Magister Tilani may be about to sacrifice me for blood magic, when last I was in Val Royeaux. It turned out my change in station was so I might meet your sweet girlfriend and be given the chance to truly earn my freedom. Which…is what I have, here in the Inquisition. I have work I enjoy, family, friendships, I want for nothing and what is even more important, I can be there for my son, make certain he can say the same.”

“Still uh…no ‘more-than-friendships’?”

His father regarded him with consideration for a moment. “Cremisius, is my seeking courtship on your mind?” he wondered, “Do you…want me to pursue someone? I…I believe you’ve several strong women figures in your life you may turn to for maternal guidance—“

Oh, shit, “No—definitely not asking you to go out and find me a mother or something,” Maker! “I just…I mean don’t take this the wrong way, I’m not accusing you of anything but um…”
“Can two people who work in the same facility and share common interests not merely be friends?”

“I mean of course they can, but um… I mean I dunno, just—maybe it’s just me but you two seem flirty is all. The playful bickering, things like that.”

“Well I could not honestly bicker with Lady Montilyet, I don’t think, the woman is too sweet for genuine meanness. I…” Papa seemed to consider it a moment, “Josephine has had many personal crisis as of late, I’ve merely been helping as I can—being her friend when she is in need of one. If ever that changes, you will be the first to know.”

“Pretty sure you lot’ll be first. And Leliana.”

“…undoubtedly.” Papa conceded. Then, “I enjoy my life, Cremisius, truly. I have much to be thankful for, I’ve been blessed beyond measure,” he insisted. “It is interesting you would bring up Lady Montilyet—when we return to the Marchands she wishes to speak with you, if you’ve a moment.”

“Sure thing.” Krem nodded. Lady need a change in guard or something later tonight? She was safe right now, he figured, going over the rotation in his mind. Bull was with Ellie, Dalish and Skinner switched off taking guard of Lady Montilyet last night so Marehis was probably with her now.

Bull… was with Ellie. And he had been with her in the cafe, unsupervised… for the better part of two hours. Hadn’t meant to spend so much time in the shop but they’d gotten caught up in it, lost track.

Papa helped him tote the supplies he picked—paint, a few brushes, and the shop owners agreed to have canvases sent to Skyhold, gave Krem their card so he could contact them in the future if he needed anything else. Papa took one too—he’d chatted with the ladies about different dyes, materials they used to get pigment for paints and pastels and the like, because yeah, from time to time he had to dye his own fabric or thread and he’d thought it interesting their use of plants—plant oils took to cloth better than minerals, apparently. They regrouped with the others in the cafe—they’d all successful times, Cole had Cole’d the crap out of a majority of Val Royeaux’s current population, and uh… Bull was a dumbass. He’d gotten a little carried away with being able to do ‘shots’ of something that had more of a kick than juice with his ‘boss girl’—no alcohol, he’d never encourage her to mess with her potions like that but uh…it also wasn’t a whole lot better.

“Cremisius!” the girl was up and on him—hands on his forearm as she bounced in place, “Crem-is-ius, Crem-is-ius, Crem-is-ius! Hi handsome!” her whole weight was on his arm as she pushed herself up on it to kiss him on the cheek, “Mwah!” she giggled as she landed on her feet, “I love you!”

“I love you too. You okay?” he asked… worried. Was she- was she experiencing some kind of manic swing or something? Girl was sort of vibrating out of her skin—literally tremors working through her as he wrapped an arm around her and rubbed circles on her back as she wrapped her arms around him to hold him tight letting out a little happy sounding grunt with the effort. Bull was staring at her… kind of the way Rocky stared at something that blew up more violently than he’d originally anticipated, “The hell you do?”

“Uhhh…” Bull droned, eye wide.
“Good heavens!” okay, Papa’s out here basically swearing, for him anyway. His tone was startled and scathing—he was at their table, examining these…really tiny porcelain cups, table was just about covered in them, there had to be at least twenty of them. He’d raised one to his nose to confirm before he started leveling accusations but, “You gave this child espresso?! H- how many of these did she imbibe?!”

“Uhhhh…shit, double shots so I cut her off at like, uh-“

“Eight! Eight! Eight! Eight!” Ellie chanted wriggling with each word before she pulled back in Krem’s hold to look up at him, to cheerily announce, “Four is half of eight! I said that four times!”

Oh man, “Yeah you did babe,” Krem encouraged and earning a smile as she snuggled against his chest.

“That’s- that’s not bad right?” Bull worried.

Papa looked incredulous. “She is neigh some sixteen years old and weighs as much as a single one of your arms, the Iron Bull! She should maybe have had one of those horrid things but none would be preferable! Oh good Maker, how many have you had?”

“Dunno, rest of them?” there…there were so many oh Maker help them all. “Took em on a test run before I let her have any-”

Yeah, what good that did. “We should do espresso before dragon fights!” Ellie gasped as if she’d just been struck with a genius thought, “The Iron Bull! Let’s go fight a dragon!”

“I…should not be trusted with Imekaris—kid’s all yours, you’re the ultimate Papa,” the Iron Bull…signed over his parenting rights it sounded like. Maker help them.

“Oh I’ll ultimate papa you—honestly- to bed with you, the Iron Bull—come,” Papa sighed, motioning for Bull to stand before he got up under his arm, wrapping an arm around Bull’s back while the Qunari put an arm over his shoulder, “you may not feel it yet but you are about to be rather miserable I’m afraid. Cole, sweet mimo, would you please go inform Dorian his lover may be in need of assistance? Bello—Cremisius, you’ve Eleanor?”

Uhh yeah and he wasn’t sure what eight double shots of espresso were about to do to the girl but uh…she had a big high to crash down from, so.

“Cremisius!” she objected the moment Krem knelt and got a hold on her, wrapping an arm around her waist and getting her over his shoulder, “I’m fine! Put me down! I just- need- more-!” he…was pretty sure she was reaching behind him, trying to grab at one of the cups on their table but he was decently sure they were all empty, and a hundred percent sure she shouldn’t have any more so he kept it moving, started heading back to base.

“Honey, I love you, but I need to stop you from chugging more espresso more than I need you to not make a scene so it’s entirely up to you how this goes down,” Krem informed her.

“The Iron Bull!” like he could help her, “Your Lieutenant is being sexy and insubordinate!”

“Can’t do a damn thing about either boss-girl,” the Qunari apologized, though uh, there was a very unfortunate wet sounding rumbling coming from his stomach, “oh man, crap didn’t do anything but moving right on through.”

“Yes, espresso is very…you will be sick and in need of the facilities certainly,” Papa
sympathized.

“Papa’classi!” Ellie complained, appealing to the man, “Tell Cremisius to put me down!”

“Oh bella, I’m sorry but I believe my son is behaving wisely at the moment,” Papa had to say, as they entered the spire to the Marchands home. “The Iron Bull, honestly, whatever possessed you to give her so much espresso? The girl is seizing.” Maybe? She was definitely wriggly.

“I’m trying to free myself, I just can’t reach- gah!” Ellie let out a frustrated growl, felt her hand slapping against the small of his back.

“Lovely, you trying to reach my butt?” Krem asked.

“No one else is punishing you!” and then she let out a frustrated growl, when she still couldn’t quite reach, “If you don’t put me down Cremius I swear, I will sit in judgement over your offenses! Caffeine deprivation in the first degree!” and then she groaned, going limp and accepting her fate...or more so succumbing to the down side of seven shots of espresso, and uh… whipped it on around to gentle whining, “Papito, I’m dizzy and nauseous and my head hurts.” Yeah he could uh, feel her heartbeat against his shoulder blade going a mile a minute. Could you overdose on caffeine?

“Hey asshole I’m pretty sure you poisoned my girlfriend,” Krem snapped as he let Papa go ahead and open the door for them, Cole appeared at his side and took hold of the bags the tailor and Krem had in hand smiling assurance before disappearing to be a pal and put it away for him, a soft I’ll get Mister Stitches in his mind as the boy vanished from sight. Maker bless him. He set Ellie on her feet though shit, she really was dizzy, caught her against himself. “Hey honey, you’re okay.”

“Awe shit, didn’t realize it’d hit her so hard, had sixteen shots of the stuff and it didn’t do—“ Bull…started. And then he went very quiet, except for this sort of...low, rumbly growl bubbling up in his chest. Huh. Making its way through and just hitting his system with uh...sixteen double shots worth of caffeine? Fun. So...Bull might die. He’d make fun of the oaf if after everything he’d ever faced, an afternoon of caffeinated dumbassery was what brought him down.

He got Ellie to bed, dress she was wearing today was simple enough, pale blue sweater dress that was comfortable enough to lay around in, and she conjured up a grateful smile to kiss him with when he undid the clasps of her bra for her so she could get comfy, pull it out the collar of her dress and sent the thing sailing blind.

“Forgive me for manhandling you?” he checked.

She nodded, smiling sheepishly, “I’m sorry I didn’t appreciate you carrying me—the me now appreciates you looking out for caffeine high me. She wasn’t totally wrong though—if Val Royeaux had a dragon, it’d be toast!”

“Oh totally,” Krem agreed. What was he supposed to do with this lot? How exactly did they survive in the field?...pretty sure the answer was Cassandra, Marehis, and the grace of Maker Himself. Otherwise Bull and Ellie and Sera? They’d’ve tipped the mayhem off the charts.

Cole...it was sweet, the Spirit appeared with a glass of water in hand and potion from Stitches that he immediately raised to Ellie’s lips, holding it for her like they’d had to do for him when his body was beat up, she took the glass of water herself though, pecking him on the cheek before chugging it. And the second she was laying back, Cole climbed in with her, curling up
against her side, brow creased with worry.

“Hey buddy, she’s okay,” Krem promised, rubbing circles on the Spirit’s back.

“She doesn’t feel good—I do not like it,” he swallowed, blinking a bit like he’d tears in his eyes, “I knew bodies ached but I did not realize how it feels until mine was hurt badly and still, I have some disconnect, I don’t feel it fully—you and Ellie have to live in your bodies, you’re more connected to them, you feel the hurt in full.”

“Mmm, but we’re also used to having bodies carino,” Ellie said, snuggling against him as she let out a contented sigh, “I’ve had headaches before, it’s not as bad as you think and I’m starting to feel better already,” she promised. Though uh, Marehis came to check on her the minute she heard the girl’d returned and gone to lay down and Ellie cracked an eye open to peek at who was coming into her room before, albeit pathetically offering up, “Mami, caffeine betrayed me, I don’t feel good—come nap with me.”

“Oh, Da’vehnan,” Marehis sympathized, offering Krem a smile and a pat on the back as they passed each other—he’d just been heading to go touch base with Josie. He motioned, pointing his thumb over his shoulder and mouthing ‘be right back’, and the Elf woman nodded.

Though he might be right back, he knocked on the door to Josie’s office before cracking it open, the woman was at her desk which was…covered in parchment, a hand worked into her hair as she pored over something intensely—Papa said she wanted to talk to him but she seemed more than a little busy.

“My lady?”

She startled, softly gasping before she smiled warmly, “Oh! Cremisius, mijo—just the young man I wanted to see, please have a seat. Your Papa informed you I wished to speak?”

“Yeah,” Krem nodded as he sat across from her, “Everything okay? Marehis is with Ellie now but I laid eyes on your guard now—did you need me to take over this evening?”

“Oh no—thank you for thinking of me sweet man, but please, I whole heartedly beg you enjoy your day off. You’re having a good day I hope?”

“Yeah, pretty great mostly—Cole helped a lot of people it looked like and I got started on your commission—sketches I can bring by whenever you wanna look at them to see if I’ve got the right idea what you want. Papa took me paint shopping which was…really great,” he smiled, “Thank you, again, Lady Josie. You put a lot into this trip and getting to spend so much time with him? Doing so many great things? A year ago I-“ he swallowed, clearing his throat. “I wouldn’t’ve believed you if you’d said I was going to get to spend a leisurely afternoon with my father.”

“Oh, Cremisius, it was entirely your father’s idea taking you out this afternoon—truly, he is…well, he is a wonderful father and I’m so pleased you had such a marvelous time. I look forward to seeing your work.”

Krem nodded. “All in all, day’s still pretty good.”

“I…heard there was a mishap with Espresso?” Josie checked.

“Yeah…little bit,” Krem chuckled, and she offered up an amused, relieved smile at that, “Ellie’s got a headache and Bull might have a heart attack, but a quick nap for her and that berk manages to stay attached to this plane of existence? I call this day of vacation an all around success.”
Josephine shook her head, “I should have warned Eleanor the dangers of Orlesian caffeine.”

“Oi—espresso’s Tevene, my Lady. Not proud of much from my homeland but our cuisine? Everywhere else in the world pales in comparison. Not just because our lot tend to run darker skinned.”

“Oh, Cremisius. I understand you’ve had a very misguided upbringing…but make no mistake—Antivan is by far the superior heritage of food and dining. I’m dying to impart more lessons in Antivan cooking upon Eleanor—she and I, we must make you and your father a proper Antivan meal.”

“So we just have to sit there and compliment your amazing cooking? We will—but that’s hardly a fair fight. Name the day, papa and me’ll step up, have a little cook off against you two huh?”

“Oh that would be absolutely delightful! I will feel badly when we beat you of course, but I am fond of Tevene.”

“You realize if I put a whole pizza in front of Ellie and tell her it’s all hers? Her votes a hundred percent gonna swing in our favor.”

“That may be true but I happen to know your father has an appreciation for Antivan spice,” fuck him sideways was that inuendo? Nah. Lady didn’t have it in her for that. Well…maybe for that, but not saying something about it to another person’s face. “And I’m certain Eleanor making either of you anything will secure our victory.”

“…yeah I’m pretty sure Ellie could give papa a plate of mud and he’d thank her and say it was high cuisine.”

“Oh he loves that girl so. But that is only because she loves you so—it would be impossible for him not to love someone who loves you as he does.”

Huh. Yeah, that would be pretty impossible he figured. Which uh…

Maybe…maybe papa hadn’t gotten the memo but Josephine? …probably didn’t love him as much as Papa, obviously, but…guy had loved mother once upon a time and Lady Montilyet?

…he was pretty sure she loved him more than Liviana Aclassi ultimately could. Pretty damn sure.

“Carino, I asked that you join me because…it if you are at comfort to speak with me on the subject, I would like to talk of; you.”

“Me?”

She nodded, “Your aqun-athlock status. If I may.”

Well…he wouldn’t be entirely sure until he knew exactly what about it she wanted to talk about. Sometimes people had questions…ones they had no business asking and either didn’t care or didn’t know any better. Josie wasn’t the sort to not care, and she might have something to genuinely address and if it turned out to be something he didn’t want to talk about? She’d respect that. So he nodded, and she cleared her throat, “I did not name names but I did reach out for…I did a bit of research,” she shyly confessed, “I must admit I’ve never knowingly encountered such a concept—but um…if you experience a great deal of dysphoria still? That is the word, yes?” he nodded, “I would be more than happy to help you find someone who specializes in that area of
...specializes? “What do you mean?”

“There are therapists who can assist in coping mentally, emotionally, with gender issues. Too there are Healers who would not be able to alter anything about your body necessarily, but could assist on a chemical level—emotional and mental health, and physical to a degree, there are ways of...” she was looking at one of the open letters on her desk, scanning the page for something and reading off, “encouraging the production of...test...testosterone?” she looked up, inquisitive, “Did I say that right?” she asked him.

Uhh...“Beats me?” didn’t have a ruddy clue.

“It is a hormone all people have but um...” she searched the letter a bit more before looking up and explaining, “there is estrogen and testosterone? Everyone has quantities of both but traditionally...” she seemed to struggle for a second before concluding, “bodies like mine produce greater quantities of estrogen than testosterone which has some bearing on my traits that are considered traditionally feminine. Likewise in bodies like your father’s, testosterone is more predominant than his estrogen levels, which affect his masculine traits.” Oh yeah, estrogen... Ellie’d said something about that before, she knew words like that anyway. “There are potions, dietary changes, exercise regimens that could be of assistance in helping your body to produce a chemical balance that your mind would react to more positively, would help you grow more comfortable in areas you might find discomfort in.”

“I uh...huh. I mean I’ve gone to Stitches for things like uh...nixing the whole ‘monthly’ thing but I never...I dunno, I just didn’t think there were Healers for this sort of thing specifically.”

“I thought perhaps that might be the case—they are not exactly commonplace, but they do exist. If it is something that interests you, something you wish to pursue for your own comfort and health, I thought you should be made aware of it,” Josephine reached out again, arm laying across her desk, hand open and he took that as invitation to place his hand in hers, getting a smile as she squeezed his hand gently, “I meant what I said—you are just as the Maker made you when He formed your most precious life, Cremisius. None who truly love you would wish for you to change in any way—save for any way you might wish to change for yourself. I only bring these options up for you because it is your every right to know of them, to pursue or not by your own discretion based solely on what you need for yourself, carino.”

He...wasn’t sure. He’d always thought—hell, his binder and a well-placed sock, and he was good to go. But yeah, he’d never dreamed there were people who actually took this thing that affected him his whole life so seriously that they would dedicate their own lives to figuring it out and ways to...to help people with it. It was a little overwhelming but...yeah, “I’ll...I’ll think about it.”

She nodded, giving his hand another squeeze before releasing it and pulling back to straighten a stack of parchment on her desk. “You may have the replies I received from my inquiries—they will give you names of potential Healers and more information you might wish to have for yourself as you ponder. If you’ve no need of them—wonderful. If you do, please, do not hesitate to come to me and I would gladly assist you in any way to make arrangements for you, Cremisius.”

He nodded, “Yeah um...thanks—seriously I- I’ll let you know.”

“Too if...if you would like—you’re a very polite young man, a gentleman by all accounts,” Josephine assured, which coming from her was a pretty major compliment, “but...I would
understand if you have perhaps been raised to adhere to feminine standards—if ever you feel uncertain about masculine forms of etiquette, conducting as much in scrutinized social circumstance, you may always come to me.”

Yeah…he had the basics covered, but um…hell, it felt stupid, but she was the one who offered, “I’m uh…a little nervous about the Winter palace.”

“You will be addressed appropriately,” she assured him…kind of like she’d slap someone if they misgendered him or something.

“Not so much about attending but uh…I mean I did alright at First Day-Eve but…” oh man, “Bull kind of taught me how to um. Dance.”

“How to dance…the lead?” Josephine asked wide eyed and covering her mouth to hide her smile because yeah—it was definitely hilarious and she was probably worried he’d think she was laughing at him. “Oh-“ she cleared her throat, composing herself before assuring, “Cremisius, if you can lead the Iron Bull in dance I’m certain you’ve mastered the skill,” and her expression warmed as she thought back on it, “You did very well dancing with Eleanor First Day-Eve. Oh I was so pleased you enjoyed yourselves! You do not feel confident in taking to the dance floor in a more formal setting?”

He blushed, “It’s stupid—I mean we’ll be running a mission but uh…you know. If we can have a dance or two? I…I just wouldn’t want to embarrass myself or spend the whole time worrying I am.”

Bull’d given him some instruction, practice, but that did little to counterbalance hours upon hours for days of weeks of years spent having it drilled into him in those Maker-awful ‘charm’ lessons to let himself be led instead of leading.

“Would you feel comfortable learning at Eleanor’s side? She’s a great many duties to tend to in preparation for the Winter Palace and one of them is to learn dance, for herself. She will be a point of focus for everyone that evening watching the Inquisitor play the Game—she must do so in good form, so, she will need to be instructed in dance herself and require a partner for her lessons…”

“Yeah?”

“It might be a bit more incentivizing for Eleanor if she can learn with a partner she’d be excited to dance with—you will learn exactly how to lead her as she follows in a fashion suitable for an Orlesian ballroom. I would be absolutely delighted if you would join us.”

“I’d be pretty delighted to join you.”

The woman started clapping, lighting up with her enthusiasm, gushing, “Oh wonderful! It will be such fun!” she sighed with some relief. “Thank you, Cremisius, for sitting and talking with me. I’m sorry if it was all a little overwhelming I just- you’ve done so much for myself, the Inquisition—for my mija. You deserve so much happiness and when I learned you might struggle with inherently being yourself I…it hurts me in the same way Eleanor’s do—for her, I schedule and plan—make certain when she has an appointment with her Healer it takes absolute priority, happens for her exactly when and as she needs it to. So I suppose I reflexively wished to do the same for you, I apologize if I came on…too strong?”

“Hey,” he shrugged, smiling assurance, “I’m never one to complain about a strong woman—thanks for all of this. I need anything scheduled, you’re the one I’m coming to. Reina of
professional assistants, right?"

She blushed at that, “So I have been told. It is my pleasure to assist,” she assured. “Gracias, mijo, for trusting me.”

“Well, gracias for being someone I can trust,” he returned. “Was there anything else you need? I should check on the caffeine junkies,” he should at least make sure Papa wasn’t single handedly caretaking a sick Bull. Guy could do it, he had no doubt, but still. And if he could get in on nap time with Ellie and Cole, he definitely wasn’t passing up on the opportunity. But, more importantly, “You’re good on security for the rest of the day? Bull might be down for the count this evening. You get nervous or something you can always come have dinner with Ellie and me—welcome to do that regardless,” he assured.

“Oh, that is sweet of you to offer but I actually have plans with your father this evening,” she...was blushing, but then she looked a little guilty about it? She shook her head, explaining, “to return the favor of last night’s dinner of course. I will touch base with Leliana and make certain we’ve appropriate security, I promise. Oh! I- I would not wish to exclude you—if Eleanor is feeling better perhaps you’d like to join us?”

Didn’t want the Lady going out of her way to buy them dinner and uh...definitely didn’t want to interrupt their dinner date. “Nah uh...you two have fun.”

“We will,” Josephine smiled and then caught herself, “Your father is excellent company, he- I truly appreciate his friendship.”

Kind of had to fight how big he was smiling, just- Maker she was shy, so, “Always nice to have dinner with friends—I’m sure he’s looking forward to it. Have a good time, yeah?”

Lady Ambassador was still blushing but she nodded. “Do give Eleanor my best.”

Josephine had never been more nervous in her life.

Everything was...going wonderfully—the Du Paraquettes were cancelling the contract with the House of Repose, it was a matter of looking over the final confirmations from all parties that the Montilyet’s troubles with the House of Repose were a thing of the past. They were on their final day in Val Royeaux, concluding their bit of vacationing, and perilous drama aside...they’d all had a marvelous time.

Perhaps...too marvelous a time.

Ohh! She felt despicable! Despised herself for holding her tongue—it had been days!

Three entire evenings had passed since Josephine no longer needed the ruse of a relationship with Tonio. And she had yet to inform him of such a thing. And it was horrible of her! And she was going to tell him! She was determined to, today, their final in Val Royeaux.

She had tried to do so sooner. Really and truly. There had been countless moments over the past few days—the entirety of their evening out with Cremisius and Eleanor, Josephine had opened her mouth to broach the subject with Tonio while they were dining together and- and-
Nothing. She was often met with things that left her silent to allow the facade to last just a bit more…while simultaneously being the very reason she should cease abusing this man’s trust. The waiter would come and Tonio would address him with such warm encouragement—the young man was nervous, very polite and courteous, eager to please, but apparently he was new and that…did not always receive patience. There were many patrons that evening that were outright cruel to the young man when he proved to be uncertain about the ins and outs of the menu, brought their beverages but mixed up which went with which person, Josephine had startled when a Comte some tables over shouted at their waiter, slapped a hot dish out of his hands and insisted he’d never been treated with such unprofessionalism in his life because the young man had served the Comte’s date, placing her meal before her first, before serving him and he apparently found the action a sign of disrespect which was beyond baffling but resulted in the Comte storming out after screaming in the young man’s face. Tonio did nothing to berate him when he mistakenly brought the wrong order—Josephine didn’t wish to kick up fuss…and he didn’t, he very gently informed the young man that ‘his Lady’ had ordered salmon, not steak, patting the boy’s hand and assuring him he would get the hang of things—even seasoned professionals had such slip ups. The waiter was more than apologetic, bringing them fresh bread and refilling their wine glasses promptly while they awaited the corrected order, chatting amicably between themselves, the Tevinter man waiting to eat until Josephine was able to likewise. She felt a bit badly for the wait but they did have a great deal to talk about-

Their arrangement came up not even once…though Josephine’s mind was occupied on other things—her research for Cremisius for example, they’d been relatively alone, in a more secluded part of the restaurant, and were careful in the words they chose as she spoke of it with Tonio before she dared bring up the subject with his son, just, she did not wish to overstep her bounds. She worried the boy might be insulated or disconcerted by her interest in aiding him—it was something he lived with, he may well already know every last thing Josephine had learned but Tonio seemed rather taken aback that there was such a thing as a Healer that dedicated themselves to the study of gender dysphoria. He held no objections to her bringing it up with his son—she thought perhaps the man himself might like to do so but he insisted he felt comfortable with Josephine doing as much, she had done the work of finding resources for Cremisius and she might be better prepared for such a talk, and too Tonio worried…if he brought such a thing up, Cremisius might pursue seeking a Healer’s advice out of worry his father finds something wanting in his son’s masculinity, that he’s being *told* that he *should* seek such assistance as opposed to being *informed* that he *could*.

“You’ve such a gentle way with your words my Lady, I feel he would clearly see the genuine nature with which you’re bringing this to him—to arm him with knowledge so if he does wish to pursue a Healer or finds he does need therapy, he knows he has the options to do so. I…” the man sighed, “I’m remiss I did not consider this myself I- he has been open with me about his struggles, I thought… I don’t know. I suppose…he’s done so well with the Iron Bull’s encouragement, and Ellie, Maker bless her, I’ve never seen him have a trace of doubt in himself at her hand. I would like to think I have been an encouragement to him, that I offer support, and I- I’ve so much to make up for in this regard, I feel like I’ve done nothing but fail him at every turn in his youth and now- I just never thought to consider there might be healers who specialize in this realm of medicine. That you immediately thought of it, made inquiries and laid so much groundwork, I admit I am a touch jealous—I should be capable of knowing how to help him.”

“It is perfectly normal for a parent to believe they can solve their children’s troubles all on their own, instinct really, it seems—to wish the ability to kiss all ails and make them better.” Josephine chuckled when the light jest made the man stop looking so very grave and smile a bit, “I assure you I only thought of as much because…well, I suppose a similar instinct—when something is hurting the people that I love, my immediate reaction is to help. Usually that help is from outside of myself—I am skilled in speech and planning and little else,” she assured, “Eleanor has her own
health struggles—physical or mental—the only thing I can do to help her is assist in scheduling appointments for her. When I learned Cremisius might have struggles of his own, my immediate thought was to do the same, but…well, one cannot make appointments without someone to make them with.”

She felt almost like she’d been rambling in an attempt to comfort him, but the man picked up on, “When something is hurting the people you love?” he smiled, eyes alight as he wondered, “You love my Cremisius?”

“Of course I love Cremisius, how could I not? We’ve gotten to know one another well since he came to work with the Inquisition—he treated me to lunch his first week in Haven, as thanks for…apparently he found me to be very understanding when it came to the Charger’s acclimation to being in Inquisition headquarters? And Eleanor’s return from the Coast saw him guarding her during all of our meetings and lessons. We’ve had a great deal of occasion to get to know one another,” Josephine smiled, “There was once, when Eleanor and her party journeyed to the Fallow Mire—this horrible place in the south that is essentially a disease-ridden bog—she fell ill and her party made camp while she recovered but this was- oh! It was just after you met!” she realized, “They went straight from Val Royeaux after their exploration of an Oasis in western Orlais, to southern Ferelden, and their travels with so many unexpected occurrences left them depleting their food stores entirely—the Chargers were up for the task of delivering a resupply to tide them over until their return. Just before the Charger’s departure, I was giving one of our allies a tour of Haven, and found Cremisius in the tavern where he was making use of its kitchen—preparing soup to bring Eleanor.”

“Oh my bello—truly?”

Josephine nodded. “It was the sweetest thing,” she assured him, “your son is a remarkable young man—he is extremely easy to love. That is-”

“What, my lady?”

She…had only just stopped herself short of saying that is easily said of you both she- she did not-

Well, of course she had love for Tonio. He was a wonderful man, her friend. To know him was to love him, was it not?

"That is..." she’d said, "the Maker's honest truth."

It was. And it also wasn’t- she should have told him! Not- not an embarrassing, impractical confession of emotion, she should have segued into speaking of their arrangement! That there was no need for it any longer, thank him for all he has done! But no. She had a nice dinner and lovely time at the theatre with the children they so loved and then another pleasant night in his quarters and-

And then her talk with Cremisius went so well. And Tonio was so grateful, joyus to hear how well it went when they went out for dinner once more and- and-

She had informed the elder Aclassi that Cremisius was indeed taking up her offer of etiquette instruction. At least insofar as the realm of dance was concerned.

“That will be wonderful,” he’d enthused, squeezing her hand as they were joined atop the table. “I’m certain you’ll make quite the eloquent gentleman out of my bello mimo. Dance will come naturally him I'm sure—he's an Aclassi man, and that is no such ridiculous pun, my father
had little tolerance for social graces, but the one bit of civility and romance he did indulge in, was dancing with my mama.”

Oh, she could not help but tease, "So dance comes naturally to all Aclassi men?" she'd wondered.

"Certainly," he assured, "if you wish, I believe I could be of assistance if you'd need of demonstration in your etiquette lessons."

"Truly?"

It led the man to feel compelled to prove as much, delighted spark in his eye as he rose from his seat and bowed, deeply, as he looked to her and asked, "Would you care to test my truth, Lady Montilyet?"

She should not have said yes. Oh she should not have said yes! It was horrible!

Only because it was amazing. Breath stealing in fact, she thought her heart was about to beat directly out of her chest as the man led her to join the few couples indulging in dance near the small orchestra that provided their establishment with beautiful music. He was perfectly at ease as they took their place, and then he'd spoken lowly, not unlike he were auditioning for the role as an assistant etiquette instructor.

“Now, a gentleman must always be respectful,” he began, "hold her hand like so and keep his supporting hand high, here," he said as he held her hand and placed the other high on the slope of her back, just above the small of her waist—"this is where he must support her from. That is what dancing is—when one leads, their one job is to lead. But following? Oh, it is more like flowering—the one who follows is often tasked with something beautiful that she alone must do...and he must support her, make a space where she can do so with the confidence that with him at her side her footing is secure wherever the dance takes them.”

She'd found herself struck speechless, smiling encouragement and silently praying the romantic atmosphere the bistro wished to tote with low candlelight to combat the dark of night would help to disguise just how very red her face was as they danced. Tonio saw fit to hum softly as they danced, and then he leaned in to be heard as the orchestra played out their final, albeit loud flourishing ending.

"Was that suitable, my Lady?” he wondered teasingly, speaking in her ear.

Now he may never wish to speak to her again, once all was told. And she would well deserve that.

Their final day in Val Royeaux, it was easily said that Josephine Montilyet had never been more nervous in all of her life. As she sat in her office as she pored over every last missive she’d received over the past several hours from the Du Paraquettes, Leliana, and the House of Repose…while awaiting the company of Tonio Aclassi to confess her grievances. Never had she let a lie stand for quite so long...neither had she been faced with documents had never meant quite so literally life or death. She read the letters thrice more before she was satisfied she understood its contents in full.

The Du Paraquettes’ ascension into minor nobility had been successfully ratified. They would be returned to a modest estate that had been claimed by a bank and been sitting empty since their downfall some generations prior.
They knew well it was only by the Inquisition, and Josephine Montilyet’s hand, that they regained this much of their former status. They’d no personal quarrel with the Montilyet family and now found themselves thoroughly enfeebled. They immediately repaid this kindness by officially and completely cancelling the contract their ancestors had set upon Josephine’s life.

The House of Repose was satisfied, and pleased to conclude their business with a an official letter offering rescission of intent. None from the House of Repose would seek to harm any in the Montilyet family, all agents in the field had been advised and retracted, and Josephine had their genuine assurance she was free of their mark upon her life.

She…read over each piece of parchment that laid every guarantee their efforts had worked, just once more. To make certain.

“…and then I was thinking I would strip bare and douse myself in honey, feathers—to be appropriately covered, as I do plan to stroll the streets of Val Royeaux, get some air. It’s a bit of a fashion risk but I am an artist—an eccentric.”

“Whatever are you—” Josephine startled, nearly knocking her inkwell over as she looked up to Tonio staring at her, utterly amused with himself. Wait—Maker! When had he even arrived- oh. “You…knocked and I did not pay a bit of attention as I permitted you entry…and you were talking and I was not listening?” oh good heavens.

“You seem to be listening just fine, I truly wish to make a name for myself while we’re in Val Royeaux,” he insisted innocently before smiling assurance, “Oh I apologize—the look on your face, it was entirely precious cara mia.”

She felt herself blushing. “I was distracted. I’m nearly finished, please, sit carino—” oh!

He did. And then he asked, “You called Cremisius that the other day, did you not?” well… the man’s hearing wasn’t failing him…she supposed that was good.

“I…did,” she said, face warming. “It is not a bad- it is the term of affection equivalent* to calling someone ‘honey’.” The sentiment had flown from her lips the moment she laid eyes on Cremisius’s injured arm, though…she knew with certainty she meant the sentiment toward the sweet boy, so much so it had happened more intentionally later. Now it- well it had been just as unintentional as the first, perhaps in exact opposite fashion—her panic came after she unintentionally uttered the word. Oh Maker that was hardly professional-

But it left the Tailor unbothered. Likely because…it would be a perfectly natural endearment if they were truly in romance. Which they were still feigning.

“That you prepared to have your measurements taken?” Tonio wondered.

“I…must confess that I have lied,” Josephine started…an albeit ironic way of starting such a discussion because she meant, “I asked that we meet to handle my measurements so…Leliana would keep her people scarce as we talk. The threat to my life has passed,” she assured when worry woke in his features, “but Leliana is nothing if not vigilant, she insisted I still have guards until she feels satisfied the House of Repose has had time to adequately recall all of their agents in the field that may not yet be in the know that I am no longer a target. I wish to speak with you without being overheard so…I allowed us to be overheard lying, saying I wished to have you measure me so Leliana would be mindful to set Human guards.”

“Surely the woman knows we would not be up to anything…untoward.”
“We wouldn’t but I’m…shy, and she well knows this. It would, in truth, make me albeit self conscious knowing someone could overhear,” she explained, and Tonio nodded in acknowledgement—the man did have the habit of either announcing the numbers to an assistant who wrote them down or spoke them quietly to himself to commit them to memory as he loosed hold of his measuring tape to take up a pencil and jot the number down.

“…so…I am not here to tailor you? What did you need of me then, my lady?” Tonio wondered.

She found herself sighing because, “Ironically enough, about further subterfuge I feel very badly about committing.”

“Oh, cara mia, you feel badly for having mislead Leliana about the purpose of our meeting today?” he wondered, almost amused that she would be so easily guilted. “It needn’t be a lie.”

“It won’t be in the scheme of things,” Josephine supposed, “we will get around to the task eventually.”

Tonio smiled gently, “True, but my lady I meant it needn’t be a lie at all—not even the duration between now and fulfilling the task at a later date—if you were comfortable there is no reason I cannot measure you now. It would be one less thing to do, we could discuss design as we travel. I would be able to start on your order as soon as we return to Skyhold.”

Oh Maker. She…this conversation would be difficult as it was. To be in her underthings and the man so close? But when she opened her mouth to insist she did wish to speak with him she found she hadn’t the slightest clue where to begin—but he would not leave this room without a full confession and a profuse apology! So, “Very well. I…will collect my thoughts, I did truly mean to speak with you but, I admit, as much as I have gone over it again and again, I’m still a bit unprepared.”

He offered her a reassuring smile, “Alright then. Speak to your heart’s content whenever you’re ready. Shall we get started?”

“Certainly,” Josephine nodded, oh goodness, she was already…admittedly embarrassed. Perhaps she had not thought her agreement through—this- this was a difficult conversation enough on its own without- bah! She would indeed take the time to compose her thoughts, it would give her something to focus on other than the fact that she would be standing…before someone she held interest in…in her um. Underthings.

She was pleased, when the man turned his attention to his sketchbook to allow her privacy while she stepped into the corner of the room behind him and began carefully removing her amulet, dress, leggings…should she remove her shoes? Likely. Oh she did hope her feet didn’t um, smell. “I’m ready.” she called once she was standing before the fireplace in- oh. In nothing but her bodice and bloomers! She’d had her measurements taken before it shouldn’t be embarrassing but she-

She felt incredibly immodest as it stood. And yet at the same time, while she did not wish to have sex before marriage, neither did that mean she wished to be found wholly undesirable. And Leliana insisted she’d the underthings of an old woman—had mocked her when the Spymaster waltzed right into Josephine’s bedroom when she was still dressing for the day and the Ambassador had been startled, shrieked and reached for her robe to cover up and Leliana had laughed and laughed nearly wept from her efforts before she choked out “J-J-Josie, you’re practically in a Mother’s habit!”.

Oh! Brassieres were only becoming popular in Orleis! And therefore elsewhere but still, she found them…considerably impractical. What would one do if
their shirt or dress blew upward? Eleanor wore leggings under her dresses which would cover her underthings should her skirt rise...or perhaps that was merely a concern for warmth—regardless, they served the same use as bloomers, it was an extra layer against chill and prying eyes and Josephine never wore as much without panties, that would be unsanitary! Under clothing was meant for modesty sake, was it not? To offer support and keep things covered if something unfortunate occurred to your overclothes.

They were _not_ grandmotherly!

The man finished scribbling something down in his sketchbook before snapping it neatly closed or, well, open but folded back on its hinge so only one side stayed open for him to write down her measurements, which he set on a small round table off to the side of the fireplace and unrolled his measuring tape, sparing her nothing more than a moment’s glance before he offered up an encouraging smile, “Let’s get started, shall we? Stand up straight.”

Josephine hadn’t realized she’d been shrinking in on herself a bit—she stood taller, straightening her shoulders and following his instruction as he measured, very cleanly, precise as he pulled the tape taut and slid his hand along its extended length swiftly to see where the end would meet with the tape before stepping back and jotting the number down. He’d just begun measuring the length of her arms. It felt silly but she asked, shyly, “Are my…” oh, she could not find it in herself to say ‘underthings’ to the man, “is my current attire…outdated?”

“It’s your dresses are beautiful, still well in style, my Lady,” Tonio assured, jotting down her wingspan before saying, “you may relax your left arm, do keep your right one up.”

Josephine nodded, correcting, “Not my dresses.”

“Oh—no, I do not believe so. This is very common—a great many of my clients wear likewise. It seems to be a matter of preference now a days. Some women prefer how they feel in more modern underthings, find bodices itchy or impractical as it is a bit more to button in the morning, and too certain styles fit better with brassieres. You look lovely, I assure you.”

Her face warmed at that, she— it came off like a polite compliment, lacked any hint of flirtation, and she did wonder further still, “Would it be rude if I questioned how you might tailor…um…would you tailor someone you were in romance with? Or would it be unprofessional to take them on as a client?”

“I don’t see why it would be—I’m currently tailoring you without issue,” he said with a playful smile at his lips as he came around to stand before her, measuring around her right wrist, “But no—measurements, undress, these are common parts of my occupation and I would never sexualize them with anyone regardless of relationship, that would be wholly unprofessional,” he insisted as he stepped away to write down his measurement, “Even as undress can be associated with romantic situations, the sentiment still stands—they would be undressed for me to measure, not for me. They are separate matters, with separate appropriate responses. The former requires professionalism,” he said, stepping back to stand close once more, gaze returning to hers as he concluded, “I would save rhapsodous attention, for the latter. Raise your left arm again, please.”

Could a brain melt? Josephine felt like her brain might be melting into her stockings. That-surely that shouldn’t rob her of her words. He was being entirely professional and she was reacting a fool! But did the man have to be so- tall and handsome and- and excellent in choosing cologne? Or was that aftershave- that was not the point! “I apologize if that was impolite to ask,” she heard herself say. Good, she was forming sentences, that was reassuring. She was even raising her arm as instructed!
“Not at all,” Tonio assured kindly, “your left arm please, my Lady?”

Ahh. Yes. She’d raised her right one again hadn’t she?

“Was this what you wished to speak with me of before?” Tonio wondered as he worked.

… “No,” not entirely, but she was getting ahead of herself she supposed. She had worried the man might not work with her if they pursued one another. But the man might hold no interest to begin with—or lose all interest once she confessed she’d not kept her word. “Your work as a tailor has hardly been a matter of subterfuge.”

“Ahh yes—forgive me, I’d forgotten subterfuge was your point of topic,” he chuckled.

Josephine nodded. “I…have admittedly…omitted truth recently. More so it is that I have not kept my word and I feel terribly about it—must right it. But I…feel I must also explain why I would break my word. Though, I must confess, that seems a bit silly.”

“I do not believe it would be,” Tonio said, “if you’ve broken your word with someone, I’m certain you did so with valid reason—it is not like you to do something in unkindness after all.”

“Oh! It isn’t!” Josephine assured, he finished with her arm but his hand raised, fingers gently pressing upward on her wrist when she made to lower it so she kept her arm up as he wrote, “I promise, it was not in meanness I was acting.”

“I would never assume you would,” Tonio assured likewise as his arms surrounded her momentarily to bring the tape up to wrap around her chest- oh! He’d had her arm remain raised so he could side-step and wrap the tape so his hands would be high on her ribcage, just below her arm pit. She was a bit less flustered with that, than she would have been with er- his hands being so very close to her breast.

“I’m glad,” Josephine said as he took down her measurement, “…because…well…the person I’ve broken my word with,” she ventured as he encircled her again, tape lower, around her waist, “…is you.”

That gave him a bare bit of pause as he raised his eyes to meet hers, “Me?” he asked, a bit confused, no condemnation in his stare just open acceptance. “How, pray tell? We’ve no word of bond that I know of save that I have promised you I would gladly listen whenever you’ve troubles to share.”

“…and to assist in misleading Leliana,” Josephine prompted, ducking her head, ashamed.

Tonio seemed to take that as her needing a bit of space, he looked to his measurement before stepping away to write it down and then he- well he dropped his sketchbook to the floor between her feet- oh. he was kneeling, to take measurements lower. Starting with her hips! Oh heavens! But he made swift work of it, horrible number it might be; advice had been…only one of the things her abuelita had passed down. But he soon moved on to her legs, she found it easier to stare ahead than to stare at him as he prompted, “Would you care to explain what you mean?”

Josephine nodded despite the fact he wasn’t looking up. “In truth…I only needed that bit of cover…before Leliana discovered my troubles. I expressed such distress at her coming on this trip she assumed it was because I…well she presumed I…have an appreciation for you in a romantic light, that I wished to be alone with you. Since I could not say I did not wish for her to come on this trip and find out my family’s financial state, as that would then be informing her of such…I appreciate you, agreeing to this but um…well, the cats are out of the proverbial bag,” she rambled,
oh! “I- I apologize for not informing you days ago—I-I-I should have but- Leliana was so upset with me for having lied to her.”

Tonio looked up at her, smiling as he assured, “My Lady, this has been a very stressful time for you, and I can certainly understand you neglecting to say anything for fear of upsetting your friend.”

“That…is not necessarily…entirely my reasoning.”

“It isn’t?” he asked, brow furrowing in confusion.

Josephine cleared her throat, “Leliana was upset with me already—for having lied about why we were coming to Val Royeaux in the first place. So she called upon Cole to lay out every lie I’ve told to her this trip and when he did not say our attempted romance was false, she was relieved and I could not bring myself to say otherwise to her and…”

“My lady?”

“Cole…um…spoke some…truths. Personal ones, ones that I know on my end to be true. And when I thanked him for deceiving Leliana, telling her we truly are…enamored with one another…he…”

Tonio seemed to be recalling something for a moment and then he looked up at her, “He informed you we have been…unbeknownst to ourselves…sincere?” he carefully ventured.

“…yes. And…I found I…quite selfishly enjoyed the idea. I- oh I am so sorry, it was horrible of me—I should have confessed to Leliana and told you the moment our arrangement was unnecessary, it was foolish- but then I realized how at ease I was conducting ourselves as such, and we were having such a wonderful time and-it was selfishness entirely on my part and I apologize—” she stopped babbling, horrified how revealing she’d been and grateful Tonio had raised his hand to politely halt her near-rant.

“My Lady,” he said, “if you would, allow me to conclude my work here before we continue this conversation? Just a few measurements more and then you can re-attire—you’ll be more comfortable, I’m sure.”

Ahh. Yes. She certainly would be. Was it too early in the day for drink? She could have wine, surely?

She was less anxious once she was dressed once more, Tonio resuming his seat before her desk as he made some final notes in his sketchbook, awaiting her, and when she came to join him he smiled and gestured to the matching chair beside him, as opposed to her returning to her desk chair. It was a bit more appropriate for a non-business discussion and too the wingback chair was more plush.

Which was of potential benefit, as it was a perfect chair for fainting deadaway in—she was certain she might when the first words Tonio had spoken in the stance of ten minutes was,

“Would you permit me to court you?” at her surprised stare he said, “I’d an interesting encounter with Cole myself, just before he took his leave for his mission. I’d been having a conversation with Cremisius and the subject matter had me thinking of our arrangement. It is not false, he said. At the time we assumed he was assuring Cremisius my words were truth—that I would never be able to be in romance with someone unless they were someone he approved of, who accepted my son in full,” he explained, gaze unfaltering as he met her eye, “you happen to
meet all three criteria.”

Her throat felt incredibly dry. “Th-three?”

“You are someone Cremisius respects and adores, you accept my son in full, and I would love nothing more than the honor of romancing you,” he said simply, reiterating, “Would you permit me to court you?”

Her mouth worked momentarily, and she only just found her words, “I- I- yes. Absolutely. I would be incredibly honored.”

“Then I would be incredibly honored if you would allow me to court you, no falseness about it. A bit of truth you can mend what trust you’ve broken from Leliana with. And a bit of well-deserved ‘selfish’ enjoyment for us both,” he returned her earlier word for it.

She smiled at that, eyes alight as she asked, “Truly?”

“In the fullest definition of the word.”

“I will…confess to Leliana that I misled her…and then inform her that it has led to genuine interest. Er…a confession, of genuine interest. I do assure you I was interested before.”

Tonio favored her a warm grin, “Likewise, cara mia.” And then, “you’ve gotten what you needed to, off of your chest?”

“…I have,” she supposed. “With you, at least. Now…well, I should…”

His smile only grew, “…would you like for me to join you while you speak with Leliana?”

“You…would be willing to do that?”

“I have a feeling if we are truly pursuing romance, uncomfortable conversations with the Spymaster will be a staple of our relationship,” the man supposed, wholly unphased as he rose from his seat, offering his hand to her and assisting in her rise. “Though it is well worth it, given staples such as this,” he swung their joint hands a bit as he rubbed the back of her hand with his thumb, earning him a smile…which only grew as, “and this,” and…well. Her brain, her heart…the entirety of her vital organs melted directly into her shoes as the man pressed a kiss to her forehead. “Shall we?”

“We shall.”

Chapter End Notes

*I hope the girl who created Yeet as we know it is having a good day and knows that I love her with my entire heart.
*After Here Lies the Abyss and dealing with the Wardens, Dorian's cutscene involves a mini rant about Divine Galatea's autobiography and I think it's fitting they have him voicing frustration with that particular thing, because they could have picked anything but they chose a Divine that would particularly be reviled as an example of the brutality of the south in Tevinter, and horrify mages in general because it was under her administration that the Right of Annulment was integrated into the Chantry, which when called upon allows Templars to execute every last Mage in their care and it's
been enacted I believe three to five times in the past 5 years leading up to Dragon Age Inquisition.
*Getting Josie to Val Royeaux to talk is clearly a set up, and the way its executed I don't believe the Comte was just some random guy they picked to lure her there, the House of Repose wouldn't go pissing off a Comte they have nothing to hold over, so I figure it's them collecting a favor.
*My dumb ass has never played this mission but apparently when you side with the Templars and move to Skyhold, it unlocks a quest with Leliana called "Under Her Skin" (which is a mirror of Cullen's quest to find Samson if you side with the Mages) but while I've sided with Templars before I guess I just never checked in with Leliana as often as I should have because I had 0 clue this mission existed before this fic. So. Leliana is hunting down Calpernia and wants the Inquisitor to investigate an ally of hers in Orlais, Vicinus. It's there they find a memory crystal that Leliana reviews and then plants in a Venatori base. I have Leliana handling the mission herself in this fic, and I figure since the mission later involves her sending an agent to plant the memory crystal elsewhere, it would fit with having her trying to find a more Josie-friendly way of destroying the contract on her life.
*there's a dispute whether the dessert popularly known as Creme Brulee was invented in Spain before or after the French started popularizing it.
*this is the one fic where your otp share a room with two beds and that brings them together, it's the chaos twin of the "ohm there's only one bed what'll we do? fall in love I guess?" fic trope
*technically the Cafe in Cafe con Leche is espresso, but you can get a similar deal with good coffee and steamed milk.
*Josephine has an unnamed brother, as he's listed last on her info page I just have him being her youngest sibling and named him Claude.
*Fa la nana, Bambino" is a precious Italian lullaby I've been dying to inform ya'll Tonio 100% sings to tiny Cremisius because I said so. There isn't a technically 'gender neutral' term in many languages (it's becoming more and more commonplace) but traditionally when referring to children in a gender neutral way, using masculine endings to words means "people in general" in spanish, itallian, etc. Like when Josie says "mijos" to refer to both Ellie and Krem, she means "children", not "boys". When Krem is a baby Tonio isn't certain about what's going on with his child but calling him bello mimo (handsome baby) or bambino (child, which can be percieved as masculine but is also gender neutral) seems to be his jam.
*In Under the Changing Stars I flesh out Thom's backstory and put a name and story on his mother, Margret Rainier. This is technically a spoiler for my final update of UTCS, and yes this is lead up to Thom finding out what's been going on with his mother after all these years. Why? Obviously I enjoy putting too much work into my plot points.
*Tythas is a relative of Cassandra the Inquisition checks on in "Investigate Hunter Fell" because he's got a string of lovers/acquaintances and one of them is a Venatori spy.
*Miraya Zeyase is Queen of Rivain so I use her last name for an official from Rivian Josie can call on as a contact, he's loosely a fanon cousin of the Queen.
*The play I describe is basically Theada's version of "Tartuffe", a French play by Moliere, which was banned for a decade or so after it's initial debut at Versailles, due to it's satirical message about false piety being seen by King Louis XIV as a challenge to the Roman Catholic Church.
*Carino is closer to 'sweetie' or 'sweetheart' but be recognized as 'honey' instead of the literal 'miel'
Before the Dawn: The Emerald Graves

Chapter Summary

Tackling "Before the Dawn" before we wrap up "Here Lies the Abyss", because thems the rules!
Fen'Harel returns to somewhat-still-familiar places as the Inquisitor and her party journey to the Emerald Graves. Sera's a badass, Solas repents, and forehead kisses are, indeed, the best.

Disclaimer: NO Seekers were fatally harmed in the *slight* cliff hanger of this chapter. The next chapter is well underway, I'm sorry I can't fit all the words in with character restrictions but I promise to update as soon as possible. Also I'm sorry and I love you all.

Chapter Notes

Hi all! I'm back! With another Chapter! Yay? To newbies, Hi! Welcome! I love you! To those of y'all still reading this--I love you with my entire heart. So much. Thank you for sticking with this nearly million-word-long fic. What are you doing here? What am I doing here? Loving you, I guess!

Also, as always, I promise I would be forthcoming and post major warnings about anything *Actually* bad happening, this is a heads-up that we walk right up to a triggering situation, but I promise everyone walks away perfectly fine and ultimately unharmed. Well, except for the people who cause the triggering situation, Spoiler Alert: Cole kills them! This was a method of dealing with the Freemen and a tiny thing that happens because of it sets up a future minor plot point with Ellie's wrist watch.

I'm not a medical health professional, but this chapter does touch on FTM Transitioning using Testosterone therapy. There's loads of research and information out there, I did my best to make sure I wasn't pulling from biased or hurtful sources, but authentic studies/info from our handsome community members who have shared their experiences as they've traversed transitioning. If anything looks inaccurate or YikesTM please correct me if you've the energy to and I will always be grateful for it!

Edit: I apologize for the inconsistency that was in this chapter when it was first uploaded, that unfortunately took me 2 days to realize. I had Vivienne in the tent when Sera discusses her magic...and then later the moment when Vivienne actually becomes privy to Sera's magical state she reacts as if its news to her (as she is supposed to! That was the plan! I just failed my self in enacting said plan!). I try to do whole chapter read-throughs before posting but unfortunately where I took brain breaks (where I lay on the floor for a few minutes resting my eyes and mumbling incoherently into the Void) left me coming back to it totally spacing on the fact that Vivienne's there earlier in the scene even though she's silent throughout the majority of it. It has since been corrected! So I apologize to anyone who read before the correction could be made. NOW I have Vivienne leaving to make tea before magic-talk can take place in the tent so...if ya'll want a fictional cuppa, made by a beautiful badass Circle Mage, you're
It was a strange thing, for Solas to return to this place. What did they call them now? The Emerald Graves. They were lush and vibrant as ever and he was not certain, but perhaps they’d grown more lovely in his absence. Of course the last time he’d traveled through these wilds, he’d been under urgency, fear and panic and fire coursing through his veins and the only thought on his mind was…well, every interaction he’d had with Mythal’s people over the last century, everything he’d seen and heard from them—who among them had done such a thing? Called her from their home when she was hardly in any state to travel—a single jarring jump might have seen their child born directly into the saddle—headlong into what he feared would be a trap, unfortunately had been. His return trip had been equally distracted, he could barely remember it, though there’d been something jarring when the Inquisitor’s party found the boundary, where Orlais spread into what his people now called the Dales and they were surrounded on all sides by green—the landscape was so overgrown it struck him as so familiar he thought they’d somehow mastered teleportation and found themselves instantaneously in the Arbor Wilds. The Emerald Graves appeared just as the older, untamed wilderness he’d laid Mythal to rest in, performed the ritual that allowed him to lift her dwindling magic to power his plans. But no, no if he’d the right perception of the world’s current map, her Temple was south of here, her grave further in the west. Younger forest had merely grown in the several Ages since he went to sleep.

He felt gentle prodding in the bond, something like question and comfort. And then softly, from the saddle of the horse riding alongside his own, “Is something wrong?”

Oh, it was relief to have her back in range of the bond, Ellie and Marehis both—even as he did not dip into his bond with Marehis, there was a level of comfort that came that the connection existed, that he could discern the woman was at least still of this world, he would have to be rid of his magic entirely not to have some feeling of her or Sera and Ellie in it, it was not unlike not being able to help seeing someone standing directly in one’s eyesight. He could not feel Sera quite yet but they’d a report from her just this morning that Ellie had read aloud—for his benefit, he supposed, as Cassandra and Marehis had read it over her shoulder as the girl read quietly to herself first and then something like realization sparked in her magic when she looked up and saw Solas… he was across the fire from her, staring very hard, admittedly trying to read the missive it backward from the barest outline of ink through the parchment and she’d offered a small smile and cleared her throat, and announced to the group that Sera was well, would be waiting for them at the Inquisition’s infiltration camp and would lead them to Fairbanks, the secondary camp she and Rainier had settled.

It’d been a kindness, and she was extending it further still. “I’m well. I am…somewhat familiar with the area—it has changed in my absence but there are some discernable landmarks I recognize. I…hope it can be of help.”

“Oh wow, you’ve been here- like way way back when?” Ellie questioned, interest piqued, a bit of wonder in her eyes. “Is it super different now?”

He favored her an amused grin, given, well yes, he was currently traveling with person beings who might not have ever existed if the world had continued being populated solely by Elvehnan. “Indeed—but I suppose you mean the landscape specifically? Yes, it is rather changed. I…admittedly may have planted a few of these trees myself. Myself and Mythal’s worshipers.”

She drew in a quiet gasp, “Really? Oh my gosh! It’s so beautiful, wow, is it…cool to see? You seem kind of sad, being back here makes you miss it, huh?” she offered, sympathetic, oh her magic twinged with it.

“I am not sad,” he assured, "merely nostalgic I suppose,” he said, smiling kindly in the hopes to relieve her. He…he would not delve into darker memories with the girl. No, if she wished it…oh
he was so pleased to be reunited with them, have her speaking in his direction without quite so much hesitation or resentment burning in her chest. No, she felt…excited and curious, like she’d a million questions she would love to ask of him, and he wanted nothing more than to indulge her in each and every one with something that would not burden her—anything he could think of that might build her excitement or sooth her sweet heart to know of the days of old that could seem so very dark now that their sins were bare before her and she knew the truth about the old world.

While it’s governing system, its sole populace was nothing to repeat in the future, it was not wholly without merit. There had been some truly wonderful things.

“Oh. Good,” she nodded, worrying at her lip momentarily before something deflated in her. He supposed she was still nervous to have an outright unwarranted conversation with him in front of the others. He…did not want anyone to worry he was seeking to have Eleanor’s ear in privacy, but he was tempted to ask if she might join him in the Fade. There they could speak without reservation if she so chose.

Or…in the waking world, through the grace of her mother. “You planted trees before the veil? It was my understanding you were a shepherd.” Marehis asked conversationally, seated in the saddle behind Ellie, her arms wrapping albeit tighter around the girl almost possessively but that was just, she wouldn’t want to give him leash only for him to take it as a blanket invitation back into the girl’s good graces. She…didn’t sound accusatory, like she thought him lying, so that was some genuine improvement.

“Not just myself,” he said and then…oh. He…supposed they’d an audience of sorts. There had been idle chatter all around them—Cole was astride the steed with Lieutenant Aclassi, the sole Charger save the Iron Bull joining them on this venture, as apparently the young man had been given time off from commanding the Chargers…which he allotted to use to follow his girlfriend into the field. The Spirit was quiet and focusing on the task at hand, or perhaps he was communing with the creature on a level as the Tevinter man had encouraged the Spirit when he asked if he might endeavor to command their steed on his own, sat quietly in the saddle behind him and let him focus. Dorian, the Iron Bull, and Madam de Fer had been chatting with Seeker Pentaghast about the finer points of their respective trips. It had been relief to meet them south of Val Royeaux on their way to the Emerald Graves, he’d beaten Seeker Pentaghast there by the barest margins. It felt heady, the rush of relief that filled him immediately when he came in proximity of Ellie and Marehis, laid eyes on the girl after their time apart, she’d been seated around their dinner campfire under the dark of night and her eyes had lit up, Magic bubbling in excitement when she realized he was there, relieved to see him safe but the only thing she could bring herself to say was “Oh! Solas, you’re here—good! There’s dinner.” Which was quite a few more words than he expected but still, they were nothing in the wake of the elated “Mami!” that tore from her throat as she leapt up from the seat she made of boyfriend’s lap and ran to meet Seeker Pentaghast, hugging her tightly and word and after word tumbled from her lips as she launched into,

“We had so much fun in Val Royeaux! I got to wear so many of my pretty dresses Papa made for me, it was fun to dress up! I matched mi Tia! And Cremisius agreed to match with me, oh he was so handsome!” The aforementioned young man was seated at the fire alongside his leader, he offered up a smile and a wave to the bemused Seeker currently in the vice-grip of Ellie’s full body hug, “And we ate so much food! Do you know about Conchas mami? They’re Antivan, Tia Josie taught me how to make them, you can dip them in coffee! Ahh! I tried Espresso!” he was not certain what that was but the word had caused the Seeker’s expression to turn into open shock and then quiet reprimand as she hugged the girl closer so she could give the Qunari a fierce look over her head when the girl informed her, “The Iron Bull and me, we did Espresso shots together! They upset his tummy something fierce though and I ended up with a headache…so it was the closest thing to a wild night out? Except it was the afternoon, and I got to take a nap with Cole. And Cremisius! He brought me dinner when I woke up, it was super sweet of him. Oh we went to the theatre! And a museum! Cremisius is so smart, he knew like, so many of the artists, he could guess just by looking at the paintings who did what and he was right, every single time I’m pretty sure? He was the cutest!” it was admittedly sweet to see…well, the young couple were dearly in love,
and it was something of comfort to Solas’s mind that while Ellie’s compliments may be well deserved, the young man didn’t have arrogance in him, was humble enough to receive them bashfully—he blushed and ducked his head as the Iron Bull chuckled, clapping his Lieutenant on the back of the neck, “Tia’s going to teach us how to waltz for the Winter Palace!” and then she gasped and...somehow dancing at the Winter Palace reminded her of something...he supposed was equally terrifying as dancing before the whole of Orlais most well-versed players of the Game, “Mami, are there Spiders as big as horses? Papa promises there aren’t but that Judge Auld person I had to write for Tia, he says there are, and I figure you’d know.”...there were. But apparently either Seeker Pentaghast had no such knowledge, or she was as resolved as all other adults in the girl’s life were to ensure she never discovered such a horrifying thing.

The night had had been full of catching up for the Seeker and the young people in their camp. The woman seated herself alongside Ellie as she resumed her seat with the Lieutenant, his chin resting on her shoulder as he and his girlfriend answered Cassandra’s every inquiry—to their wellbeing, every detail of their time in Val Royeaux—the Nevarran woman offering up a few details about her time in Skyhold. She’d apparently done some looking into reform of the Seekers, and even as she offered up nothing scandalous, she blushed through every question the Inquisitor had about her trip with Commander Rutherford.

There had been little opportunity for the adults to chat before they retired for the evening, but they’d been making up for that in the light of day. Their conversations had halted now, however, and Solas could feel eyes on him as he was addressed about his time before...well, any of their ancestors existed.

“There was once a great war that waged between Elgar’nan and Andruil, here in the south—they left the land you now know as the Dales a scorched husk. Where there is now lush, green life, there was blazing destruction in the wake of an argument over their respective territories—Everything from there to the edge of the Arbor Wilds once belonged to Andruil and Elgar’nan sought to take it from her...and in the end? Mythal talked them to reason—they’d done nothing but kill their own people over petty pride and left the lands they so sorely craved in waste, destroyed their prize in their attempts to win it. And it left it in her hands—it was a culmination of shame and...simply not wishing to have the responsibility of the land they soiled. Mythal already had claim to the lands of the Arbor Wilds, these wilderness neighbor her own, and she sent her people to task of healing it. We spent...oh, I cannot rightly recall, perhaps three...four decades, nearly half century making a home here and planting, growing shelter and food to coax the fled fauna into returning to their former home. I was there when the first of the Halla returned to this area.”

“Oh wow,” Ellie breathed, wistful, “That sounds...gosh, that had to be cool to see!”

“It was indeed,” he supposed. “My skills as a shepherd were brought to bear then,” he informed them, albeit...not smug, but it felt like a bit of flirtation to return the woman’s question to her with an answer. “Helping guide them, circulating through the foliage so they did not over consume from tender flora, kept guard of them when they took to the stream.”

“Was it super hard to herd Halla? Can you talk to them too?”

He shook his head. “No, I’ve not the magical affinity with them, but in my youth I’d a spiritual affinity with them I suppose. Too...they’ve an enjoyment of Vehnan Root, and music.”

“Vehnan Root?”

“...what we now term Elf Root, as it has a great many healing properties that brings so many loved ones back from the brink of death.”

“Ohhh,” Ellie breathed. “Oh I like that! I’ve always kind of been nervous that calling it ‘Elf Root’ because it’s pointy is racist,” true, if it was likening it to Elvethan ears...he’d certainly yet to see such a wild pair of ears on one of his kinsmen. “That’s so pretty, and sweet, it’s actual name. I’m glad you taught me it!”

“I’m glad it pleases you,” he assured.

“What kind of music do Halla like?” she wondered next.

“...the same as most, I suppose,” he avoided exemplifying it before the whole of her party. “Soothing, melodious tones. Nothing somber, airing on the side of lightheartedness.”
Thankfully it was enough to satisfy the girl, “That’s so cute!”

Perhaps it was. And he’d a likeness for the word, saw the definition of ‘cute’ play out to the letter when they neared the infiltration camp. In the same moment he felt Sera enter the orbit of their bond...he felt it two fold, like there was a separate bond linked there, Ellie and Sera’s...and that was met with a high-pitched scream of delight rising in the distance, the din of someone scrambling through the brush and Ellie let out her own squeal of excitement, was bouncing in the saddle she eventually launched herself from the moment the litany of, “Inky Inky Inky Inky Inky Inky Inky!” echoed from the wilderness because it was followed shortly by Sera bursting from between trees and flinging herself at the Human girl who had only just rolled to her feet to meet her with a bracing hug with her own cry of,

“Sisssy! Oh my gosh oh my gosh oh my gosh! I missed you so much my heart hurts!” Ellie exclaimed, her party coming to a halt behind her.

“Mine too! I mean it’s fun ‘venturin’ with Lacey but shite I missed you! You had lots and lots of fun in Val Royeaux right?”

“Uh-huh!”

“And you didn’t get assassined none?”

“Nope! And Josie only got almost assassined once! Cremisius kept her safe!” …was the girl being genuine? Solas thought the concern for assassination to derive from...well, the normal threat level of as much befalling the girl. Whatever caused assassins to threaten the Ambassador’s life? “I only had tea and cakes with the Assassin from the House of Repose. Oh and Tatie too—Leliana took me to tea to thank me for helping Tia Josie.”

So perhaps Ellie hadn’t mentioned every last aspect of her trip last night, but he supposed Seeker Pentaghast had well been in the know.

“She truly was safe,” Marehis offered him quietly. She was not looking at him, at least she wasn’t now that she addressed him, he supposed she’d noticed his quiet worry-mixed...jealousy? That was the closest word to it. perhaps it was merely longing. His punishment was merciful, what made it punishment was the fact that while he was in the Hinterlands he could not be with those he loved, that he was still albeit estranged and not fully in the know as he once had been. Scarcely more than a month ago, he would have known every in and out of Ellie’s interaction with an Assassin’s House. “If...it had been a threat directed at the Inquisitor, we may have been inclined to excuse you from your work in the Hinterlands, so your ability to monitor her safety could be brought to bear,” she allowed even.

The Marchand’s guest rooms were something of luxury, beds soft, warm but that was more on account of the woman falling into bed alongside him with a breathless sigh—he’d only just dropped into it himself after he and Marehis raced through the halls of the estate, slipping from view of their fellow party members once they left Eleanor to slumber after Madam de Fer’s salon.

“Do you think she suspects us?”

“Mmm...no, there is nothing in the bond that speaks to that.” he felt a warm grin tug at his lips, “I suppose our liaison is still that of upmost secrecy.”

“How very thrilling,” the woman conspired, pressing a kiss to his jaw as she settled in against his chest, leg looping over his own.

“If our romance were to come to light, do you suppose the thrill would die?” he wondered.

“Oh Solas,” the woman had offered sympathetically, in tones meant to sooth concern. Then, simple assurance, “Absolutely.”

Somehow he did not imagine his joining them in Val Royeaux would have been quite so pleasant. Awkward, was a more appropriate word. Too...above everything, he was grateful there’d been no reason to call him there, that Ellie had not been put to threat. So, “I’m...glad that was not necessary.”

Marehis nodded, indifferent. Though that melted when Sera...apparently grew impatient to be greeted by the woman—to be fair it was Sera who’d been preoccupied, between Ellie’s exuberant greeting and having only just extracted herself from a ‘Krem and Cole sandwich’ she’d demanded from the young men she’d missed—and now she slipped a foot into the holster to rise
up and seat herself backward in the saddle, straddling the woman’s thighs, “Oi! Hey you! You miss me or what?”

“Hello Da’vehnan,” the woman offered up amusedly, hugging the girl tightly, “Of course I missed you, sweet girl,” she assured, brushing the girl’s hair out over her face, though, oh. Goodness. The girl had a thin, shimmery scar across the peak of her right cheekbone that had certainly not been on her person when last Solas laid eyes on her. Marehis gingerly traced a finger along it before peppering kisses to the mark, sending the girl blushing and scrunching up her face as she squirmed, albeit embarrassed at the woman’s affection, “I missed your beautiful face!”

“Frig! I missed you too, barmy! You have fun in Val Royeaux? Inky said you got to go see a play, took a day at the museum with your,” the girl snorted, giggling before she offered up the word, “lover?”

That…oh. It was foolish to be jealous, wasn’t it? He…Marehis was not his, not in the least, and he’d most irreparably lost their former standing. If she…if she had found it in herself to move on from that, after he hurt her so? He would be glad of it.

“We had a lovely time,” Marehis assured as Madam de Fer sounded a haughty chuckle.

“Good!” Sera said, “Sandra—you and Commander Dreamy had a fun trip?”

“We did,” the Seeker allowed, “I’m excited to hear of your own excursion. Cullen has had nothing but good things to say, he’s very proud of you—he told me to tell you as much.”

“Silly, he’s written me that like, friggin’ a dozen times already, I believe ‘im!” Sera half-complained, almost shy. Oh, he was grateful for this…that the Commander looked on this girl and loved her perhaps as much as he did Eleanor, that she could find something of a respectable fraternal figure in the Human man. “Well…let’s get you lot up to speed then,” Sera supposed, holding out her arms as she leaned to the side in the saddle and Ellie was there, holding her arms up to the older girl as Sera slipped out of the saddle and Ellie giggled as she supported the Elf girl’s weight, kept her from falling face first out of the rather tricky seating situation she’d been in and then Sera was on her feet, hugging Ellie again with a groan of effort before turning her back to the girl, kneeling as she reached behind her to get her hands on the backs of Ellie’s knees and pulling her forward, the Inquisitor giggling as she wrapped her arms around Sera’s neck and her legs around her middle, accepting the offered piggy back ride. “Oof, alright!” Sera said as she rose up, jostling the Human girl a bit as she secured her arms under the girl’s thighs, “Follow me!”

So they did, riding carefully along behind them as Sera led them along the freshly worn path to the Inquisition’s camp. Sera did catch them up with how many Rifts were present in the Emerald Graves…a great many, Solas supposed it would be as such. So many Elvehnan had passed on from this world in this area in the days of old, Rifts seemed to tear in places a great deal of magical people had passed on and left the veil so thin in their wake that when Coryephus endeavored to bring it down, tearing open the Breach, such places tore too. Sera’s hands massaged at the underside of Ellie’s thighs like the girl sought to soothe her sister as she informed her that there…was a grand total of eleven Rifts in the area. The Lieutenant quietly cleared his throat, rubbing at his nose with the back of his hand as he turned his face away so if Ellie happened to look up at him she wouldn’t bear witness as worry washed over his features. They…were not necessarily on the best of terms, Solas supposed, he and the Lieutenant—perfectly understandable that the young man might thoroughly hate him—but he had nothing but respect, cautious care for the young man that had done so much for the Inquisition, for their Inquisitor in particular, so he offered a small, sympathetic smile that was met with neutrality…well. He did not bare his teeth at the very least, the young man had very expressive eyes that communicated well he would love nothing more than for his stare to strike the Elf man dead where he stood. That was admittedly fair, he rather…well.

The next few days would be painful, for this girl. Her Mark would be torment until they were through. And Solas regretted nothing more.

“Don’t gotta seal them all in one day Ink. Hell, you don’t even got to seal them all,” Sera was saying. “I got ‘em sort of…categorized for you? A game plan, if it’s any help. There’s seven that are real trouble, and even then there’s only three that are top priority.”

The girl hummed a bit, squeezing her arms around Sera’s shoulders like a hug as she quietly
assured, “I can do it. What’s your game plan, chica?”

“So top three are all local—one of ‘em is off northeast of our infiltration camp, but it’s not in an area we got a lot of traffic in, everyone’s good to avoid it so it’s something I figure you can catch on your way out of here,” Sera informed her, ‘First two I reckon are tippy top priority, should be taken care of as soon as possible—is the two south most Rifts hangin’ round the Pavilion. Freemen had Fairbanks and his people ruddy well trapped in this shite canyon place they was holdin’ their ground from when we arrived—his people are movin’ to a new set up we was able to secure for them and those Rifts is…there’s a way through but everyone’d sleep better at night with them gone, there wouldn’t be any risk of someone accidentally straying off the beaten path and triggering a demon horde. They’re uh…real nasty Ink. Huge. Fucking Pride demon level. Even if you could just get the south east one down, they’d have a hell of a lot more breathing room.”

“Kay. We’ll definitely kick that one’s butt today and we’ll see how everyone’s hanging before we decide if we can hit the second one. I don’t know how I’ll feel in a few days but the me right now doesn’t want to leave this place without closing all the Rifts so…ya’ll are in charge of reminding the me in a few days that might not feel so giddy about it—I don’t know that bitch yet, but she can’t be trusted if she’s willing to leave the sky all holey so keep me-her accountable. I promise a third, future version of myself will be grateful for it.”

“We will remind you, da’vehnan, but I have faith in every version of yourself,” Marehis offered. Oh. he did not need the excess worry permeating his magic from their bond to tell him she was horrified at the notion of facing nearly a dozen Rifts, what sort of pain that might inflict upon this girl. The Rift nearest their camp was not even in view, he had to focus to feel the barest glimmer of its presence but Ellie’s Mark was already stinging more intensely.

“You’re a friggin boss Inky,” Sera encouraged the girl.

She…she was. But apparently she was not alone in that.

There were a number of scouts gathered in their infiltration camp, but it would be hard to miss Lace Harding, the Dwarf woman had actually risen up to stand atop a table to wave at them as they came into view.

“Inquisitor! I’m so glad you made it, gosh, I was wondering where Sera got off to!”

“Hiya Lace!” Ellie called, raising her Marked hand to wave back.

Though the pleasantries stopped there, the casual atmosphere turned more…serious. Not sternly so, but it felt very much like a leader had stepped foot into camp and gotten the rapt attention of the Inquisition’s scouts and soldiers…and Solas thought momentarily that leader was Ellie. She was the Inquisition’s leader after all, but after,

“Inquisitor,” a scout addressed Ellie with a polite nod, the man looked to Sera, “South’s all clear ma’am. Bear situation’s handled and there’s been zero Freeman activity in the south or the north western quadrant. Butler’s due to report in from the north east any minute now.”

“Good—if you don’t hear back from him in the next ten minutes, send for an update from Direstone camp. If he hasn’t reported in with them, send a runner to tell me—I’ll be in Fairbank’s digs for a bit yet, I’ll have Thom and his men run back up and extraction or whatever, make sure they haven’t gotten themselves into trouble, I told them I just wanted eyes on that weirdy house, they en’t supposed to go in it, but shite happens,” Sera shrugged. “Bears aren’t gonna be a problem anymore? Good. We don’t want no trouble with their mama—keep our hunters out of her space and she’ll stay out of ours I figure. Camp should be safe to leave with just a few essentials here—I want you lot,” Sera pointed to, well, the group of scouts gathered around her, her finger indicating five of their numbers, “and you,” she nodded to two Inquisition soldiers to her left, “Fairbanks people are on the move today, you lend him a hand—shouldn’t be no trouble from the Rifts if they stick to the path Lace n’ me mapped out, it’s smack in the middle but out of range of both those shite things—Inquisitor’s here now. I’m taking her to meet Fairbanks in his old set up and we’ll take a crack at the southeast Rift. Make sure our people know just ‘cause the Inquisitor’s in town don’t mean all the Rifts is gone overnight—I want updates going out every shift change to make sure everyone’s on the same page as some areas’ll be safer to travel in while others are still no-gos. I don’t wanna
hear anyone gettin’ Rift burned because they don’t read their reports—they’ll get my foot in their ass so far they’ll have an excuse not to read cause my toes’ll be their new eyes.”

“Of course ma’am.”

“I wanted patrols on the path to Briathos’ Steps, and dedicated guard circuits holding the perimeter—everything’s set there right? The Inquisitor and her party will be joining their camp tonight.”

“Yes ma’am,” another scout spoke up. “I came from there this morning. The Inquisitor’s tent is as you left it, patrols are reporting all-clears from the area, no Freemen, no stray demons, and the wolves have been cleared.”

“Great job everyone, we’re kicking some real ass here, I appreciate all your help,” Sera said, like a wish of farewell though no one moved. “Oh. Right. Dismissed or whatever.”

“Ser’,” the Iron Bull spoke up, it sounded like he’d only just found his voice, “Don’t take it weird but that was fucking hot.”

“Yeah it was, my lady’s real bossy,” Lace affirmed as she drew nearer, raising a hand to blow a kiss up to Sera before using that same hand to swat at the Elf girl’s backside. “She’s really been holding it down around here.”

“Friggin’ Commander’s the one who put me in charge or whatever,” Sera was blushing from cheek to the tips of her ears, “so I had to do something, right?”

“On the contrary, Sera—it was you who took charge,” Cassandra said, “Cullen merely acknowledged your efforts to ensure you went without question. You were leading talks with Fairbanks and gauging the severity of the situation here between the Rifts and the Freemen and sundry of your own initiative and,” oh goodness, the woman almost seemed moved to tears, she was so very proud as she stood alongside Sera, raising a hand to pat the girl on the arm as she cleared her throat. “Well. You’ve done remarkably. You should be very proud of yourself.”

“Just…” Sera shrugged, “just wanted to help. Make this shite show less of a mess for Inky to deal with,” she supposed. “Shite needed done so I did it.”

That pulled a bemused smile from the Seeker as her hand went to cup Sera’s cheek thumb brushing along the mark there. “I don’t suppose I could have said as much any better myself.”

“Mmwah!” Ellie doled out a rather enthusiastic kiss to the girl’s spare cheek. “You’re amazing Ser’, seriously. You didn’t have to, but you really stepped up!” And then she patted the girl on the shoulder so Sera released her hold of Ellie’s legs and let her drop to her feet, the Inquisitor hugging Scout Harding in greeting and thanking her for everything she’d done—brightening, a happy skip in her magic flooding the bond when the Dwarf woman informed her she would be staying in the Emerald Graves, at least for the time being. So, it would seem their party wouldn’t be wholly without Dwarven influence in Varric’s absence.

…he’d received a letter from the Dwarf, actually. He’d not expected to hear from…well, anyone, but certainly not Varric Tethras. He’d a question about fauna—complained the Western Approach had him ‘ass deep in hyenas’ and wondered if he had any advice with getting them off their backs. ‘Goddamn Quillbacks—have those fuckers always been around?’ …no, actually. Phoenix’s were even stranger, they sounded like some horrible bastardization in the evolution, or perhaps devolution of Griffons. So he offered what he could of advice, he knew well if he left food out for creatures when he meditated or slept in the Fade in their habitats, often they left him be. They restocked on potions, made certain everyone had what they would need before the day ahead, Ellie quietly shaking out her hand, exhaling through a spike in its burn. Sera took her sister’s Marked hand in hers, raising it to kiss the back of her hand before rubbing circles with her thumb, swinging their arms a bit as she called ‘dibs’ on walking with ‘Inky’. She gave her a quiet rundown on what the refugee leader Fairbanks was like, as they made their way, through the forest and down a steep path into, yes, a very cavernous place indeed. Hmm.

Ahh, that was why this place seemed unfamiliar—it used to be a river, inlet from the river that still ran through the Emerald Graves. There was a great deal of water beneath the ground under their feet, but once upon a time the heights of this canyon used to be just perceivable above the waterline—where the Inquisition’s infiltration camp was, had once been riverbank. Deep
Mushroom grew along the canyon walls—that was what reminded him, helped him realize he’d been here, in this very spot exactly before—when it was underwater. While that particular plant life had not existed in the time before, back before the days of the Blight’s existence, this whole canyon had once been one solid, great rock formation in a river, it’s walls coated in bioluminescent algae. There had been…it had been his first experience with swimming, doing so in that river, diving deep to watch the array of color fluctuate through a range of blues, purples, to pale white. They would dive and collect it to take up above the water, leave homages to their patrons and each other, dedications to the forest they were trying to restore through etching murals into the algae and taking what was scraped off to used as light in the world above. It was less dangerous to carry in their lamps than firelight—and smear along paths they took to light the way in the darkness so any who were lost could find their way back. all of the trees were taller now and he wondered…he would look up this evening. Perhaps, somewhere up there, their handprints still glowed like starlight.

“Oh,” Cole breathed at his side. “That would be nice. That makes me happy.”
“What’s on, cuddly?” Sera wondered over her shoulder as she and Ellie led their party.
“Nighttime will be beautiful here,” Cole informed her.
“Maybe we’ll do a little nighttime exploring while we’re here then,” the Lieutenant said, “do a little star gazing?”
“Oh,” Ellie breathed at that, “Yeah, that would be fun. This really is a beautiful place,” she complimented softly, reaching out with her unmarked hand to trace her fingertips along the canyon wall. Oh it- oh he’d forgotten. The algae, it had been dim in the day, so much so that even now he didn’t realize until she raised her hand that that same stuff still existed—coated these walls. Sunlight met it, making the algae itself dim, but when Ellie’s fingers brushed against it? The tips of her fingers, her unmarked hand blocked the light and let what was under her hand glow in her wake, dragging a glowing trail that disappeared almost as quickly as it appeared as she walked along. It felt familiar, like watching his child trace steps he’d once taken, even as she walked where he never could have imagined dry land would exist one day—once upon a time Solas, in a time when that name meant tranquility, had walked the waking world marking light along bark and stone to guide those he loved to places they called home.

There was a startling sound, a heartbeat thunking and the stuttering in someone’s chest and Marehis flinched, breath catching in her throat like she choked on a gasp.

“You okay there, babe?” the Iron Bull was addressing the Elf woman, his hand high on the gentle slope of her back, rightly concerned as all of the aforementioned sounds had come from her. Solas- oh he carefully skirted the bond, worried she- well he wasn’t certain what would cause her heart palpitations or to lose her breath at the moment-

Sera told me to tell you, Cole’s voice spoke in his mind, passing along a message from the Elf girl, her words were strange to hear in the Spirit’s voice, ‘Shite, I friggin’ missed Inky too but damn. Glad you love her an’ pish but keep your emotions to yourself, friggin’ just about started ruddy crying! That’s just dumb!’

Ahh. The bond then, was the culprit. He’d- oh he hoped Marehis didn’t think he’d intentionally sent her his er- feelings. Being somewhere so- Elvethnan had precious little concept of not seeing their projects to fruition—it was not as if they could perish of age, there had been many mages, scientific minds that saw the long-reaching effects of their earliest most discoveries. But when Mythal perished and Solas banished their leaders to the Fade? He…didn’t know what the waking world would hold for him. It was the first time he thought perhaps he’d never see what would become of a project—of this place, the little sea of saplings they planted long ago. He’d seen the trees mature, but he never imagined this. The river drying up and leaving such a thriving, enormous world of greenery in its wake. It made him proud, and homesick, and remorseful for his actions—lament he could not just openly- they knew, these girls, that he was from the time before, and he wished…he wished he’d never hurt them, that somehow, someway they could know each other as they do now without any of the harm he caused, and he could share in this with them in full—take them exploring, tell them every last story he could possibly think of, delight them in this
place as it delighted him.

So. Apparently he was feeling rather a lot, and that unfortunately bled into his magic and the bond, startled the woman who was not accustomed to magic.

“Mami?” Ellie stopped walking to turn and look to the Elf woman.

“I’m fine da’vehnan,” Marehis assured, nodding before she looked up to the Qunari and offered a small reassuring smile, patting his arm and he nodded, removing his hand from her back. Oh. It struck him then, the familiarity of the Iron Bull’s hand on her body, and he…called people *babe*, as a form of casual affection…but he even called Dorian as much. Too…the Qunari was very casual in many respects so perhaps were- they might be-

It…was none of his business.

What was entirely his business, thankfully, was the small wave of Ellie’s magic coasting against his own, pressing a *tap, tap-tap* against his magic as the girl met his eye momentarily before resuming their course ahead. It was…it was a way they once expressed the sentiment *I love you* or…well, *I love you too* was her meaning this time. He was remorseful he’d made Marehis uncomfortable, Sera too but he…was glad to have that little bit of something he thought lost. When he was first revealed, he believed he might never feel that inside…it was not an inside-joke, because it was not a joke full stop, but it was a private code of sorts, dipping into and out of the bond with their magic in a specific pattern only they knew the meaning of. It used to be a near-daily occurrence, he would find himself proud over something the girl had done that left him expressing the sentiment, he might do something she found herself giddy over or grateful for and there it would happen. To feel that again was…

If he was not careful, he might have Sera taking swings at him for making her openly weep from his emotions. He imagined Marehis might well stab him, and he might lose what little he’d rebuilt with Ellie. So. He ground himself in focus on the task at hand, one foot in front of the other, cast wherever the Inquisitor needed him to.

Ahh, he’d wondered where Rainier and his men were—he’d expected them to be waiting with Sera but she’d apparently put them to use. He was not entirely familiar with the Iron Bull’s secondary Chargers…but he supposed that wasn’t entirely necessary given,

“Klaus!” Ellie exclaimed, excited to see the Human man who had been reaching to heft a crate but his fingers stilled around the handholds and he immediately turned, smile tugging at his lips as he opened his arms, braced for impact as the Inquisitor released Sera’s hand and rushed to hug Thom’s second in command. “Hiya!”

“Hey yourself sweetpea. Oh, I’m glad you made it here safe—Thom’ll be-”

“Ellie-girl?!” Rainier’s voice…rather boominly implored from on high, echoing down through the canyon—goodness. The man was high up on a tiered walkway that allowed those down in the cavern’s epicenter to ascend upward, it seemed like a tactical decision—if they were attacked and such a thing came to this place? They would be equipped to fire down from on high, he supposed, pull up their ladders to keep enemies from climbing. Thom Rainier was not necessarily an elderly man, but he wasn’t young and it was honestly surprising how swiftly he moved—dodging his way between a few passersby as he abandoned his station and slid down one ladder, ran further still, and then slid down another—he was admittedly breathless as he met them but he tiredly swung out an arm that Ellie put herself in the hold of as she stepped away from Klaus, hugging Rainier around his middle as he wrapped his arms around her, catching his breath as he rested a hand on the crown of her head, pressing his lips against her hair- oh. he looked…the man looked so relieved he might cry. Had there been some great cause of worry? The other Human man, Klaus—he was not necessarily very close to Ellie but he seemed beyond relieved to see her, had been enthusiastic in his greeting. “Damn am I glad to see you girl. You’re okay? Had a nice time in Val Royeaux?”

“Uh-huh, it was lots of fun! I missed you though.”

“Oh hell, sweetheart—I missed you too,” he looked to Sera over Ellie’s head as he asked, “Everything all good getting here?”

Sera nodded an affirmative while Ellie assured, “Uh-huh!”
“We had no trouble,” Marehis spoke up, meeting his gaze with intention.
“All clear all around—’cept in the northeast, but Butler’s on that. Depending on what we hear back, I figure if there’s anything, you lot can handle it, yeah?” Sera said to the Mercenary who nodded.

Northeast…oh. It was the only place that scout, ‘Quill’ Solas supposed his name must be, had listed as still holding a potential for Freemen activity.

He’d been just about to drift off to sleep himself, the sleepy haze from Ellie in the bond as the Human girl settled in for the night, warm and content as she rested…her magic felt as at peace as it did when she was with her mother. But he supposed that must be Cassandra, because he was startled fully awake by Marehis entering his tent, a finger raised to her lips as a signal for quiet—though perhaps it was that she didn’t wish to prolong a conversation with him by cluttering it with explanations and pleasantries, she had a singular objective.

"You are to monitor the Inquisitor at all times, her state of being and her proximity—she is not to be more than twenty meters away from you at any given time—if you feel her moving out of range, say the distance you are from her presently?" his tent was opposite the campfire from the one Ellie, Marehis, and Madam de Fer had laid claim to before Cassandra’s addition. “You are to lay eyes on her and confirm her location and if you can’t see her or she slips out of the perimeter I’ve set with you—you are to raise alarm immediately,” she fiercely intoned. “Do you understand me?” And when he nodded, so did she before she offered, “Good.” And took her leave.

He thought it was some measure due to Ellie’s recent mental health struggles, he’d been restless because he- he could not perceive anything unusual in the bond—her symptoms of depression seemed to be improving as of late, she felt recharged after her time in Val Royeaux, had a state of contentment about her more often than not. Had she given them further cause for concern? He’d studied the bond several times over before he found sleep. Now he supposed…was Marehis’s charge of proximity due to some threat from the Freemen? He’d…kept his word. To his own detriment even, he had…well. Ellie had gone out of sight, alone Solas thought and unfortunately it was albeit too late for him to realize it was not adrenaline from oncoming danger Ellie was feeling but er…the thrill and excitement of a more…private sort. He’d caught the unfortunate sight of the Lieutenant standing with his back against a tree, his hand pressed to his mouth to quiet himself while Ellie…

He was going to pretend the girl had merely been tying her shoe while looking upward at her boyfriend and reciting the Chant. Her lips a good, safe distance from his private parts, and not directly making contact wi-

He was not one for prayer, but if he were, he was decently certain he would pray Ellie and the Lieutenant had gotten their passions out of their system now that they were more directly in the field. Though Marehis had been amused at his expense when he returned to camp sans Ellie and informed her the girl may be occupied with something he should not be bearing witness to, would Cole give them privacy but also guard them? Blessed Spirit.

He was startled momentarily, he’d lost focus—Ellie was not currently in view. Well, more over she wasn’t currently still attached to Thom Rainier, though the man still had a hand on her—arm around the back of her neck while his elbow rested on her shoulder, bent upward so his hand could rest on the crown of her head as she turned her attention to another Human man, Fairbanks. She was shaking his hand and rattling off questions—how was he doing? Gosh it was so great to finally meet him, she’d heard so many wonderful things—did his people need anything? Anything at all? Oh they’re moving today—everyone could help carrying things and if they wanted, after their horses got a bit of rest maybe the steeds could lend to the effort!

“We’re going to clear the southeast Rift first thing,” Ellie assured him, “maybe it’s neighbor too. Either way you’ll have a bit more room that’s safe to move through—if we can, we’ll come back and help you move! Do you think you’ll like your new headquarters?” she wondered.

“They’re perfect,” he assured her, “we appreciate all the Inquisition has done for us already. Your alliance has been more than helpful.”

“Our alliance?” Ellie asked, smiling as she regarded the man with curiosity before she
looked to Sera, “Are we already allied with Fairbanks and his people?”

“Nah Ink, that’s your job, I just did mine—make contact, see what needs done around here,” Sera shrugged.

“Mmm, no alliance here then, but that’s why I’m here,” Ellie said, “seal the Rifts, and see if you’d like to continue your relationship with the Inquisition or step it up a notch.”

“Oh,” Fairbanks said, albeit startled. “I…I perceived— you’ve…your people cleared out the Freemen and saved my people from captivity—

“Well yeah, of course our people helped you. And if all we got in return for that was the ability to keep our camps up to intercept Red Templar movements and make sure the area stays Rift and Corypheus free? Cool. You want to work with us more than that? We’ll chat about your future in the Inquisition while I’m in the area. You’ve got some serious commitments to your people here, I understand if you don’t want more, but from everything I’ve heard—our Ambassador could definitely use your help with relations between the Inquisition and the Dales. You could even handle relations between your own people and Orlais more…directly—either yourself or someone you would trust in the Inquisition, talking to people at Court to make sure your people aren’t further displaced.” She rested a hand on his forearm, “Take a while to think it over. I’ll be around for a few days, we can talk it over and you can think about how exactly you might like to work with us, if you’re interested.”

The man nodded, minorly reticent at, “I…would not be one for speaking at Court.”

“I get that,” Ellie assured. “Sera has kept your confidence; she takes that seriously but um…I don’t necessarily count as ‘blabbing to people’.”

Fairbank’s mouth popped open for a moment as he started, looking between Sera and Ellie. “Oh. Oh! Ink—” he cleared his throat, piecing together that Inquisitor Trevelyan and Sera’s ‘Inky’ were in fact the same person and not some little sister back home she wrote of…some secret? “She did inform me she would be um, sharing certain information with you.”

“I’m where my sissy’s secrets got to die!” Ellie assured, “So no worries okay? It’s totally your business and I’m super proud of the path you’ve chosen and the spirit you’re keeping your privacy in. So if you do want the benefits of working with the Courts, we’re going to work with you on that—you’ll never have to do anything you’d be uncomfortable with.”

“Thank you. I would be honored to work with the Inquisition further.”

“Great! Think on your role—both what you’d like to do with the Inquisition, and how it will affect your work here—and we’ll sit down together and get everything worked out.”

“At your discretion,” he agreed, nodding even as he blanched a bit, looking the girl up and down as he said, “I can spare men for your efforts against the Rifts, if it pleases you, my lady.”

“That’s super sweet but I’d hate to take your people from you, they’ve got enough work cut out for them today. I might borrow Thom’s men if that’s okay with you and him—working together we should have it covered,” Ellie assured, confidentially enough, though her hand blazed since they walked so deep into the canyon, nearer the Rifts. He tried to send what he could of comfort. He hoped whatever it was Cullen so sorely needed from this area and Fairbank’s allegiance was well worth it.

“My prayers will be with you then,” Fairbanks offered, bowing, “By your leave, Inquisitor.”

“Are you okay with your men helping with the Rift?” Ellie asked as she turned to face Rainier directly, apologetic, “I did mean to ask, I promise it’s not a demand or anything if you’d rather-”

“Hush girl—you’re Inquisitor, my men are yours to make demands of,” Rainier assured, “Let me signal them and we’ll be ready when you are.”

“Thanks, they’re um…probably going to be pretty tough. Make sure everyone’s good on potion and Cyril has his healer’s kit on him, yeah?”

“I’m on it,” Klaus stepped up, earning a nod from Thom, “Be back in a jiff,” he promised before racing off—onward and upward out of the other side of the canyon, Solas could hear his signal horn calling the Chargers return.

Ellie exhaled, hands on her hips as she paced from Fairbank’s soon to be cleared desk that
appeared to be his center of operations, walking back in the direction they came—stopping just before the narrow trail, head lolling back and to the right, neck cracking with the motion before she rolled her shoulders. The Lieutenant gave her a moment to herself before he quietly approached her, laying hands on her shoulders and she breathed a contented sigh as he massaged at them, whispering against her ear, “You’ve got this, El. We’re with you all the way. You need to stop? Just say the word.” Ellie nodded. “How bad’s the Mark?”

“Two,” she replied softly, the young couple speaking quietly—a private conversation, at least for their Human compatriots. Solas heard Dorian groan and offer a quiet complaint to Bull that he would, in fact, be nauseated if the young man was initiating some sort of disgusting display of physical affection with his girlfriend in the middle of a field mission.

“And how bad is it really?” the Lieutenant offered in tones of amusement, lightening their subject.

“Five here. Six back there,” her head nodded backward, toward their gathered group. She swallowed. “These are going to be really bad, Cremisius. I’m…I’m scared—what if someone gets hurt or—“

“Hey—it’s going to be okay. We can do this. If it’s too much to handle? Call a retreat, we’ll work together, get everyone to safety and regroup. Cullen would always send you soldiers, and I’m sure the guys aren’t all the way back to Skyhold yet. If you wrote Skinner that you were scared and needed help in a fight? She’d sprout wings and fly her way down here.”

Oh, relief flooded the bond. This young man made Ellie feel safe, made the nervous buzz in her magic quiet and work to console its Mage. The girl offered up a wet sounding laugh, sniffling as she raised the palm of her unmarked hand to wipe at her nose before taking a deep breath before she turned to face him—the rest of their onlooking group, her eyes were a little red, features tight with strain, but the Lieutenant managed to put a smile on her lips. “Thanks, Cremisius.”

“Of course,” he nodded, wrapping his arms around her to pull her in for a hug, hand rubbing circles on her back while the other rested atop her head as he pulled her into his chest. And then he called over his shoulder. “Oi, Ser’, Cole—you want in on this?”

“Squeeze time!” was Sera’s agreement, as she ran to join them, wrapping her arms around the Lieutenant and Ellie, Cole materializing at their side to join their hug, humming a bit with his efforts. The young people held their congregation until the Spirit’s arms tightened around the young couple’s backs and he quietly announced that Thom’s men had regrouped and were on their way to join them and they relinquished their hold on one another. Ellie seemed more content. Sera slipped her hand into Ellie’s Marked one, giving it an affirming squeeze as they rejoined the group, almost in synchronicity with Klaus leading Rainier’s men who offered up a chorus of overlapping greetings.

“Hey guys!” Ellie greeted in kind, “Thanks so much for all your hard work here—I really appreciate you joining us with the Rift. Klaus gave you a run down?” the men nodded. “And everyone’s good on potions? Cyril, is there anything at all you need more of?”

“Got my field kit on me—we’re all set honey,” Cyril assured, patting the satchel on his hip. “Great! Okay—stick together, watch out for each other,” she looked to the Thom and Bull, Cassandra, as she addressed the group, “Thom, The Iron Bull, Seeker Pentaghast and myself—if any of us call a retreat, we mean it big time—get out of there, if you can either run back the way we came or…any direction south or west will work to avoid running into another Fade Rift, and we’ll regroup here. Is everyone ready?”

“Yes, Inquisitor.”

Ellie sort of startled at their unanimous agreement, giggling, “That was kind of cool! Okay, follow us,” she said, swinging she and Sera’s joint hands between them as they headed for the path northward out of the canyon, the Lieutenant walking close behind with Cole at his side, the Spirit clasping hands with the Tevinter man and humming...something—it sounded vaguely like a lullaby, nothing Solas was familiar with but it just had a simple cadence to the tune, it was pleasant.

“It is! Papa Tonio sang it to me when my body was broken.”

The Lieutenant’s brow raised, a mix of amusement and mild confusion but it seemed he was
rather used to Cole’s picking up random bits of thought and communicating to them verbally. “Oh, Fa la nana bambino? That’s sweet.”

Ellie let out an excited gasp at that, “Papa sang? And I missed it?!”

Her boyfriend chuckled warmly, “Papa…he’s shy, his voice isn’t bad, not always the best with the keeping on tune but he’s got his lullaby’s down. I’ve always been a fan.”

…the girl let out rather the shriek, unadulterated giddiness spilling into the bond as she was happy to decide, “That’s too cute! Cremisius! I love Papa with my entire heart and I miss him!”

“He misses the hell out of you too, lovely. Maybe you and me’ll write him when we’re done for the day?”

“Letter writing date! I love it!”

Cole was delighted to offer, “I can show you my memory of him singing to me in the Fade—oh! Or of him singing to Krem when he was small—he had not sung it in so long he had to think back, warm wriggly weight—Cremisius is so lively tonight. Oh…we can stay awake a bit longer, can’t we? I’ve barley seen my child today. He let you make play with the buttons on his suit jacket, you nearly chewed them off, but they were too big to fit in your mouth and you were teething, so very miserable with it he was glad to see you finding relief.”

She looked entirely in love with the prospect but, “Cremisius…if you don’t want me to I won’t, honest,” she promised.

“Don’t got a problem with it lovely,” the Lieutenant assured.

She stopped for a moment to pop up on her toes to kiss the Tevinter on the cheek. “Let’s go kick Rift butt! I’ve got letters to write and the single most important thing in life to see in the Fade! If I die from cuteness overload, Tia has my will!”

“Imekari,” the Iron Bull found issue with that. "You’re not allowed to have a will!” it was certainly a macabre thing for a young person to have, but reasonable considering the circumstances.

“Um, I’ve got a crap ton of stuff and I mean, I’m gonna die someday, probably. Money, and Solas gave me Skyhold so I like, super had to make sure the Inquisition could still use it if I bite the big one. It’s not like I can take anything with me, it’d be dumb to die with it. And I wanted to make sure Anya and Russel and my rocks are taken care of—I’m a responsible mami!”

Had the girl obtained jewelry in their time apart? She’d piercings she showed off to Cassandra, the Human woman raising her hand to touch one of the delicate pearls dangling from Ellie’s ear but that was not quite the Human definition of ‘rock’ when it came to something of value. Humans had the tradition of gifting each other with rings to signify a deepening of their relationship with one another, when marriage became a consideration, Solas had heard in passing, women gathered around a friend insisting she show them her ‘rock’ from her significant other when they proposed marriage, Solas- she- she was too- oh he had no say in any such thing but he was rather startled by the thought that Ellie and Mister Aclassi were moving so quickly…oh. No, the Lieutenant hadn’t gifted Ellie a rock of that sort—but Cole had, on her Birthday, he only just recalled, in a literal fashion. She’d made certain they’d be taken someone would inherit the things she pass? That…seemed entirely plausible, as a thing the girl might do.

That may well be happening sooner than any of them wished it.

Their chatting had been distracting for the girl, but as they drew nearer and nearer to the Rift Ellie fell silent, jaw set as she seemed to be carefully controlling her every breath, Marked hand clenching Sera’s tighter until ultimately she shifted the energy put into squeezing, to hold her hand stiffly, palm held fast against Sera’s while her fingers stretched taught to keep from squeezing her sister’s hand too harshly. It felt more like the vice grip was on Sera’s heart, it hurt so for the younger girl, something like sadness and anger and the build of adrenaline surging in the bond from the Elf girl.

Demons of Pride—demons, in the plural—of Pride—poured from the Rift.

…he had not realized Barrier could feel like a shove, like someone brushing by you and striking you in resentment even as they coated you in protection, but Dorian and Madam de Fer seemed of one accord…ironically enough, they were of one accord with Solas: this was his entire
fault they, he, resented him for it.

Somehow he preferred the scraping burn of resent-laced Barrier against his magic, to the bubbling balm of love and protectiveness that came with the wash of Ellie’s Barrier over him, her Magic bracing his like a hug, as it had always done before.

Though he- he let out a startled gasp because-

Sera. Oh his brilliant da’vehnan- she was casting! He could not be more proud of the gentle knock of her magic struggling to surge, extend outward of herself, he felt guilt and honor that she chose him to be included in it...though perhaps it was merely because of his proximity. Ellie fell in line alongside the Mages, Solas taking up post of staying close to the girl as per his promise to and Sera was very clearly targeting the younger girl with the brunt of her focus.

She needed every bit of it—Sera’s bit of barrier might have been the Inquisitor’s saving grace when the girl, in an effort to keep one of the Demons of Pride from finding attraction in Fairbank’s people in the distance, Ellie screamed at the top of her voice and cast against the demon as she charged at it, endeavoring to get it to focus on her, follow her back into the fray of Rift and underestimated just how great the Demon’s gate would be. It was a great lumbering thing, but it took all of two steps to catch up with the small Human girl scrambling underfoot…and then literally, she was about to be underfoot-

Solas had gotten separated from her when she broke off—but while he had no limbs the length of a Pride demon’s, he was still swift enough to meet her in the same moment the beast caught up with her and pull her to his chest before pushing her down and falling with her—his body over hers as the Demon of Pride’s foot came down on them as they both fell face-first into the Emerald Graves high grass.

“Are you hurt, da’vehnan?” Solas shot out, the girl was still underneath him, bracing herself for impact.

She shook her head ‘no’, catching her breath. She wasn’t seriously injured, her face hurt, back and shoulder aching, knees and elbows sore from her landing but oh it could have been so much worse. “Are you okay?” she worried, magic reaching out to his like clasping hands, wanting confirmation they were well.

“El!” the Lieutenant’s voice hollered over the rush of battle—followed by the rushing of the Iron Bull and Thom Rainier charging at the Pride demon, forcing it back and away, off of Solas and the girl before the Demon could put its full weight on them, and the moment it was off, back turned on them and Cremisius coming to…well, Ellie’s aid was more likely, the Lieutenant was at their sides, hand on Sola’s shoulder to push him off-

Oh. No, the Lieutenant’s hand rested on his shoulder and pushed gently as if to still Solas, “Hey hey hey, take it easy, shit, that was a lot on your spine—you feeling your limbs and everything? Anything hurt bad?”

“I’m well,” Solas said. He was not substantially injured—sore, he would certainly be feeling this exchange tomorrow, but he would be alright.

“Tell that to the back of your head dude. That thing definitely doesn’t clip its toenails. Sit up careful,” he instructed, pulling a healing potion from his belt, taking the cork between his teeth and spitting it aside and then his hand was off Solas’s shoulder to get a rag from a thigh pocket that he doused in potion before pressing, putting momentarily stinging pressure on the back of Solas’s head, oh, he was bleeding he supposed. Then the Lieutenant’s hand was on the Elf man’s shoulder again to help him as he rose up on his knees, straddling the girl’s legs, Ellie was already rolling onto her back to face them, peering up into Solas’s face with open concern. Solas reached back to place his hand over the rag at the back of his head so the Lieutenant could er...stop assisting him and put his focus where he truly wished it to be. That was...well, he certainly hadn’t expected the young man to spit on him if he was on fire, let alone tend his wounds on the battlefield. The Tevinter nodded before turning to kneel at Ellie’s side, speaking in quiet urgent tones to assess if she was alright.

“Hmm...pretty sure I’m dead and you’re like the handsomest angel like, ever...” Ellie informed him, groaning a bit as he helped her to sit up, “Nope. Still alive. m’okay,” she promised.
Sore, the demon’s efforts to crush her had been thwarted, but it had broken through the last of what Barrier had been surrounding her. Bruising, she’d a clotting scratch on her eyebrow, a bleeding split in her lip that Ellie seemed to not much notice as she pecked a kiss to the Lieutenant’s lips, announcing, “And now I’m all better!”

“You scare the hell out of me, you realize that?” the young man informed her.

“Fear…can be a powerful aphrodisiac?” the girl supposed in uncertain hope.

“…if that’s something Bull told you I’m kicking his ass—I’m kicking your ass Bull!” the Lieutenant called as he rose up and helped Ellie to her feet before offering an arm to Solas, “Well? Can you stand or are you turning into a wolf or something?”

Solas huffed a bit of a laugh as he accepted the offer to use the man’s arm to pull himself up onto his feet, nodding his thanks as he pulled the rag away from the back of his head, erm…

“You can just keep it,” the young man assured, pressing potion into Ellie’s hand as he kissed her temple before taking up arms again and jogging to back Cassandra up against a very persistent Greater Shade.

Ellie knocked back the potion her boyfriend had left her with before casting Barrier across the field once more, Solas shaking his head to clear it, yes—battle, barrier—he cast just a split second after her and kept close to the girl the remainder of the fight he- he certainly wasn’t letting her run headlong after a Pride demon all on her own again.

And she was not alone, not at all as the last demon was felled, and Sera was immediately at Ellie’s side, taking her sister’s unmarked hand and squeezing tight as an offer of assurance. Cassandra focused to suppress the rift and their Mages, Cole, Sera—they poured power into Ellie’s Mark as she raised it high and tremors working through her body as she put everything into the effort of sealing it closed with a resounding crack!

Sera was rounding on her sister immediately, imploring “Inky?”

“Eleanor?” Seeker Pentaghast asked, the woman had to clear her throat to do as much, the woman almost sounded congested. She rested a hand on Ellie’s back as she joined the girl who was leaning forward, hands on her knees as she caught her breath.

“I um—“ she swallowed through a wave of nausea, shaking herself before saying, “I’m okay. Whew. Gimme a minute? E-everyone regroup. S-see how we are on potion,” she instructed before sitting straight down on her bottom, head between her knees as she…was likely assessing whether she wanted to simply lay down and die—in which case they would simply call it a day and get her into camp, tucked away in a soft bedroll—or if she could manage second Rift, which may be just as difficult as the first.

Solas tentatively approached, seating himself in lotus position at her side, and upturning his hand to offer his palm for her Marked hand, which she peeked at when she felt him sit down before hesitantly placing her burning hand in his, doing his best to wholly distract the Mark with his own Elvehnan magic without putting more harm to Ellie’s. It was an effort, like pulling the Mark up toward himself, leaving only the barest bit of connection between it and her person so his Magic could interact with it without also interacting with her magic unpleasantly—it was a frustrating thing. It offered her some relief, but it was like mockery—he could pull and pull, give her respite, but the core tendril of connection the Mark had to this girl would not relent, could not be severed, save, perhaps-

He shuddered to think what the future might hold for this girl. That someday the only way she may ever find relief from her Mark is to sever her own hand.

“Solas? Are you okay? Does your head really hurt?” Ellie was asking, looking to him, brow furrowed with concern.

He cleared his throat, offering up a smile, “I am fine da- I’m well, Inquisitor. Just focusing,” he assured.

“You’re sad,” she gently accused…raising the index finger of her unmarked hand to poke him in the cheek.

“Merely wishing I could do more,” he supposed truthfully.

He could hear Marehis sighing, almost defeatedly—she’d been anxious to draw nearer to
Ellie but...there was something that spoke to mistrust and resentment, like she thought Solas had offered his assistance out of a need to try and put himself in a space Marehis would occupy—but she came to her ward now. Sera was pacing the area before them, working off nervous energy he supposed—the Lieutenant was making himself useful in following his girlfriend’s instructions as opposed to going to her side, though he did keep casting his gaze over to her every so often as he helped Cyril take into account who was injured and how to treat them swiftly, if they could make a second Rift attempt. Cassandra was at Eleanor’s back, kneeling herself now with her hands on the girl’s shoulders, rubbing them with her head bowed like she might be in prayer over the girl. Marehis sat down before Ellie, on her knees, taking her unmarked hand in her own while the other rested on Ellie’s knee.

“Da’vehn? How are you feeling?”

“Kind of wanna lay down in the grass and call it a day—it’s very soft,” she informed her mother.

The woman seemed albeit amused as she raised a brow at that, the hand on Ellie’s knee coming up to ghost an index finger over the scratch on her daughter’s brow, “Is it?” she wondered, eyeing the split in her lip. Oh, he was sorry he’d sent the girl face first into the brush but it had been rather a split second thing.

“But, I know I should just get it over with. I can do it. I can. I’m just not going to enjoy doing it.”

Cole materialized beside Marehis. “You will feel better once it is over—it is hard, but it being harder is what will make you so much more proud and relieved once it’s all over.” Oh, the Spirit looked remorseful, “I’m sorry it hurts. I’m sorry. We- we will fix it—every time. Every time your body gets broken, we’ll make it better. We will nap and- and have potion, and eat, and- and I will show you anything in the Fade that makes your heart happy. And I love you,” he concluded his list.

“I love you too,” Ellie said, "thanks for making me feel better.”

“What’s the word Ellie-girl?” Rainier asked as he approached, “Everyone’s okay, and Sera’s got her people on bringing in a resupply of potion.” Oh. Solas hadn’t realized Sera had left them, but she was still near. “Let Cyril give you a look over, okay?”

Ellie nodded though, “I’m okay—but Solas- oh! Oh gosh, your head! Thom can Cyril pretty please look at P- Solas’s head? The Pride Demon tried to squash it.”

Solas softly cleared his throat, “I’m fine, da’len.”

Cyril whistled as he’d already stepped around to examine the injury, “Nasty bruising, but the gash is closing up good, knocking back healing draught will set it to rights. Scale of one to ten, how’s your headache?”

The man hadn’t asked him if he had a headache to begin with but he supposed it went without saying. “A four, at most,” he did not wish to break contact with Ellie’s Mark just yet… there was a Rift still nearby after all, it was only reasonable someone of magical origin hold her hand. Certainly.

He did not have many excuses to do as much as of late, certainly not in the last few weeks. What was the term…? Bite him. Anyone who thought it pathetic would be right, and they could bite him.

So—he kept hold of Ellie’s Marked hand and merely withdrew health potion with this free hand, and copied the Lieutenant’s earlier methodology—taking the cork between his teeth to rend it from the bottle before dropping the thing from his mouth and taking his potion. Ahh. “My headache is already receding—the Inquisitor has minor scrapes, bruising, tendon and joint soreness in her shoulders and back. She’s also entertaining mild nasal congestion.”

The Healer set about checking the girl over, getting her to imbibe potion while he dabbed ointment on the few scrapes on her face. “Catching a cold are you, little love?” Cyril worried.

Ellie shook her head, “I don’t think so, I don’t feel crummy or sick-tired or anything. My nose is like, a teensy bit stuffy and my throat’s a little scratchy but that’s probably just ‘cause I’m really thirsty.”
“Oh!” Marehis chirped, immediately pulling…oh, she’d two canteens at her hip—her own and Ellie’s. “I apologize, I forgot to return it to you—here, da’vehnan,” she insisted, uncapping Ellie’s canteen and handing it to the girl. Ahh, the woman had taken the task of filling their water that morning and slung the girl’s over her shoulder out of habit of taking the girl’s water around at her hip while she walked around…well, Haven was where the habit started, but Skyhold and now, Val Royeaux was where it continued he supposed.

“It’s okay mami, thanks for carrying it for me!” Ellie said before gulping…well, she nearly drained the thing, he’d water if she needed it, but there was still water sloshing in her canteen when she stopped, taking in a sigh and a sniffle, clearing her throat. She set her canteen down and pulled a handkerchief from an overcoat pocket, a plain white—oh. Not entirely plain, he supposed, there was a bit of lace about it, flowers and an ‘E’ embroidered on them that…well, it was not his own handiwork. That was to be expected. The girl quietly blew her nose, taking a deep breath before reporting, “All good!”

“Alright. You tell me if you feel poorly, okay honey?” Cyril intoned.

“You got it!” the girl promised before she rose up to her feet, the adults rising up with her. Ahh, she’d apparently spotted a runner handing off potion to Sera—she, the Lieutenant and Cole had made up a team of dispensers, replenishing everyone’s stores. Solas hoped the boy remembered his own. Though the girl did stop to look up at the Seeker as the woman rose up behind her, “Mami? Are you sniffly? You sound kind of congested and your eyes are pretty red—pretty, but also red.”

The woman offered up a derisive sound, that did sound albeit strange like something in her throat made it difficult to produce her patented grunt, “I am…admittedly a victim of hayfever, given the right circumstances. Unfortunately what makes the Emerald Graves so lovely also produces a great deal of—“ she stopped, “Eleanor. You’re to wear your scarf up around your mouth and nose. Maker—you’re certain you don’t feel poorly? If I’ve hayfever that means there is allergen—a great deal of pollen in the air.”

“Oh!” the girl squeaked, raising a hand to pull up her scarf though the Seeker beat her to it—the Nevarran woman already had her hand on the evergreen material that bunched as it looped around Ellie’s neck, and pulled it more taught so it hung from the tip of the girl’s nose to her throat. Though the girl returned the action after a fashion—the woman’s hand’s fiddling with her scarf while Ellie’s went to the Seeker’s throat, finger tips pressing gently at the underside of her jaw, along her throat, “Awe mami, you’ve got a little swelling. You have to be feeling pretty crummy—you don’t have to—“

“I’m fine,” Cassandra insisted. “I’m well enough to fight—I’m not weary, or lacking in my usual strength, it is more so an in general inconvenience than anything else.”

“You’re taking medicine and laying down as soon as we get back to camp, missy!” the girl sternly intoned, though she was cheery at the prospect of, “We can be recovery buddies!” which swung to concern the moment it seemed something occurred to her, “Cremisius!”

The Lieutenant was immediate to respond, turning about on the heel of his boot to cast an assessing gaze over their congregation around Ellie, making certain his girlfriend wasn’t calling for him to physically defend her from some danger, “Yeah lovely?” he asked as he approached.

“Do you get hayfever?” she worried, “Mami gets it, and she thinks pollen and stuff might mess with my asthma—do you feel any congestion coming on, guapo?” she motioned for him to come closer, and the young man grinned, stepping forward and leaning to oblige her as if he expected what she wished to check—she repeated the action she’d done to check Cassandra for swelling? “Your glands are as perfect as you are!” she was pleased to inform him, pulling her scarf down momentarily to peck a kiss where she’d just examined and then she stepped back and raised her arms overhead, stretching her arms overhead and twisting about, an action which the Lieutenant copied, taking a deep breath as if testing his lung capacity before reporting,

“M’all good lovely, but thanks for thinking of me,” he said, pressing a kiss to her forehead. “You’re okay? Are we heading to the next Rift or calling it a day?”

“Next Rift so long as everyone else is up for it.” Ellie said, linking arms with the Lieutenant
as they moved to address the rest of their party—chat with everyone and make certain they were well before announcing their next move.

Though Cassandra’s next move apparently would be dictated by, “If Eleanor suffers an asthma attack because of this place and its horrendous pollen count I will be punching a tree,” she informed Solas.

...a rather violent response but the trees would well survive it. Deserve it even, he supposed.

Madam de Fer approached, resting a hand on Marehis’s back, “Were you injured at all, my dear?” she checked with the Elf woman.

Marehis shook her head, “No. Thank you,” she offered sounding…well, very grateful. He was rather tempted to check the bond, there was a sense of worry that emanated from Marehis’s place in his magic and it spiked in battle…and now, as the enchanter addressed her before Solas, it was mixed with nervousness.

“Of course, I could not see my lover harmed,” the woman offered warmly, a hint of teasing that was...well, flirtatious he supposed. She pressed a kiss to Marehis’s cheek before throwing a particularly haughty look Solas’s way and wrapping an arm around Marehis’s shoulders, rubbing her arm as she led the Elf woman off, lips against Marehis’s ear as she spoke in very hushed Orlesian. He was not sure if he gratified or cursed his lack of knowledge of the Human language but Trade had been the more pressing vernacular to tackle, he’d little interest in learning languages that would soon be dead...though those plans had wildly changed so, perhaps he should pick it up. Or not if...it would likely be best if he’d not the ability to translate the Enchantress’s words. He...had known they were good friends—to the point Solas had endeavored not to speak ill of the arrogant woman when in Marehis’s company, though he’d not been entirely certain just why his veh= why she would find such easy friendship in someone so heavily steeped in Orlesian racism, enough that she would be so compliant with it. Well...once upon a time, she had been, that could not necessarily be said now, he supposed—she’d a discussion with Ellie about it, had...been derisive in regard to Sera, in the past, but that had changed with time and perhaps been from how very different the girl was from the Enchantress, rather than her heritage.

But were they- were they quite seriously-

It was none of his concern!

What was entirely his concern, however, was Ellie—namely her well being. The second Rift, was no kinder to them than the first, and its sealing left the girl on her knees, trembling, tear streaked, and wheezing.

“Cyril-” Rainier called out,

“Oh it!” the medic responded as he went to the Inquisitor, “Okay honey, just keep breathing,” he intoned, digging through his medical kit. Marehis was kneeling at Ellie’s side and he handed her bandaging, “Keep pressure on those gashes, gotta get that bleeding stopped.”

Marehis nodded, blanching as she pressed the bandaging against the gash on Ellie’s hip Pride demon’s claw had put there, another was lower on her thigh, the woman’s eyes clenching shut and a whimper tearing from her lips when a strangled breath caught in Ellie’s throat and the girl wept, bile blazed in her throat and she raised her unmarked arm up press her mouth into her elbow, wailing agony she tried to stifle. Sera let out an anguished yelp into Cassandra’s shoulder as the Seeker had sought to comfort the girl when she panicked when Ellie went straight down upon sealing the Rift, and Marehis was openly sobbing, “I’m sorry, I’m so sorry da’vehnan.”

Eleven. Eleven Rifts had torn in these heavens. And it was his fault—their fault. Him and Elgar’nan and Andruil—it had been the old ‘gods’ warring that caused so much death in this area, so many magical souls wearing the space between this world and any others that would dare touch it, thin. Ultimately his Orb that rendered those worn places torn. Left torment burning this girl who did nothing to deserve such a fate.

And it sent Solas to his knees, prayer falling from his lips as he gripped tight Ellie’s Marked hand.

“Mythal, Elgar’nan, Andruil! Halani!” his ancient tongue poured from him, words they would have to hear, they must! “Ma’da’len da’vehnan is pure and blameless. It should shame us,
the harm we have caused. Please, my love, if any part of you is still of this world, come now and save this child. Elgar’nan, Andruil, it is in your house she suffers, because of your wars. Now grant her mercy. I stand in your holy places, sit at your altar, and I am sorry—I am sorry for what I have done to you, what I have done to this world, what I have done to her—it is my fault! Give it to me, take this Mark and the pain it causes and place it onto me! On my hand—onto my very heart, I care not! It was I who tore the sky, let me heal it, let this Mark torment me until my dying breath! Please!”

Magic broke from his skin, pure, and powerful, something that did not come from his magic alone-

When he dared open his eyes, he was remorseful the glow in his palm did not stay there—stayed stuck still to Ellie’s hand. Oh- oh curse him to his dying day he should not have appealed to his enemies for her life, it was him. They had little reason to aide him, even—even Mythal she—he’d done nothing but bring her shame. And now they had only…oh they punished this girl—her pain only multiplied, felt fresh to hi-

Oh. Oh. it felt fresh to him because it was. The rolling nausea and nerve-searing pain, lung-stinging breath, and the tears in flesh—it was on him now, in him. Ellie…was no longer conscious, but it was more like she’d been put under a spell that granted peaceful sleep, no longer injured, her breathing sounded clear—

“Solas!”

Magic or no, bodies…did not, apparently, appreciate sudden unwarranted injury. He was uncertain what happened next he- he thought he’d heard Marehis’s voice calling his name, and then nothing, his body had gone into shock, he supposed. Because one moment he was relieved at the transferred agony, that his prayers had, in some small way, been heard. And then the next he was awakening from darkness…into darkness. Nightfall, and a tent overhead…

A…larger tent, than what he had recently been prescribed. The Inquisitor’s tent is as you left it, a scout had informed Sera, earlier, and now he knew that meant a reincarnation of the Storm Coast’s ‘mega-tent’.

He…he was in the…

The mega-tent! Cole’s voice cheered in his mind. Solas, savior, saved—the Iron Bull carried you when you were injured. Your body aches less now. You should talk to Marehis, she has needed to speak with you since we left Skyhold, but she could not write you, not for herself and this needs to be handled in person. She is putting it off, she is scared, but if you speak to her now she will talk. I’m not allowed to talk about it, she told me, so I can’t tell her—but you can, it will ease her fear. She will be a little sad though, but only a little. When you are done you should join us—Ellie and Sera are light and happiness with Krem and I on the hill looking at the stars, but they are worried for you and will feel so much better seeing you. You would feel better, that seeing you will make them feel less anxious instead of more.

Marehis wanted to talk to him? Had- had wanted to talk to him…since she was last in Skyhold? Whatever for? She was scared, what-

He shot up in his cot- oh. that was an improvement from the former mega-tent—this one was…albeit larger, and full of cots instead of just a bedroll between one and the hard ground.

And on the cot across from the one he’d been resting in, Marehis was seated, elbows on her knees, head in her hands though she startled when he sat up, looked up at him. “You’re awake. How…how are you feeling?”

He…thought he would have to go in search of her, but she…she was here? Had waited at his bedside? “I’m…” oh. He was better—an ache that protested when he moved so quickly, lingering in his lower abdomen and thigh, but those wounds were nearly closed it felt like, they were not bleeding any longer, did not feel enflamed. He was tired but not terribly so. “I’m well. Recovering nicely. Thank you.”

She nodded. “Cyril was the one who aided you. Ellie. She…she checked your bandaging when she woke up,” Marehis huffed softly, a tenderness in her features as she amusedly informed him, “and before her ‘letter writing date’ and after dinner, and again before going star gazing. If
you find lip prints on your bandaging…it is lip balm, Vivienne has gotten her hooked on the stuff.”

And the sweet girl had kissed his injuries healed, he supposed. It certainly felt like it had worked now, warmth settling in his chest and spreading through him like he’d been the one doused in healing magic. “That was…that was kind of her. She needn’t worry, I’m well. She…is alright? She fell unconscious I- I hope my er…actions did not cause her ill effect.”

“Cole said it was…part of the blessing imparted on her, she was merely asleep, allowed rest so her body and mind could catch up so to speak—just as it is startling to be uninjured one moment and badly so the next…”

“Ah. Yes, I suppose that might have been confusing, take some processing.”

“She woke maybe an hour after we returned to camp. She was so worried for you, you needed rest so she laid with you for a while, monitoring you for a time to make certain you were healing well.” Oh…oh she had- truly? It felt foolish, pathetic even but a lump rose in his throat, he’d…he’d not thought she would do such a thing with him ever again—he wasn’t certain he might cry because the blessing that such a thing had occurred again, or because he’d missed it, been wholly unconscious, not even entered the Fade.

“…thank you. Thank you for what you did…” she cleared her throat, “for what you said.”

He felt his brow raise, not in suspect, but rather in surprise, “You could understand what I was saying?” it was…the variation of Elvehnan language…most of it had been lost in what was now considered Dalish, it was rather untranslatable.

“There is…it you have said it yourself, our language has a certain rhythm to it so that even if one cannot fully understand it*, the meaning can still be conveyed. Too, Cole confirmed what Sera and I heard.”

Ahh. “Cole…has said you wish to speak to me. Of something you’ve instructed him not to speak of?”

Marehis paled, and for a moment he was absolutely certain she was about to jump up and flee but she placed her hands on either side of herself and gripped the edge of the cot as if to steel herself, taking a few deep breaths before she dared to look at him. “I…we have a…bond, yes? Like what you share with Ellie?”

“…I did.”

“…I did.”

“What…” she gulped, goodness the woman was shaking. “What of their conception?”

“That is hardly- Marehis I cannot undo- of course I felt-“ he wasn’t even certain how best to articulate such a thing was the woman wishing to dredge up an argument blaming him for feeling satisfaction as he laid with his previous lover?!

“We were you able to tell in your bond when it happened!” Marehis snapped, “When their life formed—could your bond tell you she was with child?!”

Oh. “Yes. Certainly it-“ it had been an immediacy. Not an immediacy upon the completion of their lovemaking—it had been the following day after they laid together when Solas felt the change in the bond, the confirmation that life had sparked in his beloved. “We knew the moment it happened. I knew, at least—and then she, shortly thereafter of course, I,” ran three miles in what felt like a matter of seconds and nearly collided with the woman in her temple—she’d felt his excitement and urgency to get to her and come running to meet him and- well. “I informed her.”

“You felt…you felt her in your bond, as she died? As…as your child was lost?”

“…I did.”

“…in…inform you of…?”

“Would you inform me?” Marehis wondered softly.

“If you felt such a thing in your bond when last we were together would you have informed me?!”

Oh good- “Of course—immediately, velnan, I would never have kept- do- are- I do not understand, do you believe you are…?”
“I don’t know! I-“ her face crumbled, “I was not- my own potion fell through when Haven was lost, I ran out shortly before we found Skyhold and-“

Ahh. They had er…consummated their discovery of safe haven. But, “I have not felt any such thing occur in the bond, I promise you. If I had, I would have informed you immediately.”

She nodded, teary eyed, “I- I have not bled, and I only realized as much…I should have weeks ago, while we were in Crestwood and I did not. I waited, but nothing, and I- I’ve been so exhausted and just have not felt like myself, so I went to Elan and she- her tests left her fairly certain I’m not-“ she stopped, swallowing. “Adan offered his opinion, that I have been…stressed. Had anxieties upon me that have left my body with an imbalance of sorts, hormonally, that is to blame, I’ve been prescribed potion, a supplement that might correct the imbalance and um, encourage a return to my natural cycle but it…I am hesitant to resort to as much if there is a chance-“ she took a deep breath, “I do not know exactly, what I would do moving forward if I were with child, but I would rather the decision be my own than be made for me through misfortune. There is…little known of how such potion might affect an unborn child.”

Understandable. “I felt no such thing. You’ve…experienced rather a lot, these past few months, to find yourself in a time of burn out is more than understandable—exhaustion and difference of mood can just as likely be symptoms of…of, well, anxiety, and Elan is a competent Healer,” he offered assurance. “I…could examine the bond, if that would put your mind to ease. Though if that brings you discomfort—Cole, he informed me you wished to speak of something you’d told him not to speak of, he took that very seriously and reported he has not even spoken of it to you—but if he could, he said he could alleviate your worry.”

“I’m…reticent to release my stance with him on this. Cole is sweet and he means well and I trust him but I- he’s so close with the girls and Cremisius, I would hate for him to accidentally bring this up with them. Would you? Examine the…the bond? Pl-please.”

He nodded, closing his eyes and focusing. Oh—he could certainly sense her anxieties in full now, she was riddled with them, fear and angst of what had come to pass, and what was waiting in the future. Everything…had been rather traumatizing. It was not an easy thing…any of it—finding herself caretaker of someone who was in constant danger, finding herself loving that someone more than her own life. To have fallen in love and been so sorely betrayed, found herself unwittingly welcoming danger she felt she should have defended her daughters from…

Thankfully, her only children were Ellie and Sera. He- oh he did not- he would never regret a life made from their love, but he would never wish that upon her, the trauma of facing whether or not to carry that life, the trauma wrought from either of those paths. So he was ultimately relieved to inform her, “You are not pregnant.”

Her entire body relaxed as she rested her head in her hands, “Oh thank the Maker.”

Ahh. She was…Andrasten, now? That would be more than reasonable, he supposed.

Indeed,” he agreed softly.

She breathed a sigh of relief, “I was- oh I was so worried.”

“As was I, for a moment,” he assured. “I’m relieved, truly. Though whatever…whatever you had done, Marehis, you…would have had support. And Madam de Fer…well she might have delighted in the fun of jesting she’d impregnated you.”

Marehis offered up a wet sounding laugh at that, wiping at her eyes, “Oh, certainly.”

“You shared with her, your concern? I apologize if that made…if that caused any strife in your relationship.”

“I did, I- I could not stand by and let Ellie go into battle without me. I didn’t wish for Ellie or Sera to know of my concern unless…unless there was something to be concerned about and it was staying that way. So I confided in Vivienne and she assured me she’d make certain I’d come to no harm that might threaten…well,” she cleared her throat, “She’ll be as relieved as I am.” And then it seemed to occur to her, “Oh! She- she’s been casting more on me- I didn’t stop to think it might keep her from casting Barrier on the girls-“

Marehis, honestly, you had rather the legitimate concern,” too, Solas hardly minded Marehis being wholly protected just for herself, she endured so much danger in her station it was a
relief to hear she’d been made to be unharmed for once…mostly unharmed, there was faint bruising on her face and arms, the outline of bandaging under the torn leather over her left calf. It had been quite the arduous day of battle; she could have walked away so much wo- she could have not walked away. He shook his head, clearing his thoughts, what had he been saying? Oh yes, “And I still felt Madam de Fer casting upon us all. She likely ingested Lyrium to keep up with the demands on her magic without lapsing her previous promises of protection.”

“Oh,” Marehis breathed, “Oh bless her.”

“She…is a good ally—strong and a woman of integrity. I’m pleased she’s such a suitable match for you.”

That…that earned him another smile from her, something wholly amused, her eyes were alight with it and he- oh he could die at this very instant and be glad of it, he could scarcely believe he’d caused such a reaction in her again, was privy to her open regard once more. She raised her hand to her lips as she stifled a giggle and then, “You…you do realize she is jesting of our status? We are not…we are excellent friends, but not lovers.”

“Oh! I- she said- I was informed you spent the day at the museum with your lo-“ he was babbling. “It is none of my business. I just assumed she was sincere.”

“She was, after a fashion. I was met with poor reception on one of our outings in Val Royeaux, my being an Elf. Vivienne stepped in by insisting I was her guest—her lover, to dumbfound the guardsman as penance for his rudeness.”

Oh- oh thank- it was not his place to be grateful but he- oh he would simply cease thinking of it, he was pleased, damn him. “That is a shame, you make such a striking pair.”

“We do, don’t we? We were the talk of Val Royeaux, I assure you,” she offered with mirth, and oh it was so…it was reward enough in itself, how casually they were speaking now. He was uncertain he deserved it but he was grateful, however long it lasted. “Thank you for…for confirming everything for me.”

“You’ll…er…trust your Healer’s advice?” he wondered, hoped. If she…if she needed potion…well it was not for everyone, but she’d sounded as if she were confirming her current state to make certain it was safe to pursue potion.

She nodded. “I…” she bit her lip. “We will be traveling together for…a good while. A few weeks,” she supposed, “if…if you would…”

He would do anything. “What may I do for you?”

“Would you…perhaps…Adan warns me I might er- that there may be complications with venturing into potion for hormonal imbalance. I’ve never taken something of the sort, there may be changes, unwanted or harmful and I- I cannot risk such a thing interfering in the role I play for Ellie, or- oh if I lashed out at her, at Sera? Oh I would never forgive myself-“

“You wish for me to watch out for your behavior?”

“In…in the bond, if you would. If you would be able to perceive a shift in my mood, perhaps be able to stop me from reacting to it in front of them, I would certainly um, appreciate it.”

“If that is what you wish, I would gladly help you,” he assured.

“Privately. This is a matter of confidence, you understand? I do not want- I wouldn’t wish to add to Ellie and Sera’s worries. Cassandra- oh she wept when she-“ Marehis stopped and cleared her throat. “Ellie became aware that the Lady Seeker was struggling, she worried it was her own fault, that she in some way rekindled the woman’s depression. If they thought such a thing on my account for even an instant, that they are at fault for my anxieties, that I’ve been made ill from them, oh I would not be able to stand it.”

“They will hear nothing of it from me but…well if I may be candid? Ellie discovered the Seeker’s issues rather unexpectedly, was given context that allowed her to jump to such a conclusion and part of her conclusion was wrought from the fact that it was kept in secrecy from her. if you sat them down and discussed it, talked them through it with the assurance it is of course none of it their fault, that would safeguard them from any future potential for them to discover without your preparation for such a thing. My monitoring you could be an assurance for you all, rather than a secret to stress you further that…does not seem conducive to lessening anxieties by
adding new ones. Perhaps…perhaps Sera…I’m not entirely certain she knows how to intensely navigate the bond but there is one between the two of you, if you would be more comfortable with her monitoring you—"

Marehis shook her head. “I will consider discussing this with them, you are right enough about that. But I would not dare to burden Sera with this, she- she’s made so much progress, my word, she’s just flourishing here. She has her own anxieties, I would hate for my mine to possibly confuse her with her own, experiencing them in the bond. But thank you for…for considering how uncomfortable I might be with this situation.”

He nodded. “I am sorry for my part in…what you are going through.”

“…well. I honestly believe you are. So I suppose that’s something,” Marehis sighed clearing her throat. “I should’ve had a shift keeping guard I should get to.”

He nodded again, “I- Cole—.I’ve been invited to join the children in their star gazing? To assure the girls that I am alright. I- I would not overstay my welcome if…if you are alright with my joining them?”

“Oh. Um. Certainly,” she offered up tentatively. “I will feel more secure that they are safe. They’re capable themselves and too Cole and Krem would never allow harm to come to them but…well. The Spirit can sometimes be overwhelmed and distracted by their friendship and,” she cleared her throat softly, “Ellie does have a way of capturing the Lieutenant’s full attention. The poor boy may well not even be aware there is a beautiful starscape overhead to look upon.” Well, invited or no, Solas was sure an adult in their midst might ground the Lieutenant, he might enjoy the stars more so then. “Do you…you’re certain you’re well? Do you need someone to assist you? They are not far—laying just beyond the wall outside, on the hillside, it will be a downward slope and I’m certain they would not leave you abandoned there if you needed help returning to camp.”

It was nice, being able to speak with her again, beyond blessing that she would be permitting him to freely delve into their bond, and…it was selfishness now, that made him wish to stretch the time more—she’d already spent rather a good bit of time speaking with him in privacy, had met her limit, ventured past it, perhaps, so he would not keep her thought he was tempted to feign how severely his injury hurt so she might walk him to meet the girls—but that would be unworthy of him, so…he would refrain. “I’m well. Thank you for…for speaking with me.”

He was rewarded by the woman rising and offering him her arm…but there was a bit of wariness in the bond from her, reticence to offer him such assistance so he merely offered up a smile in thanks before holding his side with his left hand and pushing up off of the cot with his right, it was painful but not unbearably so and it was well worth it, the relief she felt…a bit of gratitude that he’d politely turned down her offer of assistance.

Warm brown eyes peered up into his own. Eleanor had likened Cremisius’s eyes to whisky when in the sunlight. Under the low lamplight of their tent, Marehis’s eyes were pools of honey, and just as sweet. Pink lips parted to offer politely, just the barest bit of warmth that spoke to her sincerity, “Enjoy your time with the children.”

He was rather certain it was unjust of him, that after his bit of restraint he wanted nothing more than to lean forward and close the distance between his lips and hers. It took more effort to quell that desire than it did to put one foot in front of the other, put weight on his injured leg—though that did help, the bite of pain did pull his focus, snap him back to the task at hand.

Chill had settled in the air as night fell in the Emerald Graves, the crackle of fire drew Solas’s gaze to the group gathered around the source of warmth, The Iron Bull was nowhere in sight though he supposed the Qunari was elsewhere or Marehis would not have felt at liberty to speak so freely. No, none save Madam de Fer knew of their discussion—her eyes were on them the moment they emerged from the tent and she rose to go to Marehis, wrapping her arms around the Elf woman and peering down into her face as Marehis smiled and shook her head ‘no’. Relief washed over the Enchanters face as she smiled and hugged Marehis tightly, hand resting on the crown of her head as she pulled the woman close and…while she looked wholly indifferent as her gaze fell on Solas, she mouthed a soft ‘thank you’ before she pulled back to meet Marehis’s eye, smiling warmly as she brushed a bit of hair out of her face to be safely tucked behind her ear.
“Come my darling, shall we relieve the Iron Bull and Ser Rainier?”
“Certainly,” Marehis agreed, walking off with the woman arm in arm.
Seeker Pentaghast and Ser Pavus regarded Solas with a polite nod as he approached, the
Nevarran woman offering up, “How are you feeling, Solas?”
“I am alive, Seeker, and well. I hope you were uninjured in our fight? Your…hayfever, is it?
It is not too detrimental?”
“It is merely an annoyance,” she assured. “I will…refrain from violence against your trees.
They cannot help what they create and they are lovely.”
It felt like a sweet enough sentiment, that the woman was refraining from as much as a form
of gratitude since he’d claimed a measure of credit for the Emerald Graves’ foliage. “I do hope you
feel better soon.”
The woman nodded. “Thank you. For safeguarding Eleanor, for-,” she cleared her throat, and
he was not entirely certain it was from congestion the need arose, “for what you did to safeguard
her. I understand it cannot have been an easy thing.”
“Would you believe that was my first attempt at prayer?”
“I’ll admit it was rather impressive then,” Ser Pavus offered up. “Perhaps next time you
could pray for something even more delightful like a rain of chocolates from on high.”
“I’m rather afraid what might be sent in substitute for chocolates—I did not get necessarily
what I prayed for, mind. I- I am sorry my efforts did nothing to remove the Inquisitor’s Mark.”
“You did try, and you- you spared her a great deal of pain in the process,” Cassandra said.
“Are you hungry? There is broth in our stores or left over dinner that we can warm.”
“I’m not particularly hungry, no—but thank you,” which was truth, he was off put from the
thought of food just yet, and too, “I’m expected elsewhere just now,” and if he grew direly hungry,
there was likely sustenance to be found somewhere between Sera and Ellie. “If you’ll excuse me?”
he asked politely.
“Certainly,” the Seeker nodded, Dorian nodding likewise before Solas passed their campfire
to walk to the edge of the stone…ahh—the entire camp fit on the rather massive landing between
two great flights of stone stairs. He stepped off the edge of the landing, past crumbling wall, onto
the hillside where…oh. Oh there they were. Ellie and Sera laying out on a large blanket with Cole
in Sera’s hold, the Elf girl playing big spoon for her Spirit friend as they watched the sky above,
Ellie lying alongside the Lieutenant, legs twined, hip to hip as her head rested against shoulder as
she peered up into the heavens and the Lieutenant…well perhaps he wasn’t distracted at all—he
almost seemed asleep, arms behind his head, eyes closed as he dozed. He did seem rather
exhausted and it was rather a relaxing environment, his dearest friends safe around him, Ellie
content and staring up into the heavens with wide-eyed wonder.
Though the girl’s wonder-filled gaze was transferred as Solas approached—her magic spiked
in the bond, like a happy leap it’s mage nearly copied in physical form as Ellie sat straight up and
turned her head to lay eyes on Sol-
Tears welled up in her eyes, breath catching in her throat the split second before…well
before the most wonderful word he felt there might be in the Antivan language burst from her lips,
“Papi!”
Ahh. So. He was being blessed with multiple points he could die happily this evening. How
very kind of the universe.
The Lieutenant startled as Ellie scrambled away from him and ran to nearly collide with
Solas as he made to join them, only just stopping herself, sliding a bit in the slick grass with a little
shriek but Solas caught her outstretched arm to steady her and then her arms were around him as
she hugged him, mindful to do so above his injury—it stung still but oh, he was glad of it if it
meant she- she was hugging him. “Are you okay?” she asked, chin pressing against his ribcage as
she looked up at him, her chin quivered as she tearfully reported, “I keep trying to check on you in
the bond—I can know where you are and that you’re still alive b-b-but it wouldn’t let me f-feel
anything that’s wrong with you so I- I couldn’t just look there to figure out if you’re in pain or
healing incorrectly or something that- that’s never happened before-“
“Well, I did request you be spared of these injuries and you have been, in full I suppose. Do not fret so, da’len—I am fine.”

“It hurt really really bad,” she argued.

“They might have, yes, when they were fresh—I’m not in a great deal of pain now, I assure you.”

Green eyes peered up into his, sparkling like the precious stones that namesaked these forests, wide and glittering and full of carefully held hope as she extended the barest bit of trust to secure, “Promise?”

Solas smiled, offering her his most sincere, certain, “I promise.”

“Kay,” she allowed, and he—oh he could not abide her tears, he took her face in his hands and thumbed them away, venturing to drop a kiss to her forehead as she confessed, “I was really scared when everyone told me what happened. You’re sure you’re feeling better?”

“I am—I’m healing well. Your mother informed me I’ve had an expert Healer checking my bandages several times over, I trust all is well at hand.”

“Well I had to,” she pouted, “I couldn’t tell anything in the bond. Did Tio check them?”

His mind blanked…Tia was Lady Montilyet, “Tio?”

“Oh—Cyril! Because he’s Thom’s manfriend and Thom’s mi tio!”

Oh. That was nice, it spoke to…well she’d just called him ‘papi’ but he wasn’t certain just how much longer he might be blessed with that title. But hearing the former Blackwall impersonator was now ‘Tio Thom’ spoke to the hope that rebuilding what he lost with these girls might not be wholly impossible. “I have not seen him since I woke—”

She drew in a startled gasp at that, “Well gosh what’re you doing out here, silly?!”

Oh, she—did she not wish to see him? “Cole said I should join you, if I’m unwelcome—”

“Oh golly it’s not that! Just lemme peek,” she insisted, pulling away to pull up his shirt, he vaguely wondered who changed his clothing, he’d been put into sleep clothes, and he wasn’t certain Marehis was feeling quite so forgiving she’d do as much for him…his magic gave him the impression that the Iron Bull had taken the task and he wasn’t certain just what to do with that. Ellie gently lifted his shirt and examined the bandaging underneath, “you haven’t bled anymore and…she very carefully pulled on the material to peek behind it, “still no sign of infection! You don’t feel feverish or anything, do you?” he shook his head and she smiled her relief, “Yay!” and then, “Um…do you wanna come sit with us? We have cookies!”

“I would be delighted.”

“Oh gosh, yay—Papi you have to come see, it’s so pretty!”

Her unmarked hand slipped into his and she led him to join the others, Sera was sitting up looking tentative for all of a moment as she asked, “You um…you okay?” to him, he supposed. “I’m well—”

Well, and winded as Sera launched herself airbound and collided with him, he wasn’t entirely certain how they didn’t go tumbling down the hillside, she nearly knocked him off his feet, “Don’t ruddy scare me like that you jerk! Friggin! Thanks for saving Inky but shite, maybe don’t give those Evan-erlis-blah people the go-ahead to maim you!”

“I’m not wholly familiar with prayer, I did try my best,” he jested lightly. He had missed this—would miss it when…well, he wasn’t certain. But surely…surely he would not be allotted so much affection from these girls, not for much longer.

Ellie was returning to the blanket, sitting on her knees at the Lieutenant’s side as she poked him in the ribs, “Papiito, despierroto.”

…he wasn’t sure he much cared for the word ‘papito’. Was it…was it a derivative of ‘papi’? That…was mildly disconcerting.

“Thanks lovely, you’re pretty ‘despierto’ yourself,” the Lieutenant complimented without opening his eyes.

Ellie giggled at that, “I am…because I am awake—it’s your turn now. Scoot! Um…Solas is up and joining us…that’s um…okay, right?”

“S’long as it’s okay with you two, I don’t have a problem with it,” he warmly assured as he
sat up, wrapping an arm around her to pull her to him and press a kiss to her hair as he met Solas’s gaze…a stare that spoke to a mix of gratified acceptance and ‘I’m watching you’. Fair.

More than fair, the Lieutenant did indeed ‘scoot’ so Solas could find purchase in the space between Ellie and Sera, Ellie resuming her seat at her boyfriend’s side, though she was somewhat seated on Solas’s uninjured side as they sat down, he politely declined their offer of cookies though he was tempted to indulge in one—they appeared fresh, like they’d been made recently, still warm from their baking. When he took note of that he…oh they informed him there was now a ‘cookie club’. Consisting of the Lieutenant, Ellie, Cole, Sera, and apparently ‘Papa’classi’ was an honorary member when they were in Skyhold. Oh, it was…it ached and soothed at the same time—ached him that he was missing so much but soothing that they were obliged to catch him up to speed, sitting together and speaking amicably before reengaging their time with the stars—he supposed the stars could wait for them, if anything else there was a greater probability of another night than there was of another night like this. A night where his…oh his children spoke to him as if he had not burned and betrayed their every sense of trust. Sera blushingly told the tale of how it all started —this club of theirs—and he…well. He was certainly glad that horrible woman she grew up with was no longer of this world, and that she had such wonderful friends in the young Aclassi and Cole. And apparently the elder Aclassi was capable of cracking eggs in a rather impressive manner, taking two in hand and neatly breaking them against one another. It pulled a smile from the Lieutenant as he wryly commented,

“Aclassi men know how to crack open some eggs.”

Which got a snort out of Sera who squealed and slapped her hands over her mouth as if to stifle just how funny she found the statement. Ahh. He…supposed his head was somewhat egg shaped. It was…a mild enough threat, more so a bit of jesting so Solas…well, at this point laughing at himself was hardly beneath him. “How fortunate it seems you’re just as knowledgeable in how to repair them,” he said, “I am grateful for your assistance earlier today.” He tentatively sought…not to butter the young man up, that was likely implausible, but it would be unjust to let the Lieutenant express kindness unrewarded. If that assisted his standing with the young man that held Ellie’s heart then that was only further blessing from the Human man Solas did not know if he rightly deserved.

“Wasn’t a big deal. You had Ellie’s back, I had yours,” he supposed.

“I hope you were uninjured?” Solas asked. There was a healing bit of burning below his ear on the sharp corner of his jaw, and bruising on his chin.

Oh, Ellie pouted at that, which turned into a pucker of lips to press a kiss to the Lieutenant’s shoulder as he replied, “Cracked a few ribs.”

“I’m sorry guapo,” Ellie apologized. Had she herself injured her boyfriend?

“Healer’s orders are healer’s orders,” the Lieutenant said as if in understanding.

“It’s just best not to risk it—first thing tomorrow is the earliest I’d be comfortable with trying again, and if um…if it doesn’t feel right I know it sucks for you but in this instance your physical health takes priority.” …oh. Oh! Solas had thought…well it was nighttime, he’d merely thought the young man’s attire was just his being prepared for bed as his girlfriend and friends were, restrictive clothing wasn’t necessarily conducive to sleep after all.

“I’m feelin’ okay El, no worries,” he assured. “S’not like there’s really anyone in our camp who isn’t down.”

“If Viv-tits friggin has a problem with it she’s gettin’ a surprise ice blast to her bits,” Sera decided.

“Nah—she’s cool,” he assured. Why…why wouldn’t she be?

“Oh! You didn’t tell me you talked with Tia Vivienne—it went well?” Ellie hoped.

“Nah, she just uh, gets it? When she thought I was gonna deck that shopkeep for throwing slurs at Marehis, she played hold-back man for me*, reminded me I probably don’t want to end up in Orlesian prison* full stop, but if I was gonna go for it, she’d have my back, stick with me, say I’m with her and make sure they didn’t throw me in a cell with a bunch of strangers if her presence alone couldn’t keep them from arresting me.”
“Oh I would’ve kicked so much butt! That jerk is who should’ve been arrested! Calling my mami- ugh! He would’ve caught major hands if mami hadn’t been all huggy to keep me from violence! I still want violence—can we go back and slap him?”

…a jerk had called her mami…what? Solas did not find Val Royeaux to be particularly interesting on its own but the prospect of inflicting vengeance on behalf of the Inquisitor and her mother was entirely enticing.

“You can probably swing by on your way home,” Krem supposed. “I know I might when I gotta get back to babysitting Bull’s bastards.”

“Someone was disrespect—” Solas stopped himself. He wasn’t sure he should be asking for details—he’d been sitting contentedly, listening to what Ellie and Sera wished to share with him.

“This asshole—potential supplier for Papa. Called Bull an ‘Oxman’ and said he had to wait outside, but uh ‘our knife-ear’ was fine as long as she didn’t touch anything. Papa turned him down on the spot and made sure everybody could hear him taking his—the Inquisitor and the Inquisition’s business—elsewhere since obviously, all he had to offer was garbage.”

Ellie giggled, “It was the best!”

“Your father sounds like an honorable man,” Solas complimented forthrightly. “I’m pleased he was returned to you. I hope he is adjusting well.” It had taken, well, almost an embarrassing amount of time when he looked back on it, for him to fully realize he was truly free—that Mythal had made him her equal, that living his life without his vallislin meant he was not subject to cruelty for cruelties sake from the Evanuris, he was a person not a thing to be ordered about, he had thoughts and opinions and they mattered even if they did not necessarily suit everyone around him. Of course he eventually took that too far but still, it had taken him some time to fully accept he was free and just what that meant. But Mythal had been patient with him, her encouragement paramount in his acclamation.

“Seems to be, yeah. Thanks for uh, asking.”

“Of course,” he said. Though, “Madam de Fer believes you could not handle being detained? You’re…I imagine you’d give any who offered you trouble a taste of their own medicine.”

The Lieutenant shrugged. “It’s uh…little bit of a ‘more likely to get violent and discriminatory’ situation for me.”

Truly? “For a Human?” …because he was Tevine? He hadn’t…he hadn’t been of this world very long but he hadn’t noticed anyone turning Ser Pavus away for his national origins.

“Different is different—I pass on the daily basis so I know I definitely don’t get it as bad as a non-human but still.”

Different…is different?

Solas stared at the young man blankly for a moment.
And then he came to the most horrific realization.

“How utterly barbaric.”

“Being labeled one gender at birth and living as another?” the Lieutenant phrased it for him, informing him that unfortunately, “Uh, yeah dude.”

How utterly barbaric.

“That is- I’ve not heard of such a ludicrous thing since-" Solas blustered. Well since Humanity decided Ellie was solely responsible for the attack on the Conclave! "Humans discriminate against you for your spirit?”

The boy squinted at him as he thought it over. “Was gonna say ‘a little bit of everyone’ has discriminated against me for it but uh…nah, just Humans. Never met a Dwarf or an Elf that wasn’t cool with me because of it, Qunari actually have a word for what I am—“

“Who,” shot from Solas’s mouth unbidden but compulsion proved stronger, “you’re not a ‘what’. And while you’re not entirely your identity, it is still a facet of who you are—just as Ellie’s being a mage does not make her a ‘what’ being a mage is part of ‘who’ she is.”

“Uhh…y-yeah,” the Lieutenant agreed.

“Elvehnan have a word as well. Several, in fact—it is a multifaceted thing, a spectrum—a
beautiful one. The Evanuris filled their council with members who found themselves in equal measure masculine and feminine or neither at all. They were held in high esteem, for what is closer to a god than a mortal who transcends the duality most mortals only receive a single half of? Humans preach the Maker is a man but that is—” he stopped, clearing his throat, “that is rather off the point. Erm. I’m rather pleased to hear that it seems at least, like the Dalish may not have wholly lost every shred of their former culture—that they do not discriminate against those we once held in either equality or higher esteem.”

“So…I’d be one of the, er, equal ones? In Elvehnan society?” the Lieutenant wondered, curious.

“You may consider Cole for guarantee if you do not believe my words, but I assure you—were you born with a perfect half of duality, you would be no more a man than I am, save perhaps the fact I’ve been a pathetic excuse for one in recent…and not-so-recent history. I’ve such a measure of respect for you, Lieutenant, because you were born with a closer-to-perfect duality—the masculine imbued into the feminine and extending itself outward. To reach beyond the confines of your flesh requires a knowledge of self and a secure sense of wisdom not everyone can simply come by. I’ve never been under the impression you were ‘passing’ for anything, Mister Aclassi—there’s nothing to pass for. You’re not pretending to be a man, you are one, I’ve never had reason to consider otherwise.”

Ellie had been doing this…little impatient bounce, more of a rock of her hips that shook her frame as she kept her bottom lip caught between her teeth as if to forcibly seal her mouth shut as Solas and the Lieutenant talked, and when her boyfriend met Solas’s words with nothing more than a nod and a look that spoke to thoughtful consideration, Ellie’s eyes darted between the men’s faces back and forth and back again before her eyes went to Solas and she tapped him on the shoulder. “Papi…do you think the Maker being considered entirely masculine is Chantry propaganda…?” she wondered.

Oh. Oh he didn’t wish to stir an argument with her, he would relent if it did something to pick at her faith but, “I personally am inclined to believe as much, yes.”

Her expression broke out in a brilliant smile as she shrieked with excitement and rocked forward—somersaulted to land on her knees and roll up onto her feet, arms extended overhead with her fists to the sky as she leapt, “I think so too!” oh, it seemed like something of a relief in her to find a kindred spirit on the subject, she…well, she proceeded doing some sort of wriggling that seemed like a happy dance before she dropped back onto the blanket, on her knees before him, taking his hands in hers, “Like its so dumb—literally it’s straight up heteronormativity. Because the Maker takes Andraste as his ‘bride’ well then obviously he must be a man! But that’s dumb! Sera’s not a man and she’d totally have a bride if she were a god—she’d have two! Or three!”

“If I can’t take three Inky I can’t do it,” Sera groaned, as if exhausted at the prospect, “it’s too much orgasms, I’m fittin’ for my frggin’ heart to wear out between Widdle and Teetness.” That was…not the turn Solas saw the conversation taking and yet it continued further still.

“But Lace is usually in the middle,” Cole spoke up as if confused. “or is Dagna the middle? Huh, you’re all technically between each other. But you are usually on top. Or laying on your back, you call it sixty-double nineing-“

“Cuddly! Don’t go yapping my bedroom strategies!” Yes, good, back on-

“Ohh, that’s smart,” Ellie complimented, “so like, you and them,” she made something of a stacking motion, one hand and then the other directly over it. Then, “You on Lacey, Lacey on Dagna, Dagna on you. Neat! I was worried how you were getting on comfortably with just the windowseat.” Solas had not been concerned with the subject at all, heaven help them. "If you ever want, you know I’d be totally okay with you having a date night or whatever in my room there’s like, a bajillion other places I can sleep in Skyhold.”

“…might take you up on that if you’re really cool with it, Ink,” Sera admitted.

“Of course!” Ellie insisted.

“Oh,” the Lieutenant complained, “I didn’t bide my time playing the long game romancing the Inquisitor just so the fancy bed can get slept in without me.”
“Sorry Kremmy-boy, girls only event!” Sera insisted.

“Cremisius—sharing is caring,” Ellie lectured, “And like, you’ll be getting back there without me in a few days so…you’ll have the big fancy bed all to yourself. I recommend,” she rolled back to being between Solas and the Lieutenant, flopping onto her back with legs and arms stretched out, “this position! Everything’s loosey goosey! And it’s just the best! Besides if Sera’s in Skyhold that means I’m in Skyhold—you and me can bunk in your bed with the Chargers! That’d be so much fun!”

“I’d literally rather walk naked through a field of thorns than sleep together in the same room as the Chargers.”

“Why? Dorian sleeps with the Iron Bull in the Charger’s quarters. And I bunked with you all the way to Skyhold from Haven!”

“Yeah but that was er…you know. Before.” Before what? “The teasing’s going to be so much worse now.”

“Gosh. I guess…you can sleep all alone in your little cot without me…I mean that’s probably a good thing we’d like have to be like,” she turned on her side, scooting to lay directly against the Lieutenant, “super super snuggled to even consider safely falling asleep without worrying about falling out. I mean golly, I just wouldn’t feel safe at all unless you were holding me.”

Oh. Marehis had not been inaccurate about the Lieutenant growing distracted—the young man seemed to entirely forget himself, eyes focused solely on the girl before him as he gulped, blushing as he said, “Y-yeah. I uh. Th-that wouldn’t—”

“Be very comfortable at all, I know,” Ellie said as she rolled to lay flat on her back, a bit more space between them as she settled closer to Solas. “I can bunk with Skinner or Dalish or the Iron Bull and Dorian. I’m sure they won’t mind!”

“I don’t mind!”

“Good,” Ellie said. “If they tease us I mean—that’s kind of their thing? They’re supposed to. They got it out of their system before, once they get run out of ways to make ‘claimer of Antivan virginity’ jokes, they’ll leave us be.”

…cl-claimer of Antivan what?

Ahh. So. His bit of hope that the Lieutenant had been so worked up over Eleanor's ability to recite the Chant while tying her shoes was dashed. They’d all truly entered such a stage in their lives? That was understandable, but there was still a part of him that screamed they were impossibly young—because they were, Ellie and Sera and the Lieutenant. Once upon a time he’d lived in a land where none were younger than he, save perhaps by a matter of days or months and he was centuries old. These children been alive mere minutes in comparison. They were not- they shouldn’t be-they were but babes! Good heavens!

He’d…never been much privy to the conversations of teenagers, were they all like this? Bouncing around from talk of the stars, to politics, to gender, to religion, to sex—all in the same conversation?

Well. If they could bounce around, perhaps they could bounce back. Solas softly cleared his throat, “I believe we were discussing the Maker?”

“Sorry baldy,” Sera snorted.

“Whoops!” Ellie apologized, "Yeah, anyway, so like, the Maker—actual gods and stuff, the Elvehnan believe if there were such an entity, they’d be like, genderless?"

“They would be where gender comes from—a perfect whole of the entire spectrum in a single being,” Solas corrected, "Denoting the Maker as merely the masculine is to ignore an entire half of who the Maker is. In fact it could be speculated that Andraste is a metaphor to make up for that lack, Humans splitting the Maker into two halves instead of one whole. Placing the feminine energy as the lesser—the mortal reaching upward to ascend unto her god, as opposed to being an equal part of that god to begin with. Or, Andraste is truly a historical figure, and the Chantry is wholly ignoring the feminine part of the Maker’s duality, a way to make women in return, less than or submissive in society.”
“Vivienne says that’s why Rivain is godless or whatever. Well. She calls it godless ‘cause she doesn’t much care for their system,” Ellie said. “They’ve got more of a matriarchal system and they don’t follow Andrasten religion—they worship multiple spirits and gods of differing parts of the natural world*, sort of like the Dalish do? Like you’re the trickster god, Mythal’s the mommy god, June’s the god of crafts,” she was saying.

“June was actually gender fluid,” Solas saw fit to inform them, “a great deal of their crafting was out of necessity, to express themself on the day to day basis as their energies fluctuated. As well as encouraging the crafting of wares.”

Ellie’s mouth dropped open at that, “Sweet!” she cheered. “Gosh that’s so cool! But Rivain has a system that’s like, super repelled by the Chantry so I wonder if it’s sort of conspiracy-y. Like the feminine being hidden in Andrasten religion in the major aspects of the Maker themself, only allowed in lesser, non-god level roles. I mean in the south we’re like, super feminine power—with Mothers and stuff because the Divine is always a woman. But in Tevinter they always have a male Divine and ignore the southern Chantry.”

“Figures we’d be that asshole,” the Lieutenant said, “find the part that’s suppressed and suppress it more is basically Tevinter’s trademark.”

“Huh. I thought Tevinter’s trademark was making all my favorite people,” Ellie pouted. “You mean they’re not up there mass producing Aclassi men and Dorians?”

“Nah, only way they’re ‘kicking out’ those is by literally kicking us out of the country.”

“Rude! But their loss is our gain,” Ellie shrugged. “Gosh—do you think the Maker doesn’t like being called ‘him’? Would…they…have preferred gender neutral pronouns? Or would mixing it up from time to time be more respectful?”

“Huh. I’m not certain I can speak for the Maker,” Solas supposed…he’d done rather a bit too much presuming the role of a god, so, he didn’t wish to speak out of turn. “But I imagine it matters not. He is as much he as she or anything in between so being called one or the other likely doesn’t invoke the Maker’s ire. Perhaps it might be more appropriate to consider the content of your prayer—just as I addressed Mythal, I called on Elgar’nan and Andruil, as they all held power here at one point, and too, they were appropriate to call upon due to their stations. In a likewise manner, as the Maker is an all-encompassing god, if you’re speaking to him of more masculine matters, then perhaps his masculine energy is the best mode of address—and the feminine on more feminine matters and so on.”

“Ooooh! Bet-sies!” Ellie declared, “how much do you wanna put on Mother Gisselle flipping an entire Chantry over me leading Skyhold in prayer and addressing the maker with different pronouns throughout?”

“Not really a matter of whether or not she will—cause she will, it’s just a matter of when,” the Lieutenant supposed. “my money’s on letting you slide the first few times.”

“Friggin’ she’ll bust a blood vessel the minute you call the Maker a lady!” Sera was certain. Goodness, he’d not realized Ellie…it sounded like the girl no longer much cared for the Chantry Mother. When had that changed? She’d expressed some frustration with her when she left for the Hinterlands while he was still prisoner in Skyhold’s dungeon.

“Mother Gisselle is a bitch,” Cole sagely informed Solas. “I want to bet on all of the bets! Because I do not know, or much care, or understand money, but I would like to make you all feel validated in your opinions!”

“Cuddly I friggin love you you little weirdo,” Sera snickered.

“Papi? What do you wanna bet?” Ellie wondered. Oh, she wanted his opinion on their fun? “I…would think Mother Giselle would be immediately offended,” Solas supposed, “but not voice as much until she could pull you aside after you concluded your prayer.”

“Ohhh yeah, she is like that—very sneaky, trying not to get caught being mean or judgey.”

He wasn’t certain just how much money he might get if he were correct…it didn’t seem to be an official sort of bet besides, but he was…well, he enjoyed being included, it was…exhausting the energy it took to keep up with their exuberance but perhaps that was just part of getting old. Or being injured. Or both.

* In the text, reference is made to the natural world and spirits, which could be interpreted as different aspects or deities in the natural world, reflecting a matriarchal system and distinct from Andrasten religion.
But it had been rather a long day for them, likewise. So it was well worth the exhaustion to be rewarded with his...his child smiling up at him after such a difficult day, one in which he felt the very real fear she might perish, and say, “You’re like, the smartest! Oh! Guys! Stars! Papi—I wanted to ask you if the stars are the same now or not! Like, do we have all the same constellations as way back when? Or are they different now? Or did they used to have different names? Or—” he did not save her from one asthma attack just to have her breathless blurt of never-ending questions send her into one from merely not stopping to breathe.

“Da’vehnan,” he chuckled out, warmth bubbling up in his chest, it quelled the fear that he may be overstepping. “Why don’t we lie back, and I’ll tell you all that I know of the heavens overhead, yes? Would that suit?”

“Yes please! Hit me with the star facts!”

“Friggin I wanna know what’s up with the tree glowing!” Sera implored as they laid back. “Ahh—I am in fact knowledgeable in both these arenas.”

Ellie hummed contentedly at his si- she- she snuggled against him, her head resting on his chest as she peered up into the sky, declaring him, “The smartest!”

He was an utter fool. That was both why they were here today, and why he’d much to make up for. He’d started with providing them with truth when he was found out, and serving his punishment without complaint. Now...he’d the much more enjoyable act of penance.

He got to lay on a soft blanket in the soft grass of the Emerald Graves, tell his children the tale of his people reviving the forest around them and making their mark, leaving what was actually glowing handprints that now hovered high overhead in the treetops, visible under cover of night in an array of soothing hues. He nearly...it was something that left him in stunned silence, the closest he came to crying he- he could scarcely believe...it was not the sort of ending to this day he dreamed he might have when he woke alone in his solitary tent that morning. He was nearly...moved to tears when, upon informing them that the bioluminescent algae was still alive and well, growing to this day around the Emerald Graves, Sera wondered at making nightlights out of the stuff, seeing if it could be used in her personal experiments—if he’d like to help her. Followed by Ellie voicing how much fun it would be, how very ‘cute’, to leave their handprints somewhere in the Emerald Graves before they left, to commemorate their being here. Both were such wonderous prospects—both were things he’d never thought he’d get to enjoy again, walking these woods with people he loved and marking them to make memories, or being part of Sera’s experiments... That had been a heartbreak all its own, he’d never had quite so much fun in his young adult life, as she seemed to generate, it had been thrilling that day in Haven when word came from the blacksmith that the rune stones Solas had ordered had indeed come in, and he went to Ellie’s cabin to find Sera—the girl’s face had immediately lit up, declared it was ‘friggin time to get clackin’! It took the whole of an hour but they managed to rig up a system—tying a Ice Rune to one end of a rope, laying that rope along through hole drilled through a post they planted in one of Haven’s clear fields before leading the rope through tree branches—keeping the rune elevated as they pulled back to get some distance while holding firm the rope in their hands and then, once they felt certain enough of their safety...they dropped the Ice Rune to ‘clack’ against a Fire Rune.

It did not have an immediate reaction. But that had apparently been their maker’s design, a safeguard that...did not quite serve for safety in their case—seeing no obvious initial reaction made them begin returning to their experiment, thinking it a ‘dud’, only to have the runes react violently—repel each other and letting off rather the startling small explosion that left their bones rattling, Solas pulling Sera to his chest as he turned his back on the explosion while the girl screamed and then, once she was certain neither of them were ‘friggin dead’ declared it ‘sweet!’. And it had been just as fun taking lunch together and sipping cocoa as they discussed just why the runes reacted the way they did—could they install a continuous delay in the runes they meant to use in Ellie’s Embrium steam necklace? Unlikely. But Sera worked around to the proposal of a transitional rune—something that could be slipped between one rune and another that had matching runes on either side—Fire to Fire, Ice to Ice, so if they used a wholly magical solution to heating steam without burning Ellie with the device, as opposed to electromagnetic induction with perhaps a few magical
failsafe’s worked in, they wouldn’t be handing the girl something that would blow up quite literally in her face just moments after its creation.

That was one of her favorite days, Cole offered silently, compassion prompting. Part of her did not think you would actually keep your word about being interested in pursuing an experiment with her, and when you did it healed so much hurt. You listened and made her feel heard, did not make her feel dumb or her thoughts feel pointless. It was fun when the runes blew up but she was also scared—both because it was scary but also because she thought it meant she messed up and you would be displeased with her, turn on her. And you did—you turned to protect her, made her feel so very safe and loved that it startled her more than the explosion had. And then you did not yell or belittle—she was safe and that was all that mattered to you. She mattered to you. Cocoa tastes even better when talking with someone you share it with, sweet sips between thoughts shared without condemnation. She fell asleep thinking of how you said you were so very proud of the work you did that day.

They were dozing, Solas vaguely aware that he himself may well be falling asleep soon if he was not careful…the Lieutenant was already sound asleep at Ellie’s side, Sera snoring in Solas’s ear, Cole was laying lax with his eyes closed.

Ellie yawned softly against his shoulder, shaking herself a bit even as she settled more comfortably against his uninjured side, “Papi…m’sleepy. Are you?”

There was bit of a feverish thrum in his head, he’d been unconscious for so long this day and still, yes, he was certainly sleepy. “Mmm.”

“Sissy and me were planning on Fade dreaming tonight—will you show us the Halla’s coming back?”

If…if there was anything out there that might hear his prayers—he was grateful for all he’d been given this evening, and very selfishly…he prayed he would get to keep it come morning.

“With pleasure, da’vehnan.”

He spent the evening in the Fade reliving one of the most beautiful nights of his entire life, with Sera—his da’vehnan was capable of dreaming and being guided in the Fade! Oh her magic was expressing itself so beautifully. Ellie at their side, Cole following after, and they watched with wonder as he wove for them the memory of the night the first Halla returned to the Emerald Graves after the great war…singing softly with his younger self as he bestowed the lyrics upon his daughters, so eager to learn—Tel garas solas-an. Arlathan.

He woke to sunlight poring through the trees, casting a glistening glow on the dew that gathered around them, to find these girls still resting at his side, their male counterparts holding them in turn, gathered together as there had been chill in the night…but also someone who watched and waited, and draped them in warm blankets when she discovered them sleeping soundly in starlight. The taste of vehnan leaves lingered in the back of his throat like someone had sweetly administered potion to see his fever broken, injuries tended.

His cheek was still warm from where lips had pressed a wish of sweet dreams their daughters had secured.

Tel garas solasan. Arlathan.

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Cassandra Pentaghast despised hay fever. Ever since she was a child and had been introduced to the ailment during what was supposed to be a relaxing day trip to enjoy the spring air and take in a nice picnic with her brother and a few aunts and uncles to celebrate the coming of warmer weather that left Cassandra wholly miserable, and not because of the social graces or her aunt’s terrible attempts at R’fissa*—her chicken was always remarkably dry, like sand in ones mouth. Hay fever, without a doubt, the singlemost meddlesome thing. It was wholly pointless—to what purpose did such a reaction serve? To grow so congested and- and disgustingly mucus
ridden? Her head felt over-full, she ached from head to toe as their time in the Emerald Graves pressed on.

And the absolute worst of these symptoms was the sniffling, lung-clogging breathing not coming from the Seeker.

It sounded at her side, warm weight ever present there since they returned from their next endeavors in Rift Sealing. “You want more Embrium salve on your back mami?” rasped from Eleanor’s throat.

“Mmm, no sweet girl, but thank you. Do you wish for more?” the woman wondered as Eleanor had sat up in their cot, had a jar of the stuff in hand.

“Uh-huh,” the girl sniffled, grunting with the effort as she attempted uncapping the jar before letting out…rather the pathetic little groan. “I did woman kind proud today, so…papito,” she hoarsely called.

Krem slid into the tent a moment later, as if the Iron Bull had relayed the girl’s call for him and he came running, “Si, mi reina?”

Oh, was the Lieutenant learning his girlfriend’s first language? That was sweet, sweeter still when the girl giggled, offering up the jar with a little pout, “This lid is being mean to your girlfriend.”

The young man made a show of rolling his shoulders and cracking his neck, his knuckles before taking the jar in hand…and a look that certainly spoke to the thought ‘oh shit’ crossed his features before he offered up a…attempting to be reassuring smile to his girlfriend before turning his back on her and putting a bit more effort into his twisting the jar lid which…thankfully bore success that left him breathing a sigh from his work, turning victorious with the jar uncapped, “Here lovely.”

“Gracias guapo!” Eleanor thanked him, accepting a peck to the lips as she’d assurances she wasn’t contagious, it was simply. The damned. Pollen count. “Aquí por favor?” she asked, pulling at the strings of her tunic—his tunic, one he used for sleeping—to loosen it enough to slide it down her shoulders, holding the fabric up on her chest as she let the back lower to expose her upper back.

“Si, mi reina,” he readily agreed after giving the Seeker a glance to make certain the woman wasn’t going to be uncomfortable with his placing treatment on her daughter but it was hardly a sexual thing, so she nodded her assent though he halted when her expression sharpened and she reached out for his hand before he could dip his fingers into salve.

“What happened here?” she questioned, Maker! The boy’s knuckles were scraped and bruised all along his fingers! Had he punched someone?

Oh. Not someone. Some thing.

“Should punch a tree*,” Rainier had jested when Cassandra glared at one after rather the vicious sneeze.

Anthony had once suggested as much. And once again, when Cassandra had been truly miserable with her sickness, he’d punched a tree they were passing by on horseback as she rode in the saddle before him, holding her close as she’d- oh, it had been one of the last times in her youth that Cassandra had giggled at something, but she had, she’d giggled at her brother bashing his fist against a tree in retribution for making his sister so sick.

It seemed the young Aclassi had likewise taken matters literally into his own hand, seeking vengeance for his girlfriend and her mother. “Hey, not to steal Adan’s thunder but if you two start feeling better—I might’ve given the trees the what-for.”

“Awe, guapo!” Eleanor cooed, “Rub salve into your knuckles too, kay? It’ll heal that right up!”

He offered up a little wink at that, “Si, mi reina,” he chuckled before he dipped his fingers in salve.

That…was a third time he’d said that. “Lieutenant Aclassi,” Cassandra chuckled out, mildly suspicious. She’d no great knowledge of the Antivan language, but she was beginning to think perhaps it was a bit more expansive than the Tevinter’s, “como estas?”

And the young man smiled and said, “Si, mi reina,” as he rubbed salve between Eleanor’s
“…is that the only sentence of Antivan you’re capable of forming?”
“Still learning,” he shrugged, favoring her a…ugh, endearingly charming grin. This boy, honestly. “Just figured I’d master the important words first.”
“Mmm, it might not be the most important words,” Eleanor corrected smilingly, “te amo…”
“…Te amo” the Lieutenant followed.
“Con todo…”
“…Con todo.”
“Mi corazon…”
“Mi corazon,” he nodded. “Uhh…” as he parcelled through the words to at least guess at what they might mean.

“Do you have a translation, mami?” Eleanor questioned the Seeker, eyes alight.
She knew well her ‘papi’ had indeed used the sentence enough Cassandra had no choice other than to know exactly what it meant. Ahh well, it was a sweet indulgence, to rest her forehead against her child’s as she translated the truth of, “I love you with all of my heart.”
“A-plus mami!” she enthused, sniffling as she pressed a kiss to Cassandra’s cheek, and the Lieutenant was wiping his hand with a rag before pulling up his girlfriend’s shirt for her, dropping a kiss to her hair.
“You ladies need anything else?” he wondered, “Got some tea coming up if you’re interested?”
“Oh, that’d be the best guapo,” Eleanor said.
It…was indeed the best. Krem left them momentarily and returned with warm mugs for them, passing Cassandra’s off with a sweet kiss to her cheek as he rubbed a few circles on her back and informed her, “Little bit of vanilla and honey for you.” That was a wholly ridiculous gesture. And wholly appreciated. “Rest up mama, feel better.”

…perhaps hay fever…annoyance as it was…was not entirely horrible. She despised Eleanor being unwell, but she did not despise that it meant she got to take rather the lazy afternoon dozing and relaxing with the girl. Oh, she’d missed her, it was selfish but she was pleased to have the time alone with her child. She’d been admittedly glad to skip out on the pretentiousness of Val Royeaux, but she missed this. Being with Eleanor and Sera and…well, perhaps the others in their camp as well. Marehis certainly—absolutely. And…well Dorian was good company when one wished to engage in particularly scathing witty conversation. Madam de Fer as well. And the Iron Bull, certainly, the Qunari was surprisingly easy to speak with of anything, mostly battle strategy for Cassandra’s comfort but when she was so inclined, the Charger’s Captain was rather insightful and…comforting. And for all Rainier had once been fooling them, playing a character—he’d a remarkable one. A deeply rooted sense of honor and loyalty, he was more quiet company but when he did speak it was always in kindness or…if he did speak something that could come off as unkind it was always jesting, he’d a smart humor he rarely unleashed but when he did it was usually for comfort or comradery. And there was a sweetness in Cole that was admittedly heartwarming, Cassandra admittedly had a level of love for the Spirit man who was such a faithful friend to her daughters and the Lieutenant. Oh and she certainly missed the young Aclassi.

Did she miss—she did not—miss Varric. No. Absolutely not. Perhaps, insofar as she missed the bit of amusement that came with complaining of his surly antics. Yes. That was it.

They were not best friends! But they were friendly. Had some sense of loyalty to one another. Insofar as working in the Inquisition—that was all!
Even if the Dwarf wrote inquiring to Cassandra’s well being after a week or so into his journey across Orlais to the Western Approach. He was merely...probably looking for her to offer up something he might make fun of. She was certain he’d cackled the night away with Hawke making rude, inappropriate jokes when she informed him she was taking a trip with Cullen. Well hell, it’s about time you took a break Seeker. Have a nice time, don’t do anything I wouldn’t do her foot!

Bah. They might be better friends than she cared to admit but she hardly wanted such an expansive inner circle. Never in her life had she been in a position where she could look on so many individuals in a single glance and every one of their faces were ones she trusted to belong to people she could turn to at a moment’s notice and find comfort or advice or aid of any sort in and out of battle.

It was sweeter still when she woke from her nap to find Eleanor still asleep at her side and discovered that they had been joined by Sera and Miss Lace. Cassandra was not wholly certain the propriety of cuddling with an Inquisition scout, but the young woman certainly deserved a nap, and too she was Sera’s girlfriend. Though for all that was true, Sera was laying against Cassandra and lace had laid alongside Eleanor. Well, it was more like sitting—the woman was seated at the head of the cot, her back against one of the tent posts with a pillow for cushioning and Eleanor’s head in her lap, carefully finger combing the girl’s hair and humming softly. Somehow the scout cuddling with the Inquisitor seemed much more appropriate.

“Oh! Hello ma’am,” she murmured softly to Cassandra, “Golly hay fevers a pain, huh? You need anything at all? Dinner’s on soon, Krem’s had it cooking all day and says it’ll be done soon.”

All day? Ahh, the young man had been about something that morning, putting ingredients into a stock pot he placed in the low burn of their campfire with promises from those holding their camp in their absence that they would keep it burning. She did smell something...well, she was able to smell again now, that was wonderful—she smelled something absolutely delicious.

Which incited a bit of giggling, “You hungry too ‘sandra?” Sera wondered, eyes squinting open as she smiled, her arm around Cassandra’s middle so yes. She supposed the girl had been rather privy to the absolutely appalling grumble her head resting below Cassandra’s breast, the girl had literally curled up to lay at her side, and she’d the hearing of an Elf, it almost made her apologetic but she wasn’t certain a person’s organs had much room for volume control.

“Perhaps,” the woman offered. Hmm. ‘Too’ implied, “Are you, sweet girl? When...when did you last eat?” they’d had breakfast before going out to face more Rifts, but it’d been so exhausting, Cassandra had just been miserable as she fell into her cot, Eleanor following suit and they’d fallen dead asleep for the better part of an hour before they could either one of them consider changing out of armor and cleaning up. She’d only barely heard Sera quietly checking on them, roused because someone was brushing her hair back to feel at her forehead for fever before the Elf girl informed them she’d ‘be right back’—she, Cole, and miss Lace had joined Thom and his men to handle the bit of trouble they’d discovered at a Chateau d’Onterre—their initial concern had been that the Freemen of the Dales had taken the place as a last stand of sorts and Cassandra was more the curious what had happened as it had sent the girl crashing into the cot with the Seeker the moment she returned and curling in on herself, holding Cassandra so very tightly and trembling a bit though...huh, Cassandra vaguely remembered this happening, blah, her head was just...full of mucus and little else it felt like, but she could at least remember now that she thought on it, that she’d stirred when Sera joined them, felt her trembling and woke enough to make certain if the girl was alright—she’d insisted she was merely cold and that had been accepted to her sleep- addled mind but as she woke, and potion and rest had worked their respective magics, that did not seem quite so an acceptable response.

“Lace and me grabbed lunch when we set out with Thom’n’them, no worries,” Sera assured, however, “Right starvin’ now though.”

Eleanor sat up...with an air not unlike a woman suddenly risen from the dead, she’d been so very soundly asleep and her body seemed compelled to rise faster than she was prepared for but, “I...don’t know what day it is...but whatever cooking, I want all of it.”
Miss Lace giggled, “We better get out there and get some for ourselves then before she goes telling the Chef—Krem’ll beat us all away with his big metal spoon if he hears Ellie wants all of it to herself.”

“Cremisius cook—” Eleanor sucked in a gasp that thankfully sounded clear, “Chicken noodles!”

“Chicken and noodle soup?” Cassandra wondered, she did smell chicken but…something of cream as well.

“No like, a thousand times better!” Eleanor assured her, swinging out of bed, though she turned back around immediately to wrap her arms around Miss Lace, “Also like, super duper surprise waking up to my Lacey! We should cuddle more—sissey’s a Dwarf hog!”

“You’ve got Varric!” Sera defended

“And like, absolutely no offense to him but he’s always got Bianca on him and that makes it hard to cuddle. Also…Lacey always smells like flowers. And Dagna always smells like fire and that’s nice? Varric…doesn’t smell like flowers or fire, he should really up his scent game.”

Miss Lace giggled, blushing at that, “Oh golly, we can cuddle any time honey, you don’t even have to be sick—how you feelin’? Dagna’s only written like…” she looked to Sera for confirmation.

“Dunno, three times today at least, askin’ after you and ‘sandra,” Sera said.

“Awe! I’ll write her after…dinner?” Eleanor guessed the time.

“Oh! Dagna’d love that,” Lace confirmed but mention of dinner hour being upon them reminded the Dwarf woman to check the time, “I gotta run—little bit of recon for our Red Templar mission,” she said, and Sera groaned a little miserably at that, earning the assurance, “just two sleeps and we’ll meet up,” she informed her girlfriend, blowing a kiss the Elf girl’s way before nodding to Cassandra, “Seeker,” and a wink to Ellie, “Inquisitor.”

“Mmm…freckles,” Sera said wistfully as her girlfriend left them, and then she shook herself out of her reverie for her girlfriend’s sweet face, “Uh-huh, yeah Inky, that’d be sweet if you wrote Widdle, she’d um, feel a lot better,” Sera said, “right worried about all these Rifts. You’re um…” her chin quivered a bit before she cleared her throat, “You can’t feel any of the Rifts here in camp, can you?”

Oh, Sera’d taken such painstaking care to map out the exact distance between this camp and any of the surrounding Rifts. Cassandra suspected the girl out and out measured until she was directly under the things, triggering them, fighting and fleeing the demons they produced, all to ensure that when she selected a base for Eleanor, it was one she would truly find rest in—she could come home and be safe, recover without the added burn of a not-distant-enough Rift tormenting her even in her sleep.

“Nu-uh, not a one!” Eleanor assured.

“Whew. Just- just checkin’. Friggin’ forgot to yesterday,” Sera lamented, “You couldn’t feel the ones we closed today neither, right?”

Eleanor shook her head, “Not from camp!”

“Sweet! Yeah, we’ll um, we’ll write Widdle after dinner, ‘kay? Give her an update. Shite—you lot haven’t eaten since breakfast!”

Which was, of course, an emergency apparently…to be fair, the Seeker suppose she’d be just as urgent if Sera had skipped lunch after so much fighting and scouting. But that was her right as…’mami’.

Horrible, blessed word. Ugh. It was still an embarrassingly thrilling title.

But it was a role she dearly enjoyed, walking with her arms around her girls as they made their way out to join the others. A blessing about the Emerald Graves was…the weather was admittedly pleasant. No rain, no unbearable heat, and the chill in the night was not unpleasant—she’d been worried when Marehis reported that er…Solas and the children had fallen asleep under the stars but they were apparently comfortable, she’d taken a blanket to them, assured that she would check—on the girls, she insisted—through the night. If…Marehis was feeling more forgiving toward the man, that was her prerogative entirely. Cassandra was beyond relieved for her
that she’d confirmed she wasn’t with child, that…if Marehis had found herself truly in such a situation, Cassandra, Vivienne…she could think of no one in their group who would not offer support no matter her decision, it would complicate her role with Eleanor but only insofar as being her body guard and that was something that could be handled in her stead, but oh she would worry endlessly, and she already abused herself over the slightest misstep in Eleanor’s care—she would feel guilt beyond belief if another took her place, and if something befell Eleanor in their care? Oh, she would never forgive herself—feel she’d failed her. That was just the occupational stresses—the implications of carrying her half-estranged, somewhat-forgiven, sometimes-the-rage-feels-fresh lover’s child were many and tenuous, each and every one of them daunting.

“Should I be concerned I, of my own volition, chose to kill that Lord who threatened Sera?”
the woman somewhat jestingly wondered last night. When she’d spoken to Cassandra of her worry, she’d listed er…changes of mood, irrational behavior such as murdering the Lord that laid in wait to kill ‘Red Jenny’ on their way to Crestwood—worried she’d only done as much due to a dip or rise in hormones. Upon reflection with what they knew now could be easily explained by her anxieties and too…

“Not at all. If you hadn’t, I would have.” Cassandra assured, “Or Cullen even—either journeying directly to the Lord and murdering him in his home, or through favor with Leliana—and he certainly cannot be suffering pregnancy hormones either.”

The woman certainly looked more relaxed now…she’d held herself a bit tensely when Cassandra first laid eyes on her seated around the fire with the whole of Eleanor’s party, Thom’s men, the Lieutenant standing nearest to the fire as he stirred the great pot he’d set cooking that morning. But the Elf woman’s right ear twitched thrice before she twisted about to look and she relaxed upon seeing them coming to join the proverbial party.

She prayed it would not become a literal one—she wanted to eat, pray the Maker un-Make every last bit of pollen in the air, and return to bed. She would maybe write Cullen. She should check on him—she was miserable with a mere sinus headache, it made her sympathy greater for his migraines. How the man continued to function…oh, she missed him, prayed he was feeling better. Unfortunately he was not likely to cease stressing over Samson and his ties with Corypheus until they had more information. Which they would not…until they could investigate the leads here in the Emerald Graves, and they would, starting tomorrow—Eleanor had sealed two Rifts northward of their camp, and tomorrow they had their designs set on a single Rift found on a road that wound along the river. It was also a road that the Red Templars in the area had been reportedly using to transport Red Lyrium, to where they were uncertain, and from where was also a concern.

“Hey Seeker,” the Iron Bull greeted, slinging an arm over Sera’s shoulders as she and Cassandra sat alongside him on one of the fallen stone pillars they’d situated to circle their campfire, resting his hand on the back of Cassandra’s neck which was, in fact, appreciated, Maker bless him and his warm hands, “Imekaris—how you feelin’ babes?”

“Well enough,” Cassandra offered though,
“My brain is full of snot and my heart is full of sadness that my mami’s so sick,” Eleanor reported. Oh, sweet girl, she needn't fret so-

“Ditto,” Sera agreed. Sweet girls!
“Oh no, is your head stuffy too sissy?” Eleanor fretted, leaning forward to look across Cassandra to Sera.

“Not like, literally or whatever. Just in solidarity,” the Elf girl confirmed, smiling when Eleanor giggled,

“Thanks!”

“Alright you bastards, wait your damn turn,” the Lieutenant…was indeed swinging a large metal serving spoon to cast off Rainier’s men gathering around his pot, just as foretold, “ladies first,” he insisted before looking to Cassandra, “How you feelin’ mama? You want crackers to start or are you all good to dig into something heavier?”

“I’m fine sweet man. What you’ve made smells delicious,” she complimented earning a warm smile, the young man blushing as he shrugged.
“Egg noodles, cream, chicken stock, peas, carrots, and…” he sighed, as if put upon as he fully expected,

The Iron Bull rumbled out an appreciative growl, “Big ol’ set of chicken breasts.”

“Oi! No objectifying our dinner, the Iron Bull! Apologize to the nice chicken and thank her for her sacrifice!” Eleanor insisted. Rightly so, honestly.

That elicited a hearty laugh from the Qunari, “Sorry Imekari—and sweet lady Chicken. Thank you for your glorious sacrifice, may your protein live on in our rippling muscles.”

“Amen!” Eleanor cheered.


Cole sweetly offered to help Krem dole out portions for everyone, the young man filling plates the Spirit carried, first two to Cassandra and Eleanor, offering up an apologetic kiss to Sera’s cheek for his body’s lack of a third hand and a promise he’d be right back.

Marehis wrapped an arm around Eleanor’s shoulders, quietly checking on her ward, asking how she slept, if she needed anything at all.

“M’okay mami, potion and everything’s helping lots,” Eleanor assured, she looked around their fire, “Um…where’s pa— um. Solas?” she wondered.

Marehis worried her lip momentarily before offering up, “Your papi is out on an errand with Ser Cyril, he should return soon.”

Eleanor nodded, seeming incredibly shy as she nervously picked at the food on her plate with her fork, “Um…I’m— I’m really sorry, I didn’t mean to— if it makes you sad or upset mami, I won’t—“

“Da’vehanan.” Marehis breathed, pulling the girl a bit closer, resting her chin atop her head, “Solas…I am still hurt insofar as his relationship with me but…I do…trust him, with you, sweet girl. He has…proven himself. I’m wary in my trust but it is still there. And my feelings on the matter do not have to be your feelings on the matter. I’m grateful for all he did for you the other day, for us. If you have love of him still, sweet girl, wish for him to maintain that role in your life? You deserve to have it, so long as he is willing to act in it the way he should, holds himself to the standard of being a reliable person in your life, which…is a role he takes very seriously. So long as he does not put you to further harm or danger, or abuses his role, I’ll have no qualms with it.”

“What Solas did for you is above and beyond what my own father has ever done for me,” Dorian voiced from across the campfire, “and I still refer to him as such.”

“It is not something I take lightly,” Vivienne supposed from his side, “to have humbled himself before his enemies and…well. It is one thing to vow to a loved one you might take on their ailments for them, it is another entirely to truly endeavor do it and bear its success so well.” Hmm, yes, he’d not complained once, been very reserved in accepting assistance for his injuries, lots of regal nods and quiet assurances he was alright though…well, upon one of the instances Marehis disappeared in the night, slipping out of the cot next to Cassandra’s and returning several minutes later, she reported the man had been suffering fever, a mild inset of infection from his injuries but potion set him to rights. He’d fallen asleep in his dinner that night, wholly exhausted, and…it had been Krem, of all people who stepped up and patted him on the shoulder to rouse him and asked if he felt like talking—using the excuse of striking up a conversation, wishing to know more about some aspect about Elvehnan society and words they used for their gender spectrum. The Elf man had seemed delighted to engage in such a conversation, Krem slinging an arm over his shoulder and the two went to speak in in the tent—the young man was comfortable around them all but it could be considered a sensitive topic, and it gave the Elf man the ability to retire without announcing how very weary he was. And the Lieutenant returned after awhile, stretching as he sighed and sat alongside Eleanor who pecked a kiss to his jaw in thanks.

“S—so…umm…no one’s going to be um…m-mad if I’m…dunno. Nice to Solas?” Eleanor timidly questioned.

Dorian let off a haughty laugh…a bit of laughter shared by all the adults around the fire—nervous laughter emanating from Thom’s men as they weren’t entirely certain just what struck them with such amusement even as their Sergeant was chuckling with genuine mirth.
“Oh my darling girl,” Madam de Fer…oh goodness, she was struggling to speak around her laughter, hand pressing into her chest as the other was raised to her lips, trying to hide just how widely she was smiling, “you absolute treasure, have you- have you considered y- y- your candor with that man to be one of m-meanlessness?!”

“I’m mean!” Eleanor defended, looking incredulously to her boyfriend as the young man cackled. And she insisted, indignant, “I can be mean!”

“O-of course,” the Lieutenant did try to agree, clearing his throat and what certainly must be the most important sentence in his Antivan arsenal, “Si, mi reina!”

“Oh, meh!” Eleanor stuck out her tongue at him before pouting, “I made fun of him not having hair!”

…when she insisted she would have subjected Solas to punishment via hair dye if…if he’d hair to dye?

“Our Inquisitor’s cruelty knows no bounds,” Cassandra softly drawled go Marehis who giggled.

“Imikari…that was baby-level shit talking,” the Iron Bull informed her. “Dorian’s melted the skin off an Orlesian man with a single glare for—and I shit you not—serving him biscotti with coffee.”

“You absolute heathens!” Dorian scathed, “You serve biscotti with Vin Santo—or not at all!”

“We had biscotti and coffee for breakfast in Crestwood,” Eleanor spoke up, confused.

“Oh my sweet, sweet Eleanor. I love you, you simple treasure—that was biscotti della salute. It is exceptionally less dense and only allowed to be consumed at breakfast, never after noon, even as you awful children still managed to do so.”

“Okay, watch who the fuck you’re calling simple,” the Lieutenant warned, leveling the man a glare before looking to Eleanor, “See lovely? That was probably as mean as all your ‘meanness’ combined, directed at Solas. Guy got off pretty easy which…” Krem shrugged, “I suppose is fair. Honestly, I think we’ve all been a little harsh on the poor fella.”

“How you figure that?” the Iron Bull wanted to know…Cassandra was admittedly curious herself. Solas had tricked and betrayed them all, the Dread Wolf with his designs on his Orb of Destruction—planning to destroy the world after all of their work to repair it.

“I mean c’mon—end of the day?” the young man grinned, “Solas’s just a dog chasing after his ball*.”

Eleanor slapped her hand over her mouth, a peal of giggles escaping her as Sera…oh goodness, the Elf girl sounded as if she might simply be, in her own words, ‘losing it’. Even Marehis was laughing so hard she had to hold her sides.

And so the whole of their campfire erupted in mirth, the Iron Bull coughing as he’d laughed so hard he choked, wiping a tear from his eye as he said, “Shit. Shit. Out here on your time off earning a damn raise, brat.”

Cassandra was only catching her breath when- oh. Oh goodness. Solas and Cyril returned to their camp, the Elf man looking upon their reveling group with wide eyed curiosity and then he- he-

The man had a round, orb-esque jar in hand with a slow slosh of thick, golden-brown liquid inside. And he tripped, losing his grip on the object and he raced to catch it deftly in his grasp before it could crash to the ground.

Marehis screamed with laughter. And she was not alone in her amusement, oh Eleanor was gasping, and Sera screeched—trying to quell her own mirth as she raised Eleanor’s embrium steam necklace to the girl’s nose for fear the girl was on the edge of a laughter-induced asthma attack, Krem was kneeling before his girlfriend now, redfaced and face tear-streaked from his own laughter as he tried to somber up and calm Eleanor down.

Solas looked incredibly amused by it all, though that may be because he’d three bonded in his vicinity experiencing so much amusement at once, he’d a smile at his lips even as he said, “I apologize da’vehnhan, I wouldn’t wish to ruin your fun but I’m worried it will turn into something
of a medical emergency if you don’t cease your laughter,” he said, clearing his throat and Cassandra supposed he must be sending the girl waves of calm to center her before she teetered over the edge.

Her mother teetered over the literal edge. Marehis fell out of her seat, catching herself on her elbows.

“Marehis! Good heavens,” Solas breathed, alarmed as his hand shot out and then stopped retreating and then stilling midair like he was quite uncertain what to do with it, “Are you quite alright?”

“I’m fine!” the woman was beaming, smiling so very wide and redfaced and wheezing, fanning herself a bit, eyeing the man’s hand before lowering the arm she used to fan herself to brace herself against the ground before offering up her left hand to accept his and pull herself up, breathing out a long, controlled breath. “The Lieutenant was just exemplifying that he should perhaps consider a career in comedy.”

“So I heard,” Solas said, his cheeks, the tips of his ears reddening, as he smiled, “it was very clever. I’m pleased such amusement could be made,” and then he cleared his throat. “Would I be permitted to make something to drink, or is the fire still in use?”

“Knock yourself out,” Krem supposed with a bit of a wink, and Solas grinned, seeming amused at the subtle jest at the young man who once leveled him unconscious in a single blow inviting him to do the same in…good humor. Cassandra…well. She felt akin to Marehis in the respect that she could appreciate things being less tense, and respect Eleanor’s relationship with the man, but there were moments her rage felt rekindled for the Conclave. Though the Lieutenants joke did…bear some genuine wisdom. Being forever angered at Solas for his actions was akin to being forever upset with sweet Anya for her tender days in Haven when she had, indeed, wet Cassandra’s bedding before she’d been properly housebroken—she hadn’t known any better. Solas’s explanation had been brutal to sit through, that he once saw them as no different than an unexpected infestation upon the world he once knew and…well, she could certainly understand he’d changed—the Cassandra who had never met Eleanor would have had the true vermin infesting the Inquisition’s fortress in Crestwood exterminated without prejudice, and she would not have batted an eye at it…in fact she may well have done so even to this day, if not her love of Eleanor, and the girl bringing revealing that there was…well, a sense of life to the creatures—that the Nugs, biological or otherwise, had value. Little lives of their own that mattered simply because they existed, and they did so without causing harm, and their extermination for the mere crime of making a home in a place the Inquisition wished to reclaim was not enough to warrant death. It…was not unlike Solas looking upon the world he wished to reclaim. He’d had no Eleanor to instill in him the value of Humanity, Dwarves, or Qunari—not until he’d already soiled the Temple of Sacred Ashes. And now he knew better…and was doing better, mourned his mistakes.

And he was continually determined to be of aid to them. Show mercy where he’d once known callous indifference. Solas…the Dread Wolf himself…had spent his afternoon in the company of a Human, scouring the Emerald Graves for the sake of Cassandra and Eleanor.

“When you are through eating, da’vehnan, I would request you make a bit of a strange fashion choice while you are outside during our stay here,” Solas said, holding out something for Eleanor to take. Cassandra almost thought it a strange undergarment but no—it was a mask, a thin rectangular sheet meant to cover Eleanor’s mouth and nose, that had string on each corner that could be tied together at the back of her neck to hold its place, though the string seemed…it was very plant-like. In fact it was. The man had gone into the wilderness in search of sweetgrass and Elf Root-er. Vehnan Root, Cassandra supposed. He’d then sat with Cyril while the man was on alert for any trouble and Solas had worked the long strands of grass into fine threads he soaked in fresh solution he made from Vehnan root and water before weaving the sweetgrass into a fine mesh that would shield Eleanor’s lungs from…well, he was uncertain if it would help entirely with every particle in the air, but at the very least it should help with the horrible amounts of pollen.

“Really?” Eleanor asked, setting her plate aside, putting the mask on properly and taking in a deep, deep breath. Oh goodness, flakes became visible on the outside of the mask, one could
actually see the pollen drawn by her breath finding an obstacle in its way, only to fall and float away when the girl exhaled and exclaimed, “*Neat!* Oh my gosh that’s so cool! Gracias papi! Golly I won’t miss that.”

“You mean you *don’t* enjoy vast pollination choking your airways?” Dorian asked aghast, a playful smile at his lips.

“*Nope!*” Eleanor assured smile evident in her eyes as she- oh. oh good heavens. Maker preserve them—“I mean don’t get me wrong—I’m new to the whole sex thing so who knows? I might be into choking. But out and about just trying to live my life getting choked by not Cremisius is definitely not my jam.”

…Cassandra’s eyes felt like they may well truly fall directly from her own head. The Iron Bull’s entire face was a startling shade of purple—she’d think the man were the one choking to death if she wasn’t vaguely aware that was the natural tinge of blush in Qunari skin, the poor man rumbled out a growl as he regarded his Lieutenant with scrutiny and then he voiced his true conflict, “I wanna high five and punch you at the same time.”

“You know, I’m pretty sure that’s how the fist-bump got invented,” Krem ventured.

“Good point,” the Qunari seconded the notion, raising a fist to…thankfully, merely bump fists with the young man who was blushing fiercely.

And then the Lieutenant was subject to a smack on the back of the head from his Chief when he threw Eleanor a silver coin along with a pleased, goofy smile and said, “Damn babe good going—you did get him to blush.”

“I *told you*!” Eleanor said, catching the coin in one hand as she lowered her mask with the other, to resume eating once she was through pressing a kiss to her newly won coinage, “mwah! Right in the shoe fund—gracias the Iron Bull!”

“Okay that’s it, that’s where I draw the line. You two gotta break up—it’s only cool when me and you gang up on Krem-puff, boss. You two can’t go ganging up on me! You,” the Qunari pointed a great finger at the Lieutenant, “stay the fuck away from my Imekari!” and then he pointed at Eleanor, “Same goes for you!”

“Well…damn, I guess…it was nice while it lasted?” Krem supposed of their Qunari mandated breakup.

“Eh,” Eleanor shrugged, nonchalant as she stuck a fork into her next chosen bite of chicken and noodles, “if you say so.” Winking as her face broke out in a smile she couldn’t fight at her own amusement.

“Solas,” Dorian spoke, almost imploringly, “What *is* it you’re using our campfire for? Planning to burn our camp to the ground, are you? Please say yes. I wasn’t on board with your whole ‘end the world’ ideals before but now, yes, I’ve experienced enough disgust with these horrible children, please end it.”

“I’m afraid, disturbing as young love can be at times, I’m rather reformed from my old mentalities on the sanctity of the world as it has become,” Solas spoke with put-on regret, “I am, alas, merely making tea.”

Tea? While Cyril got a plate of food and sat alongside Thom, Solas brewed up a steaming pot of cinnamon tea, and he used the warmth of the fire to very gently soften a small bowl of butter before he poured the contents of the jar he’d had with him to stir into the butter—he’d several jars actually, he’d gotten them out of his pack once he settled into camp and handed them off to Cole who offered to put them where the Elf man wished—in their food stores.

*Honey.*

The man had gone off in search of *honey.* Bee’s hives. From which he’d extracted, somehow, someway, several small jars of raw honey.

For *Cassandra.*

Solas sliced up an apple, the slices he then stuck into the bowl—dipping their ends in the honey-butter mixture and letting them line the sides of the bowl before he handed placed it at Cassandra’s feet as he handed her a warm mug of honey-laced tea.

“Dessert, I suppose—you may wish to take up eating honey in the mornings, Lady Seeker, it
is excellent on oatmeal and the like,” Solas said, “Bees collect and process the pollen that’s making you so very ill, if you introduce it into your body this way, it may teach your immune system to cease regarding it as the enemy. It was a common practice we had—many of my friends in days of old, they would get horrible hay fever, and it was discovered that those of them who consumed honey* in their meals and tea began suffering fewer symptoms, some of them being cleared of issue altogether, and it became something of a staple in our cuisine.” Ahh. She’d wondered why he’d gone to retrieve so much when they had a bit of honey already in their stores, though she supposed Ferelden bees may well be working with different plant life to produce their Honey.

“You get me any bees?” Sera wondered, since he seemed to be allotting a great many gifts.

“Oh ma’da’assan, I did consider it, but these are not the sort of bees that get in the business of stinging enemies. Honeybees are as sweet as what they produce,” Solas fondly informed her, a warm timber to his voice. “There is plenty of honey, and it is rather delicious—you should indulge if you’ve the liking for it.”

“Sweet! Ohh Inky—think they’d be good for cookies?”

Eleanor gasped, “Oh my gosh! Sera! Honey cookies are like—big yum! The cookie club is having so many meetings in the Emerald Graves, and I’m not mad about it.”

“Thank you, Solas,” Cassandra said to the man, “I do appreciate this.” It sounded strange, inviting the very pollen that made her so ill to begin with into her body but she supposed the man wasn’t trying to poison her. Cole would warn her.

I would! The boy’s voice chirped assurance in her mind, Solas and I did not meet in the time before, there were so many of us—but I worked in Mythal’s house and my old body, it used to get hay fever too! The honey helped and it was very delicious. My body used to wake up in the night even though it was supposed to be sleeping and decide it was time to eat some? Is that normal? Well, midnight snacking was rather normal she supposed, though she didn’t often indulge. Oh! Midnight snacking! You used to midnight snack with Anthony, oh…thank you for sharing that with me, you felt so happy and safe, and I feel it now! You made Sera and Ellie feel that on your way to the Storm Coast—for the first time? They thought you would be angry with them, pulling pudding pranks on Solas and Varric and then-Blackwall-now-Thom. You weren’t, you ate the leftovers with them and it was so much fun! Lady would have beaten Sera bruised if she pranked one of her guests…or ate pudding for that matter, and Ellie was so scared if the prank made anyone mad, she’d be sent away—you made them feel safe and let them enjoy their fun, and you didn’t realize it but you felt close to Anthony again and that was nice for your heart.

Ahh. Well then. That was…well that was nice to hear—it wasn’t nice that the girls had been so traumatized, but she was grateful beyond words that she’d not done something in the moment to only further instill that trauma, but had instead done something to soothe it. Cassandra almost didn’t hear Solas’s response to her thanks, “I appreciate being…allowed leash,” Solas offered up, bemused with the pun and the Iron Bull snorted. “It was kind of you all, to trust I was not up to anything nefarious and that I would not flee the Inquisition while in familiar territory you may have giving me chase in.”

“Oh. I would have stopped you or hunted you down,” Cole announced with serene assurance—no heat of threat, just the simple fact the Spirit was capable of tracking his thoughts and location. “I am a very good finder.”

“That is true,” Solas supposed.

“Papi, come sit,” Eleanor invited, “Cremisius made chicken noodles! It. is so. amazing.”

“It smells wonderful, I was envious of whatever camp was producing such a wonderful aroma. Thank you…Krem,” the Elf man tested using the boy’s more informal name as opposed to addressing him as ‘Lieutenant’, “for cooking.”

“See?” Krem asked, as if pleased, “Way less of a mouthful than Lieutenant Aclassi. You’ll have more room for food that way—come grab you a plate,” he gestured with his fork to the pot he’d moved from the fire to rest at his feet.

And so Solas did, the Tevinter man putting a heaping portion onto Solas’s plate, and Eleanor
pressed a kiss to Cassandra’s cheek before giving her an imploring look, a way of asking without voicing the request, and Cassandra nodded, patting Sera on the knee and motioning for the girl to sit more closely with the Iron Bull. The Elf girl took that and ran with it, somewhat startling the Qunari as his empty thigh on his blind-side suddenly bore her weight and Sera announced, “Stealin’ your boyfriend, Dori,” humming contentedly when the Qunari wrapped his arm around her waist to seat her more securely.

“I suppose that suits so long as you return him in his current or better condition,” Dorian drawled.

“That’s ‘borrowing’, Sparky,” the Iron Bull informed him, “Ser’s stealin’ me. that means you’ve got to work to get me back. File a report, call the guards, rend your clothing and cry into the sky—it’s a whole thing.”

“Oh Sera honestly—these are some of my favorite robes, now I must tear them?” the Mage complained.

“Theives don’t care what you’re wearing, Dori, we’re a ruthless lot!” Sera declared. Cassandra shook her head, bemused so much chaos had been caused by simply needing to scoot down so Solas could find purchase in the space between she and Eleanor—the girl acting as a buffer state between he and Marehis, so the Elf woman would not be too uncomfortable or feel like Eleanor was choosing the man over her, Cassandra supposed. It seemed a much more amicable situation, surprisingly enough, than what it brought to mind—Windersend in the Pentaghast home, where Cassandra and Anthony sat across the table from their cousins who had looked not unlike they faced death every time the aunt and uncle hosting their party opened their mouth to speak—they’d been going through rather the messy separation and spoke to one another through their children, ‘would you tell your father this’, ‘well would you tell your mother that’.

Thankfully, somehow, ‘your lover is actually an Elf trickster god responsible for the power the worlds current most greatest enemy wields’ bore a more mature response in Solas and Marehis than ‘I was unaware, until our seventh year of marriage, that your father likes to frequent a house of ill repute thrice weekly to dress as a Chantry Mother and be whipped by a Dwarven man, until climax’ had in Cassandra’s aunt and uncle. Loren Pentaghast, the Senior*, was a troubled man. And that had been a very troubling Wintersend—Cassandra had been seven and her aunt had been a wildly unguarded chatterer once she downed a bottle of wine. Anthony had been wholly bewildered with how to handle a young Cassandra’s questions about the appeal men found in dressing like Chantry Mothers and what was a house of ill repute? Whipping sounded terribly painful, were Dwarves somehow gifted at making it painless and somehow fun? What was this ‘climax’ and why was Aunt Elaine so very angry because it wasn’t as if she was ‘enjoying it either’ but she ‘sure as hell wasn’t going to the whorehouse!’? Was that a different thing than a house with a sickly reputation?

Cassandra supposed that once upon a time, when she’d someone in her life she trusted to give her all the answers forthrightly and knowledgeably, she’d had the ability to produce never-ending questions, just as Eleanor could. Oh, the girl was infectiously curious about Solas’s former life in the Emerald Graves, if he liked what they looked like now, if he knew then just how big the trees would someday grow, how far their forest would expand—how many trees had they planted? What kind? Had the trees changed at all besides just getting taller? Did it make him sad they had to use some of their branches for the Inquisition’s campfires? It didn’t, he said, but Eleanor still promised she would make sure everyone used oil or algae for lamplight to see by and not make fire just for light, but solely for warmth to cook with—and be extra careful to not start any forest fires, oh gosh that’d just be the worst! Scary and horrible!

“You needn’t fret so, da’vehnan,” Solas intoned, “put such thoughts out of your mind. I do appreciate the care you have for this place. Are you full, da’len? Allow me to get you seconds. Or would you care for dessert?” he seemed…eager to assist her, to soak up any interaction he could have with her while he was still in her good graces, as if he feared, perhaps, it would not be a permanent thing.

“Papi…it’s me. And I slept through lunch.”
“…seconds and dessert then,” Solas supposed. “Sera, the same for you?”
   “Frig’ yeah!” Sera cheered.
   “You were gone for quite some time this afternoon; I trust your venture was successful? You were uninjured?” the man wondered, fretted as he took Sera and Eleanor’s plates to be replenished by Krem.
   “Cyril made sure everyone got patched up okay, it wasn’t too bad,” Sera said, shrugging—she’d a bit of a tick, this nervousness that made her shrug twice, like she’d begin the action, rethink her casualness and then insist upon it, committing to nonchalance regardless of its existence. So, Cassandra was rather certain she was lying, or at the very least, downplaying her experience.
   “Oh gosh! You guys went to investigate Chateau d’Onterre, right?” Eleanor asked.
   “Y-yeah Ink,” Sera replied.
   Eleanor regarded the Elf girl with curiosity, head tilted as she asked, “Sissy? How’d it go? You’re okay, right?”
   “Not even a scratch on me Ink—honest,” Sera assured, and that much was truth, Cassandra was certain, there was nothing in her daughter that spoke to deception on that front. She nodded her thanks to Solas as the man returned her refilled plate to her and resumed his seat beside Eleanor, handing her a plate she ignored as she stared at her sister, questions building on the tip of her tongue that Sera curtailed with, “It was actually kind of funny—scary but in that fun way, like walking through one of them ‘haunted house’ or woods with yer friends. You know, people say a place is haunted and then you get all worked up about it and everything scares the bejeebers out of you even though there en’t nothin’ to really be scared of?”
   Eleanor was quiet, paying rapt attention to her older sister as the girl launched into the tale of Chateau d’Onterre, setting it up as a wholly amusing story of she and Lace and Thom and his men jumping at every shadow and creak of the old estate because it was dark and old and spooky when, in the end, “All that place is now is a big old dumb empty house.”
   Now it was empty. The girl was more forthright in her report that she processed through Cassandra while Eleanor was off bathing with Marehis and Madam de Fer that evening after dinner, with instruction to ‘just get it to Leliana’ and never let it hit the Inquisitor’s desk. Because before Sera and the Chargers cleared the place, it had indeed been something of a genuine nightmare—some hellish situation where a demon had worked its way into a child in that home once upon a time and it left in its wake a place demons broke through into the world and several undead—family members the possessed child had tormented and laid slain.
   “Oh, Sera,” Cassandra breathed once the report was sealed and sent off toward Skyhold and she’d returned to the tent to take Sera into her arms, seated in Cassandra’s cot…well, laying in it now, Cassandra holding her so very tightly to her chest, hand carding through silken fine blonde hair that smelled freshly of soap. “I am proud of you, for taking on so much responsibility. I’m grateful you’re endeavoring to shield Eleanor from knowing such a horrible place existed.” Oh a tale of demon possession, of an entire family being murdered? If Eleanor never learned of such a thing, Cassandra would be eternally grateful, what a horrific thing to know of.
   Sera nodded, “Th-thanks. Um…” she gulped, “its cool if I bunk with you tonight, yeah?
   “Sweet girl, if you’ve a nightmare in the night I do promise, I will be here when you wake—you are to wake me, you understand?” Cassandra made certain.
   “Thanks mum,” Sera said, speaking the word with what sounded like it fell from her lips naturally, without condescension—she’d usually only use some variation of the word when she lamented Cassandra and Marehis mothering her, putting the ‘mothering’ in ‘smothering’ when they worried over her in the past. Oh, Cassandra despised how quietly pleased she was, she was not blushing as she held the girl a bit more tightly, hiding her face against her hair.
   “Sissy!” Eleanor cheered as she entered the tent, cheerily joining them by climbing into the cot and laying partly on Cassandra, and partly atop Sera as she put an arm around her. “You feel like you needed a hug! but I was naked and mami wouldn’t let me run back to camp without pants on! And then you felt better and I missed it, and I’m glad and I’m hugging you now anyway!”
...Marehis had only required she wear pants? “Eleanor honestly, where is your sleep shirt?” Cassandra- oh the girl was topless! Bare breast against Cassandra’s arm! Good heavens, what were they feeding this girl?

“Oi!” Eleanor complained, “I was in a hurry! And boys get to run around with their shirts off!”

Marehis looked wholly bemused as she entered the tent, sharing a look with Cassandra that spoke of defeat and acceptance. “She argued for equality and who am I to deny her that?”

“Tits out for equality!” Sera cheered and Cassandra held her a bit more tightly when she felt the girl reaching for the hem of her own sleepshirt to join her sister in shirtless solidarity.

“Tits in for warmth and comfort—you will catch chill if you go about without a shirt,” Cassandra said, and Marehis looked stunned, ‘why ever did I not think of that?’ written on her face as she extended her arm and came to join them, holding out Eleanor’s sleep shirt.

“Fine!” Eleanor conceded, accepting the item of clothing and sitting up to pull it on overhead, “But I’m putting on my shirt as a person who is cold and not as a woman who is oppressed by societal standards!”

“There is a time and place for everything, Eleanor,” Madam de Fer’s voice was silky smooth as she entered the tent, “a woman’s breast is best reserved for the bedroom and the beach.”

“Ohhh, gosh, there’s like nothing better than warm sun just all over!” Eleanor agreed.

“Mamis, if the world still isn’t cancelled this summer—we should go to the beach!”

“That sounds like fun, da’vehnan,” Marehis agreed.

“So long as I may choose to keep my breasts reserved even from the beach,” Cassandra drawled.

“Of course mami, they’re your breasts, its up to you what you wanna do with them!” Eleanor encouraged.

“Ellie-girl,”…Thom Rainier’s voice sounded from his cot on the far side of the tent, and Cassandra’s face blazed with embarrassment—she’d not realized he was there! She’d thought the tent empty! But no, the poor man was laying on his cot, an arm draped over his closed eyes to keep them wholly shielded, and apparently, “love you, but m’ just trying to get some sleep.” and dying from his embarrassment at having overheard such a conversation.

“Do you believe in gender equality, Tio?” Eleanor wondered.

“All damn day, m’ just a shy old bastard.”

“Yay!” Eleanor beamed, dropping down from the cot and rushing to Rainier’s, pressing a little kiss to his forehead, “Then have sweet dreams!”

“Thanks honey.”

Maker, the girl was in good spirits. Warm enthusiasm as she returned to them, climbing into the cot and then Sera’s lap when the Elf girl and Cassandra sat upright in bed, she was grateful they’d already set cots directly beside one another so they touched and gave them room to handle having so many people piled into one space, Cassandra shifted to put her weight on the adjoining cot, Marehis seating herself at her side and sharing a bemused look with the Seeker, smiling to Vivienne as she left the tent announcing, "I'll put on a bit of tea, shall I darlings?"

“Gracias!” Eleanor called before more quietly questioning, "Sissy—where do you wanna go in the Fade tonight?" in hushed tones to keep the Human man on the other side of the tent from overhearing.

“Mmm…sup to you Ink. Got anywhere you wanna see?”

“Can you show me the haunted mansion?” Eleanor wondered. “You made it sound kind of fun like, spooky fun, I’d like to explore it with you!”

Oh, dear. In wishing to shield the girl from how very horrific the place had been, she’d unwittingly made it appeal to her. “Eleanor, Sera has had a tiring day, spent much of her waking time in that place,” Cassandra spoke up when Sera looked like she was uncertain just how to respond, “she may not wish to spend her sleep there as well.”

“It sounds interesting,” Solas’s voice sounded as he entered the tent. “I do not mean to interrupt but I’ll admit to some curiosity myself. Sera, the Fade allows us to see things we wish to.
if you would allow me I’d be honored to assist you in reconstructing your memories of Chateau d’Onterre.”

“Papi,” Eleanor whispered imploringly, jerking her head in Rainier’s direction to instruct his discretion.

“Hey Thommy-boy m’a mage now, yeah?” Sera called to the Human man.

“heard you the first time lovey, s’great. happy for you,” he grumbled tiredly, turning in his cot to lay on his side and put his back to them.

“Thom and his guys know. Bull and Dori too. Krem’n’me had a talk about it last night while you was gettin’ the cookies off the tray and we was settin’ up the blanket n’ pish.”

“Uh-huh,” Eleanor was aware, ahh Sera needs to talk to Cremisius Eleanor had said last night when they made question of her dallying with the task of taking their cookies to their picnic spot. She checked, “It went well, right?”

“Yeah, yer boyfriend’s a dumb sweetie,” Sera voiced almost like a complaint, “Thanked me for trusting him and gave me a hug and made me feel safe! It was dumb!” Ahh. Sera…did not go easy, into vulnerability. She likely hadn’t realized just how vulnerable a thing exposing her magic was until the Lieutenant addressed it on a level that made her feel secure and gave her the realization that she’d something to feel secure from. “He’s the friggin’ best.”

“Indeed,” Marehis softly agreed, “I’m pleased you’ve felt comfortable allowing others to know your magical status, da’len.”

“We’re very proud of you,” Cassandra saw fit to add.

“Dumb!” Sera declared it, blushing fiercely as she looked to Solas, “You um…you’ll help me reconstruct things um…right?”

“Certainly,” Solas assured, “it will be just as you described this evening, you’ll be able to enjoy the tale you told our campsite.”

Oh. Oh goodness that- that sounded…

Solas…was continuing to act as a reliable father figure, and Cassandra was glad of it. It sounded like he meant to seal away Sera’s fright of the place, give her a place in the Fade she could desensitize from the fear she felt that day and enjoy in the delight she’d woven into her rendition for Eleanor—help secure her in the knowledge that whatever passed today was in the past, and staying there, and she could move forward and be safe and replace something that might give her nightmares with a pleasant, whimsical dream.

“Thanks um…thanks,” was what Sera settled on, hugging Eleanor tightly as she said, “Yeah Ink, Chateau d’Onterre it is! Let Solas and me set it up okay? Then you can come. Cole too if he wants.”

“Cool!” Eleanor agreed, beckoning Solas closer to their cots with an index finger and when he drew near enough she sat up on her knees and kissed him on the cheek, “Sweet dreams, papi!”

“Sweet dreams, da’vehnan.”

They seemed to be—Cassandra lay awake long after Sera fell asleep, watching and waiting for any sign of distress from the girl but none came, save perhaps a soft snort of laughter and sleep-riddled mumbling, the softest smile on her lips as she and Eleanor dozed together with Solas in the Fade.

“They are having fun—I will join them, but you’re worried so I wanted to tell you that you should sleep. Your body needs it. I’m sorry the pollen makes it sick,” Cole offered quietly, nearly startling Cassandra who hadn’t seen the boy come to crouch alongside her side of the cot. “Sorry. You are kind to me but I know you are not always comfortable with mind speak—you don’t care if anyone hears what I’m saying right now though, so I thought I could talk with my mouth.”

“Thank you, Cole. For all of your talking,” Cassandra assured, it took a bit of uncomfortable twisting—she’d been laying with her chest against Sera’s back, but she turned enough so she could face the opposite direction, press a kiss to Cole’s hair as the Spirit was in the habit of removing a particular item of clothing before bed. “Have pleasant dreams.”

“Oh,” Cole breathed, blushing, “thank you. I hope you have pleasant dreams as well,” he wished her before vanishing and reappearing in the Lieutenant’s cot just a few feet away, the
Tevinter man rousing momentarily before pulling the Spirit closer, tucking his head up under his chin as he held the blonde boy more securely to sleep, oh. It was sweet, the Spirit sighed contentedly, wriggling a bit as he snuggled into his friend’s hold.

Morning dawned sunny and clear, Solas had assisted the Iron Bull with breakfast preparations, the two working…rather amicably together, which was nice, Cassandra supposed. The Qunari had been as immediate to aid the Elf man when he fell prey to Eleanor’s former injury, as he had been in his suspicion of the Elf to begin with, had Sera relay to them her interpretation of what was said by the man before magic swept through the forest around them. It had struck him as it had Cassandra, the seriousness of his request—that he genuinely willed it to be granted, that those he appealed to could place the Mark on him, not to destroy the world but to take on Eleanor’s more painful role of healing it, that they may even add to his suffering, place the burning blaze over his heart. If such a thing didn’t kill him immediately, it would certainly make his every heartbeat agony for the rest of his surely shortened days.

Cassandra exited the tent alone, she did tend to rise a little earlier than the others, well. Eleanor had risen some time ago before anyone else in their camp—Cassandra hadn’t realized the girl had left the tent until her return, the girl falling into the cot face first. The Seeker had softly questioned the girl’s absence, to which she responded a sleep-laden mumble of ‘trees’…which, in the Emerald Graves, was not entirely specific but the girl was safe and sleepy, laying against Cassandra wholly asleep almost the moment she hit the proverbial pillow, or in this instance, Cassandra’s shoulder. Which suited until the Seeker rose of her own accord an hour or so later, still early, just as the sun was rising. That was…good. For one, Cassandra did require a bit of respite from constant contact with so many all at once, being able to take a moment to collect herself, to not need to address or be addressed helped her handle the day ahead. Too, it meant a continuing improvement upon one of her major symptoms—when she was in good health, mentally and physically, it was usually in her to rise after a sufficient amount of sleep, early before even the sun did. When she was ill, especially in regard to depression…well, a good warning sign was usually Cassandra finding herself sleeping without reason—going to bed even before her usual hour for retiring, and sleeping in until the sun or duty woke her. Of course her life now occasionally gave her cause to remain in bed even after she woke, but she was awake and enjoying those reasons, be it enjoying the quiet company as Cullen or Eleanor or Sera slept at her side, relishing in getting to just be still and silent and hold her children safe.

Or. On Cullen’s good mornings, relishing in an albeit less silent form of company. She was mildly concerned she still might have a splinter in her back from er…

Ugh. They made love under cover of night and fog on a lakeside dock near Cullen’s childhood home. It was embarrassing and wonderful and she would never tell a living soul so long as she lived, so if there were such a splinter still lodged in her skin, it had better get comfortable because it was staying there, she would quite literally die before she requested assistance with its removal, because just how did a woman who went all and sundry armored and well clothed, did she get such a thing? No one could know. She was nervous even Cullen having the information. If…if they broke up…she might have to kill him. Not for revenge, but reform—no one got to bed her in strange places, know her every detail, body mind and spirit, and get to walk around the world unattached to her with such knowledge, it was simply unsafe.

Though their camp…also seemed albeit unsafe.

“Where are our soldiers?” Cassandra questioned the Iron Bull, when, in her moment of silence and reflection, she realized the camp was void of Inquisition scouts—Miss Lace had taken them and a few of their soldiers for her reconnaissance mission—but now it was also without any of their soldiers.

“Not the only one whose gotta keep an eye out today,” the Iron Bull jested, informing her, “There was some Freemen still hanging around, south of our camp a few hours ago, one of the soldiers got me and Thom’s guys, they had a report waiting for me when I got up to make this slop—Freemen were approaching for attack but our soldiers held them off. Thought we’d gotten rid of those bastards, so our soldiers are out there givin’em hell, the ones that retreated, trying to see if
they’ll lead them back to wherever the fuck they’ve been hiding out.”

Oh goodness, yes. They would certainly be on guard, “I’ll warn Marehis and the others, we’ll keep Eleanor close to camp today.” It was time consuming but Cassandra…oh, she was reticent to have multiple Rift-sealing days in a row, not with the level of Rifts in this vicinity—they were all so powerful and painful, hard to fight and even harder it felt like to seal, for all who assisted in suppressing the Rifts or powering Eleanor’s Mark. So, a day off was due.

What Cassandra did not realize, was a day off was due whether their Rift-sealing schedule permitted as much or not.

Sera sighed contentedly when she woke from her slumber, a blessed thing—Cassandra had been so very worried she would suffer nightmares in the Fade but she rose the perfect opposite of her sister—upright in an instant, babbling a mile a minute to Cassandra about how much fun she and Solas and Eleanor and Cole had, earning a smile from the Seeker who kissed her on the cheek and offered congratulations for having slept so well. She expected…a little more pep in Eleanor’s step than what they got when they roused the girl for breakfast. She did not seem…grumpy, exactly, just…groggy.

“Are you feeling poorly, da’vehnan?” Marehis questioned, feeling at Eleanor’s forehead for fever. The girl shook her head ‘no’, the motion almost like a wrenching one to cease the contact with her skin.

“Tired,” she offered up seemingly almost falling asleep again even as she was sitting up, head lulling forward before she jerked awake. “Wh-what?”

Eleanor offered up a quiet little groan—Sera had risen entirely out of the cot and was standing alongside her still bedridden sister, taking Eleanor’s arms in hand and pulling her forward to help her up, “C’mon Ink, breakfast! There’ll be coffee, yeah?”

The Human girl stumbled with sluggish steps as they exited the tent…maybe they should have brought breakfast to her. She blinked a few times at the hand holding hers, “Sera?”

“Yeah sweets?” Sera asked, though,

“Imekari, lookin’ spiffy,” the Iron Bull sincerely complimented the girl. Oh yes, their Inquisitor was in high fashion for the Emerald Graves, her hair was a sight, sticking out wild around her, a literal stick had woven its way into her hair, a leaf caught in another clump of curls, Solas’s mask hanging from her neck, and the Lieutenant’s sleepshirt almost fell to her knees. And a sock. One, on her right foot. She had somehow in the night removed her bottoms and left sock…in her sleep?

“Uh-hum,” Eleanor offered back, stumbling to his side where he was seated in lotus position on the ground before their campfire, stirring a pot of oatmeal. The girl leaned against his arm, head resting on his shoulder. “Warm.”

“Lovely, you lose something?” Krem wondered amusedly at her single sock.

Eleanor mumbled unintelligibly. “She came back to bed this morning and mumbled something about trees,” Cassandra offered, it was the only clue she had, what good it did them.

“Oh,” the Lieutenant nodded…as if he perfectly understood the girl’s earlier single worded response and left their congregation, disappearing behind their tent. That- what? Ahh…Cassandra almost felt foolish for her earlier confusion—the girl had gotten up to use the facilities—the stand of trees just north, behind their camp—and…left her bottoms there? Forgotten or were they in need of cleansing? She hadn’t said anything when she returned to bed, now in the light of day Cassandra could only vaguely recall waking when the girl fell back into the cot alongside her.

“Da’vehnan? You were securely in the Fade last night, do you not feel rested?” Solas voiced his concern.

Eleanor shook her head, “Papi?” she questioned, squinting at him as if not wholly certain, and when the man nodded she replied, “Jus- jus’sleepy.”

Solas’s brow creased in worry, gaze going from Eleanor to Cassandra and then Marehis as he said, "She is incredibly drowsy. Could she have accidentally imbibed sleeping potion when she returned from the trees?" Oh. No, Cassandra thought she would have heard something if Eleanor had mistakenly uncorked draught.
Of course it turned out, she hadn't heard anything.

Krem’s voice was full of urgency as he strode back to them, Eleanor’s forgotten clothing in one hand, bottoms, underthings and her missing sock clutched around the handle of what Cassandra believed was one of Cole’s daggers, and a small… was it a dart? In the Lieutenant’s other hand as he questioned their numbers, “Where’s Cole?” as he continued moving toward Eleanor.

Cassandra looked about, as did they all, she- she’d thought the Spirit had been asleep with the Lieutenant- he had been but… he was no longer in sight, she realized she hadn’t seen him in the tent upon waking nor was he outside the whole of their tent’s occupants sought breakfast, “He isn’t here,” Cassandra verified as Krem went to Eleanor, dropping her clothing, Cole’s dagger clanging against the stone underfoot as he brought a hand to her face, guided her to look up at him,

“El? Honey, were you hit with this?” he asked, voice carrying battlefield urgency as her head lulled against his hand, eyes lethargically blinking as she did try to focus on what he was saying, trying to show her, “shit shit shit—Cyril!”

“Fuck,” the Iron Bull rasped, fists clenching as he looked like he wished to strike violence against himself… Cassandra felt similarly about her own self good- there- it had been a diversion. The Freemen attack, that must have been only part of their numbers drawing fire while- while the others what? Poisoned the Inquisitor?!

“Help her sit,” the Healer instructed, Krem wrapping an arm around Eleanor’s waist as he went to his knees, helping her descend with him to be seated on the ground, “Hey sweetpea, okay, can you hear me?” he asked.

Eleanor nodded, swallowing before her mouth opened to permit a small, “Mhm.” And then she shuddered, insisting, “I don’t wanna go.” Go?

“Defiantly not lucid, shit. Can you tell me what hurts honey?” Eleanor softly hummed some quiet affirmative sound as she fell unconscious.

“I don’t feel anything from her other than extreme drowsiness,” Solas voiced when it seemed Eleanor could not, “I’m having difficulty feeling her in the bond but she is there, nothing hurts or feels as if she’s suffering some sort of organ failure.” The Elf closed his eyes, forcing his focus, “There is… the back of her head hurts, an external pain going internal like she bumped her head.”

“Krem, get my kit,” Cyril said, and the Iron Bull wrapped his arm around Eleanor to support her where she sat while her boyfriend rose to follow instruction, “there’s a bottle of clear solution in the front on the left, un cap it and pop the tip of that in there and bring it here,” he said, calling after the boy, “mindful not to prick yourself lad!” as he examined the back of Eleanor’s head, “not what’s got her like this, but yeah she’s got a little bump, huh.”

“Ahh!” Dorian cried, pointing urgently, “there, just there on her shoulder, chest, front whatever—there’s a pinprick in her sleep top.”

“Good eye, darling,” Vivienne quietly complimented for all she looked wholly stricken, watching as the Healer pulled Eleanor’s sleeve from her right shoulder to reveal a small clotted over spot where she’d bled from being stuck with a dart.

Krem was back with a bottle of- well, it was blue now, the solution he offered Cyril, medical kit in his other hand to set at the Healer’s side, “Turned blue real quick, white flakey shit in it, what’s that mean?”

The Healer blew out something that sounded like a sigh of relief, “Okay… okay she’s going to be fine, nothing I need to brew up something for or urge out of her,” he said, sighing as he looked to Eleanor. “Chief, you carry her? We should put her to bed until it wears off.”

There was a bit of crowding that happened, everyone trying to follow after the Healer and Bull all at once as they disappeared into the tent, so no one quite made it through and then the Iron Bull was returning, Krem just slipping past him as the Qunari exited the tent saying, “Give him a minute, dunno that Boss Girl would want everyone in there for a sec, Cyril’ll give us the run down, tell us what to do.”

“Whatever do you mean-” Cassandra’s complaint was joined by the whole of the Inquisitor’s party voicing issue with being kept outside, though that died as the Healer was joining them not
more than a moment later, for all it was dire circumstance he looked rather relieved.

“Alright. She was hit with sedative, kind meant for Mages Qunari’s ruddy use, just thankfully in a dose that won’t do her mortal harm—something meant to knock her out for a few hours and keep her magic quiet, she can sleep it off. I could dose her with something to absorb it, keep it from affecting her as hard but anything I have that would do that would also mess with her potions, the things she takes regularly wouldn’t be doing their job for a day or two so it’s best to just let this pass. She um, she’s got a knot on the back of her head, a little bruising at her elbows like she fell back but other than that she’s okay. I uh…checked for interference, confirmed there is none—sorry, I should’ve asked one of her mothers to stand in but I’ve never um, handled something like that before, I was worried you’d all try to come in and I wasn’t sure the girl would much care for having everyone around for that particular checkup, she’s uhhhh comfortable with me as a Healer and Krem, and I hope you trust he would murder me dead if I’d been up to anything improper.”

“She wasn’t interfered with- the girl was poisoned!” Dorian argued.

“He means sexually, dear,” Vivienne hushed him, both her tone and her words sent the Tevinter Mage pale and silent.

Sera was incredibly pallid as she voiced, “Freaking did someone try to-“

“No,” oh good heavens he startled them- Cole! “Some wanted to, in the Freemen. It was in some of their men’s thoughts, their dark places,” he informed them hollowly. They all turned their attention to the voice that sounded behind them, Maker, he- the Spirit’s stare just as hollow as his voice as he appeared at the edge of their camp, appearance just as startling as he was walking with a single, blood drenched dagger in hand, sleep clothing tattered and torn, blood splattered all along his clothes, on his face, in his hair. “But I heard and I stopped them, helped Ellie up and sent her back to bed. And now they are dead.”

“Cole…” the Iron Bull spoke as if wary, even as he addressed the Spirit with, “buddy…you should’ve gotten us.”

“I did not want to,” Cole informed them as if it were as simple as that. “Ellie was safe. I wanted to hurt them, and I did not want you to see. No one saw—your men still look for them but they will not find them, I did that already.” Ahh, their forces were still hunting the Freemen that distracted them while the others…had they been laying in wait or had they just so happened to come upon Eleanor separated from the others? “They waited. Their mistake was acting—I could not hear them from where they were hiding, spying to see when best to strike. They will not strike again.”

“Less they friggin come back as- as undead,” Sera whimpered.

Cole’s stare was empty as he looked to her and informed her, “They would need bodies left behind to do that.” …ahh. Well, at least he was thorough.

“Shit…you hurt any?” the Qunari asked.

“I hurt them all,” Cole assured.

“No Cuddly,” Sera squeaked out, “are you hurt?”

“No. I did not have to spare them like the House of Repose. I could cut and tear until they were all dead. And now they are. My body is tired,” he said, began moving like he meant to join Eleanor in the tent to lay down.

“S’also messy babe,” the Iron Bull said, putting himself between their numbers and the Spirit as he rested a hand on the back of the boy’s neck to still him. “C’mon, bud, bath time. You like bath time, remember? You and me’ll go get you cleaned up. Once you’re feeling better, then you can lay down.”

“You worry if you’ll have to snap my body’s neck. You wonder if that will stop me if I need stopping. You can but you don’t have to,” Cole somberly assured, “I would leave my body before I would use it to hurt any of you. Unless you wanted to hurt Ellie, steal her freedom, threaten her family, make her scream and bleed and bruise and starve her, make her know thirst, feel fear until the Inquisition gave you what you wanted—“

Your nature has been tested greatly today—you should cease talking and we will all turn our focus to everything being alright now,” he intoned, both to the Spirit and perhaps he was telling the Iron Bull to make certain to guard his thoughts, keep them of a positive nature around the Spirit at this time.

“The first time Ellie hugged you it scared you because you hadn’t been expecting it and you were worried of what it spoke of. You hadn’t been hugged since your mother died. And now this Human girl you cursed, was small and mortal and trusting and you were scared she might someday threaten your resolve...now the memory makes you happy, because she was also warm, you didn’t realize how warm it would feel to have someone hold you so tightly because they were happy to see you, and it meant she was safe and you’d been so scared for her after she collapsed at the Breach. Her eyes were like starlight when you told her you were uninjured and you wondered, just briefly, if all Humanity started out as such—small and pure and precious.”

“Yes,” Solas said softly as he took Cole’s hand, he and the Iron Bull walking the Spirit away, toward the river to clean him up.

“The first time you saw Marehis was the night you returned from the first attempt on the Breach. You were in the Tavern with Varric. She was talking with Flissa, trying to cheer her up, they laughed together and you thought she had the most beautiful smile...” Cole’s voice died to Cassandra’s ears but Marehis was wide eyed and still, blushing before she shook herself and seemed rather focused on not hearing, as she looked to Cyril.

“She just needs to sleep?” Marehis rasped and Cyril nodded.

So, their breakfast was rather forgotten as the Inquisitor’s party gathered in their tent, seated around the cot that bore Eleanor laying, fully attired courtesy of the Lieutenant, Cassandra eyed their laundry bag resting half-closed by a trunk near the tent entrance, Eleanor’s abandoned clothing, the pair of socks reunited, rested in it and he’d taken it to task to dig fresh sleep trousers from Eleanor’s trunk to cloth her in. Double layers of socks on her feet as she slumbered atop the Tevinter man who just stared into space, holding the girl as tightly as he dared, the only word he spoke while they waited was ‘Good’, when Cassandra informed him what information Cole had offered—that it was indeed the Freemen, an organized attack that distracted their forces while the others endeavored to take captive Eleanor, and Cole had stopped them, confirmed the last of their numbers in the Emerald Graves were dead. Sera was rather inconsolable—crying into Dorian’s chest as the Tevinter Mage had taken it to task to hold the girl through her upset. It took the better part of an hour, but Solas returned—at first alone to gather fresh clothing for Cole and then minutes later, he and the Iron Bull escorted the Spirit, shaky on his feet, back into the tent, clean and calm, looking more like himself for all he looked exhausted.

“I’m okay,” he said, his voice small but assuring enough.

“Yeah you are honey,” the Iron Bull encouraged, tousling the boy’s drying hair before releasing him from his hold entirely so the Spirit could do as he pleased, lie down or...well Cassandra thought he was going to, but the cot he approached was the one Dorian and Sera were seated on, the girl’s chin quivered momentarily before she nodded and the boy joined their hug, wrapping his arms around them as he sat on Sera’s free side.

“She is safe,” Cole said against Sera’s shoulder, “and it wasn’t your fault.” Her...her fault?

“Yes it is!” were the first words Sera had formed since they entered the tent, sobbing as she insisted, ‘Friggin’ stupid! She told me she was waking up to go to the bathroom and I ruddy should have woken up and gone with her! That’s like, rule number one of girl rules! No one goes to the bathroom alone!” Oh, Sera.

“It is not a practice we’ve maintained in the field,” Marehis said, “I’m always with her when we’re awake for the day—Sera, you cannot blame yourself, I should have considered it, I should have instilled in her the habit to wake me if she needed to leave the tent in the night.” Were they quite serious?

“It is neither of your faults,” Cassandra voiced, “honestly—Marehis, you cannot think of every last thing, Eleanor is grown, she is fully capable of managing to use the restroom, that this one instance became threatening is not because of anyone save the people who made it so, and now
they are dead, thank the Maker and Cole. Sera, sweetheart, you could not have known Eleanor was in danger and I’m certain those men had more than one dart as ammunition—if either one of you had been with her you may only have been in danger yourselves, not preventing it.”

“Oh,” Solas breathed, “a toxin meant to quell magic could have been devastating in either one of you for having so little or lack of it. I- I am sorry, Marehis, Sera, everyone. That my bond was wholly worthless in this,” he said, jaw setting and Cassandra did not need Cole’s ability to hear thought—expression alone was enough to know the man’s mind was likely screaming with rebuke, that he should have been able to do more, realize Eleanor was in danger, that things weren’t right with her that morning.

“Wouldn’t say that,” the Iron Bull spoke, “not your fault they shut her magic up, you’ve done what you can. And those assholes got that from somewhere,” the Iron Bull quietly rumbled out, “and I’ll find ’em. Whoever the fuck gave Humans fucking Qunari poisons. Qun’s the only place that has easy access, they use that shit on our Mages, it could’ve damn killed her,” he rasped, enraged.

“ Took apart the dart,” Cyril’s voice spoke up from where he’d been sitting with Thom, “there’s internal mechanism, looks like they just tipped their darts with the stuff, thank the Maker for small mercies.”

“It is no small mercy she is safe,” Vivienne murmured.

“I’ve only truly prayed once in my life,” Solas said, “but it was rather effective. Would it be of comfort, perhaps er…if we, as a great majority of us are Andrasten, took a moment to pray to Ellie’s god?”

“I would thank Mythal, too,” Marehis spoke up. “It is her we have to thank for Cole.”

“Ser’, you good?” Krem had to clear his throat to speak, “you um. You and Cole can get in on this if you want, plenty of room,” he invited before burying his lips in Eleanor’s hair. Sera sniffled and nodded, giving Dorian a squeeze in thanks before releasing her hold on one Tevinter man to trade him for the other—she and Cole falling into the cot next to Krem and Eleanor, Sera snuggling up against his side, her arm looped over Eleanor’s middle as she rested her head on Krem’s shoulder, Cole curling up next to Sera, curled up in the fetal position at her back, his forehead resting between her shoulder blades. It was Thom who…oh, the man had been tearful this entire time, eyes rimmed red, sniffling as he rose from his cot to drape a blanket over them, tucking it up under Cole’s side while Krem pulled the other end around himself and Sera and Eleanor. Though the Lieutenant’s hand didn’t return to Eleanor’s back, he instead swung it back so his arm was underneath Sera, hand resting on the crown of Cole’s head.

“Blessed are they who stand before the corrupt and the wicked and do not falter.”

Oh it should not make her want to cry, but tears sprang into Cassandra’s eyes unbidden at the Lieutenant’s offering of the Chant, pouring it over the Spirit in blessing. She sniffled, clearing her throat before putting forth, “Blessed are the peacekeepers, the Champions of the Just.”

“Blessed are the righteous,” Marehis softly replied, her newfound study of the Chant brought to bear, “the lights in the shadow.”

Madam de Fer took Marehis’s hand to offer it an encouraging squeeze as she finished the verse, “In their blood the Maker’s will is written.”

“Thank you, Maker,” Krem spoke again, head bowed and eyes closed, everyone following suit as he led them in prayer. “Sorry, wrong Aclassi here—papa’s better at this. But uh. Thanks—thank you for…well hell, thank you for Ellie. For protecting her and watching over her even when we can’t.”

“Praise Him most high, for that,” Cassandra voiced her agreement.

“Thanks to um…none of you other pricks be listening, okay! Back off!” Sera started her own prayer…to the Maker? Ah, no. “Thanks Mythal. For um, Cole being Spirity and able to hear shite people’s shite thoughts. If you’re um…out there, protectin’ Inky, being mum over everyone, I appreciate it.”

Marehis sniffled. “Thank you for all you have done for my child, ir abelas tu ma lathbora viran, ma seranas tu eth emma lath, ma’dalen,” she sucked in a harsh breath over a sob and
Cassandra opened her eyes thinking to cross the space between them to pass her a handkerchief if she’d need, but she stilled herself and closed her eyes again to offer privacy as Marehis’s hand reached out, clasping Solas’s and garnering his attention as she offered him, “ir abelas tu ma lathbora viran. Sincerely. I could not- if anything happened to Ellie or Sera I could not-“

“I…did not handle my own losses very well, as you can see, I’m nothing to commend, lethallan, but I thank you for your condolences. I am…grateful beyond measure for the girls’ safety,” girls in the plural, it sounded like he meant. Sera would do anything to defend Eleanor but there was precious little of that attitude that could be brought to bear when one was wholly unconscious. Oh if Eleanor had been captured- if she and Sera both had been taken or- or if Sera had risen to her defense and woken on the forest floor having failed- oh. Cassandra said another silent prayer of thanks that none of that had come to pass that…for all intents and purposes, this was little more than a disrupted morning the Inquisitor got to sleep in.

“Hey…sounds different,” the Iron Bull whispered, breaking the silence they’d been sitting in. Solas nodded,

“Yes, she’s regaining consciousness.”

…Cassandra was uncertain just who was responsible for the craftsmanship of their cots, but Maker bless them the whole of their days—it bore the weight of the four young people, Cassandra and Marehis rushing to sit together at the end of the cot Eleanor was on, and then Dorian, Vivienne, and Thom finding purchase along the side of the cot Sera and Cole had claimed, the Iron Bull kneeling at the end of the cot. Solas stood in the wings while Cyril went around to go down on one knee alongside Eleanor, to be level with her and gauge her response to waking if- if something was going wrong, if she was reacting poorly to coming out from under the sedative or if she was confused or scared or- oh Maker just what did she remember? What had she witnessed?

Eleanor’s mouth dropped open in a long yawn, eyes watering as they squeezed shut more tightly before they slowly drifted open.

“Mmm,” she patted one of the arms wrapped around her torso, Krem’s “guapo,” and then Sera’s arm, “Sissy…double mami’s,” she acknowledged, feet wriggling under the blanket as if she were pointing to the women at her feet…with her feet, “Tio’s and Tia’s everywhere…where’s Cole?”

“Here,” the boy announced his presence softly at Sera’s back.

She yawned again, rubbing at her eyes with the palms of her hands before sitting up and announcing, “This is the best wake up ever!” she…she was enthusiastic to say, “Golly, what time is it? Did…” her brow furrowed in confusion as she shook her head as if to clear it, “Did I sleep in or something?” she questioned, checking her watch and then she let out a horrified gasp, “Oh Maker! Oh no!”

Oh…oh dear she must be remembering something horrible, she- she sounded devastated,

“Eleanor, it is alright, you are safe,” Cassandra promised.

Eleanor’s chin quivered as her voice pitched with a tearful squeak of remorse, “Cremisius, I’m so, so sorry!”

The Lieutenant’s eyes went wide in his head, “El,” he breathed, “sweetheart, you have absolutely nothing to apologize for-“

“I broke my watch!”

“W…what?”

Eleanor pouted as she twisted about to offer up her left wrist to the man so he could see the cracked glass on the wristwatch he’d gifted her on her birthday, “Papito look! I’m so so so so sorry I don’t know how that happened, I promise I always try to be careful with it, I never wear it into fights or anything or-“ and then she sucked in a gasp, “those jerks!”

“They are dead,” Cole announced.

“Good!” Eleanor…in uncharacteristic callousness was cheerful to accept, although Cassandra heartily agreed, yes, good. “They- they caught me literally with my pants down! I was just trying to pee! How did those assholes know I wasn’t out there trying to go number two, huh? That would’ve served them right, trying to kidnap me and I’ve pooped myself. That’s going in the
idea book for if I’m ever captured—more fibrous diet, be ready to drop a major messy stink bomb on the enemy at any time! Ugh!” she growled, pouting further over the crack in the glass of her clockface, “at least it’s still running but still that really pisses me off,” and then her lips quirked in a smile as she snorted softly to herself, “get it? Piss?” Oh honestly, it was not a joking matter! “Did I wipe?” she wondered.

“Yes, you’d just finished when they hit you with their darts. Some missed, one didn’t, I am sorry, I did not hear them until they were close enough but then I came and I stopped them Ellie,” Cole promised.

“Oh yeah,” Eleanor said as she tried to recall just what had transpired that morning. “I got pushed in the dirt and I was able to scramble backwards when they tried to grab me the first time—assholes stole my pants! Well, grabbed them when they grabbed my ankles and I was able to wriggle out cause again—my pants! Were down! That’s just rude! There was a hand on my wrist, and I couldn’t shake it off, my brain was trying to tell my legs to kick him where the sun doesn’t shine but…did I kick him?”

“You tried to, your leg did move it was just very weak and did not make contact, I kicked him for you. Many times,” Cole assured. “I made sure you made it back to bed safely.”

“Thanks Cole…good in the pants department, thanks whoever put those back on for me! I was worried they ran off with those or something,” and then she gasped, “Did they steal my sock? I want it back!”

“Reunited with its match in the hamper as we speak,” Krem softly assured.

“Good, because I already thirst for vengeance over my watch, if I was running around with only one sock in a pair? You don’t split up pairs of socks for permanent, Cremisius, it’s just not right!”

It isn’t in her hurts. She was scared when they grabbed her, she was so confused—she didn’t want to go with them! But I sent her back to bed, she wasn’t sure what was going on, everything was so hazy, it took her a minute to realize the people grabbing her now were her family—Sera, the Iron Bull, Cremisius, and while they sounded worried, she knew she was safe. The Freemen scaring her feels like a distant fear you recover from—like when the mabari pulled you by the wrist with its mouth and Anthony got its teeth off of you, pulled you to his chest, roaring for the beast to leave you be. He made you feel safe, wiped your tears and put ointment on your hurts, inside and out when he told you he was proud of you for being such a brave little girl. You don’t even remember that now, though you do find yourself uneasy around big unfamiliar mabari—there is a small scar on the inside of your right wrist, a little divot in the flesh ointment did not clear away.

Ahh. Truly? She…oh she really did have almost no memory of this, but there was indeed such a scar on her person she’d just never quite pinpointed at what point in her life she’d gotten it, and too a weariness she’d noted but had instilled in herself to ignore—it was a phobia, she reminded herself she could easily lay slain a maddened mabari out for her blood …however it was admittedly a good thing Cullen had brought Anya into her life as a pup, if she’d returned to her bedchambers and found a full-grown mabari? Well, her reaction may have been a touch embarrassing. It may or may not have involved putting the man between her and the beast, climbing up onto her desk because surely she would be untouchable there, and drawing her sword until she was certain the thing meant her no harm. She wasn’t sure what iteration of that Compassion-talk the others were getting but the others seemed to be listening to something.

“Inky,” Sera giggled, going along with the girl’s lightheartedness, “you’re a friggin’ nut.”

“That’s what my potions regimen is for! Have I taken any of that by the way?” she wondered, looking to Cyril, “Tio should I play skipsies and just get back on schedule tomorrow? Or is it okay to take it and just knock it back earlier and earlier until I’m back to my ‘taking it at breakfast’ routine?”

“s’gone nearly four honey I…” Cyril blew out a breath face scrunching as he scratched at the back of his head considering it. “You um…do you mind letting me run a few tests first? Just to make sure all that craps out of your system first?”

“Umm…rude—fieldwork means less school! No tests, only fun stuff!” Eleanor teasingly
complained. “What kind of tests are we talking?”

“Little bit of blood, swab of your saliva and um…”

She held out her hand as if to accept something, “You want me to go pee again, huh?”

“If you wouldn’t mind pumpkin,” the man offered albeit apologetically as he withdrew a small glass jar from his medical kit and handed it to Eleanor.

“Cool—who wants to go with me?” Eleanor wondered, “Or are the bathroom bandits apprehended and everything’s cool?”

“I’m going with you!” Sera decided immediately, “Friggin’ no more going to the bathroom alone inky, you hear? Like, never!”

“That’s gonna get a little weird when we get home sissy ‘cause I got nice facilities back in my quarters, am I supposed to just jaunt out into the hall and ask a guard or something to come watch me? ‘cause that’s how we get rumors of the Inquisitor’s rampant sexual harassment and her weird fetishes real fast.”

“You assume that I haven't already started such rumors?” Dorian drawled.

“I can always count on you, Tio!” the girl beamed a smile his way.

Earning a scowl as the man raised a startled hand to his heart, refuting, “No! Rude. I refuse this atrocity, stop—ugh my heart is doing something unseemly and I detest it, do- do cease…what is it? Is this affection I’m feeling? I don’t like it, I’m send it back.”

“Kay but if you do…you’re kind of just reciprocating my affection which means,” Eleanor informed him, “…you’re being affectionate.”

“Perish the thought!” Dorian halfheartedly snapped and Eleanor giggled, bouncing off the cot on to unsteady feet, but her sister was close behind, catching Eleanor up under her arms and helping her stand steady, looping an arm over Eleanor’s shoulders as she escorted her to, well…

Cassandra wasn’t wholly certain if Sera would want Eleanor returning to the scene of the crime, and Marehis followed after them in case the girl’s sought an alternative lavatory situation elsewhere and needed guarding. Dorian groaned as he flopped forward on the cot at Cole and Krem’s feet, complaining, “Oh god she’s diseased me!”

“Called you Tio and you loved it?” the Iron Bull chuckled.

“I assure you, I hate it!”

“Would it make you feel any better if she called you Zio?” Krem wondered amusedly. Was that the Tevene counterpart?

His teasing made Dorian blush, “Do not encourage her!”

“S’my whole damn job dude,” the younger Tevinter informed him, “24 hours a day, 372 days of the year, for, Maker willing, the rest of my life.”

Cyril set up for his testing—he remained seated on the ground alongside Eleanor’s cot and pulled out two clear jars he poured clear solution in once they heard footsteps approaching.

Marehis returned before the girls did, hands around the jar as if trying to offer the liquid inside a bit of privacy from those in the tent as she discreetly passed it off to the Healer who nodded and took a dropper from his kit to fill with…well, ahem. Urine. Ugh. And then he dispensed it into one of the jars of solution he’d set up. Eleanor and Sera were there just a moment later, Eleanor announcing, “I did it, it was dumb, but I did it and I’ve washed my hands. Pretty sure that was more traumatizing than the whole ‘almost getting kidnapped’ thing. What’s next Tio?”

“Sorry little love,” the man apologized, “sit here,” he gestured for her to return to the cot and she sat with her back to her boyfriend who sat up, looking rather…well, the man had said he would be taking blood from her and the Tevinter man didn’t seem like he liked that very well, he wrapped his arm around her middle, seating himself directly behind her and pressing his lips to her shoulder, watching over her shoulder as the Healer dug around in his kit, Cole mirroring him as he curled up behind the Lieutenant, face against Krem’s back as he hugged the other boy around the waist in solidarity of…well, their mutual dislike of Eleanor being subject to pain. However, Cyril produced a slender wooden rod with a bundle of cotton at its end, “open up please, say ‘ahhh’” the Healer instructed, dropping his mouth wide open to exemplify.

“Ahhh,” Eleanor copied him, nose scrunching as he swabbed at the inside of her mouth.
When he was finished, it sounded like she were licking the inside of her mouth to rid her of the
taste that was, apparently, “ick.”

“Sorry honey. We’re almost done. You um…you’re okay with me taking a little blood? It’ll
only last a second, a pinprick, in whichever arm you prefer,” he informed her.

“You can have righty,” Eleanor said as she offered up her right arm for Healer inflicted
 torment. Well, the left one had been through much, Cassandra supposed. Thankfully her right arm
was subject to merely a pinprick—he had an instrument not unlike the one Adan had sent Eleanor
to test Dorian for his nutritional deficiencies upon his introduction to the Inquisition. Krem’s hold
on the girl tightened, eyes closed as he rested his forehead against her shoulder, not daring to look
as Cyril took the girl’s offered arm in hand and pressed the fine, sharp tip of the glass implement
into the tender flesh of her inner elbow, Cole let out the softest whine in sympathy.

“One-two,” the Healer softly, swiftly counted before pulling the thing away, “Good job, you
did so great,” he commended.

“Thanks!” Eleanor replied, raising her unmarked hand to rest on the back of Krem’s head,
scratching gently at his scalp, “I’m okay carino, that didn’t even hurt.”

The young man just shook his head against her shoulder, “Didn’t like it. Nope. Nu-uh.” Cole
nodded his agreement against the Lieutenant’s back.

“Not a fan myself,” Cyril agreed, “but…blood’s clean, everything else too. You get
something on your stomach babygirl and you can take your potion, we’ll start you on an ‘hour-
back’ routine, get you sorted before you leave the Emerald Graves, okay?”

“Okay!” Eleanor agreed, before cheerfully demanding, “Somebody feed me! And maybe
somebody else catch me up? Do we know what that kidnapping business was all about or what?”

Ahh. She supposed they’d not explained it was the Freemen making their attempts to take
her hostage as they’d threatened to. The Iron Bull offered first and foremost, “Ime-kadan—you
want pancakes or that cheese noodle stuff?”

“Ohhh, hit me with the cheese please!”

“On it, just take a minute babe Cabot sent it prepped, just gotta warm it up,” the Iron Bull
said, grunting as he pushed up on his knee to rise, “c’mon,” he invited, coming around the cot to
stand behind where Cyril sat on the ground and offer his hand to Eleanor and when the girl took it
she squeaked as he pulled her up, Krem’s hold leaving her as the Qunari pulled her high against his
chest, “Gonna be keeping you on my seeing side for a bit imekari, not diggin’ having you out of
sight.”

It seemed none were ‘digging’ having the girl out of sight, Cassandra wasn’t certain she’d be
able to find even a bit of sleep tonight if she did not take potion to do so, she could somehow
already feel herself lying wide awake, the low aching high of fear in her heart keeping her awake
and alert until sunrise. They all followed after the Iron Bull and Eleanor, Krem digging through
their stores for a pot and the prepared food Cabot had sent them the other day with a missive that
read,

*Haven’t seen the brat Inquisitor around the tavern in a minute. Make sure she eats or
whatever. Not that I give a damn. Here’s some of that shit she likes.*

Eleanor had smiled pure exuberance when the package had arrived, hugging the little slip of
parchment to her chest as she squealed and said, “Awe! He’s just the sweetest!”

He was in his own right. And his offering of macaroni noodles and copious amounts of
savory cheese sauce smelled delightful as the Iron Bull warmed it over their campfire.

“It was the Freemen of the Dales, da’vehnan,” Marehis explained. “They…” she cleared her
throat, “they’d plans to capture you, hold you hostage to make demands of the Inquisition—our
removal of the stance we hold here in the Emerald Graves in exchange for your safe return.”

“Gosh, okay yikes,” Eleanor said.

“I am so sorry da’vehnan.”

“I should’ve gone with you when you said you was getting up Inky, shite, shite I’m sorry,”
Sera seconded her mother, Eleanor had taken a seat alongside the Iron Bull by the fire and Sera slid
on her knees to wrap her arms around the girl, squeezing her tight.
“Sissy, mami stop!” Eleanor insisted, hugging the Elf girl back, “It’s not your fault! I’m the one who went out by myself, and I mean even then it’s not like I knew there were people plotting to kidnap me or whatever—we didn’t know! These Freemen jerks just—just attacked.”

It…it struck Cassandra then, as it did, well, the Iron Bull, Sera, Thom, Marehis…the Lieutenant’s jaw clenched and he looked rather like he might like to hit something. They had informed everyone that Eleanor was a target of the Freemen of the Dales. Save…well…Eleanor.

“We…” Marehis started.

The Lieutenant came, venturing far too close to the fire for Cassandra’s peace of mind but the young man did so to sit on his knees before Eleanor, taking her hands in his. “El. I’m so sorry. We’ve been getting reports all week of our scouts intercepting messages between Freemen leaders with talk of a hostage attempt. I—they—they fucking scared me senseless, literally I lost all sense because damn it, I—I should have warned you, I just— I was—“

“We were all trying to protect you—thought we could protect you physically from the Freemen while also protecting you from knowing their horrible threats,” Marehis assisted the young man in explaining, “sweet man it was not on you to do that. Ellie’s security is my responsibility. Da’vehnan,” Marehis addressed the girl. “I…there are times in my duties where I am selective with what I allow you to come to know. It is not to hurt or mislead you—there are just-if I informed you of every last thing I check for danger you would never wish to set foot outside your quarters. There are so many dangers in your life you already have in your mind, if I can spare you even just a few of them? I do. I…” the woman blanched, looked like she might be ill. “I…I wasn’t thinking clearly. I thought we would be vigilant enough but I didn’t consider you not knowing might endanger you itself—if you were aware you’d such a threat at hand…”

“If you told me to, yeah, I definitely wouldn’t have gone anywhere without someone with me, I promise to wake someone up to go with me next time. But um… I mean you weren’t totally wrong mami—you guys were vigilant enough, ‘cause we’ve got Cole!” Eleanor noted brightly, removing her unmarked hand from Krem’s hold to clasp Marehis’s hand and squeeze it reassuringly. The woman looked like she might be on the verge of tears, and the girl was endeavoring to cheer her up, “He heard them and he stopped them from taking me so don’t feel bad, okay? I know it’s super hard, running security for me, and yeah, I know I don’t know everything you do to keep me safe, but I still know ya know?” she giggled at the excessive use of ‘know’, eliciting a small, huff of a laugh from Marehis whose chin quivered as she raised the hand Eleanor gave her to her lips to press a kiss to her palm. “You do everything for me mami! And you do such an amazing job!” Eleanor encouraged, “I’m not mad—you made a call that um…seems like everyone else made too, so obviously it’s not like, unreasonable to come to that conclusion. Just…I get that I don’t need to know there’s spiders as big as horses because I’m not in an area those live in. but if I did go into a place like that? I’d trust you’d tell me the truth about them so I’m prepared, yeah? Everything can probably work like that. it was fine if we’d avoided Freemen territory altogether, but once we were, yeah, I’m…I would like to hope I don’t go out of my way to make your job hard mami. I love you all, and you’re so amazing, keep me so safe! But I can help keep me safe too, so let me in the know so I can help out, kay?”

“We have fallen out of practice, coming together to go over security measures—we’ve all been set to task at different things, our responsibilities have piled up,” Cassandra voiced—she’d had a conversation like this their first time in Val Royeaux, Eleanor asking to be included in the adult’s conversations that they usually held once she was put to bed, talking of things they would rather the girl not know were such threats to her, to keep her from fear. Their days usually concluded with a security briefing of sorts, after that—going over the day’s adventures, voicing improvements that could be made, instilling precautions in Eleanor to take for herself. But after Haven, there had been so much scrambling just to make things stay afloat that others fell to the wayside. “I’m regretful to say I didn’t warn Eleanor because I just assumed she’d been told—a mistake, in retrospect.”

“Well I friggin’ wasn’t going to tell her!” Sera said. “It’s ruddy scary! Inky if- if we could’ve
pulled it off, shite, that would’ve been like, the best—you wouldn’t have to be worried at all, and you could be safe, that’s double wins!”

“Yeah…sorry Imekari,” the Iron Bull spoke up as he scooped rather the large portion of noodles into a bowl for the girl. “I uh…should’ve told you boss-girl. Krem, dude, I’m sorry, I let you down in that. Wasn’t on you to tell her, you help with her security yeah, but that’s just it—you help with it, you’re not in charge of running it, you’re in a position where you’re around her a lot so we keep you up to date on possible threats to watch out for. It’s our responsibility, updates should have been going to boss-girl, too.”

Sera was worrying her lip so very fiercely Cassandra feared the girl might bite through the flesh entirely, groaning a bit before she urgently confessed, “Inky I fibbed about my mission the other day—!”

“Mmmm, yeah, but that’s kind of like the spider thing,” Eleanor supposed with a shrug, “I didn’t have to go to the actual haunted mansion, so you didn’t have to tell me it was dangerous unless you wanted to talk to me about it Sissy. Cole said it was in your hurts, that’s why I wanted to talk about it. When you turned it into a fun story instead I thought…maybe that’s what you needed, to have a fun memory to replace the scary one, and papi agreed to help.”

“You knew I was lyin’ when I was talkin’ about it last night?” Sera wondered timidly, “You…you wasn’t mad?”

Eleanor shook her head as she assured her sister, “No, not exactly. In that case, it wasn’t a big deal. But um,” she looked to the adults to address them, “I mean…I’m not a little kid. I’m not necessarily a full-blown grown up but I don’t…yeah, okay, things scare me and they might make me sad or angry or make me cry or whatever but that’s just…you either want me to have normal Human emotions or you don’t!” she said, albeit impatiently. “I appreciate the spirit you guys are in when you try to shield me from things but I’d…appreciate it if you didn’t coddle me so much. I’m sorry if I fail and don’t always have the best response to things, that I’m such a cry baby sometimes, but that’s just tough toenails! Deal with it! I’m in this too—it’s not all on you guys. And that has to suck for you guys, when you act like it is because you’re left handling it all on your own when I could help! Cremisius, guapo you—” she looked to her boyfriend, "I wish you’d talked to me about what was making you so scared when we were going to sleep all those nights in Val Royeaux. I mean I’d wake up because you were holding me so tightly, you’d stay up being sneaky about reading those reports you always kept locked in your nightstand and I…I didn’t go poking around to read them because I trust you and I’d never want to invade your privacy but carnio, if I were lying awake at night terrified something was going to happen to you or…or terrified of anything for that matter, wouldn’t you want me to talk to you about it?”

The boy’s mouth worked momentarily before he offered up, “Of course, El.”

“You were upset because I didn’t consult you when I asked Stitches to let you have my potions after Haven—mad that I was keeping how crappy I was feeling from you and dealing with it on my own when I could’ve told you and let you help me. This is kind of the same thing—I don’t like that you chose to worry about this all by yourself. Because that’s what this is—we’re a team, Cremisius. If something is worrying you? Or if you’re having a bad day or you’re sick, or something’s pissed you off, I want you to share that with me! Just like I’d want you to share the good things! It isn’t being very nice to yourself to not let me help you! So,” she insisted sternly. Though she smiled as she leaned in close, pressing her forehead against him, intoning, “Stop being mean to my boyfriend.”

“Or what?” he returned, it sounded almost like this were some inside conversation, a running thing between them.

She smiled sweetly, pressing a kiss to his forehead, Cassandra wasn’t certain what response the young man expected, but he got, “Don’t test me Aclassi—I’ll ruin your Maker damned life, and then I'll leave you for Lord Woolslly and we will laugh and laugh and laugh.”

The young man’s eyes were wide at that, snorting with surprised laughter. “Only like tests from your Tio Dorian, huh?” the Tevinter Mage could be heard groaning in disdain.
Eleanor nodded, “Or sissy—she always lets me blow stuff up during science tests!” a startled look on her face as she looked to Cassandra, and then Marehis, and back again, “uhh…I mean…my other sissy. The bad one. Sera’d never let me blow something up a science test! She gives me good…perfectly safe…parchment and pencil tests.”

“Yup! Parchment and pencil! No pyrogenics allowed!” Sera insisted.

Cassandra breathed a sigh of relief. Maker this day had gone so awry, things…things finally felt settled so she cleared her throat, intoning, “Thank you, for hearing us out, Eleanor. Now, eat your supper—if we delay your potions regimen further it will only make it that much more difficult to get back to schedule.”

“Oh! Right! Thanks mami, gosh, I forgot about mac’n’cheese! How the hell did that happen? It’s mac’n’cheese!” she said, as if her failure to stay on task with eating the stuff was the gravest sin. Krem moved out of the way, which was likely wise when one was between Eleanor and foodstuff, and the Inquisitor held out her hands to receive the bowl the Iron Bull had filled for her, hungrily digging in. Which was fair, she’d not eaten all day and it was nearly five.

So, an unconventional day ended with an unconventional meal. Eleanor got to eat her absolute fill of cheese-ridden carbs, and the Iron Bull reheated the large pot of oatmeal he’d prepared that morning after unlidding it and giving it a careful sniff to make certain it would not send their masses food poisoned.

“Ellie I…I did something. It…wasn’t wrong, but I felt wrong. Like when I was in White Spire,” Cole spoke up, there had been amicable small talk among their numbers but they fell silent as the Spirit who sat alongside them even as he did not eat, addressed Eleanor.

She regarded him silently for a moment before nodding, “It’s okay Cole. You wanna talk about it, carino?”

“I- I wasn’t sweet,” he said, as if correcting her. “I killed all of the Freemen. And I did it…very violently. I was harsh and cruel and I did not care, I was glad. I wanted them to suffer but that is not me, I’m supposed to be compassion.”

Eleanor worked that around in her mind for a moment, head tilting side to side before she decided, “Hmm…no. You’re not supposed to be any one thing, Cole. There’s duality remember? Like papi was talking about! You’re compassion, but there’s a flip side to that—cruelty. When you wondered if I wanted you to kill that sick soldier in Skyhold, that was cruel—but you meant it kindly, you wanted to end his suffering, it was compassion expressed in cruelty. Today you um…well you were pretty pissed off I guess?”

“I could hear what they were thinking of doing with you. and it made me very angry.”

“Everyone gets angry sometimes Cole. I mean Thom and Sera and them, they said they thought I was safe because they’d ‘eliminated’ the Freemen, people don’t tend to get eliminated all on their own—I assume they’ve been going around, and because the Freemen have been violent and posing danger, refusing to see any reason, they’ve been being dealt with. um…I know mami killed that Lord that threatened Sera—I’m glad that he’s dead. I’m glad he can’t hurt anyone anymore and he pissed me off, the way he spoke to my sister, his whole attitude—he’d have gladly seen her dead. So…that puts me and him in the same boat right? Except just one thing,” Eleanor said, “he would have gladly seen Sera dead because of his own stupid pride, selfishness, his need to feel superior to her. I’m glad he’s dead because he wanted to hurt someone I love, and would have if no one had stopped him. So which one is it, Cole? Are you glad they’re dead because you feel that you’re better than them and they don’t deserve to live? Or are you glad they’re dead because you know they would have hurt people that you love for no reason other than their own selfish pride, to feel big, and now they can’t do that anymore?”

“Oh. Oh, the second one, yes.” Cole said as he nodded.

“Being cruel just to be cruel is wrong. But sometimes, when you’re letting compassion guide you, cruelty is necessary in order to do the right thing. It’s not fun to give people stitches—it hurts, but you have to do it sometimes to stop them from bleeding out and help them heal up. It’s a part of who you are, and it doesn’t have to be a bad thing. You’re sweet, and compassionate, and funny, and you understand what people are feeling and you do your best to try to help them—sometimes
that takes a bit of cruelty. And all of that, all together? It makes up you! And I love you carino—not because you’re supposed to be ‘compassion’, but because you are you! You’re Cole!

Oh…oh the boy’s eyes were wet as he wiped at them with the back of his fist, “Okay…okay. Thank you, Ellie. I…I was so scared I was becoming something bad again. Solas and the Iron Bull helped make me light again, but I am glad I talked to you.”

“Eleanor…” Solas said thoughtfully, as if he were thinking something over himself, “you…believe the duality in spirits has a balance?” he wondered.

Eleanor nodded. “Uh-huh. Well yeah. I mean…okay so like you have Compassion and Cruelty. Cruelty on its own—ehh, bad. Compassion done in order to be cruel? That’s fake compassion, it’s wrong and you’re wrong,” Eleanor said, “but cruelty from compassion? As long as your base is compassion—that that’s at the core of what you’re doing and you’re acting directly from there? Cool! Like…pride and purpose are counter points right? It’s important to know your worth, know your purpose and pursue it, have confidence in it. But if you take it to a prideful place, where it’s all about how great you are? Blah. But there’s absolutely nothing wrong in taking pride in your purpose. The bad nature doesn’t have to sit in a corner all by itself—it’s there for a reason! It’s a component of the good part, it’s not an either-or thing. Spirits who become despair, I’m sure used to be Spirits of joy or hope—it would be pretty hard to tell when you’re happy if you’re happy all the time! Knowing there are bad things, feeling sad when you’re supposed to be sad makes being happy that much better. So I’m sure there’s a purpose for despair in things like hope and joy, I mean hope only comes from necessity—you have to hope for better things because you know the worst is possible. Without that knowledge of the bad stuff? Without the potential of despair? All you’d have is certainty. You can’t really hope tomorrow’s going to be a good day if you don’t understand the potential for despair,” she prattled on. “Uhh…did any of that make sense? It makes sense in my head but uh…it’s my head, when that’s doing things that don’t make sense to me, I’m usually in trouble.”

“I believe I’m following your reasoning,” Solas supposed. “All morality holds a duality.”

“Uh-huh! Dark and light. You can’t get more than a selfish sort of light out of darkness—lighting a lamp in the pitch, you can see your path and you think ‘oh, I’m in the light! I’m doing the right thing!’, but you’re still surrounded by darkness. Starting from light? A place that’s bright can be full of light and encompasses everyone it touches, but at the same time, all light casts a shadow—darkness supporting the light.”

“I suppose…once upon a time, if I’d truly been acting of love instead of vengeance derived from hatred I may well have made better choices,” Solas said thoughtfully. “Could there have been a better way to deal with the Evanuris?” There usually was always at least a few other options before one should consider mass murder, Cassandra supposed.

“If you’d stopped and really acted out of your love for Mythal and your baby and your people?” Eleanor said, “Um…I mean…you’re considered part of the pantheon now, right? You had followers. And Mythal made you her equal. I mean you probably could’ve taken her place, you know? Stepped up and did what she used to do, maybe even better than she did. I mean absolutely no offence, I’m sure she did the best she knew how to, it was probably the least confrontational for herself way—but it sounds like she catered to their egos and talked them down by stroking them enough. You were right that they needed confrontation, just…you did it all by yourself, so you took drastic measures to ensure you’d succeed. If you’d had the backing of Mythal’s people, of your own? Gone to them and said ‘hey, enough is enough’, maybe recruited from the other Evanuris’s houses? You probably could have turned the whole system on its head,” she supposed and…Solas looked rather like stunned and…well, Cassandra supposed it must be an overwhelming thing, to be a formerly immortal being, a person whom with it was impossible to pinpoint just how truly old he was, reflecting on things that happened before Humans were around to count the Ages—to have once been so certain of what he was doing, that there was no better plan whatsoever and have a girl who had been alive all of a blink of his eye, a fully countable sixteen years of life under her belt, propose a plausible alternative to his once ultimate plan was nothing short of confounding and possibly hair-rending unbelievable. “I mean that’s kind of what we’re doing right now. The entire
Chantry’s been corrupted so the Inquisition is stepping up and making it right, speaking truth to power and hopefully kicking Corypheus directly in the balls.”

“…told you. Ashakari,” the Iron Bull said. ahh. ‘one who thinks’? “Babe…when the hell do you think about shit like this?”

“Mmm basically anytime I’m not thinking about Cremisius’s butt.”

“Dude…a boycrazed teenager came up with a better plan for Elf-peace in like…what, the fuck long have we known about wolf-boy? A month? A damn month.”

“I’m well aware how very humbling that is,” Solas assured him, the man was even blushing a bit as if embarrassed. “I did many things I regret whole-heartedly now…though I…I am not sorry you exist. You understand that, yes? I am remorseful, but I could never regret that what has come to pass in the dawn of the Ages has led to a world where you have come to be.”

“…papi,” Eleanor breathed, smiling as she blushed seeming almost shy the man had said such…well, it was indeed a moving sentiment.

“How very sweet, I too am glad I exist,” Dorian declared, “what a wretched world it would be, otherwise.”

Solas’s lips quirked in a bit of an amused smile as he offered, “I…did mean the sentiment to encompass this group as a whole, actually. While yes I certainly mean it in a way that feels more in regard to Ellie and Sera, those I have come to dearly love,” …rather the mouthful to replace saying ‘Marehis’ but even his roundabout way made the Elf woman cringe ever-so and blush. “I am glad you exist, Dorian Pavus. Just as I am glad this world produced the Iron Bull and Seeker Pentaghast and Madam de Fer, Ser Rainier—all of you…even Varric, lo that I do owe him ‘drinks for forever’.”

“The frig for?” Sera wanted to know.

“He has expressed the deep wish to make a publication modeled after my ‘batshit crazy life story’ but he would not wish to incidentally make public my transgressions with the Inquisition, write something that people could draw lines from, to me, and discover it is not quite as fictious a work as he’d like to sell it as. So, as he is being so gracious to guard the highlights of my past, I owe him drinks eternal.” Had the Dwarf truly termed his change of heart as gracious? It had taken hours of War Room negotiations between he and the advisors for them to talk him down and make him sign a promise of confidentiality on the matter—because ultimately, if the connection were made to Solas and the Inquisition, it would not only be potentially Solas and the Inquisition hurt, but Eleanor as Inquisitor. It was a historical role all its own, to be Inquisitor. To be so young and a mage taking on that mantle, it would be unjust if her works went overshadowed in history by her falling for the tricks of ‘Fen’harel’, any progress she made for the future societal betterment for Mages may well be thwarted.

Sera snorted. “Tell’em that’s dumb—if anything you owe Inky drinks for forever.”

“Oh! Papi, do it,” Eleanor pled, “because I don’t want you indebting yourself or encouraging the destruction of Varric’s liver. And I like free drinks. And mine are cheaper! The most expensive juice I drink is orange juice and that only appeals when the stars align just right, I’m a big apple juice girl and apples are like, all over the place you could probably make it yourself and save your money,” she nodded, smiling though she looked albeit crestfallen as if something had just occurred to her.

“…you’ve made yourself want apple juice, haven’t you?” Solas supposed amusedly. Oh goodness.

She nodded. “Si, real bad.”

“Well, this one’s certainly on me,” he assured, rising from his seat to go fetch her a glass of the stuff from their stores.

Eleanor sighed contentedly as she rested her head against Cassandra’s shoulder. “I missed having an in-the-field papi!”

Oh…Cassandra had been considering carefully what she would be writing Eleanor’s ‘out-of-the-field’ Papi…thinking over if she should send along the days events in her own words to quell his worries—there would be a report and Cullen would surely read it, there would be no keeping
the Freemen’s attack from him. Not that she wished to keep it from him necessarily, she just knew well the man already worried endlessly when they were in the field, this would only absolutely petrify the man…

Though if she also mentioned Eleanor was well and enraptured with having an ‘in-the-field’ papi, jealousy may well send the man crossing boarders to get to the girl forthwith and wholly derail their operations to indulge his mijas in play and pampering until he laid claim to some horrible title like ‘all-around-universal-favorite-of-his-daughters-hearts’ papi.

Cullen’s return missive was swift when Cassandra wrote the man after dinner, he demanded evidence ‘his children’ were safe. And he received it—Cassandra had Eleanor and Sera write him that they were well, and on Cassandra’s parchment to reply to him…the Lieutenant granted them rather the nice surprise. Their party sat around the campfire for the rest of the evening, socializing and being together, enjoying each other’s company as Cassandra wrote up assurances to Cullen’s response, and when she voiced his worry, Krem asked,

“There uh, anything in there you don’t want me accidentally seeing?” pointing to the parchment in Cassandra’s lap.

She was not one for writing smut. Not often. One time! while in the field after Haven fell and emotions were rather high and she missed the man. And he’d started it! But upon their return to Skyhold…well. Leliana had snorted when she found herself quoting one of the more benign sentiments expressed in those letters and Cassandra had been horrified to realize the woman had read their post!

“In my defense, Cassandra, it was only after my agent in charge of checking field correspondence for interference rose suspicion to the er…sudden, graphic change in your letter writing style. We had to…read rather thoroughly to confirm the letters were genuinely yours and Cullen’s.” Leliana grinned, devilishly delighting in, “She requested a change of position once we were through.” …which was understandable.

“…no, is there something you would like to add?” she wondered as Krem motioned for her to pass her parchment to him. He withdrew a pencil from a thigh pocket and offered her a little wink before saying,

“Hey lovely, gimme a smile. You too Ser’,” he said to the girls laughing and making play with some….ridiculous game—sitting on their knees before the fire, knees touching as they held out their hands to one another, Sera’s hovering over Eleanor’s upturned hands while the younger girl stared with wide eyes waiting for her sister to strike. Delighting in one’s attempts to smack the other’s hands while the other endeavored to anticipate the slap and whisk their hands away at the last second. Though now their attention turned to the Tevinter man, turning their smiles on him, Eleanor lowering the pollen filtering mask so he could see. He grinned, nodding as he wondered, “and uh, what’s the sign for ‘I love you’, again? The short way.”

“Oh!” Eleanor said, holding up her unmarked hand, to him, palm forward as she made a fist and raised her thumb, index, and pinkie fingers, and Sera giggled, copying the younger girl as she stuck out her tongue at the Lieutenant.

“The frig you want all that for?” Sera wondered.

“Never you mind—be about your business,” Krem dismissed them, “You leave bruises on my girlfriend’s hands Ser’ and we’re gonna have a problem. Same to you El, don’t be too rough on my best friend.”

“No promises guapo!”

“Yeah Kremmy-boy—it’s go big or go home!” Sera agreed, their attention returning to their game while Krem began scratching pencil against parchment to make whatever addition he wished for her letter to Cullen.

Oh, it was ridiculous game but it was admittedly adorable to watch. And albeit hilarious when it became apparent Solas was struggling with having so much exuberance in the bond—between Eleanor and Sera’s delight in the game and Marehis’s enjoyment in watching them, and his own natural amusement in their antics…well. The poor man erupted into something of a giggle fit, blushing ears and cheekbones as he slapped a hand over his mouth and excused himself, rising
to get a bit of distance from their campfire and breathe in some fresh air.

Marehis…was likewise blushing when, after a moment of staring after the man with rather the warm smile at her lips, she realized she was doing so. She quietly cleared her throat and shook herself, her gaze returning to the girls, though she saw Cassandra looking to her and offered up a bit of an embarrassed smile. The Seeker smiled back, kindly, taking the Elf woman’s hand in her own and offering it a reassuring squeeze.

“He loves them. It would be hard not to be happy with that,” Cassandra whispered quietly. Cullen’s shared love of Eleanor and eventually Sera was a…well, it certainly hadn’t turned her off from pursuing the man in a romantic sense. She loved how he loved and cared for them. And while she’d no attraction to Solas, well, she certainly had an appreciation for how he loved the girls.

“Papi, do you wanna turn?” Eleanor wondered when the man returned, more grounded and calm from his overwhelming mirth.

“Hmm…” the Elf man considered it, but he’d not necessarily wish to play a game that involved, even in fun, slapping the girls hands. “I was thinking perhaps, if it would please you da’lens, I could teach you a game I played in my youth. It may well still be around today, you might even already know it—it’s great fun if I recall correctly.”

“What’s your game, papi?” Eleanor wondered in delighted curiosity.

“Ena Alas Hamin Ghilas,” he rattled off in the Elvehnan tongue, or, “Up, Down, Stop, Go.” It was rather the perfect way for expelling Eleanor’s energy after she’d spent much of the day comatose—Cassandra had been admittedly worried the girl would struggle to sleep in the night either from anxieties of the things that had come to pass that day, or from sleeping most of the day away, but that worry lessened as Solas led Eleanor and Sera in something called ‘Up, Down, Stop, Go’. The rules were as simple as they were complicated, it was a game of opposites, apparently—Solas sat with the adults, calling out instructions to the girls and it was up to them to remember to do the opposite of whatever he said. So if he called ‘up’ they were to drop down, ‘down’ they were to jump up and raise their arms high overhead, ‘stop’ meant run as fast as they could, and ‘go’ meant to, of course, stop still wherever they were. What resulted was a lot of frantic running about, screaming and giggling as the girls crashed into each other, helped each other stay in the game by haphazardly following each other’s lead. Cole joining their fun did them no benefit strategically but the Spirit did add to their great fun, he was well versed in the game…knew the rules, but that did nothing to assist him in his ability to follow them any better than his friends. Ultimately Solas’s command of ‘stop’ had sent the girls and Spirit running for each other, colliding and stopping still the moment the Elf called out ‘go!’ Eleanor squealing as Sera cackled and Cole had laughter bubbling up from his chest as he did his best to help the girls remain upright, they were stopped but they weren’t being very ‘still’ about it. And when the command for ‘stop’ came again the Spirit vanished from sight—poofing away and leaving the girls shrieking as they toppled to the ground, laughing and squealing as they scrambled to get up on their feet and run.

“Here,” Krem said as he leaned to hand Cassandra her letter back.

It may feel irrational. But if anything happened to this piece of parchment, Cassandra would hunt down whoever was responsible, and she would utterly decimate them.

“Cremisius…my most precious and beloved son,” Marehis claimed him on the spot as she laid eyes on the Lieutenant’s handiwork. Maker bless him, the whole of his days. He’d drawn Eleanor and Sera as they had been, seated by the fire, smiling and holding up their hands in the sign for ‘I love you’, Sera’s nose scrunched, a single eye open as she stuck her tongue out. “This is beautiful. Are you…” she looked to Krem, “are you capable of repeating this?” she wondered.

The young man was blushing at her praise, shrugging as he said, “S’long as Cullen holds onto it,” he would. Or Cassandra would promptly, as the girls called it, ‘dump his ass’. “I can ink it when I get back to Skyhold, transfer it for you to have if you want an exact copy.”

“Thank you, sweet man,” Cassandra said, “I appreciate this, Cullen will too.” He would be absolutely delighted with it.

“No problem,” he assured. “You uh…think they’re tired yet or can I get in on the fun?”
Cassandra needn’t voice that the girls would only regenerate their exuberance at the news Krem wished to join them—Sera heard his words and announced, “Kremmy-boy’s in!”


Krem grinned, assuring, “I’m dale-ing!” as he went to join them. The Iron Bull found it amusing to watch his Lieutenant make play with Eleanor and Cole and Sera, laughing as he alternated between giving his friend’s chase, somehow always right there for any such ‘go!’ orders to stop alongside his girlfriend, arms around her waist to hold her against him to assist her in keeping upright and in the game, of course. That was most certainly his only motives. Oh, it was sweet.

The day had hardly gone at all to plan, but at the end of it? Cassandra lay in a cot with Eleanor, Sera, and Marehis at her sides, safe and sound, the younger women wholly exhausted in the best way—spent from their fun, getting to bathe and relax and lay with each other at the end of the day, chatting and still…goodness, it was almost like the girls were speaking an entirely made up language the way they spoke with each other, quietly but excitedly, words falling rapid fire from their lips until they began drifting off, coaxed further still by Solas’s soft announcement, his voice in the dark of their tent, coming from his cot.

“Da’vehnans…if you’re ready to sleep I’m certain you’ll have pleasant dreams,” he enticed them. It sounded like, in fact, he’d planned upon it, already set up something for them to enjoy in the Fade.

“Have fun, da’lens,” Marehis wished them, Eleanor in her arms, she pressed a kiss to the top of her head. Eleanor nodded sleepily, ready to drift off.

Sera looked nearly asleep herself but she yawned and snuggled into Cassandra’s hold—she was laying atop the woman on her stomach, face against Cassandra’s neck though she looked up at the Seeker to intone, “Everything’s okay, ‘sandra. Get some good sleep, sweet dreams—you get any nightmares, wake me up, got it?” pecking a kiss to Cassandra’s jaw before settling against her once more.

“Likewise, sweet girl,” Cassandra returned. It was kind of her to worry but Cassandra did her best to focus on every single thing that had gone right today, and thankfully, the bit of dreaming her mind indulged in that evening was full of camp firelight and the people she loved most running and playing in the Emerald Graves under the stars—all present in waking life and…well. the mind could do what it wanted, and apparently that was Cullen, the man well and chasing after the girls with…with someone she recognized but couldn’t quite place from where, a young man who wasn’t Cremisius running alongside the Tevinter boy, and just when Cassandra was overwhelmingly curious.

“Hey sticky,” a similar cadence to the word ‘sissy’ that Cassandra had been labeled with in her youth when she’d not been quite so adept at stealth and been caught on more than one occasion sneaking berry pastries that left her face and fingers sticky with the evidence, Antony always had a handkerchief on hand dedicated to cleaning her up in the blink of an eye before she could be subjected to lectures from an aunt or uncle making her feel mischievous and safe, eliciting her laughter as he teased her for the mess she’d made. The smile that made her feel that way was on her now as the young man approached her, “You um…you can hear me? See me and everything, right?” he checked, waving a hand before Cassandra’s face.

“Yes, Anthony. Of course.” It was her dream after all.

“Doing real good for yourself. They’re great, Cassie, really. Total cuties, Sera and Ellie, right? Little one calls me ‘Tio’ which is…pretty damn wild to be an uncle…wilder somehow to hear about you being a ‘mami’? ‘course I mean, I held you the second you were born, felt you take your first big breath in life and…” his gaze swept over her, a grown woman in Seeker armor, a sword at her hip. “You’re always going to be this impossibly small thing in my mind, my baby sister. Dunno, you probably don’t remember but uhh, mother’d have a hell of a time getting me to put you down when you were just a baby, I used to insist you were my baby. She was just reminding me about that last Drakonis.”

“Drakonis?” Cassandra wondered.
"Well yeah. Think about you all the time Cassie—but especially when your birthday rolls around. The fifth...you’re getting old huh?" he teased, poking her in the cheek, laughing when she swatted his hand away though- oh. It- his hand felt solid and she carefully dared to take it in her own. “I’m glad your happy—don’t settle for less, got it? Second that Rutherford fellow stops treating you right, drop him. You’re real grown up, s’crazy, Maker, you’re just- I’m real proud of you. You know that, right?"

Cassandra woke with...the strangest sense she wasn’t alone. She wasn’t, of course, she was in a tent full of people, several of them laying directly on top of her come morning, she was almost having trouble breathing what with Sera and Eleanor making something of an Elf sandwich—Cassandra and Eleanor, with Sera between them. There was an arm hanging over their sides from a body atop Eleanor’s...Cole, laying, or at least simulating it—he mustn’t be corporeal just now or she would certainly be incapable of breath under so much weight.

“’sandra?” Sera’s voice was soft with sleep, “you okay?”

“Certainly,” she assured, sniffing ugh, she- well she supposed that had been...a strange, emotional dream, her eyes were perhaps a little watery.

“Mami? Did Tio come say hi like he promised?” Eleanor’s voice wondered.

“…” oh. Oh goodness she- that had been-? To her horror her tears were fresh in her eyes as she swallowed, clearing her throat and answering, “Yes. He...he did. You...you do mean Anthony?”

“Uh-huh! Tio came to see us, he startled the crap out of papi! Cause he wasn’t expecting a guest but um...he came to say hi! Well, to see you, duh, but he was worried you might not see him, he said he’s never sure if you have or not when he’s come around in the past, and he found it easy peasy to approach us in the Fade and we did our best to help him get to you, I was worried it wouldn’t work.”

“We made a mami pile,” Sera informed her. Ahh. So, the amount of bodies she had atop her made further sense. “You’re okay, right? You’re not um...you’re not sad or anything, yeah?”

“Far from it,” Cassandra assured, mind still grappling with...she’d had true communication from- that had genuinely been Anthony’s...spirit? Anthony himself? He’d come to her before and she...hadn’t seen him? Oh, she was grateful she had now.

He was proud of her. Approved of the life she’d made.

He...he thought of her on her birthday. He and their parents.

It wasn’t until mail call that morning, when she realized the date. At this time of year, in Nevarra, there was surely heavy snowfall on the ground.

It was the anniversary of Anthony’s death.

And...ironically enough, as this was certainly one year she did not feel she would need a long good cry, the parcel that reminded her of the date, bore a great many handkerchiefs.

Tonio Aclassi was indeed the sweetest man. He had apparently learned Cassandra was suffering hay fever, and when he discovered one of Eleanor’s most precious ‘mamis’, a woman he expressed gratitude to for being in his Cremisius’s life as a source of compassion and guidance, he’d felt terribly worried for her and sent along a care package of sorts. There were new handkercheifs for dealing with congestion and fresh medicine from Adan’s for respiratory and sinus congestion—he’d apparently fretted they might not have something of the sort in the field like they did healing potions and Lyrium—and small packets of tea, a mix of cinnamon, ginger, and Elf Root...along with a mug she did not recognize from the kitchens in Skyhold so...had the man- had he purchased her a mug for fear she did not have one in the field? It was a beigey ceramic thing with water colored blossoms, roses or peonies or some such blooming flower in purples and pinks all around the outside of the mug and it was entirely unnecessary and she adored it. Almost as much as she felt wholly thrilled with-

“Cremisius,” Cassandra said as they sat around their breakfast campfire, making certain the young man was looking at her as she instructed, “you will find out what your father has spent to gift me get well presents so he can be subtly repaid.” Either through arranging for Josephine to make slight additions to his paychecks or Leliana to have her agents leave coin in his pockets until
such a time he was repaid in full. A mug…may or may not have been entirely costly, but the small leather-bound book he sent along? It did not come from Skyhold’s library, it bore no seal from there—he had to have purchased it and it was rather the new publication, something Cassandra hadn’t been aware of but was now admittedly excited to read. It was a devotional, penned by a sweet Mother the Seeker had actually met in her time working with the Divine, Charity, who had been permitted to write as it was merely something of a written down collection of the Mother’s Chantry sermons put to paper, along with excerpts from the Chant. And too, according to Cassandra’s scanning the index, anecdotes about blessings and miracles the Mother had witnessed in her life, may well mention Divine Justinia’s works, there was a portion dedicated to her memory. Oh, she would…inform Leliana she had such a book, mention it in passing to test the waters for if she would hold interest in reading such a thing.

Eleanor was also the recipient of something—a parcel, and not from the Elder Aclassi. Though it was Sera Krem handed it off to at first—it was labeled to be delivered to her, but once Sera’d caught sight of the handwriting she let out an excited,

“Widdle! Oh- Oh! Frick!” she exclaimed, turning to Eleanor, “Inky, this…this is for you. I um…oh Maker um just…just open it, kay?”

“…kay,” Eleanor said albeit wary as if uncertain at her sister’s nervous excitement. The Elf girl was alternating between pacing and bouncing in place while Eleanor worked to unwrap the brown paper from around her package from Miss Dagna. She unveiled a long, slender rectangular wooden box that had no latch to keep it closed, bearing the Inquisition’s seal emblazon on its top—uncovered when Eleanor moved to take up the slip of parchment on top of the box. Though that parchment fluttered from her grasp as the backs of her fingers made contact with the box as she made to lift the missive to read, the girl sucked in rather the harsh gasp, yelping as her hands flinched away from the box which toppled from her lap to fall face down at her feet unopened as if by sheer coincidence of physics playing out or…there was magic involved to keep the box sealed shut. What was more the concern was why she dropped the box, which was due to Solas’s voice breaking harshly past his lips, loud and fierce and startling,

“Ellie! Don’t!”

“P-papi?” Eleanor wondered wide-eyed at his tone, “What gives?”

“It- It is imbued with Sera’s magical signature, it will only open to her hand, it will-” his voice trailed off and…and it was his turn to stare wide-eyed at the girl as she…well the look came into her face like realization and hse offered a quiet ‘oh!’ as he spoke and quickly leaned over to collect the box in hand to extend it to her sister, “…hurt your magic,” he finished what he’d meant to say even as he found it to be untrue.

“Why come papi? Sissy’s magic doesn’t hurt mine. Yours doesn’t either—you know that,” Eleanor said, confused.

“Y-yes, because I’ve- I’ve only ever interacted with your magic using Rift magic,” Solas explained. Poor explanation, apparently.

“Nooo…” Eleanor shook her head, “Papi, you only use Rift magic to interact with my Mark. But you cast barrier on me all of the time, and that doesn’t hurt my magic. I mean papi! We’re bonded! And we play together in the Fade all the time! Why would you think your magic would hurt mine?”

“Be…because it is Elvehnan? While your magic, beautiful as it is, is Human. The…the Mark hurts your magic, does it not?”

Eleanor stared at him, dumbstruck. “Is…is that what you mean when you talk about ‘like’ magics? You mean magic from people of the same race?!”

“Well…well yes.”

“I thought you meant like as in Rift magic interacting with Rift magic. But you…you mean it like Elf magic only interacting pleasantly with Elf magic?” Eleanor asked, aghast. And when the man nodded? She declared, “Full offence—that’s so dumb! There isn’t any difference between our magic, Solas! You made a new branch of magic—when you took Mythal’s magic and twisted it into the Orb of Destruction to make the Veil! It’s not that it’s Elvehnan magic that makes it hurt
mine. It’s that it comes from your Orb of Destruction. Natural magic—your magic and mine, it gets along just fine,” Eleanor assured, holding up her unmarked hand, a white glow of just pure undirected magic glittering in the palm of her hand. “Come on papi. You won’t hurt me, honest!”

The man was tentative, but he held up his hand, carefully calling his own magic, flinching when their hands made contact before he relaxed and...oh. The poor man still looked startled and confused and ashamed somehow as he stared at their joint hands. “See?” Eleanor giggled. “Yeah, sometimes there’s opposites and things, but papi, magic is magic. It’s no different between Elves or Qunari or Humans—if Dwarves could access magic, I’m sure theirs would be the same too! What hurts, what makes the Mark so awful is it’s from the Orb. Magic isn’t exclusionary, it’s your Orb and the things that come from it that are. You took magic and made it into something it was never supposed to be. You made something unnatural, meant to destroy, and that’s what it does.”

Solas’s mouth worked momentarily, he looked mournful. Oh…to have taken his love’s magic and twisted it into something vile…Mythal was a deity of compassion…creation even, when one considered the implication of being an All-Mother, motherhood was something of creation—if not of life itself, then a creation of love. These were all forces that stood against destruction, and that is what he’d used her magic for. And too, to have for all this time believed there was something different between the magic Elves possessed, and that of Humanity? It was a last bit of distance, a wall he’d put up between himself and the rest of existence outside his race.

“Oh papi, don’t be sad! This is happy!” Eleanor insisted, interlocking her fingers with his, “I love hugging magics! It’s like, the best! I love you and my magic loves you too!”

Solas’s chin crinkled in a way that looked like perhaps the man was pushing past the need to cry and offered up a genuine smile, eyes alight as he murmured, “As I do you, ma’da’vehnan. I did not realize my misunderstanding I—” he cleared his throat, and moved like he were going to hug her but wasn’t certain he should…which was of course a wholly ridiculous form of reticence. The girl scooted to hug him fiercely, humming with the effort before looking up to her sister,

“So sissy? What’s in the box?”

“Oh yeah,” Sera jerked a bit, her attention back on the box in her hands, “shite—Widdle meant well, honest. She was scared it’d get stole or something, didn’t want anyone to be able to get their hands on it to examine the magic and whatnot, so, she um…” she examined the missive Eleanor had dropped, “she sealed the box so it’ll only open for me. Sorry, shite, she’s- she doesn’t know your magical signature very well, she’s mostly studied the Mark, but she’s got something with my magical signature on hand er, well, she wears it on her wrist, so she used that to sort of copy it into the enchantment on the box, keep it shut so it’ll only open if I touch it-”

“It will only open if you cast against it, my dear,” Vivienne de Fer offered the bit of information in cool, controlled tones. “It requires being touched directly by your magic. Which, apparently, you have.”

“Uhh…”

“You absolutely idiotic, foolheaded girl,” Madam de Fer seethed. Ahh. Cassandra had thought they were well past the days when she felt most certain their relationship would end in Cassandra reaching her limit with the Orlesian Enchantress and challenging her in an arena where one of them would not come out alive. Apparently that end was now. Cassandra’s hand was on the hilt of her sword as Vivienne, eyes wide, looking wholly outraged, had risen up and crossed the distance between she and Sera, hands raised-

To plant a hand firmly on each of Sera’s shoulders, before pulling the girl to her chest in…in a…hug. That...what?

“You should have come to me the moment your magic wakened! Oh my dear girl you must have been petrified!”

“I uh…wasn’t real scared, Viv, it was um. I kind of...woke it myself?”

“Oh.” Vivienne said…and then, “All the more foolish!” she reprimanded, though not of the girl’s choice, but “You should have consulted me! Who better than I could assist you in mastering and guiding your magic?” Solas…was not looking at anyone in particular but he stared off into the distance with rather the wryly bemused look upon his face. Who better indeed—though admittedly
he had been on the thinnest of ice at the time. “I’ve much to impart on thwarting demons in the Fade, I could- I am the Grand Enchanter of the Orlesian Court!” she informed her of the tip of her resume’s iceberg.

“…and you uh…kind of hate me?” Sera saw fit to remind her.

And the woman looked wholly aghast at the notion. “I do not hate you. I dislike you after a fashion due to your lack thereof. But make no mistake, you absolute horrible urchin. You…are an admittedly remarkable young lady and have proven yourself as an asset to this group and I…” Vivienne cleared her throat, pulling her arms away from Sera, lowering her hands to rest on her hips, turning her head away from the Elf girl, eyes closed even as her head was held high almost like a last bit of haughtiness she wished to uphold even as she informed this horrible urchin that she, in point of fact, “I have a fondness for you.”

“Uhh...a....fondness?” Sera questioned.

Madam de Fer loosed a weary sigh. “A love, if it must be termed that way.” And then she relaxed her stance, looking to the Elf girl, “You’re acclimating well? if you’ve any questions or find yourself in need of magical guidance, you may come to me, you understand?”

“You…wanna give me magic lessons?” Sera asked uncertainly.

“Perhaps.”

Eleanor gasped excitedly, grasping her sister’s wrist and popping up on tip toe to bring her lips to Sera’s ear, “Sissy…” the girl began whispering and Marehis smiled at whatever it was she said, which, was apparently, “Maybe I could join you n’ Ink whenever we’re in Skyhold?” Sera wondered.

“Oh very well,” Madam de Fer acquiesced. “That would suit—but you must take this seriously girls. If you cannot behave and stay focused, I will separate you. And if you are lucky, I will only do so insofar as lessons are concerned. Do not test me.”

Sera’s, “Got it!” overlapped Eleanor’s, “Si, Tia!”

“Excellent. I will make certain you are kept aware of when Eleanor and I are scheduled to meet. Do try to be tidy.”

“I’ll be on time,” Sera assured.

“I said tidy, child. But yes, do be timely as well.”

The Elf girl snorted, “Alright, you got it Viv.”

“Now, if you would, do demonstrate your magical prowess,” Vivienne invited, gesturing to the box still underfoot. Sera squeaked and crouched to lift it up, the blue haze of icy chill appearing in the palm of her hand, earning a nod of approval from the Enchantress who voiced, “very nice,” before gliding her way back to her seat at Dorian’s side. “Did you keep Sera’s secret from me?”

“…I…did,” the man slowly confessed.

“You’ve more loyalty to her?” the woman wondered, as if he very well shouldn’t.

“Well, she is my friend. And we’ve a solidarity mind, given our preferences.”

“Your preferences?”

“I only bed gloriously muscular men, and she her many fine feminine conquests.”

“And you assume gender dictates my preferences?” the woman wondered as if intrigued.

“…I…did,” the man supposed again. “Just…what is your sexual preference, if I might ask?” The woman smirked, wholly amused, “Power.”

Respectable.

The box did open under Sera’s magic, and she showed Eleanor its contents with a nervous smile, “Me n’ Widdle’s been working on this for you for a while now. Um…you like it?”

“It’s cute!” Eleanor enthused and when Sera nodded the younger girl took the box’s contents in hand revealing a glove of sorts—a nearly black green glove, fingerless save for a single hole for a thumb, made to cover a person from the palm of their hand all the way up their elbow. Her elbow—Eleanor’s. the palm of the glove bore a small, smooth runestone the exact size of Eleanor’s Mark, the sigil emblazon on that stone was embroidered in lyrium-cool silver thread, forming a line of runes from the fabric on the underside of Eleanor’s wrist all the way up to her inner elbow once she pulled it on, rolling up the sleeve of her sleep shirt to examine it,
“It don’t hurt none or anything, right?” Sera worried.

Eleanor shook her head ‘no’ as she looked at the Runestone seated over her Mark, “It feels a little…weird? But not bad weird. Or good weird? Just, like something my magic isn’t sure about but it isn’t doing anything wrong,” she decided, looking up at the older girl, “What’s it for?”

“H-hopefully you’ll see. Just…lemme know what it does today, kay? If it hurts or does something you don’t like, you take it off, alright Inky?” Sera intoned, firmly without really stating what the object was for, it seemed terribly important to the Elf girl but…well it seemed there was a measure of she had something in mind of what it would do, she just didn’t wish to get the younger girl’s hopes up in the event it didn’t do whatever it was its creator had in mind.

It was somewhat alarming for the adults when, as they armored themselves and made their way to their next Rift near the river along the road to where their Inquisition scouts had confirmed there would be Red Templar activity for them to infiltrate and see if they could find evidence against Samson for Cullen, Eleanor let out a startled gasp and practically jumped, knocking against Cassandra who was swift to bring her hands to the girl’s shoulders, bracing her as she assessed the girl for harm,

“El, you cool?” Krem asked of the girl as she stood, halting their progress forward as she stared at the runestone nestled in the palm of her hand.

“Ink?” Sera asked, apprehensively.

“It’s…warm?” Eleanor said as if questioning it, “and…vibrating.”

“Uh-huh. Inside or outside?”

“Outside, I don’t feel it in my Mark or my magic, the stone itself is just kind of pulsey.”

“Kay,” Sera said, looking about and then, “Ah! There’t’is,” she pointed to a low tree branch with one of her Red Jenny bracelets tied around it, just a few paces behind their group, “You’ve just stepped in range of the Rift—like the usual distance you start feelin’ ‘em. ‘member me ‘n you got the distance down,” Sera said, and Eleanor nodded. “So…right here, your Mark should be doin’ its thing—burning more and snapping against your magic, right?”

“Uh-huh,” Eleanor nodded.

“Well…is it?” Sera wondered, so very nervous, hands fidgeting before her as she looked close to tears she was so very afraid for what the girl might say.

“It…” Eleanor’s mouth worked for a moment and then she looked away from the glove to look forward and walk ahead of their group, further down the path, stopped, and then returned, looking wholly dumbfounded, “it doesn’t,” she said, chin quivering as she stood before them, raising her gaze to look up into the older girl’s eyes, her own brimming with tears, “my- my Mark doesn’t hurt!”

“Really?!?” Sera squeaked out excitedly.

Eleanor was beaming, smiling so very wide, what seemed to be truly happy tears spilling down her cheeks as she confirmed, “Really!”

Sera let out an enthusiastic hoot as she swept the younger girl up in a hug, spinning about as she cheered, “Hell yeah!”

“Da’vehnan?” Marehis asked, like were timid to do so, as if, should she question the seeming miracle of a thing too harshly it may cease working but,

“This glove thingy,” Eleanor termed it, “when I put it on I…well there’s a level where I’m used to my Mark burning all the time so I don’t much notice it when it’s just, you know, normal level ‘ouch’, so I didn’t realize at first I wasn’t feeling my Mark but um…I can still feel that the Mark is there, it’s just more like a pressure now against my magic than a pain. Now that we’re in range of the Rift the runestone is getting warmer—not bad warm, it’s kind of toasty! Like, a cozy warm! And it’s vibrating.”

“Y-yeah Ink, its um…it’s supposed to warm up like your Mark gets warmer—how hot it get’s is sort of relates to how powerful a Rift is gonna be—and starts sparkin’ against your magic faster and faster the closer you get to a Rift. Your Mark’s just doin’ it to the Runestone now,” Sera explained, blushing fiercely when she felt the whole of their party’s eyes on her, looking for just…just how had such a thing come to be? “Solas was all ‘like magics blah blah’, how Elf magic
distracts the Mark from Ellie’s magic ‘cause they’re compatible n’ pish. I hypothesized that if Inky had a Rune chock full of Elvehnan magic, the Mark would get distracted just like when we hold hands n’ pish, stop attacking her magic to try and get on the Elfy magic. Only catch is…well, when Inky holds my hand she’s not directly holding my magic—if she was doin’ that somehow, I’m pretty sure it’d burn the same as her Mark. But see… Um…and me n’ Solas did this experiment a while back about opposite forces in magical nature, tried clacking an Frost Rune against a Fire Rune—they sploded big time!” the girl giggled a bit, snorting before she shook herself, was more serious as she said, “we figured out how to make a transitional Rune that would allow Frost and Fire to sit nice n’ cozy next to one another. So…that got me thinking, maybe the same could be done to trick the Mark’s racism. Puttin’ a Runestone with magic that won’t interest it so much right up against Ink’s hand that can act as a buffer between her and another Runestone full of Elf magic it wants to get at. Um…the…” she chuckled nervously, a hand wrenching at the back of her neck, “Sorry, blabbing, boring shite—“

“On the contrary da’vehnan,” Solas was immediate to correct her, “this is incredibly fascinating.”

“I unfortunately must concur with the Elf,” Vivienne agreed.

“If you do not give us your conclusion Sera, I will rip all of my glorious hair from my head.” Dorian’s encouragement came threat laced. “However did you get such a thing to work?”

“So like…I tested how much proximity Inky needs for the whole ‘Elf magic distraction’ thing to work—we don’t gotta make skin to skin contact, but we still gotta be pretty close, like if we held our hands like this,” Sera exemplified by taking Eleanor’s wrist in hand to guide the girl to raise it before Sera brought her own hand to hover just the barest bit of visible distance between them, ’her Mark starts getting distracted detecting Elfness. Having it burn directly outside of her hand is still ‘ouch’ so, the rune touching Inky's hand was enchanted using Human magic that the Mark thinks is just an extension of Ellie’s, it's channeled through that while trying to latch onto the Elf magic it senses nearby, in the second Runestone I got Solas to enchant since uh...well I figure he made the Mark so it sensing his magic nearby makes it try to go back to him. There's this transitional seal between the two, like a lining in the glove between the two rune stones, that has lyrium threading to make a low resonating rune that matches the Human magic rune on the Human side, and then an Elf powered one on the Elf side so once the Mark is distracted it kind of stays on that side while you're wearing your glove. Sort of like opening a door for someone but they can't figure out how to get back out? Which means when you pour Mark power through the Runestones, both of’em will be filtering mad power through them which um...just, be careful with it Ink, okay? You feel them cracking or getting to hot, take it off—we’ll check it when we’re done with the Rift today to see how much if any damage is done to the runes, ‘cause Dagna n’ me are pretty sure they'll eventually wear out, since instead of the Mark attacking your magic, it’ll attack the Human Rune as it passes through trying to make contact with the Elf one. We did a test run by having that lil Noam fellow cast using a test glove made of Frost and Fire runestones set up the same way—having him push frost magic to filter through the fire rune, into the frost rune, and Maker bless him he kept it up as best he could for an hour just casting and recharging and casting again, had Dori come down to the Forge and he worked on it for frick, dunno—”

“Three entire hours,” the Tevinter complained. “Without so much as an explanation, just ‘oi Dori, come cast n’ some pish for me, yeah?’”

“It was for Inky!” Sera defended.

“And if I had known that…I would have still complained but at least had the knowledge of just how very whiny it all is in the scheme of things. I much prefer being ashamed of myself in the moment, darling, you know this. I don’t do second-hand anything—clothing or emotions.”

Sera snorted, shaking her head, “Yeah yeah—anyway, Dori casted on it real hard for three entire hours and the Fire Rune started cracking. We had him stop and uh…I tested it after that, castin’ real gentle to watch how much more the Fire Rune could withstand…which, we now know is dangerous. I’ll be keeping track of how sealing Rifts accelerates damage done to the Runestones and get it down to an exact measure like—if you can seal seven Shade-level Rifts as opposed to
three Pride level Rifts before you gotta replace your stones, shite like that, so if you ever end up in
a bad area where there’s a lot of ‘em you’ll be able to judge when you need to take that friggin
thing off until you can get to replacement stones ‘cause it will blow up direct in your hand and it’s
a real bitch we’re definitely trying to avoid—“

“Sera!” Eleanor cried out alarmed, overlapping Marehis’s shocked,
“Da’vehnan!” the Elf woman was only a second behind Cassandra who had already reached
out to take Sera’s own gloved wrist in hand—the girl still wore the casting gloves Krem had
fashioned for her, and the Seeker had wondered to why she had taken to wearing them in the wrong
order—the left glove on her right hand, right on her left, which was doable so long as she wore
them backward—so the space the Lieutenant had left open on the heel of her hand to make contact
with Eleanor’s Mark was on the back side of her hand instead of exposing the flesh of her palm as
intended. Cassandra peeled back the material covering Sera’s right palm to reveal milky white,
shimmering scarred flesh on the heel of her hand where raw lyrium had poured out of a broken
runestone onto her skin.

“Sera, that was so dangerous,” Cassandra found her voice to rasp reprimand.
“Well duh! That’s why I had to test it for myself—wasn’t just gonna let Inky figure that out
all on her own! We was worried it’d do something like that so we had to test how much magic
could get poured through one of those bad boys before they popped, I’d rather that happenin’
on my hand in Skyhold with Widdle and Elan on stand by.”

“Sera Elizabeth Seraton,” Dorian…for all he’d just made up the entirety of Sera’s middle and
last names…scathed, “you should have explained to me what you were trying to do! I would have
done it, like all endeavors with my hands—to completion! I did not leave you to your work so you
could maim yourself, child!”

“Certainly,” Madam de Fer rasped, “Sera…I do wish you had come to me before, but
certainly once you were magically injured—Elan is knowledgeable but—“ the Enchanter swallowed,
drawing nearer to press her lips against Sera’s ear for a second time that day, whispering in tones of
fierce intonation, Sera grimacing before nodding, and whatever she’d confirmed sent the Human
woman clenching her eyes shut in what looked like a moment of sympathetic devastation and she-
well. She pressed a kiss to the side of Sera’s head before whispering one thing more, patting the
girl on the shoulder before she pulled away and Cassandra was uncertain just what had transpired
but Marehis had obviously heard, Solas as well—the man looked equal parts astounded and
grateful and Marehis mouthed a silent ‘thank you’ to her friend.

“Sissy,” Eleanor squeaked out, taking Sera’s hand, “I’m so sorry you got hurt, it…it
had to be so scary, does it hurt still?”

“Nothing to worry about Ink,” which was not a definitive ‘no’, “‘sides…we’re kind of
twinsies now,” the girl offered like that was some comfort, holding up her hand. Cassandra
supposed the burns on their hands mirrored each other. “That’s kinda cool, innit?”

Eleanor sniffled, pressing a sweet kiss to the scar on Sera’s palm, “Thank you, Ser’.”
“’course, El’. M’ the big sister—s’my job to look out for you,” Sera nodded, pulling the
younger girl in for a fierce hug. “We’ll keep an eye on your Runestones and replace ‘em as needed.
Dagna made a few last minute changes to it—we started out with just a glove that’d cover your
palm but um…just in case your Mark got spready again,” Sera reached out to rap her knuckles
against the bark of the tree they were gathered under, “we wanted it to be a bit more sleeved and
the magic there is all done with lyrium thread which…we got by wingin’ the test glove’s rune
sewing but cripes is Krem’s papa a ruddy genius with a needle and thread. Dagna filled him in on
what we were doing and asked if he’d do his thing to the final design of the glove itself, he drew up
the final draft, put the final product together. He found this fabric that’s like amazingly thin so it’s
not too thick once layered, and still super breathable n’ pish—it’s a similar set up to the hand part,
there’s inside runes direct against your skin, a transitional layer, and then the Elfy magic is in the
thread on the outside. This’ll hopefully help keep it from um, hurting so bad—and in theory it’ll
pull and guide the burn down to the Runestone. At least the painful part, not the physical spread.”

“Sera, you- you and Dagna and papa are geniuses!” Eleanor enthused, “gosh it’s just- it’s
beautiful and my Mark doesn’t hurt badly at all! And I think it’s cute you picked Spirit runes, ‘cause Spirit’s my favorite!”

Sera giggled, smiling like she found that precious but, “Well yeah Ink, and being all Spirit Runey help boost barriers you cast and barriers cast on you—at least we’re pretty sure it will.”

“Really?!” Eleanor asked excitedly, “Sera! That’s the best! You’re the best! You’re getting so much hugs today! And Sera’s boss of dinner tonight! No cooking for her, but she’s in charge of picking! And I’m kissing her, and Dagna, and Papa’classi—so Cremisius you better get cool with that.”

“Already there babe, they definitely deserve it,” the Lieutenant assured, “Seriously Sera. You’re incredible, you know that?”

Sera groaned at the compliment, blushing fiercely, but, “…thanks Kremmy-boy.”

“You did damn good Imekari,” the Iron Bull commended Sera, clapping her on the shoulder. “Baking you a damn cake. Or cookies—whatever the fuck, you’re getting dessert.”

Sera deserved…oh Sera deserved everything in life, Cassandra felt that with most certainty even before she’d done such a thing for Eleanor but-

She could prank Skyhold to her heart’s content for all Cassandra felt now. She’d never truly do substantial, unjust harm to anyone and if there were any who had a problem with it, they would be free to bring their complaints directly to Cassandra who was more than willing to duel them over it, Nevarran style—which meant naked, at dawn, with axes.

Sera clutched Eleanor’s hand tightly as they made their way through the wilderness to the Rift, the girl softly reporting her glove’s progress to her—keeping Sera up to date with how it warmed and vibrated, though their movement within their cloth confines was mutedly audible to Cassandra as they neared the Rift—there was a rattling sound from the stones knocking each other through the fabric as the Rift overhead began producing demons for them to fight.

And Eleanor’s barrier felt ever stronger as it coasted over Cassandra. Oh, Maker bless her girls, endlessly, endlessly, amen.

Cassandra was almost drunk with relief as the Rift crackled closed, Eleanor snapping it shut and taking a moment to catch her breath, fanning herself a bit before she licked parched lips to announce,

“It freaking worked!”

“Wait shit, seriously?!” Sera checked as if uncertain, “Ink, you’re…you’re not lyin’ right? Solas?”

“The Inquisitor speaks truth, da’vehnan—while it’s still requires physical exertion to seal Rifts, the same can be said of any spell, Rift Sealing is merely an extreme, that is why her heart made that sound—she’s well, unharmed, and the magical experience was wholly painless as you intended.”

Sera stared at the man, wholly silent, as if she were still trying to comprehend what he’d said.

And then she began giggling.

“Frick yes, Inky!” she declared, arms overhead as she cheered, “I’m a genius!”
Inky herself about different things—pain levels, where exactly the pain was, or did it resound across her magic, and if so, how far? But Ellie got all blushy and dumb brave-pride or whatever had her insisting it wasn’t anything for Dagna to worry about, she could ‘deal’, she as ‘fine’! She hadn’t wanted to make the Arcanist feel badly for her…and Dagna hadn’t wanted to outright say ‘Oi! I’m only asking because I need straightforward answers because I’m trying to fix this for you!’ because, what if it didn’t work? Widdle hadn’t wanted to get her hopes up. But once she realized Sera was on to it too, wanting to help find a solution, boom! Inky was easier to get answers out of, ’cause Sera already knew how shite it all was, and um…well Krem kept Ink’s confidence good, but he knew Sera’d never use anything he ever said about Ellie for his girlfriend’s harm, he could trust her, so together they managed to get enough data for figuring out how to make this shit work. When Krem asked, Ellie was always open and honest about pain levels, and when Sera didn’t focus her questions so much on how much the Mark hurt but how far it could hurt in relation to a Rift, she got forthrightness! They were able to cobble together all the variables Dagna needed to take into consideration and Lace kept their correspondence on the matter tip top private once Sera and Lace had to leave Skyhold with the Heralds party to head for Orlais, and they’d spent their first week there handlin’ those ruddy Freemen and scouting Rifts, Lace had been a friggin’ lifesaver—Sera’d been measuring distances from Rifts to places Inky’d be out of range, so her Mark wouldn’t be so ‘ouch’ all the time when they wasn’t Rift hunting. It was Lacey who was marking trees at the outer limits where Ink’s Mark would start to react to nearby Rifts. However the hell Sera ended up with two, perfect, freckly, brilliant girlfriends, she wasn’t sure but she sure as hell wasn’t questioning it.

Really…really wasn’t questioning it. Shite, Lace was so pretty. And sleepy—poor babe, she looked exhausted when their party met up with her n’ her scouts near where Red Templars had set up camp—stopped along the road to rest and pish before carting Red Lyrium from wherever to wherever.

“Inquisitor,” Lace greeted softly, smiling to Ink as they approached, “I’m glad you could make it.”

“Uh-huh, hold please,” Ellie stopped her, and uh…well, just walked right up to Lace and hugged her real tight, awe. Teetness was blushy as she hugged Inky back, and the Human girl pulled way to press an appreciative kiss to the Dwarf woman’s forehead before…huh. Ink had grabbed what Lace left marking the tree for them—that said they were in range of a Rift…oh! “I was wondering where your Red Jenny bracelet went—thanks for helping Sera and Dagna,” Ellie thanked her quietly, taking the Dwarf woman’s hand and sliding the woven bracelet back on, tightening it securely once it was in place.

“Of course,” Lace nodded, awe, sweet thing! She was permanently red, “Gosh, I’m just glad um…its working, I hope?” she wondered, looking to the friggin sweet-ass finished product! Krem’s! Papa! Was! The! Best!

“It’s working great!” Inky assured. Cripes! Another hug—on Sera, not from Inky. Sera’d been getting random hugs from all over—Mare and ‘sandra, the mom squad had squeezed her breathless when Ink sealed the Rift no problem and no magic ouches to speak of, the women peppering her with kisses and praise like friggin’! Weirdos! And then Madam de Fer, she hadn’t gotten all scary huggy again, but she’d rested a hand on Sera’s shoulder and commended her ‘work’. And Dori’d kissed her on the cheek. And Bull’d did that thing where he palms your whole ass head in his hand and its warm and comforting and you feel stupid safe for all the action implies he could crush your head in a single hand. Mm, it was Kremmy-boy now, Sera realized. The Tevinter man had come up behind her and wrapped his arms around her shoulders, his face buried against her neck as he mumbled,

“You’re the best.” Shite! Ugh. Krem was…she’d felt weirdy when he said she was his best friend. Mostly ‘cause she didn’t trust blokes much. Most of the time they was raised to go after one thing, and that was definitely not a thing she ever wanted to give ‘em. Dori and her were friends, but like, he definitely didn’t want anything like that from her, and there was always this kind of distance? They could hug and shite, and she trusted him to help her if she needed it but there was
still just some level of departure in it, neither of their worlds would end if they woke up to a day that lacked each other’s presence even in passing thought—it was nice when they was together, they always picked right back up, but there wasn’t any real ‘ouch’ to being apart. But she thought about Inky every day, hated being separated from her—that was a big nope now, she was never going on mission without Inky ever ever again! And…well she could deal with being away from Kremmy-boy but she…missed him when they were. And she thought about him, like seeing something and instantly thinking ‘Krem’d be friggin excited to draw that!’ or eatin’ something and thinking it might be something he’d enjoy ‘cause he likes spicy food, or trying to remember how something went down ‘cause it was funny and he’d laugh when she told him about it. He always made her feel safe. Kind of how Cullen did, shite that bloke was lovey, she hadn’t even…it hadn’t crossed her mind that Inky loving her might make the adults in her life look at that and say ‘ahh, they’re sisters? I guess I’ve got a second child now’. There was something in her that said when people were lovey at her, it had to somehow be a lie or a mistake. They didn’t know what they was talking about. But Cullen…well he wrote Sera just about every day when she headed for the Emerald Graves, making sure she was okay and just…shite, he’d read reports, and write her to say how proud he was! Like, gross! That made her feel proud of herself and that was just! She didn’t know what to do with that! She was used to trying so hard for the barest bit of recognition with Lady, build herself up and think ‘okay, this is it, this is the day I finally managed to do everything the way Lady wants it done and she’ll have to at least say something’ and…nothing. Usually just when she thought she got it right, she got the cane and Lady screaming at her over some dumb thing she’d managed to peg as Sera’s fault. Now she wasn’t even trying, she was just…being alive? Seeing shite that she could do and doing it to help Inky. And she got hugs and kisses and ‘I’m so proud of you’s. Ugh!

It all made her feel very squirmy! And she hated it! And she loved it and never wanted it to stop! Krem was her best friend too! And Cullen was- was freaking the first person she could think of she’d ever want to consider a ‘da’. Maybe…maybe Solas too. ‘cept he hurt Mare. And Inky. So she was pretty sure she’d die mad at him, even though she loved him, and that was dumb. Could you be mad at someone and love them? Inky seemed to do it, sort of, but she wasn’t good at holding on to anger, once she got a reason to drop it, she did, boom, just like that, whatever anger she’d been carrying around thunted to the floor abandoned. She’d been just festering with resentment over Kirkwall, how everyone turned so hard on Apostates, Ava’s murder, and when she found the person responsible…there’d been blame, then balm, the minute she learned to accept it, she did and thunk moved on. And Solas had done a lot of hurting, she definitely…there was a level Sera was pretty sure she’d never fully trust him with everything ever again, but she could trust him to, ironically enough, always do right by Inky.

Ugh! Boys was dumb and confusing! She was pretty sure that was why she liked girls so much—at least when they did evil they was pretty and smelled nice while doing it!

Mmm, Lacey smelled nice when they was all done fightin’ for the day, little bit disappointing but kind of promising? The first of the correspondence they was able to intercept from the Red Lyrium traders was a letter that told them they wasn’t getting it from the Deep Roads. They returned to camp and Inky was orchestrating everyone in camp coming together to get dinner ready while sending Sera and Lace off to nap or ‘whatever’. Lace was…kind of sweaty? But like, in a good way, where she just smelled like her, and forest and earth, barest bit of flowery pish that was in her shampoo and the deodorant stuff she put under her arms and ‘round her bits—kept ‘em from chaffing, under her tits or between her thighs. She’d been pinky from head to toe when Sera’d caught her dressing for the day back in Skyhold, rubbing translucent, flowery balm on places other than where she’d only seen Viv put under her arms while drily suggesting Sera do them all a favor and do the same.

“You okay, Teetness?” Sera checked, cripes the Dwarf woman was really sleepy, laying against Sera, head against her chest as she…well, her breathing had been evening out, like she was falling asleep and then she’d jerk, like she was trying to stay awake.

Was tickly—Lacey’s hair against Sera’s neck as she nodded. “Just thinking.”
“In general? Or is it somethin’ you um…wanna talk about?” Sera asked, little nervous. Only a little. Thinking sometimes meant the other shoe was droppin’ and it was time to realize Sera was…well, Sera, so why the hell was someone as amazin’ as Lace wastin’ her time with someone like her?

Lacey’s legs shifted, separated as the Dwarf woman sat back and up, straddlin’ Sera’s tummy as she pushed up, hands on her shoulders lookin’…shite, lookin’ real nervous. Oh crap. Oh crap crap crap.

“I want you and Dagna to meet my parents.”

The frig?

“Um…wh- um…huh?” Sera…what was happening? Her brain felt like…the way it did when Solas use to try blabin’ at her in Elfy. Throwin’ foreign words at her that her brain wanted to translate but couldn’t quite…but almost? What?! She understood the words, she thought, on an individual level but not…not all strung together like that. The fuck did that even mean?!

“My parents have been freaking out since Haven, you know? They’re safe where they are and I won’t let them come around Skyhold to see me just…just in case. But they really want to see me, so…” she took a deep breath, and sighed, “So I’m taking some time off next time we’re back in Ferelden, just like, a day or so to detour and see my parents and- and I want you to come with me. Dagna too. They’re um…they really wanna meet you guys and I dunno, I-“ cripes, she was blushing real hard, gaze down like she was embarrassed to look Sera in the eye, “I really want them to meet you too.”

“Well uh…” shite. Okay. So…Lace wasn’t breaking up with her, she didn’t think? “I- erm, I can’t ruddy speak for Widdle but um…” shite! What did this even mean?! She loved Lace and her parents sounded sweet, and there was a level she kind of wanted to thank them for friggin’ making Lace. So. “I…yeah.”

“Yes?” Lace asked, smiling with timid relief as she met Sera’s eye, “Really?”

“S-sure Lacey. Yeah. I’d…I’m cool with meeting yer er…parents.”

Yup! Super cool with it! Lace leaned forward, thighs a little squeezy around Sera’s ribcage as she pressed a real nice kiss to Sera’s lips, “Oh my gosh you’re the best! You’re the best!”

Oh frig, Lace was the best, friggin’…Sera was warm and tingly, fingers itchin to get someplace on Lace to return the favor when the Dwarf woman sort of grinded against her a bit, like she was just getting’ comfy where she was sittin and kissin’ Sera real deep, the way left the Elf girl breathless and dazed before her lips was travelin’ down her neck, Sera’s heart thumping in her chest as the woman started sliding—pushing herself back, this real slow rock of her hips as she drew them backward along Sera, clever little fingers undoing the buttons of her sleep top to expose more skin to press warm lips to until her hips were over Sera’s, rockin’ her hips in this way that caught the seam of her sleep bottoms, her underthings right up against her in the best way, like scratchin’ a satisfying itch. It was dumb, felt almost embarrassin’ how- how the woman’s rapt attention, a hand on one breast, lips on the other, clothing seams rubbing her, getting her excited like she was a ruddy teeny-bopper all over again and this was the first time she ever figured out she had somethin’ goin’ on down there, bundle of nerves it felt good to rub on.

Also liked getting er, other things. Lace…might’ve had herself a right snack before dinner, Sera screechin’ as quietly as she could because she only just remembered they was in camp! In a cot she’d curl up next to ‘sandra and Mare and Inky in! With ruddy a whole ass Qunari cooking dinner just outside who could definitely hear everything they was up to and- and-

If Solas and Mare heard um…anything…she…she was kind of cool if the crippling embarrassment decided to kill her.

But uh…huh.

They fell asleep for a bit, Lace finally drifting off now that she’d gotten her question off of her chest, didn’t wake until…well Sera wasn’t’ real sure what time it was, but she could smell dinner real strong now, like everything had cooked together real good and it was getting about that
time to start doling out portions but there wasn’t a whole bunch of people around to serve.

“…hey Thom, where’s uh…everyone?” Sera asked as she and Lace made their way from the tent—somethin’ smelled right good and her stomach was defiantly saying it was time for dinner. 'cept everyone was out. Like. Everyone. Just Thom sat around the fire, stoking it to keep it burnin’ under the pot the Iron Bull had been laboring over before Sera and Lace laid down, there was a pan under the pot now, the pot was sittin’ on top of it on the grate over the fire and it smelled like something was baking.

“Uhh…” Thom looked between Lace and Sera before he shrugged, “They’ll be back in soon.”

“From where?” Sera asked.

“Quick errand—they touched base, everyone’s safe. Here,” Thom said, offering up a bowl that had been at his feet, had a little bit of left-over cookie dough in it, “Ellie-girl says you and Miss Lace are to have first crack at licking the bowl.”

Freaking- they went off without her! “I don’t want cookie-dough! I wanna know what the frick is up!”

“Don’t sweat it Ser’,” Lace said. Lace! She’s supposed to be on Sera’s side! She was already dippin’ a finger into the bowl she’d accepted from Thom, “Mmm, seriously—you’ve gotta try this.”

There was the sound of footfalls on the path south of camp, and Sera could hear the lilt of Inky and Dori talkin’ with each other, Kremmy-boy laughing. What the fuck!

“Oh!” Inky chirped when she and her party made their way to camp, “Sera! You’re awake,” she smiled.

“Sorry Inquisitor,” Lace said, “I did my best to keep her distracted.”

Dis…distracted?

“Did you ask um…” Inky seemed real excited, smiley as she came right up to Lacey and took her hand, bouncing a bit.

“Yay! Oh my gosh oh my gosh oh my gosh! You’re going to have so much fun!” Ellie enthused, “Just send the time off request right to me and I’ll sign off on it, okay chica?”

“Thanks honey,” Lace said, poppin’ up on her toes a bit to kiss Inky on the cheek. She… awe. Sera felt a little—well she was confused as shit at what was goin’ on!—but she felt a little bad Lace had been so nervous to ask her about coming to see her parents she’d had to confide in Inky over it, like she was scared Sera’d react bad or something. But she was also…dunno, it made her feel comfy warm all over that her Lacey loved and trusted Inky so much she felt comfortable going to her and um, that Inky’d had faith in Sera when Lace was nervous the Elf girl might not like being asked something like that.

It was kind of…Sera wasn’t sure how to feel about it. sometimes people made a big deal about introducing their girlfriends or whatever to their parents, ‘cause they only did that if they was feelin’ serious about their relationship, like it was something they were going to be keeping for permanent so their parents might well get use to them comin’ around. That kind of scared her, a little in that…well she’d never had a relationship that felt for permanent. Only relationship of any kind she’d ever had was with Lady, and she’d prayed for that to end like crazy. Everything else since then? Sera’d had girlfriends, but it was always something that lasted maybe a week or was just a ‘when we see each other we know we’re down to have a drink and bang’. Everything after Lady was temporary because…anything more than that terrified Sera shiteless. Just- she’d thought she’d die in Lady’s house, that her whole entire life for forever was going to be dictated by her, for permanent. The Friends of Red Jenny appealed because…it was a mix of havin’ a name slapped on you without any permanence to the connections you made—she only interacted with people in spurts, or never at all, just having vague impressions of people she’d never meet, helping her piss off some noble prick who deserved it, no strings attached. Actual friendships hadn’t been…the Inquisition, Inky was the first person she ever felt like she was actually her friend. She hadn’t really understood what the word meant until her. And then Friend became Sister and that…people was
sisters forever. For permanent. Just like people became moms and dads for permanent.

And when she thought about Dagna and Lace…for permanent didn’t scare her anymore.

There was arms around Sera’s middle then, a hat brim bending against her ribcage as Cole kind of tackle-hugged her, humming contentedly. “It doesn’t and it’s wonderful,” he breathed, “I’m sorry you were worried—you don’t have to be. We were all safe, no one is hurt. I had an idea and it was helpful! I helped!” he announced, real happy about it.

“You’re always helpful, Cuddly, that’s kind of your whole thing,” Sera said, hugging the Spirit back, rubbing circles between his shoulder blades. He’d been…a little scary with his help yesterday but hey, Sera wasn’t about to complain. Friggin’ dirtbags deserved it, she only wished she could’ve helped.

“I’m sorry I scared you,” Cole said softly, and then he pulled back, looking eager to please as he announced, “Lace’s scouts found more Red Lyrium movement and I thought I could go! I could sneak® and get the things Cullen needs, the words on paper that prove Samson’s plot. The others agreed I could try, but not without them waiting nearby as back up in case I got into trouble. They wanted me to be safe! I scared them yesterday and they still want me to be safe.” Cripes! He was a little teary over it!

“Oh, buddy, c’mon,” Krem said, coming to join them, clapping a hand to Cole’s shoulder, “who among us hasn’t dropped into camp covered in the blood of our enemies? Why do you think El makes everyone take so many baths?”

“Bathing is nice even when there isn’t blood,” Cole said. “My body likes being clean.”

“We’ll wash up real nice after dinner then,” Kremmy-boy promised, massaging his shoulder a bit, “clean, comfortable pajamas, weather’s supposed to be nice tonight—might be good for a little more stargazing.”

“Mmm,” the Spirit hummed—Sera was excited at the idea and her magic…cripes! Inky and their magics was real excited in the bond, and the little bit of the bond she could feel Solas in was warm too, so, Spirit had a bit of joint excitement vibing around him, making him smile as he nodded. Magic was friggin’ wild, the bond was even wilder.

Huh. She kind of wondered…the bond with Inky was the strongest one she had—magically. Probably non-magically too but that wasn’t the point! Sera felt…she wasn’t sure. Was she shite at bondness? She couldn’t really…she tried, like, all the time to get a read on Ink, but she only really felt things from Ellie when there was big things emanating from her in the bond, stuff so strong that anyone who had a bond with her could feel it, probably, without even wanting to. She wasn’t sure she was doing it right—Solas could check on Inky anytime! Well, within like, a certain distance or whatever the frig. And distance…shite, Sera hadn’t slept her first night on the road after-

She might have had a panic attack. Her and Lace had gotten ahead of Thom and his guys, scouting ahead when Sera and Ink stepped too far away from each other for the bond. When Inky was out of range, her magic sort of panicked and made her panic too because frick! They couldn’t really check on the Human girl to begin with, but they could, at the very least, feel that she was there! When she slipped off…shite. Sera’s magic got the impression it meant the girl was dead or something which didn’t make any ruddy sense and oh Maker, shite shite shite, they wasn’t going into dangerous territory so that meant either they walked right into some Orlesian pricks traps or…or Inky…

She’d seemed fine. Not happy to see Sera go but happy in general. But people…didn’t always seem their worst when they was at it. and maybe they left her alone again. Or maybe it was bad enough she didn’t care who was around as long as-

Anyway, Sera’d panicked big time and Lace hadn’t known what was going on, it was kind of hazy just one minute she was close to blacking out and the next Lace was holdin’ her real tight and breathin’ the way Sera was supposed to when she was panicking real bad, her chest movin’ against Sera’s sort of got her in the right rhythm, the Dwarf woman’s hand in her hair as she held onto her and whispered assurance, groundy things, “Your name is Sera Jones, you are in Orlais with me, your girlfriend, Lace Harding. You’re sitting on the ground, it’s uh…dirt. Kind of muddy, kind of not? It’s soft whatever it is, it’s giving under your knees a little, right? You feel that honey? And
it’s drizzling out a little, the rain is cool and the air is warm. The wind is blowing. We’re safe. I love you. Your name is Sera Jones…” and repeat.

And they’d made camp there—started with just, getting out of the rain and then Sera’d been so zonked, shite. She hadn’t slept but she was just exhausted, tired and quiet. Wasn’t until morning she realized- shite! She hadn’t said a damn word! Not a single one since before her freak out and Lace had to be just-! Confused! And scared! And tired of Sera’s shite! She was gone!

And…and then she wasn’t. “Hey honey-locks,” Lace’s voice was at her back, hand on her shoulder rubbing circles, comfort that also worked to get her attention if she could give it, “I made some breakfast if you’re hungry. Brought it with me, some fresh water too—the rain’s all stopped if you want some fresh air. Do whatever you feel like, if there’s anything I can do I’m right here,” she said, dropping a kiss to Sera’s temple. “Um…mail came, Inquisition birds found us in all this mess,” she giggled, “Thom and his men are okay—caught up with us last night and I said you weren’t feeling well so we’re holding our position. They secured the area for us before I sent them on ahead, we’ll catch up with them once you’re feeling better, okay? No rush. I’ve got some reports I’ll be looking over unless you need anything—Ellie-bug sent you something, I’ll leave it right here,” she said arm coming around to place the little folded up bit of parchment, sealed on itself, just beside Sera’s face, “unless um…if you’re tired and you’re comfortable with it, I can read it to you if you want?”

Sera sat up, taken Lace’s hand and just held it for a bit, shifting to sit in her lap, pretty Dwarf smiling up into her face, “Mmm, there’s my pretty girl,” she said, hand resting on Sera’s cheek, “There’s my Sera. Hi,” she’d pressed a sweet little kiss to the tip of Sera’s nose.

“I’m sor-“

Sweeter kiss to her lips. “Missed your voice,” she sighed, real happy-like, “Don’t be sorry—there’s nothing to be sorry for,” Lace insisted. “Sweetheart…you were sick. I’m not going to be mad at you for getting sick—mentally, physically, or any other ‘ly’ out there. Gosh um. Did I…did I do it right? I tried to do everything Elan and the- the books said, the only thing I didn’t do is give you potion but you- you’ve got a bunch in your bag, different ones, I think some of them are for Ellie? You nodded when I showed you one of them, um, the purply-blue potion in the square bottle? But you wouldn’t take it and I- I’m not sure if I’m supposed to…if that’s like, part of it? You not wanting to take it in the moment but you need someone to make sure you do? Or if it’s sometimes you need it, sometimes it’s best to let it ride out on its own sort of thing. We…should probably go over that sometime.”

Yeah, shite she- she’d never really sat Lace or Dagna down and said ‘hey, I’m seeing a crazy person Healer and she gave me potion to chill me the fuck out’ but…she wasn’t sure, she felt weird giving her girlfriends a list of instructions on what to do if she had a panic attack, felt like bossin’ them or putting an inconvenience on the-

Lace…had known what to do.

Lacey had…she’d…

*I tried to do everything Elan and the books said.*

“Elan talked to you about me?”

Hadn’t asked cuz she was mad or something. But Lace gasped and launched into a panicky, “Oh god! Not about you, she- I’m not sure if you’re seeing her or Adan or anyone really—I didn’t ask if you were her patient but the first words out of her mouth were ‘I can’t confirm or deny who my patients are’ so if- if you are seeing her she’s mum-quiet about it. Gosh no I- I went and um…consulted with her, for her medical opinion on how to best um, be able to help if I’m with a partner who has anxiety. Dagna and me, we- oh gosh- oh crap!” Lace was right worried, frick, quick to scramble for, “ I mean- it was all my idea I swear, I’m so sorry, please don’t be mad at her! It wasn’t intentionally going behind your back, it’s just…we- we know, you know? Sort of like…I’m sure if Krem hung around Ellie enough he’d put a thing or two together and figure out she’s got asthma. We…um. It wasn’t mean, we weren’t gossiping or talking badly about you, just, I noticed things and I- I read everything I could find about it in Skyhold’s library but there’s not like, a whole lot of mental health books? And the few that there are had all this information in it and I
wasn’t sure what really works or what applies, or-gosh I dunno, some of it went over my head when I read it but that’s just, you know, sometimes I do better hearing things. I was going to Elan to parcel though everything I read and see if she could point me in the right direction on how to help you—m- my partner,” she clarified she’d not used like, Sera’s name or whatever, “—if you needed it, what to do if you had a really bad panic attack or something, and I told Dagna I was going to because…well if- if she’d noticed those things too and was worried and didn’t know what to do like I was um, I just wanted to make sure she knew she could come with me. Oh crap, I’m- Sera I’m so sorry if—"

Sera returned the favor, cuttin’ her off with a kiss, more salty than sweet cuz piss, she was bein’ a cry baby! But Lace, shite, “You didn’t do nothin’ wrong,” Sera assured, Dwarf woman relaxing against her, relieved. Shite, Sera was the one with anxiety? Crap, poor Lace’d gotten all worked up. “I wasn’t accusin’ you of nothing I just- Lace! You…you went to someone for me! And you read up on shite and you- I dunno. Just… I didn’t think…I wasn’t sure what you’n’Dagna would do if you knew and I um…well I wasn’t expectin’ you’d want to get all learned up on it like that for me.”

“Well why…why wouldn’t we?” Lace asked, confused. “it’s not any different than you writing neater and bigger for me, or building Dagna models of her plans, things she can interact with on a physical level while she figures them out in that brilliant brain of hers.” Well yeah, Dagna was…she called it bein’ a ‘tactile learner’, she couldn’t do the whole ‘processing information’ thing without somethin’ physical, either moving around herself or having something she could put her hands on and figure out how it’s supposed to work and Lace has friggin’ dyslexia or whatever the frig Inky called i-

And…Sera’d seen Dagna be grabby with Ink’s Mark, she couldn’t really figure out what little was possible of figuring out without seeing it up close and touching it. Bull’d said something about his Ben-Hessrath people workin’ with people who was kinesthetic learners, putting them in fields that suited movement and hands on experience. Dagna’s field involved a lot of readin’ which usually meant sitting but Sera’d talked it over with Josie sweets and the woman agreed Sera could um…if she could figure out how to and do it without leaving the books damaged, she could unsew a few pages from their binding—sort of surgically remove littler chunks of big tomes that Dagna needed to read with the intent to sew them back in once she was done, so the Dwarf woman could pace and read without risking droppin’ a huge ass book on herself or tireing out her arms. And Sera was good at buildin’, little things, mechanical things that made her magic sing—Dagna’d do her best to describe her ideas and Sera’d come up with physical representations of those ideas, either in something purely symbolic or something in prototype form like with Ink’s runestone bracer. And Sera’d seen Lace…not like, crazy struggle, but it always took her a minute to parcel out shite she read—she double checked everything she read, reading and re-reading before moving on whatever it said. Sera’d asked her about it once and she’d blushed and admitted sometimes…she said she was ‘kind of dumb’, and that wasn’t freaking okay! Lace said that sometimes her brain would just put words together weird and she’d mix them up with other words, and letters could get wonky when she looked at them—which was crazy, Lace called it, ‘cuz words was however they got written down, right? Sera’d thought it was something Ink might have heard about before and she threw out dyslexia which…Sera read up on. Started sending Lace letters in bigger, block-i-er writing instead of curvy writing, did her best to write real neat instead of just, shite! Sloppin’ words on the page and sending them headlong to the poor woman, crap! Her earlier letters had to be garbage to try and read!

Oh. Oh she got it then. She’d just been- she liked them! Loved them, Dagna and Lace and if…if they was having a problem, she wanted to help them. So…they um. Felt the same way.

“You okay, Ser’? Y-you’re kind of spacing…crap um, hey—everything’s okay, your name is-“

“Sera Jones and I’m safe, in a tent, with one of the two most amazing girlfriends in the entire freaking world.” Sera calmly interrupted her, pressin’ a kiss to her forehead. “You said there was breakfast? Mail from Inky?”
“Uh-huh,” Lace said, “here,” she picked up one of the bowls she’d left sittin’ by Sera’s knees, and handed it to her, “gosh you haven’t eaten since yesterday morning—so eat up, okay? If you need seconds, just say the word. I um…you want me to read you your mail? Your poor baby blues look pretty um—pretty,” she insisted, “but pretty tired, kind of achey.”

Yeah they was, she’d sort of…had she blinked at all last night? Dry and achey as shite, she was tired, sort of felt like she’d fall asleep as soon as her tummy was full and she knew Ink was okay—mail from her direct sounded like ‘okay’ but she’d want to hear it to make sure, “You’d um, be up for that?”

“Of course!” Lacey insisted, taking the letter up and slipping her thumb under the seal before resting against Sera a bit more comfortably as Sera set her bowl down—oatmeal, she carefully spooned into her mouth without droppin’ any on the girlfriend who cleared her throat and carefully said, “Hi!” giggled a bit, smiling probably because she knew Ink’d be super cheery saying hi to Sera, shite it was just cute! “I…miss you so much!...I love you!...I love your…face? Yeah—she said she loves your face! And um…I love your whole…exis…existence! Please be safe! Awe,” Lace pouted a bit like she saw something sweet, “And have lots of fun with Lace!...And write me about- oh. And write me all about everything—gosh I miss you! uh…” she squinted at the page some more, “that’s it, she didn’t sign off or anything, but the inside and back side is written in her hand—from Ellie to sissy—so,” she shrugged, yeah, it was definitely a letter from Ink, could’ve sent it without any outright indicators it was pretty obvious all on its own.

Wait. Frick…where had that all started? Oh! Sera was shite at the bond! And it sucked big time when Ink stepped out of range! That…had to be pretty hard on Solas—he knew she was safe on an intellectual level but his magic experienced something that felt like he was going off somewhere Ellie and Sera and Marehis didn’t exist, and he…probably didn’t like that very much given that um, people dying was them existing someplace you couldn’t reach them. Maybe she’d write him more or somethin’, when he was in the Hinterlands again. Ink’d been more forgivey but…she was the Inquisitor, and Solas had committed crimes he was payin’ for so Sera wasn’t sure if she’d be backing off on Solas’s punishment until Cory-face was dead. But at least…ugh. Solas was like, friggin’ ancient. He’d had magic for forever, and she’d had yeast infections longer than she’d had her magic wokey. But Inky! She could feel Sera like crazy it seemed—she’d come runnin’ the other night when she felt Sera all scared and sad, talkin’ to ‘sandra about that shite mansion place, announced she knew Sera already felt better by the time she got to be all huggy. Sera couldn’t even- shite! She’d done fuck-all when the Freemen tried snatchin’ Ellie! and she’d tried. She wasn’t real big on playin’ slappy games with Inky, didn’t really care for doing something where the point was to slap the crap out of the other players poor little hands. But she’d wanted to see if she could feel it in the bond, feel the sting of her own slaps on Inky’s skin. And nothing! It was shite! Was she just bad at it? She couldn’t really use the bond to do shit—feel or find Inky or…Solas said she and Mare’ had a bond but her magic didn’t much feel like it did. Blah! All she could do is sit around and wait for little waves of big feeling from the Human girl, and friggin’ get the freak out of her disappearing out of range. It was dumb!

Oh. Inky stepping out of range…sucked…but only if Sera realized it was happenin’. ‘I tried to keep her distracted’ Lace had said—friggin! “So someone freaking explain why come I wasn’t with you lot Red-Lyrium Letter hunting!!” Sera snapped as they sat down to dinner—Bull made this real thick stew Sera liked, warm gravy and carrots, potatoes, chunks of Druffalo beef, just yum! Lots of buttery toast- they wasn’t allowed to distract her anymore! She dunked a slice of toast in her bowl of stew and let it sit there while she picked a person to glare at…not Lace, not Inky, not ‘sandra, not Kremmy-boy—Solas! Yeah! She wouldn’t feel real bad glaring at him, and he was like, mega guilty of all sorts of pish so he should be easy peasy to guilt into talking!

“Ellie did not wish to drag you out into the fray again, we all feel you rather deserve to have some time off and,” he cleared his throat, “be with your girlfriend. So, Cole sent miss Lace Ellie’s orders to keep you occupied while we headed out, sans Thom, to stay and guard you while… maintaining your privacy, should you need it.”
Oh, piss, “Cuddly, you’re okay, right?” Sera checked. The Spirit didn’t look injured or anything.

“I’m not!” he said…like assurance? Oh he was answering her inside words, not her outside ones, cool—guy wasn’t hurt. “I got what Cullen needs. We found paper! One confirmed Samson is purchasing the Red Lyrium, that he wanted to double his order and they…mention his armor looking strange, ‘templar’ like but not quite Chantry regulation. And then there was a third letter—the traders had a mage helping them, he tried the Red Lyrium and said it was very strong like ‘serving brandy in an ale tankard’?” Unexpected kick to it, huh? “But eventually he starts foaming at the mouth, which is apparently very bad for bodies to do. They had to lock him away in a storehouse because he was suffering Lyrium madness and they don’t it, they think it is very dangerous what they’re distributing from Sahrina Mines.”

“Papi’ll get back to us soon but…I’ve got a little hunch we’ll be going wherever Sahrina Mines is,” Inky said. “Who wants to run the books for Varric? Fifty silver it’s somewhere absolutely miserable!”

“Wherever else would you think Red Lyrium could be mined from, darling?” Viv wondered, amused. “My money is with the Inquisitor.”

“Well damn Imekari, you know I’m all about rebelling,” Bull said, “and I sure as fuck don’t wanna trek out someplace miserable—fifty says the Red Templars are mining their demon-juice from tropical paradise and they’ll all conveniently drop dead once we get there.”

Sounded like the Qunari was just wantin’ to fund Ink’s shoe collection some more. But maybe he was just tryin’ to be funny and put a positive spin on things, Inky wasn’t exactly goin’ around collecting on any of her bets. Though Sera was decently sure Dwarfy was keepin’ legit tabs on them, planned on enforcin’ his books someday to make sure everyone paid up whatever they owed each other. Frig. Might burn that bitch—Sera was either way up or way down and she couldn’t remember friggin’ which.

Okay…they was safe and yeah, it’d been kind of nice—real nice—to get a break, she…hadn’t really realized she needed one but now that she’d had it her body was a little ‘duh’. She’d been kind of…they’d taken days off since Inky and them arrived, because poor sweets needed it big time after hitting such friggin big ass Rifts. But their first break-days came with…well the Freemen had still been out there and what’s-his-tits, Fairbanks, she’d checked in with them for Ink—just…not putting them meeting off, but she wasn’t real big on the guy bombarding Ellie with allegiance talk on her days off so Sera’d been keeping him updated for her, on their progress with the Rifts and just telling him to keep considering what he wanted for his role in the Inquisition once Ellie was ready she’d invite him to talk herself. So Sera’d alternated between layin’ with Ink and runnin’ around trying to get leads on Freemen activity and Fairbank’s pish. And she definitely hadn’t been takin’ any days off once they caught up with Thom and them, she’d felt just awful they’d gone ahead of them, ended up in the Emerald Graves before her and Lace when they was the ones supposed to be scouting ahead.

So…yeah. Break was a relief, she’d gotten a big stress off her noggin’ with her and Dagna’s rune bracer working for Ink, and she’d gotten to relax with Lace and now…it was time for honey cookies! Those was the best! And star gazing was the best! And…Solas might be the best. Kind of. Maybe.

The best…whatever he was. Cullen was the best at bein’ a da though. Cause he wasn’t a lying sack of shit old Elf god. And he gave better hugs. More on him to hug, guy had muscle and pauldrons, and he just kind of made Sera feel…she was a little taller’n him but still, the Human bloke managed to make her feel small in a way that made her feel safe when he hugged her. Dumb!

But Solas was the best when it came to er…magic shite. Sera’s frustrations with it, anyway.

“Something troubles you, da’assan,” Solas said as he snapped the blanket he was spreading to lay flat on the ground—they was star gazing again tonight and Lace was finishing up some reports she needed to get to Leliana before end of day, getting it done before joining them, Kremmy-boy and Cole was bathing it up, and Mare was helping Inky with snack duty. Sera’d made sure Marehis was cool with her helpin’ Solas lug blankets and pillows out to the hillside, didn’t
uh…dunno. Just kind of felt weird—she didn’t want Marehis thinking she’d ever pick baldy over her, Mare won every day of the week! Solas could friggin’ eat it!

But he could also be a decent da. So. Sera sighed, “I’m…I’m bonded to Inky, right? And M-Mare too, yeah?”

“Certainly,” Solas nodded.

“So am I just magic-stupid or something? Cause- Cause Inky can be all up in her bond with me, she could probably tell me m’ bout to be a sad bitch before I even know what I’m gonna be sad about! But I only feel stuff from the bond when like, her magic is all spilly or wh-when she ‘n me are-“ shite, her chin was quivering-

And…Cullen’s hugs might be better, but Solas’s was still okay. The guy had dropped the pillow he’d been placing on the pile and swept Sera up in a hug, “Ma’da’vehnan,” he breathed, rubbing circles on her back, “oh. I’m sorry—I did not know you and Ellie would be going separately into the field, I heard nothing of it until I joined the Inquisitor’s party on their way to the Emerald Graves. If I’d- oh, I wish I had prepared you for the event in case it should come to pass I just…I didn’t wish to overstep, and you’re usually rather inseparable. Oh, still. I apologize, da’len. I should not have sent you unprepared. I hope…I hope you were alright?”

“Well I wasn’t freaking great! My magic said Inky was dead!”

“So…it’s not broke, it’s just busy,” Sera nodded. Cripes, yeah, that made sense. If she was a little dumb baby, she’d be learning about all that shite too, need a minute to learn how to talk.

“Ellie has had her magic for far longer, it has grown with her, knows every facet of her core personality and how she thinks, it has seen the sun rise and set with her a thousand times over. So it can indulge in learning new things—she’s never had a bond with another before me, and she could not perceive me in the bond for quite some time, weeks da’len, it was not until we were on the Storm Coast meeting the Iron Bull that Ellie could even begin to lightly sense me in the bond, and even then she could not so much sense my emotions but that the bond was existent and she could send things to me through it—little flashes we’ve come to develop into a language of sorts even as she has grown in her abilities with it,” Solas said, squeezin’ Sera’s hand assuringly and-

And then he called a little icy magic into his hand, holding it up and nodding to her so she um, she copied him, held her hand up to his and his magic sort of knocked against hers in a short little pattern, like a tap, tap-tap and, cripes it was…she could cast actual spells now but this felt stupid hard! But she did it! She copied the pattern back, might’ve left Solas’s fingers a little blue but he smiled real wide, warm as he said,

“Excellent, da’vehnan! Oh, my sweet girl, you did so well,” he enthused and then he sort of caught himself gushin’, blushed a bit and cleared his throat, more chill as he said, “So you see? Perhaps it would comfort you to practice as such with Ellie. The signal I just taught you it is two fold—the one pulse is Ellie and I’s way of greeting one another, a sort of hello we sometimes use. It, with the additional double pulse has always been um…well, it was her way of conveying to me she loves me, as best she could with what little she could send in the bond,” awe that was sweet, he was sort of just…blushy, ramblin’ a bit, this sort of fond, distant look on his face like…pride in his kid’s silly little accomplishments, baby things. Sera’d sort of seen it—not from Lady, but like she had this memory one of her first nights on the road after Lady died, she was in this Tavern and Inn run by this little family, little kid art tacked to the wall behind the bar—shite work, but like, it was little kids! And their da had been dumb proud of it—saw Sera starin’ and he refilled her drink, launchin’ into which kid did the drawin’ she’d been staring at, how old they was—just this tot
obsessed with color waxes and makin’ pictures her da doted over.

Ugh. It was cute, he was bein’ too cute! Solas. Made her feel like hugging him again and they’d already done way too much of that—he en’t even done any crazy god-callin’ magic to save Inky’s life in the last 24 hours or nothing! So.

Guy blinked at her, startled when she flicked him in the cheek, and then he raised his hand to rub at it, chuckling softly, “I apologize. If I may offer some advice? Your magic…all magic can have times of struggle, but your magic is very new, there will be other times it might reach out to you in the way it did when you moved out of range of the bond. You felt ‘Ellie is dead’ from your magic, but…how magic communicates with us, especially young magic, it can be somewhat rudimentary—it was likely not a statement, Sera, but a question—‘Ellie is dead?’ your magic was looking to you for the answer. When you became frightened at the prospect, believed it to be true, Magic mirrored you, likely amplified whatever panic or sorrow you felt at what it was interpreting as news you were confirming. There will be times your magic does not understand what is happening and will look to you for guidance. If ever you find yourself separated from your sister again, be it by choice or even…there are times in the field I have found myself out of range, you must focus on the task at hand and keep yourself safe—when your magic proposes that Ellie’s absence in the bond means she has perished, you must simply inform it that it is mistaken, that she has merely stepped out of range. Your magic will often times be a source of strength and assurance for you, ma’dar’vehnan. Occasionally you must return the favor.”

Yeah…yeah that all made sense. Shite, Sera felt a lot better about it, magic did too.

“Sissy! I brought! Snacks!” Inky declared as she cannonballed into the pile of pillows, landin’ almost in Sera’s lap, cripes! Double cripes! Lace was ridin’ piggy back on Inky! The girl was gigglng as she launched herself into Sera’s lap, Inky laying against her, Lacey relaxing to lay against Ellie’s back as the girl informed them, “Mami’s carrying them! But I carried Lacey!”

Lacey was still gigglng up a storm over it, “She really did, golly—thanks sweetie.”

“No problem!” Inky said, hugging Sera, “Honestly I was just beating you to Sera so I got dibs on first snuggles. For…5…4…3…2…1….okay!” Ellie squeezed Sera tight before letting go, Lace rolling off of her back as Ellie rolled closer to Solas, “You’re free to stargaze with your girlfriend! Hi papi!” Ink moved it right along, climbing into Solas’s lap, the poor bloke still looked startled at all get-out like he expected at any minute Ink’d hate him again. Which was dumb, considerin’ Ink hadn’t hated him really. “Mmm, warm.”

“You are likewise warm, da’vehnan,” Solas offered, feeling at Ink’s forehead as he rubbed her back, holding her secure as he reclined in the proper nest they made. Mare was along shortly—Krem and Cole tagging along, the boys carrying the snacks and mugs while she had canteens of…Sera’s money was on warm cocoa, pressing a kiss to Sera’s temple as Krem handed her and Lace mugs that Mare filled with—yup! yum! Uhh…and drinks and snacks was always boss with a show and…it was kind of interesting watching Mare and Solas interact, but uh…woman sat between Sera and Solas. Probably so she could sit with Sera and Inky at the same time, and it left Solas’s other side open for Kremmy-boy to be near his little girlfriend who…was kinda snoozing away on Solas’s chest.

“She fell asleep?” Marehis asked as she sat on her knees, sounding quietly amused.

Solas nodded. “I believe she’s entertaining a mild fever, she feels feverish to the touch and the bond is confirming.”

“Oh…” Marehis reached out, hand just below Solas’s on Inky’s back, “sweet girl,” she shook her head. “Does it feel like she is ill? I…” Mare sighed, “I believe it may be a stress fever.” Awe, those wasn’t any fun.

“Ah. Has something happened?”

“Cullen wrote back. He is grateful for our work here and once we have concluded our business in the Emerald Graves…Sahrina Mines awaits investigation in Emprise du Lion.”

Solas nodded as if understanding, “So Ellie, of course, is thinking of everything that needs done here and wants to push to get it all done—”

“-yesterday,” the Elves said in unison, pokin’ fun at Inky’s way of giving herself impatient
timeframes to work in when she was determined to get things fixed and happening. Gross.

Mare shook her head, “She will…I understand Sera’s invention lessens the pain of Ellie’s interactions with Rifts but,” Marehis let out this woosh of breath, “it…the physical toll on her.

Maker, I- I’m always so petrified her heart won’t catch its beat again when she seals those horrible things. I would appreciate…” she cleared her throat. “It is why I was delayed and the young gentlemen caught up with me,” she gave Krem and Cole an appreciative nod, before looking to Solas, “I’ve consulted with Cassandra and the Iron Bull. We’ll be presenting a united front with Ellie, putting our foot down in an appeal not as subordinates to the Inquisitor, but as Ellie’s parental figures—she is not to try and seal the six remaining Rifts in a single day. I would appreciate your cooperation with that.”

“Of course,” Solas readily agreed. “I understand Ellie’s desire to remove all known Rifts but perhaps I could dissuade her from sealing unnecessary ones—ones that can be wholly avoided for the time being without causing harm. She could always return to the Emerald Graves at a later date and …well, perhaps such a date will bear more progress in regard to advancements with Rift Magic and our understanding of it. We may have other means to seal the Rifts or develop ways to suppress them to the point they needn’t be sealed—if she could be spared the burden of dealing with them I would be glad of it.”

“You…you truly believe such a thing could be possible? Marehis wondered.

“I am not ordinarily a man of faith but I have always had as much in magic, I suppose. I hope that either through some efforts in Skyhold or my own field research a solution could be found.”

“You do research…?”

“During my time in the Hinterlands, in the evenings when I have finished my community service, I believe it is called? When one dedicates themselves to the betterment of a community they have wronged as penance? I study the nature of Rift magic as it interacts with Humanity. Um…how to remove the Mark from Ellie, alternative methods of dealing with Rifts, how the Orb of Destruction might-“ he stopped himself, assuring ‘I whole heartedly believe it, itself, should be destroyed, but it…it clearly left its power on Ellie, and I’ve some hope it could take it back, remove the Mark it placed on her before destroying it. I would never attempt to go against the Inquisitor’s ruling, I would wish to work within it. The Inquisition would take custody of the orb should it be recovered from Corypheus, and any circumstance I would be anywhere near it would be strict and controlled, solely for the purpose of removing the Mark, and then destroying the damned thing.”

Mare looked like she was thinking it over, nodding before asking, “This is what occupies your free time in the Hinterlands?”

“Ellie considers matters of Spirituality and morality every waking moment she is not otherwise occupied with love-sickness,” he supposed with a shrug, “I consider matters of the Fade and the Rifts torn into it.”

Mare’s brow raised at that, “When you are not otherwise occupied with love-sickness?”

“Of a less enjoyable sort than Eleanor’s perhaps, as I’ve more to mourn in that regard.” Well shite. That was one way of saying ‘I’m a sorry asshole and I miss you’. “And I’ve not the sort of appreciation for the Lieutenant’s backside as she does—I’m an in-general fan of your existence, mind—but it does not occupy my headspace so I’ve plenty of time for other realms of thought.”

“Thanks,” Kremmy-boy snorted softly as he…yup, guy was bad at stargazing, he could give fuck-all about the stars, he was laying on his side, hand carding through Inky’s hair. Cole was real quiet, curled up against Krem’s back, arms around the other boy’s waist, lookin’ real sleepy-like, the way he did when he put himself in the Fade, probably playin’ or chattin’ with Inky while she was zonked out, hopefully he was talking some sense into her, helping her sort through shite.

There was something tickling at Sera’s arm- oh. “Can I help you Lacey?” she wondered.

Lace was…sometimes Sera wrote on her arms and hands to keep track of shite, there was the soft rub of a wax pencil against Sera’s arm now, she just wasn’t the one writing.

“What about this?” Lace proposed. She’d drawn up a list of the final Rifts in three columns
—each day started with a Rift that was high priority to close before leaving and one that Inky could choose to leave open if she wanted, but she’d definitely not be fucking around with more than two Rifts in a single day, “three days, at the very least, to wrap up things here. I’ll need that long just to get to Emprise de Lion to scout ahead—golly it’d be nice if I had time to lay down some ground work and assess the situation there before the Inquisitor shows up, I mean I’ll work as fast as possible but I’d just hate to let the Inquisitor down…” she smiled softly watching to see if the others were picking up what she was getting at.

“Oh,” Marehis breathed, “bless you sweet Lace—yes, that will work splendidly, Ellie would not rush you for the world. Framing it that you need more time would certainly lax her own schedule.”

“Yer a freaking genius Lacey!” Sera cheered, mmm, big snuggles for her genius girlfriend!

“I just hope it helps? She should at least spend the rest of the week here, and you can take it easy getting to Emprise du Lion. I’ll send my recommendations for a good route from here.”

“I’ll have her back,” Krem promised, awe…really? Dumb, sweet, ugh! He was just the best! He shrugged when Sera smiled at him and said, “Gotta head back to Skyhold soon—Emprise du Lion’s on the way.”

Sera nodded…and held her Lacey tighter still, cheek resting atop her hair, “I’ll miss you.”

“Miss you too Ser’,” Krem grinned when Sera stuck her tongue out at him.

Lacey giggled, “You too, but that’s what makes it fun, getting to be excited to see each other again,” though she pouted a little bit, “Miss Dagna like crazy though.”

Sera groaned, “I knooooow. Widdle’s getting so much kisses when we get back.”

Lacey’s nose crinkled at that as she smiled real cute, “Isn’t she like, the best to kiss? I mean you’re the best being kissed by,” friggin ditto! “but she’s just like, gosh. So cute.” Yeah Danga’s always grabby and enthusiastic, got these adorable little sounds she makes that’s just! Friggin the best!

“You’ll have to wait your turns,” Inky mumbled, yawning a bit as she snuggled against Solas’s chest, still-kind-of sleepin’. “Cremisius, I’m making out with Dagna when we get back to Skyhold for inventing my glove and also just for existing in general.”

“Hey, gotta give credit where credits due,” Krem supposed, “how you feelin’ lovely?”

“m’okay, just got sleepy,” she said, and then Solas coughed around a grunt as the girl on his chest wriggled about, elbowing him in the ribs as she shifted to lay on her back, “Papi—star facts! Wait—did I hurt you?” she worried.

He chuckled softly, “Hardly, da’vehnan,” Solas assured as he settled more comfortably, wrapping his arms around her tummy and taking a deep breath as he regarded the heavens overhead. “Well, lets see…I’m afraid I’ve rather exhausted my current knowledge of these constellations with you.”

“She hasn’t shared this knowledge of the stars,” Marehis said softly, “if you’d feel like catching those of use who were absent up to speed.”

“I would be delighted, if that suits,” Solas assured and uh…no one was really arguin’—wasn’t like anyone was feeling super chatty they was just out here to doze under the stars, and baldy had this nice timber to his voice, could be real soothin’ when he was all talky for a long time.

Though Inky and Kremmy-boy was talky for a long time too—Sera wasn’t down with gettin’ bug bit all to hell again, so she’n Lacey headed back to camp and Marehis and Solas and Cole followed, joining the rest of the adults around the campfire, giving Ink and Krem a bit of time to themselves since yeah, dude would be heading out tomorrow. Sera couldn’t really hear what they was saying but Krem was talkin’ an awful lot, Inky listenin’ contentedly from the looks of it the few times Sera got up to stretch her legs and take a peek at the hillside to make sure they was still there and safe n’ pish. Little cuties fell asleep.

And Sera figured out what they was talkin’ about come morning. Cuz Krem wanted to talk to them about it too—Sera and Cole. They was helping him pack up while every one else was working on getting breakfast underway and Inky popped up on her tip toes to press a kiss to Krem’s cheek.
“Have a good talk, carino. I’m just outside if you need me,” she reminded him.

“Thanks El,” he nodded, kissin’ her on the forehead before letting her leave. Oh, shite, guy seemed kind of nervous as he sat down on a cot, “Um…you two mind sitting and talking with me for a minute?”

Sera made to sit in the cot across from him but Cuddly literally vanished and reappeared in Krem’s lap. “I know, and I love you and I love that you want to talk about this with me and I am sorry you are nervous but you do not have to be.” So, Sera followed the leader as best she could—plopped it down right next to Krem and Cole, resting her head on his shoulder.

“Ditto—what’s up Kremmy-boy?”

Guy smiled at that, resting his head against hers as he held on to Cole, hand scratchin on the back of Cuddy’s neck the way that always soothed the Spirit as he took a beat, and then, “Well uh…I am a boy, just…not in the traditional sense,” he started out. oh. yeah, Sera nodded against his shoulder, quiet as she listened. “But um…so…I struggle sometimes. My brain freaking out over my body feeling wrong to it. doesn’t happen a lot, but it’s…you know. A thing. Apparently it’s a thing Healers study and uh…Lady Josie helped me get in touch with some.”

“You’ve been feelin’ bad about yourself?” Sera worried. Shite! She hadn’t seen anyone uh, questionin him or being a dick about whether or not he’s got one. Was someone in Skyhold doin’ something to mess with him or was it like other mental health things where there didn’t need to be anything necessarily going on for your brain to be committing bullshit? If it was people, she’d be putting so much arrows in them! If it was just Krem’s brain, well…no arrows. Cept metaphorical ones full of like, love or whatever the frig.

“No like bad-bad? Mostly just occasional moments of dysphoria where I’m embarrassed as shit or just wanna crawl out of my own skin. Um…so I’m meeting with someone on my way back to Skyhold, a Healer who specializes in,” he shrugged, “All this. to uh, talk about…treatment?” he supposed was the right word. “See if maybe I can find a better balance that’ll make me more comfortable uh, hormonally I guess? Do things to boost um, my testosterone.”

“You want someone to go with you, Kremmy-boy?” Healers was scary sometimes and getting help for things was hard. Sera felt just dumb going to Elan over her anxiety pish, but having Mare and ’sandra with her really helped. Inky might not be able to go with him but Sera…well she didn’t like leavin’ inky none but she’d do it for them, if Krem needed his friends and Inky needed her boyfriend to have support.

Krem shook his head. “Nah, Lady Josie checked her out for me to make sure I’d be in good hands and it’s just a uh, consultation.” Ellie wrote papa last night after Cremisius talked about this with her, because he said he’d written his father about it—but Krem won’t ask outright for his papa to go with him, in fact he told his papa not to even worry about it. While he would like his father there it is travel, and he worries papa is already so busy and would not want him to feel badly or trouble himself. But Josie wrote Ellie back—his papa had already left Skyhold and will be waiting for him at the Healers, to be there either in the appointment with him if he needs it, or afterward to support him. Awe sweet! “I might start like,” he shrugged, “diet changes, maybe a potions regimen. Not a huge deal, I just wanted you guys to know, because you’re my friends and I trust you, and uh, there might be changes so I thought I’d give you a heads up. And…I kind of need a favor.”

“Sure thing,” Sera said.

“I talked to Ellie about this last night just, you know. She’s my girlfriend, and she knows some stuff about this sort of thing but uh…something she didn’t bring up that Josie passed along in her information from the Healer is a word of caution El says she isn’t worried about—I said if it did worry her, or if she was nervous about it or sees anything that scared her I’ll drop this, and I swear I will,” Krem assured, “I…just don’t know that I’d be in the right mindset to actually do that if I did have a problem so, that’s where you guys come in. I might experience uh, mood swings, and sometimes there’s been issues with things like this where uh, patients become more aggressive or irrationally angry. If uh…you notice anything off with me—I start getting angry for no reason or dunno, have bad swings just, hold me accountable, okay? I’m um. Shit I’m scared I might mess
things up. If I ever hurt El or- or any of you,” he swallowed. “That would kill me—I can handle things as they are right now, I can. So if trying to make me feel better in my own body makes things worse for the people in my life, it’s not worth it to me. So, I’m asking you guys to keep an eye out, I’ve already talked about it with Bull—you guys see anything concerning, go to him.”

Oh, frig. Yeah, shite that’d be bad but- but that was like, a bad side affect of somethin’ good Krem would be doing for himself. Trust him to take something that might be real good for him and worry more about it hurtin people he loves. “Trust in you, Krem. It’s not in you, to ever want to hurt Inky. But if we get worried, see red flags, we’ll go to Bull,” she promised, taking his hand and squeezing it, “It’s gonna be okay Kremmy-boy. If this is something you gotta do, I’m really proud of you for doing it. If you need anything, just let us know, kay?” she pressed a kiss to his cheek.

“I will keep track of your hurts Krem, I will help you if your mind makes hurts out of your healing. It is okay to struggle. We love you, we will always help.”

Awe, Kremmy-boy sniffled softly, “Love you guys too.”

“This um, treatment stuff, its supposed to make you feel more like yourself?” Sera asked. She kind of had a million questions cuz like…well it was something medical he was doin! She’d wanted to know everything about how to help Inky with her medical stuff!

“I guess? Give my body a chemical balance that matches what my brain needs it to be, there’s a whole thing,” he said, handing over an envelope. Oh cool! Yeah, huh. So like, Kremmy-boy’d be introducing more testosterone to his body, it’d do pish like encourage muscle development, redistribute muscle and fat differently. Holy frick! ‘Subtle bone changes’ sounded ouch, but she supposed it wouldn’t be, it just meant shiftin’ and changing over time like, in his face, or whatever, same way bones did as anyone grew up. And shite like that wouldn’t be real noticeable or happen right out the gate, some of this stuff would take years. Awe. Poor babe might get smacked in the face with the acne stick, skin would start...thickening? And getting oily. Sera’s face oiled up like crazy, Viv-tits called her greasy once—Inky was right pissed about it! But she also set her up with this pepperminty cleanser and uh...what-its-tits...witch hazel! That shite, Sera used it from time to time when doing the whole bathing thing and her face felt more comfy bein’ not so slicky. Maybe she’d send some Krem’s way—the Healer’s pish recommended a cleansing routine would help and she wanted to help! If...if there was any uncomfy things that came with this, she’d want to help. She...she wanted Krem to be happy with himself! And healthy! And have all the nice things!

“Ser’” Krem chuckled a bit when, well, Cole was still sittin’ on him, but now Sera’s knees were kind of on his thighs and the Spirit’s lap as she threw her arms around the Human man and just! Squeezed! Big squeezes! “It’s not...it’s not something major, I’m not really sick or doing something dangerous—I’m gonna be okay,” he soothed, running a hand through her hair, sort of scratchin’ her scalp, frick! She loved gettin’ her scalp scratched! Damn it!

“You’re my best friend and I love you and- you’re the best boy! The best one, Krem-is Aclassi! It’s you! And then Cole! And then Bull! Then Cullen, then Dorian. Thom’s cool too. Solas is friggin’ the dread wolf but like, he has his moments. Oh! And your papa’s the best!”

“Had to get it from somewhere I guess,” Krem joked lightly, rubbin’ circles on her back, “Love you too.” Kissed her on the forehead! Blah!

“Forehead kisses are the best,” Cole cheerily agreed, “they make everyone feel so happy and safe!”

Krem smiled, dolin’ out a forehead kiss on the Spirit boy—little cutie, he friggin’ loved shite like that, bein’ loved on, he got all big smiles and blushy faced.

Krem was blushy faced when it was time for him and Lace to head out. Sera was pretty sure he was gonna have to walk all the way to Emprise du Lion and his Healer’s appointment with Inky attached...possibly kissin’ him the entire time.

“I love you.” Huh. That was...the fifth time she’d said as much in that last three minutes. The Tevinter man was patient though, “I love you too,” he steadily returned, amused.

“And I’ll miss you. Like a lot. And I can’t wait to see you, and- you’re gonna write, right? Like...”
“No less than usual when you’re in the field El—don’t let yourself be distracted, I’m
defiantly not gonna distract you. But I’ll keep you updated, I promise.”

“You will?” she pouted. Pretty sure just to trick the Vint boy into kissing her.

Trick he was a sucker for every time. “Each stop,” he promised as he pulled back, “after my
appointment. Anytime I need you lovely, trust me, you’ll hear from me.”


“Same to you, you need me, write me. Everything’s gonna be okay. Stay safe, alright? Red
Lyrium’s no joke, if the Red Templars are out there en force—if you guys need backup you know
the Chargers are always at your service, Inquisitor.”

“Don’t tempt me, I will literally pay you to go with me everywhere and be in kissing range
24/7.”

“Mmm…not complaining…but paying me to be available for kissing implies I’m a gigolo.”

“An honorable profession, and if that’s your next career move guapo I’m like, so in. I’m just
going to need to be a priority client.”

Krem hissed like that was gonna be a toughie, “You’ll definitely be my favorite client.”

“Fair, your business decisions are entirely up to you—I’m just here to support your goals,”
me! Big one”—she demonstrated, puckering her lips to press an enthusiastic kiss to his cheek,
“mwah!”

“Will do,” he promised, tucking a loose curl behind her ear and pressing a kiss to her
forehead, “be safe.”

“Will do,” she returned giving him a little wave as he and Lace hit the road. Dumb road!
Taking Lacey and Kremmy-boy places that wasn’t here!

But they got to see Lace not too long after. Inky kept them on a pretty tight schedule—three
days of Rift Sealing and chattin’ up Fairbanks to secure his allegiance with the Inquisition, and the
last Rift they sealed on day three? Was on their way out of the Emerald Graves to hit the road for
Emprise du Lion. Thankfully…Lace’d only taken a day and a half, her and Krem treading the path
ahead and writing to inform them—both of them wrote Inky directly, Krem doublin’ up with letters
to Dorian and Cassandra too—that Emprise du Lion. Was freezing. Fucking. Cold.

He uh…must’ ve written his papa too, cause they got big time deliveries from Josie sweets—
she raided everyone’s business for him, ‘cause he got Krem’s letter asking him to send Ellie’s
warm things since their original plan was mildly-springy Val Royeaux, mild woodlands of the
Emerald Graves, and the blazing heat of friggin the Maker-damned desert!

Not freaking! What the hell?! Was this place cursed or whatever the frig?!

So anyway, yeah. Thank friggin tits and Josie and Krem’s papa, because they got their left
behind coats and hats and scarves and gloves and- and freaking someone had knit Sera a sweater!
Oh yeah, Krem’s da had when he realized he’d just about missed her birthday—Marehis had put in
an order to him, friggin’! She’d gotten Sera extra clothes, and this dress…that also got sent along
‘cause Dagna heard what Josie was up to and had been going to send it her way anyway so it got
thrown into the mix. Sera hadn’t been real big on dresses before but this one was like, friggin’
perfect! Neat little thing that fell to her knees, long sleeves, all this black-lined red plaid that just!
Cute! Came with a matchin’ bowtie for the high collar! And it had pockets. And the skirt had
matchy shorts to wear under it so she didn’t have to follow any dumb dress rules! So…yeah, Mare
was the best, Papa was the best, and Dagna was the best cuz Sera’d been going to write her to see
if she’d pack this very outfit to bring along for Sera to change into for uh…meetin’ Lacey’s
parents. That was sounding more like a definitive thing they’d be doing before returning to Skyhold
after all this pish and Sera…wasn’t sure about parents. Frick! Like, she definitely wanted to meet
them! She was just…really wantin’ to make a good impression. Because they was Lacey’s parents!
What if they didn’t like her?! Oh cripes—what if they didn’t like Dagna?! Or what if they only
liked one of ‘em! Shite! Maybe three-sies was a mistake, there was too many variables for
‘could/couldn’t like!’ Frick!

She’d be dressy, and maybe have Marehis do somethin’ with her hair, clean it up style-wise.
Did she need new shoes? Ink’d help her. Yeah! And ‘sandra taught her how to do eyeliner good but um…maybe she’d do it for her though? She was nervous, felt like…actually armoring up probably wasn’t in the cards but Viv taught her there was other kinds of armor to be worn across different fields of battle. She didn’t put so much umph into her appearance because she found herself wanting—she did it cuz she’s frickin’ boss, armoring herself up with her pretty clothes and make up and perfumes was just a way of makin’ sure when she walked into the room, everyone knew who they was talkin’ to. So…yeah, put her best foot forward, put out effort that said she was taking meeting them seriously, told them ‘I’m one of your amazing daughter’s girlfriends and I freaking love her and I don’t know what the frick I did to deserve her either, so just be chill!’

Was already freaking chill in the Emprise. Fucking piss-ass blizzard!

“You’re toasty, right Ink?” Sera friggin’ fretted. It was cold! She pulled at Ink’s scarf, the way ‘sandra and Mare did to keep it snug around her neck, ‘cause sometimes it got caught up under her armor. Her gloves was secure, and they…well they had back up Runes ready to roll, the original runestones had gotten into right bad shape, big Rifts burned ‘em down fast—they probably could’ve been good for another big Rift after sealing the last six in the Emerald Graves but Sera was not riskin’ one of those things breaking direct in Inky’s hand, shite! Lyrium burns hurt! Sera’s palm was still, like a burnin’ itch always there, patch of skin in her left palm just hurt all the time and she definitely didn’t want something she made to ever hurt Ellie. Sera was nervous—there was Rifts all around and Krem had helped Lacey test run one of ‘em down on the ice. Friggin’ had to run for their lives cuz there was pride demons!

“Uh-huh,” Inky nodded, “Are you cold? Gosh Sissy your cheeks are all rosey—you’re the cutest!”

Blaaaaah! Squirmy! Friggin’ loved Inky! “Face is a little freezy,” Sera allowed. Maybe that was why Viv was so into icy magic—when you applied cold, ya didn’t need blush!

Friggin’! Inky and Marehis, they was really ‘like mother like daughter’ ‘cause they took Sera’s face being cold as reason to each attack a cheek to pepper with warm kisses! Cripes!

“Oi!” Sera- friggin got giggly! Her magic was all dumb happy, warm and cozy and kind of… dunno, felt like her and Ink’s magic was huggin’ if that was a thing? Was sweet and Sera…she did her best, tried sendin’ the tap, tap-tap across the bond-

Tap! Tap-tap! Right back at her from Inky! Oh friggin’ yay!

Double yay! Lacey was waiting on them as they walked into camp—hoofed it the last stretch on foot, ‘cause path was steep and the whole area was pretty yick, they’d spared their horses for now—poor Russel didn’t like being cold any more than his mistress—found them stables nearby.

Frick Lace was pretty—Inky thought Sera was cute all rosey cheeked? Lace was just… wowza. Awe, but she looked pretty beat—tired and sad, though she offered up a little smile to Ellie, something that spoke to relief they’d made it in safe. Teetness deserved so much naps.

“Inquisitor,” she nodded to Ellie, “We’re on the outskirts of Sahinia . This is what’s left of the town. The lucky ones got out before the river froze over—the rest are penned in by Rifts and Red Templars. We’re the first friendly face they’ve seen in a long, long while.”

“The entire river froze?” Inky asked, aghast.

“It got really cold, really quickly. Sahinia relies on its river for everything, trade, food. They weren’t expecting this.” Shite! So this weather just freaking…just came out of nowhere? They’d never had a cold snap like this before, where they could anticipate having a shite winter?

“Gosh, that’s just horrible,” Inky breathed, “I’ll check in on the townsfolk. The Inquisition is here to help, lets make sure they know that.”

“The entire river froze?” Ink asked, aghast.

“Let’s get out there and take it back from them.”

“We’ll go kick major Red Templar butt Lacey—you and me, let’s go!” Ellie cheered, hand shooting straight out for a high-five from the Dwarf woman. That pulled a warm smile and a giggle from Lace as she high-fived Ink and agreed.

“I’m with you Inquisitor.”
“Great! You guys can just, you know. Chill out, take a nap—Lacey’ll go whoop the Red Templars and be home for lunch!”

“Oh certainly, do have fun Eleanor,” Cassandra encouraged, bemused.

“Awe, c’mon Imekari—you can’t leave old Iron Bull out of the fight,” Bull complained.

“Well… I guess anyone who like, really wants to come can tag along—but no slowing us down!” Inky warned fiercely, pointin’ a lecturing index finger at Qunari. And then she smiled real warm at Lacey, “I think I’ve actually got enough people with me for the day ahead so… maybe you can show those Templars what-for by sticking around our infiltration camp? If you nap that’ll really stick it to them,” Inky assured, pressin’ a kiss to her scout’s forehead. Awe, that— Inky was the best. She’d seen what Sera’d seen, Lace real worn out. “Great work out here Lacey, you’re the best. Get some good rest—Inquisitor’s orders. We’ll take it from here.”

“Thanks sweetie.”

Cripes Sera was glad Thom’s men was still having their backs out here. Red Templars… they’d put up a mad tough fight in Haven, at that Redoubt place too and Red Lyrium? That shite was friggin’ terrifying looking to Sera. Magic felt a little creeped by it—she’d been able to stay way far away from that shite when they found it in Crestwood. If they was mining this shite from around here? Yikes. Was it bad Sera was hopin’ that meant the Red Templars had mined it all and hauled it off for their friggin’ schemes?

Inky made her way around the locals—oh man. Town was wrecked. The biting chill was just ‘bout the only thing keeping any color in Inky’s face as they made their way through just… friggin’ ruins of a place. People didn’t even have roofs over their heads for the most part. Few shite tents, a building their Mayor or whatever was working out of, a bedroll in the corner, a few benches? Shite.

“Cassandra,” Ink waved the woman over as they took pause outside the Mayor set up. Er, ‘Mayor’ wasn’t the right word Sera guessed, she was ‘Mistress’ Poulin. But she was in charge of runnin’ Sahnia or whatever. Cassandra went to Ellie, bending so the girl could talk into her ear for a minute, real quiet—private, but like, no one with Elfy or Qunari ears could really help but overhear so… “Mami, would you please send a message to Skyhold? Emergency level, to be handled immediately—Tia knows where my seals are in my desk in Skyhold.” Seals? Oh, for banking documents n’ pish. Shite! Bull was all rumbly in his chest over it, the quiet kind that said the Qunari whole heartedly approved. “Tell her to make a transfer from my account to the people we get our stores from, for our Orlais camps? I want food and water, medicine, Inquisition tents here as soon as possible for the town. Cots, bedding, coats—if papa can, I want just warm tunics and trousers in different sizes, underpants, socks. Tell Josie, ‘sin limite’, please?”

“Seen…?” she tested, uncertain.

“S-i-n l-i-m-i-t-e.” Cassandra nodded as she committed the spelling to memory. “Adan has an Orlesian apprentice um, crap,” Inky hummed real soft to herself, before freaking coming up with “Esmee, I’m pretty sure?” shite! Did her little name-song thing freaking work for everyone in the Inquisition?! “Gorgeous skin like Tia Vivi, just like a little taller than me? Ask Tia to get me her information and write up an offer for her, send something for me to approve by end of day? I’ll write her myself before bed, and in the meantime I’m going to ask if Cyril would consider sticking around here until we get a Healer secured for them.”

Casandra nodded before rising to confirm, “I will send word to Skyhold, Inquisitor. Do stay within the town perimeter until my return,” she intoned, Ellie nodding in agreement. And then, shite, ‘sandra almost looked teary eyed as she tucked a bit of hair behind Inky’s ear, “I am proud of you, Eleanor,” she said, voice real warm, “you are growing into a remarkable young woman.”

Inky got real blushy at that, “Gosh, it’s just— they really need help bad. We have to do whatever we can.”

“Certainly. I will return shortly,” the woman promised, resting her forehead against Ellie’s, voice real soft and quiet, almost like the way she prayed over them sometimes, “Take heart, and take a deep breath, my sweet girl—the Maker will provide. We will handle this—we will help these people.” Gave Inky’s shoulders a squeeze before casting her gaze over them all in a sort of… well on Sera it felt like warm regard and on everyone else it was pure ‘if anything happens to my
children in my absence, I will be the standard by which you set your definition of pain and terror’. Yikes. Yay for Sera though, these dummies should’ve played more tag and thrown more pies or whatever the frig it was Sera did that got her landed Inky’s sister. Oh frig—Bull runnin’ around with a high-pitched voice, actin’ all effiminent to pass off as Ink’s sis. That’d be hilarious!

“I can make paper words,” Cole volunteered when Cassandra’s gaze landed on him. Oh, Cuddly had been shrinking back a bit, clutching Bull’s hand. Oh man, hurts had to be pretty loud here and Ink was getting to them…this would be a way of helping. “I can write down exactly what Ellie wants, and Lady Josie will be happy I am using politeness! She taught me how to write letters properly and now I can write her a proper letter!”

“Our ambassador taught you to write letters?” Viv wondered wryly.

“She thought it might be another way to help heal hurts without frightening her guests. If I could do some ‘gentle’ groundwork in person and then write them of the more ‘intimate’ details because they may feel more comfortable handling that through reading and writing instead of face to face,” oh shite! Brain! Quiet until Cuddly is gone- wait, maybe he should know. Poor sweetie, Sera…well she kind of was in the know on how Leliana operated and her hand was pretty obvious in this, it wasn’t right to trick Cuddly! “It isn’t a trick,” Cole assured her, “well, not on me because I know Leliana suggested the idea to Josie, in a move to potentially have documents full of leverage over the powerful people who visit Skyhold. Lady Josephine doesn’t know and it would hurt her if she did—she does not care as long as she is not in the know, that is a lot of how she and Leliana’s friendship works.” Cole smiled at that, “I am glad that is not how our friendships work. Thank you for worrying I had been tricked and wanting to untrick me.”

‘sandra…wasn’t sure what all the ‘trick’ stuff was about but Sera nodded to him to take credit for the brain-thoughts he’d been responding to, and Cassandra let out a soft ‘ahh’ before confirming, “Yes…thank you Cole, if Eleanor has no complaint,” Ink smiled and shook her head that it was fine, “I would appreciate being able to stay here. We will wait for you,” she assured before the Spirit vanished.

Nothing exciting happened while Cuddly was gone though. Inky asked Cyril if he’d mind her volunteering his healing services to Sahrnia’s people, and of course the guy was down for it, immediately promising to stay with the people here until the Inquisition could send someone else. She went and shook hands with Lady Poulin. Damn, lady was stressed but um…dunno. When Ink was asking for a rundown on the situation with the Red Templars she got kind of…heart-skippy, beating erratically, this loud thunk thunk in her chest that didn’t sit right with Sera—didn’t think the bitch was goin’ into cardiac arrest, so, that left lyin’ through her teeth. About what, Sera wasn’t freaking sure, but if she friggin froze the lake herself or- or whatever the fuck was going on with leaders of towns screwing their own people over with water, Sera was putting! Arrows! Everywhere! And no one could freaking stop her!

“Heads up Imekari,” Bull rumbled out soft as they left, Inky turning to look up at him, “Lady uh, might be sketchy. Something didn’t sound right, got real nervous about you asking after the situation with the Red Templars.”

“I agree,” Cassandra said. “She was lying, I am just uncertain as to what.”

Inky sighed. “I hope for these people’s sake their leader hasn’t betrayed them,” she ran her hands over her face as she took a deep breath, fingers going to her temples to rub at some ache there, poor sweets. “Okay,” she cleared her throat, “Cole’s on his way back now, we’ll meet him on the way to, well…there are Red Templars holding a position southwest of here so, we should probably go take care of that. Lacey sent me a report last night, Leliana agrees it might be a good place to set up camp if we can oust the Red Templars.”

“Da’vehnan?” Marehis addressed her concerned, shite, Ink kind of looked like she might sick up which wasn’t any good. Poor sweets barely ate half her breakfast.

“Ellie, would you take my hands?” Solas asked as he went, crouched in the snow to kneel before the Human girl who took hold of his offered hands with a nod, looking at him like she wasn’t sure what was happening. “Unclench your jaw and relax your shoulders da’vehnan, and put your focus in the bond.”
Ink did as instructed. Well, Sera was pretty sure, anyway—she heard the girl’s teeth scrape against each other as she unclenched her jaw and she visibly relaxed a bit. Still pretty bond blind though, dang it! She wanted to know what was happening! Inky seemed to be relaxing more, less overwhelmed, breathing regulating more and she looked more confident in moving forward.

“Gracias papi,” Ellie blushed, pressing a kiss to the guy’s forehead since it was in-range for her at the moment, sent his ears right blazin’ though.

“Of course,” he assured as he rose up and fell in line as Ellie moved to lead them through what was left of Sahnia. Cassandra looked to him in curious question and he informed them, “The Inquisitor was on the verge of…either overwhelmed tears or a panic attack, neither of which are conducive for her at the moment when we are about to head into battle. She was rather a ball of almost literal knots of nerve and tension in the bond, whenever Mythal faced such circumstance, such devastation in her lands that only she could fix, it was the faith her people had in her, those who were bonded to her, that would help instill in her the confidence to press on. These are dire straits, and while she may feel otherwise about herself and her abilities, I have every faith in Ellie. I have poured that faith into the bond, to imbue Eleanor in it and drown out the doubts that plague her.” He smiled real warm as he looked to Sera and held out his hand to her, so she took it and cripes! Ahh! Yay! That was…that was ruddy sweet of him. Sera’d been feelin’…well she felt bad! She wanted to help Inky too! ’cause she believed in her like—like the most!

If Solas had ‘every faith’, Sera had every faith times infinity! Inky could do freaking anything she put her mind to!

And she’d been feeling shite that she couldn’t make Inky feel that in the bond but Solas was helping her now, sort of like guiding someone by the hand to help them take someone else’s hand in theirs, he pulled on her confidence in Inky and sent it through to help him ground the Human girl in that sense of belief. And Inky gasped and let out what sounded like a happy squeak of surprise when the bond got more full of nice feelings. Friggin yes! If Inky couldn’t believe in herself, they could believe in her for her!

Huh. Marehis was lookin’ real thoughtful about all that—Solas stepping up and helping Ellie, friggin believing in her so hard the girl went from feeling failure, to faith she could handle this, help these people and face the Red Templars with success. And Solas was real blushy…was he peepin’ in the bond? Sera thought he wasn’t supposed to do that! Did Mare’ know?

“She does,” Cole said as he appeared at Sera’s side, “she gave him permission.” Wait, frick. Really? Huh. Their business. Was they…like…relationship-y again? They hadn’t been slippin’ off with each other or anything, but they was…Marehis wasn’t so ‘if you was lit on fire I’d stand in front of you drinkin’ the last cool glass of water and watch you burn’ with him at the moment.


“Oh, no. Our birds are fast but not that fast. But I did ask the fastest one to please take my message to Skyhold—she feels good today, and the wind is favorable, and the small freckled one—that’s what she calls Lacey—gave her her favorite treats this morning, she wants to do a good job for her. Sera likes Lace’s freckles too—do not worry,” Cole said to Sera, “Lace loves Leliana’s birds but she loves you and Dagna more.”

Sera snorted, she uh, hadn’t exactly been worried about that but still, “Thanks Cuddly.” Cripes he was a silly sweet one. He hummed at that and took Sera’s hand. Oh, that was nice, hopefully…her and Solas and everyone focusing on the task ahead, thinking positive thoughts for Inky was helping, giving him something else to focus on other than all the hurt-thoughts coming at him from every remaining Sahnnian.

There was this Human* bloke just sort of…holdin’ his own at the battlements southwest of town. Ink shook his hand and introduced herself, said the Inquisition was there to help and he said his name was ‘Michale’ or something, he’s here hunting some- some shite demon bloke! Ishmael, the fuck kind of name was that?! But he couldn’t chase him through Emprire du Lion with all these ruddy Rifts and Red Templars about, and he’d seen Sahrina in the state its in and thought his sword was better put to use defending the town and its people.

“If we can help you find Ishmael and deal with him, let us know, okay? Are you set up okay
out here? Do you need anything? I'll have supplies coming in for the town soon, and we’re hoping to recover some ground from the Red Templars today—if you need a place to stay, you’re welcome in our camps—Andaran atish’an!" she assured him…for…some reason?

Guy looked…dunno, there was a softness as he regarded her with a little smile, “Ma seranas, Inquisitor. Dareth shiral.”

Awe, Inky smiled real big at that, “Dareth shiral!”

So. There was Red Templars. And wolves. Like, big fucking wolves driven bat-crap crazy from Red Lyrium shootin’ up out of the ground near where the Templars was holding position. Magic got screamy, was scared of it and Sera was glad her job was just shootin’ ‘cause that meant she got to stay way the fuck back from that shite! Frick!

Oh. Solas…he’d said magic was like a baby now, right? New, and little, and would sometimes need her to tell it things. And Inky was always talkin to her magic, so…we’re okay, I’m not going anywhere near that Red Lyrium shi- uh, stuff you don’t say swears at babies! We’re safe.

Well, from Red Lyrium. Red Templars was shite!

“I…” Inky gulped as she tried to catch her breath, “is everyone o-okay? Cole, gimme a list—worst to okay.”

Sera was okay, little scraped up but potion was more than enough to set her alright—still, knocked some back so Ink didn’t fret over her. Viv and Dori was helping each other, dabbing each others scrapes with Health potion, and Thom was helping patch Bull up. Cole wasn’t hurt—Mare had sprained her wrist real bad, and the Spirit boy was at her side uncorking potion for her, Solas friggin’- the guy looked stricken, hands twitching like he wanted to reach out and help her bad, Sera had to make eye contact with him and point at her own arm for him to snap out of it realize he should probably take potion for the gash on his.

Worst on the list was Cassandra.

Chapter End Notes

Dale=I feel like I haven't translated this word and it's pronounced like "dah" like Dahlia, and then "lay" like. Laying. and it means "Go!" which can mean literally "go!" or "you go you guy/gal/non-binary pal!" and it's usually a form of enthusiastic encouragement.

Despierto=get up!

Si, mi reina=yes my queen

Sin limite=no limit

Dalish: Tel garas solasan. Arlathan.=Come not to a prideful place. This is a place of love. (Arlathan is also the OG name of a major Elvehnan city/their capitol)

ir abelas tu ma lathbora viran, ma seranas tu eth emma lath=lathbora viran translates to- the path to a place of lost love- and equates to longing for something you can never really know. So this passage translates as "I am sorry for your loss/the child you longed to know, thank you for the safety of my love, my child."

During a convo between Sera and Solas in-game, Solas blathers at Sera in Dalish and when she informs him she doesn't know that talk, he assures that their people have been known to be capable of garnering understanding of their mother tongue by rhythm of the speech alone. That comes in handy when an Old God whips out pre-Age Elf language.

*Ya’ll if you had any idea how many plot points I map out and ultimately don't touch on due to my shit brain, I don't know, you'd probably be a little concerned. I set up
Vivienne's moment with Krem and didn't have adequate follow through last chapter, so, I had to squeeze it into this chapter. Vivienne being an ally! Yas!
*Trans men and women suffer greatly both in and out of the criminal justice system but even just getting arrested is dangerous and volatile and there is a disgusting lack of protections in place, and what few there are are often ignored and abused. If you didn't know that, now you do! Do with that information what you will! Knowledge is power and whatnot.
*Rivain isn't Andrasten, it doesn't subscribe to the Chantry. Rivaini people are usually polytheistic and worship spirits and gods/goddesses of nature and morality.
*R'fissa is a Moraccan dish. Nevarra is based on an ancient middle-eastern civilization, at least it was last time I read up on it? There isn't a direct correlation but a lot of their culture came from a middle-eastern civilization/old germanic civilization, but I can't find the exact source I took that note from. They've got a more euro-centric vibe somehow but eh. My headcannon is their cuisine involves Baklava and R'fissa and Tagine.
*Companion dialogue between Cassandra and Blackwall has Cassandra complaining of her hayfever, which she does in canon suffer from, and Thom suggests she should punch a tree. This is one of those places the writers were trying to draw lines between Blackwall and Anthony, a big 'ouch' of his betrayal for Cassandra is the familiarity of having someone be sort of 'older-brother-ish' to her, have all these things that remind her of her deceased brother, and for him he's got the loss of Liddy and is sort of getting to stretch his older brother legs in this relationship, only to have that ultimately disintegrate in the wake of "Revelations".
*Solas being a dog just chasing his ball is something I saw in a tweet and FRIENDS I can't find the tweet anywhere but I can't take credit for that line, and I need whoever tweeted that to know I love them and hope they're having an amazing day and if they need a wife who owns absolutely nothing, look me up. --> *Correction! It was a Tumblr post and the amazing SiberianSpring was kind enough to find it for me! This joke comes from a delightful post by the wonderful Fibrochemist (Ethanamide here on AO3).
*Consuming honey local to an area you normally get allergies being in/going to can potentially help with said allergies. It's not like, hard core proven, but it has been known to be a thing for some people!
*Loren Pentaghast is in canon a cousin of Cassandra, so. I gave that cousin a father he's named after.
*If you don't want to fight the Red Templars while recovering the letters in the EG you CAN tell your people to halt and then using a Rogue character with the ability to activate Stealth (best done once "Lost in Shadows" is unlocked) you can sneak and collect the letters and then slip back out.
*Micel de Chevins is, in canon, half-Elf. He of course passes for Human but he loves his Dalish mama and her culture and I had to give that a little love in this fic because he's a child of my heart.
Before the Dawn: Emprise du Lion

Chapter Summary

Emprise du Lion missions. Leadership continues to disappoint, Red Lyrium is a literal nightmare, thankfully it's Veil-thinning affects can unlock immense rage-fueled power in local Dalish gods, and Varric has a hair cut.
(No fantastic Dwarven chest hair was harmed in the making of this fic)

Happy 1,000,000(+) words!

Chapter Notes

Hello! I'm back! And I'm so sorry I haven't uploaded since last year! (I'm more sorry for making this joke this late in January!) Happy Belated New Year!

I do not own anything! Any dialog from the game or quotes from codex entries (all letters and their contents found in Sahinia Quarry are canon) belong to Frostbite/Bioware/Anyone but me. I'm also not a Middle-High-German fluent Knight-Poet by the name of Wolfram von Eschenbach famous for 13th Century Chivalric Romances. I promise. I give you this cryptic promise so I can fit all my end notes into this chapter—the first *'s note can be found here:
*The method Ellie uses is Tube Thracostomy, first mentioned historically in Wolfram von Eschenbach's work: Parzival (circa 1210-20s) where he describes treatment of a Knight's injury, basing that description on medical care he himself received for a similar injury he maintained where his lung collapsed some years prior to his fictitious work's circulation. It's a method of dealing with injuries like this that was developed before his time, but he has one of the earliest examples smart people have found written down.

NOTE: An absolutely amazing reader PsychoLeopard made the perfectly sane suggestion of providing break points since my scenes and chapters do tend to run a *little* long, and ya'll have lives! You should be free to lead them! And it's much easier to do that if you have a reasonable stopping point, so! I give you—Soft Breaks! Soft Breaks are marks I've made at points where you'll have come through a good chunk of story and you're at a place where if you drop off and came back, you'll be at a decent point to pick up again. I made these marks every 5-10 pages depending on what was going on in the story to make sure it's not a horrible place to stop if you need to! There are 14 soft breaks total and they are all marked with bolded and underlined — marks in the left hand margin (so they look like distinctive, noticeable equal signs that at the same time don't obstruct your reading experience if you're godless and time has no meaning and you just wanna consume your fic whole-chapters at a time. If that is the case for you, please know I both fear and respect you) . The first break like this appears in the first scene, just before Sera reads a letter from Cullen, you'll see the mark to look for if you'd like an author-recommended break point!

As always thank you so much for reading and I love you, I love every single thing about you because you're alive and reading my fic!
“Mami s-sit, c’mon, I’ve got you,” Inky said as she took the Seeker’s weight against her and helped lower her to the ground, shite, Cassandra swallowed a pained sound as she went down, and Ellie had her lie back while she knelt at her side, “I need you to breathe for me, in through your nose, out through your mouth. I’m taking your chest plate off, I’m sorry, I know it’s cold. Stay awake for me mami, kay? Sera? Can you come hold her hand?”

Sera wasn’t gonna argue with that, shite! She knelt at Cassandra’s side, holding her hand while Inky was workin’ real quick with her buckles and straps to get her friggin’ chestplate off, how the hell did she and Commander get anything done with all that noise? But she got it undone—there was a freaking hole in the front of her chestplate where one of those friggin’ Shadow freaks tried to run her through! It hadn’t managed to break all the way through, but some Red Templar bastard’s sword was able to strike that literal hole in the Seeker’s defenses, pierce the leather underneath, and left a gushing, deep wound bleeding high on her tummy, shite! Shite! “Okay mami, this is going to hurt—you’ve got bleeding on your lung, it’s punctured, potion can fix it but I need to drain the air and fluid in your chest cavity first. I need you to look at Sera, okay? Keep looking at sissy and hold her hand and I promise I’ll be done soon and you’ll feel all better.” She looked to Sera as she opened ‘sandra’s leather under armor to expose the gushing, broken, bruised injury underneath, Inky warning, “You’re gonna wanna keep your eyes on mami’s face, this is gonna be kind of yuck.”

Did not have to tell Sera twice. Shite! Inky- Inky was talkin’ she was pretty sure, talking through whatever the frig she was doing. She smelled- shite! Why did Inky have super alcoholy alcohol? Oh, to keep shite sterilized or whatever the frig. And then all Sera’s ears was focused on was the sound of something slicey and jabby and- and this horribly squelchy sound. ‘sandra was pale, drawing in these just awful, painful breaths and Sera- shite she hoped she didn’t get her tears in ‘sandra’s lung stuff cuz she was crying, pressing her forehead against Cassandra’s,

“S-s-s-stay awake, o-okay?” Sera stammered out, shite. She was supposed to be reassuring! “Inky’s got you and I’m- I’m right here. You’re gonna be okay.” She…she was gonna be okay, right? Frick frick frick.

“I…will be fine,” ‘sandra- shite! She- she shouldn’t do that! Shouldn’t talk! That took air she was struggling for! “Don’t cry.”

“Shhh, just shush, m’okay, you’re not fine. Just zip it and stay awake or I’ll—I’ll friggin’-! If you die then Mare has to be my favorite mum,” ‘sandra’s brow furrowed at that. “Well yeah you’re my favorite, dummy. No offense to Mare’s just…dunno. She’s Inky’s favorite in a way, cause she was her mami first, you know? As far as mums go, you was like my mum first, before I warmed to Marehis that way. So you en’t allowed to bite it, not till you’re a hundred—I done ‘splained it to Inky! You was there! So stop actin’ like you’re new—you know the damn rules!” ‘sandra offered what she could of a smile at that, that…that was good, right? Sera was distracting her from the horror fest going on with her body while keeping her focused on the task of staying freaking awake.

Alright, Ser’? Can you help mami sit up a little?” Ellie asked, “Support her head and shoulders while I administer potion.”

“Oh it,” Sera said- oh frick she shouldn’t’ve looked! There was something sticking out of ‘sandra’s side—long slender silvery stick, jabbin’ into ‘sandra’s side must be hallow* or somethin’ cause pourin’ out of its end was blood just soakin’ the snow, shite! Wasn’t lookin’ anymore, just, got her arm under ‘sandra’s shoulders and supported her head with her free hand while Ink poured potion past the woman’s lips.

“You’re going to feel some pressure and ‘ouch’ and then a little burn that’ll turn right into soothing cool, okay? Keep looking at sissy,” Ink instructed. Sera heard a yicky, squelchy sliding sound, “pressure for three…two…one, ouch,” Ink announced apologetically, ‘sandra’s eyes
clenched shut momentarily but she nodded that she was okay, “and burning, just for a second mami, I promise…kay…how’re you feeling?”

“It does not burn anymore,” Cassandra croaked out confirmation, “Thank you.”

“You’re lung is gonna feel weak for a while, it probably feels kind of weird breathing right now huh?” Ellie said, and Cassandra nodded. “You’ve gotta be careful for a few days, okay? I want you resting the rest of the day. I’d feel better if you got at least twelve hours of solid, sound sleep. The Iron Bull, come sit with mami and keep her warm until we- we get our people out here with tents and things. I’ll send up the signal and we’ll set up camp.”

Bull came and sat with Cassandra—Mare too, kneeling at the Human woman’s side and pressing kisses to her cheek, whispering thanks to the Maker that she was okay and promising she’d write Cullen for her. Inky sent up the signal and uh, Sera… didn’t feel anything from Ink in the bond but her own magic said to get up and follow Ellie so, she did—Ink had used the war horn to signal their infiltration camp to send supplies their way to set up camp, and then she disappeared behind boulders lining their camp and when Sera stood up to follow her she heard why magic said follow, even ‘sandra flinched at the sound of Ellie hurling her guts up, shite!

Cole was already there when Sera came up behind Inky kneeling, poor sweets. She was uh, really hurlin’ it into the snow, yikes. Half-digested oatmeal looked friggin gross! Cole let out a sympathetic whine as he knelt at Inky’s side, casting his hat off as he rested his head on her shoulder and murmured assurances that she was going to be okay, Sera crouched on her other side to rub circles on her back, pull her hair out of her face before the braid Mare had worked it in could get all vomity.

“s’okay Inky, ‘sandra’s okay, you did a really great job.”
“I’m sorry, I’m- I’m o- “ um… dry heaving now, so not quite ‘okay’.

“Shhh, shush. We’ll sit here until you’re not sicky anymore, I’ve got potion if you need it, okay sweets?” Inky nodded, leaning against Sera when she was done and catching her breath, shite she was shaking real bad.

“She needs potion, greeny-white,” Cole said as he vanished.

Frick! Yeah, good, he was off to get it then, Sera didn’t have those ones on hand but Mare… oh cripes, she hoped Marehis did. “Does your tummy hurt real bad?” Sera worried, even more when Inky nodded, resting her head against Sera’s shoulder, catchin’ her breath. It took…it took a while for ulcer things to happen, right? Took weeks for Ink to develop one last time. She’d been pretty stressed the whole way here, and then actually getting to Sahrnia and seeing how shite it all was, ‘sandra getting that badly hurt and having to do something medically ‘ouch” to help her was definitely taking a toll.

Red Templars was shite! And they could freaking rot for all Sera cared!
Sera pressed a kiss to her temple when Cole showed up again, unstoppering potion as he held it to Inky’s lips for her to sip at, real careful until she downed it all, trying to keep it down.

“We’re just gonna sit here until you feel better, kay Inky?”

“Kay,” she agreed, noddin’ and closing her eyes. Mmm, kay, it was cold as shite, but it was warm sitting like this, especially with Inky in her lap and Cole coming to wrap his arms around them, pulling them to his chest—he was a skinny guy but he had enough room for their heads, tucking Inky’s under his chin.

“You will feel better,” Cole said, kind of of sounded like he was assuring himself more than Ellie, shite he sounded teary, “it will be okay.”

Let them sit for a minute while Ellie caught her breath good before, “I need help up,” Inky sniffled, oh, yeah she was real shaky, Sera was nervous the girl might go face first into her uh, pile of vomit, but Sera rose up with her, supporting her weight. Something in her big sister brain went off and she just wanted to carry the girl, but they had people coming. Soldiers and things Inky was supposed to be boss of so, she just wrapped an arm around Ellie’s shoulders and helped keep her upright, Cole trailing after them like a worried pup.

“All good, Imekari?” the Iron Bull asked.

Ellie nodded. “Sorry, yeah, I’m okay. You okay mami?”
sandra looked exhausted, layin’ against Bull’s side but she nodded, Mare’ was holding her hand and when the Seeker gave her hand a squeeze the Elf woman offered her a smile and voiced the question ‘sandra was too tired to, “Are you alright, sweet girl?” Marehis asked, “Cole came and made theft from my potions bag,” she assured they wasn’t about to let it slide if Inky shrugged or brushed it off like she hadn’t just been sick or needed potion.

“M’okay, potion helped. How’s your wrist mami?”

Was fine, at least Sera’d seen it get taken care of, but the Elf woman held her wrist now—wrong one, that was how fixed up her wrist actually was, she didn’t even remember which one had been hurt in the first place—and said, “Would you look at it for me please, da’vehn?”

Oh, ‘cause it got Inky sitting down instead of standing around or pacing while they waited. Ellie immediately knelt before Marehis, doting on her poor little wrist, checking it for bruising and carefully pressing and asking how badly gentle pressure hurt, Marc…fibbin’, but just enough to pass it off like it was still sore—not enough to need anything done to it, but just enough to double check everything was okay so Inky wouldn’t immediately pop back up again. Ellie carefully tested each of Marehis’ fingers, massaging at her knuckles and peppering the hand with kisses when she was satisfied her mami would make a full recovery. And then her attention was on ‘sandra, checking her for fever. The woman was practically falling asleep, laying against the Qunari and Ellie gave her a run-through of sorts,

“Don’t be scared to fall asleep, okay mami? We’re going to take good care of you,” Inky promised, “Everyone is safe, we’re secure here, and we’ll settle in for the day, okay? So absolutely zero worries! I’ll write papi and make sure he’s okay and doesn’t need anything, and if anything happens I’ll help! And if I can’t do it, I got a lot of people around me who can help me! and…oh! Okay—do I have permission to administer sleeping potion?”

“Of course, Eleanor. Whatever you deem necessary I’m fine with,” Cassandra tiredly assured, brushing her knuckles along Inky’s cheek.

“Kay—so, if you fall asleep soon, don’t worry about it,” Ellie said, raising a hand to cover the one resting against her cheek, givin’ ‘sandra’s hand a little squeeze, “Mami and Sera will help me—we’ll make sure you’re clean and comfortable, in warm jammies and a cot as soon as that becomes available. We’ll keep you warm. You need to stay hydrated, so we’ll be administering fluids however you can best take them on. The only potions I’ll use is sleeping, and a few doses of Vehnan Root and Embrium tonic, um…there’s potion that would help with your recovery that I’ll whip up fresh—that all sounds good to you?” she wondered, running through every last thing…oh. Oh! ‘cause ‘sandra might not be cognizant of what’s goin’ on around her if she’s sleepy, it might scare or confuse her, so Inky was going over everything she might start to wake up to, so she knows what to expect and can know that she’s safe and nothing weirdy is going on—she can just doze off with the peace of mind that everything’s going to be okay. Cassandra nodded. “Okay. So don’t worry about anything—get some good rest, and when you wake up, you’ll be all better, okay mami?”

‘sandra offered her a tired smile. “Do not worry yourself either, love of my heart. I trust under your care that I will, in fact, be all better when next I wake.”

Inky nodded, shite, she looked like she wanted to cry. Sera kind of wanted to cry too. Mums wasn’t allowed to get sick! Or hurt! Or anything! Nothing bad was supposed to happen to them—full stop!

“That was some damn good moving on your part, Imekari,” the Iron Bull spoke quiet, mindful of the sleepy woman laying against him, his hand went to rest on Inky’s shoulder, “you did good. We’re all here, and we’ll help however you need. Your mami is safe, and she is alive because of you. That took some damn guts kid,” he complimented but uh, yikey word choice, he even grumbled a bit like he caught it too and assured, ‘I’d be throwing up if I wasn’t holding the Seeker ‘cause uh…pretty sure no matter what state she’s in, she’d rise up and totally kick my ass. I hire Healers for a reason—shit at it myself.”

“You did very well, da’vehn,” Marehis assured, pulling the girl to sit in her lap.

“I couldn’t’ve done it without Sera’s help—thank you sissy,” Inky said, shite! She didn’t
need to be all teary eyed over it! “I know that was hard, and kind of gross but I really appreciate you being brave and watching mami for me.”

“Wasn’t nothin’ ink, glad I was helpful,” she’d felt…pretty well useless in the moment but um, shite, she was glad she’d kept it cool and did what Inky said.

“Here, da’len,” Solas spoke as he approached, sittin’ in front of Inky criss-cross applesauce, holding out a canteen. “You should drink. It is merely water,” he assured.

Little bit of a mischievous smile on Inky’s lips when she raised the canteen to them and got a whiff. “Uh-huh. Has it truly come to this, Dread Wolf?” she wondered drily, as she accused, “Trying to poison me with Vehnan root. Tsk, tsk, tsk.” What the frick-?! Oh. Vehnan root. Elf root. So not-poison then.

“Indulge me in my nefarious schemes if you would please, da’vehnan. I promise I mean you only the upmost harm.”

Inky giggled at that, sipping away at the ‘tainted’ drink, “Gracias papi, my throat really hurt and my stomach was still a little sore—they feel better now.”

“At last! My dastardly deeds have gone perfectly to plan for once,” Solas, frick, the guy was fighting the little smile tugging at his lips as he said, “how refreshing.”

Inky raised a hand to her mouth as she giggled, and that sent the Elf man grinning as if he’d just friggin’ done like, the most amazing thing ever, eyes all crinkly and happy as he shared a little laugh with Inky.

“Oh shit,” Bull warned, “he’s making puns now—this bastard is truly our worst enemy boss-girl.”

“The Iron Bull, don’t be so dramatic. Our worst enemy is the instatement of the ‘no shirt no shoes’ rule. I mean us? Having to wear shirts? By like? Law?” Inky shook her head, “Orlesian criminal and civil justice system is fucked up.”

Poor Bull had to take in a deep breath, hold it as he shook out his laughter, tryin’ to keep it quiet, though ‘sandra was out like a light, poor mum. Sera’d write Cullen too, just…check in on him, make sure he was okay. Guy got real bad headaches, like, big ouch and she thought sometimes stress made them worse. Hearing ‘sandra was hurt, even though she was…she was fine, she was going to be okay, still. It’d freak him out big time. He already hated that they was out here on account of his investigation—he hated that his orders sent them to the Emerald Graves and Emprise du Lion, sent them after Red Templars and put them in the way of Freemen shite. So…he was getting letters! To make sure he was okay, and give him reassurances that they was all safe and staying warm and looking out for each other, and that this shit would be worth it when everything was said and done. Whoever the fuck this Samson asshole was, he was getting arrows in the balls.

Ellie was up the moment she saw…freaking she’d been watching Bull’s ears! Waiting for them to twitch when they picked up the sound of their soldiers and scouts getting close! Marehis was up the second Ellie was, hands on her daughter’s shoulders to support her because shite she-Sera wasn’t sure she should even be standing. And then freaking! She drew her staff! Oh maybe she was gonna use it for support- nope. Nope nope. Inky carried it horizontal at her side as she trekked over to the more open part of the clearin’ just ahead of the mouth of this cavern shite that just…dunno. Something felt off about it. Inky steered clear of it though—she was walking around the clearing and using her staff to scratch…marks? Triangles some places and then rectangles others and when she was done she leaned a little on her staff, swallowin like she thought she might sick-up, but she didn’t, just sheathed her staff again and was heading back to their gathered group just in time to meet their arriving reinforcements. Sera was relieved when Lacey came with the others to bring supplies, got a big hug from her little girlfriend, and she was right worried over Cassandra, frettin’ and helping Inky whip everyone into gear.

“Thank you for coming, I really appreciate all the hard work you guys are doing out here, seriously—if I wasn’t all battle gross right now, all consenting parties would be getting major hugs,” Inky assured, smiles and laughter scattering through their troops, and she nodded before offering up in full seriousness, “Seeker Pentaghast was injured and needs a place to recover. I’ve
marked our campsite up—triangles are where I’d like tents, rectangles are for our base of operations, potion stores, food stores, requisitions table and our trusty war horn. I want a barricade on the northern end before the mouth of that cavern, there’s serious Red Lyrium energy coming from that way and I’m decently sure those scratching sounds coming from it aren’t the friendly neighborhood fennecs.” Freaking scratching sounds?! Shite! What- what was making that? Sera didn’t wanna know! “Red Templars will want this position back badly, so I need heavy guard rotations—three rotations of five and five on either side, operating five hour full-alert shifts.” Huh. oh. So like, first rotation would get ten hours to eat and sleep while the other rotations went—second rotation would get ten while third stepped up and then first again, and third would rest during first and second rotations…cool. That…made sense? Shite, she really did want everyone fully ready, no half-assing their posts. These freaking Red Templar freaks was no joke. “I want scouts reporting our position and condition to the infiltration camp who will transfer those reports to Skyhold—every hour on the hour. If they don’t hear from us, they’re to assume we’ve been hit and need backup, to send word to Skyhold to get further reinforcement asap, get someone out here assessing the situation and figuring out how to move forward. Does anyone have any questions? Concerns?”

“Ready Inquisitor!” assurance rang up from their troops.

“You know it’s real neat how you all do that at once, like, it’s a major power trip and honestly I don’t know how I’m going to handle the whole ‘the world is fixed and the Inquisition is no longer necessary’ thing because I’m pretty sure I’ll be fully addicted to it by then,” Inky sighed. “That’s a future me problem though, we’ll let her handle it. Current you guys, get to work—thank you and I love you all,” Inky waved them off, letting them get to work. “Kay, no one should be coming our way, and everyone’s over there busy, so...the Iron Bull, stay with mami but um, keep your eyes shut, okay? No peeping—you’re here for warmth not peekies. Everyone who isn’t Marehis or Sera, if you’d please be so kind, circle up—give us a bit of a wide berth and keep your backs to us—you know, to stay on guard and give mami some privacy, please and thank you.”

Oh. yeah. River was ruddy frozen—they couldn’t freaking take a bath! And it was cold as shite out here anyway!

Inky was getting so much betting money—Sahrnia sucked ass!

But, they had canteens of water and clean rags, so. They managed. And they was able to keep ‘sandra warm against Bull, the Qunari keepin’ his eyes and mouth shut the whole time, even when Sera was pretty sure he could definitely tell ‘sandra was topless for a few minutes—she needed cleaned up! Shite she was sweaty and bloody, and Ink had bandaged her up good but she changed her bandaging out for fresh—the skin was still bruised and scraped up, looked like she’d like, fallen and hit herself at a weird ass angle where her tits wasn’t what hit first, and she scraped her stomach along her ribcage, well. Scraping and there was this one clean line, just a little thing but it was different from the rest of the injury, shite, Inky’d had to cut into her a bit huh? Weirdy but whatever she’d done, it didn’t...it had sounded gross, and there’d been so much freaking blood, but it wasn’t like she’d chopped the woman open or anything, just made a teensy little incision that freaking saved ‘sandra’s whole-ass life. Frig. Inky plied ointment over the mark—the whole injury too—but it looked like she was worried, like maybe ‘sandra might be pissy if something Ellie put on her scarred. And then fresh bandaging. Marehis was helping with washin’ the woman up and shifting her as needed, so Sera dug around in Cassandra’s bag to get her sleeping clothes, and they got her in her sleep shirt before Inky was hittin’ the rest of her, washing her up careful with a clean washrag.

“Dale mami,” Inky said all complimently of ‘sandra’s bits.

“Da’vehnan,” Marehis laughingly chastised.

“What? I’m just saying! She’s cute and super healthy!”

Really? Sera felt a little blushy ‘cause uh...well, they was a little similar—her and ‘sandra in the uh, downstairs region. Like duh, vaginas, but not all vaginas looked exactly the same from the um. Outside. And Inky said it was...healthy? Sera’d always been a little self-conscious ‘cause um...her lady parts, outside of ‘em, the lips or labias or whatever the frig, had a little more dangle
to them than what she’d seen on most of the girls she’d been with. And there was…she wasn’t much into it—much!—but there was the occasional like…smut mag. These things where women was all drawn up, uh…in various states of dress. Sometimes zero dress with everything uh…out there. And their business was always drawn real neat and tiny, so she’d kind of worried something was wrong with hers\(^8\).

But there was nothin’ wrong with ‘sandra once all was said and done—they got her squeaky clean and in fresh jammies—double socks because it was freaking cold! And by the time they was done, their tent was up—Sera’d arranged for the big one they used in the Emerald Graves to be transported here with them, it’d been set up real nice and everyone laid claim to their cots, they got Cassandra comfy and bundled, Inky asking Bull the stay with her please until their tent got warmed up. Cole too—he was to monitor ‘sandra close, call for Inky the very second something happened, if Cassandra was in pain or running a fever or waking up or something felt wrong. Inky was pretty religious with the potions—first thing first, she poured her refill flask of Embrium for her steamy necklace into a tea pot she uh, heated direct in the palm of her hands until it was steaming and she asked Dorian if he would watch it, get it steaming again if it stopped—help moisten the air in the tent for ‘sandra so her poor healin’ lung wasn’t breathing in scrapey dry air, boost her protection from respiratory infection with the Embrium in it. ‘Mami’ was to have sleeping potion twice, one Ink administered once they got her settled in the tent, and once again in six hours—that’d give her body enough time to healthily process it before adding another one to the mix to keep her sleeping safely for at least twelve hours straight—if she slept more, more power to her, she needed it. And hydrating, nutritive potion every four hours until she was awake. And Health potion—every four hours. ‘sandra had…Inky said it was ‘vitamins’ she took every morning, but Sera was pretty sure she meant her depression potion, just, being cool with it—she’d make sure that got taken with nutritive potion when they had breakfast if she slept through it. She announced this schedule to…well, everyone, so they knew if something wasn’t happening at a certain time, someone needed to jump in and take care of it. But Inky was pretty much in charge of it all—administered potion to Cassandra before disappearing from the tent for…well Sera thought she was just checking on how everything was going outside but she didn’t come back. Solas slipped out of the tent a moment later, saying he was going to assist her and Sera…she had that panicky feeling again—like she had whenever Inky was sick? That if she let Cassandra out of sight for even a moment, something awful would happen. But curiosity-mixed-concern got the better of her when she felt…something ‘ouch’ in the bond. Wait…

Oh frig! She was doing it! She was worried about Inky and her magic was checking up on her and letting her feel…shite! Where the frick was Inky’s steamy necklace?! She’d been wearing it, hadn’t she? Sera had smelled it real strong for most of the day but…it wasn’t doing its thing now. Or did it just not work full stop? No, no, it worked—Inky’s breathing didn’t get real rattley when she wore it and Solas confirmed her lungs didn’t hurt so much breathing in cold, dry air. But freaking ouch! It was like scrapey little knives in her lungs! So what the fuck?!

Inky was at the potions table, Solas at her side, both their hands involved in holding and adjusting this little cauldron over uh…well, their hands. Like, Inky had a hand palm-up on the table, and Solas did too, both conjuring matching fire into them, and in their hands rested the cauldron. Solas was using his other hand to hold the cauldron still and secure while Inky stirred and occasionally stopped to chop up shite and throw it in.

“Um…hey Inky, I can refill your necklace—”

“Not right now Ser’,” Ink said, not…snippy, but short like she didn’t have a whole lot of focus to spare. She was really paying attention to her potion, huh? probably didn’t realize,

“It’s empty, sweets, I can just—“

“Not right now!” Though she reached out in the bond with something that felt like ‘love you’ and ‘sorry’. “Lace is doing something go b- go help her, kay?”

Kind of felt…hand throwy at the ‘b’ sound, ‘cause that sounded like the start of ‘bother’. She wasn’t tryin’ to be a freaking bother! She was trying to help! But Ink’d caught herself, hadn’t been trying to be mean. Sera just felt…well, shite. Because she- she wanted to help! And all she felt like
she’d done was…bother Inky. She was good at sciency stuff, had helped her with potion before but…well it’d been easier stuff and uh, they’d had a proper set up—fire, instead of Inky having to make the kind of heat required for them. And she’d gone into it with Sera, not starting on her own and having someone come up and pick at her attention. But Solas had come out to join her too! Oh. She probably sent for him. Why hadn’t she sent for Sera?! She— …well she wasn’t like, real good with fire. Or any good, really, she couldn’t cast any fire spells yet. Only thing she was like, good-good at with magic was icy pish and uh…that was the exact opposite of what Inky needed.

Blah! Okay, this was some bullshit, Sera’s brain was doing some bullshit! She wasn’t useless—no one thought that! No one she loved, anyway. And she wasn’t a bother, and no one was treating her like she was! She could help—Inky didn’t just need potion, she needed camp running smooth! And Sera was boss at that! She would go see Lacey and see if she could help—not ‘if’, ‘how’!

She wasn’t going to say bother, Cuddly got all mindy on her, she was going to say ‘be with’ but worried that might sound inappropriate like she meant you’d permission to go get Lace from her work to be with her girlfriend. There are thoughts I heard when we arrived, I told Ellie because she would want to know. There’s gossip that bothers Lacey, that the Inquisitor plays favorites because you’re so close and Lace is with you. It hurts Ellie that anyone would think badly of Lace, so she wanted to be more careful, make it sound completely professional because it is. You’re professional, you can help.

Oh, okay, Sera was going to kick major arse if she heard anyone say shite about Lacey! Inky didn’t play favorites out of nepotism or whatever the frig. She played favorites cuz Lacey was her favorite! Freaking Lace worked hard, the Inquisition wouldn’t get fuck all done without her. Cripes that pissed her off! Ugh! Sera helped Lace unload things into their stores for food and pish. And word had come from Skyhold—Cullen to Inky and Sera, and Josie to Cole for Inky. Cole mind-talked to gave her permission to read Josie’s letter to him so she looked it over—Esmee’s info included and a uh…yikes-looking transaction list that confirmed a shit load of stuff was hauling ass to get to Sahrnia already. And papa had tacked on to Josie’s letter, asking after Cole and everyone, and assuring he and his people were all working on getting warm clothing sent out before this evening. Kay. So Sera set aside Esmee’s information and the offer Josie wrote her for Ink to approve, and then she wrote to the infiltration camp, a report that said to be on the look out for Tailor Aclassi’s delivery and to distribute it to the townspeople as soon as they could, gave them a heads up about deliveries of tenting and food and water coming in for Sahrnia too—if they needed more hands on deck, they was to send word to them, and they would send who they could spare.

—

Sera, oh Maker I hope this finds you well. Are you hurt at all, sweetheart? Ellie wrote and said you weren’t hurt, that she is fine (is she? Cassandra warns she’s not allowed to use that qualifier) but your mami was injured—recovering, but it was rather serious? A punctured lung sounds extremely serious. Please, be careful out there. I love you and I miss you and I’m so incredibly, ridiculously proud of you every time I get a report from the Emerald Graves—sweetheart you were amazing! And I’m sure you’re doing amazing in Emprise du Lion. Be safe, watch out for your sister, and do tell your mother she is to cease this punctured lung business—injury to her person is injury to my very heart, and puncturing ones heart is rather a fatal blow. She’s killing me—your mother is killing me, when she is better, please inform her of as much. You’re not hurt, are you? Please take care of yourself sweet girl.

-Cullen

PS Or…would dad be a more correct term? If, you know, there is to be a term at all. Entirely up to you.

Really?
PPS Cassandra did write to inform me you have called her ‘mum’. You did not hear this from me, but she is incredibly honored and absolutely loves this development and I will not be at all insanely jealous.

PPPS Would da work? Or papi—Sera is Antivan. Very fitting for my girl, ‘to be!’: Or father? That’s a bit formal for my liking but it also makes it sound like I’m well off and own an estate and drink old expensive bourbon while staring into large fireplaces—you could get away with so much probably ‘oh my father will hear of this!’ whenever someone crosses you. Papa is acceptable but I would be worried about confusion between myself and Mister Aclassi, how your mothers handle both being ‘mami’ is astounding.

PPPPS Absolutely zero pressure, I ramble because I’m nervous and trying to work with you if you’ve some wish for a change of address with me but aren’t sure which you would like. Call me assface for all I care. Please don’t call me assface—small amount of pressure to resume calling me Cullen, but again, entirely up to you.

PPPPPS This is just in case you enjoy the abundance of p’s needed to denote each additional post-script. Josie is glaring at me—she claims I’m using an excessive amount of ink! The nerve! It’s a perfect amount of ink to convey my important letter to my perfect child!

Freaking Cullen was a nut! And freaking her- her dad, so yeah! The whole letter wreaked of it, if she hadn’t thought as much before she would certainly think so now, Maker!

So she dropped him a little note, Hey Dad. Yeah I’m okay, it’s freaking freezing here though! Inky is taking real good care of Cassandra, she’s got a whole potions schedule for her and everything. So, Inky’s watching out for Cassandra, and I’m watching out for her. You’re doing okay, right? We’ll keep reports coming in—don’t worry about this none, we’re here and we’ll handle it and hopefully when all this shite is through you can punch this Samson bastard in the face or something. Drew a crappy little ugly dude face, ‘cause she figured that’s what Samson freaking looks like, and drew little arrows in his dumb face!

Kay. So, food stores were settled, guard rotation looked good, set up how Inky ordered. Oh, food—lunch! Thom was already poking around their stores though, so she made sure he was planning on whipping up lunch, asked if he needed any help—freaking, Inky needed to eat! Once she was done with her whatever-the-frig she and Solas was up to. It looked like a lot of work. Mare even checked on them, quietly asking if they needed anything. Dabbled a hankie at Solas’s forehead and brought Inky water to sip at before joining Sera and Thom, helping get lunch handled.

Ink and Solas looked relieved as all get out as they finished their potions project, friggin’ Solas was sort of leaning against the table for support for a minute, Ink’s hands was shaking something fierce as she reached for vials to pour potion into.

Sera approached, little nervous but, “Can…can I help Inky?”

Ellie blinked a bit, like she was trying to focus and then she smiled real tired, “Please sissy? Thanks.”

“Course.” Yeah, she could do this no problem! Real carefully she poured potion into the vials Inky had set out, filling- shite, all this for a single vial of pish?

“Can…can you hold it up to the sunlight for me sissy? Sun shining directly through it, and tell me what color it is?”

Sera nodded, uh…sun had moved and it was right cloudy overhead, but she got the potion in the light and oh- shite. It- it’d been this murky grey color but now, “s’white, inky? Goldy streaks all through it.”

Ellie heaved a sigh of relief, “Thank the Maker,” she breathed. Then, “And papi,” she took a beat and Sera set the potion down on the worktable, raised her hand to rub circles on Ink’s back.

“You want me to fill your necklace now Ink?” Sera wondered.

“Oh, gosh! Thanks for thinking of me sissy, I’m sorry I was snappy,” awe. Was sweet, but she didn’t gotta be sorry for bein’ focused on something important. Still nice to get hugged though! “I’m okay um…can I use your Embrium water please?” she asked.

Oh! “Sure thing Ink,” Sera said, handin’ over her flask. Inky didn’t move to refill her necklace just yet, but Sera wasn’t the one who needed it, wasn’t a big deal if Inky held onto it,
clipping the flask to her belt. “Lunch is on,” Sera told her, hoping, “your tummy feels better?”

Inky nodded, “Uh-huh! Thanks—I’ll eat in a minute, Mami should take potion before it cools. You go ahead, kay sissy? Gosh, I forgot all about lunch, make sure you eat good,” she fretted, looking Sera over, “You’re okay? You’re warm enough?”

Huh? Oh, was in her sleep shirt—friggin tits could only dig being in armor for so long, she’d wanted to get more comfortable, had her overcoat draped around her shoulders so she wasn’t freezing. “Yeah Inky, I’m fine. You okay?”

Ink nodded as she stepped way from Sera, cool—she was okay on her feet, not so shaky anymore as she took the potion she’d made and dashed off to the tent. Solas smiled warm when Sera offered him her arm, just, guy looked warn out and she figured he would be ready to eat too—she was gonna make Inky a plate for when she was all done with ‘sandra. “What was that stuff?” Sera asked.

“I don’t rightly know. It was rather the large mix of Vehnan root, Crystal Grace, Embrium,” Solas sighed, “we made quite the concentration, that stuff may well be capable of waking the dead.”

“Maker’s Breath,” Viv said, she’d come out for lunch with Dori and Bull, Thom filling a bowl of stew for her.

“Yeah, cripes, it’s crazy all that only turned into one friggin vial.”

“It was not an oath, child, but the name—the potion is ‘Maker’s Breath’. Its an extreme concentration of healing properties for handling debilitating respiratory illness—brewed to perfection, a single vial is all one needs.”

“Da’vehnan,” Marehis greeted as Inky emerged from the tent, though the Human girl went to Sera first, looked like she was gonna hug her but something…huh, her magic told her to stick her arms straight up? Which was weirdy, made her overcoat slip off her shoulders and onto the ground, but okay? So she did and Ellie let out a little happy squeak before- frig! Awe! Inky Sweets had gotten Sera’s sweater for her! She pulled it over Sera’s arms and head, the Human girl picking up Sera’s fallen coat to drape it back over her shoulders and then Ellie’s arms were around her neck giving her a squeazy hug, frig! Sweater was tasty! Like…dunno, Ink’d…gosh. Her magic was already ‘xhausted from holdin’ fire for so long and she’d still managed to squeeze out a bit more to make Sera’s sweater feel cuddly warm! Made Sera wanna hug her and lay the frick down for a nap it was so cozy! But naps could wait, Ellie finally sat it down to lunch, sitting in Marehis’s lap, snuggling up to her and signing real content.

“Mami’s sleeping really good and she took potion so well! Her chest sounds clear and she isn’t developing infection, potion should keep her from doing that…still want a dose of Vehnan root in…gosh, pretty soon, wowza, were we brewing for two hours papi? Gosh, I’m sorry just…um, it kind of…it takes longer to brew at the lower temperature but—”

“It comes together stronger—yes,” Solas assured, “I do understand the methodology of ‘low and slow’. It was pertinent to get it in the Seeker’s system quickly after such an injury, but yes, taking the time allotted proves beneficial as well in the final result, I’m pleased to have helped you to your mother’s benefit, Ellie.”

“Eleanor,” Viv spoke up, real careful, like she was caught somewhere between bein’ worrying about pressuring Ink with her question and bein’ scared of what her answer might be, but, “is there some...reason you do not come to me when you’ve need of magical assistance?” she wondered.

“Huh?” and then Inky gasped, “Oh gosh! Tia! Awe, I love you loads—honest! There’s all sorts of stuff I’d come to you for if I needed help, I just- I wouldn’t want to mess you up.”

And now the woman was just confused. “Mess me up?”

“With your own potions project. Gosh, you practiced so much in Val Royeaux, I mean you spent days at the University. You’re practicing to get your timing down just right, yeah? Developing muscle memory and reinforcing it—I’d hate for it to come down to your final project and you’re so caught up in what you’re doing your hands remember something we did with potion I didn’t necessarily need you to help me with. I’ll come to you if I need help with learning a spell or
demons, or hair trouble or problems with bossy nobility or just needing a hug from my favorite tia!”

Viv’s brow raised at that, “…truly?”

“In and out of the field!” Inky assured, “Well, except out of the field you’re tied—it’s still first favorite! Just! With Tia Josie—I’m sorry! But I love her to pieces of pieces! When we were all shopping together my heart was so happy! It was the best Tia-Mija date ever!”

Shite, Viv looked ruddy…like she was horrified to find herself moved, almost teary at that. Madam had to clear her throat at that, “Well…perhaps we shall make time for another such outing. Too, I…delight in Lady Montilyet’s company, there is no reason she cannot join us when we’ve meals together, save her own schedule perhaps but we could work to suit that. If it…if the notion pleases you, my dear.”

“Tia!” Inky said, almost screamy with excitement, “That’s the best idea anyone has ever had in life ever! Yes please!” and then she was real gaspy with excitement, “Podemos hablar en Antivan todo el tiempo?”

Viv uh, got real blushy, softest little smile on her face as she supposed, “Si te gusta,” with a nod. Speakin’ warm as she assured, “Of course, my darling. I will write Lady Josephine and make arrangement. Something to look forward to, upon our return to Skyhold.”

Oh shite- oh shite! Inky…Inky smiled but her chin was a little quivery, eyes tearing up as she nodded, snifflin’, crap!

“Oh da’len,” Mare rubbed Ellie’s back.

“Sorry! Sorry! I really do love it,” Ink assured, hastily wiping at her eyes and smiling to Viv, “gosh, yeah, I miss Skyhold just awful.”

“s’okay to be homesick Inky,” Sera said—they was getting fists! Fists to the face if anyone so much as thought making Inky feel like she was a baby for missing home and the people there! Cripes. Sera’d only heard once from Kremmy-boy, and Ink…well Sera knew she thought the world about the sort of treatment he’d be getting—she’d never heard of it but once she did it made sense to her, she felt almost dumb for not thinking of it herself before, testoster-whatever helping with um…shite, what had Krem called it? Gender…dysphoria! Yeah, anyway, Krem’d connected Ink with his Healer Goode. Which uh…was good? Like a good omen maybe, havin’ a Healer already labeled that? Healer Goode was real sweet, Krem told her that his girlfriend was into healing, would be supporting him through all this so she sent along a shite ton of information, booklets and a pages long letter offering her insight and letting Ellie know she could feel free to write her anytime with questions and if she was ever in Elmridge*, Healer Goode would love to meet with her. Didn’t come off like a ‘I wanna rub elbows with the Inquisitor’ invite either, ‘cause Krem wasn’t in the business of throwing her title around and the things she wrote had to be sent through Krem—Healer Goode sending him the package marked ‘To Lieutenant Cremisius Aclassi’ with a little note attached ‘for your Ellie’. And Krem’d fessed up to yeah, keeping his connection to the Inquisition’s leader on the down low but uh…sounded like he was a little embarrassed, at least that’s what Sera got when Krem wrote to her when she asked after his appointment—’cause apparently Healer Goode posed the question “what’s your support system like?” and he’d talked about Bull and the Chargers, and his papa, his friends and mentors in the Inquisition…and then his girlfriend. To the point their appointment ran over into the Healer’s lunch break and now there was some lady Inky never met who knew she smiles like sunshine, loves coffee, her mabari, and feta cheese, and her favorite color’s green, and one time, while evading guardsmen after her and her friends for settin’ off illegal fireworks in the woods, she straight up got knocked out from running face-first into a tree and woke up off the hook for her crimes ‘cause they saw her hit that tree and thought ‘oh, the poor girl’s blind’ and he was pretty sure that was the first time he thought he wanted to marry her—her telling him that story. Sera’d never ruddy heard about that before! And Inky was pretty cute when Sera asked her about it, animated and enthusiastic as she retold it for her in front of her party the other night, it’d been a right riot.

Oh! Frig, anyway—Ink had to be missing everyone back in Skyhold but especially Krem, she was excited for him explorin’ this treatment but yeah, there was a level of nervousness too. She
was ruddy terrified something might go wrong—what if there was some complication where Krem didn’t like how he was respondin’ to treatment, or worse he responded in some way that was harmful to him? What if it hurt his sense of self? There was like, things about people* who’d done this before and when they encounter dysphoric feelings or reminders of their birth identity they had worse feelings about it, could even get angry with themselves, hate it! She- she wanted him to do this for him, for his own sense of self and peace of mind and mental, physical health, but she hated being so far away—there was a difference between being able to go see him, be able to get all the information on what was happening in the moment if something was going wrong for him because she was present and being able to help or comfort him in person, and just maybe getting some mention of it in a letter, writing that she loves him and offerin’ support on paper. What if he really needed him and she couldn’t be there? And what if…what if he didn’t er…like her none, didn’t find himself attracted to her anymore? Things like that could change, when people started messin’ with their hormones, sometimes people who identified one sexuality came out the other side attracted to something completely different or…what if he did get er…super upset, feel abandoned or finds he really hates the long-distance part of their relationship more than just cutsey “I hate when you’re gone mwah mwah mwah”? And then Inky felt like absolute shit that she was worried about that because that- that just affected her and this wasn’t about her, she said—she wanted what was best for him! If this led to him being happier and healthier? Loving himself more? She wanted that way more than she needed him to love her. Which was…dumb! Sera’d be devastated if Lacey or Widdle broke up with her! She didn’t freaking want to be devastated! She usually went out of her way to avoid that pish! So it wasn’t wrong of Inky to not be thrilled at the fear of Krem not wanting to be with her anymore! That shit would hurt!

And Cullen was…he was sicky too. Real bad migraines, it scared Sera. Day before they left Skyhold this last time, she’d walked into his office to update him that she would be going with Thom’s people and Lace to investigate the Emerald Graves and found him at his desk, no lamp light, hunched over with his head in his hands, just pale—no freaking color to him whatsoever, like he- like Lady, when they found her dead. Pallid and clammy and strained, like the muscle and tendons in his head was tryin’ to squeeze his aching skull out so they wouldn’t have to put up with it anymore, just exhausted looking.

“Cullen? Shite, d-do you need-“ Adan, she was gonna say but, Cullen sat up, right startled but he smiled real big, breezed right through, “To see my brilliant child? I did! Come on in sweetheart, what can I do for you?”

It…it wasn’t any fun, knowing something was wrong, that there wasn’t much you could do to help to begin with but…it was worrisome, being away and not being there if he did need someone to get him a Healer in an emergency. And this shite with Samson, it was definitely wearing on him, had to be making him anxious, what if he wasn’t eating or- or getting enough sleep or- just in general havin’ shite headaches and then doin’ things that contribute to that even more because of all this?! Inky wanted with everything to do whatever she could to help Cullen—she hated how much this was all getting to him, it pushed her harder to want to be perfect at setting it right, go in, solve their problems, and their next report home is “Everything’s great papi! There’s no more problems in the world and you can knock back potion, eat some soup, take a hot relaxin’ bath, and go to bed!”

Sahrnia was shite, ‘sandra was sick, and so was the two most important men in Ink’s life—possibly important people in her life ‘cause Krem was definitely top two favorites of all people, and Ink was a major papi’s girl.

And there was a major time crunch—‘cause all this shite? Needed handled before the freaking Wardens did their crazy blood magic meeting in the Western Approach.

Inky was stressed and she could cry about whatever the fuck she wanted to! Sera snuggled up with Mare and Inky, tryin’ to share the warmth the Human girl had put into her sweater. It was freaking cold out!

Sahrnia was shite!
Sera…was still real shite at the bond stuff.

Ink handled her paperwork during lunch—stomaching a few bites of stew as she scratched away a letter to that Esmee lady for a change of post, if she’d come work for a few weeks with the people of Sahrnia until they was back on their feet, get a proper healer in house or…well, they might just have to ruddy relocate. Which was another thing—wrote up Josie and the advisors, talking plans for the Inquisition to assist if Sahrnia was straight up lost and its people needed moved. Sera thought…she saw the half bowl of stew and thought Inky had gotten seconds, like normal, and just hadn’t finished it. And then she took care of administerin’ potion to Cassandra, checking on her, well, every hour on the hour really Sera realized about the fifth time it happened. Cole might’ve been monitoring her, but Ink was still constantly checking her watch and going to make sure Cassandra wasn’t suffering complications. And she laid down with Sera and Mare that night, in the cot alongside the one she had ‘sandra set up in, Inky laying between them and the Seeker after she got another pot of Embrarium steam running once the first finally steamed all the way empty. She didn’t lay down just yet though, she had a little jar of…oh! Lotion pish Viv made for Sera um, after she found out ‘bout Sera’s lyrium burn. She’d um…known Lyrium burns just sort of always felt scratchy and burny, even after they was healed—Sera’d found a jar of lotion in her pack on the way to Sahrnia, Viv’s handwriting on the label, something pretty smelling and medicinal that soothed the milky-white scar on Sera’s palm real nice. Inky’d gotten the jar out of Sera’s pack and took her hand, massaging lotion into Sera’s hand before pressing a kiss to her cheek and saying she was sorry but she didn’t think she would dream in the Fade with them tonight. Which Sera thought was fair, Inky might be scared she’d see bad shite in the Fade or…or maybe she just needed a break from it. Sera didn’t think she’d ever get bored of the Fade. Crazy as that sounded, she used to be ruddy terrified of it but now it was like, the ultimate play place, she could dictate what was happenin’ while she was dreamin’! Who wouldn’t want that? But yeah, taking potion to sleep, just get some pure, deep rest where her brain would be totally off for a few hours? Sera could respect it.

So she was right confused when breakfast rolled around and Inky looked like she hadn’t slept for shite.

“Inmekari? You okay babe?” Bull wondered when he gingerly passed her a bowl of oatmeal. “Mmhmm,” she nodded, sloppin’ her food around with her spoon a bit before taking a bite she swallowed and then, “Mami will wake up today. I’d like to close the Rifts before she does.” …uhhh… “All of ‘em, Ink?” Sera asked. Lace uh…no one had been able to get straight through this shitezone. They wasn’t sure how many of those fucking things were in the area, ‘cept for the ones just right smack on the river outside Sahrnia.

Which was the ones she meant, duh. “The river ones, yeah,” she swallowed again uh, no food that time, just nerves. “They’re pretty bad and I…mami needs time to recover. If she wakes up and they’re still out there, we’ll still need to deal with them and she’s not going to like being awake and having to just lay there waiting for us to get back, plus that’s…that’s super stressful, everyone going off and leaving her to worry will just…it’s not conducive to actual rest and recovery so we’re not doing it—if everyone is with me, I’d appreciate it if we could hit them after breakfast.”

It wasn’t…it wasn’t till Inky was sealing the first Rift shut that Sera realized she wasn’t hearing the vibrating rattle of runestones resonating from Fade Magic gettin’ forced through them. Because they wasn’t.

“Is everyone good on potion? No one hurt real bad?” Ink checked, everyone had to dip into their potions but nothin’ serious. “Okay then, lets hit the second and call it a day.”

“Inky!” Sera screeched, friggin’ alarmed, she-! “You’re not wearing your bracer! Shite—Cole—”

Ink’s hand was on her arm as she- frick, “Stop!” broke fierce from her lips. “Cole’s watching mami!”

“It’s just real quick Ink, he can bring your bracer and zip right bac—“

“Its fine,” Ellie insisted, voice a little cracky—dry, hallow sounding. “my own fault
forgetting—I’ll remember next time, won’t I?”
That…didn’t…okay that sounded almost creepy, like- like punishing herself? “Inky.”
“Da’vehn an, do not be so hard on yourself. Cole can stay put, I’m no Spirit but I’m swift, I can-“ Marehis was offering.

“Keep it moving to the next Rift faster then. It’s literally right over there, why would we waste our time?” Ellie drawled almost…almost a literal eyeroll accompanying her tone.
No one was hurt real bad but uh…they was all staring at Inky like she done went and grew a second head. More like a second personality. Since when did she talk back at Marehis?

“Inky.” the name shot out of Vivienne and Solas’s mouths in unison before their very separate, overlapping,
“-take that tone with your mother again and I’ll take that glib tongue of yours and freeze it.”
“-apologize to your mother this instant.”
Ink was already moving forward…toward the next Rift which-
This whole fucking place was shite.

“I’ll be sorry for her then,” Sera said, restin’ a hand on Marehis’s shoulder, “let’s just go close that thing.”

“If the Inquisitor insists on behaving like a brat-“ Viv started.
“Look where we are!” Sera snapped, “Fucking what? A shit shoot from camp? Two freaking huge ass Rifts within a mile of our beds last night. The Inquisitor has been holding it down for twenty four fucking hours with no sleep, fuck all to eat, in nerve sizzling pain that only gets worse the longer we stand around. She can be plenty sorry when she isn’t about to keel over, okay?”

“Why the hell hasn’t she been wearing her bracer?” Dorian wanted to know.

“She can’t!” oh Sera was- she was about to catch a tude! Start fightin’ the grown ups for sicky Inky!

“Sera is correct,” Solas rasped as if he’d just…the fuck was he doing all day?! He was the one actually good at the bond and he was just now using it?! “These Rifts, they are powerful, proximity to our camp alone would have worn her runestones down twice over at the very least, if not thrice, had she worn her bracer the whole of our time in their reach. Runestones, unfortunately, do not grow on trees.”

Gotta be made. With rare-ass ingredients. Shite. And Ink…she wasn’t punishin herself she was just literally dead-ass tired, didn’t wanna say she was hurtin’ but didn’t have the energy in her to dance around and spout off some cheery bit about them being able to press on with the power of love or some shite.

Vivienne sighed out a frustrated sound, "She could have returned to the infiltration camp, none of us would begrudge her that-"

"Infiltration camps even closer to the Rift and even if it wasn’t, ’sandra couldn't ruddy be moved and if you think Inky would just leave her right now you're out of your freaking mind," Sera argued.

“Shit,” Bull swore softly as they started following after Inky who stopped short of settin’ the Rift off all on her lonesome, frick that would’ve been bad! They needed to catch up! “No wonder kid forgot to put it on when it was time to move out.”

Sera…wasn’t too sure she’d actually forgotten. “Anyone check on ’sandra last night?” She sure fucking hadn’t. Shit. She’d been ruddy tired and just slept hard until she smelled breakfast. Checked on ’sandra once she was up, pecked a lil’ kiss to her cheek and made sure the blankets was snug around her. They had been, cuz ink hadn’t shared them with her, she’d bundled her mami up, and laid at her side wide awake and watchin’ all night.

“I woke and made sure she was well,” Marehis said. Awe, sweet.

“And was Ink up?”

“She-” Marehis blanched. “She said she was merely re-heating the pot of Embrium solution and then she would return to bed.”

Yeah…sounded like one of Ink’s ‘not-a-lie’s—she’d be returning to bed. Didn’t mean she was going to sleep. “Ink’s scared shitless ’sandra was gonna have some complication in the night.
If she fell asleep and something happened, she’d never forgive herself. Huge ass Rifts burning at her Mark probably helped her stay ‘wake.’

“Might be the only thing keeping her awake,” Bull rasped out.

Ink was standin’ kind of shaking herself, jostling on her feet like she was working out some nervous energy Sera wasn’t sure where the fuck she got ‘cuz she had to be about out of energy for forever at this point but when they caught up to her she cleared her throat, chin quivering.

“I’m sorry, mami, seriously,” she snifflled, “I’m being a bitch and none of you deserve that—"

Oh, Mare was arguey at that, “Da’veh!”

“You’re all out here doing this for me, it’s early and miserable out and we’re down a badass Seeker of Truth. That wasn’t right and I’m sorry.”

“I forgive you, sweet girl—I’ve said things to my own mother that would make your snapping sound like an ‘I love you’.”

“I do love you mami,” Ink promised, soundin’ miserable with herself and Mare pulled her in for a hug.

Did not love the second Rift though, but they survived it, if only freaking barely. Everyone drained their potions real hard, and Thom was limpin’ it back but Sera offered her shoulders for support. Bull’d have done it but he was a little occupied. Second the Rift was sealed, Inky was on her knees, workin’ to catch her breath, trembling and the Qunari had immediately scooped her up and started carrying her back to camp, Marehis on his heels.

“I’m okay,” Ink sniffled as they neared the frozen riverbank, “th-thanks the Iron Bull.”

“Should lay it down Imekari,” the Qunari intoned when she swayed as he set her on her feet. “I have to check on mami, she’ll be waking up soon,” though, whew. Okay. Ink had put her runestone bracer in the chest they kept in camp of important armor pish, broke it out now ’cause there wasn’t any Rifts around to wear it down, but it…Maker she was glad it could distract her Mark, keep it from burning full stop and that wouldn’t wear her bracer down bad.

And um, she did finally get to ‘laying it down’.

Ink stopped real still the moment she stepped into the tent.

“Good morning Eleanor,” Cassandra greeted soft warmth in her voice. Cole’d piled most of their pillows up so she didn’t have to put any effort into it, was just propped up real comfy, a little tired but cozy. But she was up and warm and readin’ the book Papa Aclassi had sent her, Cole was seated criss-cross on the cot next to hers holding onto a warm mug of tea for her.

Sera could smell salt, Ink was definitely tearing up, breath a little shuddery before she asked, “How are you feeling?”

“She is recovering—she is tired but not badly.” Cole readily reported, “Her lungs do not hurt, her breathing is back to normal, she does not have an infection or bleeding or blood clots.”

“I am alright, sweet girl,” Cassandra confirmed.

…Inky hyperventilated for a hot second before a sob tore from her throat and she just went full weepy, crying, “I was so scared! I’m so gl-gl-glad you’re alright, I— awe sweet babe, she was cryin’ too much to talk.

“I am alright, sweet girl. Are you?”

Ink nodded even as she fell into the cot alongside ‘sandra. “I’m really tired mami, my everything kind of hurts right now and I’m…I’m so…” she snifflled a bit, voice petering out on her as…shite. Being armored up wasn’t uncomfortable enough to keep her conscious. “I’m so glad…”

Cassandra rested a hand on Ink’s back, “…would someone care to explain my child’s current state?”…well. Already recovered her mum bear glare. Yikes.

“Your body was badly hurt.” Cole said simply as if that were, in itself, explanation. And then, “Oh. She stayed up watching over you, I watched over you but she needed to do it herself, could not sleep because she was scared you would die. She did the same thing when my body was badly hurt. She thought she messed up again. She didn’t mess up before, but she feels like she did, she couldn’t let it happen to us.”

Well at least ‘sandra was as confused as everyone else, “Cole?”

“A boy from Ava’s village, he was playing with his older brother, playing swords but with
pitch forks, and ended up with one of the tines in his throat. His brother ran with him to Ava, and Ellie was visiting. Ellie had never helped with that before—Ava talked her through treatment. She did as instructed, there was nothing else she could have done, they plied stitches and potion and ointment and rest and prayer and still, Ellie woke in the morning to discover he had died in the night."

“Maker,” ’sandra breathed, running a hand through ink’s hair, playing a bit with the part that had unwound from the braid Mare’d put it in.

“Ellie did not have Ava to talk her through this time, we are in terrible climate for recovery, everything is against it—Sahrnia needs so much, the Inquisition needs so much, we were not prepared for this quest to take so much, so long. Everything is scarce. So she has been making sure nothing is scarce for you. That you were warm, had good air to breathe. She used the last of her Embrium water, Sera’s, to do that, there is only so much left in her stores, she is saving it for emergency—the if of you needing it disarming her need for it, it is just plain water in her steam necklace now.” Shite! Sera thought it smelled different—still smelled like Embrium ‘cause it usually had the stuff in there all the time, it lingered even when the necklace was empty. “Then she watched and waited, guards until you were safe and sound, burning in her Mark to keep focused. Now she is full of relief.”

Viv cleared her throat. “Dorian.”

“Yes dear, I’m with you,” he immediately…agreed?

“We will go prepare more Embrium water.” Oh! Sweet!

“Ellie hid her Embrium so no one could use it for not-Cassandra,” Cole said, “It is in her socks. Not the ones on her feet—the clean ones in her pack.”

Sera dug around in Ink’s things for them—she needed ‘em anyway, the socks. “Kay, you lot do that—thanks,” she said, handin’ ink’s stash off to them. Pfft. Inky had a stash. Just wasn’t anything fun, cripes, she was such cute little dork!

Sleepy dork. Dumb, sweet Ink.

“Let’s get Inky cleaned and cozy,” Sera said, Mare nodding, pressin’ a kiss to Sera’s temple as she murmured, “Excellent thinking da’vehnan.”

Everyone cleared out, even Cuddly made himself scarce, he wanted to help the others. ’sandra sat up more to offer, “I would be of assistance if that suits? Eleanor made certain I was clean the other day after all.”

“Mmm yes,” Marehis hummed as she dug out clean sleep clothes and wash cloths, “She was very complimentary.”

“…complimentary?”

Sera snorted. “Dale on yer bits, ’sandra,” she tattled with a giggle as she fell into bed alongside her and Ink, pullin’ the girl’s boots off. Frick! Good thing she hadn’t hid none of her Embrium in her wearin’ socks. Maker, stinky Inky!

“You’re super cute and healthy, in Ellie’s medical opinion,” Marehis teased, “We’re in agreement, of course.”

“I’m…my…” ’sandra was bright red, very tentatively pointin’ at her chest.

“I said yer bits mum,” Sera corrected, “not your tits.”

…well. Her lungs was workin’ good cuz she took a deep, deep breath.

“Maker preserve me.”

There was a sentiment Sera had expressed multiple times since their arrival to Emprise du Lion, that Marehis whole heartedly agreed with. It fit this whole experience rather well. Sahrnia is shite.

Succinct, accurate, the stuff of poetry really.
She wasn’t certain what was worse, really. The Red Templars, the Red Lyrium, or the red in her underthings.

Ugh. She was relieved in that regard, unpleasant as it all was—she’d been petrified for weeks when she realized she’d missed her monthly when it should have reared its ugly head in the wake of losing both Haven and access to potion. Adan had only barely gotten enough to supply Ellie as quickly as he had. Solas’s assurances were enough to set her mind to ease enough to pursue potion that would encourage her to return to her own er, natural rhythm. But it was even more assuring once, well…

She’d been wholly asleep—Ellie was curled up against her chest, Sera wrapped around her sister in their sleep, snoring softly against the Human girl’s ear, Cassandra…oh it was such a relief to hear her breathing clearly and strong, Sera’s head tucked under the Human woman’s chin as the Seeker held her close. Marethis startled when she felt a hand at her back, warm and familiar gently stirring and she had conflicting thoughts.

She felt certain she was safe…and felt like she’d been stabbed. Like a boot knife had been left sheathed in her lower stomach.

“Marehis?” Solas’s voice was just barely falling from his lips, an effort not to wake any but her, “You are cramping and I believe erm, you may begin bleeding shortly. I wished to let you sleep as long as you could but you may wish to mitigate the chance for blood stains in your clothes and bedding. Doing the wash will be quite the task while we are here.”

Yes she could uh, feel said blood endeavoring to make its debut. Ugh, her back was stiff, sore as she held her breath to quiet herself as she detached from her sleeping girls and sat up to deal with this…somehow. She was uncertain just where she should go to handle this. How did Cassandra deal with her monthlies in the field when they were all camping together, under the same fabric roof? She was not about to wake her and ask, but,

There was a hand on her back, another taking hers to support her rise from the cot, letting her lean on him as she winced. There was a reason Marehis did not entertain her monthlies. They were horrible. She did not enjoy wasting weeks of her life in misery, nor was she in an occupation that allowed for a fourth of the month where she was not at her absolute best. It was infuriating in a way—she had a tolerance for pain, could go days, weeks enduring the circumstances of torture, her mind remaining sharp and in control of her every faculty while injured and starved, parched. And somehow monthlies could send her to her knees, utterly exhausted and tetchy, and hungry. For food and blood, in the metaphorical sense of course…almost literal as she once broke the binding of a textbook over the head of a boy in her class who tried her patience during such a time—he pulled on her ear while complaining her knife-ear was blocking his view of the chalkboard! She wasn’t in a place of peace to stoically handle the slight and educate him from his ignorance. So. She brained him with a book instead. Red stains found in the wash always forewarned her mother to leave warm meals at her child’s door and let her stay locked away where she could be of no harm to anyone.

And she did not want this affecting her ability to defend her children, and she certainly did not want it to—oh, if she was cruel to them? If Ellie had rolled her eyes just twenty four hours too late, she may have encountered a Marehis she’d never wish to meet. Of course…perhaps this development would prove useful—she’d never endured her monthly in full force since becoming one of Leliana’s Nightingales. Maybe she could afford her girls a few days of rest—lounging around their campsite staying warm and safe while she went forth and singlehandedly beat every Red Templar in Emprise du Lion to their deaths fueled with only the burning rage that accompanied her in times such as these.

She…wasn’t certain just where they were going, but Solas escorted her from their tent, stopping only to shod their feet…the man knelt to do so for Marehis so she did not have to bend over and do so herself, before leading her out into the night.

To another tent. A small one, set up behind the boulders near the edge of camp—so the rocks were between the tent and the camp itself. She wasn’t certain this condition required such privacy but she supposed with everyone in the camp in mind…she would be admittedly
embarrassed if any woke—more so because she was accepting assistance from Solas than the fact that she was enduring a perfectly natural bodily function—and the barrier between them and camp may well keep even the Iron Bull from waking and investigating Marehis missing from her cot. He…had a sense of protection over Marehis, may well tear the camp apart to find her if he discovered her missing. The Iron Bull had been a source of comfort through this time. The Qunari had allowed her to sob her heartbreak into his chest in the wake of Solas’s betrayal, offered support, swearing a sort of allegiance to her as his Imekari’s Tamassran, that she could always rely on him be it for protection or comfort. Or sex—she was to know he would always be willing to do so at no disservice to her, solely for physical relief and perhaps emotional comfort but ahh she… had not yet felt the dire need to ride the Bull. But who was to say? Sex could…alleviate cramping, and the Iron Bull would not shy away from his offer due to her monthly. So. Maybe. The Qunari was very warm and Sahrnia was very cold.

Not…as cold as it had been just a moment ago.

Solas led her to a tent that was rather toasty, like perhaps the man had carefully cast warmth into the tenting fabric as he set it up—he walked her to it, opened the entrance to see her settled and then gave her her privacy, informing her if she needed him, he would be aware and come to her, before taking his leave. There was lamplight and bandaging awaiting her…a kit of sorts for…for perhaps the coming days. A pack, full of bandaging and a…oh. Rice bags. He’d taken soft knit fabric to fashion two slender bags he filled with rice before sewing closed and- and what seemed like some sort of soft fabric belt made to button securely around her hips and hold the bags in place against her lower back and stomach. He’d already warmed it, it was emitting the most soothing- oh-

She hated him! Utterly despised!

What in the world gave that man the right to- to do such dastardly things—endeavor to destroy the world, lay devastation on her child’s hand, and- and then do things like- be steadfast with her girls, pay open penance for his crimes, lay his heart bare before his enemies and pray for them to strike against him for the salvation of her daughter, and then- be-

She understood it now—Sera’s earlier candor with the man, when once upon a time she outright demanded Solas be mean to her, in the wake of Solas showing care for the Elf girl he’d initially disliked, called his kindness ruddy weird. It was! He was not allowed to be so confusingly kind to her!

Because there was a level where Marehis felt it was dearly deserved—the man should grovel at her feet the whole of his days, wait on her hand and foot and beg her forgiveness for time eternal, to pay penance for what he had done. But there was also…every bit of redemption he showed was dangerous to her resolve. To- to hate him for the rest of her life!

Ugh! She would cease caring that he was being so very thoughtful! She would!

He…would just…have to cease being so very thoughtful first, perhaps.

Oh! She hated him!

And he was awaiting her by the fire of their camp when she returned, a mug of warm tea in his hands. And he disliked the stuff. So.

"It is for you, of course,” Solas confirmed with a bit of humor as he handed it off to her. “I…trust you are feeling better?”

“That is not obvious in the bond?” she wondered…perhaps a touch snappishly.

He smiled softly, “It is, I suppose, but there is a politeness in asking,” though, “…as it apparently annoys you, I shall be mindful of it in future.”

“Saving it for when you truly wish to annoy me?” she wryly wondered.

His lips twitched upward, “Perhaps,” and then he chuckled warmly, “I apologize—I do sincerely not wish to upset you. I’m unfortunately doing a poor job of it, apparently. It…” he was silent momentarily, as if considering something or perhaps focusing more on the bond, “before I amend this—do know you may come to me or any of our mage acquaintances to have your rice bags reheated.” And then- he-
He pushed her.
He set the mug of tea aside. Rose up from his seat by the fire. And then pushed her down, onto her back to make a soft landing in the snow, something warm and teasing in his gaze as he nodded and then he left her.

He-!
She’d…she’d been so annoyed with his kindness she’d wished for him to be mean. He’d somehow done a simultaneously perfect and piss-poor job at it.
She swallowed tea past the lump in her throat, grounding herself its warmth as she took a moment before returning to their tent. Solas…she wasn’t certain just where he was, he was not yet returned to his cot, but she’d a certainty he’d not abandoned their camp.
“Everything all good?” the Iron Bull’s voice rumbled out quietly from where he lay in his cot with Dorian against his chest.
“I’m well sweet man,” she softly assured before slipping back into bed alongside Ellie.
The girl stirred…only due to, “Mmm, warm mami,” she mumbled out, snuggling against the Elf woman, head against her chest as she pulled closer to be middle-to-middle and share in the warmth from her rice bag…which would only assist in it retaining its warmth, being caught between two warm bodies and she’d hardly any complaints with the situation.
Sera snorted in her sleep, “Y’cold Inky?” she fretted…almost wholly asleep, just barely awake enough to question her sister and then…proceeded to strip herself of her blankets to cast them over the Human girl, “Stay warm, kay?” before rolling away to lay almost directly on top of Cassandra.
“Sera?” the woman questioned quietly as the action roused her, her hand coming up to card through the Elf girl’s sleep-hazarded hair. “Is it a nightmare, sweet girl?”
“Gave Ink m’blankets.”
Marehis wasn’t certain if the barely-waked woman accepted that as a ‘yes’, that Sera had dreamt to her own horror that she’d given away all of her blankets, or a ‘no’ that she’d truly done as much in sweetness to her sister. The Seeker offered a quiet, “Ahh,” without further explanation, merely holding the girl more tightly, rubbing her back as she fell back to sleep.
Marehis…was the last to wake out of the whole of their party. And she’d been in competition against a woman recovering from the collapse of a vital organ, and Ser Dorian Pavus—a man who despised having to remove his body from his bed before one in the afternoon.
“Mami?” was what roused her, Ellie’s voice soft…behind her, not before her—how was the girl casting her voice? Oh. When Marehis opened her eyes the cots in her eyeline were empty and she carefully rolled over to face Ellie who was kneeling beside their cot, Sera standing a few feet behind her looking…well, worried. Marehis was worried as well, just what time was it? Her girls were armed and armored, her youngest sniffing was she crying? Oh no, no she was entertaining a case of the sniffles Solas had promised to keep her updated on—he was to split his time, ugh. She hated- it- if she were to react badly to potion, she hardly wished for it to be in a way that unleashed itself upon the girls. And if there was some complication…Solas would defend their girls if he felt something that said Marehis was incapable of doing so be it from sickness or exhaustion that her body failed her in this time. So there was a bit of necessity, his keeping close focus on her in the bond, but- oh he hadn’t realized Ellie’s misery their first day in Emprise du Lion—he’d been in the bond when they were in battle with the Red Templars, but afterward, he’d resumed focusing on Marehis. It hadn’t been until he felt the sting of Ellie’s snap at her that his magic had apparently sent him focusing on the Human girl for an answer as to why she’d take such a tone with her. “Papi says you aren’t feeling very well today—we brought you breakfast.”
“Your tummy hurt Mare?” Sera worried, “Do’y want potion?”
Oh, her sweet girls. Perhaps they needn’t be concerned she’d ever have a negative reaction toward them—she felt entirely too emotional, like she might cry, but only because- oh she had such sweet girls! She loved them so much sometimes her heart felt literally over-full like it might truly burst and she would gladly die of her love of them!
“Oh mami, are you in pain?” Ellie worried, unmarked hand against her cheek to thumb away,
well, tears that had formed in her eyes unbidden, ugh.

“Oh, no sweet girl I’m sorry, I’m fine,” Marehis promised. “I’m…well I’m currently entertaining my monthly guest. I’ve had a need of change in my potions regimen that requires er, ceasing taking the one that keeps me from the experience altogether.”

“Awe, mami!” Ellie cooed, hugging her tightly and pressing a kiss to her cheek, “I’m so sorry! Monthlies suck!”

“They do indeed.”

“Shite Mare, I’m sorry,” Sera sympathized.

“Oh! Is that why you were so warm last night?” Ellie wondered and when Marehis nodded, “Is it something magical or does it need re-heated?”

Oh, “I would appreciate if someone would reheat it, yes,” Marehis confirmed.

“We can do it!” Ellie volunteered, “Mami, you eat up—if you want seconds just ask, kay?

Sissy, you wanna try learning a little fire magic? And we can make fresh potion for mami!”

“Sure Ink,” Sera agreed, awe, her sweet girl looked shy and excited at the prospect of learning something new magically, being able to help.

She had such sweet babies! Lights of her heart! Oh, she loved them!

Warm oatmeal, honey…cinnamon sugar? There was something that spoke to Solas’s intervention in the addition to their morning meal.

More so when seconds were delivered by her girls before she could even do more than wish for them.

“Mami! We brought you more oatmeal and there’s toast! And here’s potion for um…cramps and headaches si?” Ellie sounded like she was confirming with Sera.

“Yeah, s’what he said,” Sera nodded as she and Ellie handed her a second bowl of oatmeal and set a plate of warm buttery toast at her side.

… “He?”

She didn’t truly need confirmation. “Papi! He made potion before breakfast, he’d just been letting it cool down and rest until you needed it. I wondered why we had ingredients for it, it was really sweet of Adan to think to send ingredients so you could have fresh potion whenever you were ready for it.”

…she was unaware of any such arrangement. Had- he- she hadn’t thought to write Skyhold’s Healers for potion to handle the symptoms of monthlies, it had been so long since last she had endured one she hadn’t considered much in the way of preparation but…well. Someone had. Adan was an excellent Healer but he’d thought her starting her potions regimen to encourage menstruation as soon as he’d provided as much to her. The only person who knew, in full, her current medical business was. Well. “That was sweet of him.” Solas.

“Ink and me got your rice things warm again for you,” Sera said, handing the cursedly blessed thing back to her.

“Thank you, ma’da’vehnan,” Marehis smiled, and as her child drew near she took her sweet, sweet face in hand and pressing a kiss to her cheek, earning a warm blushing cheek to kiss and the barest bit of just precious giggling. Her sweet ears were blushing! She could just eat them up, truly!

Oh! She wanted to stay in today—no Red Templars or Lyrium or horrible plots, just her and her girls safe and sound at her side.

“Mu-um! You’re welcome, cripes! I thought monthlies was supposed to make us right bitches!” Sera complained—oh! Mum! The girl snorted, “Figures—Inky got all screamy ‘bout how much she loves ruddy everyone durin’ hers. And that was ‘cause she was pissed off!”

“Ohh! Mami! Cremisius let me beat down on dummies when I was all upset and bleedy! We’re going to go beat down on some Red Templar dummies today!” Ellie enthused, “But you can stay at camp if you don’t feel good, we promise to send updates—“

She did want to stay in camp! With her girls. And that unfortunately was not in the cards, was it? “I’m well enough,” she would be—she’d get a change in bandaging and knock back potion, she- she was not sending them out without her and she was wholly certain—she felt a type of violence in how dearly she loved her girls today, that violence could easily be targeted with menace
at their enemies. Oh if anyone lay harm on these girls-
   “Kay mama, you need any help gearing up?” Sera wondered.
   “I have it well in hand but thank you my loves.”
   “We’ll let you get dressed,” Ellie said, and then she brightened further still, her hand going to
Sera’s wrist, “Papi wants our help with something!”
   Did he now?
   Ugh. Despised him.
   Everyone was ready for the day when she emerged from the tent, Vivienne was the first to
approach her, warm hands on her shoulders massaging as she pressed a sweet kiss to Marehis’s
cheek, “You’re certain you feel up to joining us today darling?”
   “I am.” Marehis assured. She would be. More so once potion kicked in, but she had already
delayed them so much she was hardly going to do so further-
   “I apologize, we’re nearly finished,” Solas’s voice was promising, though he chuckled as-
ugh. Her girls were giggly, delighting in something- a…delay of sorts. They were gathered around
the fire, brewing some such concoction,
   “Solas is teaching us honey water!” Ellie announced. “It’s going to be so hydrating and
yum!”
   “It certainly will be…except there seem to be a pair of mischievous da’lens running around
stealing swaths of honey.”
   Sera and Ellie, oh goodness, their mouths dropped open in unified shock as Ellie gasped out,
   “J’accuse, papi!”
   “J’accuse,” he heartily assured, warm laughter in his chest. “Oh but certainly I mean a
different pair of mischievous da’lens. You and Sera would never.” he was certain.
“Damn straight! N’fact I think they went that way,” Sera insisted, pointing over Solas’s
shoulder toward the lake as she dipped a sneaky little finger into a squat pot of honey at his side to
steal another taste from.
   …it was not until Marehis’s potion fully kicked in and the rolling pain in her stomach ceased
that Solas led the girls in filling their party’s water stores with warm water laced with honey,
something beneficial that would be a bit of a treat as they traveled today.
   They would sorely need it.
   The caverns just beyond the edge of their camp. The only path through Emprise du Lion?
Were full in equal measure, of Red Lyrium and Red Templars.
   The caverns themselves was a tight, cramped space for battle—they had to push forward and
be victorious, there was no running back to the security of their camp, their hold there was
precarious as it stood. Maker these Red Templars were wretched things!
   Even as they were felled. Sera stopped breathing altogether—she hyperventilated
momentarily and then sucked in a breath she couldn’t find it in her to force back out as she fell
straight down onto her bottom, hands clutching at her head.
   “Sera!” Ellie beat Cassandra and Marehis to the girl’s side only by the barest of margins,
Ellie sliding on her knees to be before her sister, hands on Sera’s shoulders, “Chica, carina, breathe
breathe breathe, gimme your hands okay?” she implored, hands slipping to take Sera’s, palms
lapsing palms and the Human girl shivered as she poured icy chill in to her hands, pulling on Sera’s
own magic as she promised, “It’s okay, it’s okay—the Red Lyrium can’t get to you—you’re safe in
my sissy! She loves you so much and she’d never ever ever let anything bad happen to you! I love
you, and my magic loves you, and you’re so so safe!”
   Sera shuddered out a breath of relief, crying as she released hold of her sister’s hands to wrap
her arms around Ellie’s neck, “I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I know m’supposed to comfort it b-b-but it was
so scared and I got scared and-“
   “It’s okay Sera! It’s okay—don’t be sad with yourself,” Ellie pled, pulling back and
thumbing away Sera’s tears, “I’m so proud of you, you’re doing such a great job, it’s okay if
something scared you both! Red Lyrium’s terrifying chica! I was only keeping my cool holding
Tio’s hand!” Oh, Dorian was clutching the Iron Bull’s arm rather tightly now and Marehis had
seen him holding Ellie’s hand the moment before she came to Sera’s aid. Oh…oh goodness, this horrible place! There was Red Lyrium growing out of every rocky surface. Grey stone with Red Lyrium growing all around had to be an all-too-real reminder of the horrific future Ellie and Dorian had witnessed at Alexius’s hand.

“Here sweet girl,” Marehis said as she crouched at Sera’s side, lifting the girl’s canteen to bring it to her attention before uncapping it for her, “drink a few sips for me, won’t you da’len?”

Sera sniffled, oh, please don’t let this horrible place be giving both of her girls colds, her poor da’lens! “Th-thanks,” she offered before gingerly sipping at her water, color returning to her features now that she was calming down.

“Sera darling,” Vivienne’s voice sounded, “I myself am unfamiliar with communing verbally with my magic in the way Eleanor does, and I’m rather discontent with the amount of Red Lyrium about. Our magics represent rather similarly, if you wish, we could commune as we pass through this unpleasant place.”

…it was a very round about, very sweet way of asking Sera to hold the Enchanter’s hand. Marehis was albeit confused, thought that Ellie would hold her sister’s hand but oh, Ellie was already shivering rather fiercely with what little ice magic she and Sera had shared, and chill was altogether unpleasant for her, made her poor shoulder ache with old injury—she would give her sister what she needed, but she needn’t do so to her own detriment when someone could step in for her.

“Here da’vehnan,” Solas spoke up, kneeling before Ellie and taking her chilled hands in his, raising them to his mouth to breathe warm air from his lungs onto them as he rubbed them between his own and then his palms glowed warm orange as he returned warmth to her hands. Oh…he seemed to delight in the newfound discovery that…well, magic was magic, that while there were different channels it could take, there was no difference in magic between races. There was light in his eyes as Ellie smiled her thanks for his efforts. “How are you feeling? Are we prepared to move forward?” he wondered.

Ellie nodded. “Uh-huh. Ser’, are you okay?”

“Yeah Ink, m’okay, promise,” Sera said, squeezing Vivienne’s hand as the Enchanter helped her rise to her feet. “You warm enough Ink? Shite it’s freakin’ cold.”

It was…and as they journeyed through the cavern, they discovered why.

Red Lyrium? Was very…very warm. Blazing hot in a way that sent Marehis almost feeling ill, like a sickening heat rolling off the horrible stuff.

“Oh my gosh,” Ellie breathed, holding Solas’s hand tightly as she almost hid herself against him, the Elf man relinquishing hold of her hand to wrap his arm around her shoulders to hold her close to his side, something about it altogether protective- that- he wasn’t allowed- it wasn’t-! It felt altogether barbaric that the man being protective of her child immediately instilled in her a desire to perform the very act that might create another with him of all people! Even more so when just barely a week ago she’d been wholly petrified at the very thought! Oh! Monthlies were nonsense! Or maybe she was nonsense. She wasn’t sure.

The Iron Bull was extremely protective of her children—maybe she would focus on that. She might indeed ride the Bull to keep herself from utter foolishness!

…which felt like indulging in a brand of utter foolishness to spare herself from another. Oh! She hated this!

And she hated Red Lyrium!

“Guys um…sissy? Science time. The facts! Sahrnia is place that relies on it’s river that’s reliably been a source of trade year-round because it’s never had a cold snap like this ever. The entire river froze for the first time in life in the middle of Spring. And there’s blazing hot Red Lyrium all over the place—so much of it, Red Templars are mining it from the area.”

“Friggin’ Red Lyrium’s stealin’ all the heat!” Sera screeched her scientific conclusion, “Shite!”

“Crap,” Ellie agreed, growling out a frustrated, “Ugh! We’ve got to- there’s got to be a way of getting rid of it. If we can’t Sahrnia m-might never get it’s river back! This whole place will just
“S’gonna be okay Ink,” Sera encouraged.

“Eleanor,” Cassandra spoke from Marehis’s side—the Seeker had offered her arm as they moved forward, “We will help Sahrnia however they need it. If all else fails, we will assist those who are left of Sahrnia in relocation, offer any in their ranks who wish to join the Inquisition a place to rebuild with us. You needn’t press yourself to solve their climate issues.”

“Red Lyrium is a menace to the world! I wanna fight it mami!” Ellie complained.

“We’ll fight it, hell yeah Imekari! Break this shit up with our bare hands if we have to,” the Iron Bull assured.

“Amatus,” Dorian sounded exhausted in a way that implied he did not ever believe he would be the sort of person to be the protective uncle rather than the fun one, but, “do not encourage the child to touch dangerous substances with her bare hands.”

“Do stay away from it if you can, da’vehnan,” Marehis cautioned, worry twisting in her stomach. All she could think about was that horrible future Dorian had described for them, of the Red Lyrium disease that plagued them all. If such a thing befell any of them, oh, she could not bear to even think of it. They weren’t even certain how such contagion spread! Ellie, oh, she was already suffering a bit of congestion from this horrid weather, what if- what if breathing around so much of the vile stuff did something irreparable to her girl-

“Ellie, would you do me the distinct honor of a favor?” Solas ventured. She did not owe him a thing in this world! How dare he- “I apologize da’vehnan but it is concerning, so much Red Lyrium around. We’ve not the slightest clue just how those in our ranks became infected by Red Lyrium in the future you bore witness to, if you would please wear the mask I made for you? I made it to filter pollen but perhaps it would behave likewise with lessening your exposure to Red Lyrium.”

“Oh! Gosh, yeah papi. I can do that easy-peasy!” Ellie readily agreed…pulling up her mask from underneath her scarf. “Favor granted! Huh, you know, we’re in Orlais so…now you owe me a favor!”

“Ahh, the formidable Game,” Solas acknowledged. “Well, I must say I’m rather glad if I’m to play with you.”

“I dunno papi…I can drive a pretty hard bargain,” Ellie warned, “I once made Tia Josie make Leliana have a sleepover with me! They wore matching nightgowns! It was the cutest!”

“I’ve no objection to matching nightgowns if it would amuse you da’len,” he supposed, smiling as he earned her laughter echoing through the cavern.

This was all very exhausting, this swing between- between hatred and appreciation, distrust and lust, and back again.

The Red Templars had well established their hold on Emprise du Lion.

The absolute bastards.

They laid their claim on another of the Red Templar’s holds. Well guarded by a- a Behemoth. There were more Red Templar Behemoths. The one assaulting Haven had been nightmare enough, they’d managed to make another and Marehis prayed it would be the last.

Ellie…had been out in out terrified, at the prospect of Spiders the size of horses. And yet she’d not even hesitated to run charging at a mountain sized monster made of Red Lyrium.

“Imekari’s all tuckered out,” the Iron Bull said, as he cradled the girl to his chest. Sera was riding on his back, she’d jumped up to wrap her arms around his neck when he hoisted Ellie up after she struggled to raise herself up on her staff after she, Vivienne, Solas, and Dorian had cast in unity a fierce blast of cold* to finish off the Behemoth. “How you doin’ Seeker? Mare? Momsquad holdin’ up?”

Cassandra and Marehis were holding one another up a bit, walking with their arms bracing each other’s backs, and after consulting her Elf counterpart with a look, Cassandra offered, “We’re
well, the Iron Bull. Let us prepare camp and rest, Eleanor will tell us where we stand when she 
wakes.”

“Is she alright?” Marehis asked as they settled, seating themselves in a circle around a dying 
campfire the Red Templars had been so kind enough to leave them, Thom making himself busy 
building it back up, his men were securing the area and sending up the signal for the Inquisitions 
forces to send supply to them for a third camp in Emprise du Lion.

“Exhaustion, she has minor injuries to be tended,” Solas confirmed. Sera had kept hold of the 
Iron Bull—her feet on the ground now as he was seated before the fire—and now she relinquished 
her hold looking somewhat panicked and eager at the same time.

“Her knees is scraped!” Sera announced sounding concerned but…excited? Awe, her sweet 
da’len, she’d confessed in Marehis…well, she said she’d spoken to Solas about her frustrations 
with her abilities in the bond, and that he had offered her guidance. She came around the Qunari to 
look over her sister, “And her ribs is ouchy—they en’t broke are they?”

“I don’t believe so,” Solas assured. “Health potion will set it to rights.” Thankfully that 
could not be said of the Red Templar that- ugh, vile thing. He’d charged Ellie and knocked her 
onto her back brought a steel boot down harsh on her ribcage in the split second it took Marehis to 
tackled him to the ground, shins landing on his shoulders as she took his head between her thighs 
and…well. there was precious little coming back from one’s skull being wholly detached from 
one’s spine.

Sera took care in rolling up Ellie’s leggings, voicing her confusion at ‘how the frig’ her 
knees got scraped up but her armor was just fine as she dabbed the injuries with a potion 
moistened cloth, Solas steadily offering the rational that the force of contact with the ground drug 
her leggings against her skin—she’d technically scraped her knees on her own armor as opposed to 
the ground tearing through it to scrape her flesh.

“Oh. Ruddy dumb that is,” Sera decided.
“Most certainly,” Solas readily agreed with her, sounding amused to do so.
“Pfft, whatever,” Sera snorted.
“How are you feeling darling?” Vivienne asked, she’d seated herself alongside Marehis and 
Cassandra, raised a hand to brush back a bit of hair that had fallen into the Elf woman’s face. “Do 
you need a moment?”

“If I may,” Marehis said, though she was reticent to…Sera confessed a type of paranoia 
where she felt certain her loved ones would perish if she could not lay eyes on them while they 
were at harm. She felt something admittedly similar, there had always been something of a 
lingering worry for her ward when they left each others sides, that something would happen in her 
absence. That worry only worsened in her after Ellie slipped from her grasp and a wall of fire kept 
her from strangling the creature that pulled what they thought to be dying screams from her child. 
She’d had something of…well she supposed it was a panic attack, when she thought back on it, 
that evening Ellie gave her reprieve from her duties while she hosted Josie and Leliana for their 
sleepover. She’d woken in the night and something just- she hadn’t seen or heard from Ellie or Sera 
in hours and her mind launched into horrific scenarios, most of which made absolutely no sense— 
they were in Skyhold! They were safe—there was every reason to believe they were absolutely in 
perfect health! But her mind just kept spiraling into this fear that something was amiss and…she’d 
a measure of intuition, she usually did know when something was off with one of her girls…and 
then she realized she hadn’t, not always—she hadn’t expected Ellie’s suicide scare in Crestwood, it 
wasn’t until Solas came to inform her he’d gone to Ellie’s aid and brought her to Cassandra that 
she was aware something was the matter, and even then- oh, there was part of her that worried 
about Ellie’s seeking the Seeker in her moment of vulnerability, that she hadn’t thought of Marehis, 
that…maybe Marehis had said or done something that made the girl cautious to bring such issues 
up with her. She’d…she’d responded correctly, hadn’t she? When Ellie came to her upon her return 
from her first venture into the Hinterlands and confessed her symptoms of depression, had Marehis 
given her some reason to believe she could not come to her? What if…what if she found herself 
feeling this way and- oh the balconies in her quarters were so very high-
She’d nearly been ill of her fright, couldn’t catch her breath, it felt like a great weight had settled against her heart trying to crush the air from her lungs and…and she had to move, go, she’d run all the way to the Great Hall and—and realized what a sight she must be, gasping for breath, expression haggard and deranged as she stopped in the doorway between Fen’Harel’s quarters and the Great Hall. She’d told herself they were in Skyhold and nothing seemed amiss. She would calm herself, neither of her girls should see her so-so worrisome, she’d concerned herself, honestly. So. She took in the night air, heading first and foremost to see Sera. Oh, her girl had been having a bit of fun with her girlfriends, drinking and making lively in the Tavern in the middle of the night. There had been a warm hand on her back then—Cremisius, sweet man. He’d just been returning to the Tavern to head to the Charger’s quarters for sleep after his shift and he’d questioned if she was alright, asked her if she would join him, he’d appreciate the company if she was up for it.

And then the Lieutenant gave her his usual seat in the Tavern, where she…she could lean and peek over at Sera if she needed to but the girl wouldn’t necessarily spot her, gone up to the bar and returned with a warm mug of cocoa and…for all that he’d invited her into the tavern for company, told her he would ‘be right back’ and disappeared up the stairs only to return moments later, crouching to pull thick woolen socks onto her chilled, bare feet before shodding them in slender leather slip on shoes,

“Skinner’s, Bull got them for her but she refuses to wear them. You like ‘em, keep ‘em.” And then he looked up at her, smiling kindly, “Everything okay?”

“Certainly,” she assured. He was beyond sweet, but…well it would hardly be appropriate to- she barely knew where to even start speaking of tonight and if she were to do so, it certainly wouldn’t be to a boy who did not deserve half the burdens he carried already, she was hardly about to add her own to them. Oh, he was so tired, sweet sleepy da’len, and it was a sweet ache to her heart, the knowledge that if she began rambling about her anxieties he would sit with her and listen until the sun rose if she needed it. “Get some rest, da’mi. Have the sweetest dreams.”

She’d had sweeter dreams once she laid down again after laying eyes on Ellie sleeping contentedly in Lady Montilyet’s embrace before the warmth of the fire.

She was similarly…in the embrace of someone who loved her, the Iron Bull would not let even a trace of harm befall the girl in Marehis’s absence.

“Huh?” Sera said, sounding confused as she looked to Solas and then, her gaze went with some uncertainty to Marehis as she said, “Hey Mare? You mind if I tag along? I gotta take a leak something fierce.”

Oh. “Come along then da’vehnan,” Marehis invited.

Sera did join her—slipping under the bank at the edge of their newfound camp that dipped low enough they required bridges overhead to safely traverse…especially with a cart full of Red Lyrium, Marehis supposed. It would um…suit, they supposed, for privacy and relieving themselves. Though…

“Oh frig, cool,” Sera giggled from where she’d chosen to squat, supposing, “I did have to go.”

Marehis spoke over her shoulder to the girl, “I’m happy for you da’len?” had she feared she wouldn’t truly need to?

“You um…you okay Mare?” Sera wondered.

“I’m well da’vehnan. I’ve survived monthlies before.”

“I just mean…dunno. Kinda bad at this,” she confessed.

Marehis had successfully finished the gruesome task of changing bandaging…it was little wonder the first time Ellie endured as much she thought someone had truly attempted to murder her. She turned her attention to Sera who’d…why had she removed her socks and boots? Wait, was the girl stripping wholly naked to go to the restroom?…was that a superior way to handle peeing and whatnot in the field? Sera must think so, she was seated on a rock pulling her socks on—oh her sweet little toes had to be so cold!—when Marehis asked, “Bad at what, da’assan? There is precious little you cannot do if you put your brilliant mind to it sweet girl.”
“Oi! Stop mummin’ at me for two seconds and lemme mum you back!” Sera snapped, groaning, “m’bad at… well not bad at. My magic’s a right baby! Just little, so it’s busy learning baby stuff. Like about sunlight n’pish. And so it’s not super good at figuring out the bond— s’getting better! I felt Ink’s asthma shite our first day in Sahrnia, and her scrapes today. But um…I dunno, Solas can feel you er…sorry if that’s weird? But we’re bondy too! And I can’t feel shite from you. Which I was trying to do ‘cause um…Solas sort of told me you didn’t wanna go off on your own, I guess? Dunno! It just came off as a ‘you need me’ for something and I can’t figure out what it is, so I thought I’d be like, ‘sneaky talk’ to get into it but I’m shite at that! So I guess…if there’s something wrong, or something I can help you with Mare, please just tell me? ‘cause yer my mum and I love you and I wanna help!”

“Come here sweet girl,” Marehis said, opening her arms and breathing a sigh of relief as the girl came to her, hugging her tightly, “oh, ma’da’len, you do help,” she promised. “I was merely…I worry, when I must leave you girls. I suppose my worry was so great it spilled into the bond and Solas sensed it, was…kind enough to suggest you come with me so I have one of my girls at hand.”

“Mare, we’d be like, two feet away.” Sera said, though she looked at the bank and…well. Marehis was not wholly certain just how they were going to get back up it. It had been a simple thing to slide down into it, it was altogether something else to…climb? Back out. It was certainly higher than a mere two feet, and they were far enough away from their campfire Marehis was a bit embarrassed she might have to raise her voice and scream for the Iron Bull to assist them. “Kay so like, a little more than two feet but you know what I mean.”

“I suppose my monthly is merely getting the best of me,” Marehis offered with a shrug. And Sera stared at her, regarding her a moment with…something in her deflated as she stared at Marehis, “Um…shite. Mare? Wh…why’re you- are you lying?”

“Da’len I’m…definitely experiencing my monthly,” Marehis assured.

“No I know just, that’s not what’s bothering you I don’t think, and you don’t think that either.”

Ah. There it was. The snap of monthlies, the sharpness it could imbue in her, she opened her mouth to- to inform the girl that as of right now, the only thing bothering Marehis was her—

“You are not allowed to hurt Sera!” Cole informed her fiercely as he materialized between them, putting Sera behind him with his hand reaching back to take Sera’s hand in his. “You don’t want to, not really, but you will if you say that to her and then you will be in her hurts! And I will be upset with you! And you will also be upset with you! You can be upset with me instead, I like that better, it doesn’t hurt my friends.”

Marehis took a deep breath, Maker, she- she didn’t want to hurt anyone, oh goodness, she had almost said something so unkind, “I apologize—da’len I promise you are correct, I do not wish to snap at Sera, but I’m not upset with you either, Cole, why would you think I would be? You’re defending Sera, I’m pleased you would do so.”

“You…you are upset with me though,” Cole insisted. “Because I knew, and I did not say. It is quiet in you, but it is there, your resentment. I…I am sorry I did not say anything about Fen’Harel. But I…hearing is confusing, I thought…it did not occur to me it was a hurt—something that needed to be known, because no one did know so it wasn’t hurting anyone but Solas that he was Fen’Harel.”

“Oh. Oh da’len, you are sweet, and I love the friend you are to my girls, I promise I do not resent you-“

“You say that, but you won’t let me help you!” Cole cried out, oh goodness the boy looked devastated over it, “it is there, in your hurts! You were hurt I did not say anything until you and Ellie began feeling hurt about Solas lying about his identity! I am sorry, I- I want to do better, I want to help you better! You were scared for weeks, terrified—I could have told you immediately, the moment you felt fear at missing your monthly that you were not carrying anything other than anxiety. Anxieties- Marehis, I can help you! But you have to let me! You’re full of hurts and they make you so scared you will fail in protecting your daughters again, you fail to face the actual danger to them!”
"I- what-"

"It is killing you!" Cole insisted. "Marehis, your body has stopped working because of it! You thought- you thought your irrational actions, forgetfulness, the pain and sickness you’ve felt could be symptoms life, but it is not! It is death! It is your anxieties literally destroying you! Wearing on your brain and your heart and your stomach- those- those are all important things! Your body needs them to not be destroyed!" he informed her as if truly afraid she did not understand that. And perhaps she didn’t, she- oh. She had thought- she’d found herself feeling hazy in her thinking, found herself forgetting things easily—little things. Did she lock her own chamber doors before leaving Skyhold? Was it 5 or 6 when last she checked on Ellie? Were the potions in her stores today’s or tomorrow’s—Ellie had taken her potions as normal this morning, yes? When had she last heard from Sera? Wait, had she sent the girl anything when they were apart? And then she’d a habit of keeping Ellie’s canteen on her person when they were together in peaceful places—Haven, Skyhold, Val Royeaux—so the girl could have it at hand without having to carry it about, it wasn’t exactly a fashionable accessory, but it was a necessary one in the field! And she’d wholly forgotten to hand it off to the girl when they prepared to meet the others in the Emerald Graves—what if they had been separated?? Sera had potion now, was…had she given it to Marehis? No…no she didn’t think so. Her mind was…rather frayed, and…and she supposed she’d found her chest aching more and more lately, her stomach burning, leaving her nauseated- oh. Yes. All symptoms of anxiety as…as Solas had said. and Adan. And Elan. And…now…Cole. So. There…may just be something to it.

"There is!" Cole agreed, "You are anxious all of the time! From the moment you wake up, until the moment you lay down, and then you are anxious even in your dreams! You are so scared Corypheus will come and he will take your daughters away, or Solas will reveal he’s still working with him, betray us further still by handing Ellie over to his partner in crime, or- you are scared of so many things happening to Sera and Ellie and yourself that it consumes you. It made your body so sick it stopped working! Potion makes you have monthlies again but it does not solve your anxieties that will deteriorate you in other ways. It is bad for you to be scared all of the time! I can help you, Sera and Ellie and the Iron Bull and Cremisius and Papa and Leliana and Josephine and Cassandra and Cullen and Dorian and Vivienne and Thom and Varric and Solas, they love you! They can help you! But you have to let them! You have to trust them and stop blaming yourself for things you cannot control! It is not your fault Mythal died or that Solas created the veil! It is not your fault he did not understand the value of non-Elvehana life until it was all too late! It is not your fault Corypheus wants to destroy the world! But it is your fault he is different now! It is your fault that Ellie knows she can be loved, that she is alive and safe today! It is your fault that Sera loves herself even her Elfy parts!"

She would have fallen if not for Sera’s arms around her, and then Cole’s as he joined them, hugging Marehis rather fiercely. She was…well admittedly crying, almost too much to speak, trembling be…because it was cold. That was all. Very cold out, Sahrnia was just- just awful. "I…I don’t know how to stop being so afraid."

"Well…” Sera ventured, "it might help sayin’ what scares you. You know, um, telling people? Mare, we- we had no idea you was so worried all the time. You…you’ve been sick over this?" and when Marehis nodded Sera’s arms held her tighter, with almost bruising strength, "Mum! Everyone gets sick sometimes, you gotta get help when that happens! That’s freaking what we’re here for! I…I get brain sicky over shite that scares me, overthink things ‘cause I…er…worry about ‘em, I guess. I don’t always get talky about it ‘cause um…well if I recognize it’s happenin’, Bull and Elan’ve taught me uh, how to work through it? Or Cole comes and lets me know its happenen’ and then he helps me. Or if I can’t handle it, if I try to talk myself through it and that don’t work…I know I can go to Inky or you or ‘sandra.”

“You do?” Marehis- oh she felt foolish checking, just- well Ellie went to the Seeker more often, it felt like, when it came to matters of mental distress. And Sera, something had been troubling her so much Ellie had gasped, dropped a bar of soap into the river, cried out with the upmost urgency that ‘Sissy’s sad!’ and fled. Marehis had had to run after her with her clothing, and
only then could she get the girl to hurridly hop into her bottoms before declaring ‘shirts are stupid!’ and informing Marehis she would be doing her daughter a grave injustice if she kept her a moment longer arguing that she should put on more clothing than she would demand of a boy. By the time they made it to the tent, however, Sera had thankfully been comforted already…by Cassandra.

“’course I do,” Sera said, and then she looked at Cole momentarily before squeaking out, “Cripes! Mum! We don’t trust ’sandra more or something! You…I dunno. You’re busy making sure Inky’s safe, keeping after her, I don’t like bothering you with my problems when you’ve already got so many you’re dealin’ with. If I distracted you from keeping Inky safe? I’d never forgive myself.”

“Ellie trusts you, Marehis,” Cole promised, “And she loves you so much. But so much is already on you and her mind makes her feel like dirt when she considers going to you, looking you in the face and saying that after everything you do to make her safe, all the ways you make her happy, something is still the matter. There isn’t any fault of yours there, there isn’t anything you can do to make her feel otherwise—you do the best you can, and so does she.”

“I…” Marehis was objecting.

“Can’t do anything more, Marehis. And you can’t do it alone.”

“Ain’t a character flaw that you can’t do everything all on your own, Mare,” Sera said, “Let us help you, okay? I mean…if you really wanna help Inky? Last thing she needs right now is her mami falling apart because she refuses to take care of herself. She’d rather know you was strugglin’ and be able to help you, than find out after the fact once you’ve worked yerself into the ground. I mean would you prefer asking for help, or forcin’ us to help you? Cause that’s all that leads to—you refusing to ask for help just leads to you completely breaking down, sick or- or real bad off, and then we gotta help you anyway.”

Marehis sniffled, “I…would appreciate help getting out of this ditch.”

Sera stared at her for an entire minute as if trying to comprehend the words that had come out of her mouth, “…oh! The literal ditch huh?” she snorted, “yeah I figure we’re right stuck down here Mare.” There was a path forward through a rise of a plateau, but who knew what enemies may lay at the end of the path or how well they could make their return to camp through it.

“I will get the Iron Bull! Vivienne is holding Ellie now. She wants to but she doesn’t—she does it now because you are gone and Cassandra looks tired, the Iron Bull is patrolling. She trusts Dorian and Thom but…being more comfortable with a woman holding her while she sleeps gives her an excuse to do so, so it looks like she has to do it instead of wanting to do it. She wonders if it would be telling if she hummed. It was her choice, she tells herself, her dedication to the Maker and the Chantry that made her get rid of any chance of having children of her own at the risk of passing on her affliction. Ellie is already sick with it—magic—and a child, and sometimes it makes her heart ache. She wonders who her mother was, if she made a different choice than her that led to the same result—”

“Cole,” Marehis smiled reassuringly she- oh she felt badly he’d thought she resented him—she didn’t! Or if she did it was…it was not with him, it was with the situation. She truly did adore the boy- oh, he brightened at that, good. She hoped that progress wasn’t lost over the gentle reprimand, “I know you mean to help, and you do not intend to cause harm, but it is not your place to discuss Vivienne’s private business.” It…wasn’t a sore spot, necessarily with the woman. At least, she did not make it seem as much but Marehis had found it albeit horrific, when…well when Marehis first brought her concerns up with the woman she’d…well she’d wondered how Vivienne had handled any such scares in her own relationship with the Duke. She had no children to Marehis’s knowledge and…well they’d rather the long relationship and Vivienne…there was some sort of potion she took, but it wasn’t for the suppression of monthlies, and condoms um…well Vivienne had once—rosy-cheeked from their second bottle of wine the two shared in the privacy of her quarters in Skyhold—had shared a laugh over the Duke’s disdain for such measures, that he found them uncomfortable and too, they were unnecessary as she’d only ever laid with him, and he’d kept clear of sexual disease. When Marehis carefully voiced the question as to how Vivienne
went about ensuring their relationship remained a childless one, Vivienne had offered up a smirk and the casual explanation that, “That has never been a concern. The year my magic came to fruition I was encouraged…well. Bleeding is a risk for Mages and too, there are many studies that suggest children of mages, especially when carried and birthed by a mage directly, are at high risk of having magic passed along to them. One cannot menstruate or risk pregnancy if you’ve not the organs to do so. As they are non-vital, I opted for their removal before my first blood.”

That did not sound like the sort of decision a twelve-year-old should be encouraged to make. Something so utterly permanent that…well there were people in their twenties and thirties, decades older than she had been who wrestle with the idea of whether or not they wish to be a parent. And there was something sad in that…that in her childhood, someone looked upon Vivienne de Fer and said the world would not benefit from her passing on her traits, that she had nothing good to offer in the creation of another life.

“Oh!” Cole chirped, “I…I wasn’t meaning to say Vivienne’s private things…I didn’t really. Odette* made that decision. But she lives with it as Vivienne. Bodies and names are strange.” he scratched at his head before he vanished to fetch the Iron Bull.

—

“C’mon Mare, no more work today. Ink’s out and I’ll watch out for her when she wakes up, you just…dunno, nap? Oh shite, s’lunch—still! You nap, we’ll worry about lunch, and you just eat and rest up and um…if there’s anyone you wanna talk with? Things you wanna get off your chest, we’ll make that happen,” and when Marehis opened her mouth, “No friggin’ buts! ‘cept your butt in bed!”

Marehis smiled, pressing her lips to the girl’s temple, “No buts indeed. I mean to thank you, sweet girl.”

Though it did take a moment for anyone to get anywhere—The Iron Bull was indeed capable of hoisting them out of the ditch, but…he had slid down the bank into it to do so, and gave them the much needed boost out. It took the whole of Thom Rainier’s men holding each other around the middle to form a chain to heft the Iron Bull out of his self-inflicted predicament when the Qunari found he could not raise himself back out of the ditch of his own power.

“The hell?” Bull complained, once he was seated securely on higher ground, “You assholes know how to make a guy feel like a fat ass.”

“Oh no, s’not you Chief,” Thom…wheezed as he worked to catch his breath, “it’s…it’s us. Bunch of weak bastards.”

Sera offered up a giggly laugh, “Kremmy-boy could’ve gotten you out of there with one hand.”

“Ahh. Marehis huffed a laugh, taking the Qunari’s offered arm and going to sit with him by the fire. Oh, Cassandra was tired, the woman was dozing in her seat, she startled slightly when Sera sat on her knees at her side and wrapped an arm around the woman to support her, pull her to rest against her side where the Seeker relaxed and offered her a smile before looking to Marehis and offering something of a sympathetic look, shaking herself a bit to wake up more. Oh, to be awake to…get things off of Marehis’s chest, she supposed. Ellie was resting…very hard. The girl was congested to the point of snoring, loudly as she slumbered in Vivienne’s arms, the woman admittedly looked a bit alarmed, like she was not certain just how the girl was producing such a loud sound…though she did nothing to pass the girl off to anyone else even as the Iron Bull and Marehis returned.

And…they were all staring at her, Thom’s men giving their fire a wide berth as they patrolled the area. And the Inquisition’s reinforcements had yet to show up…Ellie was asleep and Marehis…would discuss this with her much more gently at a later date, purely to assure her that Marehis was seeking assistance.

Marehis…did not experience the bond as her girls might, but she did feel something,
occasionally. Their first day in the Emerald Graves she’d been struck with pure, unadulterated, overwhelming love of her children and something that *ached* like the most painful-pleasant bit of nostalgia in her chest, and an instinct that told her the feelings belonged entirely to *Solas*. That he was feeling those things in such abundance they resonated with enough strength in the bond that even she could feel it. Now she felt something similar, an ache that was wholly painful—worry-mixed-adoration, like the concern for something entirely precious being put to danger and sadness that spoke to the mourning and fear that such danger was being ignored. She hated that she’d tears in her eyes as she met Solas’s fraught stare, but she opened her mouth and spoke.

For perhaps a solid ten minutes. Of her every fear and remorse since Haven had fallen. She found herself in the comfort of the Iron Bull’s warmth as the Qunari slung an arm around her shoulders and held her to his side as she wept and she…well she realized why they called it ‘venting your spleen’, truly it felt as if, while frustrations flew from her lips a balloon of pent-up anxieties deflated somewhere inside her. She was scared for her children, she was scared for everyone that was important to them, she lay awake worrying about where next a threat or betrayal would befall them. She was scared to trust her own instincts lately—how could she? She’d entertained the culprit behind the Conclave, trusted him with everything. Was it some failing on her part? Surely she should have- should have realized *something* was amiss. Ultimately she just felt so…*incapable*. After Haven alone? She’d spent hours appealing to Leliana, surely- surely someone else was more qualified to guard Ellie? She would be heartbroken to leave Leliana’s ranks but she…she could not- she could never abandon Ellie, she would just maintain her role as the girl’s maid servant. Someone who knew what the hell they were doing would take over her protection. When Solas’s involvement with the Conclave came to light? She’d all but tendered her resignation—she had written it up but…it felt like selfishness that kept her from turning it in. She-could not leave her girls. Her fears multiplied from there, felt innumerable, and she- oh she’d been so inadequate in her position because of her anxieties, she realized that now that yes, her forgetfulness, haze and exhaustion were all symptoms of them and she didn’t even know where to begin dealing with that. The more she worried, the less useful she was—which spawned further worry!

“What do you need us to do?” was the first question asked of her, and it was from Cassandra. And she felt wholly worthless replying, “I…I don’t know.”

“Well that doesn’t work Mare,” the Iron Bull decided…staring at her almost in challenge to refute him as he said, “you’re gonna sit down and decide what the hell is best for you to fix this shit inside yourself. Don’t worry about the Imekaris. ‘cause at the end of the day, we got them, okay? and you not being at your best is only a detriment to them—only way to be at your best? Is to do what’s best for you. You need potion? Go for it. Therapy? Hell, I’m down to throw re-educator knowledge at you. If you just need a damn break? Take it. You need to take a few swings at this asshole?” he pointed a thumb at Solas. “I’ll hold him down, keep my bad eye on the situation till I hear you calm down.”

“We are here, darling,” Vivienne insisted, taking hold of Marehis’s hand. “Be gentle with yourself my dear, the Iron Bull is correct.” she scanned her gaze across their numbers. “Eleanor has every imaginable bodyguard at her disposal in the field. Do not even consider her security—when we are in camp, enjoy your time with Eleanor and Sera. In the field? Fight as any party member would—we already have an eye on her at all times, I assure you.”

“I don’t even know what these Red Templar bastards look like, honestly,” the Iron Bull agreed, “Just been swingin’ blind at ‘em keeping the good eye on Imekari.”

“You will cease assuming you are solely responsible for Eleanor,” Cassandra voiced, “I…found myself in a similar situation when you were being chased by Venatori, Marehis. Feeling wholly inadequate, a failure at every turn because I could not keep every bit of harm or discomfort from Eleanor in your absence,” she offered a rueful grin, “I vented my issues and…came nearly to what could easily be mistaken for tears, in Varric’s presence. He’d similar advice for me. To rely on our allies, and cease beating myself up.”

That…she- oh she appreciated them, and she felt worthless, ungrateful because- oh she just
was not certain that would even work to ease her worries-

“Most of them do not exist!” Cole insisted.

“…Cole. Treasure that you are. I’m not certain I follow,” Vivienne drawled. For all Marehis was certain he’d been addressing her personal thoughts, she wasn’t certain she followed either.

“I don’t talk to your inside thoughts because you don’t like it! It hurts you to accept help from me,” the Spirit almost sounded like he was whining, he felt so complaintive about not being allowed to help the Grand Enchanter. “It is rude to interrupt people’s conversation,” the boy saw fit to remind her eliciting something of a surprised…thankfully amused, stare from her before she waved for him to please continue and he looked to Marehis once more, “Marehis…a great deal of the threats you’re fixating on, worrying they’ll happen? They do not truly exist. Some of them entirely, and most of them no where near the moment you’re existing in. They are all coming to you, from you. You consider them—which is your job—but then you focus on them, and that makes them feel real and pressing when they are not.”

“Ink does groundy things most mornings um…we do ‘em before we wake up?” Sera said, “but we can just like, wait until we wake up and do them with you, mum. You think that might help? It helps um, me be in the habit so when I do start freaking out…well, depends on whatss freaking me out, but more often than not I can er, tell myself where I am and what’s really happening, and I feel better. And me and her do the meditate-y stuff um…” she shrugged, “whenever we’re in Skyhold most nights and before bed in the field. And I know if I need to, I can say ‘hey, I’m feeling this’ and Ink’s always there to listen and help.”

Marehis nodded. “If…if it wouldn’t be a bother, waiting until you are awake, yes I would um…it would be nice to join you, I think. In the evenings as well,” she agreed.

“Course it wouldn’t be a bother Mare, jeeze,” Sera said, “Um…it kind of sounds like you’ve been talking mean at yourself? I do that too sometimes, but you and ‘sandra and Ink, all of you lot’ve taught me it isn’t true, the mean things I can say at myself. So…if I start thinking something you lot would never say to me, that’s the first clue that helps me realize I’m overthinking something to the point of letting my brain sickness fuck with me over it. Once I realize that, I can usually brush it off and refocus. Like I was worried I was botherin’ Inky the other day, ‘cause I interrupted her when she was busy with making potion for ‘sandra, something real hard that takes lots of focus. I got all spiraly thought wise, worrying I’m just useless or whatever but…well none of you’d say that about me, not even Viv, so,” Oh…oh thank everything that was still truth, if she’d said something of the sort in a snappish mood. “I realized I was fine, just overthinking, and figured out where to move on from there. Mare…you’re the only one saying you’re inadequate and shite at protecting Inky.”

“You are!” Cole agreed, “You’re the only one those thoughts exist in.”

….aah. Truly? “After everything?” Marehis asked…quite truly surprised, “I’ve made nothing but mistakes since Haven- I- I did not realize Ellie had been drugged-!”

“Mare. Babe,” Bull snorted, “Imekari doesn’t do mornings any different when she’s not hit with sedative.”

“Morning happens too early.” Dorian insisted in the girl’s defense. That may well be true but- but- “It was from my hand she fell into Corypheus’s!” Marehis insisted.

“Good lord, Marehis!” Dorian exclaimed sounding appalled, “You honestly- the Iron Bull’s arms are the length of your entire body—if any should be commiserating not sweeping Ellie to safety when we fled Haven, it should be he. Or Cole with his ability to teleport. Or me—we saw a wall of fire and panicked, I cannot tell you the number of times I have kicked myself for not thinking ‘oh, perhaps if I stop for two seconds and act like a damn mage, I can cast chill to make way through the flames and give the girl an escape’! And believe you me, sleeping with the Dread Wolf—I have given worse men than Solas access to the temple that is my body in exchange for, I kid you not, a sandwich. Did I know what a sandwich was beforehand? No. No I did not. I had never consumed as much outside the realm of hors d’oeuvres, but a week without food makes what sounds like some sort of horrible dish made of literal sand seem a fair trade for carnal relations.
You? You’re golden my dear, there are swaths of people who have done worse. And we all trusted him, believed his ‘I’m just a friendly Apostate passing by when I saw the Conclave go ka-poof, oh do please allow the shine of my scalp to light the way through these dark times’ bit.”

“I do believe that is precisely what he said to clear suspicion with me in my initial investigation,” Cassandra drawled, holding Marehis’s gaze. Ahh. Yes. Even the literal Seeker of Truth had dropped suspicion of Solas early on.

“We could hardly fault you for believing him when we all were played a fool,” Dorian concluded. For all the man could be rather catty he did have a sweet compassion in him.

“For the record I suspected him on sight,” the Iron Bull rumbled out.

“Yes amatus, delight of my heart, you suspect everyone on sight. If Cremisius revealed himself to be the spawn of Corypheus laying in wait to betray us all this entire time, you would be none surprised.”

“…names being so similar is real damn freaky,” the Qunari defended the bit of conspiracy. Marehis, oh she huffed a laugh at that, “I’ll gladly play the fool—you’re not to suspect Cremisius of anything more than being a perfectly wonderful young man.” Though, “Thank you all for…for listening, offering support.”

“Take a little time, figure out what you gotta do, okay?” Sera intoned.

Marehis nodded. “I will—do not worry da’vehnan. I…I would appreciate it if we kept this to ourselves. Ellie—”

“Uh…Inky’s in the Fade right now and I’m like kinda super positive she was watchin’ for our soldiers to get in before making herself wake up to help set up camp but um…yeah she probably heard everything.”

Marehis blanched at that, “Oh! Uh…” she looked to the girl sleeping against Madam de Fer…though if she were in the Fade did that mean she was standing away from her body? How did that work, exactly? She cast her gaze about uncertainly, “Da’vehnan I- um. I hope you don’t take it badly, that I wished for secrecy, I just did not wish to cause unnecessary concern—”

There was a sharp inhale as the girl sat up rather immediately sat up in Vivienne’s hold, startling the Enchanter a bit, “Mami, s’not unneces- un- unnecessess-” the girl groaned a bit when she struggled with pronouncing the word, resting her head back against Vivienne’s shoulder, “Tia. Mi cerebro esta rota. Eres mi mami, es mi trabajo preocuparme.”

“Ahh,” Vivienne cleared her throat and informed Marehis, “Apparently, the Inquisitor’s brain is not currently cooperating with her—you are her mami, and therefore it is her job to worry for you.”

“Gracias,” Ellie yawned, leaning sideways until she was falling out of Vivienne’s lap into Marehis’s, “love you,” before she was steadily falling back to sleep.

"Sera," Vivienne voiced the question, "how is it, exactly, you knew where Eleanor was in the Fade? She could have been anywhere. Was it the bond?"

Sera snorted, "Not the bond, just my eyeballs."

The statement had Dorian's eyeballs nearly falling out of his head, "You can see into the Fade…from the waking world?" Sera shrugged, "Dunno. Always been okay-ish at seeing shite in the Fade, apparently. When I think back on it. Was one of the things that told Solas I got magic big-time. I’m not like super at it—I can’t see Ink non-stop. But I know she’s here, and I know where to look ‘round for her, and if I get an impression of where she is I…I can’t like, look right at her, but I look through where she is, and see her that way. Like creepin’ on someone you don’t want noticin’ you starin’—so you focus on a spot behind ‘em to still have them in sight.” Sera's voice dipped quieter as she informed them, looking to the stand of their proposed camp where one could see past the fallen behemoth's Red Lyrium nest in order to see the road. "Ink's pacin' a right storm over there."

Cole looked to Sera, smiling brightly, "I can do that!” he assured her before vanishing from sight, and after a moment Sera quietly announced, "Cole’s ‘stractin’ Inky in the Fade, it en’t like any of us are new to camp set-up, I got a pretty good idea how she’d want it and shite she’s sleepy,” Sera said worriedly.
“I don’t think she feels very well at all,” Marehis agreed, feeling at her child’s forehead, “she’s not feverish but she’s coming down with something unpleasant.”

“Oh,” Solas let out the mildly startled sound when he took that as reason to investigate the bond, “so she is.”

With…certainty. Oh. It sort of struck her then. She could think something was the matter all day long and it truly isn’t, but when she knew something is wrong? She knew it. She’d worried endlessly her girls may get ill—the horrible weather, restless nights, the overall stress of the situation—but now it was a certainty. She could have…well she could have found more focus in those moments before, spared herself from worry and waited until the actual reason to worry occurred—because she would know it once it was certainty. She knew her girls! She’d not taken offense in the moment the other day when Ellie snapped at her, because she may not have fully realized the situation but something in her said it was to be expected, to let it go because it was not that Ellie didn’t respect her—something entirely else was the matter and she should focus on figuring out just what. It had been a scarce moment before Sera spoke on her sister’s behalf, that Marehis realized they were not very far from camp, the Rifts had to be near enough to feel through the entirety of their time there and Ellie was carrying herself stiffly, a slump to her left shoulder that occurred when the formerly twice-dislocated appendage ached with old pain.

She’d…been terribly unkind to herself, hadn’t she? She could not know everything, but she knew enough.

——

So, when Ellie stirred despite Cole’s efforts to keep her distracted from realizing their reinforcements had arrived to set up camp, Marehis held the girl more tightly and intoned, “Da’vehnan, you are ill, you will do no one any favors if you do not rest and recover. The camp is in good hands—you will rest until it is set up, and then you will eat, take potion, and go to bed.”

“Bossy mami,” Ellie lightly accused, a small smile at her lips as her nose crinkled and she tiredly agreed, “kay.”

Marehis…put everything else from her mind. She told herself they were in camp, surrounded by allies, and her only concern? Herself and her girls. Sera was entertaining symptoms herself of being unwell, a rasp in her voice like her throat was sore and she was tired when she sat down alongside Marehis and Ellie, resting her poor head on Marehis’s shoulder. Oh her da’lens! The afternoon had gotten away from them as they fought their way through Emprise du Lion, it was essentially dinner time by the time camp was settled and Cassandra with the assistance of Cole and Rainier was seeing to getting food on the proverbial table.

“Da’assan,” Marehis offered softly, rubbing circles on Sera’s back, “dinner will be on soon, we can clean up after and relax until you fall asleep.”

“You’ll relax too?” Sera checked and Marehis nodded, “Sweet, s’do it.”

S’do it, they did. They would be subject to the mere act of wiping sweat from their bodies during their time here, wouldn’t they? The very instant they had access to the necessary facilities they were all indulging in a nice warm, proper bath.

…

It had been something she’d seen many a time in her recent education in Adrasten religion—the idea that the Maker would always provide. So would, apparently, Fen’Harel.

There were tents for their soldiers, and their reinforcements moved along the tent for the Inquisitor and her party. And then there was one tent more, that Solas sat spelling for the better part of an hour to warm while the Iron Bull seemed to be assisting in building a secondary fire to warm a great pot of water over, and Vivienne disappeared into the tent Solas set up, leading a few soldiers who carried, well,

There had been preparations for the horses they’d left in the comfort of city stables—which meant there was an unused troth at hand, a long metal tub that could be used. As a tub. For bathing.

Altogether it allowed her to rouse her girls for dinner, see them eat their fills which was not
much, Sera hadn’t much of an appetite, but she did join her sister in sipping at broth—it was ‘yum’ and soothed her throat, didn’t upset her stomach. Vivienne prepared honeyed tea for everyone, sitting herself at Sera’s side as she quietly offered her…well, it sounded something like comfort, like she felt badly that the girl was poorly, and giving her advice—words of caution to consider when managing illness as a Mage, and Sera promised she trusted everyone’s judgement if she started doing ‘weirdy shite’, and if she felt uncertain about Fade dreaming she’d take ‘sleepy potion’, the sort prescribed to Ellie as it would keep her from the Fade. She’d a good understanding not to accept anything, even benign seeming from anything in the Fade, but the heavy presence of Red Lyrium in the area made demon activity more aggressive and if illness clouded her judgement, she may even unintentionally accept a demons deal. Solas assured he would guard the girls in the Fade but he well understood Sera’s reticence, she was so new to magic and too…

Sera groaned…rather miserably for all she was soaking with her sister in a warm bath steaming with Embrium that soothed their symptoms, though the Human girl had fallen asleep while Marehis was washing her hair. “I know m’not supposed to take any demon deals but I’m kinda scared I would if they promised Inky wouldn’t get sick no more.”

“She’s alright sweet girl,” Marehis promised.
“I don’t like it,” the girl pouted.
“I don’t like it either,” Cole’s voice all but had Marehis jumping out of her literal skin—Maker! The boy appeared, seated beside the tub. Sera did not seem to mind his presence and neither did Marehis believe he would join them to invade their privacy for inappropriate reasons. He shook his head, ‘no’, “I came to make Sera laugh. Though I am afraid to make her laugh, her throat is so sore—I do not like your bodies being sick!”

“Awe, Cuddly—we’ll be okay.”
“I went to Mister Cyril, he says potion will help, and sleep—Ellie is sleeping, should you sleep now? We would keep your body safe from the water. Oh! And staying hydrated, you are doing a good job by being in the bath!” he encouraged, “But it would not be good for you to be wet and return to the cold, so you have to be made dry before you leave the tent,” he sagely informed them. “I got all of the warm things and put them in our tent, blankets and pillows and the rocks from around the fire.”

“Da’mi-“ Marehis started though she was interrupted by Cole’s exuberant gasp, the boy was wide eyed with excitement as he rocked back with a burst of energy and announced,

“That is what you call Krem because you love him!”
“I do,” she assured, “it is a term of affection that works for you both da’len.”
“My old body used to be da’assan like Sera, but it makes me happy this body can be da’mi like Krem because you…you love me?” he checked.

Marehis nodded, she did, increasingly so at this moment, the sweet boy was admittedly precious when he was so very rosy cheeked and enthusiastic, but, “While I love you and the efforts you’re going to, to make the girls well—the rocks from around the campfire are there to assist in keeping the fire contained and creating something of a marker for those nearing it to keep a safe distance.”

“Oh!” he chirped in surprise, “I will put them back!” he assured as he vanished from sight.
He ultimately…had to put many things back.
The Iron Bull came and took both girls into his arms once they were clean and dry, Sera offering up a bit of argument that she could ruddy walk but that did not stop her from leaning into the crouching Qunari’s open arm immediately, letting out a happy little hum at how warm he was as he hoisted the girls against his chest and made his way out of the tent to head for the one they would share for sleep.

Very well-blanketed sleep. The cots Cassandra and Marehis shared with Ellie and Sera had a great, massive pile of blankets. Not unlike a mountain.

“…Cuddly,” Sera said, blinking in surprise as she took in the sight, “we…we have blankets, you know.”

Cole materialized at the foot of the cots, smiling enthusiasm as he nodded, “Yes. Now you
have all of the blankets!”
…”All of the blankets da’mi?” Marehis questioned.
“Yes.”
 “…in camp?”
“In all of our camps. At least the ones in Emprise du Lion. The others are too far, I did not want to be too far away if Sera or Ellie needed anything.”
Ellie and Sera were jostled a bit in the Iron Bull’s hold as he did his best to contain his laughter, rumbling out a mirthful, “Oh…buddy.” Ellie’s eyes cracked open to investigate the disturbance.
“Cole,” Cassandra spoke up from behind them, she’d only just entered the tent and had a hand over her mouth trying to hide just how widely she was smiling, “sweet boy…why?”
“Ellie and Sera are sick—they need blankets so they can be warm.”
“So do our soldiers and scouts,” Cassandra reminded him.
Cole blinked as if wholly confused. “They are not sick.”
“But they may well become sick if they lack the means to warm themselves,” Marehis returned.
Soft realization dawned in his face, “…oh.”
“We only need our own blankets sweets,” Sera assured him, “you want me to help you put them ba-“
“No!” Cole nearly yelped, sounding alarmed, “you should not go back out into the cold, this was supposed to help you stay warm! I messed it up!”
There was a soft, cracking cough, and then a little peal of giggles from Ellie, “C-Cole! Y-y-you-“ oh she let out a small scream of laughter she had to cough after, Sera joining in her giddiness. “Oh, Carino! This was really really sweet, I’m sorry you have to take everyone their blankets back, but it made me and Sera’s hearts so happy that you love us so much you’d do something like this!”
“Oh!” the Spirit blushed, “It did!” he breathed a sigh of relief, “Good. So many people say laughter is the best medicine, I am so happy I made you laugh!”
“Thanks Cole, you’re the best,” Sera encouraged.
Oh, he did mean well, it was altogether very sweet and he was immediate in his correction, disappearing with the majority of his blanket pile in his arms as he vanished from the tent.
“Sissy, I know you like Fade dreaming, but if we sleep-potion it, it’ll really help us feel better when we wake up,” Ellie reasoned.
“Sounds good Inky, yeah, let’s get some good sleep,” Sera agreed as she separated herself from the Iron Bull and held her arms out to the younger girl, hugging her tightly…and proceeding to walk forward to the cots while she held her sister fast against her chest, it took a great deal of effort but she did it laughingly as she deposited Ellie onto the cots first, “Ink and me’ll be all good Mare, you go take a bath and get ready for bed, kay?”
There was something akin to deja vu. Solas invading her bath—at the beginning as opposed to the end as he had in Skyhold. Well, it was more like she invaded—he was merely replenishing the tub with clean warm water and there was the faintest scent of something medicinal she couldn’t quite put her finger on. He blushed as he cleared his throat and rose to his feet,
“I apologize, erm, it is ready. Enjoy yourself,” he insisted.
“Ma seranas,” she offered, clearing her throat, “I do appreciate the help you’ve been.”
“Of course,” he nodded. “I’m pleased you’re feeling better. Sera and Ellie are well,” he thought to assure her, “they are…talking, giggly over something as they’re waiting for potion to send them off to sleep.” Oh. It should not be so heartachingly sweet, the utter adoration in his features as he spoke of them.
“You’ll miss having them with you in the Fade,” Marehis supposed, albeit sympathetic.
“Ahh,” he grimaced slightly as if it hadn’t quite occurred to him, “Yes, I suppose I will. But I…I am pleased I can wake to them—grateful. I’m not certain who I should thank for the change in sleeping situation, but I do…know such a change could be revoked if you bid it. I appreciate the grace you’ve shown me, allowing me to be close with the girls while I can be.”
“It’s only because of your own actions toward them,” Marehis assured. Too, she’d not much say—it was the Iron Bull who laid Solas to rest in the tent Sera’d prepared for their whole party, there had been more room for Cyril to work with, stitch his injuries closed and administer potion and what not. And Ellie had been so panicked when she regained consciousness, terrified because she could not be made aware of Solas’s wellbeing outside the fact that he was at the very least alive and near, in the bond, and they were hardly going to banish the man while he was injured, even less so once he had their Inquisitor physically attached to him. And to revoke the change after he’d made it so clear he would serve Ellie as any of them would…well, he was a party member. So until he began acting as otherwise, he’d be treated as such.

“Well, do enjoy yourself. If you’ve need of anything…”
“T’m sure you’ll know.”
“I’ll send someone you’d erm, be comfortable with assisting, should you need it,” he promised.

…that should not invoke the thought that they’d bathed together before, she wasn’t entirely discomforted at the thought of-

“Your hair is very greasy,” Solas said.
“…excuse me?”
“Your hair, Marehis,” the man steadily returned, “you’re rather the sight. Whatever will people say, Madam de Fer’s lover walking about in such a state?”
“Are you endeavoring to pick a fight with me?”
“I’m endeavoring to make you upset with me, I suppose,” he shrugged, “I rather prefer that than you being displeased with yourself—” he cleared his throat. “I’m messing that up though, aren’t I? Well. Oh,” oh he looked pleased with himself as he realized, “you’re annoyed with me now,” with a little satisfied nod as if- oh!

She was annoyed with him! How dare he be so-! So-!
He bit his lip and ducked his head as he swiftly took leave of the tent and that…that was good because she only barely trusted herself to not go after him, she certainly would not risk kissing him in the middle of camp. And that was what she’d been inspired to do, for some reason.
Who got so upset and annoyed with someone that they wanted to kiss them of all things?!
She was a little scared the end of her monthly may not be the end of such distressing swings and she wasn’t certain what that meant or what to do about it.

Her first thought was to kill Solas. And she liked that more than wishing to kiss him, it felt like a much more sane way of handling things, all things considered.

It was vehnan root. The extract of it, in the form of oil, that she’d smelled when she came in. He’d poured it into the bath water, she discovered as she lowered herself into it and she had never been so upset to have her every ache alleviated from her body. She spent most of her bath stewing over that, until Vivienne peeked in to check on her.

Her annoyance renewed with the information that Solas had suggested Marehis may need help with her hair.

She didn’t, not necessarily but it was something of a relief, a luxury to have someone else massage shampoo into her hair, and Cassandra joined them with warm tea and a bit of a smile on her face, for all she looked a bit confused.

“I’m…supposed to say I thought you might like some tea.”
“Solas made it,” Marehis sighed.

Cassandra nodded. “I did think to bring you this, if your potions regimen permits?” she wondered, offering up a flask, “Borrowed from Ser Rainier so. It is wine.”

“Wine is my potions regimen, thank you,” Marehis smiled when Vivienne chuckled softly at the jest, Cassandra’s eyes crinkling with her amusement as she passed off the flask for Marehis’s consumption. Yes, she…was relatively new to Andrasten religion but in this moment—at the end of a hard day, her girls safe, friends at her side while she soaked in a warm bath with a fun flask of red wine?—she was absolutely certain there was a Maker, and He did in fact love her.

“Are you feeling any better, darling?” Vivienne worried.
“…I am, I think,” she confessed. Once upon a time, when her ward had looked up to her and informed her that merely seeking help from Adan, being open with the fact that she was struggling and getting help for that struggle had been enough to offer her a sense of relief, Marehis had found that questionable, worried Ellie was downplaying how she was feeling to press on with her day. But…well, now she knew from personal experience that yes, “I’m…relieved, I…feel like perhaps in part, my anxieties were worsened by the fact I was trying to hide having them.”

“It is a difficult thing to be vulnerable with,” Cassandra sympathized, “but when we are, we can best help each other, can we not?”

Marehis nodded, leaning to press a kiss to the woman’s cheek. “How are you feeling?” Marehis wondered, she’d expected Cassandra to be asleep by now.

“I’m well, feeling much better. Eleanor insists I not stay up too late,” she sounded bemused, “but I am waiting for word from Skyhold, Leliana and Cullen really. I had Sera pen her theories about Red Lyrium causing Sahrnia’s winter to linger and hold, worsen to the point it has frozen the river in a permanent fashion. So far we’ve had no ill reports, but Sera fears there is a need for caution where we take our water from. Snow is the only clear source we can find with the river in such a state, and snow so near the Red Lyrium may well be tainted by the stuff, the last thing we need is Lyrium madness spreading through our ranks. She wants to collect samples tomorrow to send for Dagna’s examination,” Cassandra shook her head as if to clear it, like she’d gotten off topic, “I’m concerned Cullen will be distressed by new developments, it is not a necessarily pleasant thing that every time we learn something new of Red Lyrium it is always something devastating or sinister.”

“It would be nice to discover the stuff heals all ills if processed the right way,” Marehis supposed, earning a huff of laughter from the Seeker who nodded.

“He is…oh he is petrified we’re drawing so near to the quarry,” there was an amused smile at her lips as she said, “I mentioned Eleanor’s brush with attitude Vivienne informed me of, that she was rude with you the other day? Cullen may have suggested you take issue with it even as she has apologized—ground our Inquisitor for talking back to her mother.”

Oh, Marehis smiled at the thought as well because she was certain he meant, “Ground her—so she will simply have to return Skyhold to serve such punishment and miss out on all of her regular social activities?”

“Yes—no Rift Sealing, Red Templar slaying, Grey Warden dealing for at least a month until she has learned her lesson. He acknowledged that may well lead to the world ending, but he also acknowledged he doesn’t much care.”

Ridiculous, wonderful man. “How is he?” Marehis worried. “Has he been feeling any better?”

Cassandra sighed, oh, Marehis made to rest a hand on her shoulder but that might be inconsiderate given her hands were currently wet and would only soak the woman’s sleep top. Vivienne neatly dried her hand on a towel and offered comfort herself, that was sweet and the Seeker raised a hand to overlap Vivienne’s. “He assures me he will be fine though his migraine persists and Cremisius,” she had to stop and clear her throat, “oh he has only just returned to Skyhold but he reports his belief that Cullen has not slept in days. So, I’m waiting to hear either from Cullen, so I may offer console and insist he get some rest, or from Cremisius with confirmation that the man is in fact in bed at this hour.”

Oh. Oh! She’d meant to write him! Krem, sweet man, oh she was just dying to know how his appointment went. Cassandra had written, asking after him so she could always ask but…well, it was the Lieutenant’s business entirely, while Vivienne may or may not have negative ideas about his gender identity, that didn’t mean the man would be comfortable with her being privy to discussion about his medical business. Too, he’d spoken to Marehis and Cassandra separately, she wasn’t certain if that meant he only wished her to have certain information while he got more personal with the Seeker. He’d spoken of it briefly with Marehis, seeking to confirm with her she understood he would be undergoing treatment he wasn’t wholly certain just how it would affect him—oh, she’d hugged him and voiced her support, wished him the best, and it made for excellent
practice with praying to the Maker, she hoped Krem was well, that this treatment would be nothing but a blessing to him And he’d gone to Cassandra before agreeing to see a Healer, apparently—when Cassandra met with them on the way to the Emerald Graves, the young man had pulled her aside in the evening and while they stayed in sight of camp, Marehis couldn’t quite hear what was said, but she’d seen the young man looking wholly nervous as he confided in the Seeker and she’d hugged him fiercely, and they’d talked for hours, Marehis and Ellie had headed for bed before they returned to camp, and it felt like she’d been asleep for quite some time when she was roused by Cassandra softly apologizing as she joined them so late.

“The Lieutenant is well?”

Cassandra met her eye to inform her, “Nervous, worried about Cullen,” she listed the two separate things together—nervous in relation to his treatment, coupled with cover before Vivienne, “but he is well. Very excited to be returned safely to Skyhold with his father.”

“Is there…” Vivienne started, curious and careful all at once, “…something going on between he and Lady Montilyet?”

Marehis wondered at the mischievous quirk to Cassandra’s lips followed by, “I should certainly hope not,” she drawled, “as Cremisius is still dating Eleanor and too, Lady Montilyet, lovely as she is, is hardly an appropriate match for the young man. Goodness, she is nearly twice his age.”

“Oh you know well just which Aclassi I meant,” Vivienne reprimanded.

“Hmm…well, I’ve not gossiped of it, I wasn’t present in Val Royeaux as you two were, but I do have a sense of…I think they would compliment each other well. They’re both sweet, gentle-spirited people.”

Oh…

It should not be such delightful fun—but it was! Marehis was giggily with her joy at the prospect and that had the other women looking to her, and Vivienne’s hand slipped into her bathwater, which glowed a soft shade of redish orange for all of a moment to make the water warm again as she insisted she know every detail Marehis was willing to share.

Which was all of the details she knew. Her bathwater grew cold again as she and Vivienne sipped at the flask of wine while Marehis filled the women in on their time in Val Royeaux—that Leliana informed her Josie and Mister Aclassi were testing the waters of a possible relationship…which ultimately led to the revelation that they had not been entertaining any such notions, it had been a lie to cover up the Ambassador’s distress that Leliana was joining them in Val Royeaux, a farce turned factual by the end of their trip, apparently. Oh, Cassandra may be incapable of mixing wine with potion, but she was as rosy cheeked and giddy as her wine-drunk counterparts by the time Marehis was through with what she knew of the tale, eyes alight as she breathed,

“That…is incredibly romantic. Oh!” she blushed, hiding her face in her hands as she grinned, “Just- unspeakably precious,” she sighed, albeit embarrassed with herself as she cleared her throat and excused herself, “I…should check for messages from Skyhold. Do either of you ladies need anything?” she was met with both women shaking their heads ‘no’ and she nodded, leaning forward to press a kiss to the side of Marehis’s head, “Sleep well. I’m glad you’re in better spirits. If you’ve need of me in the night just wake me.”

It should not make her feel so very warm but it was quite literally a heartwarming sentiment that the Human woman imparted on her, adding her to her list of people who were permitted to rouse her if they’d need of comfort.

She had…she had such wonderful friends. And she’d not much been acting like it, had she? Not feeling like she should rely on them—that was what friendship was for. To rely and be relied upon. She laid down, clean, warm and dry, and pleasantly tipsy, this warm heady haze thrumming through her pleasantly as she crawled into a cot with her girls, and slipped off to sleep.

—

She woke to sunlight peeking into the tent and a soft, “Mami?” voiced against her shoulder before the girl who mumbled it snuggled against her more and began falling asleep again, met with
a snort from Marehis’s other side, an arm snaking across her to rub circles on the young Human girl’s back as Sera said,

“Sweets, s’time to get up. Doin’ it out of the Fade, remember?”

Ellie nodded, eyes struggling open and Marehis felt her daughters’ arms tighten around her as her youngest murmured, “What we see, issy?”

“Hmm, well. Sleepy Inky,” Sera listed, poking her sister in the cheek and getting a smile and a soft giggle from her, “mama’s awake, there’s blankets, a lamp hanging over head, and the roof of our tent.”

Ellie’s hand shot out a little blindly to thread her fingers into her sister’s hair, softly scratching at the Elf girl’s scalp, “I feel blankets and my pillow, and Sera’s hair, and my mami,” she let out a yawn, “what’s three things you hear mami?”

“Well…” Marehis rasped softly, voice rough with sleep. oh, this was…it was quite the pleasant way to start the day, “I can hear my voice,” she supposed, but more blessedly, “and my da’len’s sweet voices,” and if she listened closely enough her ears were sensitive to pick up, “and their precious heartbeats.”

“What’s smell?” Sera wondered.

“Coconut oil and mint,” Marehis listed. Sight, touch, sound, smell…that left taste. Vivienne had reminded Marehis to brush her own teeth—it wouldn’t do to fall asleep with them freshly coated in wine, but now her mouth was rather tasteless-

A soft kiss was pressed to her cheek, and something warm raised to her lips as her child giggled and Marehis trusted Ellie enough to part her lips and allow her to deposit…candy. A disk of albeit spicy, sweet cinnamon candy that melted on her tongue after a moment and allowed Marehis to announce, “Cinnamon. Da’vehnans. Where…?”

“Mami. If I have to explain snack pockets one more time I’m gonna recommend Papa patent them or something because apparently its a foreign concept.”

Decreasingly so. “You sleep with candy in your pockets?”

“It keeps them warm! And sissy and me have a piece when we wake up—we always do taste outside of the Fade! It’s called mental health care, mami!”

It was certainly a sweet start to the day, both literally and otherwise—Marehis could not help herself, she started laughing, Ellie and Sera smiling up at her. “I love you da’vehnans.”

Light grew greater in the tent momentarily, the soft sound of someone clearing their throats, before offering pleasantly, “Good morning,” Solas greeted them, “Breakfast is ready. I thought perhaps you would appreciate a moment if you’ve need? The Iron Bull is doling out portions and we’ve decided to eat in the tent so those of our numbers entertaining colds can remain out of it until there is need.”

“You’re bringing us breakfast in bed?!” Ellie wondered excitedly, and when the man nodded. “Bed is my favorite place to eat!”

“I’ll be along with it in a moment then,” he assured before stepping back out and securing the tent closed behind him. Ahh.

“I need up, sweet girls. Just a minute,” Marehis excused herself to answer the…very distressing amount of blood pooling in her bandaging. She hated her monthly—absolutely despised.

“Oh! Check your pack, kay?” Ellie requested.

…her pack was just under their cot when she rose, and in the top of it could be found a clean pair of her underthings already lined in bandaging…under which there were glistening bottles of potion for cramping and a little note reminding her to allow someone to reheat her rice bags if she’d need—the note was written in Sera’s hand, but a sweet little heart drawn in Ellie’s stood in place of a signature. She was struck with something like…it felt akin to when she felt things from the bond, experienced Solas’s emotions—in her mind she could see clearly her girls kneeling in the dark, using the glow of Fadelight from Ellie’s palm to see by as they conspired to make their mother’s morning a little bit easier.

She loved her girls—absolutely adored.
Breakfast in bed was a delight even in the field. And there was something alleviating to her usual anxieties, about staying in the tent, it made the world feel somehow smaller and safer, the assurance that they were all secure more certain. Ellie and Sera curled up against her in the warmth of their covers, and Cassandra was the one who passed along her bowl of oatmeal as she joined them once more in their cots, while Solas served Ellie and Sera heaping bowls, eyes alight with mischief as he smiled to them—a bowl in each hand…and then a plate piled high with slices of warm buttery slices of toast appeared from behind his back…floating somehow in midair.

Ellie breathed in an excited gasp, “You’re doing it again—papi! How’d you do it?”

“What the frig?!” Sera backed her curiosity, “When’s he done that?”

Oh, that had Ellie pouting a little bit, but it was at the memory of, “My heart was so sad because I hadn’t seen mami in forever! When she couldn’t come back to Haven and Cremisius had to be my bodyguard instead? Papi brought me a midnight snack and told me stories about the Fade until I was able to sleep.”

“He tucked her in, kissing her on the forehead and wishing her sweet dreams,” Cole announced serenely, “It was overwhelmingly sweet, made her heart feel full in a way that was almost painful. She could not remember anyone having done anything like that for her since she was little, just the glimmer of memory from her life before she dreamed in the Fade, something she thought she’d never have again.”

Ellie blushed fiercely, looking almost painfully shy as she hid her face against Sera’s shoulder, the older girl giggling and wrapping an arm around her as she sympathized, “Awe, Inky!”

Marehis was not teary eyed at the thought, oh! But she was…unspeakably grateful, she hated how much so, that when she hadn’t been able to be with Ellie, Solas had stepped in in such a way, and while the man had taken so much from this girl through his actions before they even met…he’d given her much since then. Precious things, things Marehis hadn’t quite considered she’d been robbed of far too soon in her youth. Solas looked a bit overwhelmed, he had to quietly clear his throat and then he offered the girl reprieve.

“It is an adaptation of Barrier, da’vehnan,” he spoke as if explaining.

“Huh?” Ellie asked, peeking up at him.

“My floating plate trick, it is something that was common practice among those whose job it was to serve at mealtimes. Force magic requires something of continuous movement at an advanced rate to a predesignated destination or direction—but if I hold something just so,” he took the plate of toast he’d set down on the cot back into his hand, holding it so there was just the barest bit of distance between the edge of the plate and his torso, the soft pulse of magic sounded as he explained, “And I cast upon myself with the plate in my vicinity,” he slipped his hand out from under it, “barrier supports the weight of the plate, creates a channel of orbit for it to pass through around me as barrier is made to cast evenly across a space,” he said, and as he stepped back the plate shifted to slide around him before he brought it back before him and pulled it from it’s spelled space, rested it on the cot once more, “it also serves to keep the foods heat contained, keeping it warm without burning the one carrying it.”

“Oh that’s so cool!”

“Friggin’ sweet!” Sera cheered.

“Gracias for showing us, papi!” Ellie thanked him, leaning forward, which prompted the Elf man to crouch to be more level with her so she could do as she pleased, pressing a kiss to his cheek.

“It is my pleasure to teach you, da’lens,” he assured.

“It is my pleasure to eat this toast if you’re done playing with our food,” Marehis offed teasingly as she made theft of a slice. Her girls! Teasing her girls and not- not him!

And he chuckled warmly! Such rudeness! “Well, if you’ve need of more, let me know.”

She was not blushing as she pulled the plate closer so the girls could more easily reach— they’d neither one of them raised a spoonful of breakfast to their lips. It was true they’d been talking, but they could do so while shoveling breakfast into their mouths, they’ve well proven that almost every morning she’d known them. Warm, thin, salty bread might be gentler on their tender stomachs if they were still so poorly. Oh her poor girls! Just the faintest bit of congestion sounded
in Sera’s breathing, only slightly better than Ellie’s, but drainage was a horrible thing, bile and phlegm could build up and pour into ones stomach, making everything seem wholly unappetizing.

“Mmm, Inky, you-” Sera was saying as she leaned out of the cot to rummage about in a pack the moment Ellie affirmed,

“Uh-huh! And we can-“

Sera gasped excitedly, “Yeah!”

“Do you know what they’re saying?” Cassandra quietly wondered to Marehis.

“I was just about to ask you,” Marehis replied, honestly.

Oh, Sera had taken up three vials of potion in hand, two warm red potions—cold medicine—and a pale, nearly white potion used to calm a burning stomach, save for the faintest tinge of green that said it was mixed with Elf Root tonic…vehnan root tonic? That was a nicer name. It was something Adan and Stitches had developed to curtail any potential for another ulcer. Oh, it was sweet—Sera setting clinking bottles down and uncorking cold medicine for her sister before she uncorked one for herself, clinking potion with each other before knocking it back with good cheer, and then she passed along stomach calming drought Ellie drank steadily, nose scrunching that spoke to potion tasting ‘yick’. And then once their hands were no longer occupied with potions bottles, the girls pulled their blankets up around their shoulders before…ahh, calling chill—Sera into her left hand, Ellie into her right, and they proceeded to hold hands throughout the meal, their magic communing while they ate.

Oh that was- it seemed like a bit of further grounding for Sera and her magic, Ellie using her magic to send reassurance and security and encouragement to prepare her sister’s newly wakened magic for the day ahead. It was…interesting. Marehis hadn’t thought much about magic before…well it didn’t much cross her mind before she had a child—now children plural—who had magic. But magic was something alive in her girls. Vivienne regarded their communing with curiosity, though she waited until the girls were finished eating to question the practice…but hadn’t…oh. They hadn’t explained anything. Marehis just…well she had a sense of what they were doing. Huh.

“Sera’s magic isn’t used to lots of stuff—we thought maybe my magic could teach hers things!” Ellie said, “So we’re gonna try letting them have like, magic-sissy time!”

That got a wry look from the Enchanter, something caught between bemusement and genuinely finding the idea precious, “Your magics are sisters then, are they?”

“Oh-huh! Sera’s my big sister, but her magic’s just a baby! So my magic gets to be big sister to her magic! It’s so much fun! I like being the big sister!”

Sera snorted, “Why come Ink? S’there a difference?”

“Yeah!” Ellie insisted, setting her empty bowl aside and scooting back as far as she could in their cot before rising on a knee and moving to seat herself directly behind Sera, wrapping her arms and legs around her as she did her best to tuck the older girl’s head under her chin, “It means I get to be the protecty one! And I love doing that! I just! want to! love you!” she enthused, grunting with her efforts as she squeezed her sister before pepperings kisses to the top of her head.

“Already do love me! Cripes!” Sera laughingly complained.

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It…was heartachingly adorable. And when Cassandra was assisting Marehis with her armor while the girls were out rallying with their party to prepare for the day ahead, the Nevarran woman’s face blazed when Marehis giggled and asked, “Ellie loves her magic being a big sister, just how do you think she’ll enjoy the role herself someday?”

Cassandra scoffed softly at that, “Do not look at me. That will not be my doing, not for years. A decade at the very least before any such thing will occur.”

“A decade?”

“…maybe not in its entirety. But still years!” Cassandra insisted, letting out something of a miserable groan, “They truly shouldn’t be so precious,” she complained. “You are not to say so much as a word about this with Cullen ugh. He’s…he is pleased you are well, but I do think he’s
mildly disappointed you are not expecting.”

“Really?” Marehis asked. Oh, sweet man, had he gotten excited at the prospect of a little one underfoot? She’d…well, she was far more glad it wasn’t the case, but there was a small, small part of her that had been…a little happy with the prospect. Under the layers of crippling betrayal and fear and distress at it all, but still, it had been there, she did not wholly abhor the idea.

“I think he was fully prepared to walk around his office performing his regular duties with your child in his arm all day while you tended your duties with Ellie.”

“…somehow I feel my scare being merely a scare is more blessing for you then,” Marehis chuckled, “I would have had free caretaking—you would have had Cullen following you about with a baby, trying to convince you that you and he should endeavor to make them an adorable friend their age.”

Cassandra let out a derisive sound at that, shaking her head. “Are you prepared, Marehis? Potion has settled?”

Marehis nodded. And mention of potion brought up, “…you saw Ellie take another—”

“Yes,” Cassandra sighed. “We…we are running out of time to handle our missions at hand, I’m- I regret the pace we’ve had to set, and there is precious little end in sight until we’ve thwarted Corypheus’s plots for the Wardens. I’m…”

“Petrified,” Marehis offered her own word for it, decently certain it was the same for the Human woman.

“Exactly. I just pray…we’ve a few weeks before the Winter Palace, hopefully there will be sufficient time for recovery before she’s launched from one battlefield to another…” her nose wrinkled in disdain, “worse sort of battlefield.”

“You may be incapable of openly fighting anyone at the Winter Palace…but there is some hope for private violence. Too, you could always challenge anyone who annoys you to a formal duel.”

“…Marehis, if you’ve need of a false lover when we are before the Orlesian courts, I would be honored to stand in for Madam de Fer.”

Marehis laughed at that, oh. “That would work splendidly—between my race and your status as Nevarran noble-pariah I’m certain our pairing could insight a great many duels.”

Oh, Cassandra chuckled warmly at that, wrapping an arm around Marehis’s shoulders as they took leave of the tent.

…Marehis had not heard much of what was going on outside the tent, but Ellie was seated near the fire, directly in the lap of the Iron Bull to encapsulate herself in warmth, and before them was a rack made to hold…something. Ahh slender glass vials—test tubes Sera called them when she appeared. She and Cole came running back to camp from the field they’d battled in the other day, collecting samples—some of snow, others of dirt—into tubes they brought to Ellie so she could mark them with a paint pen with labels—S1 for ‘sample 1’ S2 and so on—and then scribbling down into her parchment pad notes of where each sample was pulled from. How close to a source of Red Lyrium each sample had been collected, Cole scraping snow from around the base of a Red Lyrium shard so Sera’s magic would not have to venture too near, while the Elf girl handled samples closer to their camp. Oh, it was so sweet, them working together, Sera including her sister in a way that gave her something substantial to do while not tasking her with running in this horrible weather just yet.

“Wanna see if the Red Lyrium does anything to the environment other than just absorb all the friggin heat, if it’s poisoning the ground or getting into the snow, we definitely don’t want to be using Red Lyrium tainted snow for our water supply,” Sera cautioned, sniffing with congestion as she passed the last of the samples to Ellie. “If Sahrnia’s got a snowball’s chance in hell of surviving,” oh she smiled, just adorable with her pleasure at Ellie gasping and giggling at her pun, the rumble of approval from the Iron Bull’s chest, it lessened the blow of, “the last thing they need is to try rebuilding and growin’ shit in dirt that’s gonna put Red Lyrium crap in their crops.”

“I think we’re all set—does it look okay Ser’?” Ellie wondered, worried as she showed the older girl the notes she took down.
“It looks great sweets!” Sera encouraged, “Let’s get this packed up and sent off to Widdle, she’ll be so excited!”

Unfortunately… well, Marehis was pleased Miss Dagna would be having a pleasant day, oh she adored Sera’s sweet girlfriends—but unfortunately for them, there was precious little excitement in the day ahead.

Ellie’s rune bracer was snug and secure on her hand, blessed thing… Marehis just wished it hadn’t begun rattling.

The Inquisitor grimaced at that, looking off in the direction she’d been leading them and then the other with a little sigh.

“There’s a Rift that way I think,” she informed them, “but um… scouts said it’s that way to the Red Templar’s claiming the Tower of Bone. We’ll be making camp there so… is everyone cool with Rifting first? Worst-case, we can always just return to the camp we’ve claimed and take on the Red Templars once we’ve recovered. I kind of… I’d hate to derail everyone’s bedtime schedule but um, we’re harder to see in the dark than they are, what with all the glowing and whatnot. I’ve been kicking around the idea of night-fights.”

“With who, Imekari? ‘cuz that’s a kick-ass idea and this is the first I’m hearing it,” the Iron Bull said.

The girl blushed at the praise-mixed reprimand, “With myself?” she supposed tentatively, “I dunno, if I said all my ideas I’d sound like a lunatic. I think a lot!”

“Always free to sound like a lunatic with me, boss-girl,” the Iron Bull assured, resting a hand atop her head as he came to walk alongside her—Marehis was almost miffed, the Qunari interjected himself between she and Ellie, but he was certainly capable of defending her, and too it was likely warmer for her to walk with him so close. Oh. Marehis didn’t realize she’d been holding herself tensely until she relaxed at his joining Ellie… that may well be why the man stepped up. They were surrounded by allies, it was not on her alone to keep the Inquisitor safe, she had to remind herself.

Marehis was entirely miffed when, after the cataclysmic sound of runestones cracking against each other as the Rift snapped closed… they did not cease their rattling. Which meant a second, unseen, Rift was somewhere nearby.

They came to a place where there was a great ominous door in the side of the cliff before them, and Bull’s hand went to Ellie’s back when Marehis heard her heart skip a beat as she startled a bit, “Imekari?”

“Magic found something,” she said, slipping from his hold to investigate a- oh there was a body!

“Da’vehnan!” Marehis reprimanded, she- she shouldn’t touch something that has been dead for who knew how long-

“Oh!” Ellie chirped, crouched before the body as she stopped and looked back at her mother momentarily, “Uhh… right! Sorry!” she looked back to the corpse, “Hi! I’m Ellie and I need in your pockets please and thank you!” before she reached into a pocket on a battered leather overcoat to remove a key.

“Eleanor?” Cassandra questioned with mirth, albeit confused.

The girl was smiley as she rejoined them with her found key, “Tia Josie says I gotta say hi and ask nice before putting my hands in people’s pockets—thanks for reminding me mami!”

She wasn’t certain if in moments of misunderstanding such as this she should be concerned the future of the world as they knew it rested on the shoulders of this girl, or if they were proof positive she was exactly the balance of methodical and tenderhearted leader they needed.

“Huh, papi—ven aqui, look,” Ellie instructed, bringing Solas to her side and holding the key up for his inspection.

“Oh,” he said in soft surprise, “it… it is a key shaped like a griffon. What an interesting find da’vehnan.”

“It’s so cute!”

"..."
It took a bit of umph to turn the 'cute' key in the ancient lock, so much so when she completed the task she offered up a grin and flexed her arms, and the Iron Bull was at hand to offer her an encouraging cheer of, “Hell yeah, Boss!” and a high-five as she pocketed the key in her overcoat.

He was also at hand to wrap an arm around the girl and pull her behind him when they were met with what was essentially...a cursed tomb of a place filled to the brim with blighted Darkspawn and undead...led by a Hurlock Alpha.

A Hurlock Alpha they’d been wholly unaware of until it made its presence known. Ellie and Sera had found themselves separated from the Mages by the great number of Darkspawn and undead—they’d been wise and stuck together as they made their way to the top of the stairs that led to a platform where there were twin sets of double doors, and it was from up there they resumed their flinging spells and arrows down on their enemies, Marehis and the Iron Bull—their other Warriors among them edging closer to the stairs to join them.

And then the Hurlock Alpha emerged from a corridor at the top of the stairs. From the door directly behind her girls.

“Girls, get back!” Marehis ordered when the girls screamed and narrowly dodged the swing of the Alpha’s axe, Sera reaching behind her to pull her sister along as Marehis rushed past, “Behind your father—now! Bull!”

Solas got the girls behind him and The Iron Bull was immediate to drop to his knees and basket his hands, gave Marehis a proper foothold to jump from with the Qunari pushing her along, propelling her higher and faster so she could get a vice-grip around the back of the Alpha’s head, her legs wrapping around his neck to ply pressure to his airways, arms around his helmet and using her weight to pull his head up and back so the thing couldn’t see to strike, pulling his posture open—it could not slouch so protectively around his vital organs, left its middle open for the Seeker, Rainier—two swords struck organs, sheathing their blades in the Alpha’s belly and up under his ribcage to puncture whatever vital organs they could while the Iron Bull lodged his axe directly into the Alpha’s spine.

It was mildly embarrassing, the surprised yelp that left her throat when the Hurlock plummeted forward, dead—Barrier, fierce and protective and urgent coated over her as she found herself going down with the beast, thankfully she’d the presence of mind to hit the ground arms first, relaxed her hold the instant before she made contact with the ground so she wouldn’t bash her head against the stone floors and instead roll forward safely onto her bottom.

The next assault on her person came in the form of two bodies colliding with hers in a hug, “Mami!” and “Mum!” were overlapping as her girls rushed to meet her, kneeling at her sides and hugging her fiercely as they offered…unified praise and reprimand. Ellie’s,

“You did such a good job!”

And Sera’s, “That was so cool!”

“But it was so dangerous!”

“Yeah—friggin’ barmy!”

Marehis found herself giggling oh, it had been...well an exciting bit of fun for all it had been dangerous, and her girls concern was as precious as it was needless, “I am fine, da’vehnans. Barrier was swift to soften my fall.”

“Sera! Gosh, wow mami fell so fast I didn’t even have time to think to cast.” Ellie gratefully commended her sister, eyes gleaming with so much pride and adoration for the older girl, who snorted,

“Wasn’t me,” Sera said.

Ellie ‘hmm’ed a bit, curious as she began hugging Marehis more tightly, pressing her cheek directly against hers and then she let out a happy sound like she was being tickled before she announced, “It’s my papi’s magic! Hi! I love you too—gracias for protecting mami, mwah!” she pressed a kiss to- well, it was Marehis’s cheek, but she supposed it was for the bit of Barrier still shielding said cheek.

Solas, Vivienne and Dorian just behind him, joined them at the top of the stairs, blushing a
bit, “I am pleased your mother was unharmed.”

Mostly, potion healed up the few bruises and scrapes she’d gotten, swallowing quickly because the Rune bracer was emitting the most violent rattling sound.

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Behind one door, had been a Hurklock Alpha. Behind the second? Was their mystery Rift awaiting closure in a crumbled, half-ruined room that held a devastating drop they were by no means nearing. No no. Absolutely not.

Marehis had an appreciation, a love for Ellie’s magic—it was something that secured her daughter’s life so often, gave her companionship and guidance in her so often solitary youth. But she could **strangle** it for drawing her child’s attention to something across the broken portion of the room once the Rift was sealed closed.

She was inclined to slap Dorian when the man only encouraged her efforts and used magic to call up crumbled stone from below to make a haphazard path to cross, oh she could-

She- she nearly did, it was only a hand on her wrist that kept her from raising her hand to strike the man—Maker! It was one thing to be frustrated with the man but to raise her hand in actual violence against him was another, she just-

“…you okay Mare?” Sera asked quietly, coming to her as Solas’s hand slipped from her wrist and the man whispered against her ear that he would keep Ellie from harm before leaving her as Sera wrapped her arms around Marehis’s waist. She was fine she- “Hey mama, breathe with me for a minute, okay? Everything’s alright. Don’t gotta um…” they were surrounded by friends, but on the field of battle—in the field! This was not- she was beyond embarrassed-

Her heart was thundering in her chest, throat tight, something that had been building up in her in the moment before her hand nearly raised so she could cross the distance between herself and- and Dorian! She adored him! She would never—never—raise a hand to someone unprompted in anger like that, she’d felt an urgency to do something, and she’d felt so overwhelmingly outraged.

She was…apparently…having a panic attack.

“Don’t gotta be loud—just think. Five,” Sera whispered softly. Oh…five things she sees? Thinking them, that was doable, felt less obvious she was having such a moment.

She could see Vivienne and Cassandra…and Ellie. All three of them standing at the edge of the makeshift bridge—item number four—Dorian had made, her child safe with Cassandra’s arm around her shoulders as they watched what Marehis used as a fifth momentary truth to ground herself back into the present as it was—Solas making careful progress across the bridging to where Ellie’s magic instructed in the girl’s stead.

“Four.”

Touch. Her hair, some had fallen out of the bun she’d pulled it into that morning, it was against her cheek. Her armor was secure around her. Rice bags still emitting warmth. Her wrist was still warm from where Solas had held it- she supposed that did not count, or maybe it was that she didn’t want it to. Number four was Sera. She could feel her sweet girl hugging her, the reassuring beat of her heart against Marehis’s that helped her own heart catch its rhythm again.

“Three.”

Sera’s voice. Ellie’s calling out for her ‘papi’ to be careful! Solas’s voice calling back to his da’len that he was fine, warm encouragement that her magic had made such an excellent find, oh he was sweet with her.

“Two.”

She smelled atmosphere, the sort of scent that sealed Rifts left behind. She smelled Sera, the salt from her sweat, a rust from drying blood on her armor, and underneath it all she still managed to somehow smell like mustard even as she hadn’t had a bite of anything with that stuff on it since yesterday.

“One.”
Marehis took a deep breath, and then pressed a kiss to her child’s cheek, the faintest mix of dirt and sweat on her lips when she was through. “Thank you, da’vehnan.”

Ellie was speaking sweetly with Thom, asking if he would mind his men coming to collect the Grey Warden artifacts they’d found in this place before she came to join Marehis and Sera. “Mami? You okay?” she worried.

“I’m just fine sweet girl. Did you find what you were looking for?” Marehis checked, brushing hair out of her face, oh, “Da’vehnan, you feel warm.”

She nodded, sniffling. “I’m okay and um...if everyone else is still up for it, I’d sleep a lot better getting the Red Templars off the high ground so close to our camp.”

“You sure Ink?” Sera asked tentatively, and when she nodded the older girl wrapped an arm around her shoulders. “Okay. Just stay close to me, alright sweets?”

Ellie did stay close to her sister, thankfully. The Red Templars were very determined to keep their hold on the Tower of Bone, the high and low of it too—the Iron Bull, Thom, Cassandra, Marehis and Cole rushed down the circular ramping to face the Templars in the lower portion of their camp, their Mages and archer kept to the level high-point of the ramping to cast Barrier and assault on their enemies from on high.

And the second the last of their Red Templar foes were felled, Marehis looked up to her girls and saw the moment Ellie fell—directly into the hold of her sister who pulled her close and seated herself down quickly, safely away from the frightening edge of the ramp. Cole vanished and reappeared at the girls’ side offering She is alright, she is safe, she just needs rest. Sleep and potion and love, you are good at getting her all three, to Marehis’s mind as she and their warriors rushed to meet with the rest of their group.

“You did so well, da’assan,” she could hear Solas praising Sera warmly as they drew near, “so well. Sweet girl, if you let go of your sister, I can take her to secure ground, alright?”

“Y-y-you’ll be careful right?” Sera worried.

“Absolutely.”

Oh. Oh, Sera was staring at the edge of the ramp with horror struck eyes. She’d been a mess, blamed herself endlessly when Ellie had fallen in the Oasis, from scaffolding she’d been fighting alongside Sera on before plummeting into a Rift-filled mine, and it was rather the perilous drop—Ellie would have hit a lower level of ramping, perhaps broken something but it wouldn’t have been the devastation Sera was reeling with the fear of her reliving. Marehis knelt at Solas’s side, “Da’vehnan? Look at me sweet girl,” she smiled reassuringly, pressing a kiss to the girl’s cheek, and she sucked in a deep breath and met Marehis’s gaze. “oh, there’s my girl’s beautiful eyes. Solas is correct, you did perfectly. Will you walk with me? Hold my hand?”

Sera nodded, oh she was just shaking, the hand in Marehis’s trembling, but she relaxed when Marehis put an arm around her shoulders and they made their way off of the ramp and back onto steady, sturdy ground of the plateau the Tower of Bone rose upon. “M’okay, m’okay, shite, sorry.”

“Do not be sorry,” Cassandra intoned, “Come, sit sweetheart, you should rest.”

Solas had seated himself in the center of the area they’d be making camp in, thanking Rainier as he took claim to the campfire the Red Templars had been kind enough leave them, Thom building it back up. Ellie was resting against the Elf man’s chest, eyes clenched shut, still catching her breath through her mouth in painful rasping gasps.

“It is alright da’vehnan,” Solas said as if in encouragement to Ellie, “relax, rest—you will be fine,” he promised and Marehis was beyond grateful Cassandra was at hand, she supported Sera, her hand on Marehis’s forearm the only thing keeping the Elf woman upright when a wave of dizziness swept through her. It- it was more like exhaustion and Solas was apologetic as Marehis knelt at Solas’s side, “Da’vehnan? Look at me sweet girl,” she smiled reassuringly, pressing a kiss to the girl’s cheek, and she sucked in a deep breath and met Marehis’s gaze. “oh, there’s my girl’s beautiful eyes. Solas is correct, you did perfectly. Will you walk with me? Hold my hand?”

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“You got it,” the Qunari readily agreed, seating himself beside the fire and taking Ellie in his
arms while Solas rose, quietly announcing he would see to potion. “Shh, I got you Imekari, just the
good old Iron Bull. Sera, babe, you want in on this?”

Sera nodded, crawling to lay face down alongside her sister. “Friggin’ colds is stupid!”

Cole let out something like a low whine. “Fever makes their bodies ache, they are so tired!
Sera has a headache!” Oh da’assan! Marehis fumbled in her own stores for potion but their last
scrape left her stores depleted, and Sera’s weren’t any better- ah. Well then. She supposed that was
why Solas was emptying his pack of raw ingredients and crouching by the fire, endeavoring to
prepare fresh. Good. “Where is your manfriend, Thom? He has to make them better!” Cole
insisted.

“Uhh…” Thom looked to Marehis and Cassandra, “I can call him—he’d come. Only haven’t
done it ‘cause of Ellie-girl’s orders for him to stay with Sahnia’s people until a replacement healer
arrives.”

“Yeah well, I say we mutiny,” the Iron Bull spoke, concerned. “Imekari’s starting to feel
warm to me and uh…that probably isn’t great.”

“I’m certain a compromise could be met,” Cassandra reasoned, “Send Cole for word on if
there is pressing need for him with the refugees, if there is no emergency, instruct him to come to
us. Our Inquisitor would not begrudge her sister receiving healing—and Cyril may as well
examine her while he is here, should he not?”

Thom nodded, “Alright, go on boy.”

Cole breathed a sigh of relief, “Thank you. I know you are mad at him right now. He did not
mean to hurt you, but you know that,” he said as he vanished from sight.

Oh dear, “…Cyril has caused you some offense?” Marehis questioned the Mercenary gently.
The man sighed. “Complicated,” he said, running a hand over his face, “I uh…Lady
Josephine asked me about my mother recently for um…well something just barmy, didn’t sound
like something she could go to my mother for—I couldn’t offer any advice on the matter because I
didn’t think it was actually my mother she was talking about. I figured the last person in the world
who could help Lady Montilyet secure official documents from the Free Marchs government
would be a sticky-fingered drug addict from downtown Markham. I spent most of my childhood
bailing her out of jail. She kicked me out not long after Liddy passed, and I haven’t exactly looked
back since. Apparently…she’s really turned things around. Cyril used to go home to see his family
before uh, prison. He’s even visited with mom, known she sobered up and—” he blew out a
frustrated sigh. “He’d badger me to visit but I always refused, I could be a right asshole about it—
ever really let him get a word in edgewise. It’s not exactly his fault he didn’t tell me if I made it so
he couldn’t.”

“You wish you had gone home when your mother wrote you after your last tour with the
Orlesian military. It makes you sad you’ve had second chances offered to you when you couldn’t
be bothered to do the same to your mother. You wonder if things would be different, if the Callier
Massacre would never have come to be,” Cole said as he reappeared at the Human Charger’s side.

“Thom, with our without you, Gaspard made his decision, you were not a deciding factor—
Mercenaries are found anywhere. But you wish you’d given your mother a chance, and still some
part of you feels it can’t be true, that there must be some other Margret doing all of the wonderful
things you hear your mother’s name doing, that your mother could never change. But she has, she
is in Cyril’s memories, the last time he visited his parents before Gaspard ordered Callier’s death.
He checked in on your mother—how is Thom? Did he get my letter? Thank you for trying, thank
you for loving my son. You are right, she is not the mother that let you raise yourself, put her next
high above your next meal. She is beautiful and kind and healthy. She’s better now. So are you.”

The Human man reached out and pat Cole on the shoulder. “Thanks lovey.”

Cyril arrived shortly after their reinforcements came to begin setting up their camp, and
Thom greeted him quickly but um…albeit more passionately than the shy Mercenary usually did. It
may be because there were no young eyes save for Cole’s upon them, or as penance for his upset,
but Thom greeted the man with a very thorough kiss and an apology for being cross with him.

“Yeah, well, you’re a real asshole Thom Rainier,” Cyril drawled the sarcastic exaggeration of his usually tenderhearted lover, “but I suppose that’s part of your charm.” And then, “Now, where’re are my patients?”

He barely had a question out with Sera before she was waving him off and insisting he ‘freaking help Inky already’. Cole must have passed along her symptoms because Cyril responded by handing off potion for her congestion, something to help with her headache and fever and instructed her to rest as he looked Ellie over.

“Her fever’s high. Chief, I know you mean well but I’ma need you to keep your distance from her for a bit, the way she’s going you run the risk of overheating her. She needs to cool down but being out in this, shivering is only going to make her internal temp rise—we need her out of armor and in bed as soon as possible.”

Oh. Sera did not care for that at all, she was certain Ellie would be miserable if healing required the lack of blankets and being able to be held. They got their tent situated, and Ellie was laid in a cot as soon as possible in her sleep clothes, sans socks, no blankets, Cyril insisted nothing more than a sheet could be permitted, and the one they did provide the girl was sweated through quick enough they thought it might best best she go without, oh Maker. It was misery to- she was afraid to even hold the girl’s hand, even Cassandra was tentative, chilled a cloth in the snow to rest against Ellie's forehead before daring to press her own against her child's to whisper a fervent prayer for the Maker's hand to bring healing to this girl. A chilled cloth that swiftly lost its heat against the poor girl's burning forehead.

It was Sera's hands that provided a bit of much needed assistance.

She had been seated on a cot opposite the tent from her sister, watching and waiting and worrying, lost in thought. Solas was seated on the ground at the foot of Ellie’s’ bed, eyes closed as he voiced an encouragement-laced, "Da'assan," and a nod.

“Oh, frig. Really?” Sera checked, as if he’d approved of something she’d been considering and wasn’t sure of, but with his ‘go-ahead’ she hopped down off the cot to scramble to Ellie’s, scooting a nearby cot closer so she could sit with her legs criss crossed before her on its end, seated directly behind Ellie's head, and then she splayed her hands at her sister's temples and called icy chill into her hands.

“Oh, brilliant, Ser’,” Cyril commended, "if you can keep that up—take breaks, for your sake and hers, it’s best not to apply direct cold for too long, but if you cycle through and stay consistent, that will surely help."

Sera nodded. “Hey Cole, she…she’s okay in the Fade, right?”

The Spirit nodded as he said, “Fever makes her bleary, everything seems a little hazy and confusing but she knows she is safe. Solas is with her, keeping guard from demons.”

Oh, she felt wholly useless. Sera’d the ability to help with her magic, Solas the ability to guard her in the Fade—

…there was more to life than magic. She’d the ability to do a great many things. She had been speaking unkindly to herself, Sera was correct and…and it helped, yes, her advice that if she found herself having thoughts—words that no one who loved her would say to her—they may well be incorrect. She wasn’t useless. She could help—fever sweats were incredibly dehydrating, Cyril himself warned of that. She could not hold her child’s hand or cuddle with her to comfort, but she could offer cooling relief—sit at her side and put careful drops of water past her lips, and there was so much snow at hand, it wasn’t difficult to dash out and get washcloths freshly chilled and come back to wrap them around Ellie’s wrists—applying cool to ones forehead and wrists, it helped bring fever down, at least in her experience with it, her mother always did as much for her when she was ill.

“Comin’ down good, she’s responding to potion well.” Cyril said as he checked her temperature once more before brushing her hair back out of her face, seeking to gently wake her, Ellie’s eyes drifting open to blink up at him.

“Mmm, hola tio,” her voice cracked softly from her throat.
“Hey honey, how you feelin’? Hanging in there?” he checked, and when she nodded, “your fever’s coming down nicely and you’ve started responding to potion.”

“Sera’s okay?”

“Yeah sweets,” Sera assured for herself. “This okay? Sorry it’s cold.”

Ellie let out a happy little hum, “Feels great sissy, you’re the best…”

Oh, the encouragement only left the poor girl tearing up as the Human girl was too weak to remain conscious much longer, drifted back to sleep so immediately. Marehis claimed a seat on the cot Sera sat on, wrapping her arms around the girl’s waist and pressing a kiss to the back of her precious ear! “You are doing so well da’vehnan—she will be fine.”

“Don’t worry about it honey,” Cyril offered kindly, checking once more, “you’re still feeling better?”

“You’re all doing a good job. I feel confident Ellie-girl’s on the rebound—some good rest, keep her hydrated, and she’ll be just fine,” Cyril promised. “I should be heading back to Sahnia, but listen—her fever goes up again, dose her with potion and start doing everything you can to bring it down and send for me at once. If I don’t hear from you, I’ll swing by and check on her tonight.”

“You uh…you could spend the night if you wanted to. Keep an eye on her,” Thom shyly invited.

Cyril smiled warmly, “Depends on if I can leave Sahnia to its own devices for that long but I might just take you up on that.”

“Alright. Be safe love.”

“Always am.” Oh Maker, they were adorable.

Cole looked conflicted but he offered, “I will make sure he makes it safely back. I- I will be right back,” he promised them, drawing nearer to the cot to timidly offer up a kiss to Ellie’s forehead while Sera took a bit of a break from plying cool, sighing in disappointment, “forehead kisses always make people feel better. Oh!” he chirped, looking to Marehis and Sera, and then his gaze went around the different members of Ellie’s party gathered in the tent who sat by watching the…well, the admittedly precious exchange, “It made all of you feel better! Oh, I am glad,” he said before vanishing from sight.

“…friggin’ love Cole,” Sera sniffled.

“Are you alright, da’vehnan?” Solas voiced. Oh, he’d woken when Ellie had Marehis supposed. “It is sweet of you to do this for your sister but her fever is no longer dangerous and another can assist her in this way. You should not wear yourself out, da’len—you are not well.”

“You do look rather peaked, sweet girl,” Marehis fretted.

“You should rest, you could join your sister in the Fade if you wished, she is feeling better. You could make play or I could show you anything you care to see,” Solas enticed.

“Think you could teach Ink and me another one of them weirdy songs?” Sera wondered. The man favored her a warm smile as he nodded, “Certainly, da’len.”

“Is Solas’s singing so very entertaining?” Marehis wondered quietly.

Sera shrugged, “Mostly just teaches us the words and plays his little fluty thing,” she blushed a bit, “Songs are pretty, and s’fun to sing with Inky.”

Oh. Oh that was sweet. Cole had mentioned it before*, Sera’s lack of pleasure in singing even as she did have…oh she had *such a beautiful* singing voice. Marehis had found it in herself to tentatively question Sera’s dislike of an act she was so talented in. She’d outright denied any such great ability to sing, insisted she was *shite* at it, then shrugged, sniffing a bit as she groused, *Lady used to make me sing at Chantry all the time, ‘cause she got so many compliments on it—how pretty the little knife-ear she tamed could sound, wasn’t it a friggin’ glorious testament to the Maker blah blah blah blah. Get her ego stroked to death, and then all I’d hear is how I messed up, was off key or looked weird or whatever she could think of to make me feel like dirt for it all later. It was sweet to hear she found some enjoyment in it now.*
“Oi Viv, you feel like um, taking over for me?” Sera wondered to the Grand Enchanter who was perched primly at the end of a cot, reading from a small, silvery tome she briskly closed as she gave Sera her attention,

“Certainly darling. I will keep watch over Eleanor—do get some rest.”

The poor girl looked rather done in, exhausted both physically and magically though Marehis wondered if perhaps that would benefit her—she would be restful for the next several hours and wake renewed. She did seem to be improving, only the faintest bit of congestion still sounded in her breathing and she seemed mostly exhausted from the work they’d done that day rather than from the energy-theft of illness. Marehis assisted her in cleaning up, getting into her sleep clothes, brushing her hair—it did not take much to detangle such thin, fine hair but Sera never shied away from indulging Marehis in brushing it a bit more thoroughly than necessary, the brush was gentle enough it was albeit relaxing to have it scrape gently across ones scalp,

“Put all worry from your mind, da’vehnan,” Marehis gently intoned, “We are safe here in camp, we’ve secured this area rather thoroughly, we will be watching out for you and Ellie. Rest, and enjoy yourself in the Fade,” she wished her, sweeping hair back behind the girl’s ears, pecking a kiss to one that fluttered just adorably as Sera blushed and relaxed further against her mother, “have the sweetest dreams.”

“Thanks mum—you get some rest too, yeah?” Sera returned as she twisted about to press a kiss to the edge of Marehis’s ear, oh her sweet da’len!

Sera laid down as closely to her sister as she dared, afraid to risk the delicate balance they’d struck to get her fever down to a safe level of ‘feverish’. She did take hold of Ellie’s hand before she relaxed in her cot and drifted off to sleep.

“I believe I’ll join them,” Cassandra voiced tiredly. Oh yes, Marehis was still amazed the woman had rebound from her injury so swiftly, she’d fought so well today, “you should as well, Marehis, if you’d like.”

Something in her mind felt panicked at the thought, like the fear that if she went to sleep she would wake to something horrible having happened because she was not awake to do something…but this was something in Ellie she’d only just reprimanded the girl for. Well, not reprimanded—it was hardly the girl’s fault, but it was something that needed correction, something she needed help to overcome, feeling that she alone would be to blame if something befell those she cared for, that she needed to push herself beyond her very limits to ensure their safety when…well, she’d help around her, others she could rely on when she was worried Cassandra may suffer complication—she’d Cole monitoring her, the boy would have woken Ellie immediately if something had been amiss. Too if something had happened? It would not be for lack on her part. It was anxiety, not necessity that kept her wired and wary all night. She was to tell her loved ones what she was fearful of and seek assistance she would rely on.

“I am tired,” Marehis confessed. “If…if there is any change in the girls I would ask someone wake me.”

Thom, Vivienne, and Dorian spoke in unison offering up their own, “Of course,” overlapping Bull’s, “You’ve got it.”

Solas was back to guarding and guiding Ellie and Sera in the Fade, but there was something…she felt it when she laid down alongside Sera and Cassandra, once she was comfortable, there was a feeling she was becoming familiar with, something that said she was experiencing something from the bond. It was…warm and comforting, it relaxed her as she fell asleep, the last bit of waking sensation before she drifted off was…almost startling but it sent her right to sleep—she could hear her girls, their voices in the Fade a sweet harmonious tune that was just…oh.

She hated how much love she felt for the fact that she was allowed by Solas to experience such a thing, given such a beautiful reassurance that her girls were safe and enjoying themselves together as they slept under guard of those she trusted to do so.

Marehis was woken in the night by someone reporting that something indeed was amiss with her girls.
“Mami?” Ellie’s voice was directly in Marehis’s ear...oh! Oh goodness—Marehis had rolled over, from the edge of the cot she’d been sharing with Cassandra and Sera, onto the cot Ellie laid on, laying herself directly atop the Human girl! Oh, had she made the girl uncomfortably warm or hurt her? “Mami my body is so hungry and you’re laying on it—I love it but I need up.”

It took a moment for her mind to catch up, “Oh! No, sweet girl stay put,” Marehis insisted. Oh, ugh, she felt almost ill as she sat up, cramps were horrible things. But, if she got out of bed, she could get potion—and then food, yes, she could see to it. “How are you feeling, da’vehnan?”

“A lot better,” oh, she even sounded it, her breathing was clear and her color returned, the rosiness to her cheeks nothing threatening. “Are you hungry mami? Ser’?”

“Ruddy starvin’,” Sera announced, yawning as she sat up and stretched.

“Am I dreaming or is there talk of food?” Dorian’s voice wondered from his cot.

It seemed everyone had fallen asleep—well, those of them that could, Cole was awake, he almost startled Marehis as the boy was perched on the foot of the cot like he’d been keeping literal guard of them as they slept. None of them had eaten since breakfast and it had gone eight according to the cracked face of Ellie’s wristwatch. Marehis announced her intent to get dinner underway and everyone set about checking on one another, seeing if they were tired still or hungry.

It was Marehis who checked on Solas, but that was purely on accident—she nearly stepped on the man as she made to exit the tent! He was still seated on the ground, hunched forward, snoring softly. Oh. he….well he sounded congested now, it was chilly to be seated on the cold ground without so much as a blanket to retain warmth and goodness, he’d fallen asleep like that, keeping careful watch over Ellie and Sera in the Fade. They were awake now and he- that couldn’t be comfortable and- oh she hated it but,

“Solas?” she questioned softly, tentatively placing a hand on his shoulder.

He startled a bit under her hand, and he....he seemed like he’d wakened and was merely considering whether or not to open his eyes like perhaps he could prolong her contact with him by feigning sleep—she felt annoyed at herself at the fact she wasn’t immediately annoyed with him, had somehow found it endearing. He opened his eyes and offered up something of a sympathetic smile,

“I…apologize, I’m awake. Did you have need of me, Marehis? There is still potion isn’t there?” he wondered. Oh. did he think she was waking him to demand he make her potion for her cramping?

Fool man, “I’ve already taken some,” she assured, “The girls are awake and need dinner, I was just about to see to it. Are you hungry? If you’re tired still you should seek a cot.”

“Ah, I should have woken with them, they did not say they were hungry but...well. Ma’da’vehnan have quite the appetite, it may be wiser to always assume that was what was waking them,” he supposed, amused. “I could assist with dinner if that suits.”

Well, she wasn’t inclined to stop him so she nodded as she stepped away and began heading from the tent though she winced when she heard the rather painful sounding series of pops from Solas’s spine as the poor man rose from his seated sleep. She heard the muffled sound of his voice speaking warmly as he checked on the girls now that they were awake before he followed her out of the tent, Cole following after him, though the Spirit went digging in the potions supplies before heading back toward the tent, Marehis’s questioning gaze at his back had the Spirit cheerfully announcing,

“I am helping!”

Well, he certainly sounded happy so she was happy for him, certain he was being of great use with whatever task he’d taken up.

Apparently her girls had a potions project in mind—Cole brought them what they needed and by the time they warmed stew and bread, they’d concluded their experiment in brewing in the tent. Solas hefting the pot while Marehis carried the stack of bowls, utensils safe in the top most bowl while she took up the platter of bread loaves in the other hand and Cole was sweet enough to open the tent for them so they could enter with ease, begin doling out portions to their party members seated and waiting on their cots Ellie and Sera smiled at them as they entered and then,
“Gracias for making dinner, gosh it smells so good!” Ellie complimented before ordering, “Papi, ven aqui—potion time, mister!”

That got a confused look from the man as he set down the pot of stew on the ground and went to Ellie who stood up on the cot, the weave sinking under her feet, making her squeak as she nearly toppled over but she caught herself on his shoulders, pressing a kiss to his cheek as she handed him what looked like potion for colds, and then she held her hand out to Sera who handed her...oh, the woolen hat Ellie’d knitted the man months ago, he still had it? The girls had gotten it out of his pack and now Ellie whisked it onto his head, intoning, “You got to keep yourself warm,” she pouted a bit, “I didn’t realize you weren’t someplace comfy when we were sleeping.”

“I was someplace entirely pleasant while you were sleeping da’vehn,” he assured her, “I’m fine, da’len, I’m certain this will clear my bit of stuffiness right up.”

“No getting sick—no one in this Inquisition is allowed to get sick or hurt bad anymore,” Ellie informed them all, “that’s a rule!” she said, dropping down onto her bottom, the cot bouncing with the motion as she rejoined her sister and declared, “Your Inquisitor has spoken!”

Their Inquisitor was through speaking for the time being as she devoured several bowls of stew she wiped clean with slices of bread though she did eventually get around to voicing some curiosity,

“Tio Thom, whose Maggie?” she wondered. Maggie? “Cole said I should ask about her?” Thom blushed a bit, embarrassed as he cleared his throat, “My uh…mother.”

Margret- oh! Oh! long for Maggie! Maggie

Oh, that got an excited gasp from the girl as she was struck with the realization, “Thom! You have a mami?!” though that overlapped Marehis’s rather excited,

“Maggie Rainier is your mother?!” oh she wasn’t certain why she hadn’t- oh she hadn’t thought about the woman in a few years but she’d thought Thom had a striking resemblance to someone but it had been years since she last saw Maggie—she’d not laid eyes on the woman since before Kirkwall’s Circle fell and the Mage Rebellion kicked into full gear, and Leliana recruited Marehis in full.

“...yeah,” Thom offered up almost tentatively, like he was afraid he was about to hear something unpleasant but,

“Oh my word I- I didn’t realize—oh I never realized she’d such a hard time of it coming up,” Marehis breathed, “Maggie Rainier is the sweetest, most incredible woman I’ve ever met,”

Marehis assured him, “she goes to my family’s restaurant, I used to wait on her all of the time,” oh, the woman...well sometimes she ate with friends or her clients, but she usually came in alone. Marehis had always wondered at that, “she helped my mama refinance our business, helped us get out of debt and properly own restaurant it- it is difficult to do so outside of the Alienage but Maggie was unrelenting, and- oh brilliant, the mind on that woman is incredible. I can’t believe I didn’t make the connection—you’re her Thom! We have a copy of the article Markham’s newspaper put out on your victory at Tourney hanging behind the counter, she was ecstatic, so very proud of you. She...” Marehis thought on it. She realized then, why she missed the connection.

The Maggie Rainier she knew...well five, nearly six years ago, Marehis had gotten the impression something terrible happened to Maggie’s son—had come to assume he was gone for good, either disappeared or dead. She’d gone from almost always having something to bring up about him—how he was doing in the Orlesian Military, how proud she was of all he’d done—to seeming in mourning. The general assumption had been that Maggie Rainier’s son died in Orlais war—there were few in Markham who kept up with Orlesian politics, she’d never heard of the Callier Massacre until it came to light its perpetrator had been working with the Inquisition under the guise of ‘Warden Blackwall’. Oh how awful, Marehis knew now the sort of trouble he’d gotten into, Maggie would ache to help her son—Cyril had been keeping her updated apparently, and he certainly couldn’t do that if he was in prison and Thom was on the lam, that must have been horrible to loose all connection to him. “She loves you, very much. I’m sure she would have been able to help you, if you’d gone to her.”

“Really?” Thom wondered. “Cyril said she put herself through school and got a few
degrees.”

“Like I said, a brilliant mind for it—she was regretful you didn’t know you could go to her.”

Ellie was looking back and forth between them trying to absorb everything, and then, “Oh! That Judge—Margret Rainier—Cremisius said she helped him get identification! Oh gosh that’s so sweet, I didn’t realize…” she blushed, “um, sometimes I forget last names are a thing people share and it means they’re family. I thought it was cool she had the same last name as you,” she giggled at having missed the full connection. “I’m sorry though um…does her being a judge make things awkward for you?”

“It may well do so,” Thom supposed, “I um…I don’t know. She wasn’t exactly sparkling when I was coming up, made a lot of bad choices where…if she’d made good ones, even just decent ones,” he shrugged, “Liddy’d lived to see her ninth birthday at the very least. But she’s…she has a life where she uh…she’s apparently turned things around for herself I guess.”

“Do you wanna find out?” Ellie wondered, “Tio! We can write your mami a letter- oh! I can write her! And explain to her how good you’re doing! How you’re helping the Inquisition and keeping me safe and being my favorite tio!”

“I do beg your pardon?” Dorian interrupted, appalled.

“Thom does my hair and makes me snacks—I’m only Human!” the girl lamented, “I love you just as much and you’re my favorite for shopping and school stuff and you always smell very nice, and you’ve got the nicest mustache! Thom doesn’t even have a mustache anymore!”

“I do not usually settle for being tied,” Dorian said, shooting the Iron Bull a rather fearsome glare when the Qunari rumbled a quiet laugh at that. Oh goodness. “But I suppose I can make the exception for you.”

“So you just go around saying that to everyone I guess,” Bull snorted.

“Oh do behave!” Dorian reprimanded.

“Yeah!” Ellie agreed reproach was necessary, “And be careful with my Tio’s circulation! You two use a safeword, right?” Who taught her such things?! “Good!” she said when the Qunari nodded and then she returned her attention to Thom, “Anyway, if you want to reach out but you’re afraid to, I can write your mami and see if she’d write you? I don’t think I’m biological war-farey anymore, I feel like, so much better! I think I fevered it out.”

“Y- you don’t have to put yourself to any trouble Ellie-girl-” Thom objected.

“It’s no trouble—I mean if you don’t want me to, I won’t but of course I want to help you Tio. I dunno, I know I’m young and having mami’s is a little new for me but now that I have them? I mean I’m always going to want them in my life. I think everyone needs their mami’s, age doesn’t matter, as long as they’re good mami’s. If you want to see if yours is, if you would like her in your life? I want you to have that! Everyone should have a mami!” she took rather the deep breath to loudly declare, “Anyone who needs a mami—I’m your mami now!”

The Iron Bull huffed a laugh, “Qunari’s don’t have-“

“You do now! All of you! Have Josie send a formal decree to Par Vollen!”

“Nah, those assholes don’t deserve you as their mami, Imekari,” Bull said, “You got your hands full with me.”

No. Those assholes didn’t deserve this girl’s consideration. That vile Gatt—he provided the leak ofSaarebas tranquilizer into Freemen hands. Or he was part of the leak. The Iron Bull…oh, blessed man he’d…chosen to be creative when describing the Herald of Andraste. Bull had personal sources that told him the Herald was a Mage, but he kept that detail scarce in his early reports to Par Vollen—he’d figured the Qun would demand he infiltrate the Inquisition, and he knew well that they would have less reticence in those orders and fewer demands on how he was to handle things if they didn’t know about the Herald’s Apostacy. Gatt had been the first member of Ben-Hessrath he’d allowed to realize Ellie’s Mage status. Unfortunately he was not the last. Gatt had taken that information directly to a fellow Viddethari agent—an Arvaarad responsible for the guarding Saarebas—and from there…well. When news traveled that the Freemens of the Dales wished to capture the Inquisitor, that wish was made known to that Arvaarad, and she supplied them with something that would keep Ellie’s magic from defending her, would render her
unconscious—would have killed her if they’d just hit her with a full dose of the stuff! She was 1/4th the size of a Qunari Mage, if-

Needless to say, the Iron Bull was blasphemously praying to any deity who cared to hear, that he would in fact see his dear friend Gatt again someday to properly thank him for his hand in Ellie’s harm. Marehis prayed she was with him.

“Mami?”

Marehis startled a bit, looking to the girl staring up at her with concerned curiosity, “Yes? Are you still hungry da’vehnan?”

Ellie shook her head, “No—thanks for making dinner, gosh, its so late um…is everyone okay? What happened? I kind of…I remember fighting and then Sera was hugging me and then I kind of remember the Iron Bull but everything was kind of brain foggy after that.”

They filled her in—camp was secure, they’d set up and sent for Cyril, who returned to Sahmnia. They’d all been keeping to the tent, resting and waiting. Ellie listened, worrying at her lip a bit,

“The Iron Bull. I’m thinking again…you wanna kick it around with me?” Ellie wondered. “Hit me babe—what we thinking?” the Qunari immediately encouraged.

“Papi and me, we looked around Sahmnia quarry ‘cause scouting and Cole says he can hear lots of hurt coming from there—they’ve got villagers from Sahrina captive all throughout the quarry, locked in cages. It’s…there’s a lot of Red Templars, the Iron Bull—a lot. A behemoth too. Getting the villagers out safe is my priority. So I’m seriously considering…if everyone feels up to it, and doesn’t think this sounds totally bat crap crazy—we’re rested, we’ve eaten, I mean any sleep we’d be getting tonight would have to be potion induced as it stands so…wanna go kick some Red Templar butt?” she wondered. “The way I’m thinking—we’re a lot harder to see in the dark than they are given that they glow and we don’t,” she looked to her Marked hand and shrugged, “…mostly. Same goes for their captives—if they can stay quiet and just run for it?”

“Cover of night will make it harder for their captors to realize they’re escaping and go after them,” the Iron Bull agreed.

Ellie nodded. “I was thinking we could split into groups,” she said, “each one handling a different thing—our warriors would go in with a few of our mages and face the Templars head-on, draw their fire and attention. They’re focused on the attack while Cole and I go around hitting their cages and getting people out, keeping them calm, telling them how to get to our camp here.”

“You’ve got a lot of good thinking here boss, but uh, night also makes it harder, more confusing—captivity can really fuck with your head, not sure how well they’ll be able to navigate their way out and to safety, especially in the dark.”

“Oh!” Sera chirped, “Ink!” and then…then she just held up her hands, splayed them before herself as she patted the air.

Ellie let out an excited gasp, “Genius, chica!” she enthused. What was genius? She loved that her girls had such a way with each other but sometimes their two-worded sentences left a bit too much to the imagination.

“Oh, that is an excellent suggestion, Sera,” Solas encouraged—how did he know what they were speaking of?!

“We have glow stuff from the Emerald Graves!” Ellie explained, “We can mark a path on trees and rocks and things with glowing marks that can be seen in the dark—they can follow it back to camp and we’ll clean it up as we return, I mean worst case scenario it’s something that won’t be visible come morning so we have time. We can give them little lanterns so they can see as they’re making their way out of the quarry—it doesn’t make a lot of light, so they won’t be drawing attention to themselves.”

“The quarry is very confusing itself, da’vehnan,” Solas said, offering, “I’m…rather certain of the path through, I could mark as much for ourselves and the captives to use to find their way out.”

Ellie nodded. “Kay so…three groups? Warriors and mages drawing fire, me, Cole and
another mage or someone to help in a fight to protect the villagers, help us get them out, and then you and... well I don’t want anyone doing anything entirely by themselves so take someone with you, kay?”

Someone, between the Warriors and Mages with their specific jobs, left either Marehis or Sera joining...either Cole and Ellie in rescuing the villagers, or Solas in lighting their path.

Sera immediately volunteered to go along with Solas...but Marehis needed no magical bond with her child to know she wanted to stay with Ellie. If anything strange happened in the bond, if they got separated by the vast distance the winding paths of Sahrnia quarry could make and lost track of one another in the bond? Oh, it would be beyond detrimental for Sera or Ellie to panic. It had been albeit startling when they left the range of the bond when they went their separate ways to the Emerald Graves and Val Royeaux—Ellie had startled, it was only the Iron Bull’s hold on her in the saddle that kept her safely seated, eyes wide as she hyperventilated momentarily before she whispered to herself “She’s okay she’s okay she’s okay—she’s with Lacey, and Thom, and Cyril and Klaus and everyone—she’s okay.” it would be dangerous if they experienced that in the field. Too there was just something that made her feel better, that her girls would be together—be able to look after one another, have Cole giving them aid. It was not necessarily a riskless job, but it felt a great deal safer—they could retreat far easier if there was need.

“Stay with your sister, sweet girl,” Marehis said, “your ability with arrows will be hard to use in the mine’s maze, whereas closer quarters suit my daggers just fine—areas where the villagers are captive should be more open, allow you to defend yourselves in that way if you have need, and I would feel better if Ellie and Cole could have magical support I cannot offer.”

“You sure Mami?” Ellie worried.

“Of course, da’vehnan,” Marehis assured. It would be fine.

It would be.

It wasn’t.

It was! In that their mission was successful and everyone made it through without loss of life or limb. But only barely.

Ultimately, she hated Red Templars, she hated Red Lyrium, and she hated Mistress Poulin. She hated Solas! And she hated that that was something akin to a lie!

They’d a great deal of this bioluminescent substance that they marked the way from their camp with. Though Ellie brought their party to a halt, she Sera and Cole slipping down the bank along the broken bridge near their Tower camp. They reappeared a moment later, Ellie showing the adults small, shiny gold ring that's inscription indicated it belonged to refugee's they'd seen in Sahrnia, an Elderly woman Ellie had stopped to comfort when she was mourning the loss of this particular family heirloom that was now safe and found, securely tucked away in Ellie's overcoat pocket as she led her party to Sahrnia Quarry.

Solas continued to mark the path as they neared the towers and barricades that marked the edge of territory surrounding the quarry. The first cage of captives was just before one entered the quarry, Sera standing guard with an arrow knocked while Ellie and Cole made to comfort the villagers, calm them for their escape while Ellie used the light of her Mark to see by as she made swift work of the cage’s lock. Meanwhile their warriors, Dorian and Vivienne descended into the quarry, drawing the attention of the Red Templars as Marehis and Solas followed after, quietly, marking the path so the Inquisitor and her party did not end up lost, any captives further in could find their way out, Marehis keeping guard while Solas dipped his fingers into a pot of glowing substance to draw arrows pointing to their entrance that would act as their exit from this horrible place, scouting through the quarry to mark the way throughout. It would make for an easier exit for them all, eventually, Maker this place truly was a maze*. Oh, she hoped- she could hear their allies fighting the Red Templars, she hoped they were safe, and she hated being separated from the girls—if all went to plan they would not even be involved in squaring off with the Red Templars, but still, any number of things could go wrong.

“The girls are well, lethallan,” Solas’s voice was a bare whisper as he drew another mark along the cavern wall.
“Where are they now?” Marehis wondered.

“Hmm…half a mile behind us, in the east,” he was quiet for a moment, head tilted almost like he meant to physically allow himself to hear something better though it was internal speech from Cole, apparently, “they are unharmed, but I felt distress from Sera, sorrow from Ellie—they are alright, Cole informs me there is a woman, a villager from Sahrnia, dying from Red Lyrium poisoning, Ellie is praying with her and holding her hand, has promised to take a letter for her husband.”

Oh…oh Maker, “Oh my girls, that poor woman,” Marehis shook her head. She rested a hand on Solas’s forearm so he would halt, “Can…you can comfort them, yes? Are you able…I’ve limited understanding of the bond or if I can do anything in it but is there any way—”

He nodded, closing his eyes momentarily as he took a deep breath, loosing it before opening his eyes and confirmed he’d done exactly she wished, even as she’d failed to vocalize it, “I have sent them your love, the compassion you feel for the woman’s situation.”

That…was twice now he’d done so—offering her confirmation that Ellie and Sera were well before she could ask, sending them comfort from her, before she could ask. “I thought you could not focus on all three of us at once,” Marehis softly accused—he’d claimed as much the other day. She’d railed at him for not telling her immediately that Ellie wasn’t sleeping, was feeling ill to the point she could not eat, all while existing in range two Rifts burning torture into her Mark while they slept soundly in their cots. He informed her that while their existences could be felt in unison, deeper specifics could not be focused upon in such a way—he had to do so one at a time. He could switch between them rather seamlessly, but he could not know Ellie was unwell in the exact same moment he was monitoring Marehis so closely—he apologized for forgetting to resume monitoring Ellie when they were in battle against the first Rift, it wasn’t until Sera spoke up to her feeling her sister was lashing out from strain that he was reminded to resume focusing on the girl.

“I do not need magic to know when you are worried for the girls or wish to offer them comfort. You are always worried for them,” he gently teased, “and you are a good mother. If you hear Ellie or Sera are in need, you wish to fulfill it.” He adverted his gaze, arm slipping from her hand as he turned to continue down the path, “I do not need the bond to know you.”

She—oh she nearly yelled at him—in fact momentarily she forgot herself, that they were on mission, and followed after him swiftly, mouth opening to—well she would think of something!

Something clever to—make him regret saying something so—she wasn’t sure! But it was something he wasn’t allowed to say, that was for certain.

And she ran into him—he stopped abruptly, his hand shooting back behind him, resting low on her stomach before she felt a pulse of magic reverberate from his hand as Barrier coasted across her while he pushed her backward as he turned, pressing his back against the cavern wall and guiding her to do the same, she heard him holding his breath and that told her to do the same and then yes, she heard it—running footsteps in the passage just before them, they were nearing a place the path could be followed left, right, or forward on, and just a moment later Red Templars raced down the slope of the path before them to get to the lower levels of the quarry where their Warriors fought…thankfully leaving them undetected.

“My apologies,” he offered softly for the intrusion, startling her and putting his hand upon her without warning. Or maybe it was for the glowing fingermarks left on her armor from where his hand had pushed her back. Either way.

“We should keep moving,” Marehis replied.

She had not enjoyed him being so close! Not in the slightest!

They moved quickly and undetected—save for the instance where they were met with escaped villagers who stopped still and frightened as they assessed whether or not they had just run into enemies but Marehis gestured to the steel insignia on her chest just under her left portion of collarbone that bore the Inquisitions seal, while Solas—well, he raised his glowing fingertips in a bit of a wave—he was the one responsible for marking their escape route.

“Oh thank the Maker,” one whispered.

“Maw-seran-nis,” another offered in…well, a sweetly intentioned mangling of their native
‘thank-you’.

Marehis nodded, quietly intoning, “Go, quickly, quietly.” She did not have to tell them twice. She slapped a hand over her mouth when she felt a yelp rise up in her throat, oh good heavens! The behemoth in this place could be heard roaring in fresh anger, the ground trembling underfoot. She almost didn’t realize her other hand had gone to grasp Solas’s arm, her heart was thundering in her chest-

“Marehis, it is alright—Ellie, Sera and Cole are in the quarry maze but they are far from where our allies are fighting the behemoth. They are heading for the area Cassandra and the others just cleared, to free the captives there.”

She released a breath she hadn’t realized she’d been holding. Oh, she hated this place. It was frightening and she was so worried—for her girls and her friends, oh she prayed Cassandra was alright, if anything happened to her Ellie and Sera would be inconsolable- she was scared for them and angry at this Samson, at his Red Templars and Corypheus, and-

“Marehis—you need to breathe and focus, do you- we need to keep moving but if you need a moment-“

And she was angry at him!

“Stop it!” she hissed, pushing him away. “Stop- stop being so- kindly and caring and knowing every last thing I need!”

“If I’ve offended-“

“You have! Greatly!” she assured him, “And then you haven’t. You- you’ve lied and betrayed and hurt me and my children and now you- you guard them with your life and show them unspeakable care and compassion. You take every bit of anger and abuse I throw at you for penance and- and I can’t- it kills me, Solas! It destroys me!”

“…wh- why ever- I’ve- I have hurt you, Marehis, unforgivably. Why should I not live in remorse of that—to do you unkindness after all I’ve already done to you, your family, the world? Why would my erm…endeavor to not hurt you further, hurt you so?”

“Because I still love you, you jackass!” she railed at him. “I love you and it kills me—I mean what do I even do with that?! You’re Fen’Harel. That reputation was frightening enough, but to know how you earned it?! That it is your fault Corypheus could carry out the destruction of the Conclave—that it is your Mark that left an innocent girl with blame for an act of treason she was a victim of, you left her responsible for the aftermath of your mess. So how, after all of that can I even consider- I can’t imagine anything ever being the same after that. and so it’s devastating, because I shouldn’t love you and ultimately I- I can’t. I can’t do anything with that, we can’t be.-“

And even as she said that…well.

There was the sound of the ceramic pot clattering against the stone underfoot as Marehis went from pushing him away, to grasping fistfuls of Solas’s vest and pulling him to her and his response was immediate—a hand on her bottom, another in her hair as she forgot herself entirely. Where they were, what they were supposed to be doing. That only an entire idiot would list every last reason in the world they should not be with someone ever again, and then proceed to kiss them like they were dying and the antidote was hiding beyond their lover’s lips.

Ex-lover! What was she even-

His…his response was immediate in other ways. It was not…chillingly cold in the quarry, Red Lyrium was to blame for that. And Solas did not necessarily wear armor. He wore the equivalent of plain clothes under his vestment, it was Marehis’s understanding they were enchanted to be protective but they were soft cloth and while they may keep some dangers out it did little for…for anything from within.

“This is- I-“ she wasn’t sure what she was thinking or what she was doing, she wanted him—and she wanted him on the other side of the planet now! Far away where he can’t be- here and confusing and making her lose her every bit of sense-

She ached to be with this man. And it terrified her. and met her with the definition of what the Iron Bull had assured her she could come to him with, if she found herself feeling such a way she needed such attentions.
His hands were on her hips then as he placed her on her feet and she gulped in gasps of fresh air—that was it, she needed air, air to think, oxygen to her brain to form coherent, rational thoughts—

She lost all sense of thought when one hand undid the clasp at the front of her armored leggings, and another tugged the zipper all the way down—

And- and proceeded to pull at her leggings, her underthings in a smooth motion that got them up under her bottom which was now pressed against the warm cavern wall, then down just under her knees.

“Lasa nuvenin?”

She was not even capable of thinking of forming words. How did the mouth work, exactly? She wasn’t certain anymore, she barely comprehended *is this what you wish?* Let alone the cognizance it took to do more than dumbly—in all senses of the word—nod her ‘yes’.

She wasn’t entirely certain just how her legs ended up over his shoulders, leggings behind his head as she was held fast against the wall, seated—

She’d forgotten how mouths worked and Fen’Harel was kind enough to impart on her his knowledge on the matter. He…knew very well…just how to handle lips, teeth, and tongue against tender, wanting, flesh until she *cried*, tears slipping from her eyes as she shook and trembled and—

He supported her weight on his shoulders as they caught their breaths and her legs worked through their trembling good- good god indeed. And when she felt certain she could stand again his hands were on her hips and he did the reversal of what he’d done to seat her, goodness—he raised her up higher while ducking his head out from under her leggings and her feet thumped against the path as she found her footing again and he released her allowed her to uh, pull up her things…s-secure her bandaging…it was only the act of doing so that reminded her, made it do she didn’t let out some cry of alarm when she saw just, an alarming amount of red on Solas’s mouth and chin and- and a little bit on the tip of his nose, some staining on his tunic. He’d handkerchiefs on hand, of course, doused one in water as he cleared his throat and…passed it to her, before he took a second he wetted before turning away to wipe at his face. Oh. Oh! That was erm, considerate, she undid her leggings to clean herself up for um, well—if one did not necessarily have to go to the restroom after intercourse, it was wise to at least wipe up.

“Uh-“

“Keep it. Or…well, the Iron Bull may well be able to erm…smell so—“

She tossed the handkerchief at him, eyes wide with alarm as she panicked demanded, “Burn it!” Burn everything! Was she clean enough? What about her underthings was there anything- what about him?! He’d…visually calmed down in regards to his…body’s earlier excitement but had he…was she wondering out of fear there was something for the Iron Bull to detect or out of worry she’d just left him unsatisfied…which was beyond the pale, she shouldn’t be concerned about that at all! He’d-! Despicable things he’d done! But had he?

“Yes,” he drily assured her, “and it would be a kindness if perhaps you could cease focusing on such things just now, if only out of mercy for those we are here with,” Solas said, clearing his throat, “Ellie is calling.”

Marehis’s heart stopped in her chest, the statement was the verbal equivalent to having had a bucket of ice-cold water thrown over her. What was she even doing?! What was wrong with her?! How could she have just- just- lose all sense on mission. “Is she hurt?!”

“She is fine, nothing a little potion and perhaps a hot bath can’t remedy. The villagers are out, and the behemoth is down. We’re regrouping to investigate the Quarry for evidence.”

Marehis nodded. “Good,” then, “This…this doesn’t mean—“

“I didn’t think it would,” Solas assured her. “I…was merely fulfilling my promise to do… whatever it is you need, to navigate this trying time. Anxiety, menstruation…such release can be beneficial for both.”

She was somehow frustrated and grateful he could make it all sound so clinical, like she hadn’t lost her actual mind and merely accepted assistance from an ally.
Solas collected the pot he’d dropped, capping it carefully and returning it to his pack before leading her through the Quarry until they were somewhere in the midst of it all near a disconcerting amount of Red Lyrium and the great, slain Behemoth that once guarded it. Was that...why were their great pendulums hanging in this place holding large shards of Red Lyrium? Was that decorative or did it serve some even more menacing purpose?

Ellie greeted them with a smile, waving them over, “Hola mami! You guys okay?”

“We are fine sweet girl,” Marehis assured, going straight to her girls, raising her hands to get a bit of her girls in each hand, tucking tendrils of hair behind their ears and resting her hands on their cheeks, “how fared your mission?”

“Everyone um,” Ellie sighed a bit, “everyone made it out okay, Cole’s popped out to check and make sure everyone made their way to camp and help get them settled for the night, they’re not bad off—Cole said Tio Cyril came back to check on me but our soldiers filled him in on our mission, he’s sticking around to checking over the villagers, and I’ll make sure everyone’s okay when we get back. Tio and our soldiers will escort them back to Sahrnia tomorrow, I’m thinking some of us will go with them? Just to make sure they get back safe and assure Mistress Poulin that the Red Templars have been dealt with and I um, I promised I’d take something to this place near Sahrnia so,” she shrugged.

“You did real good Inky,” Sera encouraged, her arm around the girl’s shoulders as she rested her cheek against Ellie’s hair, “Camps gonna be friggin’ full tonight, all the villagers we saved and um...”

“Da’len?” Solas offered as he drew nearer, ugh. He rested his hand high on Ellie’s arm, “I know it is sad, but take heart—that woman, she was so ill for so long with Red Lyrium poisoning, death was mercy. She would have passed this night whether you were here or not—that you were here, could bring her comfort? You made what could have been terrifyingly lonely final moments something bearable, of certainty and comfort that her final wishes will be carried out. I am proud of you.”

He made her sweet girl cry! But only...only minorly, and it was a healthy response to something saddening, Ellie sniffled, “Thanks papi,” she cleared her throat, “um. Everyone’s okay right? There’s something...a few things here I think? Magic said so, anyway. And then there was definitely something up um,” she turned to point back up a sloping path to a higher level of the Quarry. “There’s this place where there’s like, an office or something we should check out. Then we’ll be all done! We can go back to camp and have victory snacks!”

“We follow your lead, Inquisitor,” Cassandra offered warmly.

...for all she’d just had warm regard for Ellie, when Marehis walked forward with her arm around the Human girl’s shoulders she heard something of a rumble from the Iron Bull’s chest and then a strangled sound as something—an armored elbow—hit the Qunari hard in the ribs as Cassandra hissed, “Do mind your business.”

Was she a sight? Her hair was a bit out of sorts, her braid loose where Solas’s hand had woven into it but that could be from in general gravity or a fight—that would be a far more reasonable assumption!

Perhaps she was being paranoid. The Iron Bull was...well it hurt him when Ellie hurt and she was sure there was a level of difficulty, distrust in seeing Solas comfort her, perhaps he’d had some non-verbal reaction of jealousy and Cassandra was reprimanding him to keep Ellie from witnessing a moment of immaturity in her elders.

Maker knows Ellie’s circle of adults had immaturity in spades this evening. At least from one of her mamis in particular.

Magic brought Ellie’s attention to a few different areas up in the scaffolding. Marehis and Sera followed directly behind her, and it was sweet, the Iron Bull pacing just off to the side of the scaffolding, following them from below, good eye trained on their progress as he watched and waited, ready to play catcher if there was an unfortunate fall to be had.

Ellie took up a few sheets of parchment they found, scanning them under the glow of her
Mark to make certain their importance and announcing they were letters* from Samson and his upper ranks—one penned by Samson speaking to the horror of the Red Lyrium transformation, giving the instruction to keep pumping those suffering through their change with Elf Roof. They had been growing the Red Lyrium in these parts apparently, somehow, someway with quote “materials” Samson sent them. How vile.

Marehis snatched the second letter—from some ‘Captain Paxley’—out of Ellie’s grasp to re-read more thoroughly when she saw the girl was through and her own eyes caught her child’s name on the page near the end. The Venatori’s spies have seen Inquisitor Trevelyan herself heading toward the Dales. Show her we haven’t forgotten our brothers and sisters lying dead at Therinfal. ‘To my fellow captains’ ugh. So this missive had been widespread. “Let me have this please, da’vehn? It should go to Leliana first and foremost—I do promise she will send it on to Cullen after, so he has everything from our findings here.”

“Security stuff?” Ellie checked and when Marehis nodded, “Okay mami, tell Tatie I say ‘hi’.” Hmm, she would, even if at risk of her occupation.

Marehis and Sera were not the only members of their party nervous about Ellie’s scaffolding adventures. The Iron Bull was pacing just off to the side of the scaffolding, following them from below, his good eye trained on their progress as he watched and waited, ready to play catcher if there was an unfortunate fall to be had.

…her child took this as inspiration to skip out on ladders altogether for her descents. She stepped up to the very edge of the scaffolding holding her arms out and the Iron Bull let out a rumble of laughter as he invited,

“Come on Imekari, I got you. You too Ser’.”

The girls took each other’s hands and jump together to drop into the Iron Bull’s hold—which was thankfully swift and secure, he had the girls in his arms the instant they were in reach and let out a playfully menacing growl, overlapped by their startled shrieks and giggles as he whirled about with them in his arms before he placed them on their feet. Just in time for another ladder, though Cassandra was already following the girls up the scaffolding, so Marehis stayed below once she’d joined the others.

Solas softly cleared his throat, like he was staving off a bit of coughing perhaps—was the man getting ill? There was something…foreign, in the way the bond was, that felt like-

Marehis gasped and whirled about because it felt- it felt like a warning, that the man was informing her there was something behind her she should deal with but the space behind her was empty.

“Darling?” Vivienne questioned softly, concerned, “Are you alright?”

“Yes, sorry I um, thought I heard something,” Marehis offered in return, sending Solas a reproachful glare. Why did he think to startle her?! Was it some sort of flirtation? It hadn’t felt playful in the slightest, he’d been genuinely warning her of something, it felt.

“Here my dear,” Vivienne said, removing the overcoat of her armored attire and handing it to her, “It’s a bit too warm with all this Lyrium for my liking, and you appear chilled,” she excused the act before stepping closer to whisper, “you’ve a bit of staining. Understandable at this time but potentially embarrassing, I understand.”

Oh. Oh! Had she gotten…gotten blood on the back of her leggings? She did not think she could bleed through leather but perhaps her earlier misadventures had gotten blood on the back of her leggings—either way…understandable at this time implied Vivienne thought it was merely something naturally occurring from her monthly. Solas nodded encouragement for her to accept the offered coat so she supposed yes, that was what he’d meant to convey to her. She took the Enchanter’s coat, though she felt a little badly for it—the Quarry was warm but outside of it, Emprise du Lion was in perpetual winter, and while Vivienne’s armor had a high collar…it left her bosom rather exposed, her arms bare save for gleaming golden bracers at her wrists.

Marehis’s attention was drawn back to her girls as she heard Ellie sigh, tiredly. “Well…this is probably why Cole isn’t back yet,” she said softly to her sister.

“Shite,” Sera swore as she read over Ellie’s shoulder, hugging the girl from behind.
“I feel so bad—that’s such an awful situation gosh…papi?” she called down to Solas, “Can Cole hear me from here?”

“If he is at the tower camp? Ye…Yes,” Solas supposed, “I believe so—you’ve need of him da’len?” he worried.

“Not for me,” she assured, and then after a moment of consideration, “Sissy, arriba?”

_...ven aquí_ was ‘come here’…_arriba_ was…

It was up. _Arriba_ was up, as in up on her sister’s shoulders. Sera knelt with her back to her sister and let the girl _sit on her shoulders_ so the Elf girl could raise up to her full height, the Maker had blessed her with perfectly parallel daughters—Sera was as tall as Ellie was short, and the combination was frightening just now—they were already up so high! To what end did this girl need to be higher?!

Reception, apparently. Ellie closed her eyes and focused for a moment before she announced, “He can hear me!” and then she held up the letter she’d found to read to herself…well, to _Cole_.

And then she explained, “We found a written confession by one of the villagers we saved tonight, he um…apparently murdered his brother in law and wanted to get that off his chest before he died. He’s still alive though, so…I thought I should give Cole a heads up in case this is in his hurts and Cole thought to touch on it—he _might_ be repentant, but he might be violent, I suggested waiting until we’re all together.”

The Quarry Quandary was full of just wonderful information, wasn’t it? “We will handle it da’vehnan,” Marehis promised, “Sera please be careful.”

“Mami, getting down’s easy peasy!” Ellie assured, Sera’s eyes going a bit wide as she tightened her grip on Ellie’s knees when the girl proceeded to lay back and hang upside down from her sister’s shoulders, arms down so her hands were splayed and Sera let go so the girl could catch herself on her hands and flip herself forward…rising up on her feet, one foot atop Cassandra’s, the girl yelping out apology as she moved hurriedly to get off her mother’s foot and the Seeker had to wrap her arms around the girl to keep her from bouncing off her foot and over the edge of the scaffolding.

“She’s beauty, she’s grace,” Dorian drawled.

“She’ll pop you in the _face_,” Ellie threatened. Truly? “Don’t make me come down there and kiss you Tio! I’ll do it! I’ll do it _twice_!” Ahh.

“Alright, I relent—my most sincere apologies, Lady Inquisitor,” Dorian was immediate to assure.

“You’re already insulted! I’m piping mad!” Ellie insisted, “The Iron Bull!!”

The Qunari was swift to catch her as she dropped from the scaffolding…and he assisted her, holding her up so Dorian’s face was well in reach of the girl he usually towered over, allowing her to take his face in her hands and adorn his cheek with a long, enthusiastic kiss. “Mwwwwwh! Vengeance!”

The man scowled looking caught between disgust and adoration before he let out a frustrated sound and pecked a kiss to the girl’s cheek in return. “You are without doubt the worst person that I make acquaintance with, I hope you know. Horrible child.”

“Tatie says the same thing—that’s how I know she loves me.”

Dorian was intelligence personified as he responded to that by sticking his tongue out at her, and of course she returned the gesture as the Iron Bull set her on her feet, chuckling at their bickering.

They found more correspondence from Samson further in the Quarry. Samson writing, demanding they send double the Red Lyrium to someone named ‘Maddox’, so he could modify Samson’s armor—claiming this armor gave him extraordinary power, and with it he was certain Corypheus would choose _him_ as ‘the Vessel’. If Marehis remembered correctly, their mission against Venatori in Orlais had born similar illusions from Calpernia—she was preparing to be some vessel for Corypheus. And that was twice now, that something they found had mentioned Samson’s armor wasn’t it?

“There was a letter in the Emerald Graves,” Ellie nodded when Marehis voiced the question,
“one of the people transporting Red Lyrium—he mentioned Samson’s armor being weird, said it looked Templar-y but not like any Templar armor he’d seen.”

“Excellent catch Eleanor, Marehis,” Cassandra said, “this will certainly be useful to Cullen—perhaps this strange armor will make bare some weakness to exploit.”

“We all done here Imekari?” the Iron Bull asked.

Ellie shook her head, “Sorry guys, magic pinged when we were near that office place—it’s not far from here, honest. We’ll take a quick look around and then I promise we’re finished and free to snack and relax!” she assured, “Thank you everyone for helping out tonight, I’m sorry if I’ve totally derailed our sleep schedules, I promise—fresh potion all around to help us get back on track for anyone who wants it.”

Ellie was certain of step as she led them through the Quarry’s passages, though there was a place where two paths met that Marehis found herself halting to look about for something, just… she’d the strangest sense again, like the feeling of being spotted by something that was going to follow. She saw nothing, heard nothing. Was…was Solas doing something to make her wary with the bond?

“Stop,” she hissed the whisper as she swatted him with the back of her hand.

Solas met her gaze, “Is something the matter?” he wondered…worried. No hint at all of deception in him, and strangely enough…even as she’d unknowingly entertained his lies these past months…that gave her insight to know exactly what it looked like when he lied—even if it was about something he was dedicated to passing off as truth. He was being forthright, and he did do something in the bond—it felt like a cursory glance, as if checking her for something, and then gentle reassurance that he found nothing of concern. Concern of what? Oh. There was the distinct impression in her mind now—they were surrounded by Red Lyrium, the heat of it, the stench, it smelled bitter and of heat and decay. And one of the initial symptoms of Red Lyrium poisoning was paranoia. He must not sense anything to be amiss with her so…

Ugh, was she being paranoid? If not due to Red Lyrium, then perhaps…perhaps it was some symptom of her anxieties.

“Mami?” Ellie wondered. The Inquisitor, the whole of her party had stopped to stare at-Marehis hadn’t meant to fall so far behind her ward! Everyone was ahead of her, save for Solas and now Ellie’s gaze was going from her, to Solas, and back again though the questioned, “Is everything alright?”

“Everything is fine, da’len. I thought I saw something—it is dark, and all this danger about tonight, I’m on edge I suppose.”

Ellie smiled holding out her hand in invitation, and Marehis could not help but smile likewise, grateful to her friends who let her weave between them to get to her child and take her sweet hand. “Just stick with me mami—everything’ll be okay! Everyone did such a super great job clearing the quarry, and we got all the villagers out, and we’re finding so much great stuff for papi! He’s going to be so proud!” oh the girl seemed excited about it, like she expected a great deal of affection from the man when they were together again and could hardly wait. She squeezed Marehis’s hand as she continued leading them along the path, prattling right along, “We’re safe! And we’re together! And the path is nice and smooth, sturdy under our feet, and the stars are really pretty, and the quarry is warm. Kind of stinky though,” she raised her Marked wrist to her nose and sniffed. “I still kind of smell like lotion though mami, see?” she held her wrist up in offering and Marehis let out a chuckle as she sniffed. Coconut oil and vanilla were much better than bitter decay. “And I can still taste dinner! Can you?”

“Yes, da’vhenan,” though ahh…Solas had apparently brushed his teeth directly after dinner, before they left camp. It was his toothpaste she could more predominantly taste in her mouth.

“Kind of yicky after a while, huh?” Ellie supposed at Marehis’s uncertain tone, “we’ll brush our teeth later!” Delightful idea.

It was a bit of a climb, but they made it to the office area—it was quite the feat, but it was quite a few levels between the ground level of the Quarry and the office, several ladders between the two places so all of her party gathered together in the small, cramped space. Which sorted—
there was only one place they needed to look, and their Inquisitor had entered the room first, gone straight to it as her magic guided her directly to the final piece of evidence they needed to collect this night.

“Da’vehnan?” Marehis questioned softly when she heard the girl draw in a very deliberate, controlled breath and smelled the faintest bit of salt, like tears had welled up in the girl’s eyes but not fallen.

Ellie cleared her throat, wiping swiftly at her eyes before turning to address her party. “I’ll want agents of Leliana going with us when next we return to Sahrnia. I’ll speak with Mistress Poulin myself before they take her into Inquisition custody,” she informed them before elaborating, “she’s apparently…been selling her people to the Red Templars, in exchange for resources. The people we saved tonight weren’t kidnapped—they were sold,” she met Marehis’s gaze, eyes red from unshed tears, oh her girl, this hurt her heart so much and she was truly endeavoring to show less upset in the face of what was…becoming a sad, depressing, angering pattern of behavior in people who held positions of power they’d encountered as of late. “Our prisons can hold her while she waits for me to Sit in Judgment right? It might be a minute before we’re back in Skyhold but uh…I don’t want her running while she has the chance so we’re not leaving here without her.”

“Good call, boss-girl,” the Iron Bull gently praised.

Marehis nodded. “Yes, Inquisitor. I’ll make proper arrangement with Leliana when we return to camp,” she promised.

Ellie nodded, letting out a small, “Gracias,” before handing off the damning letter to Marehis who swiftly cast her gaze over it just in case…it felt like mixed fortune, that Ellie’s reading comprehension was on par for the Red Templar’s level of vocabulary, she’d read correctly. Damn. Damn this place, and damn this whole situation and the people who created it! She would see to it Leliana got this along with Marehis’s letter passing along the Inquisitor’s instructions.

The girl took a deep, bracing breath she blew out as she said, “Alright—we’re done here, great work everyone!”

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Marehis wrapped an arm around Ellie’s shoulders, holding her close, relieved at how the bit of contact had her relaxing into Marehis’s side, and she got a smile out of the girl by pressing a kiss to her cheek. “Come da’len—we’ll return to camp and ensure the villagers are well, and you can take a warm bath, some cocoa and get some rest,” she said as they stepped out into the night again. The moon overhead was just past its zenith so, “it is not so very late, if we rest upon our return to camp we can resume our schedule as normal.”

“Thanks mami, you’re the best,” her girl sweetly replied. Was she truly? It made her feel giddy with pride.

Maybe Andrasen religion wasn’t for her. The Maker did so love, it seemed, to bless her with moments of triumph and pride before tearing it all out from under her. Not unlike someone hugging her and patting her on the head, so that when she relaxed, her pain was that much more amusing when life metaphorically kicks her directly in the crotch.

Ellie slid down the ladder ahead of her, Marehis following after once the girl was safely out of the way—it wouldn’t do to drop directly onto her. Ellie was already at the second ladder, making her descent to the ground.

She’d not quite shaken that feeling, the paranoia picking at her nerves, the innate fear that something was following them. There were several sounds she’d heard since joining the Inquisiton that could invoke horror and suffering in Marehis on impact. The crack of a Rift in the distance. The sound of Ellie’s heart stopping, pained screaming tearing from her throat as a time-shifting Rift burst in the sky. The crunch of her child’s bones under the boot of an enemy thrice her size.

The ear-filling screech of metal being torn through, the squelch of skin and sinew and grinding snap of bone, all wrapped in an anguished scream that stole all the breath from her
Show her we haven’t forgotten our brothers and sisters lying dead at Therinfal.

A Red Templar Shadow. Those—those fucking invisible freaks. They moved in stealth, breathing undetectable, heartbeat slow and sluggish, so quiet it sounded like the echo of any around like the ghost of their own heartbeats. Their only discernable trait was their stench—the vile odor of Red Lyrium this wretched place was drenched in.

And it was only when they struck their gift of invisibility unveiled them. This Shadow revealed himself.

With its horrifying Red-Lyrium Shard of an arm running Ellie through.

She wasn’t…entirely certain what was happening. There was this high-pitched ringing in her ears as everything blurred together, this horrific image of some twisted, demented creature that should never have existed, impaling the girl that made up half of her beating heart, while her other half—her Sera screamed in absolute gut wrenching terror, the sound blending with cries of anguish and alarm from every member of her party. Her family.

And of her father.

The almost-sickening warmth wafting up from the caustic amounts of Red Lyrium in this place was suddenly overpowered by cold, dread, chill. The air was like ice, felt thick in her lungs like it had a fullness to it—the smell of atmosphere like when the Fade was near, close enough to touch the waking world through a Rift. But there was no Rift.

There was only Fen’Harel.

Solas’s staff blazing with power that shone through his very skin it— it almost looked like that day in the Emerald Graves, when prayer poured from his lips and power broke from his body that left it torn with Ellie’s wounds but that— that had something like neutrality in it—enemies and allies granting him his wish without much weight of their own heart in the act, the faintest hint of something vindictive in it, like impish amusement at getting petty revenge. This?

Every part of it felt like Solas. And it was wrath.

There was something like fire—literal, pitch black flame burning from- from Solas’s eyes, the whole of his eyes black, twin voids that looked for all the world like they might be the source of all rage as he came to the edge of the lowest scaffolding, voice thick, reverberating with power.

“Ir, Fen’Harel—ma halam,” he ground out before he dropped from the scaffolding, the air underneath him moving as if he dictated its will, his descent was controlled, left the ground at his feet quaking beneath him and he- he brought his staff directly down, struck and shattered the Shadow’s arm at the elbow to detach the beast from the girl, Solas catching Ellie against him and carefully lowering her down as the creature reared back, screaming in pain. And that was before Solas roared—a sound that tore from him with fury and venom before he launched himself at the Red Templar, shouting the threat—the purest promise—“Ma emma harel, bellanaris din’an heem!”

Solas…splayed his hands on the Red Templar Shadow…and the creature was eviscerated.

Light broke from its every pore, the sound like stone cracking and crumbling before it disintegrated into a pile of smoking, useless rubble and ash.

That Solas fell into. First onto his knees, and then collapsing face first.

Ellie’s eyes were wide cast, taking her air in harsh gasps, pale and trembling and Marehis was petrified she was going into shock. Marehis was the first one down and at Ellie’s side, Sera- she’d no ability to manipulate gravity at the moment but she dropped straight down off the scaffolding to scramble to her sister’s side. Marehis she- she knew precious little what to do. it was an alarmingly large thing at its base—the size of marehis’s fist—tapering to a fine point that protruded from Ellie’s back with- it was covered in blood and- and tissue- it looked like the thing had skewered an organ from her body, left it a burst broken fleshy mess coating the Red Lyrium shard-

And then…not coating the Red Lyrium shard, but crystalizing to become part of it.

Oh. Oh Maker she knew—she did know what needed done and now. She had potion, Vehnan root, several vials left over in her own stores and- and-

“Frick frick frick we- h-hold on Inky we- we’ll get it out—” Sera was saying, hands ghosting
over shard of Red Lyrium lodged through the tissue just above her right hip and inward and up to break out of the back of her ribcage and Marehis’s hands were snatching her child’s away before she could risk doing what she was about to be warned against,

“Don’t touch it!” The Iron Bull’s voice roared, “Get back! Sera—that fucking thing’s the only thing keeping Imekari from bleeding out,” the Qunari said as he slid down the ladder to join them, “She’ll bleed out quick if we don’t do things right—Ser’ I need you to focus, you wanna help? Go get Cyril—get in range of Cole and get Cyril here now.”

Sera bolted, racing off to do as instructed as the Iron Bull took Ellie’s hand,

“Imekari, breathe, keep breathing alright? Doesn’t sound like that thing pierced your lung.”

“U- u-“ each sound popped from her mouth with a gasp around them before she could work out, “under- pr- pressing-“

“Shhhh shhh shh, okay, okay,” he soothed, “just focus on keepin’ the air coming in and out baby, we’ve got everything else. You’re gonna be okay.”

“Dorian, Vivienne—one of you! Come, I need Fire,” Marehis called out, the Mages had made their way—Cassandra was at Marehis’s back, resting her hand there and murmuring that she was here if need for her arose, oh bless her. Dorian was first to Ellie’s side between he and Vivienne and Marehis- oh they had to move quickly, “She’ll choke if we administer potion, I need one of you to get these,” she held out vials of health and regeneration potions, “vaporous, get her breathing them in, they will strengthen her lungs and draw potion into her bloodstream. The other I need with me, calling fire into their hands—you will have to be immediate.”

Vivienne had taken vials of potion into her hands, uncorking them and working to heat them though her gaze went to Marehis, “What would you have us do?”

“We cannot leave something toxic like Red Lyrium in her body—we must remove it, and quickly. Her wounds need cauterized—exit wound, while I pour potion to circumvent internal bleeding, and then immediately after, the entrance wound.”

Dorian blanched but ground himself like he would push through the disgust for Ellie- oh. oh it wasn’t disgust at the gruesomeness of helping the girl, the poor man looked devastated at implementing a healing tactic that would cause so much pain.

“Darling, take these and get them in her system, my hands are ready to serve such purpose,” Vivienne said, passing off the bubbling bottles of potion to the Tevinter Mage who looked wholly relieved to be given a task that was pure healing. “I’m with you.”

“Bull,” Marehis looked to the Qunari-

“Got it, on your order,” he knew well what she needed of him he- Marehis had a great deal of upper body strength but this was not the time to test it, she would do her child little help if she only made things worse by wriggling the implement about in her wounds. The Qunari squeezed and released Ellie’s hand before scooting to be lower at her side, right before the shard of Red Lyrium and Cassandra knelt behind Ellie, taking the girl’s head in her lap and holding the hand the Iron Bull had to let go of to take hold of the Lyrium shard.

“I am here, Eleanor. The Maker is here, He is always with you,” the Nevarran woman was whispering to their child, “Though I am flesh, Your Light is ever present And those I have called, they remember, and they shall endure. I shall sing with them the Chant, and all will know, we are Yours, and none shall stand before us. Though I am flesh…” the Chant repeated on, a litany from the woman’s lips as she prayed over the girl, pleading with their god.

Marehis unstoppered a vial of regenerative potion and took a deep breath to utter two words it took all of her will to say, “Do it.”

The Iron Bull pulled the shard of Red Lyrium from her body with one smooth motion, casting the wretched thing aside, and the very moment the tip of it disappeared into Ellie’s body Vivienne’s hand was on Ellie’s back, blazing burning heat to cauterize the wound closed, and the instant the Iron Bull was casting the wretched thing aside, Marehis poured potion into the gaping wound, the contents of her own stomach blazing a path up her throat as she bore witness to yellow-green tonic filling the space like it would a cup. She kept her mouth shut, and her eyes focused until the bottle was empty and then so was her stomach as she turned away and crawled to put
distance between herself and her injured child to heave mostly-digested dinner onto dirt and stone
and Red Lyrium.

Red Lyrium…that grew—the contents of her stomach, these thick lumps crystalized and
became part of the bit of Red Lyrium she was kneeling before at the base of the Quarry wall, how-
…People. People were the ‘materials’ Samson-

They weren’t turning the villagers into Red Templars. They were turning them into Red
Lyrium*.

This whole place-

“S’okay lovey, it’s all gonna be okay, do what you need to, I’ve got you,” Thom Rainier’s
voice was like a balm to her ears—she once thought she’d gladly see the man slain by her own
hand for his betrayal of Ellie and now he was her trusted ally, someone she loved for gathering her
hair in his hand to keep it out of her way as she heaved further still, the Human man rubbing circles
on her back and blessedly offering, “Ellie-girl’s handled as much as we can do right now, Madam’s
got her wound cauterized on both sides. Bull just said she’s breathing more easily, doesn’t have to
keep her breaths so shallow to avoid knocking and popping a lung against that damn thing,
Cassandra’s got her sipping potion and water, Cole promises he’s on route with Cyril. You need
some water honey?”

He held up her canteen as Marehis turned away from the Red Lyrium to face him, seated on
her bottom as she took a few deep breaths and accepted the canteen, taking a few sips to spit on the
ground at her side to clear acidic bile from her mouth before taking a proper drink and nodding as
she voiced, “Thank you.”

“I er, checked on Solas—made sure he’s still breathing. Skin was ice cold and his pulse was
thready when I first checked him but I got potion in him and his colors comin’ back, he’s just out
cold. Don’t know what the hell he did but it seems like the guy’s just plain tuckered out.”

“Ma seranas,” Marehis thanked him, holding out her hand and the man grunted as he took
hold of it and grunted as he rose to his feet and helped her rise with him, sniffing as she went to
check on the man for herself, kneeling at his side. Oh, his color was returned, he’d been practically
grey when he fell over, but his skin was icy chill to the touch when she rested her hand on his
forehead, smoothed it back along his scalp.

What in the world was she supposed to do with him?

“Ma seranas, Fen’Harel,” she whispered, pressing a kiss to his forehead.

She returned to Ellie’s side, the girl was only barely conscious, oh her da’len-

“Da’vehnan, I am so sorry,” Marehis whimpered out, taking the girl’s hand and raising it to
her lips.

“’m okay,” she promised, “j’s jus’ don’t like…s’loud,” she complained.

“What is loud, Eleanor?” Cassandra questioned, to little reply as the girl fell unconscious. Oh
she’d a frightening chill to her—it did not speak to nearness of the Fade, but a great loss of blood.

There was the thunderous sound of Sera and Cyril running to get to them, Sera collapsing
into Marehis’s side, wholly out of breath she’d run all the way to camp, literally grabbed Cyril who
thankfully had his medical kit close at hand, and ran all the way back.

Cole materialized before them, the sight no longer as startling as it used to be now that they
were rather used to it but, “It’s the Red Lyrium! The Red Lyrium is loud!” was very
alarming.

“We’ve been here far too long,” Cassandra agreed, “we should move her-“

“Not around her,” Cole clarified, “in her. In her blood,” and then, “Where did her appendix
go?”

…but what was an appendix? L-like in a book?

Not like in a book. It was apparently a small, non-vital organ that the Red Templar had been
kind enough to skewer from her child’s body, the horror that set in her was beyond belief until
Cyril spoke, “On the bright side—no chance of appendicitis in future. Cole, can you talk me
through—how bad is her internal trauma?”

“It is healing, potion is doing what it should, there is just- there is Red Lyrium in her blood
stream, in her magic. We need to get it out—Cassandra can do it but she will not like it.”
“I can…?” Cassandra looked wholly confused…and then absolutely horrified. “Cole you-you cannot be serious.”

“What’re you thinking Seeker?” Cyril questioned urgently, “If we’re going to help her, it’s gotta be now.”

“I- I’ve the Seeker’s ability to cause Lyrium to burn. It—” she thought on it, “Yes I suppose when I’ve had to,” she cleared her throat, “implement such an ability for long enough, more Lyrium has needed plied as the act does break it down, clears it from the person’s system. I—” she stopped, “Can we- what would happen if—”

“It would corrupt her magic, it can only grow stronger now that it is in her, Cassandra,” Cole informed her. “It’s feeding on her as we speak, it will consume her if it is not destroyed. I’m sorry.”

Marehis rested a hand on Cassandra’s arm, bringing the woman to meet her gaze as she said, “It is what has to be done. I know this is hard, I know it is the very last thing you want to do. But this will save her, and she will not hold this against you.”

“Save for myself perhaps,” Cassandra said, “But I suppose I can live with that,” she looked to Cyril. “What do we do?”

“Burning it um…it’s painful?” he asked.

“Yes,” she assured, “it may bring her blood to boil.”

“I’ll ready potion—Embrium and Elf root liquid-concentrate steam for her to breathe in while you’re doing this, keep her lungs going strong, help with the pain. Cole I want word—the second it’s out of her system, you tell me, okay?”

“Yes,” Cole agreed.

Cyril did what he could to rouse Ellie, talk her through what was about to happen while Dorian warmed potion to steam, but oh the girl just stared overhead unseeing, mumbling incoherently under her breath, Cole softly announcing she couldn’t hear him past the haze of Red Lyrium. Sera was crying into Marehis’s lap.

Sobbing when Ellie’s screaming wails echoed through the quarry.

And Cole’s confirming, “It’s gone,” was almost needless as Ellie laid trembling, gasping for air to catch her breath as the burning subsided—there was nothing in her left to burn.

“E-Eleanor?” Cassandra’s voice rasped out, oh the woman was weeping.

“We should get out of here,” Cyril said softly, “Get her comfortable and sleep this nightmare off.”

“I got Imekari,” the Iron Bull spoke up, “She’s mine—you assholes can fight over who lugs Solas,” he decided, taking the girl up carefully into his arm, a miserable sound coming from his chest when he pressed his nose to the girls hair like he’d been seeking comfort he hadn’t found.

“Ime-kadan needs a bath—we all smell like this fucking place.”

“We can go, we can bathe!” Cole assured, “Solas just fell into the Fade, he didn’t mean to, he’s confused. I can get him out—he can carry himself.”

Solas was roused shortly after Cole vanished from sight—the boy reappearing when the Dalish man sat up straight, sucking in a gaps of air as he looked about, thoroughly confused.

“Ellie she- she is hurt, where—” he rose shakily to his feet as if he thought he had to get up and find her, he stumbled and fell onto his knees when he turned about and faced them, a “Oh,” falling dumbly from his mouth, gaze screaming of relief as he saw Ellie lying well among the living, “What…what happened?”

“You uh…” the Iron Bull, ever the wordsmith, succinctly informed him, “you went full Fen’Harel on some Red Templar ass and then passed out like a little bitch.”

“Ahh. Well then.”

“Didn’t know you could do shit like that.”

“Neither did I, so that sorts,” he supposed, his gaze went to Ellie and he breathed “Ellie’s pain is lessening as potion is kicking in. Her body is experiencing shock of sorts, dealing with the trauma of her injury. She’s exhausted and sore, her- her veins ache? She’s afraid and confused, but that is fading in her as she rests—she is not of the Fade just now but I will seek rest as soon as we return to camp, make someplace safe for her, inform her she is safe and recovering in her camp.”
It was…good the man would be seeking rest, because he was wholly spent, Solas could barely rise, but Cole came to his aid.

“I can help you if your feet don’t want to work,” Cole offered up cheerfully, “Krem taught me how—yeah buddy, let’s take a lap!” Oh sweet boy…sweet boys, as it was the Lieutenant’s influence that had the Spirit going to Solas’s side and pulling the man’s arm over his shoulder as he wrapped his arm around his back and helped him stand.

Sera followed suit after a fashion, wrapping her arm around Cassandra to draw the woman’s attention—the Seeker had been staring into space and Marehis thought perhaps if they’d left, she would have sat there staring into space until the Red Lyrium spread to turn her crystallite. “C’mon mama, ‘m tired—let’s home.”

There was something sweet in that home merely meant camp, surrounded by their allies. But something ached in Marehis’s heart to return to Skyhold—she wanted home, a place she felt her child was truly secure, she wanted to lay her on a proper mattress, in her quarters, and let her rest until she was fully recovered.

Camp was…very full. Their rescued villagers were gathered around several fires that had been made to keep them warm, she could smell clean water and soap like they’d been afforded the opportunity to wash their faces and hands, bundle themselves in blankets. There’d been sitting in something of a silence when their party approached, Cole helping Solas into their party’s tent, and then,

“Is…is that Ellie?” one of the villagers asked.

“Oh Maker take those Red Templar bastards,” another scathed.

“Ink, erm. Ahem. The Inquisitor,” Sera spoke up, “sh- she’ll be alright. Healer Cyril’s returned so take your ouches to him. Dunno when she’ll rally but we’re all around if you need anything—rest up, we’ll get you lot some hot breakfast come morning and escort you home. Um…you’re safe here, focus on that. Maker bless?” she offered up with some unease, like she was running through a list of things she was certain Ellie would touch on if she were conscious.

“Maker bless,” rang up from their guests, with some varying with, “the Inquisitor,” and “the Inquisition.”

“Thanks,” Sera replied softly as she walked with Cassandra to the bathing tent, Marehis following close behind.

——

The Iron Bull had already entered the tent, Dorian at his side. The Qunari was merely holding the girl while his lover plied magic to the tub to warm it up. “Human’s really don’t need their appendix?” the Iron Bull questioned as if the very thought baffled him and he didn’t trust it. Marehis wasn’t certain—her job had her focused more on vital organs and their placement as opposed to non-vital ones, so…the fact she’d never been taught to stab a man in his appendix was reassuring that it was, in fact, truth, so she nodded. The Qunari grumbled under his breath.

“Fucking stupid. The hell you even have it for then?”

“To be fucking stupid I suppose,” Dorian drawled. “Astounding as my love making may make me out to be, I am not truly the Maker made flesh, so I can’t rightly know the intention behind every facet of our design.”

The tent was rather cramped as it stood—it wasn’t exactly the mega tent, the Iron Bull had to crawl about in it, make himself small and crouched to fit alongside the tub, Dorian pressed against the thing as he knelt at its side to warm it, Cassandra and Sera had knelt in the small space on the other side of the tub and Marehis was at the foot of the tent when the entrance opened behind her and Cyril peeked in, taking in the already crowded space and holding out a squat jar to Marehis.

“Here, for her burns.”

“Thank you,” Marehis said.

She took the jar in hand, but it was Cassandra that plied it. Marehis had handed it off to her because, well, someone needed to remove Ellie’s things first and foremost. And too, the Seeker…
oh, the poor woman needed to do something, anything that felt like it could make up for the pain she’d had to inflict, she seemed desperate to do anything that might bring relief to her child. So once the girl was bare, ready for the nearly warmed bath, Marehis got out of the way to allow Cassandra to come around and kneel at the girl’s side and with the upmost tenderness plied soothing ointment to the harsh burns on Ellie’s hip, her touch feather light, slightest bit of tremble in her hands as she worked, eyes darting between the healing wound and Ellie’s face in search of the smallest sign she was unintentionally causing her child further pain.

The men left them while they got the girl into bathwater that…almost wreaked of Vehnan root—it wasn’t that the smell wasn’t pleasant, it was just in a proportion that was overpowering. The bathwater was green. Dorian must have poured every last vial of Health potion he had left in he and the Iron Bull’s stores. Cassandra was silent as she took up the task of washing Ellie’s hair, making certain the girl’s head stayed above water while Marehis assisted in bathing the girl. As strong as the smell of potion was, it was…well, it was relieving to see the shift between beaten brusied skin healing as she soaked, the scrapes on her knuckles…only on her Marked hand? Oh. Marehis had held Ellie’s right hand throughout er…treatment. Her other hand had been free to scrape harshly at the ground, digging her fingers into the dirt—her nails were filthy, paint chipped. She would wait until the girl woke again to paint them—indulge her in some pampering.

“Red Lyrium is people,” the notion struck Marehis again—she’d nearly forgotten but, “it is Lyrium tainted by Blight, but it grows by consuming people. That was what they were doing with the villagers.”

Sera stared at her for a moment. “Shite, yeah. That stuff was comin’ out of us in the future right? S’what Ink said. And people was like, growing into the walls or whatever.”

“It um…consumed Ellie’s blood—the shard that was in her, I think that is how she lost so much of it even as we were careful in stopping her bleeding with its removal—the thing soaked up everything it could, would have crystalized further inside of her until it was a part of her that couldn’t be removed.”

“All her clothes’d fit real weird,” Sera said—a jest but her tone was hallow like she was just spent, trying to offer cheer to them that she couldn’t feel herself at the matter.

“Tonio Aclassi has had more difficult customers, I’m sure,” Marehis offered in kind, getting the barest smile from her da’assan. “Are you alright, Sera? You’re uninjured?”

“Yeah m’okay. Gonna write Lacey to um, keep her updated. And Cullen needs that stuff right? Letters n’ shit. And you wanted things sent to Leliana? I can um. I can do it,” Sera said. Oh she looked like she so very much wanted to do something to help but she’d little inclination to leave-

“I have brought the writing pish!” Cole was happy to inform them as he materialized in the tent, a stack of fresh parchment in one hand and an ink well and quill in the other, offerings he placed before Sera before he popped—disappeared and reappeared almost as quickly on the other side of the tent where Ellie’s armor and clothing lay in a pile he decidedly sorted through, picking up her overcoat and digging into the exact correct pocket that had the letters she’d collected and kept on her person for sending to Cullen later, before he popped back over to Sera and handed them to her, pressing a kiss to her forehead that sent the girl blushing before he left them.

“Cuddly’s friggin’ the cutest,” Sera complained as she set about her work…their work, since Marehis’s hands were rather occupied in warm, soapy water, and Ellie was comatose. She wrote up a report to Leliana, letting Marehis read over it herself but the girl had gotten the gist of how Marehis was required to report every last detail. Her note to Cullen on Ellie’s behalf was less expansive, she looked a little nervous about it but when she was through she said, “Um…feel right like dirt, lying to ‘im. But s’not a lie. I just said we had a rough night and Inky’s sleeping so I’m writing for her. I just…dunno,” she shrugged, looked almost like she might cry. “I know all this crap is stressin’ him out. This,” she waved the letters of evidence they found, “is supposed to make him feel better, tell him this shite’s all worth it. Telling him it got Inky hurt real bad might dump all over that, worry him even if I tell him she’s okay and I…I dunno it seems like he gets real bad migraines, ‘specialy when he’s stressed. I’m pretty sure it’d kill me if I wrote something that made
him real sick.”

Cassandra sniffed, cleared her throat like she might speak but she smiled her thanks, a wavering thing but she managed it, so Marehis offered up a verbal, “Thank you, da’vehnan,” Marehis said, “Excellent work.”

Sera’s cheeks pinked at the bit of praise, though her work wasn’t quite through apparently. She began scribbling on another sheet of parchment, and when she caught Marehis’s curious gaze.

“Writing Kremmy-boy. Promised him I would if anything happened to Inky. And then Widdle cuz I wanna give her the details on the Red Lyrium shite. And then Lace, ‘cause I wrote Widdle and I feel mean not writin’ both my girlfriends!”

“Inderstandable,” Marehis supposed amusedly.

Cole returned to take up her letters to send them off and then Sera bounced a little impatiently in place as she built up the nerve to ask Marehis if her and ‘sandra thought it’d hurt Inky any if Sera bathed with her. It wasn’t like the girl was in the habit of striking violence against her sister in the tub, so Marehis assured it was fine, Cassandra nodding her agreement and the girl stripped herself and climbed in, scrubbing herself up and down, haphazardly wetting and scratching at her scalp before just sitting still and watching her sister until it was time to dry off, Sera endeavoring to call heat into her hands—she did manage it for a short moment but it didn’t last nearly long enough to dry her hair. Vivienne was sweet enough to check on them—‘the boy’ sent her she said, which was…admittedly a kinder term for Cole she’d taken to calling him—and she dried the girls’ hair, Sera made a little whine sound when Vivienne took up the Elf girl’s sleep clothes in hand before she could put them on but she giggled and thanked ‘Viv’ for it once she realized the woman was warming the clothes she was about to put on. She did the same for Ellie’s, sighing and plying a kiss to the slumbering girl’s forehead. The Iron Bull came, the clatter of buckets clinking together announced his impending arrival as he carried several in each hand full of more water for the bath, setting them down in the tents entrance before he crawled into the tent and gathered Ellie against his chest and rumbling out the invitation for Sera to ‘climb aboard’ which the girl giddily accepted.

She wrapped her arms around Cassandra’s shoulders first, startling the woman who’d been staring into space and pressing a kiss to the Seeker’s cheek, “You wash up good, kay ‘sandra? I love you lots. And Inky loves you lots. And everything’s okay, you got it? So…if um…if you have any nightmares or something, you wake me up okay?” the woman nodded but…well she’d not spoken a word since the Quarry, it was a bit of manipulation on Sera’s part but, “If…I have a nightmare, I can wake up and you’ll be there for me, right?”

Cassandra nodded again, and then, “Always, sweet girl.”

“Thanks mum,” Sera squeezed her more tightly before releasing her to climb onto the Iron Bull’s back, giggling the whole way out of the rather impressive exit, he had to support their weight on his knees, do something of a one armed pushup-hop to keep a girl in his arm and a girl on his back.

The Seeker was still rather unfocused, didn't realize the other women in the tent were busy helping one another drag the tub out into the chill to dump its contents before pushing it back into the tent to refill it with fresh water. Vivienne poured her last vial of Vehnan Root tonic into the water and then a vial of some sort of very expensive oil that smelled just divine, soothing, and Marehis had assumed she wished for as much for a bath of her own but,

“Come darling,” Vivienne said, clearing her throat and putting an arm around Cassandra’s shoulders, “You should bathe,” she insisted.

They assisted her with removing her armor, the woman was stiff and exhausted from their work tonight and ultimately…distracted. Depressed, more so. She slipped into the tub and Vivienne put her hands in the water to provide more warmth and Cassandra made no move to do much in the way of bathing herself.

“Cassandra?” Marehis questioned gently, dipping her hand into the water to take the Seeker’s hand and raise it up in hers, pressing a kiss to the back of the woman’s knuckles as she squeezed her hand in reassurance.
“You did what you had to, my dear,” Vivienne ventured once more.
And Cassandra’s expression crumbled, and she sobbed, weeping into her hands as Marehis released the one she’d held so the woman could do as she needed to, it embarrassed her beyond belief to cry in front of others, to be so vulnerable. “I- I hurt-” the word squeaked from her throat.

“That thing hurt her,” Marehis corrected fiercely and it- oh, it made something in her loosen up, feel less fraught with tension, in the back of her mind she’d been…something akin to screaming. Screaming the entire time since the moment she saw Ellie in the Red Templar Shadow’s grasp. That this was all of her fault. She should have put herself before her child—gone down ahead of her, it was only sensible, the girl was prone to falling afterall. And she should have listened to her instincts! She hadn’t been being paranoid! She’d been right, something had been stalking them through the Quarry with designs on harming their Inquisitor. But…ultimately, it was that creature that hurt her, it had been wholly undetectable, Marehis would have looked insane swinging at thin air, been made a mockery before the thing as it watched her look for it without solid knowledge that it was there or how to find it. “Cassandra you did what you had to—you saved her. Ellie would be dying of agonizing Red Lyrium poisoning or becoming some horrible creature or turning into horrifying statue. I would prefer any statues of our child be not her encased in stone—but that is just a preference, maybe I’m crazy.”

“She- she is the dearest thing to my heart!”

“I understand, it makes it mortifying to have hurt her,” Vivienne offered rather gently, “…I had to lay my hands on her, burn her injuries to keep her from bleeding out. It…anguishes me, that I had to do so. I trust you will not hold the act against me.”

Cassandra’s eyes shone with tears as she stared at the Enchanter. “I am…oh I am grateful you assisted in saving Eleanor, I could not be more so,” she assured.

“I feel likewise with your own acts tonight,” Vivienne returned. “I’m certain I’m not alone.”

Cassandra sniffled, nodding. “What if…what if when she wakes she fears me? I- oh Maker I could not bear it.”

“Cassandra,” Marehis breathed, “oh lethallan. Ellie loves you, knows you love her—that you would never do anything to harm her for malice sake. If she experiences a period of unease, it will be through no fault of yours—she trusts you, and more importantly she has faith in you, she will work through it, if she’s a need to rebuild her trust, you need only be patient.”

“What do I tell Cullen?” she wondered listlessly.

“Exactly what happened,” Vivienne supposed, “darling, he’s hardly going to renounce you. He will understand, see the necessity of your actions—he would never assume you would harm Eleanor for even a moment unless it was absolutely required for her own wellbeing. If anything he will have compassion for the trauma you’ve endured. Darling, Eleanor was not the only person tortured by your acts tonight—we know well you suffered with her. Bodies…have a tendency to heal more quickly than minds.”

Cassandra nodded after a moment, wiping at her eyes before she let out a frustrated sigh, “Oh, I do apologize I- I’m sorry. I’m rather a mess aren’t I? Thank you, Vivienne, Marehis. You are…you are excellent friends.”

“Of course we are darling, we’re fabulous.”

“Exactly,” Marehis agreed, pressing a kiss to Cassandra’s cheek, earning a soft huff of laughter though it didn’t quite put a smile on the woman’s face, she seemed…wholly embarrassed for having gotten so upset. “We are your friends, Cassandra. Who else can you be a mess with, but us? That is the entire point of friendship.”

“That sounds rather miserable,” Cassandra said, “you having to comfort me as I react a fool.”

“On the contrary we’re pleased to comfort you. And…” Marehis cleared her throat, “it is not always great sorrow we must parcel through together and comfort one another over. If…if it makes you feel better, lethallan…it is I who acted a fool tonight.”

“Marehis,” Cassandra breathed, “oh sweet woman, you cannot blame yourself—no one expects you to bend time and space itself to protect Eleanor, you did everything you possibly could, she is alive because of your level headedness.”
“Thank you but…I do not mean Ellie’s injury. It…it has nothing at all to do with her, in fact. I…” she blushed furiously, ears and cheeks blazing.

"Well come now darling, don't leave us in suspense," Vivienne insisted.

"Marehis?" Cassandra questioned, curious.

"I- I may have confessed a lingering love of Solas and-" oh something out there, strike her dead, "and allowed him to- to…pleasure me." There, she said it!

…

Vivienne’s, “Oh darling-" overlapped Cassandra’s,

“Marehis-“

Followed by matching, unified, “-we know.”

“Well,” Cassandra clarified, "perhaps not the confession of love but the latter, yes, was very er…plain.”

“It was!?” Marehis asked alarmed.

“…my dear treasure,” Vivienne soothed, reaching across the tub to brush hair behind Marehis’s ear, “…you have Solas’s handprint glowing on your ass.”

“Your hip as well I believe,” Cassandra informed her.

That was the ‘bit of staining’ Vivienne had offered her coat as cover for. Had her girls seen?!

“You should certainly bathe tonight,” Vivienne intoned, “that algae may not er…sit right if it is anywhere…delicate.”

“It isn’t!" Marehis squeaked, oh Maker! “No I- he- his hands were not involved in that way.”

“I do hope you used protection,” Vivienne said.

“…it…it wasn’t necessary,” Marehis’s face felt like fire when they looked appalled at that—some unspoken concern she’d truly lost her mind and wanted to risk becoming pregnant—it had her hurriedly assuring, “he-! It was- he…used only his um.” Oh this was absurd! “He went down on me!”

“Oh!” the women chirped in unison.

"Marehis there is no need to be embarrassed,” Cassandra soothed, “it is perfectly- I mean that is normal in any sexual partnership, is it not? Cullen does as much…er…regularly.”

“Bastien has not kept our relationship alive with peonies alone,” Vivienne assured.


…but got her more of a look from the women as they processed that.

"And his first endeavor to do so was while you're ahem, entertaining monthly company?"

Vivienne confirmed, Marehis blushing as she nodded.

“Well then…” Cassandra spoke.

“…that is growth,” Vivienne supposed.

Oh, they dissolved into giggles, the three of them, and Marehis was…well, glad her bit of embarrassment resulted in a smile on Cassandra’s face, laughter in her voice after such a horrid day.

Cassandra endeavored to question, “Are you…pursuing things with the man or was it mere…”

“Wham bam, thank you fallen Dalish god?” Vivienne offered, “As I do believe the youths are saying.”

“Oh, I informed him immediately it- that it didn’t mean anything,” Marehis groaned a bit, “but I don’t know what it means! And I can’t- I mean he- I- I would be stupid if I even considered resuming our former relationsh-“

Cassandra stopped her, “…Marehis, I do love you but I will strike you where you stand if you finish a sentence that would label Eleanor as anything less than intelligent for resuming her former relationship with Solas.”

…she certainly wouldn’t want that. To be slapped by the Seeker or to imply her child’s ignorance. “I hadn’t exactly thought of it, in those terms,” Marehis confessed, assured. But surely, “It is a different circumstance,” she argued.

“…how? In that Eleanor is more directly affected by his actions?” Cassandra returned. “It is
she whose entire life is forever changed by Solas’s actions. When you’re finished with the
Inquisition you walk away with the friendships and family you’ve built here—if you truly wished it
you could leave the Inquisition tomorrow, go off and completely reinvent your life however you
see fit. This isn't to belittle your hurt, but thus far everything you've endured? You can recover
from. Eleanor will likely never have such a luxury. There will always be some consequence of her
time in the Inquisition she will live with for the rest of her life. But she’s found something
redeeming in him, understands his past mistakes and feels the certainty that he won’t repeat them.
Her healing isn’t yours—but if or when you find yourself with your faith in the man returned?
However you wish to proceed is your business entirely. None would judge you either way, save
perhaps the Iron Bull, who will of course be very upset you continue to elude him as a sexual
conquest.”

“I’m not entirely certain of my return of faith just yet, there is still hope for the Iron Bull,”
Marehis supposed.

…there was an enthusiastic whoop that echoed against the mountain range, courtesy of the
Qunari. “Hell yeah!”

Well. Cassandra had been mistaken—there would be a consequence of her time in the
Inquisition she would have to live with for the rest of her life. Marehis’s ears were permanently red.
She had not realized—! She didn’t think anyone much was listening!

Cassandra softly cleared her throat, taking Marehis’s hand and giving it a squeeze before she
offered up something to make…her embarrassment mutual.

“Cullen and myself…had sex…on a dock.” Oh, she was not used to necessarily sharing
intimate details of her relationship, but she did try. “Thrice.”

“Thrice?” Marehis asked.

Oh the dear woman was blushing, head to toe almost. “One encounter but um. Multiple
reinstigations.”

Vivienne looked wholly amused and mildly impressed, “Dale, Lady Seeker.”

The once beautiful, peaceful, provincial town of Sahrnia was officially a hellscape as far as
Cassandra was concerned. One that tormented the Seeker even in her sleep, sent her startling
awake with the bone chilling screams of her child ringing in her ears, the thankfully false image of
Eleanor dead at her hand.

She was only assured the image was false because she lay alive and…alive, at her side, pale
and pained. Dorian was awake, seated at Eleanor’s side—Vivienne had been keeping watch over
her when Cassandra first fell asleep. Using…using her— it felt like sin to call it a ‘gift’ now. Using
her ability was draining, exhausting on its own, somehow the thing that felt like it should keep her
lying awake and anguished had sent her straight to sleep once she was laying with Sera and
Eleanor. Dorian was calling chill into his hand which he rested on Eleanor’s brow.

“How is she?” Cassandra whispered.

“Feverish. Solas is assisting Cyril in making fresh potion for pain,” Dorian reported,
apologetic as he asked, “Did I wake you?” Oh, he’d a book in his free hand, “She’s been restless,
awake but not-quite…disoriented and frightened. I thought this might comfort her.”

“Thank you,” Cassandra replied. “please, continue.”

“Gladly, we were just getting to the most riveting part,” Dorian assured her, gaze dropping to
the page before he resumed quietly reading, “…Macadamize,” Macadamize? “a verb, ohh,” he
spoke as if he found what Cassandra was certain he considered a dull fact to be truly interesting, “of
Ferelden origins—to pave by laying and compacting successive layers of broken stone, often with
asphalt or hot tar. It is a respelling of inventor or this method of road building’s name…
McAdams.” Ahh. The dictionary, ever the exciting read. Eleanor did truly enjoy learning new
words so she may well be entertained. Or perhaps it was the soothing timber of Dorian’s voice,
even as he was wholly bored, he put as much effort into his delivery as if he were reading a great epic to the girl. “How quaint—perhaps in time you’ll have the world call the act of ‘tripping spectacularly while in the midst of important business’ ‘Trevelyaning’?” he teased her pleasantly, a warmth to his tones and something expectant like…was the man trying to goad her into waking to defend herself? To argue and kiss him on the cheek—acts that if she were capable of, would signify she was indeed on the mend. Unfortunately she did no such thing, but as he continued reading Cassandra saw why he took up the task, the girl tensed up occasionally, drifting in an out of consciousness, she could not wake enough to be aware of little else than what she was feeling which…at the moment was fever and pain, but she could hear the man’s voice, feel his hand soothing with cool from magic she was familiar with on her forehead, and be reassured that she was safe.

“You okay ‘sandra?” Sera’s voice was soft against Cassandra’s ear, the girl’s arms were wrapped around the Seeker’s waist as she curled up behind the Nevarran woman. “You have a nightmare?”

Several. It was the third that startled her to full consciousness. “No sweet girl.”

“How you feelin’?”

Like an utter waste of Human flesh. “I’m fine.”

She also felt the sharp jab of an index finger poking her in the cheek as its owner informed her, “Mumma, Cuddly’s a little dummy that don’t give a crap ‘bout snitches get stitches.”

“I like Mister Stitches, but he is Adan’s, they are very happy together, I think it would make them very sad if I got to keep him for snitching,” the boy voiced his confusion from where he lay atop the Iron Bull’s chest. “And I only want to have Maryden. We could break up, but neither of us want to if that’s okay.”

Sera snorted, “Keep your girlfriend cuddly, it’s just a figure of speech, don’t got nothing to do with Stitches…the person, anyway.” Sera held Cassandra more tightly, “No thinking bad things about yourself! Inky’s gonna be okay,” and then, “you wouldn’t like it if I thought bad things about myself.”

…no, she would be utterly horrified if she learned Sera ever considered herself a waste of flesh. It did little to cheer her but she supposed her girl had a point, “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t gotta be sorry—just be honest, kay ‘sandra? Don’t say your fine when you aren’t.”

She did not think she would be fine. Not for some time.

She hurt her child.

Grey light entered the tent the moment before Solas and Cyril returned and the Elf man administered potion to Eleanor while the Healer pulled aside the blanketing to pull up her sleep shirt enough to get to the bandaging over her injury, horrible thing, Cassandra had not been able to stomach looking at it herself, she well understood Marehis’s upset, it had been vile. There was still some measure of…of a dent in her child’s hip, raw muscle and tissue visible as her skin had not quite gotten around to repairing itself, which was likely er…good, it gave the Healer the ability to pour regenerative potion directly into rebuilding her insides—the entrance wound was nearly four inches in diameter, tapering down to half an inch where the Shadow’s sharp appendage exited her body. That it was now less of a gaping hole and looked more like the girl had been skinned was miraculous.

“Is that pish gonna hurt?” Sera worried as Cyril unstoppered regenerative potion.

“Not badly honey,” he promised, “but it’ll sting.”

“Here mum, hold Inky’s hand with me—hand sandwich!” Sera demanded, though, “ugh, sounds right nasty. Done put me off my breakfast. Still—doin’ it.”

They were. Cassandra was…nervous to put her hand on Eleanor…what if she woke? What if she didn’t want Cassandra touching her? Sera took hold of Cassandra’s hand and laid it atop Eleanor’s so it was more so Cassandra’s hand sandwiched between the girls’. Oh her girl’s sweet, small hand! It was warm from either sleep or fever, and so little for someone who carried so much responsibility.

Eleanor stirred, gasping around a strangled, pained sound, whimpering as Cyril worked, but
he was blessedly swift, replacing her bandaging with fresh. “I got ointment cooling out there—it’ll keep that disinfected and really help her skin with its come-back. Exit wound is good, checked it an hour ago and it’s healed well. Keep her from rolling onto her side or her stomach, let her rest up—nothing strenuous for a few days at the minimum—takes a lot to heal up and she’s gonna need to uh, basically recover from her recovery. Little worried about her fever—Renee’s supposed to be reporting in day after tomorrow, Maker willing—I’ll be returning with the villagers, but you get worried, something doesn’t seem right? Send for me. Once I’ve handed the reigns over in Sahnia I’ll be back for good. Won’t set out for a few more hours yet though,” he assured.

“Thank you, Cyril. Truly,” Cassandra said. Maker bless this man a thousand times for this girl’s life.

“Glad to help,” he replied, “Spymaster wrote, Requisitions Officer told me to pass along the message to you or Marehis,” he held up a bit of sealed parchment, “Early, I know, but I figured it’s a priority.”

Cassandra gently squeezed Eleanor’s hand before releasing it, patting the arm of Sera’s that was caught up under Cassandra’s body before she sat up and accepted the missive, “I’ll see to it.”

She would. Leliana had agents inbound to apprehend Mistress Poulin and transport her to Skyhold to await trial. They would make contact when they hit the infiltration camp and await the Inquisitor’s arrest…or a representative of the Inquisitor. Someone had to do it, they would either have to wait for Eleanor—Out of the question. With her victims freed, Mistress Poulin would surely flee an impending revolt. It needed handled sooner than Eleanor would be capable of doing so and…well, that suited. It was already difficult enough that Mistress Poulin could do this to her people, sell them to Red Templars to be tortured and anguished until their bitter end to be made into the horrible substance cursing the rest of her people to eternal winter, that such a situation existed was one thing, that Eleanor’s sweet heart was subject to it. Unacceptable. Cassandra would deal with Mistress Poulin herself. She…She would take on any horrible task her child would put herself through to settle their affairs in Emprise du Lion. This place had beaten the girl down—every single day of their time here had resulted in Eleanor working herself to utter exhaustion, unconsciousness. And now it had put her down for days. If not weeks! She would not work in it further, she would not rise to another day that would end in her beaten, bleeding, bruised until she was left at the mercy of her allies to keep her of this world. The next time Eleanor so much as set foot outside of their camp, it would be to go-

Home, was the word Cassandra wanted. But it was not likely to be. Cassandra was not one often to use foul language. But fuck Corypheus.

Eleanor would not do a single thing besides resting and recovering until they had to move on to some other damnable place! And that was final!

Cassandra would handle it!…and she would not handle it alone. She had the Iron Bull, Dorian Pavus, Thom Rainier, Madam Vivienne de Fer, Cole, Marehis, her Sera, a fallen Dalish god…

“Where the fuck is my kid?!” a shout echoed up from the path below their camp.

And one, Varric Tethras.

Cyril’s eyes widened and Cassandra nodded when he pointed over his shoulder that yes, he should go intercept the Dwarf as he arrived in camp before he terrorized the literal villagers or caused such a din that it disturbed Eleanor.

It was sunrise, and they’d a busy day ahead, so. Cassandra rose up and armored herself, Sera dressed but resumed laying alongside her sister, Marehis rolling over in her sleep to wrap her arms around the younger Elf to hold her closely.

“…what do you mean she’s-?!” Varric was…road haggard, Maker, his eyes appeared brusied from lack of sleep and it appeared his face repelled razors…though his hair had perhaps taken razors ransom—his hair was cropped closely to his head which was a startling change in the Dwarf’s appearance. It was his voice, Bianca, and his ever voluminous chest hair, exposed even in
Sahrnia’s cursed cold, that confirmed it was Varric Tethras and not some other rude, rowdy Dwarf infiltrating their camp. He stopped arguing at Cyril as Cassandra emerged from the tent and breathed a sigh of relief, “Oh holy shit. Thank the Maker’s balls, Seeker, you’re alive!”

… “Of course I am alive, Varric. What nonsense are you on?”

“Shit I- kid wrote and said you were hurt!” Oh. She had been, yes. “Tall kid—not spirit kid or short stuff.” Sera was to thank for his intrusion? “You popped a fucking lung or something? Figured Ellie’d be a wreck over it and you assholes would need a little more fire power and- and it scared the hell out of me!” He…was hugging her now. It wasn’t as though the man had never done as much, but still, it was always a bizarre occurrence. “Don’t fucking do that!” Scare him, or collapse a lung again? She sincerely would endeavor to avoid the latter in future.

…“…you came from the Western Approach…because you heard I was injured?”

“Lungs are a vital damn organ! I thought you’d be down for the count, how the hell are you even on your feet? If this is some bullshit prank of Sera’s…I’ll have to give Buttercup a hug because fuck—Tumbles is hurt??!”

“It was no prank on Sera’s part…but I am not displeased you are here,” Cassandra supposed. “I’m jonesing here Seeker, I haven’t seen Tumbles in weeks—I came all this way expecting a hug from the kid when I got here—what the hell happened that stole my damn hug fix?”

“Eleanor was injured last night when we took back the quarry from the Red Templars. We…” had she developed some allergy to truth? She felt like her throat closed over when she made to speak of last night.

“Fill me in,” Varric inturrupted her—speaking with as much brashness as if he were truly interrupting her and not merely picking up where she’d lost her voice. He walked up to her, taking her arm in his like he was demanding she escort him and…he was. “Give me the grand tour, the hell we have a ramp for? I just came up that bitch of a hill, now I gotta go down? That tower’s cool as shit though.”

His…barrage of questions and comments gave her a moment to clear her throat, swallow the lump that had settled there, collect herself. He’d no true interest in the ins and outs of their camp, and he would see them as they walked—to the ramp he complained of—and down as she informed him of their mission. Freeing the villagers, what they discovered about Red Lyrium, their leads on Samson, Mistress Poulin’s betrayal…the Shadow that stalked Eleanor and ultimately took a piece of her down with him.

“Appendixes are just as useless in bodies as they are in books huh?”

“Books’ appendixes are important,” Cassandra argued. “Bullshit,” Varric refuted, “They’re the table of contents and the actual contents ugly bastard child.”

Ugh. This Dwarf was one of her dearest friends, wasn’t he? Awful. His argument made her smile. She didn’t deserve to smile.

“I had to burn Red Lyrium from Eleanor’s blood.”

Varric stopped as they drew near the stone archway that marked the edge of their camp, still and silent as he stared up at her, absolutely horrified. Oh, bless him—he would condemn her surely, he would condemn anyone who harmed Eleanor-

“Shit…Cassandra, fuck,” he hissed, appalled. His hand was on her forearm then, was he… trying to squeeze her harshly or something? It didn’t feel like reproach but- “I’m…I’m sorry. That had to be rough. You holding up okay? Don’t…be too hard on yourself. Don’t be hard on yourself at all, hell—you saved her. If she had that crap in her blood?” he shuddered, “She wake up yet? Is she…damn, that stuff could send her off the deep end. You got it out right away right?”

“…as soon as we realized it was present in her blood and we deliberated on how best to rid her of it, yes. I acted without further question.” It had been urgent, but what person so quickly gave way to harming their child?

Varric…breathed a sigh of relief. “Good. That shit’s no joke Bartrand…dude can’t even piss by himself, the guys so assbackwards. Red Lyrium might not be in him anymore but sickness warped his brain uh… permanently.”
That…oh she felt badly for him, compassion. She knew they had not be necessarily close before sickness set in, but still, a brother was a brother and Varric felt responsible for him, for his downfall. And too…it was a small tick toward not feeling quite so harshly about herself, she did see the necessity for her actions. She just hated her actions and she felt- surely there must be some punishment. One did not get to just- hurt Eleanor, torture her, and walk away without so much as a slap on the wrist. Sera was vicious in her protection of Eleanor, she thought surely the girl would despise her from the moment she heard her sister’s screams until the day Cassandra last drew breath, but no. She’d just called her mama, made sure she was alright after everything. Vivienne never passed up the opportunity to have what Varric and the Iron Bull termed ‘a bitch off’ with the Seeker she liked to dislike, and yet no, their frenemy relationship extended itself in the fullness of friendship when Cassandra was down. Marehis- the woman had once wished to come to blows when Cassandra was down. Marehis- the woman had once wished to come to blows over Cassandra merely frightening her over the possibility that Eleanor had been brought to harm under Marehis’s care that day in Haven after they returned from their first adventure to the Hinterlands and Cassandra unthinkingly dismissed Eleanor’s night watch, left Marehis to discover her wards homestead seemingly unguarded and running every horrible scenario of what could possibly have befallen her through the poor woman’s mind. And yet the most horrific scenario Cassandra could ever imagine happening by her own hand hadn’t so much as earned her a biting remark from the fierce Elf woman.

Someone…someone had to punish her! Corypheus would die for all he had done to the world and Eleanor, Solas was exiled to the Hinterlands indefinitely! The man who threw a goat at Skyhold’s walls had gotten off more harshly than she was! This was utterly ridiculous! Someone needed to- to beat her or banish her or- or something!

And it could not be Cullen! Oh she was so ashamed, how could she possibly tell him what she’d done? She could not imagine…he loved Eleanor most out of anything in this world. She was his daughter, his baby girl he had called her on more than one occasion! He would not possibly be able to stand even looking at Cassandra once he knew what she had done. And never had such a possibility—of someone she was pursuing romantically throwing her over—devastated her more in all her life. It was foolishness, utter nonsense, but she felt most certain if she woke to a day Cullen no longer cared for her in? Hated and despised her? She would surely die. Oh she would live! But she would be miserable doing it! She used to balk when she heard insipid people lamenting about the one that got away, it was an entirely ridiculous notion—the world was full of people, they found someone once, surely they would find someone of equal or higher caliber again, honestly. Now she was most certain if such a thing befell her, she would indeed regret the things that made Cullen Stanton Rutherford the one that got away, for the remainder of her days.

No one she would be relieved to find condemnation from was willing to do so. She would find it from within.

She returned to camp and saw to it breakfast was underway, that the villagers Eleanor so cared for were taken care of. and…Sera, made certain- ugh. She shoved a bowl of oatmeal into Cassandra’s hand, holding her own before her, spoon raised, gaze meeting the Seeker’s as if to dare her not to eat—because Sera would take nary a bite that Cassandra didn’t take herself and…oh, the last thing she would do was starve this girl. So. She consumed a bowl of oatmeal, Sera matching her bite for bite and then she doled a kiss to the girl’s temple, and intoned Sera was to eat her fill. She’d more to do before they left camp—she recalled that one in their midst was, in fact, a murderer, had confessed his crimes in writing, to be found upon his death. Cole did not have need of food so once the villagers, Eleanor’s party were up and eating, Cassandra called the Spirit aside and had him verify with her just which one of these people was ‘Louis’ and what Eleanor had thought to do about his crimes. Cassandra…well what he’d done was unforgivable—he murdered this Linette’s brother, Cassandra would…she did not hate mages as a whole any longer, but she would always hate the mage in particular who took her brother’s life. But, he’d done so in self-defense, this woman’s brother had been behaving dishonorably, been caught at it, and moved to
murder the man his sister loved for fear of being turned in for his crimes, Louis defended himself…killed his brother-in-law on accident according to the letter. And…he’d no reason to lie in a letter of confession, the entire point was to get the burden of truth off of ones chest. Cole confirmed that the man remembered that night that way, that he only meant to stop his brother-in-law not lay him slain. But this was something that hurt the man—burned in his belly and carved torment to his mind every day he lived that his wife loved him unconditionally *I don’t deserve her love*, his note had said.

“I want to help him. Ellie does too. She believes…just walking up to this woman and say ‘Louis killed Garde’ would be ‘fucked up’*,” Cole informed Cassandra on Eleanor’s behalf. “But showing her his note of confession—letting him explain his guilt to her? Yeah, she might never want to see him again, in fact she might even decide that at first. But eventually…hurts heal. If she loves him…she knew her brother, knew his hurts and how far he’d fallen. She will be…not glad that he is dead, but glad that Louis isn’t. They can work from there—she will know the truth, and he will be free from it.”

“You feel confident in moving forward as Eleanor wishes?” Cassandra questioned and Cole nodded eagerly.

“Yes. I can do it! I can return Louis and his truth to his wife. I will be safe. He won’t harm me—violence doesn’t live in him.”

“Then proceed as you will.”

Cole nodded, staring at her a moment more, “His wife will understand. And he will feel so much better once the truth is known,” and his gaze felt assessing before he sighed as if disappointed in himself, “it didn’t work,” he murmured albeit miserably, and then he vanished, confession in hand.

Thom, Dorian, the Iron Bull, and Vivienne were prepared to leave with Cassandra, help her lead the villagers back to Sahria. Sera as well—she was insistent upon helping ‘Inky’, if the Inquisitor couldn’t be conscious for her work today, Sera would go in her stead to verify with her own eyes that everything Eleanor could possibly want done got done, exactly as she thought her sister would do it—as breakfast wound down with the villagers, she went to every single person and asked their name, laying hands on them for comfort, asking if they’d need of anything, if they were getting enough to eat. She prayed with those who asked for as much, readily agreeing with such enthusiasm Cassandra was momentarily suspicious that…well she’d never considered such a thing to be possible, but perhaps through the Fade, Eleanor was capable of possessing Sera’s body—the true Sera at play in the Fade while Eleanor set about her day in the physical form of her older sister while her own body lay healing.

All suspicion of that cleared, however, upon,

“Er, dear Maker—whussup? Everything’s pretty shite here, thanks for that. Uhh, I mean it could be worse? So…thanks for letting it not be worse. Sorry—should I start over? Blah! Thanks for uh, keeping these people alive, guarding them in your hand or whatever and helping us get them out alive. Please keep…doing your thing while we take them back to their loved ones.”

Oh the girl was trying. She’d not been one for prayer before her time in the Inquisition, she’d a…waving faith in her Maker—how could she not? She’d been raised Andrasten by the likes of Lady Emmauld, that was hardly going to imbue her in unshakable faith in a Maker of mercy when she was in the hands of a woman who likely knew no end of mercy in her own life and couldn’t be damned to demonstrate it herself toward the tender child she took into her so-called care. Most of her religious practice now came from merely wishing to spend time with her sister rather than the Maker Eleanor worshiped—she enjoyed sitting in silent prayer or listening to Eleanor do as much aloud or reading the Chant and discussing it and Eleanor…well, a great many of her take-aways from the Chant would be seen as blasphemous by the Chantry but…she always spoke her truth, and delivered it forthrightly, no hidden agenda, just eagerness to understand their Maker. Cassandra was inclined to take on the interpretations Eleanor found in their Chant, it made her wonder how truly corrupted their religion had come to be through the machinations of those the Chantry put into power—if Andraste herself appeared before todays Chantry they would lock her away for her
blaspheme, and blindly follow Corypheus’s tricks to the end of the world. That was a separate matter—Sera’d no designs on being a Sister other than the one she was to Eleanor, so…her attempts were precious and appreciated, and thankfully left the villagers with no insult—they saw an Elf extending herself to pray within the bounds of their religion and took it as the kindness that it was.

Solas still looked rather done in from his…near-spiritual experience—too he’d only a few hours rest under his belt. Red Lyrium came to be in places the veil was thinned, and as it thrived it thinned the Veil further still. In the midst of a quarry full of the stuff? Solas had…it was akin to stepping into the Fade in physical form, and he momentarily had access to both the power he held in the physical realm, and that which he had in the Fade—alone they were nothing astoundingly impressive, but the power combined? Doubled? The man was lucky he was still of this world, he summed the experience to his every cell surging with power that could have rendered him a pile of ash if he’d not immediately processed that power and sent it subjecting another to that fate. It left his magic depleted, his body exhausted, so. He would stay in camp and rest, be there to monitor Eleanor while her party was gone. And Marehis was staying—to watch over her child! Oh, she needn’t be so shy and embarrassed—no one…er…assumed she was staying for any other reason. Eleanor was ill, and with their Mages leaving, the one that was staying sleeping, she would be keeping Eleanor’s fever in check ‘the old fashion way’. Which was the way everyone who did not have immediate access to Mages did it, Cassandra supposed. Marehis was hardly going to go on a sexual bender with the girl’s recovering ‘papi’ while she lay comatose a few cots away.

Let alone in the presence of Varric Tethras. Varric declared he wasn’t leaving ‘Tumbles’ unless it was for Red Lyrium—to either destroy the stuff, or its makers in the Red Templars. That suited as…well, the man was exhausted, would do little service to them in the field, but he could guard camp well, rise and defend Eleanor if she needed it, be of comfort to her if she woke—she would be heartened to see him, she’d truly missed the Dwarf, worried for he and Hawke and Stroud while they worked in the Western Approach.

…they’d truly worked. When Cassandra informed Varric their members were leaving to escort the villagers and make arrest of Sahrnia’s leader, he pitched a low whistle, shaking his head as he informed her,

“Damn. Skyhold prison’s filling right on up. We uh, caught up with this Venatori bastard, Crassius Servis* some asshole that worked with Corypheus and uh, screwed him over. Stole a bunch of his shit and sold it—artifacts or something. He was in charge of mining operations in the Western Approach, fucked a bunch of stuff up—unleashed Darkspawn on the Western Approach, hired raiders that killed this Orlesian Dragon scientist guy’s people, stole his research and then botched their own attempts at hunting the dragon there. We uh…saved it for you, pretty lady—goddess of Dragon hunting,” when she stared at him for a moment he admitted, “we tried, shit my pants, it was a whole thing.” He sighed, “He’s a real slimeball, will do anything for coin—not into the Venatori indoctrination, Corypheus just dangled a money bag in his face and he went along for the ride, he was writing a ‘candidate for the vacancy’ letter when we found him if you can believe that, trying to get another mining job quote ‘as far away from the Inquisition as possible’.”

“How unfortunate he finds himself housed in our dungeons now then,” Cassandra supposed. Ugh. Wretched sounding man. She was grateful he’d been apprehended, that was one less threat to Eleanor she would have to take on when she got to the Western Approach. “Thank you Varric. Eleanor will be grateful when she hears.”

“…yeah, she’ll probably thank me in person, but she’s already read all about it. Wasn’t exactly flying blind out there—been reporting direct to her and waiting on her word…she hasn’t shared me and Hawkes letters?” he wondered.

Eleanor…usually sent a great deal of letters when they traveled now that she’d the ability to read and write for herself. But Cassandra had noticed an uptick of sorts—she’d been worried perhaps Krem was struggling and Eleanor was writing to him more but…no. He’d written Cassandra herself when she reached out for confirmation he was well, assuring her his appointment had gone pleasantly, exuberant with his relief and gratitude that his father had made a surprise
appearance to support him. So, the rise in Eleanor’s mail was apparently from Varric—reports of his time in the Western Approach, that sent her writing him back with advice or orders from the Inquisitor to aid in his works, and she submitted all of his reports to Skyhold for him so Leliana could do whatever she saw fit with the information—send more troops to the Western Approach or resources or add new information to her intelligence.

So, before Cassandra led the way from camp, she sent out a message to Leliana—a formal request for copies of reports on the Western Approach so she herself could be well informed before they journeyed there. And then she pressed on for Sahrnia.

Sera was very quiet as they walked the path…though she was very- she walked right alongside Cassandra, brushing against the woman and corralling her almost it…she wasn’t sure what was happening but the girl was very determined to keep a wide berth between herself and the right edge of the path, her right hand curved at her side like she were holding something.

“Is everything alright, Sera?” Cassandra questioned. She was behaving rather strangely. And Sera was her beautifully strange child.

“Uh-huh,” Sera said. Cassandra detected no lie to the affirmation.

“Is…something wrong with the righthand portion of the path?”

“Nah,” Sera said, “Just leaving room for Inky.”

That…well. That was a um…oh it was an entirely precious sentiment that lodged a lump in Cassandra’s throat. The girl was leaving room for her sister who couldn’t join them—how did her girls think of such things? They’d such a love of one another, it was just…wonderful. Cassandra prayed her girls’ relationship remained as such the whole of their precious lives.

She wanted to write Cullen of it—he would find it incredibly adorable.

*His wife will understand. And he will feel so much better once the truth is known.*

*Ugh.* Damnable Spirit. Dear child. He was kind. And…wise. Who would not be if they were a Spirit of Compassion who had seen every cause of hurt and its healing for who knows how long? …she would write Cullen when she returned to camp.

The happy gasp that sounded in her mind was startling but she was glad of the interruption in her heart’s regularly scheduled rhythm, that it was due to Cole’s enthusiastic and private, *It did work! I did it right! Where was he? I am holding Louis’s hand. He is very scared—it will be alright. I can hear his wife’s hurt for him from here, she doesn’t know yet that he is alive. She will forgive him. Sometimes forgiveness takes time and that is okay.*

The town was still in shambles as far as their buildings went, but it was…fuller—there were tents now, Inquisition tents offering shelter to the towns people. There had just been two, but their soldiers and scouts were just finishing erecting more tents to house their incoming populace. It was…it was heartening to see loved ones reunited, Cassandra admittedly ached that Eleanor had borne all the burden and consequences of rescuing the villagers and precious little of the rewards. She would be delighted when she woke and heard of their safe return but she deserved to see it with her own eyes, the overwhelming excitement and joy and relief Sahrnia came to life with as all were reunited. Cole had vanished from sight, but she supposed he was somewhere monitoring Louis’s reunion with his wife, oh the woman held him so tightly, weeping into his neck her relief that he was alive.

Leliana’s agents were awaiting them as promised, coming directly to Cassandra as she made her way to Mistress Poulin’s area of operations. It was…a surprisingly clean effort. She’d half-expected the woman to run, but there was something in her expression as Cassandra approached with Inquisition scouts on either side of her, that spoke to her acceptance of the realization she had been caught—she’d heard the reunion between people she stolen from with the people she sold. When Cassandra voiced that she was being placed under arrest by the Inquisition, on behalf of their Inquisitor, she went without question, save for the few citizens voicing their confusion before their returned loved ones solemnly informed them of her crime, and her arrest whiplashed from indignation on behalf of the leader they trusted, to resentment and betrayal as their bewildered stares turned to glares on Mistress Poulin.

“Oh,” Sera said to herself, taking a deep breath and sighing as Cassandra joined her.
“You okay ’sandra? Thanks for handling that for Inky.”

“Of course,” Cassandra nodded. “Are you well?” she checked…worried. The girl had only just begun to get over her cold, she looked peaked.

“M’okay, just sucks being out of range, you know?”

“Oh,” Cassandra breathed, “I- I didn’t realize,” she should have, Saharia was several miles from their Tower Camp! “The villagers are well at hand, we’ve no further business here unless you…would it hearten you to see Miss Lace?”

“Well yeah,” Sera smiled, offered a bit of a laugh, “but uh, Lacey isn’t here—in town or either of the Saharia camps. Sweet’s got her scouting pish so we can prep to help with whats-his-nuts. Uhh…Mikey, with his demon huntin’ mission.”

…”Michael?” Cassandra verified, and Sera nodded. Oh. She hadn’t realized- Eleanor hadn’t discussed the matter with her! She’d…promised the man he would be aided in his quest, it wasn’t as if Cassandra hadn’t expected something to come of that, but Eleanor had yet to bring it up after their initial meeting.

“Yeah, Inky’s been been writing him since we got here. Michael and Lacey and that Berand bloke—”

“Lord Berand?”

“Yeah—he and his men helped out in the Emerald Graves a bit before you lot showed up, Cullen had them running protection on the transport taking more of those Shard things we’ve found all around to the Oasis. They was headed to Skyhold but uh…dunno,” Sera shrugged. “I guess Inky knew Berand would be passin’ by Emprise du Lion on their way back from the Oasis and wrote him to see if he and his crew would take a detour to meet us here to back Michael up to take down Ishishpish—she had a letter from him this morning confirming they’re headed our way,” Sera snorted, “My Lady Inquisitor blah, dunno how Inky stands that shite.”

Ugh. Eleanor had truly written him? Oh, Cassandra supposed that was unfair. It was hardly the man’s fault his parents had once upon a time bombarded an already overwhelmed Eleanor with a horrendous marriage proposal—in the midst of the havoc of Thom Rainier’s reveal and her first ever moves in Orlais’ Game, they had made the poor girl tremble with the fear the Inquisition was about to marry her off to some strange man she didn’t know! She’d been quietly, hands clutching together in a move that in retrospect Cassandra realized was her need to have a hand held, she’d merely not felt Cassandra would be at ease doing so in the middle of an important meeting at the time, she’d been shaking and his Lady mother noticed and squealed ‘Oh yes, isn’t it exciting?!’ Eleanor had been terrified! Met the woman’s eye and politely refuted, “Sorry, just cold. I’ve got nothing against your son, but I have absolutely no interest in marriage to anyone right now.” The woman laughed it off—that all children say that, as if it were a ridiculous thing for children to say! The whole conversation had been nothing short of deplorable and Cassandra…admittedly still wished to formally duel the noble couple, when she was reminded of it, her anger felt fresh. But… it had not been their son’s fault—he’d warned Cullen of their designs as soon as he realized what his parents were up to, assured he’d not put the thought in their minds, they’d merely heard the Herald of Andraste was a young, unwed girl and saw one last shot at a summer wedding while their son still mourned the woman he’d originally planned to marry that summer! He’d proper knowledge that Eleanor was just a girl, a child that stood on a chair to shake his hand when he agreed that he and his mercenary crew would join Cullen’s forces. And he’d been nothing short of a reliable ally ever since, so…she really should not look at him in the same proverbial light as his parents. Horrible people!

There was a hand waving before her face to get her attention. Oh. Her Sera, “’sandra, you uh…gotta go number two real bad or are you just thinkin’?”

“Sera!” Cassandra- she was reprimanding! She was! It just…came out, wrapped in a bit of laughter because- oh, this was something she simply adored about Sera now, wasn’t it? To think she once found her crudeness unbearable. “Whatever am I to do with you my sweet girl?”

“Scritch the back of my head, would ya? Right itchy and your nails is longer.”

Ahh. Well, she had asked.
She did as Sera requested, walking with her to join the others as their party gathered in the midst of Sahrnia, save for,
“Cole, bud—you comin’?” The Iron Bull asked.
“Mistress Poulin has left so much hurt…” the Spirit looked conflicted, and then he looked to Sera who offered him an assuring nod. “I will stay and help—I will come back. Send for me if you need me before I do that.”
“You got it!” Sera encouraged, squeezing Cassandra’s hand as she raised the other to offer Sahrnia a wave goodbye, and they began the return to camp.
They were nearing the Red Lyrium cavern when Sera let out a frustrated sound, “Freaking! They know we didn’t just swoop in and steal their in-charge person and now they’re on their own, right?! They can come to us and shite, and- and we’ll help if they need it, gettin’ someone else in charge or—“
“They know well the Inquisition is here to assist them, Sera,” Cassandra assured when it seemed the girl was about to go off on a breath-thieving tangent that was best to calm as soon as it started, “Everything was well at hand.”
“Inky’d make sure they knew! She’d freaking organize their election or something or-dunno. Something,” Sera sighed, exasperated.
“Imekari,” the Iron Bull intoned, reaching out to rest a hand on the back of Sera’s neck and shoulder, massaging gently, “Don’t gotta do things the way Boss-girl would. You’re your own kind of boss…girl,” he chuckled when she snorted at that. “She’d be real proud of everything we’ve done today, so don’t sweat it, alright? You did good babe.”
Sera sighed, reaching up with her free hand to take hold of his finger, “Thanks.”
“You keepin’ my hand Ser’?”
“Hand’s warm! And I friggin forgot my scarf,” Sera complained, letting out something like a whine, “Inky always bundles me up good before we leave camp!”...Sera was always mindful to bundle Eleanor likewise, they’d a ritual of putting each other’s hats on one another’s heads, wrapping their scarves for each other before high-fiving and if they heard the slap of skin to skin contact, that was what reminded them to put on their gloves. “I’m a freeze my tits right off if she don’t come ‘round soon!”
“Camp will be warm,” Cassandra said, “and you can rest with Eleanor, I’m certain it would hearten her to have you near—that can only aid in her recovery.”
Sera hummed contentedly. “Sounds good but um…you need help or anything, lemme know, alright?” Sera intoned.
Cassandra squeezed the slender hand in her own. "Certainly, sweet girl."

Chapter End Notes

Dalish:
Lasa nuvenin?=Do you give voice to this want? (Consent is key!)
Ir Fen’Harel—ma halam/Ma emma harel, bellanaris din’an heem!=I am Fen’Harel—and you are finished! You should fear me, I will make you dead!

*All labias are normal labias!
*Elmridge is a Ferelden town northwest of Skyhold, nearish to Orzammar and the border to Orlais. It can be dangerous territory due to Avvar activity, but passable since apparently the town survives on travelers and trade.
*Like any information I touch on about Transitioning in this fic, it is based off of modern studies because I’ve got modern day readers and a few of them might just be Trans, and I’m not about putting out harmful/outdated information when it comes to
something that could truly affect or disrespect a reader's real life situation.

Be gentle with yourselves! Transitioning is beautiful, liberating, and challenging. Sometimes getting closer to obtaining your ideal self can leave you feeling that much more defeated when dysphoric feelings crop up, I wanted to touch on that to say—that sucks, and being upset about it is perfectly normal! You're not wrong if you ever feel that way, feelings are always valid! Any kind of dip in progress can feel defeating the closer you are to any goal it hits harder when your goal is in sight and *one more thing* gets in the way—with transitioning the dips might be felt exceptionally more harshly because you're achieving your goal by doing things that are affecting your hormonal balance and that's where we get our body's emotional feelings from my loves, so that combination of your body's feelings and your personal thoughts and feelings are likely to exacerbate each other. Too, sometimes transitioning can bring unexpected changes. Some people experience a change in general personality (a lot of this can be due to finally being able to live as their true self, mind, but some of it can come from the fact that you're rewriting a great deal of your chemical makeup which will have several affects on your brain) some people experience a changes in things from their taste in food, to their taste in people. Sexual preference changing post-transition isn't uncommon. I wanted to elaborate on this point, I do it a little already in Sera sharing Ellie's perspective but I want to make this perfectly clear—you deserve to love yourself. You deserve to be who you truly are and if you need to transition in any amount from some transitionary process to a full medical Transition in order to do that? You deserve to. Yes, it is scary, and I can understand a partner being scared of losing their relationship BUT if someone *truly* loves you—that's a fear they will be willing to face for/with you. You are so much more important than any one relationship, and you are so deserving of living content and whole and at peace with yourself above all else. Thank you for coming to my TED talk.

*Red Lyrium Behemoths have a weakness to Ice magic!*

*When you look at earlier gamefiles inside Dragon Age Inquisition, Vivienne is referred to as "Odette" implying that in early game development, that was her original name. This is a homage to that, putting it into her backstory as "maybe before making a name for herself in her Circle she was Odette LastName" because I misunderstood the name 'de Fer' (which actually translates into "of Iron") for its homonym "Faire" which means 'to make' which made me think perhaps "de Fer" along with Vivienne being a French (Orlesian) name and not Spanish/Rivani like her origins, got me thinking to begin with that she might have changed her name post-magic awakening. So, she and Sera might have a bit more in common than canon Vivienne would care to admit. Thank you Isilzha for catching my mistake and teaching me the word 'Faire'!*

*Cole can be quoted in game saying that Sera is great at singing but hates it, bad at dancing but loves it.

*I'm always Full Lost every time I'm in Sahhrnia Quarry. I just am. The Map is Zero Help and the Maker cannot hear me there.

*Another instance where going both Mage/Templar routs makes the paths conjoin, both canon letters are mentioned as well as Calpernia and Samson competing for a shot at 'Vessel'.

*The 'materials' are people. Red Lryium can be seen growing out of people several times in game, and I think that's why there is so much of it in Emprise du Lion—bodies!

*The game implies you don't give Louis's wife his confession note if you choose to tell her. Inquisitor just walks up, says "Louis killed Garde" and then walks away like they didn't just drop a Red Lyrium Behemoth on someone's life. The secret hanging over his head is likely killing pour Louis if you go the other way. So, fic-fix.*

*Cassius Servis is captured in the WA and can be judged or left to die. I sometimes
forget to tackle his mission its so to the side so I figured there might be others who are like "new playthrough, who dis?"
Here Lies the Abyss: The Western Approach

Chapter Summary

Wrapping up Here Lies the Abyss! Finishing up our time in Emprise Du Lion before tackling the Shrine of Dumat, Western Approach, Adamant Fortress...and the Fade! Fun interdimensional travel!

Chapter Notes

Hi all! I'm alive! Buckle in!
I own nothing! I'm not even wearing socks at this point! Any dialog from the game belongs to the brilliant minds at BioWare and Frostbite!
This chapter is brought to you by the letter L. For long. And lesbian. Even though there isn't a great deal of lesbian content in this chapter, save for the existence of our lovely Sera! Anyway, onward!
There are 8 Soft breaks! 2 Scene breaks! So 10 breaks total!
Something to note that didn't make it into the End notes: I am aware that everyone has responses to what Nightmare says to them in the Fade BUT I have no such fantastical memory and the only written quotes I could find were Nightmare's dialog. Having Ellie respond is both therapeutic for the child AND serves a plot point coming at you in the next chapter!
Also here are the first two End Notes because Character Limitations:
*according to codex things on repairing Judicial's Crossing, Lady Josie does receive like dozens of letters daily demanding the Inquisition restore Judicial's Crossing because Orlesian Nobles are cheap cry babies.
*All the missions mentioned are canon missions for the Western Approach, this is a way of expediting in a way that makes sense and allows me to be lazy in a way that I hope doesn't wholly disservice ya'll!
I love you! You look amazing today! And I hope you're having the actual best day!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Their return to camp was made without incident, and Cassandra released hold of the girl’s hand as they neared the tent, Sera stopping in its entrance to look back at the Seeker. “You comin’, ‘sandra?” she wondered. “You can come sit with us—lots of work you can do in the tent.”

There was, she supposed. Eleanor had made example of working from their tent, it was where she did a great deal of her reading, writing, she’d taken to seating herself in her cot with parchment all around her that she hunched over, using the hard back of a tome or a spare clipboard to give herself a surface to write on—she did so, so much Cassandra considered putting in a request that another desk be put into place wherever the Inquisitor made camp, if only to spare her spine.

Cassandra’s own spine didn’t need such mercy but she…she’d still some lingering fear,
that Eleanor would wake and find herself scared and confused and taking in sight of the Seeker might…well it certainly couldn’t be a comfort, she didn’t think, and may well only frighten her worse. So she offered a bland, noncommittal sound to Sera, only entering the tent to lay eyes on Eleanor and confirm with Marehis she was well.

“She stirred while you were gone, was distressed and confused but I got her to calm down, I don’t know if she much understood me, but I told her where she was, that everyone was safe and you were returning the villagers to Sahnrnia and she fell back to sleep.”

Sera groaned, “Inky was scared? Poor sweets.”

“She will be alright da’vehn,” Marehis soothed, “I dosed her with potion Cyril left for her, as instructed, and I believe her fever’s broken.”

“Oh shite!” Sera screeched as if alarmed at the prospect and then she looked to Cassandra for that point of guidance, “Wait, oh. Broke sounds bad but that just means it’s gone right?” and when the Seeker nodded, “Whoo!”

“I am glad as well,” Cassandra quietly offered. “I’ve work to see to. Call on me if you’ve need,” she said, before she left the tent and went to the Requisitions table to see if there’d been any progress on getting the reports she’d asked for—no such luck, there was only an unsealed envelope with Tio Thom written in Eleanor’s hand which was curious but nothing that concerned her, he would see it she was sure. The only thing for Cassandra was confirmation that Leliana had an agent working on compiling what she’d requested but cautioned it was quite a lot to parcel through. Emergencies are reported as soon as possible, but Marehis’s regular reports on the Inquisitor are due at end of day. Could I trouble you for an update before then? …ahh. Her way of checking on Eleanor without outright saying she feared for the girl.

So. Cassandra sat down at the Requisitions table and wrote up a reply—that Eleanor was healing and no longer fevered, she’d yet to wake but Cassandra would make certain Leliana was made aware when that happened.

And then she took up the task of writing Cullen. It took—she felt badly how much parchment she laid waste to as she scrapped draft after draft, but it was even more difficult to put to paper than she had anticipated and she’d…anticipated it to be an excruciating experience. She’d thought her record of the destruction of the Seekers at Caer Oswin would be the most difficult thing she would have to put to paper. But she’d had such sweet encouragement, youthful wisdom guiding her as she dealt with putting down everything that had transpired and looking through Order’s tome of secrets. Krem’s advice had been remarkably useful, their training session before his date with Eleanor had been more a benefit for Cassandra than Krem. And when they went their separate ways after Eleanor’s ruling on Crestwood’s mayor, Cassandra had gone to the forge, sat at a table in its upper levels and gone to work as she listened to the clank of hammer against anvil, imbued herself in the comforting scent of fire blazing strong steel so it could be molded into something that served higher purpose.

She only barely heard soft footsteps approaching, the creak of the railing as someone held onto it and swayed to pull with their weight against it so they could make play leaning and swinging a bit as they voiced their curiosity, “Mami? Are you busy?”

Oh! Eleanor, still attired from her judgement session. Did she not have a date this evening?

…Cassandra had been, admittedly, hurting. So, Cole had sent her, hadn’t he? And she’d come. “I am working, but I am not too busy for you sweet girl,” she cleared her throat. In fact, “Come,” she said, closing the tome over her journal to keep its contents from plain sight, as she scooted back in her seat and opening her arms to the girl, “sit with me won’t you?”

Eleanor smiled, seating herself in Cassandra’s lap- oh, this was wonderful reprieve, just as she suspected—she hadn’t dressed for her date just yet but Marehis had worked with her hair, it was still drying, felt cool against Cassandra’s cheek and smelled wonderfully of
coconut oil, and her child was so warm to hold.

And curious as ever, “What’s up, mami?” she wondered, the head against Cassandra’s
cheek ducking to tilt sideways to try and peek between the space the Seeker’s tome left in the
journal she was making use of.

“I am making record of Caer Oswin and sorting through the Lord Seeker’s tome.”

“Oh gosh, I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to interrupt! Um…how’s it going? Are you okay?
Do you want help?”

“It isn’t entirely pleasant, but I am dealing.” She swallowed, burying her nose against
her daughter’s hair, breathing deep, grounding herself in the security of her hold on the girl.
She’d…she believed she’d discovered what the former Lord Seeker found so very damning.
It…was damming in Cassandra’s eyes likewise, and that was distressing.

She had been made Tranquil. They all had. Every single Seeker of Truth had been made
Tranquil, and had that Tranquility broken, and that was what imbued them with their abilities
and their immunity to possession. That this could leave Mages cut off from their magic and
the Fade forever had only been discovered when the Order wasn’t so very exclusionary and
Mages had been permitted in their ranks, before the Circle of Magi. A Mage candidate had
been incapable of having a Spirit of Faith summoned to their side—they had not been found
pure and were left with the ceremony only half performed. They were left as an empty vessel,
incapable of connecting to the Fade…and the Order took that and implemented it when
Circles came to be, entrusted them with their most sacred knowledge for the purposes of-
of bastardizing their rituals to tame Mages that…well, if Tranquility had truly only ever been
used for it’s original intent, it would spare them execution—the Seeker of Truth that penned
that passage had thought it some great solution, that there would be no more need for death
to be the final sentence for a Mage who could not be trusted to not abuse their magic
horrendously, they could merely have it taken away. It, and the entirety of anything in them
that would cause them to behave as they once did. Death sounded less complicated and more
preferable. They could have-

They could have made their mages immune to the thing they were taught to fear most!
The reason the world at large was so very fearful of Mages was the threat of possession—this
ritual was made to immunize a person from such a fate! Red Lyrium complicated such
matters, had proven to lead to a more physical form of demonic torment in Seekers, allowed
them to wreak havoc upon their bodies than be capable of controlling their minds, but that-
that did little to take away from the truth of the matter. Once upon a time, the Seekers of Truth
took truth and tarnished it in the name of oppression and fear. It was they who set up the sort
of system Cassandra would never want her own child being subjected to, the broken system it
was now on Eleanor to see set to rights.

She should have this information. And she would.

Just…not now. Not in the middle of a not-so-trying day, the first in quite some time, one
that saw her fulfilling her duties with success, and was to end with her going on something as
exciting as a date with her sweet boyfriend.

Sweeter lips pressed a kiss to Cassandra’s scarred cheek, “I’m really proud of you
mami.”

What if mages could be made immune to possession? What if Eleanor would never
again have to fear a demon may take control of her mind? Now the girl lay injured, she’d had
that damnable stuff in her blood, if a demon had struck while they were in Saharia’s Quarry?
Even now there was the pressing fear such a thing could come to pass. She was strong, had
faced demonic possession on more than one occasion and came out of it victorious but
sometimes such things felt like not a matter of ‘if’ Eleanor might one day be possessed, but
‘when’.

Ugh! She would put such thoughts from her mind now, they served no purpose! She
sent her damned letter to Cullen and- oh she could not abide just sitting useless and waiting!
Purpose, she needed purpose. And she found it on the Requisition table.
Word had come for Eleanor, in Cullen’s hand, sealed with his Advisor’s mark so it was official business and Cassandra would handle it if possible. Oh. It was confirmation that something had been handled already—a matter Eleanor had addressed once her scouts brought it to her attention, that Judicael’s Crossing lay just at the edge of the Tower of Bone, their scouts had informed her when they laid claim to Drakon’s Rise and scoped out the Tower to see just what it would take to make relinquish the Red Templar’s hold on it. Lady Montilyet had apparently been plagued by unrelenting letters® from Orlesian nobility demanding that now that the Inquisition was in Sahrnia, they restore Judicael’s crossing, as the Red Templars had broken it to take siege of the area—the only way in or out was through Sahrnia village, funneling through the Red Lyrium cavern, everywhere else was surrounded by impassable mountains. So Eleanor had apparently signed off on orders for it to be repaired as soon as possible and Cullen’s forces had delivered—there were passable repairs made, foot traffic across the bridge was now possible and…there were apparently sightings of dragons.

She was never so certain the Iron Bull would ravage her against any surface she deemed fit if she were so inclined, than she was in the moment she informed him she wished to go dragon slaying—two dragons. He had been laying in his cot with Dorian at his side and the Mage looked wildly insulted when the Qunari hefted him to cast him aside, lifting him off one side of their double cot to place him on the other so the mage was laying against the tent wall and the Qunari could be free to spring off the cot without trampling his lover.

“Seeker,” the Qunari growled appreciatively, “If you were a red head? Cullen’d be in trouble. unless he was a red head…swung the right way? Oh man.” Oh. No, no thank you. The Qunari was handsome but Cassandra’d no…Cassandra’d little interest in a triad.

“I am right! here!” Dorian snapped.

“Yeah, you’re great- love you, die for you, just let me have my moment.”

He had several moments. One would think it was Wintersend morn—the Iron Bull was purply-cheeked and grinning ear to ear the entire time Cassandra was certain. It was…it was a type of reprieve, pouring the whole of her focus into the task at hand. Sera remained with Eleanor and Solas as they were both rather comatose—though the Dalish man rallied and consumed a meal, was seated in meditation at Eleanor’s side by the time the rest of her party and Thom Rainier’s men had concluded their business of dragon slaying.

Two Dragons may have been a bit much to take on in one day. But she was hardly alone, they’d the numbers and potion to take on the task. And there was something in the sting of sweat-salt in her wounds, in the burning tear of her muscles and the thrum of adrenaline dying in her blood, leaving her spent, having to focus everything into putting one foot before the other, the exhaustion of wiping herself clean—she forwent a bath, the Iron Bull was well due a turn and if she soaked she may lose what pains she’d gained in their day’s endeavors. She wanted to ache from head to toe as she lay in the cot next to Eleanor’s, watch the rise and fall of breath in her child’s chest until she herself slipped from consciousness.

“Sandra?” in Sera’s voice was what called her to drag her eyes open the following day. The girl was seated on her knees at the end of the cot, still in her sleep clothes, sunlight pouring in from the unsecured entrance she must have just come through. “Breakfast’s all over but I saved you some. Things came for you to look over I guess? Bunch of pish from Leliana, a few letters from Cullen.” A few? Oh Maker, that did nothing to quell her worries. How many ways had he reviled her on paper? “You um…you okay? You wasn’t hurt bad yesterday or anything, were you?”

“No, I am fine, merely tired. Thank you for waking me, I should see to my mail.”

“Everything’s on the Requisition’s table,” Sera assured before turning her attention to Eleanor and offering up sing-song, “Innnk-y! It’s break-fast…” she sighed. “Potion again huh? That’s okay Ink—you’re doing real good, healing up, getting strengthy again,” she encouraged the sleeping girl as she leaned forward to rest her weight on her hands pushing herself forward to press a kiss to Eleanor’s cheek before sitting back on her knees and looking to Cassandra. “C’mon mama—get your breakfast on, I’ll take care of Inky.”
“I’ve potion and broth for her,” Marehis said as she entered the tent.
“Give it!” Sera fiercely insisted, “I wanna do it!”
“Alright da’vehnan, alright,” Marehis laughed, handing off bottles of Eleanor’s potions regimen and a bowl of broth.

Cassandra’s muscles protested as she rose up from the cot. She wasn’t certain if she was indulging in Sera and Eleanor’s company, or putting off the inevitable as she lingered in the tent, carefully armoring herself for the day ahead before she set foot in the direction of their requisitions table. There was a plate with eggs and toast waiting for her but it…could continue to wait.

First and foremost was Cullen’s letter…letters.

The most recent was Sera has sent me an update, she says you’ve been dragon slaying and went straight to bed upon your return to camp, I apologize for the bombardment of letters, but I was worried. Please, ciela, write me back. At your earliest convenience. To clarify—still worried.

The ‘bombardment’ was three small letters, equating to You’ve not responded and that’s scaring me and I need to know you’re okay, please send me some sign of life. Had his initial response been so horrendous he believed her unable to face him even on paper? It may well be true once she actually read the thing, but- oh, she hated that she’d worried him.

She…she really, truly hated that she’d worried him. If she’d not been such an utter coward, she would have taken up the first letter from Cullen when she saw it on the requisition’s table last night.

I don’t believe I’m capable of conveying how I feel at this moment in writing, so it is fortunate I am already on the road. Maddox is the lead we needed—I will be in Emprise du Lion as soon as possible. Leliana has leads on just where Maddox is being held, she believes her findings in Marquis Vicinus’s estate and what you discovered in the Quarry will bring both our investigations to a head. I will be in Sahnria as soon as possible. How are you? Are you hurt? I’m- there were several sentences thoroughly scratched out with frustrated strokes and then I am beyond sorry, I can’t say how much. I hate that you were all put to so much danger for this, that Ellie is hurt. How is she doing? Stay safe.

…it was an entirely…normal letter. It wasn’t a scathing condemnation. But it was very neutral, as far as Cullen’s letters went. She penned a reply, assuring him she wasn’t harmed, and Eleanor was healing. Oh, she prayed he was well, that he was staying safe himself. She would keep an eye out for further messages from the man.

It may help…if the Requisition table wasn’t so very full. Leliana had sent the reports Cassandra asked to view and…

Well. Ask and you shall receive, apparently.

Stacks of folded parchment, several inches thick and each held together with a single string of twine, awaited her on the Requisitions table, and Cassandra sat down to go through each and every one of them. It took a moment just to organize everything, Maker. Oh, the missive for Thom was still on the table—she would bring it to his attention when she was through.

If she got through in this Age. They’d been rather busy in the Western Approach*.
Varric, Hawke, Stroud, with the assistance of their soldiers and scouts, they’d taken Griffon Wing Keep in Eleanor’s name, he took note that they found one of ‘Wolfie’s weird artifacts’ there. They’d handled raider squatters laying claim to a nearby fortress, avenged the Dragoncologist, Frederic’s fallen assistants and recollected his missing research. Too they’d infiltrated a strange ruin that held…two parties frozen in fight, Tevinter researchers who had disappeared in the Western Approach had apparently been found, frozen in time, mid-fight with demons from the Fade…from a Breach, they’d accidentally formed while performing some sort of experiment. As they’d no means to handle the Rift until Eleanor arrived and no clue where to even begin dealing with whatever time magic was in place, they left the Still Ruins as they were save for a tome they took from the place at the request of Frederic, as it
was apparently a manuscript of some authority on Dragon hunting. Cassandra had wondered at the hefty tome that arrived in the mail for Eleanor that she passed along with a letter of her own, she was curious why the girl hadn’t had Cassandra or the Iron Bull peruse the text but… it was apparently ancient and Tevene, Dorian may not have been able to translate the text. Eleanor had sent it along to Skyhold with a request to Lady Josephine—did she know anyone who would be willing to translate it for them? She’d a friend who had a friend…who had a brother attending Circle in Minrathous, worked in their college of Antiquities who would be happy to do so. and assisted with the groundwork of tracking the hunting patterns of their local dragon and had traps prepared for setting for the dragon whenever they’d a proper dragon hunter at hand. There was a trail of Chantry totems that made its way through the Western Approach, but their end was met with a magical barrier they couldn’t pass until they’d the assistance of a Mage. They’d done what they could to clear the area of White Claw raiders, handled the trouble with Darkspawn and secured a viable water source for their forces in the Western Approach.

There was nearly a hundred back and forths between Eleanor and Varric, and Lady Montilyet, and Leliana. And Cullen. And Tonio Aclassi. And Knight-Captain Rylen. And Lord Berand—he’d been nearing the Oasis…and written Eleanor of his position. They’d a friendship, apparently, it sounded like he’d been keeping Eleanor appraised to how he was faring, personally, how his men were, the missions they were fulfilling for the Inquisition—the letter that came across the Requisitions table in Cassandra’s request for everything on the Western Approach gave her that impression, anyway. That the man had just been writing Eleanor as normal, mentioned they were nearing the Oasis and Eleanor had written back, asking if he would consider performing a ‘teansea favors’…teensy favor, Cassandra thought she meant, but the misspelling looked intentional and was followed by a little drawn up smiley face, an inside joke perhaps. She’d requested, if he and his men were up for it, they be a bit of backup for Varric and the others as they investigated the source of Darkspawn plaguing the Western Approach. For all the Grey Wardens were using the Western Approach to fulfill their mad, misguided plan to save the world from the Blight, they certainly weren’t doing anything about the actual Darkspawn issue there. Ahh. The Lord wrote back the very same day, he must have been awaiting word from her because Cassandra did recall her gaze catching sight of the smile drawing when she heard the girl folding up her missive and looked to her to ask if she was finished working for the evening in the split second before Eleanor was sealing up her letter and sending it off before climbing into bed and pressing a kiss to Cassandra’s cheek and sighing tiredly, sweetly asking if she would ‘pretty please’ read to her from a book she’d started in her time in Val Royeaux—she was nearing the end and wanted to read more before sleeping but her eyes were feeling tired and she’d a bit of a headache and—

She’d shared it like a bit of conspiracy, her lips against Cassandra’s ear as she giggled a whispered, “Don’t tell tio or papa—you’re the only one that does voices,” She did not do voices! She perhaps entertained a change of inflection when she was reading for differing characters—as one should! “so you’re my favorite reader, mami!” That sentiment felt heartbreaking now.

Ahem. Well. The point was, Berand had readily written her back, it’d had to have been nearly midnight when her letter was received, his reply was dated the very same day with immediate agreement that he and his men would…ahh, grant her this ‘teansea’ favor—so it was an inside joke—and set out at first light to meet Varric in the Western Approach. And it was immediately followed by a letter from he to Varric, letting him know that his Lady Inquisitor had bid they join forces to take on the Darkspawn, and they would be arriving forthwith.

Whatever floats your scrote –V was by far the…most disconcerting, but shortest missive Cassandra had to sift through.

It was all…on a level…disconcerting. She could not be more proud of all the work they had done, how well Eleanor had handled it all, make no mistake. But there was so much, and
not a bit of this had Cassandra heard talk of, a great deal of work on all of their parts. And
Eleanor hadn’t discussed a thing of it, it seemed like, with any of them, she’d just…taken up
the responsibility and done it. Which was what she was supposed to do but…well, she’d
always come to them for guidance, why hadn’t she done so here? Was there some…dwindling
trust? Or growing arrogance? She feared it was the former—reading about a situation and
being in it were two different things and her child had that understanding in full, had given
orders with that in mind, there was no arrogance to be found in what came off like the girl’s
best attempts at helping with the decisions that needed made, offering encouragement and
advice, signing off on whatever her people were telling her they needed—she wrote Knight-
Captain Rylen directly, thanking him for taking command of Griffon Wing Keep and asking
if there were any concerns he wanted brought directly to her attention, and she wondered if he
would mind at all, if she had a few questions. He supposed she was free to ask all the
questions she liked—she was in charge, had the title of Inquisitor, that came with the territory,
did it not? …Cassandra’d a feeling the man hadn’t been expecting the next letter from her to
be an entire sheet of parchment dedicated to her inquiries, but that’s what he received. But he
was kind enough to offer succinct, serious answers to her every question…even that of his
favorite color, the single word, green sufficed and likely excited the girl…yes, in her reply
Cassandra saw her written exuberance that they shared the same favorite color. She’d asked of
everything from inquiries about his wellbeing, to their environment, how everyone was
coping with the dessert, to the morale of his people. His answers led to her writing the Elder
Aclassi with questions about cooling clothing, things that could help with the heat. A week
after their initial correspondence, Tonio was confirming he’d sent scarves—one of which was
green and embroidered with Rylen’s name on the underside along with a portion of the Chant
he had to recite when taking up his vows to serve the Maker when he joined the Order—to the
Western Approach, made of materials that he promised would protect from the sun and heat,
and promised she and her party would have likewise if she wished it. She did…and she’d
taken the task of requesting colors she knew her companions enjoyed which was unnecessary
and time consuming and precious that she cared about such things!

Oh. Eleanor…she knew well, by now, her party member’s preferences on color. She
was confident in the knowledge. So she sent it along, without asking them all for a second
time to verify. The other decisions she’d handled were rather the same, it wasn’t that she
didn’t trust their guidance—she only came to them when she’d need to, when she wasn’t
certain of what to do. With all of these circumstance, she’d felt confident in her response and
how Varric or any she wrote in this time, would handle her orders. She was…

Oh she was growing up, wasn’t she? Finding more solid footing in her role and trusting
her own instincts and knowledge.

—

“Seeker,” the Iron Bull’s voice was battle-urgent as the Qunari emerged from their tent
to step out, it startled Cassandra to her feet, rising up from the seat she’d taken at the
Requisitions table, dropping the letter she had in hand as she looked to him, assessing. Was
there some danger? Oh Maker, was Eleanor suffering some complication? The Qunari
stopped when he took sight of the Seeker he’d addressed and he quickly wondered, “Uhhhh
do you need a moment?” why? Oh. Ugh. She shook her head ‘no’, wiping furiously at her
eyes with the back of her hand—Maker! The girl was sixteen and Inquisitor and- and- growing
up was to be expected! “Cuz I can rally the troops—I hear horses, big time, hoofin’ it our way
real fast. Could be friendlies but who the hell do we have on horseback in these parts?”

None, the weather was treacherous and there was precious little place to keep such
creatures, and too the Red Lyrium exposure may be detrimental to them in ways they couldn’t
expect. Could Cullen have made the journey so very quickly?

“The Iron Bull hears oncoming visitors on horseback—do we have eyes on the
situation?” Cassandra called.

Their scouts verified the Qunari’s concern—they did have visitors but, “Inquisition
colors ma’am.”

It was a moment later that a bird arrived from their infiltration camp from Lace Harding—the woman had returned from scoping out the fortress of Ser Michel’s demon, and their visitors had just been arriving, and- well. The missive was almost pointless because it came at the same time as those it forewarned of.

Lord Berand was swinging out of the saddle of his steed, wide eyed and covered in dust and grime from the road, breathless from the harsh pace they’d set as he rushed to meet them, his men stopping just short of his own steed while the Lord forwent stopping to catch his breath to nod to Cassandra respectfully as he strode straight up to her with the words,

“Lady Seeker. Scout Harding tells me my Lady Eleanor was injured, that she is here recovering—is-,” falling from his lips in urgency, he gasped in a breath lungs still trying to catch up even as their owner wasn’t entirely cooperative, “how is she? May I see her?”

“Slow your roll there dude,” The Iron Bull said…his tones friendly, but Cassandra recognized this particular brand of friendliness. It was the sort he used with Solas, back when he first suspected the man was up to no good when they met on the Storm Coast. “Take a deep breath. Boss-girl’s hanging in there.”

He nodded to the Qunari, but still, “I came as soon as I heard. What happened?”

“On Eleanor’s orders we took Sahrnia Quarry the night before last,” Cassandra said, “the Red Templars had taken captives, she made rescue of them while we cleared the Quarry but…” she cleared her throat, “Samson had them rather galvanized to take vengeance upon Eleanor for their losses at Therinfal Redoubt. A Red Templar Shadow made itself scarce, remained unperceivable and silent and waited until Eleanor was leading us down the Quarry’s scaffolding where it could catch her alone momentarily and it ran her through. She lost a non-vital organ and a great deal of blood, endured…trauma to have Red Lyrium removed from her bloodstream.”

One of his men pitched a low whistle, whispering to another who nodded at, “Holy shit.”

Lord Berand looked horrified, “Maker’s breath. She- is she- will she recover?”

“She is not in mortal peril, she’s healing as well as can be expected and our Healer assures us she’ll make a full recovery.”

“May I see her?”

Well. Cassandra wasn’t certain why the Qunari was being falsely amicable, but he didn’t show any displeasure at Cassandra’s cautiously offered, “Certainly, we’ll show you to her,” oh, that got a quiet grunt of approval from the Iron Bull so she supposed she was doing the right thing in his eye, “but I ask you do not disturb her. She needs to rest.”

“Thank you, Seeker Pentaghast. Oh, and you as well the…I mean no disrespect I just- Lady Eleanor has spoken of you- er- him-“ ahh he was uncertain if the Qunari he was addressing was truly named the Iron Bull.

“Yeah that’s me. What’s my Imekari been saying about me? All good I hope?”

“Your…” the man questioned the foreign word.

“Qunlat. Means child.”

“You love her as such, that is good—she loves you likewise,” Lord Berand assured, “she speaks very highly of you.”

And now the Iron Bull was staring at the Lord like he wasn’t certain just how to proceed, almost as if he were frustrated, like he’d wanted the man to say something offending so he could warrant the Qunari’s ire.

Cassandra cleared her throat, only just remembering to take up the envelope for Rainier Eleanor had left, “Well. Come along. You may check on her, and I’m certain she will be glad to hear you’ve arrived safely and were thinking of her when she wakes, I know you are friends,” she offered up the fact in case, perhaps, the Iron Bull wasn’t aware of as much, thought the Lord’s interest was ingenuine.

Lord Berand was practically on her heels as Cassandra led him to their party’s tent, the
Iron Bull close behind, standing in the tent’s entrance almost as if he were standing guard as he watched the proceedings.

“Lord Berand and his men have arrived to assist in dealing with Ishmael,” she announced to those gathered in the tent. Solas was still comatose in his own cot. Vivienne was seated at Eleanor’s side, quietly reading…a book she’d borrowed from Cassandra that the Seeker was absolutely horrified to have read to her child but—oh. The woman was being er…creative, editing the more inappropriate parts, the section she was in was rather the graphic lovemaking scene she somehow managed to make sound like three consenting adults, kneeling in prayer to their Maker, in the throes of passion for His good work. Varric was awake, beyond amused as he listened whilst he and Thom played cards. Sera sat on the cot next to Eleanor’s, Marehis was seated at Sera’s back, making play with the Elf girl’s hair as she watched over her shoulder as she and Dorian played a game of chess.

And in the midst of this lay Eleanor, and now Lord Berand as the man came to kneel at her side, just before Madam de Fer who paused her reading to examine the Lord that interrupted them and was now tentatively resting a hand over the unmarked hand laying lax at Eleanor’s side. He closed his eyes and sat in a moment of silent prayer over the girl, before he quietly cleared his throat. “Thank the Maker she’s alive.”

“Ink’s gonna be okay,” Sera said, “How you doin’ Lordy?”

“I’m well.”

“Look like shite.” Oh goodness.

He huffed, favoring her a warm grin, “I apologize for appearing such a sight before you, fair Sera,” eliciting a snort and an eye roll from the Elf. “You’re well I hope? Lady Eleanor mentioned you’d a cold when last she wrote.”

“m’fine. Sahnia’s a right shit-hole.”

“Not quite my Lady’s words, but she warned it wasn’t the most pleasant of places when she asked we join her here,” he sighed, “thank you all, for protecting her and keeping guard of her life,” he said as he cast one more look to the slumbering Inquisitor, gently squeezing her hand before he rose to his feet. “Lady Eleanor made arrangement for me to meet Ser Michel—she was going to call him to this camp as it is closest to Suledin Keep?” Cassandra…wasn’t certain—Eleanor hadn’t known the exact day he would be arriving—

“Lacey’s on it,” Sera assured. “Inky set it up with her when she asked you to come—she didn’t want you lot goin’ in there until scoutin’ was done, Lace’s supposed to be getting back today, as long as you checked in with someone there, she’ll know to send Mikey our way.”

“She was safely in your Infiltration camp when we arrived,” the Lord informed her.

“Oh sweet! Then no worries—he’ll be ‘round soon.”

Berand nodded, “Excellent. I’ll inform my men.”

“You lot’re probably pretty beat from the road—hungry and shite, right?” Sera asked and when the Lord nodded, “Go wash up, get comfortable uhhh…Bull you wanna help me? We’ll get ‘em food. Should probably be thinking about lunch anyway.”

“We’ll wash up and assist of course,” Berand returned, “You needn’t worry yourselves.”

“Whatever goes down—we all need fed! No one goes hungry in Inky’s camp—that’s the rules!” though the girl did have the thought, “huh…maybe if we put off lunch, put it out into the universe we’re starving Inky’ll come ‘round.” And at Cassandra’s sympathetic smile the girl groaned, “I freaking miss her. Which is dumb! But I do!”

“I wish the kid’d wake up already too,” Varric spoke up, “but I want her better when she does, and I definitely don’t want her jumping into ‘fix-it-myself’ mode.” He put down his cards, folding to Rainier. “But dude’s right—you hang tight with Tumbles. I can help out.”

“Yeah, leave it to us, Ser’,” the Iron Bull said, clapping Lord Berand…very hard, high on his back palming the back of his neck fingers over his shoulder squeezing. Not massaging. Had the Lord offended him somehow?

…should she be wary of the Lord? Varric…only willingly volunteered for cooking duty
when he sought to take the task from Rainier upon his betrayal. He’d little love for the task.

“I can be of assistance,” Thom volunteered likewise, rising up from the cot alongside Varric. Oh!

“Actually, there was something for you on the Requisition Table, from Eleanor I believe,” Cassandra informed him as she passed the envelope off to him.

“Inky left somethin’ for you?” Sera wondered.

The man sat back down on the edge of his cot so swiftly Cassandra was almost afraid he’d collapsed, but he sat straight down with the letter in hand, the other raising, trembling as he ran it over his face, his hand staying lax over his mouth as he—oh. Perhaps he’d need of a moment, his eyes were red and tearing up. Lord Berand made himself scarce, nodding to Cassandra as he took his leave of the tent to see to his men while the Inquisitor’s party remained as they were, watching and waiting until the man roughly cleared his throat, looking over…there were several sheets of parchment and then a small scrap of parchment that looked like a page torn from one of Eleanor’s small parchment pads.

“She uh…” Thom sniffled, shaking the bit of parchment pad paper that was apparently an added note to him informing him, “Ellie-girl said things are busy around here and she didn’t want this falling through the cracks, so she left a draft of her letter for mother on my behalf, for me to read and send so long as I’m comfortable with it.” he shook his head as he turned one sheet of parchment over, and looked to the ones still behind it, “Maker, she had to have written all this while we were preparing for the Quarry.”

“Inky’s the dumbest!” Sera complained. “I don’t mean it mean!”

“We know, da’assan,” Marehis assured, her arms around Sera’s shoulders squeezing reassurance.

“Take your time Sarge,” Varric clapped him on the shoulder. “We’ve got lunch handled.”

Cassandra joined them. As did Ser Michel, the man arrived on foot not too terribly long after Berand and his men, aided by Bull and Varric, began working to get their next meal underway.

“Good afternoon Lady Seeker,” he greeted pleasantly, looking about their camp, “Inquisitor Ellie sent for me to meet Lord Berand?”

“Ahh, you must be Michel de Chevin,” Lord Berand rose from where he’d been seated at the fire dicing potatoes, wiping off his hands to shake the Chivalier’s, “Lady Eleanor speaks highly of you, has told me of how honorably you’ve protected Sahrnia in the wake of their Red Templar struggle even as you have a mission of your own.”

“Sahrnia’s people needed defenders, if the Inquisition had not shown up when they had I do not know how much longer I could have defended the place myself,” he insisted, “the Inquisitor tells me you’ve a strong crew, I’m grateful you’ve come to assist me with Ishmael. Where…” he looked about once more, “where is Lady Ellie?”

“She’s recovering from injury some Red Templar coward struck her,” one of Berand’s men scathed.

“Curse those wretched things,” the Chivalier swore, “She will be alright I hope?”

Cassandra offered a nod. “My prayers are with her.”

Their party gathered, Solas rallying now that he’d had some proper rest and his hunger roused him from his cot. Only Sera remained in the tent with Eleanor—dashing out to grab a plate of ram’s meat, potatoes, scrunching her nose at the hefty portion of brussels sprouts the Iron Bull doled out for her before snatching up a bowl she placed a vial of nutritive potion and a jar of broth inside along with a spoon, explaining ‘Lunch for Inky’ before she rushed back to the tent…though she stopped in the tent entrance, gaze trained on—oh. There was a plate of stale toast, interesting smelling eggs that had gone untouched still on the Requisition’s table. Sera stared very hard at Cassandra, unmoving until the Seeker waved her full fork and popped a proper bite of lunch into her mouth and then she disappeared into the tent.

They discussed their plans for Suledin Keep now as Michel had Scout Harding’s
findings on the place. It was a fortress, guarded by Red Templars and...two Red Lyrium infected giants. and Ishmael's hold was strong.

“He is a malicious thing—he will offer anything to keep his life,” Michel warned. “He will not be easy to get to, and he will certainly not be easy to deal with.”

“He is the one who had laid claim to Suledin Keep?” Solas asked with some interest. “I heard him working in the Fade as I slept—he is who I have been being vigilant against while the girl... girls he nearly said, but not all present were privy to Sera’s magical status. He cleared his throat, “the Inquisitor has been in the Fade. He is a spirit of choice, we must be prepared—this Ishmael can take on the form of any demonic body, be it Pride or Rage.”

“Yes, he is powerful and he must be stopped,” Michel insisted.

“We’re with you,” Lord Berand assured.

“So’re we,” The Iron Bull said, “but uh... who’s goin’, who’s keeping back with Imekari?”

The host of their Mages were going—Solas was well enough, he insisted, and he’d the ability to keep their party appraised to Eleanor's health, Suledin Keep was not so far out of range that he could not swiftly reestablish connection, he could raise the alarm if something happened which was a relief to their minds. Their warriors were on board, and Cole returned as they prepared for their mission and readily agreed to join them. Sera insisted upon coming as well, she was determined to see the things that worried Eleanor through for her, and she didn’t want this ‘demon shite’ anywhere around anymore—what if he heard 'Inky' hurting and tried to get in her?! Which was horrifying, yes, oh Maker Cassandra hadn’t even considered that possibility and now it screamed at the forefront of her mind... which she would push back—while Seekers were immune to demonic possession*, it was still wise to guard ones thoughts when interacting with them, if it could perceive her mind without overtaking it she hardly wanted to hand it ideas for a different vessel it could endeavor to possess.

“But he can’t,” Cole spoke from Cassandra’s side, the young man was looking up at her... he was addressing her concerns about Ishmael attempting to posses Eleanor? “Yes. He cannot. That is what you learned in the Seekers Tome.”

Was it? “You know what I learned?”

“Its been in your hurts. It would come out of them if you talked about them,” he advised.

“If I were to speak of them aloud, it would be in private,” she said.

“Oh!” Cole chirped, understanding. And then privately, to Cassandra’s mind, You can’t be possessed because Faith touched your mind and found you pure.

Yes but that...
...she’d been sequestered for a year, isolated in a chamber where her time was dedicated to fasting, praying, and focusing on her faith in the Maker. And at the end of her vigil, when she was empty and hallow, they branded her mind with the Andrasten sun, and called a Spirit of Faith to her side who healed the Lyrium burn and left her mind free and unbroken, unable to be chained by a demon’s will. Eleanor... had been isolated*, starved, and poured her resolve into her faith in the Maker, put her all into faith in Him... and a Spirit of Faith touched her mind and left her whole. She was not branded with tranquility - It isn’t Tranquility that makes you immune to possession. Human machinations made that, something that harms, left to be healed. Security from possession comes from a mind touched by Faith. Tranquility is... Sera would call it a byproduct. The Rite is to make yourself pure for Faith to come and judge. Demons can’t occupy a space a Spirit has already claimed.

Alright. She wasn’t certain that was entirely correct—not for doubt of Cole of course. She merely feared faith in this instance would fail her if she placed it in something she so desperately—more than anything in this world—wanted to be truth. Part of what delayed her discussing this matter with Eleanor came from...well, she hoped to plant a seed of interest—one she hoped would spread to Sera likewise, that her children would be inclined to begin
considering performing the Rite herself to permanently protect themselves from possession—to know that if demons came for them in the future, their attempts to take their minds may still be frightening, require resilience to navigate, but they would never be taken over. But there would be such risk—the girls could be made permanently Tranquil if they were not fully prepared and Faith found them wanting. She would never wish that upon Sera and Eleanor. If…if Tranquility were not a necessary component…if Eleanor had already accidentally performed the Rite, if having Faith come and find one pure, make them whole was all that was required to save one from future possession?

“Lethallan?” Marehis’s voice drew her attention, “Is everything alright?”

“Are you well, darling?” Vivienne chimed in her own concern.

“Merely thinking,” Cassandra assured, “…Madam de Fer, if I may have a moment of your time, later? To discuss a matter of confidence in private.”

“Certainly,” she assured.

Marehis alone would stay to keep guard of Eleanor, Thom’s men would keep their camp secure.

And…well. Cassandra learned just what the Iron Bull’s issue was, with Lord Berand. It was very much her issue—it pushed the quandaries of how ancient Seeker ritual and Circle secrets may or may not affect her children and the world at large in the future, from her mind for the moment, so. At least it was something of a distraction. That did not make it a welcome one.

They were preparing to take their leave, Sera exiting the tent to announce “I gave Inky one last squeeze! Gentle, ’cuz like, duh. But sweets needs love!”

“I would wish Lady Eleanor farewell before we depart,” Lord Berand excused himself. Which wasn’t inherently an issue. It shouldn’t be—Sera was Eleanor’s dearest friend and sought saying an affectionate farewell, and even Varric had doled the slumbering girl a forehead kiss while voicing his own goodbyes. But Cassandra saw one of Berand’s men roll his eyes while another shook his head, muttering, “’rand’s got it bad.”

Ahh. So. The Seeker had avoided risking a third return to the tent while Eleanor slumbered, but now she followed after the Lord—Marehis was with Eleanor, she’d stab someone who dared to do something untoward to Eleanor as she slept—if the Lord came out of it with an injury they’d have only Marehis’s word for the encounter, while those within the Inquisition would readily believe and defend her…Lord Berand’s family was another story, they may well press charges against the Elf woman, so. Cassandra would bear witness to verify her claims, take blame if need be, perhaps perpetrate the crime herself if this grown man sought to do anything inappropriate.

He toed the line, very dearly. A soft smile on his lips as he leaned over to press a kiss to Eleanor’s cheek, murmuring the intonation, “Do me a teensy favor and be well soon, my Lady.”

Oh. Ugh. Had the man developed a crush on the girl? Or were his men the sort to look at Berand following his young Inquisitor’s requests as something sexual in nature? That the man simply must be currying favor with Eleanor to earn his way into her heart, or other places he’d no business being while she was monogamously engaged in a romantic relationship. Was that what he was doing?

Well. Cassandra’d a headache from the unknowns so she well understood the Iron Bull’s frustrations.
The Lord smiled warmly as he chuckled, “Oh…my Lady wrote me to inform me she’d the ability to write and wished to check up on me as…well, she’d only just learned of birthdays and in her inquiries as to birthdays led Lady Montilyet to inform her mine was coming to pass in Guardian and she expressed her well wishes and her sympathy, that now she knew they were such important days spent with friends and family, I may well be missing mine—my parents, mourning Vellania. We were only just heading to the Fallow Mire, and,” his smile grew, “she asked me the teensy favor of staying safe. T-e-a-n-s-e-a.”

Dorian let out a huff of laughter. “Oh, we’d only just covered how one spells ‘sea’ as in the water mass, and I recall that mistake in her homework—she thought surely that must be how you spell the tee and sy of teensy and was wildly upset when I informed her that while phonetically that may work, it was wholly inaccurate in writing.”

“It was a precious mistake and I…oh I did not wish to embarrass her or say something that might cause her to lose her building confidence in her newfound knowledge. So when I wrote back agreeing I would try to grant her teensy favor, I used Lady Eleanor’s spelling of the word. She was embarrassed when she was elsewhere corrected, but it truly had been…I found it adorable, and she’d some amusement with it, it’s become something of a recurring jest.”

That sounded…sweet of the man. But it did little to assure Cassandra he wasn’t sweet on the girl.

*He is. Sweet and sweet on,* Cole lamented.

Oh. Well. It was nice to have confirmation at least.

Though that confirmation could have been deduced on its own when they stopped to rest a moment, confirm their plans and strategies. Everyone was sipping from their water stores save for Cole, who did not partake of water often, he hadn’t his canteen on him, it was Eleanor who usually insisted the boy at least carry it with him on the off chance he did want or need it. Lord Berand saw his lack of canteen and extended himself in kindness.

“Cole, is it? It’s nice to finally meet you,” Berand said.

“I am glad you think it is nice,” Cole supposed.

“Are you thirsty? We should remain hydrated for the battle ahead—you could share my canteen if you’d like?”

“No thank you,” Cole politely declined, even as he serenely informed him, “I do not like you.”

Sera snickered, turning into Cassandra’s side to hide her face against the Seeker’s shoulder while the Lord blinked at the Spirit’s bluntness.

“I apologize if I have caused offence.”

“You haven’t yet but you will,” Cole assured.

“Well I…I will certainly try not to.”

“No you won’t!” Cole guaranteed—that he won’t try, it was clear to Cassandra what the Spirit meant, but Lord Berand smiled, somewhat relieved as he took the Spirits affirmation to mean he suddenly believed the Lord wouldn’t do anything offensive.

Cassandra would be keeping close guard of the Lord, if not to keep him from behaving unbecomingly toward Eleanor, then to preserve his life from the Iron Bull, should the Qunari take it into his head to lay slain a competitor of Cremisius. It was not in Eleanor to string someone along or do anything that would hurt her boyfriend. But she was kind to all she could be kind to, and sometimes that was confused for sexual interest. It…was a bit sad, really—those who assume kindness equals sexual interest are therefore likely only kind themselves to those they find sexual interest in, a depressing a deplorable way to live. She was gratified that Berand didn’t seem that sort of man…of course his kindness to the people in Eleanor’s life may well only be extended to them because of their relationship to the girl—*someone ten years younger than he!* She may be technically of age but that merely meant she was *beginning* her adult life, not she herself a fully-fledged adult! Ten, twenty years down the road? Perhaps such an age difference wouldn’t matter—a thirty-six-year-old would be no more or less
mature than a forty-six-year-old to any significant degree. But the difference between twenty-six and sixteen? When he could find her mistakes ‘adorable’ and be well versed in not making any such mistakes himself, spelling or otherwise? That he could so easily speak of the girl as if she were a child? He’d no business pursuing such a person—and if he endeavored to, he would be corrected.

After he was lauded. He and his men were excellent help, taking on the fortress—even as half of his men, he sent with Michel to Sahrnia when, upon their arrival at Suledin Keep, Ishmael sought to distract them and unleashed a pack of Shades to attack the villagers. They immediately took their steeds and rode off with Michel leading the way to go protect innocents while Cassandra led Berand and the remainder of his men, Eleanor’s party, forward and through the Keep, overrun with Red Templar’s, their behemoths, and Red Lyrium infected Giants—Varric’s call of “Shit! Shit! Red Lyrium made those things even worse!” was very informative and helpful.

Ishmael offered himself as informative and helpful, when they at last caught up to them. Ugh. He offered Cassandra power, riches, and…virgins, of all things.

He doesn’t even have any, Cole informed her silently, with the cheery addition, I’m a virgin* and you already have me!

Ahh. Well then, she hardly needed a thing from this demon, did she?

“…Then we all live happily ever after,” Ishmael finished his rant meant to cajole her into letting him go, “Well, not all of us,” he supposed, he did intend to kill Michel upon his release from the Inquisition’s pursuit, “but who’s counting?”

Eleanor. The girl was absolutely counting both the lives this decision would affect, and counting on Cassandra to handle this in the best way possible, which thankfully meant, “No,” Cassandra succinctly declined, “I’m killing you.” Which earned her a cheer of approval from Sera. Where was she? Oh, Vivienne had taken the girl quite literally under her wing—the Enchantress stood with her arm protectively around Sera’s shoulders whilst the Human woman stared down the demon Ishmael.

Demons Ishmael. He shift into the form of a Fear demon and immediately summoned two Fearlings to assist him, horrible creatures, like large swarms of maggots* crawling over one another in an effort to propel their masses forward to attack—as if the Horrors already at the demon’s side weren’t threat enough. Their forced united were strong and fearsome, standing against Ishmael even as his health depleted and he shifted into a massive demon of Rage, following this act by…well, his dying efforts were rather impressive as he shifted form a third and final time into a demon of Pride upon which Cassandra dealt a deadly blow. A very literal example of pride coming before the fall, as they say.

“Excellent work, darling,” Vivienne complimented, Cassandra nodding, breathing a sigh of relief that the demon was slain without- oh she’d put Eleanor entirely from her mind, she had to, she could not risk that horrible creature learning the Inquisitor was near and injured—he could have turned his attention upon her or…or offered her as an option Cassandra may well have been truly enticed to accept, if he’d been able to promise to remove her Mark? The…the guarantee that when she woke she did not utterly fear and despise the Seeker? She knew better than to dare accept any such thing, but she’d rather not risk it at all. Now she wondered after both of the girl’s, she wanted guarantees Eleanor was alright- I will go, I can check, I’ll step in range and come right back! Cole promised. Excellent, now. Sera.

“Are you alright?” Cassandra checked on the girl. She’d a cut on her temple that was steadily closing, she’d taken potion, good. Cassandra raised a hand to wipe at the blood trailing down Sera’s face, though she’d not gotten her attention. “Sera?”

“Shite, sorry hi. You’re okay, yeah?” Sera worried.

“I’m well,” Cassandra promised, following the girl’s gaze as Sera was still staring at something over the Seeker’s shoulder. Oh, scorches on stone where those horrible fearlings had been laid slain. “Did they frighten you badly, Sera? What did you see?”

“Nothing,” she whispered.
Nothing? “Sera, if you’d rather not discuss it you need only say so, you needn’t lie—“
“No, mum, I saw nothing, it was friggin’—“ she shuddered, arms wrapping around
Cassandra’s waist as she buried her head against the shorter Human woman’s chest plate,
sniffling, “you saw somethin’ different? You okay?”

“Maggots—I’d a childhood disdain for the things.” Being raised by Mortalisi had
imbued it in her, she’d been utterly…she hadn’t coped well initially with the concept of death,
that one day her body would be wholly helpless, all her strength and intelligence left to be
consumed by maggots, it had only worsened with Antony’s demise, she’d been utterly
distraught at the notion that the body that carried her so much of her childhood, hugged,
protected, was broken and lifeless and nothing more than meal for maggots. “I’m alright—
we’re alright sweetheart. We will settle things here and return to Eleanor and she will be so
proud of our work today.”

She would, and she’d benefit from their work. As they took their leave of the place,
could render closer attention to their surroundings and Cassandra realized there were several
passable sprigs of Prophet’s Laurel. She’d not- she was no Healer, she hadn’t remembered it
was commonly used in Healing remedies, she’d thought to collect it since…well it was
believed it had its glowing sun-esque streaks and flowerings because it had been blessed by
Andraste herself*. Sera and Cole delighted in picking the stuff,

“sandra! You’re freaking the best!” Sera declared her, oh, goodness. “We can make
Inky potion! Prophet’s Laurel is boss at healin’!”

“I’m certain Lady Eleanor will appreciate it,” Lord Berand encouraged.
She would. When she woke. When. She would. Cassandra had dreaded it, in that she
was dreading facing the girl. But it was getting to a point Cassandra would be grateful if the
girl rose up and slapped her in the face, screamed and swore and declared her hatred for the
woman if it just meant she was awake and recovered and…

What if she’d been too late? What if it had been utterly futile, her burning Red Lyrium
from Eleanor’s blood? What if the damage was already done and she was comatose? Or woke
and was…vegetative. Or had an alarming dip in her sanity? Cassandra wished she would wake
in the same way one wished to have something painful pulled from their skin as swiftly as
possible—a rush of pain as opposed to some drawn out affair.

Her heart leapt with excitement when she heard Sera’s voice as she neared the tent, “…
and then there was these friggin giants Ink—Cuddly got ‘em chasin’ him in circles, it was
right hilarious! Bull took ‘em down easy peasy. And ‘sandra was a right badass handlin’
Ishpish. He didn’t stand a freaking chance! She told him off and killed him dead!” but she was
regaling her sleeping sister in the tale of how their day had gone. Sweet. A let down, but it
was heartening, how enthusiastically the girl told her story. She was seated with her legs
crisscrossed, on the cot alongside Eleanor as she spoke a mile a minute. “Suledin Keep is
freaking huge Inky. We gotta play tag in it! In the Fade, once you’re all better. Kay? I’m
gonna go make potion for you—fresh! We found Prophet’s Laurel at the Keep! Mum saw it, I
didn’t even notice! We picked it all! I’m gonna borrow your birthday potions book, ‘cause I
don’t got the recipe memorized but I’ll take extra good care of it, promise.”

“You wished to discuss something my dear?” Vivienne questioned as she came to
Cassandra’s side.

She did. In privacy. She wasn’t certain exactly where such privacy would be secured
from the whole of Eleanor’s party and their guests in Berand’s men.

It wasn’t. They settled on the Tower of Bone. The place was called as much for the
discovery of several hundred Human bones found in a hidden chamber beneath the
flagstones*. The bones had been cremated in accordance to Chantry law, and the chamber
itself was cleansed and sealed—it’s antechamber was still accessible, and it had taken
Leliana’s people little time to unearth it upon their claim to the place. They had to pass a great
deal of Red Lyrium corruption, but once at the base of the tower, and inside the antechamber
proper? They were met with a proper room, four solid stone walls with doors on either side—
one was sealed permanently against a place that held the dead, and the other could be closed securely behind them, offering them privacy.

The Enchantress cast to spark the sconces to light so they were not in utter darkness, resting her hands on her hips as she looked to the Seeker expectantly. “To what do I owe the dusty pleasure?”

“I apologize there is no proper place for such a meeting but I need to discuss with you a matter of strict confidence.”

“Do you plan to elucidate or shall we enjoy this miserable *mise en scène* until we perish? The Mortalis raised among us might be at home in a crypt, but I assure you it is not a universal feeling.”

“Are you reduced to cattiness when you lack the supervision of Eleanor or Marehis?” Vivienne sighed. “I apologize, I’m…tetchy. Being so constantly exposed Red Lyrium has been exhausting and I—” it almost looked like the woman physically bit her tongue out of reflex, like she would absolutely never be so inclined to confess such a thing.

“Are you feeling unwell or…out of balance?” Cassandra carefully pressed, “It is understandable, you could be returned to Skyhold or take time to see Bastien, you must miss him terribly—”

“It is not myself I am concerned about!” Vivienne all but snapped, sighing in frustration, “Sera is so new to her magic, and Eleanor may be skilled in thwarting demon influence but we have seen Red Lyrium give demons access to torture Seekers on a physical level, if there is even a trace of it left in her—” she shuddered, “and having so much about, its presence wears the veil thin and it…has been causing even myself to dream in the Fade without the use of Lyrium.”

Oh. Cassandra rested a hand on the woman’s shoulder, “You have not been sleeping well,” she sympathized.

“I fear for the young mages in our camp more than I am concerned with my own beauty rest but yes. I have not been sleeping well at all.”

“Yes the Inquisition’s Head Apothecary is a delight but I’ve my own Healers I trust with my personal care, thank you,” Vivienne’s tone was terse though she loosed the tension in her frame, raising her hand to overlap Cassandra’s on her shoulder, “I am reduced to cattiness when I’m unsupervised and feeling anything less than perfectly well. I do mean thank you, sincerely. It is kind of you to be concerned. You’re—”

“Expressing concern as a friend and not falseness to compromise you further.”

“Yes, that,” Vivienne patted her hand twice before dropping it back to rest on her hip, “Now you, darling. What did you wish to discuss?”

“Something that…you may be more relieved to hear of than I previously anticipated,” Cassandra supposed. “I’ve had time to sort through the Seekers tome. There are some things I will be bringing to Eleanor’s attention as she is Inquisitor and tasked with the reformation of our system at large. One of those things is a matter that Cole has communicated to me about—Eleanor and possession.”

“I know she’s thwarted possession in the past but it is not unreasonable to be concerned—”

“That is just it, Vivienne I…I do not think Eleanor has thwarted possession of her own will. Not continuously, anyway.”

After she’d a vow from the Grand Enchanter that she would not so much as breathe a word of this outside of Cassandra’s confidence, Vivienne was silent as Cassandra disclosed to her the history of Tranquility, Cole’s commentary on the matter.

“So a mind touched by Faith is immune to possession?”

“I thought the whole of the ritual would be required, but Cole insists it is not the case.”

“…it would…explain a great deal,” Vivienne supposed. “Eleanor has been easy prey for demonic influence on multiple occasions. It’s almost defies sense she would continuously
withstand such attacks without a demon’s success. Too…”

“Yes?”

“Well. Her ability to find objects of value and importance to her task at hand, more often than not items that reveal truths about things—the way she could find with immediacy the letters and documents in Sahriia Quarry?” Vivienne listed. “She attributed these things to her magic, and that may well be from where they stem, but what put that ability there?”

“…you believe-“

“It is a Seeker ability, yes.”

…

She was not certain if perhaps she was sleep deprived or it was some byproduct of her depression, but Cassandra laughed. She laughed so hard she doubled over with her efforts and sent to tears.

“…Cassandra?” Vivienne softly questioned, concerned.

“Sh- she-”

“Breathe, darling, please.”

“She was five! I dedicated twice the years of her very life to becoming a Seeker!”

“I am not saying she is a Seeker proper, obviously,” Vivienne snapped, brow furrowed as she looked…almost like she was extending herself in vulnerability—to defend her claim instead of going on the offensive as if someone were mocking her and she needed to scathe them to into a puddle with her words. “But her mind was touched by Faith—that is where your immunity to possession and the powers branded ‘Seeker abilities’ are believed to come from, is that not the case? You did not read up on your ability to- the Seeker ability you possess. It was bestowed upon you at the completion of your vigil—your years of training are what qualified you in the Order’s eyes to guide you through ritual that would grant you as much.”

“I apologize I- I do promise I was not laughing at you. Just-“ Cassandra sighed as she finally caught her breath, “you’re correct, it would explain a great deal.”

“…it may be something to watch for closely in our Mage recruits,” Madam de Fer said, “Eleanor and myself have shared her methodology with those Enchanter Fiona trains—of ignoring the call of demons and pouring one’s focus into their faith in the Maker and calling for a Spirit’s aid.”

Oh. That might…she wasn’t certain what, exactly, that would mean, save for the possibility, “We may come to have those in our ranks with their minds touched by Faith, preserving them from risk of possession. Possibly leaving them with abilities they did not formerly have.” Abilities they could utilize…or abuse. It would be something to be mindful of, moving forward.

“I will move forward however you feel best,” Vivienne assured. “I can keep an eye for myself, or I can caution Fiona—with discretion, there would be no need to mention the Seekers, it could merely be a theory that has formed in our time observing Eleanor—she has only just been in close vicinity to a powerful demon influence while surrounded by Red Lyrium, injected with it even, badly injured and he could not take possession of her—I am certain he heard her bloodshed in the Quarry. She has been so disoriented, rambling in her slumber, we have all taken turn, doing what we can to safeguard her in the Fade, but demons have been crowding, making their attempts with us all.”

“Sera has not made complaint,” Cassandra worried the girl was keeping her fright in the Fade secret either in an endeavor not to worry those around her or perhaps out of pride, not wanting to appear weak in the face of a consequence she’d assured she was prepared to deal with when taking on her magic by choice.

However, there was something like relief in the Enchantress’s gaze then, even as a very neutral, “Good,” dropped from her lips.

…Cassandra was not certain if perhaps she was the one fighting possession. For a second time she feared Eleanor’s spirit at hand, but it was likely to be blamed upon the girl’s
influence more than anything. Something possessed Cassandra to wrap her arms around Vivienne De Fer’s shoulders and hug her fiercely.

Vivienne…complained, it sounded like, the woman sounded wholly uncomfortable, “I have disclosed my…less than derisive feelings for the child. I would hardly wish to see her come to harm.”

In honesty, Cassandra had thought perhaps the woman was overstating her feelings for the girl in Eleanor’s presence as a form of manipulation to endear herself to the Human girl further. Something in her expression as she pulled away from the woman must have said as much because it prompted something of a frustrated huff from the Enchantress. “If you must know…having gotten to know the child…I see a great deal of myself in her. Meeting Sera today, you would never know the timid, painfully shy and withdrawn Seda Emmauld she has described.”

“Her change of address struck such a cord with you?”

Vivienne shrugged. “For all our differences, I’ve an appreciation for the mutual understanding she and I have of personal rebranding. It’s a wonder what a change of address can do…” she offered a small wink, “But all we’ve shared here today is done in confidence, is it not?”

She supposed that much was true, so she held the questions that rose to her mind, endeavoring to quell her piqued interest through personal restraint as she merely nodded in reply. She pushed open the fortress door, waiting until the Enchantress banished the fire she summoned, and they made their return to camp.

Cassandra made certain Leliana and Josephine were updated on the Inquisition’s newest conquest—they would make claim of Suledin Keep, if only to prevent the Red Templars or worse from settling there. And she checked if she’d word from Cullen—she did not but…well she felt badly for leaving him in suspense, and he was in travel, he’d likely precious little time to write, but if he could have an update waiting for him, that would sort. She sent off a quick letter, informing him Ishmael had been handled, that they were all safe.

—

She did not hear back from him. But neither did she have to.

It was not nightmares that woke her in the evening, it was the feather-light skim of the knuckles of a bare hand gently brushing her hair out of her face. “Cassandra?” whispered softly.

She felt groggy but…certain she was not dreaming, “Cullen.” Oh Maker. He was here.

As was, possibly…his ire.

_I don’t believe I’m capable of conveying how I feel at this moment in writing._

She sat up in her cot, intending to rise and take this outside, so they might talk or- or yell, if he needed to, to vent his frustrations-

She did not make it much further than swinging her legs over the edge of the cot before his mouth was on hers and he was kissing her like he was a man dying of thirst and she was the first vessel of cool, lifesaving water he so desperately needed. She could taste Elf-Root on his tongue and it alleviated the bit of headache she’d gone to bed with—though perhaps it was more so that he was here and safe and…and not outright casting her off, and it relinquished the bit of stress she’d been carrying that he might hate her for hurting Eleanor-

Somehow his words winded her more than his kiss, “Thank you,” were the first words from his lips once hers were her own once more, “Cassandra, Maker—thank you for acting so quickly, for saving Ellie, I- I don’t know what- if she’d been lost to Red Lyrrium because of this- this business—I would never forgive myself I-” he shook his head, “I would die. I truly think it would have killed me, there is no-” he swallowed, clearing his throat.

“I hurt her,” Cassandra whimpered out.

“I know, I know you had to and I’m so sorry Cassandra—thank you,” he breathed, fingers threading through her hair as the other brushed along her cheek, thumbing away her
tears, “thank you for being strong enough to do that for her.”

Ugh, she was sniffling, “I thought you might hate me-“
“I don’t.”
“What if she hates me?”
“Cassandra I don’t think she even hates Corypheus—if he was willing to settle things with a polite conversation that ended in his genuine apology and a pinky swear not to try to destroy the world ever again? It’d be done. She loves you and you know that—this will not change that.”
“I’m glad you are here,” she confessed.
“So am I,” he assured, “are you alright? You were injured—you’ve recovered?” he worried.

She nodded left hand rubbing at the right of her ribcage, and then his hand was slipping under her sleep shirt, and he was kneeling to lay eyes on it herself, the bit of scarring, the angry red mark below her breast, the small pale puckering line of Eleanor’s incision in her side.

Two marks, laden with two kisses before he breathed, “Thank the Maker you are alive,” against her skin. And then he rose up, pressing a kiss to her forehead before excusing himself, “One moment,” he requested, and he left the tent.

He returned minutes later, clad in a soft tunic and trousers, smelling of soap, hair curling and damp atop his head, with his chestplate and pauldron’s in hand. He rested them at the foot of her cot before clumsily getting his boots off by stepping on the toe of one with the opposite foot to slide one foot out, and repeating the action with his socked foot—he nearly fell doing this, mind, offering up a smile when he managed to keep himself upright. It was a literal swing from smooth storybook romancing to endearing embarrassment that came with love in the flesh and oh Maker, she truly loved this man.

She truly did, oh she’d missed him. He held out his hands to her and pulled her up off the cot to hold her against him in a hug, a hand high on her back rubbing circles while the other palmed her right buttock as he maneuvered a transition of sorts—turning them about so his back was to the cot as he fell back pulling her along with him to lay atop him, the bit of bounce in the cot stirring Sera who blearily peeked open an eye to look at him,

“Hmm, heya dad-“
“She calls me dad!” Cullen quietly enthused against Cassandra’s ear, holding the woman more tightly in his excitement as Sera continued on,
“-are these sexy cuddles or can I get in on it?”
“You’re always welcome, sweetheart,” Cullen assured, chuckling as the girl rolled to lay over his arm and snuggle up against his side, her arm around Cassandra’s back as the Elf girl sighed contentedly. She’d no sooner got the man’s arm around her than he was fast asleep, wholly exhausted. When last had he slept?

She let him rest when she woke—he was feverish and she worried about the dip that seemed deeper between his cheekbones and jaw, like the man hadn’t been eating well enough. Cassandra would see to breakfast...perhaps single handedly. Everyone was rather soundly asleep, Sera was snoring directly into Cullen’s ear, but it wasn’t like the man wasn’t returning the favor. Marehis was fast asleep, curled against Sera’s back. Even Cole was prone, at least simulating dozing, against Varric’s chest.

She checked on Eleanor, still soundly asleep, before she went out into the chill of their camp. The fire was high, thankfully—she was the only person in their tent awake, but a few members of Thom and Berand’s men were gathered around the fire, sipping coffee and eating fruit and dried meat from their stores. They were much more interested in the meal of oatmeal and eggs and fried ram she was considering providing for the whole of camp, so she had more than enough helping hands to do just that. She heard movement from their tent—no one emerged from it but she clearly heard signs of life from Sera who let out a happy shriek. Had the girl not been fully awake when Cullen arrived? She must have forgotten he was here and
been delightfully surprised all over again, that was sweet. Well, the man was sure to be awake now, the others would likely rouse as the smells of breakfast filled the air, so she went ahead and gathered up a plate for the man—he would do likewise for her.

Though she ultimately did not do so for him because her hands failed her. She dropped the plate of food the moment she entered the tent.

Varric was seated…receiving a hug from a fully awake Eleanor who was blushing and giggling at his theatrics as he let out an almost alarming groan,

“Oh man, that’s it—that’s the good stuff. Hawke can’t hug for shit Tumbles.”

“He can too!” Eleanor defended, her voice was weak but her defense as fierce as ever, though the sound of Cassandra’s mishap with the breakfast she’d brought startled the girl, left her jerking a bit as she looked up from the rather impressive gathering of her party around the cot, Sera was seated directly behind the girl, supporting her so it was not of her own strength she had to sit up, Cullen seated at her side while Marehis had risen and taken claim of the chair beside Eleanor’s cot, empty bottles of potion in her hands.

Eleanor’s gaze fell on Cassandra.

And then she smiled, her voice hoarse but what enthusiasm she could muster was freely given, “Hi my mami! I was wondering where you were.”

Cassandra’s mouth worked. Which was a strange way of describing such a thing, as it meant her mouth wasn’t working, at least not insofar as creating proper sounds that formed speech.

“Stop standing there like someone crazy—Inky’s up!” Sera cheered.

“Are you okay?” Eleanor worried, patting the space before her, “Come sit. M-maybe you shouldn’t be getting up so early—did you sleep enough? You’re probably still recovering. I know it wouldn’t be any fun all by yourself, but you could keep anyone you wanted except papi ‘cause he’s gotta work—but we could drop you off at the Marchand’s when we pass Val Royeaux to get to the Shrine of Dumat. You can just relax and rest up and we’ll swing back around on our way to the Western Approach—“

“Who said you’re to join us at the Shrine of Dumat?” Cullen questioned. And then, “Wait, just how did you know that was where—“

“Inquisitor—answer to both of your questions,” Eleanor informed him. “I say I’m joining you at the Shrine, and I know that’s where we’re going because Tatie found out Calpernia’s vying to be Corypheus’s ‘vessel’ when we were in Val Royeaux together, and she said that the Shrine was likely their next point of interest, Calpernia’s all mad because Corypheus says she can’t go to the Shrine even though she’s certain that’s where she could best train to be his vessel. When I saw Samson rambling about wanting to be vessel too? I figure Corypheus probably has something or someone at the Shrine working on this vessel business, and he doesn’t want his candidates interfering with his behind-the-scenes plots. As a point of reference,” Eleanor cautioned, “all of my behind-the-scenes plots involve me getting snacks, and I usually share. I feel like maybe if we advertised that, we’d get some Red Templar/Venatori converts.”

Had the girl truly just brandished her authority as Inquisitor to overrule her father’s opinion on the matter and then followed that with the assurance she was a trustworthy leader because her only conniving plots involved sweets?

Cassandra wasn’t certain if she was laughing because she truly found it hilarious, or if she was slappy happy in the wake of her child waking and- and not despising her or acting under the influence of Red Lyrium.

“Mami?” Eleanor was smiling, confused but amused, and the Seeker stepped over the mess she’d made of breakfast to crawl onto the cot and sit before this girl and pull her into a hug. Varric was absolutely correct, this was, indeed, the good stuff.

“I’m so sorry,” did not feel nearly sufficient to describe the fullness of her remorse.

“Don’t be sad, I’m okay,” she promised, followed by words the others had spoken over these past few days—a sentence she did not believe could be true until it came with certainty
from Eleanor’s lips, her voice to her perspective, “Thank you for saving me.”

Cassandra brushed a hand along Eleanor’s cheek, “How are you feeling?”

“Tired. Potion is helping, but I’m definitely going back to sleep—but my mouth wants to taste real food and I want caught up on what everyone’s been doing—fill me! In and up!”

Oh heavens, Sera snickered, met with Eleanor’s reprimanding,

“Sera!”

“In ’n up,” the Elf girl giggled to herself.

They did, in a fashion wholly unlike Sera’s amusements. Oh, it was relieving to see Eleanor awake. Though it wasn’t entirely relieving to have Lord Berand make the discovery that she was—the man…wasn’t rude but he did overstep his welcome after a fashion, rushing to join them in the tent to rhapsodize over Eleanor’s recovery which was sweet, but Cassandra was worried the next words out of his mouth might be some sort of awful confession that thankfully did not come. And he made no moves to act physically—Cullen was not moving from Eleanor’s side, neither was Marehis about to give up her seat, and Sera was absolutely unrelenting in her hold—Cole took up the task of kindly feeding Sera since ‘her arms are busy holding Ellie’, apologizing to Eleanor’s hair whenever he dropped a bit of egg in it before announcing “Oh! It likes it! Just not cooked*,” which was met with Eleanor’s supposition that hair likely benefits from the proteins found in egg. Needless to say, the girl was very well surrounded so Lord Berand stood awkwardly at the foot of the cot as he visited. Which he was apparently doing until…well she hoped he would have the sense to step out once Eleanor was tired, honestly, but she was certain he would take his leave if Eleanor or one in her party asked him to. Ugh.

Cassandra did her best to articulate everything that had come to pass in her sleep, the girl looked aghast at the notion that they’d all gone dragon slaying twice in one day. She was relieved Emprise du Lion was well and secured. Cole disappeared only momentarily to get something from the requisitions table—mail for Eleanor, letters from Lady Montilyet confirming her dear friend Edouard Desjardins* had agreed to take a leadership position in the area on behalf of the Inquisition—he would oversee Suledin Keep’s operations and the people of Sahrnia could rely upon him, and the Inquisition through him, during this time as they lacked leadership.

“There’s so few people, I was wondering if maybe we could make sure they know they can work with the Inquisition. I mean Suledin Keep might be more secure than what’s left of their town, and we could always use more people, and they could relocate anywhere afterward if Sahrnia isn’t salvageable as a habitable place. The Inquisition would be a good way for some of them to find someplace new, we’ve camps all over the place, they’ll pass through lots of places in their travels.”

“I don’t know that they would all be able to find work in the Inquisition,” Vivienne voiced concern, “there are elderly members of their town.”

“So?” Eleanor questioned like it was the most absurd concern. “Granny Mae is a treasure of the world and the Inquisition would be lucky to have her! She knows so many things! And she can crochet! That’s like! Fancy knitting or something. She can read and write and cook like nobody’s business! She could help with requisitions and mail and things like that or meals in Suledin Keep, she’s old not dead! Oh! Did you give her mama’s ring back?”

Had they?

“Uh-huh,” Sera confirmed, “she sent this!” Pressing rather the long…messy sounding kiss to her cheek.

“Sera!”

“She’s a slobbery lady!”

“You’re ridiculous and I love you and I’m going to miss you when I go back to sleep!”

Eleanor informed her, “But first I wanna write my boyfriend because I miss him and he’s not making a surprise visit, is he?” she wondered, as if hopeful Cullen was about to reveal he’d hidden Lieutenant Aclassi in his pack this whole time.
“That would ruin a surprise, now wouldn’t it?” Cullen said.

Eleanor swatted her father with the letter she just unsealed, “He’s helping your troops gather for the Western Approach! Cause that’s probably going to be a big fight to stop the Wardens from whatever they’re doing. Awe, papito!” she cooed, looking to Cole who vanished and reappeared with one thing more from the requisitions table. Oh…awe indeed. Cremisius had fashioned his girlfriend an evergreen nug with Orlesian blue buttons for eyes and matching bow tie, a small parchment tag attached with the Lieutenant’s script reading Get well soon, lovely, and she was burying her face into the plush creature’s head. “He’s the cutest! This nug, and my boyfriend—I have the cutest boyfriend!”


“It’s a shame he couldn’t manage the journey to be at your side in this time,” Lord Berand said…in tones that sounded like it was a shame but to Cassandra’s ears smacked of judgement—like the man did truly believe it to be unfortunate in a way that he thought poorly of the younger man for not dropping his every responsibility and going to Eleanor’s side.

“I miss him, but I’m really proud him for all his hard work, and the longer the wait the even better it feels when we’re back together again! Cremisius is pretty smart—if I’m not careful he might just wise up and get bored of me if we were together all the time,” Eleanor teasingly supposed with a giggle.

“Only an utter fool would find themselves bored in your company,” Berand argued.

“I do seem to have a lot of crazy stuff happening around me all the time!” Eleanor supposed… Sera buried her face against the girl’s hair while Varric had to wholly advert his gaze like he was internally screaming in amusement laced frustration, Madam de Fer palmed her own face while Dorian and the Iron Bull quietly groaned, wincing as the girl cheerily breezed right past the man’s…not flirtations but competition, of sorts, toward her boyfriend. Where he implied that he himself would never bore of her were she in romance with him, she saw her friend making commentary on her currently adventurous life keeping those who kept her company on their toes. “I guess I don’t really have to worry about boredom striking until after we’ve finished this whole ‘saving the world’ business is done,” she said, wondering, “Sahrnia’s squared away—when do we have to leave for the Shrine?”

“Sometime between tomorrow and never,” Cullen said.

“Kay—tomorrow morning we’ll saddle up and hit the road. Gently. I’m riding with somebody and they gotta be down with holding me ‘cause I’m sleeping. And making sure my nug doesn’t fall—his name is William, he’s mine and Cremisius’s first born son! If I die, he gets everything!” she informed them, “Have Tia update my will!”

“Imekari,” Bull groaned the complaint of her will-talk.

“Oh! I’ve got a will!” Sera…decided, it sounded like, more than she likely actually had one written up and notarized. No, she’d a verbal one she was making before them, “m’leaving it all to my ghost—don’t none of you assholes touch my stuff! Cept Inky can call dibs on whatever she wants but she’s gotta fight my ghost for it!”

“Deal!” Eleanor readily agreed, “Now. Who wants to nap with me?”

“Sounds good Imekari,” the Iron Bull said, looking to Berand, “Visiting hours are over my man. Kid should get some rest.”

“Of course,” Berand said, bowing to excuse himself, “I wish you sweet dreams, my Lady.” She liked it less and less every time he managed to work the words into his speech. She did like that the man did finally take his leave, however. Maker.

Cullen was immediate to lie back down alongside the girl and pull she and Sera close. Oh he’d missed them terribly. Too, he dearly needed to rest, Cassandra indulged in joining them, it was the best sleep she’d gotten since…well, since Skyhold, really. Eleanor laid on her uninjured side, facing Cassandra so she could share her stuffed nug. A ridiculous thing but her life seemed full of ridiculous things that she couldn’t imagine being without.

They left Sahrnia the following morning. They…had to tell Eleanor of the existence of two Rifts on the other side of Judicael’s Crossing, but Cullen sat down and took her hands in
his and vowed, his soldiers would make this place safe for any who traveled through—such travel was unlikely given Sahrnia’s current state, all were avoiding it—she was in no condition to attempt sealing two high level Rifts. If it was truly necessary, they could and would return to seal the Rifts when she’d the strength to do so…Cole’d the fear with everything else taxing her body just now, her heart might stop and they were none of them willing to risk it refusing to resume beating.

“I…I could let everyone else do the fighting…maybe we can knock me out and someone can just hold my Marked hand up and see what happens?” Eleanor proposed.

“Mija,” Cullen shook his head, reaching out to tuck a few curls behind her ear. She nodded, “Yeah, I…I know I can’t do it right now,” she confessed. But that did not mean she would ignore the danger the Rifts possessed, “Josie might hate me but…no one can get hurt by the Rifts if we close off access to them…”

“You wish to close or…deconstruct the repairs to Judicael’s Crossing?” Cullen surmised.

“Maybe? Gosh I’d feel garbage ordering your soldiers to undo all their hard work, so I’m thinking ‘closing it’. And blocking off the gate over there. People can detour around Sahrnia, there’s roads and things…those might need like, announcements or signs or something? Can we do that? I wouldn’t want to step on anyone’s toes. Who owns the bridge? Its Orlais’ road but like, does that mean it belongs to the Empress or the people or a Marquis or something?”

“The Inquisition currently holds responsibility over it. Think nothing of it darling,” Vivienne spoke up, “Allow me to step in with my court connections Eleanor, won’t you please?” she pled, “I am certain Lady Montilyet and myself, we can placate any who would find complaint with your judgement—the area will be secure, and any petty political feelings will be pacified.” She drew near, brushing Eleanor’s hair back as she intoned, “You are to put every concern you have about this matter entirely from your precious mind, my darling.” And then, with all the poise of a woman well versed in the precision and propriety the slightest hand gestures required when under the scrutiny of a ballroom of Orlesian nobility, Madam Vivienne de Fer raised a single, delicate pinkie finger as she announced, “you are to promise me—you will trust me, and therefore you will not worry.”

Eleanor smiled, linking her pinkie finger around the Enchantress’s, “I promise.” “Excellent.”

It was, oh Maker, she hoped the girl didn't allow unnecessary anxieties to press on her at this time. Worry sank in Cassandra’s stomach as Eleanor was dressed in armor and accepted the offer of Sera’s arm, leaning on the older girl as they made way to leave camp, Eleanor’s steps were careful and labored like relying on her own ability to move forward was painful, a soft sound of discomfort catching in her throat.

“My Lady?” Lord Berand approached, his greeting offered in concern, and his gaze swept across them like he was looking for someone to inform the Inquisitor she was to return to bed and when no one did any such thing he smiled and proceeded as planned. The Inquisitor’s orders were clear and when they conveyed that to Berand and his men last night, the man had readily offered up their steeds for anyone in their party that wished to ride instead of walk—especially their recovering Inquisitor. “My men have offered the services of our steeds until you can be reunited with your own—my stallion, Patrick, he would carry you and any you wish to join you. It would be best not to ride alone given your injury.” Well yes, they’d made it clear Eleanor would have someone they trusted riding with her.

“Thanks—you’re sure? I feel badly, stealing your horse,” Eleanor apologized. “Think nothing of it, my Lady,” the Lord kindly assured reaching for her free hand which she gave him, and then he guided her to him, putting himself between she and Sera who did not look entirely pleased as he led Eleanor to his steed, and then he raised her hand to his lips which was…could be a perfectly benign thing but Cassandra did not care for, “you needn’t steal anything—it is an offer and too, we could share it. If you would allow me
the honor—I would keep you from harm, you could sleep all you like in my hold.” Oh. Ugh.

Eleanor blinked, albeit confused before smiling and saying, “That’s nice of you to offer but you really don’t have to, I appreciate it but I’m probably definitely going to fall asleep and that’d be boring—”

“My Lady, do me a teensy favor and cease referring to yourself with that word. You are far from boring, and I would delight in holding you—” he seemed to catch himself, his words sounding…Cassandra would term it creepy, even to himself. He had the grace to blush and step back from the young woman, “as you’re injured and need rest—it is merely an offer.”

It was altogether awkward and ugh. In righting his blunder he blundered further—she didn’t wish him having his hands on Eleanor any further but releasing her so swiftly and stepping back put the whole of her weight back to being carried by her frame alone, she winced, grasping at her side and she might have doubled over and risked falling, were it not for Cullen who wrapped his arm around her, pulling her close as he stared at Berand with quiet distrust. Well. Not entirely quiet, it was then it clicked for Cullen that perhaps a man outside the Inquisitor’s inner circle—made of those who had proven themselves to be trusted with her—offering to have her sleep and rely on his hold to secure her was a red flag. He assured him, “I am more than capable of seeing to my daughter’s safety,” he assured, looking to Eleanor with warm regard, “My own steed would suffice if you would you care to ride with me, mija?”

“Uh-huh,” Eleanor agreed, looking to Berand, “I hope it’s no offense to you—you’re the best just, I really missed my papi, and I just have people I’m comfortable with helping me because I’m used to them helping me like this, we kind of do it all the time—I take a lot of road naps,” she offered up humorously. “If you were to do it I would just feel badly and uncomfortable about having you do something definitely not in your job description.”

“Of course!” Berand assured he was unoffended, smiling, abashed with his embarrassment, which did seem genuine like he did truly understand it wasn’t an appropriate thing to have offered. “I apologize, I should have realized I would be overstepping—I do not partake of road naps but when I think about it…neither would I be comfortable with any of my men making certain I don’t fall from the saddle as I sleep,” he supposed.

“’s’because we’re right arse- er, childish,” one of his men caught himself as he jested, “we’d either be swapping coin on when he’s gonna fall and let it happen.”

Another snorted, “Make it happen ourselves.”

“Awe,” Eleanor looked up at her father as she sweetly assured him, “if you drop me for coin I will devastate you emotionally—you will never know your grand-nug and your grand-puppy will be trained to poo in your boots.”

“Oh sweetheart I’d never drop you for coin,” Cullen assured. “Unless you asked me to and it was an arrangement to split the winnings.”

“Tio taught me how to fall from horses without getting hurt—once doing that won’t actually kill me, we could rob everyone blind!” Eleanor conspired.

“Yeah babe,” the Iron Bull offered, a few laughs rumbling from his throat, “might not wanna announce your scam plans though.” His advice earned him a show of tongue from Eleanor and- Cullen. The absolute child. He raised a hand to pull down on a lower eyelid as he joined their Inquisitor, sticking out his tongue.

She’d never been one to consider marriage before her time in the Inquisition and now time and time again it worried her beyond belief that it was moments such as these that brought the topic to mind. Not the topic—the feeling. It was an emotion, Cassandra discovered, there was an actual, legitimate emotion labeled I want to marry this man, and she did not appreciate it, and she would be consulting her Healers because surely it was some misfiring due to her potions regimen.

Cassandra joined them, supporting Eleanor momentarily while Cullen got into the saddle of his own horse and then Cassandra helped the girl to get into the saddle before him—she chose to walk alongside the steed while Sera and Marehis took up riding on Ser Patrick
since Lorde Berand was feeling so very generous.

Cullen assisted Eleanor and Sera in fulfilling their promise to the woman they’d discovered perishing of Red Lyrium poisoning—he led his steed to the fallen, hollowed out tree the woman had said her husband would look to when he returned from war, and Eleanor thanked her sister as Sera dropped from her own saddle to dash up and deposit the letter for the widower as instructed.

Eleanor did gingerly unseat herself—looking very much like she regretted it because it only meant she had to reseat herself later—to address Michel, who was awaiting them in Sahrnia to see them off.

But she pushed through, handling it amicably, “You know…we could always use another agent,” Eleanor said, “Someone with your experience would be a really great asset. I mean gosh you could help any of my advisors I think!”

“I would be honored to join the Inquisition,” Michel agreed.

“Great! Hmm…full nepotism, I’m assigning you to Cullen—’cause he’s my favorite and I’m decently sure he’s staring at me and I think he wants you for his team real bad.” Cullen had whispered a rejoicing ‘yes!’ as he pumped his fist when she announced Michel’s assignment, so. She wasn’t wrong. “If Josie and Leliana really wanted you, they’d be here too, staring at me—so that’s on them.” Obviously.

—

There was no vacation to Val Royeaux. Due mostly in part to the fact it anguish Cassandra straight to her core to worry and frighten Eleanor needlessly, and that was the closest they got to convincing the girl to let Cullen handle their dealings at the Shrine of Dumat—after two days of riding with Eleanor alternating between being comatose in the saddle before the Iron Bull who vowed to keep careful guard of she and her nug, and chugging vials of Vehnan root tonic, they concocted a plot to pursued the girl to indulge them. Marehis made complaint of her monthly, that it was lasting longer than what was normal for her, that she was in a great deal of pain from cramping, which was met with Eleanor’s concern and she offered to see the woman safely settled in Val Royeaux, but she really did need to see this investigation through. Their plan B was Cassandra and she failed miserably—she would have been successful if she could have borne the guilt. She attempted to feign complication with her injury and developing some sort of respiratory ailment, because surely the girl wouldn’t leave her if she were ailing from something Eleanor would feel the need to be at hand to help with, but her child looked so stricken at the sound of Cassandra’s very convincing coughs and the woman was immediately remorseful—she could quite literally feel the Maker most High looking down upon her with the threat of damning her for her cruel attempts at deception—and instead of voicing false concern for her own health she offered up a very pathetic sounding, “I apologize, I got pepper caught in the back of my throat.” Which was met by disappointment-mixed understanding from her co-conspirators, the adults at their dinner fire, and Eleanor and Sera’s unified, apparently jinxing, offers of their own waters to the Seeker. Maker help them.

They did manage to make excellent progress forward and Madam de Fer, while she could not dissuade Eleanor from her station, she could sway the girl to end their days of riding early, make camp sooner than what they would normally, to allow the Enchanter the opportunity to work on Eleanor’s hair for several hours in the evenings to prepare it for their time in the desert. It was a style that derived from Rivain—popular among pirates and psychics but it garnered popularity even cross-continent, in Antiva for its style and benefits. It was a great deal of work, took three evenings in camp for Vivienne to straighten sections of Eleanor’s curls she weaved into small, taut, conditioned braids that fell to the middle of her back until she’d a head of braids that Vivienne assured would protect her hair from the heat, her hair would support itself structurally and retain moisture, be defended from wear from their environment, and ultimately protect her hair from what Sera described as poofing all over
the place. Though there was one minor complaint that came from the girl’s new hairstyle,
“Gah!” Dorian yelped their first morning in Orlais’s desert when he was behind Eleanor
in line to have oatmeal slopped into a bowl by the Iron Bull and the girl whipped her hair back
over her shoulders to keep it out of the way, braids smacking the Tevinter man in the face,
“Woman! You’ve weaponized the child’s hair!”
“That’s why it’s called a protective style, Tio!” Eleanor informed him, the man’s
features scrunching as he endeavored not to laugh as the girl whipped her head to and fro to
lightly smack him with her hair as she declared, “It’s protecting me!”
Maker help them all.
The Shrine of Dumat…was no holy place, not as far as Cassandra was concerned. It
was filled with Venatori and Red Templars.
“I know the Inquisition really wanted to bring Mages and Templars together but I’m
like, 95% positive this isn’t what Divine Justinia meant,” Eleanor supposed when she took in
the sight of the enemies awaiting in the Shrine’s courtyard.
“No,” Cassandra assured her, “it is not.”
She’d been quietly resentful, how great their own numbers were because it meant
Berand and his men were still insisting upon tagging along—the Lord had asked Cullen if he
would like their assistance and Cullen…sweet, fool man that he was, thought it was very kind
of the Lord, thanked him and invited him along without hesitation. But she was very grateful
they’d the strength of Thom’s men and Berand’s backing the Inquisition’s troops and scouts
that awaited them at the Shrine. Too…
She did so rarely get to truly fight in genuine battle alongside the man. And it was…
She’d thought the notion of the Iron Bull’s er…appreciation of Dragon fights to be
appalling when she learned what that Qunlat phrase he shouted meant. But Taarsidath-an
halsaam summed the heat of battle with Cullen at her side very nicely. It just would not be
happening at any point in the near future while they traveled with so many in close quarters
with their children—she had every respect for Marehis because if she’d been walking around
with Cullen’s handprint on her backside for Eleanor and Sera to see, she would surely die of
the embarrassment. She nearly did so when they crossed the river that led from Lake
Celestine to the Waking Sea, and Dorian oh so sweetly wondered if Cassandra could do with a
bit of a break—they were passing the loveliest stretch of fishing docks. Cullen? No? Everyone
was fine? Eleanor perceived the man’s pettiness as a subtle way of saying that he needed a
break and the girl had them stop to take on fresh water for their stores, dismounting to limp to
his side and dote on the man because oh, she knew he must be exhausted and uncomfortable
and she was sorry they had to have such hard riding days but she was so very grateful he was
with them. Maker bless her heart. It was a sweet vengeance to Cassandra’s mind, the man was
remorseful, waving off Eleanor’s concern and returning her attentions, kicking the Iron Bull
from his own steed so the Tevinter man could ride while supporting the girl and reciting
something that sounded akin to a children’s bedtime story in her ear.
The Shrine of Dumat was the stuff of nightmares.
They found two mages at the center of Corypheus’s plot—at the center of the Shrine’s
innermost chamber. A Tevinter Magister, Erasthenes, held by some horrible ritual of binding
magic of Corypheus’s designs…a magical barrier that surrounded him, kept him on his knees
on the ground and cracked with waves of electricity that were surely hitting him, torturing
him. He was certain, he said, Corypheus would put Calpernia in something similar—more
powerful—once he’d a vessel, be it Calpernia or Samson. Corypheus apparently enjoyed
having the two at odds, would see which one is truly committed, who can withstand the
vessel’s burden once it was time to at last choose.
This place burned with little fires all throughout , the Red Templars had been actively
attempting to destroy the place as the Inquisition stormed it and the air was full of smoke,
Eleanor’s voice was muffled as she spoke through her scarf, “Can we get him out?” she asked
Vivienne quietly.
“I’m sorry darling. I… I couldn’t even begin to imagine what makes up his prison,” Vivienne apologized.

“Papi?” Eleanor checked with Solas.

“I am sorry, da’vehnan. I know not how Corypheus has constructed this, it goes beyond my understanding of his magic—it isn’t Elvehnan in design, it is something he knows or created himself,” Solas said.

Eleanor nodded, looking to Cullen, “Let Leliana’s people talk with him, see if they can get some answers…and then um,” she cleared her throat, “put him out of his misery. That can’t- that’s no way- he’ll be die in there as it stands. Get your information, make sure he’s ready and then um, he can choose, to be left or to um, end it.”

“It is cruelty, to be compassionate,” Cole murmured the assurance to Eleanor who nodded.

And then… there was Maddox.

Cullen knelt at the man’s side as he… oh Maker, he lay dying, poisoned at his own hand.

“We weren’t going to hurt you,” Eleanor promised, absolutely anguished at the thought fear of the Inquisition’s arrival sent the man to such drastic measures. “We can still help y-”

He cut her off, insisting he didn’t want or need their help. The Tranquil Mage sat and died spilling his Master’s rhetoric.

“I’m sorry papi,” Eleanor consoled Cullen, wrapping her arms around the man’s neck and hugging him tightly.

“Oh mija, it’s alright,” he returned, hand cradling the crown of her head, “We should get you out of here, this place is foul.” He waved his hand to disperse a plume of smoke and for a moment Cassandra thought the man might rise up and begin swinging his arms like a Human windmill to combat the air that posed threat to his child.

“Magic says there are things here that are useful. Maybe there’s something to salvage—we’ll be real quick,” she promised.

Oh, thank the Maker. Eleanor was able to point out a few places to scavenge for information—they found tools and work left behind by Maddox, for the armor he maintained for Samson, something bastardized by Red Lyrium.

“Widdle’ll be able to do something with this,” Sera was certain, “We’ll write her as soon as we settle tonight, yeah Ink?”

They settled. Cullen settled rather hard, they’d gathered around their campfire, setting up camp even before the sun set as it had been… rather the taxing day, and Eleanor’d a great deal of correspondence to handle between her advisors in regard to their discoveries at the Shrine. Her Commander was fast asleep against Cassandra’s shoulder. Cole was sweet enough to appear before them and catch the mug of warm tea that would have poured all over the sleeping man if the Spirit hadn’t taken it in the moment Cullen’s hand laxed.

“He’s okay, he’s just tired,” Cole assured, though his words spilled over further, “He does not like how dangerous this has been, it hurts him how much hurt this has caused. He wishes things could be different for Samson, wishes he’d done more—something—when he was excommunicated. He wishes Ellie hadn’t seen the things we found at the Temple, Corypheus’s binding magic or Maddox dying or making the decision to kill the trapped magister. He misses Skyhold the way you do—wants this to be over so you can go home, sleep and eat breakfast together, train and teach. Just when he thinks his head might crack open from the pain he gets a rush of thrill because you’re back earlier than planned, or Ellie missed him during the day and came to see him, or Sera’s bursting into his office to assure him everything’s okay and Dagna didn’t blow Skyhold off the map but almost, but it’s fine. And it is, because you’re home and you’re safe and he’s never loved anything so much before.”

Cassandra quietly cleared her throat, “Thank you, Cole.”

“You are welcome,” he was serenely offering though his expression… sharpened. Like
the Spirit was angry. She’d not truly seen him as much before—she’d seen the aftermath of his ire, his emptiness or remorse. It was rather the startling change, as his eyes narrowed and he turned his focus on—was he upset with Eleanor? “No. He said he wouldn’t offend but he’s about to.”

Well she supposed his opportunities were few. Eleanor had slept most of their journey, though that hadn’t stopped Berand from seeking her attention when she was awake, striking up polite conversation, offering compliment at every turn, and then there was the one instant where he offered to have her ride along with him while she slept which…wasn’t wholly malevolent but it disturbed Cassandra. Now the Lord and his men were preparing to take their leave—return to Skyhold. The Inquisitor’s party was gathered around the fire, Sera was seated in meditation with Solas. Bull, Dorian, Thom, and Varric were…playing some variation of chess where one drinks after having one of their pieces taken. Vivienne and Marehis were chatting and painting each other’s nails, though their conversations died when the Iron Bull let out a low growl, they turned their attention Lord Berand approaching Eleanor. She’d been in the mix of nail painting—Marehis had just painted her toenails while she handled her letter writing and now the girl was making a careful, barefooted jaunt to Leliana’s birds who had found purchase on a low branch of a dry husk of a tree on the edge of their camp.

And she turned to be greeted by the Lord who held out his arms and Eleanor met him with a hug of farewell but he said…something that prompted Sera to whisper, “Oh shit,” as she was no longer in a meditative state and looked like she was prepared to rise and go to her sister if she’d need. ‘Goodbye’ certainly wouldn’t prompt as much. “What’s happening?” Cassandra questioned quietly.

“He did say he was leaving, that he will miss her. And then he asked Ellie if she would consider letting him court her,” Cole said. Well then. “He’s confused—she’s just asked if he didn’t realize she was already dating Cremisius, that when she called him her boyfriend she didn’t just mean ‘a boy who is a friend’.”

“Son of a bi—” Bull was saying but the Qunari fell silent when there was the resounding crack that echoed through their camp. Of a slap. The sound of which startled Cullen awake in time to see Lord Berand’s dumbstruck expression accompanied by an angry red splotch on his cheek, and then Eleanor was storming back to camp, shaking out her hand. “What just hap—” Cullen stopped, looking outraged, “What did he do? Berand?!?” he called, rising to his feet…hand on the hilt of his sword, oh Maker, “You hold right there!”

Eleanor met her father with an outstretched hand on his forearm to stop him, “Let him go papi. He’s a jerk but I probably should’ve done that since um, you know. I’m Inquisitor. Definitely don’t need my advisory staff beating him up.” and then she sniffled, “The Iron Bull! Go beat him up!”

“Oh it,” the Qunari readily agreed, surging to his feet. “Wait! Don’t—” she sighed, frustrated, “I shouldn’t be giving orders to beat people—just- make sure he and his men are on their way. You can be mean about it—full permission to be as big of a jerk as you want.”

“I’m in,” Varric said, “c’mon Tiny. You’n’me’ll be the Inquisition’s official unwelcoming committee.”

“What happened, mija?” Cullen asked, his hand on Eleanor’s shoulder as he took hold of her unmarked hand to raise it for examination, “Did he hurt you?” he questioned. Well, did she hurt her hand on his face was more accurate but that was rather beside the point. And then his eyes blew wide in his head when that prompted her to cry of all things. Oh, the man looked miserable at her upset, “What can I do?”

Hug her apparently, since the girl wrapped her arms around his waist and buried herself against his chest. “I thought he was my friend!”

“Awe Inky, he’s just got a little crush on you—you can still be friendly,” Sera offered. “But that- he- ugh! It makes me so mad!” she fumed. “I mean if he was really my friend he wouldn’t do something like that. Trying to mess with your friend’s happy relationship isn’t
being a friend! I’m with Cremisius and I love him—and he knows this! He-! He said Cremisius doesn’t cherish me—because if he did he would have dropped everything and come to my side when he heard I was hurt, not sent a ‘plaything to placate me’. Which is crap—Cremisius is where I need him to be! He wanted to come sweeping in but that’s not what I need—I’ve got everyone watching out for me and making sure I recover, what I need from him is for him to do his job and stay on task with the whole ‘saving the world’ thing. He’s done his best to keep updated on me and he took time to make me a get-well present to be here because he can’t be! Berand isn’t some great hero—he didn’t actually do anything to make me better, he didn’t drop anything, he just happened to have orders that let him be in the same area as me to do his job! And then he said I can’t be ‘serious’ about a future with Cremisius, that he can provide me some kind of- of better life or whatever! I already provide myself a good life thank you very much! and I’m very serious about a future with Cremisius!” Eleanor insisted. “We have a puppy daughter—and a son!”

“Ima get him!” Sera said, was she meaning to follow Berand for vengeance? Oh, no. She was scrambling up to dash into the tent.

“I’m sorry sweetheart,” Cullen soothed.

“It’s okay, it’s not your fault he’s a jerk! Ugh! I wasn’t- gosh I hate that- did I do something? Oh Maker, if I did something I shouldn’t’ve to make him think-“

“You didn’t do anything,” Cole assured. “You treated him as a friend and his mind made it more. That isn’t your fault. It isn’t even his entirely, he should know better but he does not. Now he does.”

Eleanor nodded, sniffling before she declared, “Mamis, my heart is sad! I wanna lay in your laps! Tia! Say fancy mean things that make me laugh!”

Cassandra moved to be seated at Marehis’s side, accepting the unspoken offer from the woman shaking a bottle of dark, sparkly blue nail polish in the Seeker’s direction, while Vivienne readily agreed,

“With pleasure darling,” she said as Eleanor came and laid across Cassandra and Marehis’s laps, her head rested on Marehis and Vivienne’s thighs and the Enchanter took up making play with her braids. “Where shall I start? Did you see the Marquis Manon when we were at lunch in Val Royeaux? He was the gentleman with the large crimson plume in his hat? I could go on about his offenses to sense and fashion for hours.”

She did just that. Madam Vivienne de Fer spent the next hour solidly roasting the Marquis with flowery language that impressed and delighted Eleanor and Sera likewise once the Elf girl returned, armed with Cremisius’s plushy nug, depositing it in Eleanor’s hold while Sera sat before the girl, enjoying Vivienne’s commentary, playing with Eleanor’s unmarked fingers, alternating between twining fingers and tickling her palm, occasionally calling magic into her hand to commune with Eleanor’s.

“Do you think Cremisius will be mad at me?” Eleanor timidly wondered.

“…Imekari, c’mon,” the Iron Bull groaned, “Don’t think like that babe—you didn’t treat that guy any different than you would any other friend. Krem’s not gonna think you were leading him on, and he’s sure as hell not gonna have a problem with how you handled it.”

Sera snorted, “Handled,” she squeezed Eleanor’s unmarked hand, “you slapped the crap out of him!”

“He insulted Cremisius! And I dunno, I guess I panicked—I thought I could trust him. But what if he- what if he’s never been my friend?”

“He was sorry by the time he left,” Cole said, sounding almost perplexed. “...He was hurting, this whole time. I didn’t realize until it was happening, but what I’ve been hearing from him, his thoughts of pursuing you...he just misses Velania. His family still wants him to marry, and you are so kind to him, have been such a good friend you soothes his aches and that makes him think maybe you can heal them. He didn’t realize in confessing his attraction to you he’d foil his chances at you ever finding attraction in him. It isn’t kind or good to try and take someone’s happiness away from them, and that is what he has tried to do, he sees
Krem’s happiness and wants it for himself—doesn’t realize it isn’t Ellie that is the key to that, it’s just being with someone you love and loves you in return. It feels like meanness and many times it can be—but it was ultimately something from his hurts. And I...I did not try to help him,” the boy lamented. “I was so upset when I heard his thoughts. He had mean ones about Krem, he’s had them since he got here, that he is better than him, that he can give Ellie more—deserves her more. But thoughts like that only come from his hurts, if I’d talked to him, helped him through them, he would realize they were thoughts of jealousy of Krem and not love of Ellie. I didn’t even try because his thoughts made me angry at him! Hurt my feelings because Krem and Ellie are my friends—I didn’t realize they were hurts until they came to the surface and he did something outward with them because I let myself be upset.”

“Well it makes me mad too,” Sera said, “Cuddly, that’s just being a person—people think or say shite things about our friends and it pisses us off, we got loyalty to friends, it don’t exactly put us in the generous mood when people wanna hurt them. I’ve decked the guy myself if I heard him say something mean about Krem—he didn’t say anything but he thought it, and that’s ‘saying’ as far as you go.”

“But I’m not a person—I’m a Spirit and I ignored that.”

“You haven’t always been a Spirit Cole,” Eleanor said, “and I mean...technically you didn’t start out that way, right? You were Elvehnan. Then Solas made the Veil and when you died, you became a Spirit of Compassion. Now you live in Cole and that...well that’s like both things in one, you know? I’m sorry you’re disappointed in yourself, but it’s understandable—sometimes being a person outdoes being a spirit. I mean it works the other way more often, right? You always ignore your person-ness to handle Spirit business. With Berand, you took it personally, so it was the other way around.”

“Awe Cuddly—don’t be upset! Come get hugs!” Sera invited the boy, patting her thighs and the Spirit appeared in her lap, letting the Elf girl hold him tightly, and Eleanor sweetly offered him her nug to hold. The boy let out a happy hum as he hugged the plush thing to his chest, cheerily informing them it was indeed full of the Lieutenant’s love.

“No more new recruits to the Inquisition. I have Michel—that’s the cut off,” Cullen decided that night when he and Cassandra settled in a cot while Eleanor and Sera were off bathing, “and they aren’t allowed to talk to my children—none of them. Male, female, non-binary—no one is permitted near them save for our inner circle!”

“You are very excited to have Michel in your camp,” Cassandra teased as she settled comfortably against his chest.

“He was Empress Celene’s Champion! He bested Gaspard in single combat!* He held the line at the battle of—” he caught himself, wondering, “you’re going to make fun of me if I start raving about his resume aren’t you?”

“I am already making fun of you so do please, continue,” Cassandra invited.

“Mean, Lady Seeker—very mean,” Cullen accused even as he pressed a kiss to her lips.

“It is my most appealing quality.”

“Ahh, and here I thought your heart was what most appealed,” Cullen said, fingers lazily trailing a path up and down Cassandra’s side, “your love, and bravery, and compassion.”

“I assure you, you are mistaken.”

“Oh I’m certain I make mistakes on the daily basis, but of you? I’m absolutely correct, without doubt.”

“Should I leave so you two can practice making Tumbles a sibling or can I call it a night?” Varric’s voice wondered. Ahh, the man had shaved, cleansed himself and was standing in the tent entrance prepared for bed.

Cullen’s eyes twinkled with amusement, and he hid his smile against her hair as he assured, “I don’t mind if he watches, do you?”

“Oh not at all—please Varric, do stay,” Cassandra wryly invited, “Perhaps you’ll find inspiration for your next work.”
“This is personally my favorite position, but it is so much nicer when we’ve a few more people involved,” Cullen informed the Dwarf who was staring at them as if he wasn’t certain how serious they were or what was happening and he was amazed and horrified at the whole affair.

Eleanor and Sera could be heard chatting, giggling as they approached and entered the tent before seemingly racing each other to the cots to climb in and join Cassandra and Cullen, laughter bubbling in the Commander’s chest as Varric exhaled the breath he’d been holding, shaking his head as he went to his own cot,

“You almost had me Curly, shit.”

The following evening was their last before reaching the Western Approach and Cassandra steeled herself to do what needed to be done. While the others gathered to prepare dinner, she approached Eleanor, the girl readily joining her when she requested she walk with her, slipping her hand into Cassandra’s the girl swung their arms a bit as they walked the sandy path along the plateau they’d set camp beside to protect their tents from the fierce winds in these parts.

“What’s up mami?”

This time the question was met with Cassandra debriefing her on her discoveries in the Seeker’s tome—the truth of the origins of Tranquility.

“What do you want to do with this?” Eleanor wondered.

“I…am not sure. It is…I don’t think Tranquility entirely unneeded, but I know well it has been doled out in abuse.”

Eleanor nodded. “I know it’s super secret Seeker stuff,” she startled a bit, giggling, “that’d be a fun tongue twister I think? ‘Super secret Seeker stuff’—all future initiates should have to train to say that five times fast!” she blushed, “Sorry—I know this is serious, honest.”

Cassandra smiled gently, offering, “Serious super secret Seeker stuff,” oh goodness, it was a bit challenging to say.

Her efforts got a smile from the girl as she wrapped an arm around Cassandra’s middle, the Seeker laying an arm around her shoulders. “Yeah, Um, what I was getting at is—I know it’s sensitive information, you’re only sharing with me because I’m Inquisitor. That doesn’t necessarily mean…I’m boss of the Inquisition but you’re boss of the Seekers. I trust you and your judgement—I’m gonna work with you to do this however you feel is best for the reputation of the Order while doing what’s right by the entirety of the Chantry in the future.”

“Thank you, Eleanor, I do appreciate that.” Cassandra assured. “But I started this conversation to garner your opinion on the matter—it is a lot to take in, I understand if you need time to formulate a proper response.”

Eleanor nodded. “I mean I’ll definitely think about it, but at first blush?…brush? Blush,” she decided more certainly, though, “Am I saying that right? Blah. I think Tranquility should be reserved for the previous Inquisitor’s original intent—he gave this information to the Circles as an alternative for execution, a punishment for Mages you would otherwise have to kill. But with what we’re learning about Spirit purification, I think this goes beyond that even,” she said, “I mean…gosh, I know it takes a lot of work, it’s so amazing that Seekers have been able to do that—I’m so proud of you mami,” she assured, “But that’s to make certain, after all your hard work training to become a Seeker, you don’t fail the purity test. Seekers found impure can’t have a Spirit of Faith called to them. So…emptying yourself out of desires, you fast, you’re not allowed outside contact—you’re isolated for an entire year, made numb to daily aches and strife’s of dealing with people or conflicts or emotions. It’s just you, focusing on your faith in the Maker. By the end of it? You really had to have messed up if you’ve been desensitized to the world and Faith still won’t come to you. It’s hard, but achievable. And Tranquility being reversible…I mean it could be a final shot at reform—not always a permanent punishment. If a Mage abuses their abilities so bad there’s almost no choice left but execution, yeah, permanent Tranquility. But maybe create a system of reform for them—where they could be instilled to make better life choices with the promise of a
chance at getting their magic returned to them if they sincerely change. And I mean they’d have to for it to work—calling a Spirit of Faith and having them touch your mind, breaking Tranquility only happens if you’re pure. If somehow they manage to still be an untrustworthy asshole after that? I dunno, I don’t know if they can be made Tranquil again.”

…well. “Tranquility is caused by branding a mind with Lyrium—a type of injury. You’ve still been able to maintain injury of every sort.” That earned her a slightly confused look from the girl. “That is another reason I wish to discuss this. We may have already implemented a practice that encourages mages to already do this. Because you have already done as much yourself, we’re certain,” Cassandra said. She was far more certain of it now, she’d days to consider it, had pulled Cullen aside to discuss the matter and he concurred. It had been rather the rushed vigil but Eleanor had been isolated the whole of a day, starved, made to thirst, before being put into a situation where her resolve was to put her full focus into her faith and then a Spirit of Faith came and made her whole. She talked the girl through Vivienne’s deductions on the matter. “Demons have made contact with you but you’ve always found it in yourself to resist them having power, they’ve tried to control you.” While her endeavors to always decline demon influence were commendable, Cassandra knew well there were demons powerful enough to take what they wanted by force, without setting a bargain with the person they were assuming control over.

“I mean Envy got in me pretty good though,” Eleanor offered argument. “Lord Seeker exposed his mind willingly to the demon of Envy that masqueraded as him—that demon did the same to your mind by force. In fact the thing’s plot boiled down to handling you in the same way he did the Lord Seeker who we know is immune to possession. Envy was to know you, and leave your body as sacrifice to Corypheus while it continued on pretending to be you.”

Eleanor took a moment to consider that. “Annd I’ve definitely been able to still get hurt—reinjured in ways I was injured before Faith saved me. So…”

“Tranquility may well be something that can be reintituted if we experienced backslide in someone broken of it,” Cassandra voiced the conclusion. They could not be entirely certain but…if someone required Tranquility eternal and it could not be plied…execution was always a…viable option.

“…what about people who chose Tranquility?” Eleanor wondered, “We have people in the Inquisition who chose Tranquility for fear of demon possession. If making them not-Tranquil anymore would keep them from ever being possessed…?”

“They may wish to have a connection with their magic and emotions once more, yes,” Cassandra agreed, “Yes, I’m not certain…when we should begin making moves to set them to rights but I do understand your wish to offer them the chance of rectifying their situation. Tranquility has a great many drawbacks, was always meant to be a final punishment not an optional purgatory. We will have a discussion about it back in Skyhold, with the whole of your advisors once we’ve adequate time to plan and consider.”

Eleanor nodded, hand wrenching at the back of her neck. “Okay, yeah. That sounds good—we’ll figure it out. Gosh, I’m really glad there’s a solution…”

“But it is hard to sit on that information, I understand,” Cassandra assured, resting her hands on the girl’s shoulders to massage at them, “We will handle this.”

“It’s kind of scary that choices the former Inquisitor made had such a drastic affect they never wanted on the world.”

“He did his best—followed his convictions and did what he thought was right. That is all you can do Eleanor, it is an enormous responsibility. All you can do is follow his example—you can’t know every instance this information might be used in, I’m certain that unfortunately there are many ways it can be used for abuse, you are not responsible for that. Be certain in your decisions, make sure they are convictions you can stand with in confidence, and you will have nothing to regret.”

The girl relaxed under her hands, nodding, “Thanks mami.” Then, “Is this something
we should bring up to Sera? If she could be possession proof, I would want that for her.”

“I’m…uncertain. I would want her to have such protection, of course, but I would not wish to pressure her insofar as…” Cassandra sighed, “it takes a full devotion to the Maker—I’ve no doubt Sera believes there is a Maker, but faith can be a fragile thing.” There was something in her that felt she would be more disappointed if Sera attempted and failed than Sera would be, it would hurt her to see the girl struggle, and the last thing she wanted was to attempt something that might ultimately discourage Sera. “It may be something she encounters on her own, in her own time, too I don’t wish to involve her in the Seeker’s business, but…if you were so inclined, you could speak to her of yourself.”

“Like…hey Sera I think I can’t be possessed?”

Something like that. “It’s something Vivienne and I have discussed—that you were not possessed even in the middle of Red Lyrium infested countryside, injected with the stuff, so much of your blood shed. Madam de Fer, Solas, Dorian—they’ve all reported a great deal of demon activity in Sahrnia during Ishmael’s reign—if you’d been open to possession, he surely would have taken you. Cole is the one who initially affirmed with me that Faith touching your mind made you as such when I was worrying your state might leave you with such a fate—perhaps he could be of assistance in broaching the subject with Sera.”

Eleanor nodded, as she parcelled through that, mulling over just how to bring up the topic with Sera. “Kay, I’ll do my best…” she looked albeit conflicted, tentatively asking, “would you be really mad if I talked this over with people I trust? Just like…philosophical hypotheticals? Not spilling Seeker secrets about Tranquility, just asking papi about Spirits of Faith, expressing curiosity from my experience and stuff.”

“You wish to discuss this with Solas?” Cassandra confirmed.

“Just how Spirit stuff works,” she quickly assured, “Cole too, maybe? Only if that’s okay with you. I absolutely promise I won’t mention Seekers or anything. I mean I’m sure Cole already knows?” she supposed albeit uncertainly.

“He has assured me of his confidence.”

Eleanor nodded, “Good. I just have ideas and questions they’d probably be able to help me with to figure out. But only if you’re absolutely fine with it, I understand if you don’t want to risk me saying something I shouldn’t.”

Cassandra raised a hand to tuck a few braids behind the girl’s ear, “My trust in you is absolute sweet girl,” she assured. “Eleanor…I do hope you know just how very proud I am of your work as Inquisitor, of all you have done. Of all I’m certain you will do.”

The girl beamed, a happy little hum in her throat before she offered an abashed,

“Thanks!” and decided, “No matter what comes of my time as Inquisitor, if my decisions damn us hundreds of years from now, at least let the history books record that I tried my best and my mami was proud of me!”

Cassandra smiled, her arm around Eleanor’s shoulders, pulling the girl to her side as they made to return to their camp. “Well, they can certainly quote me on that.”

Cullen usually didn’t have the privilege to join his loved ones in the field. Doing so now was a relief of sorts—wonderful to know with absolute certainty that at the end of the day Cassandra, Ellie, Sera—they were safe and sound and just in reach. It was better than the short missives that assured him of that on paper—some nights he had to make the trek up to Leliana’s in order to check in with her and see if she received reports from the field. He’d asked if she could trouble one of her scouts—she often did so to bring him pertinent updates on work his agents were performing—to bring him word, verification that Marehis or Cassandra had confirmed their status with the Spymaster before turning in for the evening.

“Oh Commander, I think not,” the Spymaster amusely declined, the barest smile on her lips as her eyes seemed to sparkle from her cheer alone, “I quite enjoy reminding you that my tower rises higher than yours.”
In truth he suspected it was concern the woman worked from. On days he didn’t receive word from the Inquisitor or her party, they were likewise days he didn’t write to Cassandra—he let her set the tone when she was in the field, if she wrote him that meant she was in a space she could take time to receive a reply. So, he supposed his ability to carry himself through Skyhold and up the several flights of stairs to her area of operations, it proved something of his current health and gave the Spymaster the opportunity to lay eyes on him herself to verify he was well. There was one such evening…he could have made it, just- he’d been waiting for word from Ellie—she’d written of their progress in Emprise du Lion, that they were going to ‘kick Rift butt!’ the following day, and that day brought no word from the field—he’d been worried, had found it rather hard to focus on his work; Rifts were dangerous, Cassandra was only recovering from injury, Marehis, Maker bless the poor woman was in the coldest place they’d yet to send them while mother nature charged her monthly bill, and Sera and Ellie had tattled on one another, informing him of their colds. He’d had drills and paperwork, a migraine that…temporarily blinded him, but it was fine, mostly. He’d rested his head on his desk and the next thing he knew, the back of someone’s hand on his…forehead, and he opened his eyes to his sight returned and Leliana was in his office for a change, hurriedly hiding her hand behind her back as she seemed embarrassed to be caught showing a bit of concern. “The Rifts are sealed, and they’ve laid claim to territory the Red Templars were holding at the Tower of Bone. Marehis reports that they are planning to take Sahrnia Quarry tonight.” And that had left him wide awake. Thankfully he’d had company. Lieutenant Aclassi had knocked on his office door, and he wasn’t sure how he felt about the Maker blessing the young man pursuing his mija with such a charming smile, “Hey Commander—fancy a round of drinks?” “A few rounds perhaps.” He’d been so appreciative for the offer of company he didn’t think about the implications of going to the Tavern until they were nearing it—the Herald’s Rest was restless in the night, full of loud voices and music. But they walked directly past the building and up the stairs that led to Tonio Aclassi’s workshop. The lamp lights had been blessedly low and their company kind and quiet. The elder Aclassi was there, offered Cullen a comfortable chair and Krem poured them all glasses of bourbon that…the Iron Bull might notice the absence of upon his return to Skyhold—Cullen recognized it as the kind the Qunari enjoyed when he wasn’t drinking something gastly that put real fear in Cullen for the day Ellie may be capable of imbibing alcohol. But the bourbon was excellent, smooth and helped take the edge off of his aches and the nervous worry while they awaited word from Sahrnia, talking amongst themselves—how business was going for Tonio, Cullen and Krem going back and forth on their next moves, their forces would be moving out once the Herald was headed for the Western approach, to be ready and waiting if they’d need against Corypheus’s forces there—if the whole of the Wardens had been corrupted save for Stroud? They could be in for a battle of epic proportions. The Chargers were not exactly an army but they often worked like one—the Lieutenant was an excellent sounding board for Cullen, listening and offering encouragement as they discussed moving on the corrupted Wardens, and Tonio politely listened, he’d no combat experience to speak of but he did offer some appreciated advice about the unbearable heat—there was silken emerald green fabric pooling on his worktable and Cullen felt it safe to assume was a project for Ellie’s dessert excursions. “Is your drink not sitting with you, mimo?” Tonio worried when the boy had fallen silent for quite some time. He startled a bit when his father rested a hand on his shoulder, “Nah, I’m fine. Just…dunno. Worried. Something doesn’t feel right.” He almost wondered if perhaps the young man was psychic. Not even an hour later did word come from Sera to the two of them—the Lieutenant had stood straight up from his chair so quickly it clattered to the floor, and it almost looked like he was leaving but he
merely strode the length of his father’s workshop and back, pacing as he read, “Fuck fuck fuck” falling from his lips. Cullen seconded that. On the back of letters in Samson’s hand confirming Maddox of all people was in his employ, further cryptic mention of someone becoming a ‘vessel’ of some sort, Samson’s call against the Inquisitor—that his people saw her journeying to Sahnia, to take vengeance for their losses at Therinfal Redoubt—there was a letter in Sera’s hand that everyone was alright, ‘Inky’ was out like a light so that was why she was sending things on in her stead.

Her letter to Krem was more illuminating—he wasn’t ‘fuck’ing because of what had been learned at the Quarry, in fact he’d not those particular details from the girl, she’d written him based on the promise she would send him word immediately if anything of note happened to Ellie. Oh, it had been…he was incredibly proud of the young man for launching into how best to be of help instead of losing his collective shit like…Cullen basically did. His hand still ached from where he’d struck the wall in anger because Samson wasn’t in reach to pummel senseless. Maker. Krem had caught his wrist in hand before he could go for a second swing which was wise, and pulled him into a hug that was mildly embarrassing and much appreciated. The Tevinter man offered sense and compassion, “Leliana’s been gathering her people that she wants on the ground at the Shrine of Dumat, you do the same now, yeah? You go—do what you need to do. You’ve trained everyone well, the Chargers are always at the Inquisition’s disposal, you need help just say the word. El’s gonna be okay, Sera wouldn’t say so unless she really believed it.”

Tonio Aclassi had taken up Sera’s letter to Krem and came to lay hands on Cullen and Krem’s shoulders, the kindly man offering up a moment of prayer on Ellie’s behalf—thanking the Maker for her life, asking that He continue to watch over her, guide the hands of her Healers and those who cared for her as she recovered.

Never in the years following his time in the Circle Tower had he found himself so incredibly relieved to be in such cramped quarters. After a week of nothing but tension and reports of his loved ones being injured and ill, it was blessing to wake up and be able to feel the certainty of Cassandra’s breathing, her breath against chest, the rise and fall could be felt under his hand on her back, hear Sera snoring against his ear, Ellie’s Marked hand in his—she was so exhausted in those first few days she took hold of his hand, twining their fingers so it was less likely for them to lose hold in the night, and was practically asleep before she was even horizontal—so it took a few evenings for him to wonder at why,

“Oh!” Ellie chirped, green eyes alight as she smiled, “I didn’t say anything huh? Whooops! Um…” she worried at her lip, nose scrunching a bit as she met the Iron Bull’s eyes as he passed their cots and the Qunari offered a soft ‘night Imekari’, and she spoke softly to Cullen, guarding her words in case it might embarrass him but, “I know sometimes small spaces can be scary—if that happens, squeeze my hand, okay papi? You can always wake me up if you need me!”

He had done so, unintentionally…well, more so it was just he woke, heart hammering in his chest from a nightmare, he’d only just stopped himself from crying out, and his hand had flexed around Ellie’s and the girl had stirred, shaking herself awake and squeezing his hand before releasing her hold and rolling off of Sera and…scrunch-scooting on her belly, backwards off of the cot. Sera stirred at the absence of her sister, murmuring something about not going to the bathroom alone and Ellie whispered, “I’m getting something to drink with papi, wanna come?”

Cassandra had stirred but fell back asleep when he assured her he was well, and Sera climbed out of bed, taking hold of his left hand, Ellie his right, and they went out to take in some of the cooler air the dessert had to offer without sunlight blaring down on them, though the light of the moon, the stars was rather impressive—enough to see by while he took a few bracing breaths of cool air. Something to drink was apparently…he almost thought it was wine and he’d been alarmed when Ellie poured the three of them glasses and raised hers to her
lips but it was merely a very sweet grape juice that went down without the burn of alcohol but the
barest burn of acidity that felt grounding, like something real that jarred him a bit into the
present—he wasn’t trapped in a demon’s realm of torture, he was in the midst of a desert with
his daughters partaking of…grape juice that turned into a midnight snack of juice and sweet,
crunchy shortbread, his girls chatting about Sera's time in the Fade which was, apparently…
pleasant. He was glad they were able to do so pleasantly, that Solas…for all the harm he’d
done, had imbued the girls with the ability to master their environment in the Fade more so
than Mages were usually capable of, of course Mages did not normally have the assistance
and teachings of the creator of the Fade, so.

“You’re okay, yeah da?” Sera wondered, “You have a nightmare? Or was the tent too
crowdy?”

“A bit of a nightmare I suppose—I don’t rightly recall now.”

“You sure papi?” Ellie pressed with care, "I get not wanting to talk about stuff but it
can really help—mami always lets me talk about things that scare me and it always makes me
feel better about them, sometimes it makes them seem less scary and sometimes it just helps
making me feel like if whatever scared me did happen, I could handle it.”

…if Samson and his Red Templars murdered these girls and the woman he loved
before his very eyes while he could do nothing but sit there and watch, there was precious
little handling it. There would only be vengeance and hopefully some swift, merciful death.
And voicing the scenario would not make it feel less scary, he didn’t think, despite his mija’s
continuous wisdom—he had every faith she would be capable of reforming their broken
Chantry system but in this regard he would defer to his own sense of peace in not horrifying
his girls with tale of his nightmares and offering them a smile and,

“We led our soldiers into battle against the Wardens and I had not a stitch of armor or
clothing on my person.”

The girls’ mouths dropped open, eyes widening as Sera reared back in her seat,
cackling into the sky while Ellie breathed in gasp of surprise, “Really, papi? Totally
starkers?!”

“As the day I was born.”

“I think that’s a sound battle tactic!” Ellie decided, “I mean we had to fight men in
their underpants back when we met sissy—did we tell you about that?” Cassandra had, yes, at
the time she’d been rather annoyed, only to be annoyed further by Cullen’s outright
amusement at the tale, “I didn’t want to go anywhere near them! So maybe if we all just show
up—everyone in our army—butt naked, the Wardens’ll be too uncomfortable or shocked to
fight us and we can just like…dunno. Talk it out? Hey—Corypheus is tricking you! Look at
all these sexy people, would we lie to you? No—lying isn’t sexy!”

“You! That’ll show’em!” Sera encouraged, “Cory-face is an ugly git—we’ll just go
around, the Sexquisition and seduce his allies to our side!”

Oh Maker, he’d meant to make the girls laugh and they more than returned the favor,
Cullen almost felt badly, worried their shared levity might make their camp but no one came
to join them, and he was selfishly glad of it—it was so rare, the opportunity to sit and make
fun with Sera and Ellie, he enjoyed sharing a midnight snack and silliness before returning to
sleep sweeter dreams, Cassandra resuming her place against his chest, pressing a kiss to his
collarbone as she whispered a wish for his pleasant rest. Oh, he wished her the same. Maker
he- he did not mind at all, nights his mind made him suffer in this way if it meant being
cheered by those he loved. And it was…it was horrible but relieving when they’d such
struggles themselves—horrible in that it was heartbreaking when it happened, he felt his heart
seize when he woke to tears on his chest, Cassandra trying to quiet a anguished cry she had to
catch in her throat as she trembled, but it was the purest relief that his hand carding through
her hair as he held her more tightly had her relaxing against him, catching her breath as she
nestled against his chest. “Shhh, ciela? You're safe.”

She took a deep breath, blindly reaching out to her side to take a fistful of Eleanor’s
sleep shirt, before she rubbed circles on the girl’s back until she heard a soft, sleepy, “Mami?” Cassandra sniffled, clearing her throat quietly, endeavoring to sound like she wasn’t crying, “I was just checking on you, Eleanor.”

“I’m okay, you okay?”

“Yes—I apologize for waking you, sweetheart.”

“Mmm, not as sorry as papi’s ribs.” His…ribs? Was she planning on striking violence against him in retribution for disturbing her sleep? He hadn’t woken her! He had been forewarned of Ellie’s…incompatibility to mornings, and he’d always been armed with breakfast when they endured them together in Skyhold, perhaps his mija was a hellion if waken from her slumber too soon—ah. No. She shifted to join her mother in laying almost directly on top of him, against his side partially laying on his chest as she snuggled against Cassandra, pressing a kiss to her cheek before breathing a sleepy sigh, “Have sweet dreams mami.”

“Sandra’s sad?” Sera wondered, half asleep. The woman opened her mouth but, “Mmhm,” Ellie confirmed.

“Kay, snugglin’,” Sera announced, sitting up and rolling onto her knees to crawl down the cot and then over their legs to get to Cullen’s other side. Well, Cassandra’s, to engage in an all-around, thorough, snugglin’.

The Maker had blessed him beyond measure when He made woman kind. He’d an appreciation for his own mother of course, his sisters, but his life as it stood now felt like it was made of these women who held the whole of his heart in their hands and he honestly was uncertain just what he’d been on about before. How exactly had he pushed through the days his body was wracked with addiction, withdrawal and regret and ghosts of demon torture making his every moment torment? He would never be grateful enough that he had survived those times—he’d not known then, in the wake of Kirkwall’s fall, where his life would take him. He hadn’t expected the Inquisition, and he’d certainly never dreamed it would result in his newfound family.

The matriarchs of which, were behaving very strangely. Marehis was…cagey, as they traveled, and…tetchy? She was never brusk or rude with the girls or any of the adults save Solas—which was her right. But then rudeness would swing right around into…shyness. It took several instances of her cutting the man off mid-speech to snipe at him, and sending veiled threats the Elf man’s way that Cullen recognized it for…well. Mia had been like that—combative in the face of a crush she was embarrassed about. There was a…homely boy that lived a stone’s throw away from their childhood home who had open affection for her, and he was very sweet but children can be menaces—not many were kindly to him, certainly not Mia, not openly. Not until she got to a mindset where she didn’t much care what their peers thought, ceased worrying they might judge her and she gave up the pretense—starting with an apology to the boy and ending…well…

He was Cullen’s brother in law now. So. Maker help Marehis with whatever she was dealing with, with Solas.

As for the other woman heading their family unit…Cassandra was being…extremely cautious and contrite. It was not outright obvious in the first few days—she wasn’t acting entirely out of the ordinary, but it eventually became clear that every moment they were in the camp the woman was diligent to be at Ellie’s side, always at arms length where she could see if the girl wanted for anything and was ready to eagerly provide—was she hungry? Thirsty? In pain?—the moment she saw anything even the slightest bit amiss she was immediate to offer food or potion or ointment. Sera was insistent on helping Ellie with changing bandaging and applying ointment to her injury every evening, and Cassandra always made a point of seating herself behind the girl—sitting on Ellie’s bedroll and supporting her against her chest, holding Ellie as Sera worked, Cassandra’s cheek pressed against the silken scarf wrapped around Ellie’s head—Madam de Fer was insistent she keep the practice and make it a more solid habit while her hair was braided because she did not take such diligent care with her edges to have them
abused by a substandard pillowcase. Ahh but the point was Cassandra was...cowering in a way, eyes clenched shut as she buried her face against Ellie’s scarf and held the girl as tightly as she dared. It wasn’t a painful process—Ellie would chat with her sister, giggling at the first brush of cold contact from Sera’s ointment coated fingers and chat with her sister, unbothered by the process that clearly bothered Cassandra. The moment Sera was through Cassandra was immediate to ask if Ellie was alright—did she wish for something warm to drink? Or a snack? Cassandra could read to her if she’d like? It took several evenings of her mother offering her sugary foodstuff before bed that Ellie realized the woman was behaving rather uncharacteristically—being overly...apologetic, everything came off like an act of penance.

Ellie sighed with discontent and was met with, “Does it hurt you, Eleanor, to sleep in a bedroll?” Cassandra fretted their second night after the Shrine of Dumat. “We could set up a cot or- or stack bedding. You could use my pillow to cushion your hip?”

Ellie scooted from Cassandra’s lap before turning about and climbing back to sit with her knees on Cassandra’s thighs as she wrapped her arms around the woman’s neck, “Have I told you I love you a lot today? I love you a lot.”

Well, her pallor was overcorrected as blood rushed right back to her face, “I am aware-”

“But I will fight you if you keep beating yourself up over saving me. I’ll fight you and I will win,” Ellie assured.

…oh. Maker. Cullen had- he’d seen Cassandra’s behavior but he thought it was because- well Ellie was still recovering, even Cullen worried over her every time she flinched when something in her smarted, when she looked so very exhausted as they made camp for the evening at the end of the day. He thought the woman was merely worried, he hadn’t realized the woman was still struggling with her guilt but perhaps she didn’t realize it herself —she looked utterly confused in the moment before realization dawned in her features and she sighed, hugging the girl back as she questioned,

“Oh you’re certain? Well, you’ve the penchant for argument.”
“I don’t mean arguing mami. I mean brawling you in the middle of camp.”
“With fists?”
“Big time. Which is why I win. I think I can handle slapping you to teach you a lesson,” Ellie supposed.

“You believe you could bring yourself victory in single slap?” Cassandra wondered.
“Oh huh,” Ellie nodded, “Wanna know why?” she asked, pulling back to look the woman in the eye, “because I know you would never actually hurt me, not unless you needed to. So, a no-stakes brawl just to prove a point? You’re toast.”

Staring into the girl’s eyes as she smiled up at the woman Cullen was certain the woman already was ‘toast’, she had that look on her face—it almost looked strained, but Cullen knew it to be an indication of quiet vulnerability in the woman who abhorred being vulnerable in front of…any audience, but especially one as large as what they currently entertained with a tent full of the Inquisitor’s party gathered in their nightly sleepover. But she breathed a sigh and raised a hand to cup the girl’s cheek as she rested her forehead against Ellie’s and said, “Thank you, sweet girl.”

He enjoyed traveling this time around—it was much more pleasant than their march through the snowy mountains to Skyhold. Cassandra was still…it was not their first day riding this way but she still sat in the saddle before him, cheeks pink—from the sun, she insisted, even as Madam de Fer provided them all with the most wonderful lotion that protected their skin from sunburn. Sera and Ellie were on Russel, riding alongside them, Sera’s arms wrapped high around Ellie’s middle as she hummed into the girl’s ear as she dozed. Cullen was half inclined to join the Human girl in slumber—word from Dagna came…good golly gosh Commander! It’s a shame we couldn’t get Maddox’s mind on our side, everything you recovered from his lab is just Wowza. Just leave it to me, you and the Inquisitor come swing by the Forge whenever you get back and I’ll have a present for you! Here’s a hint: it’ll help
our little cutie kick Samson’s butt!—which was comfort enough that he was able to put
Samson from his mind for now, he was focused on the task at hand, surrounded by his loved
ones, and assured of their safety, he’d a great deal of peace of mind for the first time in quite a
while, and he found that blessed him further still—it was the first day in months he didn’t
wake up with so much as a headache. Somehow that made him feel exhausted—a satisfied
sort of tired but still, tired.

Cassandra let out a bit of surprised laughter as he leaned against her, resting his head
on her shoulder, “May I help you, Commander?”

“You already are, Lady Seeker.”

She huffed at that before offering quiet concern, “Are you well?”

“Certainly, just following my Inquisitor’s example,” Cullen assured.

“Imekari’s out again?” the Iron Bull’s voice rumbled as the Qunari turned about as
much as he could without unseating Dorian to look over his shoulder on his seeing side, trying
to put their younger travelers in view, Sera nodded. “Damn.”

“Baby girl got a chunk taken out of her—she’s healed well,” Cyril voiced his
assurance. “Perks of potion mean our injuries heal faster—drawbacks are that draws on a lot
of energy, sometimes we gotta catch up.”

“Tumbles should rest while she can,” Varric said, “got a lot of shit done out here but
the Western Approach isn’t exactly a picnic,” he sighed, wondering, “Think you can talk her
out of some more Rift sealing, Curly?”

Oh, it had been the sweetest sort of victory when he was able to talk her through
abandoning her efforts in Empris du Lion. If she’d attempted to seal a Rift then? He had a pit
in his stomach as they neared the Western Approach, anxious for her first attempts since her

Sera’s humming came to a halt and she was very quiet for a moment before voicing,
“Inky’s made her choices clear, ‘bout Rift Sealin’. Trying to talk her out of it kind of…looks
like not respecting her decision, like you think she can’t think for herself. I don’t like her
hardass friggin principle about sealing all the Rifts she can, but it’s hers, that’s her choice
so…I gotta deal with it. If she doesn’t feel like she can take on a Rift—she’ll be the first to let
us know, you know? She’s…you lot made her Inquisitor. So now you gotta act like it. We’re
all…family-y, but whether we’re in the field or back in Skyhold location don’t matter none,
it’s purpose—where she’s workin’ as Inquisitor, says things from that position? You lot ain’t
her mami’s and papi’s authority-wise when she’s doing that, you’re Commander and Seeker
and we’re the freakshow that follows her around. She’s our Inquisitor.”

“Damn babe,” the Iron Bull commended her.

“…well said,” Madam de Fer conceded sounding almost surprised and…perhaps
quietly proud.

Oh. Oh he hadn’t-. He hadn’t thought about it quite like that. He…well he realized
he wouldn’t dream of attempting to dissuade her from a Judgement ruling after she held
assembly, or from a War Table decision—he spoke his piece during deliberations and the end
result relied entirely on Ellie’s judgement. At Haven, it was on her orders he led their escape,
he’d have been a fool to have stood there and argued with his child that her own safety should
come first even as that was exactly what he’d wanted to do—he’d wanted with everything to
stop and convince her…possibly to the point of throwing the child over his shoulder and
carrying her out by force, in fact he would much prefer it if that was exactly how that had
gone down even if it earned her ire, his heart would have much rather handled carrying her
over his shoulder to safety and getting the silent treatment for a while than having her collapse
in his arms from injury and exhaustion, so very cold it was not unlike- he’d almost been
horrified a Spirit had merely taken possession of the girl’s dead body and puppeteered her
form to them to be laid to rest.

But…it wasn’t his place to circumvent that. Mia—she disdained his occupation for
the threat it put him to, she worried for him constantly. But it would be wrong of her to
actively endeavor to keep him from his duties, even if something she did manage to dissuade him from something that would end his life, it wasn’t her place. Just as it…wasn’t his, with Ellie. She acted exactly as she needed to—exactly as he would expect anyone deserving of the title ‘Inquisitor’—that night. And she continued to do so when it came to matters of her station.

Rifts. Loath that he was that they existed…they were her call.

Hmm. He…wanted to hate Solas with everything in him. In fact on a level, he did. He despised his hand in all of this, but he…did understand he would not have the relationships he had today without it. And there was no going back, only moving forward.

Moving forward…he would have fierce competition for ‘favorite papi’. He was almost embarrassed how urgent he felt the need to join them in the field while they were still in the Emerald Graves when he read the words We are do endeavor to be as civil with Solas as is possible, in future. Eleanor has made her wishes to resume her former candor with him clear, and we are not to put undue pressor on her to behave otherwise. Well, it was not so much those words but the ones that followed, words he could almost hear Cassandra’s teasing as he read—Eleanor is simply delighted to have an ‘in the field papi’ once more. He brings her juice.

Cullen could bring her juice! He could bring her hot chocolate! Which…wasn’t going to earn him favor under these conditions. Unless perhaps it could be chilled? Milk infused with chocolate and made cold might…be refreshing after a day in the heat. Ha! Cold chocolate!

Fen’Harel might be a god among Dalish—but Cullen was a father among men! Well. He would certainly try to be, anyway. Which apparently meant that sometimes it was his job not to be, to step back and support from his role of Commander when his daughter was done napping and woke the Inquisitor ready to take on the Western Approach’s Rifts.

It was a gentle enough start. The rumbling Ellie’s bracer was a little jarring, but they were very close to a Rift that did…definitely need closing, it was so near their infiltration camp he was almost worried it would begin raining demons on them. He was grateful beyond measure for the things invention—grateful to his Sera and her Dagna.

And Miss Harding, blessed Scout that she was.

“Inquisitor,” Scout Harding greeted, oh—her gaze shifted from Sera to Ellie as she addressed the girl after finding her girlfriend’s face and assessing she was present and well, looked relieved to see them. Was it sexist that he did not mind Sera’s girlfriends? If Ellie announced she’d made a triad with two men, her next big announcement would be one of distress she’d surely get over eventually—of their unfortunate disappearances…ugh. If she truly loved them he’d get over it. Come to…respect them as he had the Lieutenant. But he wouldn’t be happy about it! “We’ve sighted Warden activity to the southwest but no one’s been close enough to figure out exactly just what they’re doing. The wildlife is…wild and the environment isn’t that much better—our first sighting of the High Dragon was deliriously reported by one of my men after he got too close to a poison hot spring…there’s poison hot springs honey, between that and the sandstorms? Please keep your little breathing mask on at all times, alright? It’s still holding up okay? I can send for more of that um…sweet grass? From the Emerald Graves.”

Ellie dug around in an overcoat pocket momentarily before withdrawing a small, pale green mask she pulled over her head, down to her neck before drawing it securely over her mouth and nose, “It’s still working I think—papi promises its sturdy,” …had he? When had he done this?

Ahh. He would challenge the man to a duel for the title of papi, he really would. Or perhaps give him a hug. Because, “It is, da’vehnan, and I gathered extra sweetgrass for replacements should you need them.”

“Sweet-Gracias, papi!” oh. Sweet girl. His child. She smiled and giggled, eyes
glittering in the sunlight as she addressed the Elf man who regarded her with open warmth, returning her smile with his own. The Maker was testing him—he was truly supposed to let her just go off and fight Rifts and rogue Wardens and Corypheus? “Thanks for the heads up, Lace!”

Scout Harding blushed. “Of course, Inquisitor. Hawke and Stroud have been staying in Griffon Wing Keep—we don’t like announcing your movements to non-security personnel so…”

“I can surprise them?” Ellie asked, just a bit excitedly.
“If you’d like.”
“Um, I love!” she assured, “kay, we have Rift locations marked and prioritized?”
“Uh huh, ready whenever you are—we’ve got solid holds here so you need potion or a place to stop and rest, Varric should be able to show you to camp.”

“Thanks Lace, I really appreciate it,” Ellie said, turning about to seek out, “Varric! Come be my walking buddy!”

“Hell yeah Tumbles! Lemme show you around, I can give you the grand tour,” the Dwarf man drawled as he joined her, linking arms with the Human girl.

The first stop on their tour was the nearby Rift, of course…Cullen may have borne witness to his child sealing the entire Breach and he still had no comfort whatsoever with her tackling a Rift. He served as Commander, fought, stood by and supported his Inquisitor as she sealed the damnable thing closed.

And the moment that was done, he was at her side, allowed to be a father for two minutes—for every Rift he got two minutes of papi time, he decided. As a treat.

“Excellent work sweetheart—how are you feeling?” he questioned, resting a hand on Ellie’s shoulder as he looked her over for serious detriment, “Sera? Are you hurt?” he called, waving the older girl to him, oh. she’d bruising developing on her cheek “Oh, sweetheart,” he looked between the two of them now that he had them in hand, “Do you need to take a break? Are you thirsty?”

“m’fine da, barely a scratch,” Sera assured.
“I’m okay papi—potion toast?” Ellie proposed, uncorking a vial of health tonic. She’d a few scrapes, some bruising that began clearing when he and Sera clinked their own potion against hers and they knocked them back. “Everyone’s okay? Cool! One down! Eight left yeah?” she checked. Maker. No. Truly?

There’d been something like eleven Rifts in the Emerald Graves. Nine here? Not to mention those they had dealt with in Emprise du Lion…

Between his child’s last stay in Skyhold and her return? She will have sealed twenty four entire Rifts. Was this how it always was in the field? So consistently unrelenting?

Apparently. Maker, he thought the cold of Sahrnia had been awful, but the Western Approach was unbearably hot. So that when they successfully sealed a second Rift and drew near what had been christened their ‘Craggy Ridge Camp’, everyone took a moment to relax and regroup, and began shedding any unnecessary pieces of armor—there was a pile of overcoats between Ellie and Madam de Fer, Sera and Varric casting theirs off and away. Ellie threatened to ‘dismantle this entire Inquisition’ if anyone took issue with her undoing the clasps of her armored tunic to lie back and ‘let everything breathe’ while they stopped to take on water and bit of lunch. Cole and Sera joined her, lying at her side and staring into sky overhead, chatting a mile a minute about…it seemed like they were making up stories about the few clouds overhead as Sera and Ellie shared grapes and apple slices—no one was much interested in a warm meal just now. He’d little appetite himself, between the heat and the blinding sun, his head felt not unlike how he imagined it might feel if the Iron Bull tired of Cassandra’s monogamy and decided to take Cullen out of the picture by stepping directly on his forehead with the whole of his weight.

“He wouldn’t kill you that way—everyone would see that,” Cole spoke up, “and he wouldn’t kill you—he would seduce you and have you both.”
“…amatus,” Dorian wondered, “should I be concerned that it is perfectly clear the Spirit is referencing you when he lists designs for polyamorous seduction as substitution for murder?”

“Means I’m not a barbaric brute—I know how to adapt and compromise. Find peaceful solutions to everyday problems,” the Iron Bull winked at his lover as he popped a grape into his mouth.

“That is not a problem,” Cole said sounding almost frustrated as he sat up, “I was talking to Cullen with my outside voice because he might worry he is hallucinating or hurt more if I used my inside voice. Oh!” he slumped, physically dropping in disappointment, “I’m sorry—I am being rude! It’s my fault, I did it wrong—you can’t know who I am talking to if I do not say their name. I am practicing, I promise! But it is usually best to talk about private things with my friends privately, in their minds, but strangers get scared when I know their names before they tell me!” he complained. Then he shook himself, refocusing, “I’m sorry—it is okay to talk about things that bother me but I am helping Cullen right now—Cullen I am talking to you, and I would appreciate not being interrupted unless it is with help for you.”

Ellie sat up, “Papi’s head hurts really bad?” she asked Cole who nodded. The girl rose up and came to Cullen, sitting before him as she looked him over, “Scale of one to ten?”

“Mija, I’m fi—”

“Scale of one to ten,” she said firmly, though she splayed her hands before him, palms up and wriggled her fingers. Oh. He tapped the pinkie finger of her unmarked hand, dragging his finger along her fingertips until he landed on the middle finger of her Marked hand to signify eight. “You’ve taken potion?” he nodded, “When was the last time you drank water? It’s really hot out and dehydration is bad in general but like, when you’re already sensitive to it, it’s going to make it worse, add that to the sunlight—maybe you should stay—”

“I’ll drink some water—thank you for the suggestion mija.”

“Maybe,” she firmly finished her sentence, “you should stay inside for a while, cool off and rest. Not taking care of yourself isn’t doing your job!” Ellie…snapped at him. Oh Maker, he was startled that he’d made her upset with him but that was the extent of her wrath. He had not meant to be disrespectful just- he could hardly stand even the thought of staying behind, it made something in him feel worthless, but if he went? If he couldn’t rise to the challenge or worse, take their focus from the task at hand, make them have to defend him atop everything else they were trying to do and someone got hurt? How worthless would he truly be then? She took his hands in hers, “Everyone gets sick papi. Part of taking care of your job and responsibilities and the people you love, is taking care of yourself. This isn’t your usual work environment, so it’s not like needing to take care of yourself to compensate means you can’t do your job,” she assured him, squeezing his hands before she sat up higher on her knees to press a kiss to his cheek before prescribing, “Be like the Iron Bull and adapt! Instead of murdering yourself by pushing yourself when you’re sick, seduce yourself with self-care.”

“We’ve a mission,” Cullen argued.

“Oh. I’m sorry! Mami—gosh, what were you thinking?” Ellie questioned, looking to Cassandra, “You weren’t supposed to let me just lay around for days on end in the middle of a mission! You should have propped me up and dragged me around to arrest Mistress Poulin and Dragon slaying—I mean I skipped out on fighting two dragons and a demon! A demon that I promised Michel we’d help him with. Honestly I should probably tender my resignation—who wants to be the new Inquisitor? Mamis? The Iron Bull—that’d show the Qun! Tia Vivi?” she wondered, looking across the whole of her party, and even to the few scouts and soldiers in camp, “You?”

The Dalish man who’d been sorting through deliveries to the Requisitions table breathed a huff of laughter and offered a friendly, “No thank you miss. If it makes any difference, I think you’re doing an excellent job.”

“Awe thanks! I think you’re doing an excellent job!” Ellie cheerily returned the compliment before returning her attention to Cullen, leveling him a look that said, ’so?’ “Am I
resigning or are you taking a nap?”

Who taught this child to craft her ultimatums with such dire conditions? He suspected Dorian’s influence. Oh. It was almost tempting to refuse further, Ellie took her sincerity seriously, she may just hold her word and truly resign on the spot. But…that wouldn’t stop her from her responsibilities sealing Rifts or being a target of Corypheus…she would have all the detriments of the role of Inquisitor with fewer rewards. So. “Well then, I suppose I’ll nap.”

Oh. How fair was it he got the luxury of a nap and earned a brilliant smile from his child? “Stay hydrated and cool down—if you’re feeling better later and still want to join us, you can! We’ll be keeping the camps updated on Rift progress!” she promised. “Can you eat? Take on what you can. Sissy,” she turned to Sera.

“Yeah!” the older girl readily agreed, jumping up and coming to take hold of Ellie’s hand before they were off…to do something. They went to the Requisitions officer and started chatting with them, a few of their reinforcements holding this camp, but for what, Cullen wasn’t entirely certain.

“Do they communicate in the bond?” Marehis wondered quietly to Solas.

“Our sisterly one, perhaps,” Solas supposed. “Sera’s gaining excellent insight when she and Ellie’s magic directly commune intentionally, but she’s still garnering experience in navigating the bond on her own…” he was silent for a moment before he softly cleared his throat, only just daring to meet Cullen’s gaze for a brief moment before he addressed him, “Sera is…she’s very scared for you. When you’ve migraines. She worries for you when we are in the field. There is something in her, questions she has but she worries it is not her place to pry I…I’m uncertain if Cole has brought it to your attention but…it does not feel like a resolved issue, so I thought it best you know so you may proceed however you deem fit.”

It ruffled something in Cullen…perhaps on him—ruffled his feathers—to have the man speaking to him…ugh. It was ultimately what soothed his initial unrest. Solas was speaking to him…father to father. Speaking from a place of love of Sera, and who was he to begrudge him that? He offered the man a nod.

Vivienne de Fer regarded him with concern, “It is worrysome that you are poorly so often, Commander. If Skyhold’s Healers have not found solutions for you there are several I could refer you to.”

“I do appreciate your concern,” he assured, sipping down just a bit more water before saying, “My treatment is well at hand—Skyhold’s finest Healer is currently handling my care and she prescribed a nap which I think will suit,” he said, leaning to press a kiss to Cassandra’s cheek before rising up to…well he supposed there were plenty of tents and someone would not begrudge him space there-

They…would not. The moment he went to ask where he might lay out his bedroll, he discovered the item in question missing from his horse’s pack and the scout he’d asked offered him a certain nod and said to follow him.

“Kay higher…higher….you can go a little bit higher Inky. How come this is the way we settled on doin this?”

“You’re almost as tall as papi so gotta play papi! Laying down your heads’ll be in the same place-”

“Oh, duh. Makes sense!” Sera cheerily conceded.

His children had gone off to see to the set up of another tent that laid wholly empty save for Cullen’s bedroll, which Sera was laying upon. He could see that, because Ellie was standing in the tent’s entrance holding its opening overhead while her sister offered suggestions for adjustment. Based on the view of someone lying with their head on Cullen’s pillow…which to his knowledge wasn’t a view that would be affected by height as it did not matter how tall or short someone if they needed the perspective of someone lying down with their head merely in a specific place…
He’d the most brilliant, wonderful girls. But sometimes they operated in a way that was not unlike Cullen’s last functioning modicum of intelligence he could cling to when he’d not slept in a week and his head was in the vise grip of pressurized torment. Though their efforts were much more endearing than his own, which usually involved nearly walking over the edge of crumbling wall when he went east out of his office and continued on as though he were taking the western wall to the Tavern…pouring from an empty vessel that once held coffee and proceeding to sip at an empty mug determinedly for the better part of two minutes before he realized it was empty…and incidentally writing Mia, with the intention of writing Cassandra. I love you more with each passing day and miss you, the girls, beyond belief. I dream of when next I wake and we are together again. Maker watch and guide you until then, all my love –Cullen had thankfully…well, he’d not used Cassandra’s name, it had been a matter of misfortune that he blindly slipped the letter into the first envelope in the stack Josephine had prepared him on his desk—the woman had been kind enough to do so because he’d lamented during a meeting earlier that morning that he’d been meaning to respond to Cassandra, complained that Mia was pestering him for an update…and he’d nieces. So, what could have been a very unfortunate circumstance earned him a very confusing letter from his sister gushing over his sudden ‘burst of emotion’, assuring she and her family were well, and wondering if he was ill because he definitely never said much more than ‘I’m alive and well, I hope you’re the same’ in his previous correspondence since joining the Order.

“Would you care for a hand, sweetheart?” Cullen asked warmly, Ellie and Sera gasping in surprise like they’d been caught, overlapping,

“Papi!”

“Dad!” Sera exclaimed as sat up, “You just hold it right there—don’t move!” she ordered and his child had come into her power as of late so. Who was he to deny her? He held up his hands in surrender and stopped right where he was while she scrambled from the tent to come to Ellie’s aid—the younger girl holding the tent’s opening flaps in their agreed placement while Sera fastened them down so they stayed that way without Ellie’s hold on them. The girl smiled her relief, offering up her unmarked hand to high-five her sister while her Marked hand rubbed at her right side, oh he hoped she hadn’t strained herself. Sera squatted a bit, her hands on Ellie’s shoulders as she lowered herself to be level with the girl which was…almost silly looking given they’d a height difference but it wasn’t great enough she needed to kneel, just bending her knees and lowering her bottom to address the girl. Well, not verbally—she looked Ellie in the eye and opened her mouth to speak but then Ellie offered a reassuring smile, nose scrunching with her enthusiasm and then they nodded in unison after their…wholly silent conversation. Sera put her arm around Ellie’s shoulder as she rose up, pulling the younger girl into her side as she turned to address Cullen…nope, it was Ellie who spoke,

“Alright—ready papi!” Ellie assured him.

“Come on da—nap time!” Sera announced.

…they’d set up a tent and his bedroll…and his…grand…nug. William—strapping lad, a welcome addition to the family. For Cullen’s nap. So he might do so undisturbed, comfortably, and…not encapsulated in a confined space—the sun wouldn’t be in his eyes, but he could open them and see plainly the tent was open and the world outside was waiting for him if he’d need.

He’d loved his family, growing up—still loved them, most certainly, his mother and father, his siblings. But they all lived separate lives now—it had been that way since his teens, since he first went to join the Order, and he’d been…made to disconnect himself as much as possible. Devote himself entirely to the Order—not put too much into relationships outside of that realm. It was not as if they’d taken up vows of chastity, but connections were meant to be…limited—they could wed, but nothing could come before duty. There was always a level…no matter what your ties to someone, you must be ready to abandon them entirely, if the Order had need of you to for any at any time…
Now...he had family. In a permanent sense—it felt more permanent even than the family he'd been born to. He'd already experienced his ability to detach from the Rutherford family—his family’s ability to detach from him to allow him to follow the Order. But Cassandra...Ellie, Sera? He was out of the Order now. And even if he were not he...he could not imagine...there was no amount of loyalty that outdid what he had to them, no orders pertinent enough that they would see him abandon or go against-

If he woke up tomorrow and Circles were restored in their former fashion and there were orders to Circle his girls? Oh. There would be a renewed rebellion, made entirely of Cullen taking down any who thought it in their power to do such a thing. Once upon a time he'd hated mages. Thought they deserved Circling and everything that came with it—they were dangers that needed protected from, the world from them, and they from themselves. He still had a respect for the dangers of magic, but mages? Were like any other person, they were not inherently evil, people he should hate on sight for magic alone. After everything, he was certain if he ran into his former self he'd fist fight him in the street, no holds barred. He loved these girls. Understood...he could not be more grateful for the existence of magic now—it saved Ellie, guided and preserved her all of her life and now she was here and his. And Sera...he wasn’t certain at first, how he felt when she made the decision to wake her magic...but he’d also realized it didn’t matter—it was Sera, her choice entirely and...what they learned about Elves and magic...it sounded like a natural part of her, something she was always meant to have access to and not having that birthright if she wanted it would be nothing short of a shame. And she’d...oh he wasn’t certain she realized it but her ability to step up and take command, her newfound confidence? He knew from personal experience finding oneself, being able to stand on your own two feet and know precisely who you are and what your place is, made you capable of claiming and holding that place. He found it when he left the Order, and she found it, it seemed, when she joined the Inquisition. Lady Emmauld had taught her worthlessness and shame. Now...being accepted for who she is and coming to accept herself—in full—for who she could truly be had caused her to flourish.

His girls were capable, and brilliant and just beautiful and...

Something ached at that—something had always ached, a bitter to the sweet of how much he loved them, loved Cassandra, he...

“Dad?” Sera’s voice sounded, concerned, garnering his attention.

“Papi? Oh gosh are you um...” Ellie waved her unmarked hand before his face, his gaze followed her hand before settling on her face as she breathed a sigh of relief, “spaced out huh?”

“Time to tell your mind to zip it and get some rest,” Sera intoned, pressing a kiss to his cheek, and then, “Oh!” Sera and Ellie let out surprised sounds as he wrapped his arms around them, though they were swift to hug him back tightly. Oh, his girls.

They deserved to be loved. And they deserved to have and all know his love for them. He wasn’t in the Order anymore. He was absolutely resolved to never take Lyrium again—his mind would not eventually be lost to Lyrium madness, he’d no longer the risk of growing to be an unstable burden upon any he was close with.

His parents...he wanted his parents to know these girls. Wanted Mia and Rosie and Branson to know these girls. Wanted them to be known in return! As their...well as far as he was concerned—their granddaughters, their nieces! He wanted to know his nieces! His nephew!

“Please be safe,” Cullen...pled, he was pleading. To them, with the Maker, internally, to guard those he loved as they went on without him.

...not all of them. Cullen entered the tent and the girls left him to remove heavy parts of his armor, don the fresh tunic and trousers they’d left laying out on his bedroll, and when he laid down he heard quiet footsteps approaching, he cracked an eye to see Sera unarmored looking wholly tentative but,

“Cole says your head hurts real bad and you’re still really warm um...my magic pish
is cold representing, I was able to help Inky when she had a fever, I thought maybe I could stick around and help you, if you’d be er, cool with it.”

“I’ll definitely be cool with it,” he assured, smiling when she snorted at the pun. “You’re certain you wish to stay?” he checked.

Sera nodded, “I mean I’ll be friggin’ worried about you if I leave and someone staying’ll keep Ink and ‘sandra from worrying so much,” she shrugged. “M’tired, could use a nap.”

Oh, he didn’t hesitate to wave her over, let her join him in his nap set up, she didn’t immediately lay down though, she knelt behind his head, hands splayed on either side of his head, sticking her tongue out at him and he returned the favor briefly before she began calling chill into her hands. Oh, Maker.

…magic was very much a blessing.

“It don’t hurt or nothing, right?” she worried.

“It’s wonderful—thank you, sweetheart,” he said, he could feel himself dozing, though Solas’s words jarred him a bit, ugh. “Sera…it is not a lack of love of you that I haven’t been candid about my health—the exact opposite. If you have questions, you’re free to ask them.”

“You’re real sleepy, I don’t wanna bother you,” Sera shook her head.

“I’ll sleep better if we talk, I promise. This conversation does occupy my headspace—it’ll be easier to tell my mind to let me rest,” he assured.

“Alright…uh…I mean do you know what it is? Are you um…sick?”

…he wasn’t certain what exactly he expected her to ask first—that was the most obvious first question and yet it was the very last one he wanted to outright answer. None save for Adan, Cassandra, and Ellie knew—she only knew because of her status as Inquisitor. But did he owe her an explanation on the level that she was his child? She’d allowed him his privacy—known something ailed him but did not press, just offered her support, that day in Haven. But Sera was not Ellie—he couldn’t expect her to need the same things. She’d a great deal of anxiety and it seemed she coped with it better when she had more answers than questions.

“Well…” he said, “a great many things changed for me, when Kirkwall fell. When I realized how corrupt the Order had become I left it, and all it’s trappings behind, the things that prompted blind loyalty. I…do not wish to be bound any longer so I’m not, I never want to be in a position where I rely directly upon the Order or the Chantry…this is a matter I have only been open with Cassandra and Ellie on as it pertains to their roles in the Inquisition—I disclosed to Cassandra when she offered me my position, and Ellie upon her promotion to Inquisitor so I would ask that you keep this a matter of confidence,” she nodded determinedly, prompting him to continue. “…part of achieving my independence from the Order, is through the choice to cease taking Lyrium. I had been taking it for more than a decade, so…addiction is thoroughly set in.”

“S-so that’s what gives you migraines? Makes you sick?” she confirmed.

“Yes.”

“There’s nothin you can um…I mean there nothing that can help with your addiction pish?”

Cullen huffed softly, raising his hand to take gentle hold of her forearm, rubbing a path with his thumb, “You already do. You’re my beautiful, brilliant, brave girl—you’re always looking out for your sister, your mother, me. I could not ask for more.”

“Friggin- you’re just as bad as ‘sandra and Mare’n’them!” Sera complained. “Part of looking out for you is knowing what I can do to help. Light n’ pish bothers you when you got migraines bad, sound too? And Inky said something about heat, dehydration. Stress and stuff triggers them? Or are they just random?”

“It would seem to be a lovely mixture of both,” he supposed.

Sera nodded. “I know I can be a loudy bitch, if I’ve been giving you headaches-“
“Sera Middle Name, you are to never refer to yourself as a b- as that word.”
“Sorry. I can be a loudy cu-“ she shrieked, a sound that dissolved into a giggle when he blindly raised a hand to try and cover her mouth—bopped her on her sweet nose but she relented her horrendous teasing, “If I’m ever too loud or something just tell me to shut it.”
“Oh, no my dear—you keep being loud, it’s one of the many things I l-“
“Don’t say more lovey stuff!!”
“Sorry. It’s one of the many things I unendingly adore about you.” She removed a hand from his temple to poke him on the nose! “Don’t let anyone stifle or silence the things inside you that produce so much exuberance.”

She snorted, blushing fiercely, looking down—not at him, but training her gaze on her own lap like she’d been struck shy momentarily. And then, “I won’t tell no one about um…the lyrium stuff. But you mind if I talk about migraine stuff with Widdle?”

…oh Maker, which one was Widdle? One was Sweetness. No…lots of people could be ‘sweets’, she usually said ‘Inky Sweets’ when she meant her sister…teetness! That was…Lace! Widdle was Dagna, of course, he wasn’t certain as to why she’d wish to speak of this with her, but “Not at all. Do give her my regards.”

“Kay…I don’t got anymore questions…you need more cold, or can we get our nap on now?”
“I’ve cooled down nicely, thank you,” he readily assured, pleased when she scooted and laid at his side, snuggling against him, and he relished in pressing a kiss to her forehead, hand drawing a lazy line up and down along her back as she let out a sleepy sigh, “Think of pleasant things and have sweet dreams honey.”

She nodded, settling comfortably, he was certain she was steadily falling asleep, he begun dozing off, but he woke the moment he heard Sera whimper,

“It’s okay, she’s okay—she wasn’t hurt, she was fine, so she’s still fine now,” she whispered…to herself…about herself?

“Sweetheart?”
“m’okay—Ink’n them is out of range but everything felt okay—she wasn’t scared or hurt anything. Gotta tell myself ‘cause my magic’s little and gets freaked when she’s out of range…it kind of interprets it meaning she’s dead so I gotta tell it she’s alright.”

Oh…Maker. It was a fresh level of heartachingly sweet that she would choose to stay back when she knew she would feel he wasn’t certain if her magic could hear all around her but it was a sentiment he wished to intone to his child, her magic too if it were possible, “Everything is alright—we’ll see them when we wake.”

“Thanks da.”

What more could she do? Maker, this was more than enough. The heady rush that came with every time he could be there for these girls? When they claimed him as a man they chose to give the role of father? High. It was a type of high, he was certain, it released a rush that honestly soothed at the ache in his head, or at least was so grand and all-consuming his brain forgot just how much pain it was in.

So he wasn’t certain if it was the nap, or the fact that he woke to find Sera still secure at his side, Ellie at his other, opening his eyes directly into Cassandra’s who was seated behind him, stroking his hair, that saw his migraine gone.

“Hi,” he whispered, his voice felt lost from sleep and he didn’t wish to risk waking the girls. Cassandra returned in kind,
“Hello,” she greeted softly, smiling as she continued massaging at his scalp. “How are you feeling?”

“Better. You? How did it go?”
“Two more Rifts to the south, one to the north.”

… “She se- five? In one day?”

“She was utterly determined and we’d potion and not a great deal of injuries. Too, Varric, Hawke, Stroud—our soldiers, they’ve made way through the place, rid it of bandit
interference, the violent wildlife so Rifts are the only threat…save for the dragon.”

“…Please tell me you didn’t-“

She smiled her assurance, “We are putting it off for another day.”

Thank the Maker. He breathed a sigh of relief, rubbing gentle circles on Ellie’s back, Maker the girl was out like a light, snoring softly against his chest, the faintest bit of bruising, scratches on her face that were still clearing up. He was remorseful he hadn’t been there but…this was just as much a place he needed to be. In a place to give his child refuge after such a hard day.

“Do you wish for me to sit in when you’ve a discussion with Sera?” Cassandra gently wondered.

“We spoke.”

“She’s alright?” Cassandra fretted, he almost loosed an actual whine when her hand left his scalp but he didn’t begrudge Sera the attention as she started scratching at the girl’s hair a bit.

“I answered all the questions she has right now, and I hope she knows she can come to me if she has more.”

Oh, she leaned down, whispering against his skin, “Thank you,” before pressing a kiss to his forehead.

He was amazed he was capable of falling asleep again, but Maker, apparently he’d needed it. He…and Cole—the Spirit startled him, he was lying weightlessly atop Cullen’s chest, mop of blonde hair directly in Cullen’s face—Cassandra was lying alongside Sera, Marehis lying with Ellie…Varric had his bedroll out at their feet, laying in the tent entrance.

“He was tired as shit didn’t know where the fuck else to sleep,” Cole pleasantly explained with Varric’s damnable language, sighing as he relaxed more corporally against Cullen’s chest.

“Are you tired, Cole?” Cullen wondered, he didn’t wish to disturb the boy if he was only just getting to find reprieve, he could stand to lay about a little while longer.

Oh, the boy let out a contented hum, “Thank you for caring that I am comfortable. I am sorry I had to use my voice to talk to you earlier, I know you were not ready to tell Sera— but she was. You were mostly not ready because you worried she wasn’t. You aren’t upset with me but my heart still wanted to say that I am sorry.”

Of course he wasn’t upset with- “Cole, I do understand it is your nature, you’re compelled to help, and you do your best to choose the best way possible…I’m not…it is nothing personal between you and I, I trust you but hearing your voice in my mind—any voice in my mind other than my own?”

“Would scare you, I understand. I will always use my outside voice with you,” he quietly assured…a bit amusing as ‘outside voices’ usually meant free leash to be loud, but he understood ‘inside voice’ would mean an ultimate form of physical silence on the boy’s behalf, so. “I will go—Thom is considering starting dinner, he should. Everyone’s bodies are getting hungry—yours is hungry, Ellie’s body is very hungry, Rifts take so much energy, Magic take so much energy—she really did try her best to stay in contact, kept sending Sera’s magic reassurance for as long as she could. Sera is always hungry.”

—

…mere talk of food roused the girls. Though they found themselves distracted from it when they saw he was awake, he received overlapping greetings of “Hi sleepy Papi!” and “Hey da” before, “how are you feeling?”

“Much better-“

Even more so when he was the recipient of dual kisses to the cheek before he was pulled to join the outside world. Desert air was refreshing, chilled once the sun had set, and the light from their campfire wasn’t anywhere near as blinding as the sun. He hadn’t meant to sleep the day but he supposed he’d needed it. Marehis and Cassandra followed after them, having been woken by the girls’ excitement and the whole of their party gathered around the
A campfire. He claimed a seat with Ellie and Sera, though Cassandra actually got Ellie in her lap, swooping in behind the girl and having her rise so Cassandra could be seated and pull the girl to her as she launched into an update on everything they did while they were out for Cullen and Sera’s benefit—the Rifts, and apparently they managed to wind a path around the Dragon’s territory, Varric leading them to the place they hadn’t been able to enter before without Mage assistance…there had been some sort of experimenting of some sort going on in that location, a great deal of Fade activity still dispersing in that area, but she glossed over it, shrugging and chalking it up to “Creepy stuff” but it was interesting that it seemed like their experiment had a focus on Spirits.*

Ellie’s hand took Cassandra’s momentarily, squeezing twice and the woman taking a deep breath before she pressed a kiss to the top of Ellie’s head, and then Solas looked up as if she’d called his name, she must have prompted him in the bond before saying, “Papi,” ah, well he supposed that was one way of differentiating between them, “wanna talk Spirit stuff with me? Cole?”

“Yes!” Cole cheered like he’d been eagerly awaiting such a conversation. Well, Spirits as a topic may well appeal to their Spirit audience.

“Certainly, da’len,” Solas readily agreed.

Ellie rattled off questions over dinner that Cole and Solas took in stride. What were the real differences between different kinds of Spirits? Faith—was she Elvehnan? She belonged to Mythal’s House, right? So why-come the Maker could send her? Or did He not send her at all? Did Mythal have to send her or does she have a sense of free will—like Cole, he goes around tracking Hurt and Healing it, was Faith listening for the prayers of those who needed her and going where she was needed?”

“Has your mind been troubled by your magic waking, da’len?” Solas worried at her questions. Oh Maker, that…was enough to turn Cullen off of his dinner, quietly clearing his throat as he set his spoon back into the bowl of stew. It had thoroughly wrecked him when Cassandra had laid alongside him in her quarters in Haven upon their return from the Fallow Mire and vented her ire, her heart break—it sounded like they beat her in the street until they thought that she was dead and left her to rot. Oh he prayed she wasn’t dwelling on that as of late, that it did not hurt her more than it already had.

“Not troubled,” Ellie assured, “I’ve just been thinking about it I guess. Not the um…bad parts, the ‘Faith’ part. I kind of wonder…if maybe Faith interacting with my magic did something to it.”

“Have you been feeling something amiss in your magic da’vehnan?” Solas voiced concern, rising from his seat across the fire to come sit before her.

“Not different for me recently, but like, since Faith. I mean I only had my magic maybe a day before I met her so…maybe…I dunno, is there something different between my magic and other people’s because of it?” she wondered, “I thought everyone had something their magic did for them like how mine finds things? Ava always told me to keep it to myself so I thought it was an ‘everyone’ thing. But the only differences between people’s magics seems to be their personal relationships with it and which spectrum of magic it presents with first.”

“…I’ve never encountered someone having a similar additional power that your magic has borne,” Solas supposed, “If…if Ser Pavus or Madam de Fer would be so inclined I wonder if maybe we could conduct an examination of sorts?”

“What, precisely, would this examination entail?” Vivienne wondered.

“I would compare your magic to Ellie’s.”

“Well I do so love hearing how superior I am,” Dorian supposed, rising from his seat at the Iron Bull’s side and sitting alongside Ellie, “but do not take it too much to heart—you outshine me in many arenas. Sickening kindness. Disgusting adorableness. Many ‘nesses’.”

Ellie giggled, sitting closer to the man and linking arms with him before they raised their free hands to Solas who splayed his hands to match theirs, “Will Barrier suit you,
Dorian? Excellent.”

They called Barrier into their hands, communing magically for a moment while Solas examined them for… differences? A difference which he apparently found.

“Huh. Madam de Fer would you care to take a look?” Solas called over his shoulder.

“Certainly darling, I do so love squatting in the sand like a cat.”

Ellie gasped loudly, looking to Cullen and imploring, “Papi! Are the cats okay? They’re still eating right?”

…Maker help him, was he going to have to become a cat person? He was almost certain he was on his way to being considered as much with the Kitchen staff because, “They were in excellent health when last I saw them, they’re eating very well—miss Molly dotes on them.”…he checked in on the cats from time to time—just, in case Ellie were to ask after them in her absence—let the creatures rub up against his shins when they were so inclined. He wasn’t going to kick them away! And his hand had perhaps grazed their fur on occasion. Ugh. They were…cute in their own respect, he supposed. Slightly.

“Oh good,” Ellie breathed a sigh of relief, and she smiled at him like she was proud, “Gracias papi!”

Loved cats, grand creatures, there was room in Cullen Rutherford’s heart for Mabari and cats. “Of course, mija.”

Madam de Fer’s brow was arched as she stared at the girl with incredulous amusement before raising her hand to cover her mouth as she cleared her throat and schooled her expression before she risked… smiling too widely? She shook her head before she very primly knelt before Dorian and Ellie once Solas scooted aside and she raised her hands, calling Barrier into them to compare between the Tevinter man and Ellie. Her gaze sought Cassandra’s momentarily before she announced, “Yes I do concur, there are abnormalities—both benign and malignant—in Eleanor’s magic.”

Sera made startled sound, looking pensive, “Malignant?”

“The Mark’s tearing on her magic, darling,” Vivienne explained, “but there is something more, something wholly benign imbued in it, something that grows…in her magic, like it becomes a part of magic as it regenerates in her.”

The Mages started chatting about the implications of that—speculating on what it might mean, if there was any precedent they could think of amongst themselves. Sera was quiet and seemed to be listening, Ellie stopped, saying ‘oh!’ and then turning to look at the older girl, “Sissy! Ven aqui—wanna talk magic?”

“Um…”

“You’re more than welcome to join us my dear,” Vivienne assured.

“Yeah, sure,” Sera shrugged, claiming a seat on Cullen’s thigh since apparently that was the nearest location to Ellie to ‘ven aqui’.

The conversation was…he’d an understanding of magic to a degree but five mages and a Spirit speaking mostly of theory that went directly over Cullen’s head but it was pleasant to listen to, he enjoyed that the girls were enjoying themselves and it was interesting to watch Sera at play with learning. She was so new to it all but there was so much for her to learn and she seemed be dearly enjoying it, and it was educational enough for Cullen. Sera was quiet and listening and it was delightful to learn that—well he’d seen it before, but he hadn’t realized just exactly what it meant and now it was no longer merely just endearing, it was entirely flattering—her ears fluttered, twitching twice whenever she heard something she found interesting or she merely liked. And then when she was ready to offer something herself, had formulated something she thought worthy of contributing to the discussion, her ears did a single upticking movement in the 3..2..1 before she spoke. Maker the girl was a force of brilliance. He’d never the pleasure of seeing Ellie in an educational setting outside of the realm of physical training, save the occasional instance of her bursting into his office to proudly show him the marks she’d gotten on her work. It was fun to see her wide eyed and excited to offer up theories, lip catching between her teeth like a physical barrier to halt her
tongue as she listened and considered what her mentors had to say, their only warning that she was about to hit them with questions was the surely bruising skin slipping from its constraint and flying with inquiries and ideas.

The most interesting of which was, “Do you think maybe that’s what kept me from being possessed all this time? Because of what Faith left in my magic?”

Madam de Fer looked almost deliberate in the pause she gave before supposing, “It is rather the miraculous feat to have thwarted demonic designs for so long entirely of your own power.”

“Ellie is strong, and her resolve against demons is absolute,” Solas argued defensively.

“Well yeah,” Ellie said, “I mean—hypothetically speaking if I were immune to possession like mami is—that still wouldn’t make it okay to accept demon deals. Even if they can’t get their end result you get a lot of false fixes that just lead to relying on them anyway and I’m sure they could figure out a work around with that—have someone immune to possession doing their bidding in exchange for favors. So not dealing with them full stop is still the way to go,” she assured. “Tia’s not wrong, papi. I mean wowza I’ve been in some doosies. If a demon could take me I kind of feel like it definitely would have happened somewhere between that jerk in the Hinterlands and Envy at Thernfal. And gosh…we were kind of just in the middle of demon territory, surrounded by Red Lyrium—Papi was able to break through to his power in the Fade, demons should’ve been all over me.”

Solas seemed to consider it momentarily and then, “Seeker—you’re immune to possession, Ellie says?”

“It is a boon of my status as Seeker, yes,” Cassandra replied.

Solas blinked at that, pondering that bit of information for a minute before he carefully requested, “Would you permit me to compare your Seeker Ability to Ellie’s magic?”

Cullen’s hand went to rest on Cassandra’s back to comfort and hopefully prompt the woman to please breathe because she stopped altogether, paling at the question before offering one of her own in frigid tones, “How exactly do you propose we do that?”

“I’m not thinking of anything untoward- Seeker I would never request you torture- we have seen you er…” Solas seemed reticent to speak further. “You’ve poured lyrium out for the purpose of burning it—if you could do similarly now, I wonder if perhaps I would be capable of er…examining how the power works and see if what is in Ellie’s magic is similar.”

Cassandra considered it a moment…or perhaps she was paying close attention to Ellie’s hand on her thigh—the girl’s hand was hanging at her side, index finger on the side of Cassandra’s thigh…writing? It looked like she might be spelling letters, pausing between words but Cullen would be damned if he could understand what she was communicating to her mother before the woman cleared her throat and said, “Certainly.”

Ellie stood up from Cassandra’s lap and Cullen was glad he was seated on the ground already or he might have found himself falling off balance when Sera pulled the girl into her lap, adding a second weight to Cullen’s left thigh to watch as Madam de Fer emptied the remainder of a half used bottle of Lyrium from her stores onto the ground before the Seeker. Oh, he was grateful Cassandra’s focus went to the Lyrium as he felt Ellie flinch—well, it was more like he felt Sera flinch when she did, the older girl holding Ellie more securely and making a soft comforting sound in her ear. Solas splayed a hand to match Cassandra’s as she raised it to bring the Lyrium to a boil, and Cullen thought Ellie- oh Maker was she truly in distress? It had been a traumatic thing, having ones blood made to burn, was she afraid somehow the Seeker would miscalculate and incidentally attack Lyrium in her system? She rose up out of Sera’s hold and walked—

Nowhere. She was merely climbing out of Sera’s lap and climbing into his, her hand going behind her head momentarily before her arms went around his neck and he felt material against his face, over his chin and nose—her breathing mask, she was apparently putting on him as she whispered, “Careful papi,” and buried her face in the slope of his neck. Ah.
supposed it might- yes. It probably wasn’t wise, at this juncture for him to incidentally breathe in Lyrium fumes…was that healthy for anyone? Everyone was doing well to cover their mouths and noses while Solas and Cassandra worked.

But…when they were done? Solas had been silent the whole of his examination and he looked like he was taking something under serious consideration and then he said, “Seeker…have you encountered a Spirit of Faith?”

“We’ve a great many rituals, the details of which I’m not privy to speak of with outsiders. However I…was rather incoherent during the climax of my vigil to become a Seeker, but when it was through I was initiated and assured of my status of being immune to possession, too it was when I was able to realize my Lyrium ability,” Cassandra supposed.

Their mages began speculating on that—the implications of Spirits and demonic immunity. Though Sera got albeit distracted…in truth he had a feeling she’d been distracted since Cassandra had stopped causing the Lyrium to burn.

“Hey mum,” Sera wondered, “think I can look at that?”

Cassandra looked albeit confused until she followed Sera’s pointing finger to the spot of Lyrium burned sand. Where there had been a blazing puddle of Lyrium was now a smooth solid something, shining under moon and firelight. “Certainly. Be cautious, Sera, you’ve your gloves?”

Sera nodded, rising up to go get them but Cole had vanished and reappeared with the things, and he crouched alongside her when she went to examine the Lyrium-burnt sand while Ellie resumed sitting in Cullen’s lap. Ahh, well, at least he still had one of his children. “Oi Inky—sorry I don’t mean to interrupt but I-“

“Oh!” Ellie chirped, rising up- why? To what end?! He was childless now! “Umm… Oh! I kept-“

Sera gasped, “Inky! Yes!”

And now Ellie was off! Disappearing into the tent! And Sera was not returning to his lap! Who gave him such insolent children?

The Maker. He’d also blessed him with their mother. So. Cassandra let out a muted yelp when Cullen’s arm snaked around her waist as he pulled her into his lap and she begrudgingly obliged, informing him, “If I am made comfortable and you push me from your lap the moment they return I will leave you, I swear. You are ridiculous.”

“That is why you love me,” was met with a derisive grunt but an assuring, “Yes it is!” from Cole. Sweet boy. Adored him. That sent him gasping and falling onto his back as he pulled his hat down to cover his face, letting out... Cullen was decently certain it was a happy, excited sound but it almost came off as mildly frustrated like he couldn’t fully express the depth of what he was felling. “I can’t! You all- you all have levels of love and care for me and it is overwhelming because I love all of you back just as much, some of you more because you love me less—it is not your fault, you don’t have to love me as much as I love you!” he promised, the announcement of which made Madam de Fer clear her throat and look abashed—he wasn’t certain if it was because she did not care to have the boy including her in those he loved, or if it was because she was certain she was one of the few who did not love him as much in return and she felt something about that…perhaps guilt?

Whatever it was now she was distracted—they all were. Ellie had returned, excitedly joining her sister in the sand, sliding on her knees to meet her bearing the box Dagna had sent her bracer in, she’d apparently kept it and now it was the perfect receptacle for depositing the long, paper thin lyrium sand shard in for transport.

“Tell Dagna I say hi!” Ellie requested, Sera doling out a kiss to her cheek before she popped up and went to the requisitions table to see to just that. “Oh! Wait crap—does she need-“ she was calling to the girl from where she knelt in the sand.

“She should still have my magic in the runestone I left her—she needed it for makin’ the box locky, so,” Sera said over her shoulder, shrugging.

Ellie breathed a small sigh of relief, absentely rubbing at her Marked hand.
"Mark aching you tonight, Imekari?" Bull asked gently.
Ellie shook her head, "No more than usual," she assured, what assurance that was.
"It’s just felt a little different since we arrived in the Approach," And then she looked to Solas, wondering, "Papi, do you think Corypheus is here with the Wardens?"

Solas blanched at that and the entire party turned their attention on him the- the bastard! "I am regretful I do not know the full of his plot—I thought the Conclave would be the end of his designs, I did not care much what else he planned to do. I’ve no idea where he’s taken refuge in this time—how a monstrosity his size can easily hidden is beyond me—but his primary concerns seem to be plotting against Orlais Empress and creating a 'vessel' for some likely horrific reason. It is likely Wardens he has left in charge here, he may be able to beguile a select few with his presence but I truly doubt the Wardens as a whole have seen the blighted creature they now follow.” He rose and carefully went to be seated before the girl, asking, “How does your Mark feel different, da’len?”

Ellie shrugged, “Just…like its picking up on something?” and then, very quietly, “Maybe the Orb? It feels the way it did when Corypheus was coming…and sort of like…” she thought about it, “I think it felt this way when we were in the future. My Mark was…the sky was full of the Breach and the world was covered in Rifts and there were new ones opening constantly all around us so, its hard to tell past the ouch of it all, but thinking back, Alexius had the ability to open Rifts, the way I do now.”

Solas nodded. “I doubt Corypheus would entrust a lacky with the Orb, but he has clearly seen fit to bequeath powers from it to them in the past…future,” he amended with some frustration, “despite the flow of time, you’ve the personal experience that he does as much,” the man finally landed on, time travel truly was mind boggling. Solas looked across the faces of those gathered around them, though it was Marehis’s gaze he held as he announced, “There is every chance Corypheus is near with the Orb, or at the very least he has a subordinate he’s gifted an Orb ability to use in his plots here. Either way…”

Sera yelped, abandoning the Requisitions table to scramble to Ellie’s side , wrapping her arms entirely around the girl and holding her to her chest as she screeched, “We can’t let him get Inky!” No, they most certainly could not.

Marehis swallowed, clearing her throat as she rose from her seat, schooling her features into a smile for Ellie as she drew near—passing them on her way to the Requisitions table, but she did stop to rest her hands on Ellie and Sera’s shoulders, “I will report our concerns to Leliana, da’vehnans, we will scour the area and make certain our Scouts are on high alert for Corypheus’s potential presence,” she promised before going to do just that, the Iron Bull rising to join her, the rumble of his voice speaking low as he assisted in reporting to Leliana. Ellie hugged Sera back…struggling with her momentarily as she wrestled the older girl, pushing her onto her back so she could assume the position Sera formerly held—hugging getting her chin atop Sera’s head and hugging the girl tightly to her chest with a hum of effort before she assured,

“Everything’s gonna be okay! Hey—did you finish prepping your delivery for Dagna? Do you wanna write Lacey? I know she’s busy, but she’d love hearing from you! Oh! You want dessert sissy? Papi made grapes cold for us! The green kind—those are your favorite! And then we can get ready for bed—I’m feeling a lot better, so I’m skipping sleep potion tonight, you wanna play in the Fade tonight?”

Sera giggled at the rapidfire suggestions from the younger girl before agreeing, “Sure Ink, that sounds like a plan—c’mon, lets go grab some grapes, you wanna help me write Lacey?”

“Sure!”

As much as Ellie was endeavoring to distract Sera from their fresh concerns, Sera was doing likewise to some extent—taking the girl by the hand and pulling her up and along to write her letter to her girlfriend, which was apparently a matter of privacy but not from her sister. It got Ellie off where her sweet Human ears couldn’t hear the adults if they needed a
moment to...plan, consider, panic. Once she was out of earshot there was a quiet overlap of voices—Varric, Thom, Vivienne, Dorian all speaking at once voicing different concerns. Was this all a trap to lure Ellie out here—their forces were immediately around her in Skyhold and the place itself was rather impenetrable, they’d the resources to outlast a siege on the place, could cut off all contact with it by blowing the bridge out—there was no other way of getting to them save for the sky, and they were well prepared for that given Corypheus’s dragon, the beast he unleashed on Haven. Skyhold would withstand a dragon attack as it was mostly comprised of stone that had since been blessed by Cassandra—both by her beautiful presence, and the literal blessing she could imbue in the place, there were several unperceivable runes that marked the walls now Pentaghasts of old had developed to defend their holds from Dragons in the days when the creatures were many and vengeful, capable of striking war against those who were so determined to slay them. Once upon a time, dragons could come in hoards to attack their enemies and the Pentaghasts were responsible for...well a great deal of just how architecture in the age of Dragon. All major cities, Circles, Chantry buildings constructed entirely of stone as to not burn in the blaze of a Dragon attack. Stone alone was a great help, but the Runes would assist in making it hold strong, keep bursts of violence against their walls from making them crumble—up to the point that literal dragons could bash their bodies against Skyhold’s walls, and they would not crumble further. The whole of their forces could survive inside the center castle, the walls, until Corypheus’s forces tired if need be. Here? In the Western Approach? They’d no such ability—they’d not the resources and the only suitable structure was Griffon Wing Keep and even that...well Cullen had reviewed the map of the place, it was very open, required tents for their people to have true shelter, and there was little stopping any of Corypheus’s forces—closing the gate just meant they either had to break through, or climb, and his dragon? It could strike them like fish in a barrel and that metaphor felt truly horrific now that there was such a high potential for it to truly apply to them. What if this was all a way of getting the Inquisitor in a place of weakness so Corypheus could strike again with her forces just out of reach? Did they have a way of escape? If Corypheus came for her...they were uncertain just how they could handle that at the moment. Ellie had come far in her training but she could only do so much, she was still in recovery—she’d been favoring her left side all evening, slumping from pain in her right side after their day of battle testing her recovery, she was in no condition to be in a fight against someone like Corypheus, even with the whole of her party at her side. They would need to extract her, make escape and get her to safety, going head-to-head with the creature was not doable just now if he was coming for her.

Oh...he prayed rather fervently that evening when they settled in for sleep—grateful beyond words to have his girls resting safe and sound between Cassandra and Marehis, pleading the Maker would guard and guide them all, keep them from Corypheus’s hand.

The following day dawned bright and blazing, Ellie and Sera making certain Cullen ate well, pushing more water on him, clinking potion bottles in a morning toast before they set out. Sera rode Marehis’s steed—Cole joining her so she did not feel lonely!—as Marehis took to Russel’s saddle with Ellie. Their scouts had no sighting of Corypheus or those they suspected were close associates in or around the Western Approach, but Marehis would be riding with Ellie at all times now, prepared to evacuate should the need arise.

Cullen personally felt the need arose the moment they came face to face with the Western Approach’s local Dragon but uh...the panic shortly passed. In point of fact...and this might not well reflect upon his fatherhood...he entirely forgot Sera and Ellie were with them, but to be fair...he forgot everyone was with them.

Cassandra Pentaghast was a beautiful, fearsome, goddess of dragon slaying. She was not one for makeup save her rather iconic eyeliner, but she certainly did not need it and that which she acquired from battle? All else paled in comparison to dust from the battlefield, blood on her face as she straddled the dragons neck and sank her sword to sever its spine from its skull.
“Dude full offense, the second you fuck up with Seeker I’m wooing the crap out of her,” the Iron Bull breathlessly informed him. “If I truly mess things up with her? You’re more than free to woo away.”

“Mami that was amazing!” Ellie cheered—snapping Cullen back to the reality their children just faced a dragon, good Maker—as she rushed to meet the woman sliding to drop to the ground, Cassandra was rosey cheeked from exertion, smiling wide as she opened her arms for the girl, grunting a bit on impact though she chuckled warmly as she commended Eleanor for her efforts—where was Sera? Ahh, well on her way, she met them both with a sweeping hug as she questioned them on their health, sharing health potion all around as they…Maker, this was fun—Cassandra was warm exuberance, everyone adrenaline fueled and feeling high from their victory as they regrouped, the Seeker chatting away with as much excitement as Ellie and Sera usually produced on their own, Cullen thought the woman omnificent as she recalled her moments of pride during their battle, listing every one of Ellie and Sera’s moves against the creature, commending their tactics, that they stuck together, avoided the beasts teeth, had their timing down *impeccably* when it came to avoiding getting swept up in its windstorm—she only halted her words when their party came to a literal halt before Professor Frederic’s camp where Ellie broke off to assure him the Dragon was slain and…returning with a deal struck with the man, he bowed to her before she left him and she announced he would be assisting Leliana’s forces in studying Corypheus’s dragon*.

“Oh…Eleanor—that is excellent!” Cassandra enthused. The woman he loved was literally high on her own happiness right now and it was utterly delightful. Cassandra Pentaghast was a proud mami and they let her ramble her enthusiasm freely until she was satisfied, all the way across the Approach as they went to face their next challenge of the day. Though her exuberance was outmatched by Sera and Ellie when Cullen introduced them to what he called chilled chocolate. He’d prepared warm cocoa before bed, jarred it up and put it in the cold chest overnight, and relinquished it to the girls as they rode along to the Still Ruins, earning him brilliant smiles and, *Da! Friggin genius! and Papi! This is the best!* It was! He was pleased they enjoyed it so much, the two of them gulping it down though Ellie asked if anyone was cramping after their Dragon fight, and she passed hers off to be finished by Cassandra, Sera sharing hers with the Iron Bull…*apparently* chocolate was just the thing for post-dragon battles! It helped with muscle cramps! Oh, that made him all the more pleased, to have made something that was both enjoyable and beneficial*.

The Still Ruins were eerie as they entered the scene Varric had described to them—a battle between Venatori and demons frozen in time. The Iron Bull was…stealth personified, surprisingly enough, as he hung back from Ellie and Sera’s investigation of the place, and the Qunari unsheathed a knife he kept at his hip to attempt slitting the throat of a Venatori mage only to find whatever magic kept them in stasis made them untouchable so long as time for them stood still. Inconvenient—something felt dishonorable about going around and striking mortal blows against those who could not defend themselves, but neither did Cullen necessarily feel wholly concerned about honor when it came to Venatori or demons—the last thing Rifts needed was further reinforcement for their demons.

They really, truly did not.

It was chaos the moment they finished collecting the shards and Ellie cast to set time in motion again. The effect was immediate and the whole of the temple was full of battle…which was albeit helpful in that the Venatori and Demons were so focused on one another, they did not immediately focus on the Inquisition’s addition to their party, they killed each other off well enough.

“Hangin’ in there, Boss-girl?” the Iron Bull checked on their Inquisitor once the Rift cracked closed. Ellie stood with her hands on her knees, catching her breath, Marehis rubbing circles on her back.

Ellie nodded, her voice hoarse as she admitted, “I think that was all the Rifts I had in me today…is it okay if we head for Griffon Wing Keep and call it a day?”
“Of course, Inquisitor,” Cassandra affirmed.
“That sounds excellent da’vehnan,” Marehis softly commended, pressing a kiss to the back of the girl’s head. Oh, Cullen was relieved the girl was honest about her capabilities… just as Sera had said. He really did have the smartest girls. He’d been so fearful when he heard how many Rifts she’d conquered yesterday, he worried she’d try to seal every last one in the Western Approach today on top of a dragon slaying.
“C’mon Imekari,” Bull said, pulling Ellie to his chest when she appeared unsteady on her feet earning a bit of giggling as the girl wrapped her arms around his neck, head resting on his shoulder.
“I’m excited to meet Rylen,” Ellie said, “and I really want to touch base with Stroud and I miss Garrett…” Varric visibly cringed, he still did not care for Hawke’s first name, though his expression softened when he realized she was half conscious against the Qunari.
Varric sighed, shaking his head as he warmly assured, “That asshole misses you too Tumbles.”

…he truly did, Maker help them all. Ellie stirred in the saddle before Marehis just as Griffon Wing Keep appeared in the distance, and its impressive size was only outdone by the sheer loudness of an alarmed, equally alarming cry that broke out to echo up from the pace before the gate opened well before their party was near enough to enter and Garrett Hawke came bursting from the Inquisition’s hold shouting,
“Half-pint?!”
“Whole-pint!” Ellie gladly returned.
“You’re here!”
“Only physically!” she cheerily assured as Russel came to a halt and Hawke was at she and Marehis’s side, holding his arms up,
“Bring it here!” he invited, helping the girl down and pulling her to him to take her up in a hug. “Maker’s breath, I’ve been worried sick—Varric sent me some bullshit about you losing an entire organ.”
“I did lose an entire organ! The Red Lyrium ate it!”
Hawke looked dumbstruck before he said, “Shut up!”
Ellie smiled up at him, awing a bit before dropping her smile and reprimanding,
“Don’t tell me to shut up!” before she giggled at her efforts of playing mad.
Hawke chuckled warmly, wrapping an arm around her shoulders as he led her toward the Keep. “Then tell me everything! What the hell happened and who do I gotta kill because of it?”
Cassandra looked amused as she regarded Varric, “I trust you’re jealous Hawke’s attentions are stolen yet again?”
“Eh. We’ve seen enough of each other out here. Guy might be ignoring me for not taking him with me to Emprise du Lion but he can suck it—his ass was asleep-“
“You abandoned me like some regretful one night stand!” Hawke accused over his shoulder as their party followed him into the Keep, “How hard is it to wake me up and say, hey, great work, I’m leaving a gold piece on the nightstand and heading out, Tumbles is hurt?”
“Gold?”
“I’m worth nothing less!” Hawke insisted.
Ellie giggled as Varric conceded, “You know what, my bad—you’re right and you should say it.” Maker help them all.
Stroud was resting, Hawke said—they would see him before they made way to interfere with the Wardens gathering, he assured. But she could meet their Keep’s esteemed leader. Rylen looked well, in his element. Cullen had forewarned Ellie that the man was… focused and direct, he said as many words as needed said and little else.
It…went about as good as could be expected. Rylen looking out of depth, his face
ablaze and he could not blame the desert sun due to the silken emerald green scarf wrapped around his neck, over his head before his helmet—so, it was likely due to the one-girl ambush of their Inquisitor showering him with seemingly unending praise. Gosh it’s so great to meet him! He’s tall! Did he know he was tall? The Western Approach had been handled so well! Griffon Wing Keep was awesome! He was doing such an amazing job! She’s so proud of him! Did he like his scarf? Oh yay! Her boyfriend’s papa made it! He looks very handsome in green—Rylen and her boyfriend, she informed him.

He did not have to laugh for several minutes when he discovered the ‘papi’ she’d been referencing was Cullen. But he did. Rylen looked Cullen in the eye, looked to girl smiling up at him, and then back to Cullen before he began laughing. For possibly the first time ever in his life—it was certainly the first time Cullen ever heard him doing as much, for a moment he thought the sound was the man was yelling.

“Apologies,” Rylen excused himself, clearing his throat, “honor meeting you, Inquisitor. Need anything, I’ll be around.”

“I do have one more question,” Ellie said hopefully, as if leading up to some great request of favor… “do you like tag?”

“I…tag, miss?”

His child breathed in a startled gasp, looking bewildered and excited at the prospect, “You don’t know about Tag?! I didn’t know until I joined the Inquisition either—I can teach you if you feel like joining us!”

He politely declined, but he’d no objections to learning through example—she was Inquisitor and this was her fortress so. She had the run of the place…literally as she and Sera and Cole ran about the Keep, weaving through walkways and those at work, a few soldiers and scouts even joined in on their fun…Hawke, as well. Maker.

It looked like great fun but Ellie quietly slipped out of the game she started to go to Cassandra, catching her breath before asking if she’d like to lay down and read for a bit. The woman looked entirely in love with the notion as she led the girl off to do so. Cullen was tempted to join them, but Sera came running up to him not long after, catching herself from nearly colliding with him by bracing herself, hands on his forearms as she caught her breath, brimming with enthusiasm.

“Da- Widdle- sh- she-“

“Sweetheart, slow down—let yourself breathe a moment,” Cullen chuckled, Maker the girl was excited, she nodded as she took on a few more deep breaths and then,

“Widdle sent things—try, okay? Close your peepers!” she ordered so, he did. And a moment later he felt something sliding over his ears and resting on his nose all at once before, “Open em!”

…he opened his eyes to a darker world and it was an absolutely delightful relief for all a darker world sounded foreboding. The sunlight wasn’t torture to his eyes for the first time since crossing from forest to desert. “What…what is this?”

“Glasses! But for blockin’ out the sun”—I saw a noble priss wearin’ weirdy glasses with dark lenses in Val Royeaux, and I thought something like that might help you—lenses is obsidian,” she explained. “You um…you like ‘em?”

She let out a surprised, delighted sound when he swept her up in a hug, “I love them—Sera, you are a genius, never let anyone ever tell you otherwise. Please give Dagna my compliments,” Oh Maker, he’d have to thank the girl when they returned to Skyhold… carefully—he owed her a great deal but if he said as much she might take it as invitation to burn their dragon-proofed hold to the ground.

Blessed things—he’d seen Lyrium miners wear something similar to protect their eyes, goggles though instead of a strap around the back of his head, silver frames kept everything together and them on his ears. They looked cool as shit—in his and the Iron Bull’s opinion, Varric’s as well. Maker bless his brilliant child.

They did not see Stroud until morning, Hawke disappearing to check on the man and
inform him Ellie and her party were prepared to face the Wardens. The man looked…not well. To have the Call so constant and unrelenting, it sounded horrific but the man bore it well for all it wore on him. He offered their group a quiet greeting and Ellie invited him to sit with her, the girl speaking quietly to the man in soothing tones, asking questions, checking up on him, getting him to take on a few ginger bites of toast and potion before she took his hands and they closed their eyes, the girl offering up a soft prayer for the man and the day ahead.

“Sometimes I feel things that aren’t real either,” she confessed, “I know it’s definitely not as bad as what you’re going through, just- sometimes I feel like my Mark is spreading when it really isn’t or I’ll feel like I’m in danger when I’m safe in camp with my family. Reminding myself it isn’t real and grounding myself in things that are helps.”

“Thank you, Inquisitor,” Stroud’s voice was hoarse as he spoke.

They mounted up and road from the Keep to the camp they’d stayed in their first night in the Approach—the Wardens were not meeting far from there, and camp was a safe enough place to leave their steeds. They did not wish to announce their presence nearing the Warden fortress outright, warning them he was uncertain just what they might find, to be on their guard.

…no amount of being on guard could prepare them for the horror waiting them at the Ritual Tower.

It wasn’t a traitorous Warden leading their rituals, but a Tevinter Mage—venatori. Lacky of Corypheus, leading the Wardens in some vile ceremony, piles of their brothers and sisters lay dead around the Ritual tower, at the hands of their fellow Wardens—and as another was slain by a Warden Mage, he—Cullen was uncertain—had the man been made into a demon? Or had his sacrifice pulled a demon from the Fade?

“Bind it, as I showed you,” the Venatori mage ordered.

The Mage Warden’s eyes glowed red as he waved his hand before the demon of Rage and it…became compliant. Like a leashed mabari, it followed the Warden without so much as a roar. Oh Maker, they’d truly bound a demon. The Tevinter Mage smirked as he raised his hand likewise, a glow emitting from it before the Warden went to join his fellow Mages lining the tower, standing with…their own bound demons. How wonderful. This wasn’t fresh hell.

Cole shrank back from their party, letting out a startled cry before he vanished from sight.

“Cole?” Ellie whispered, and when she received no reply she shook herself and led their party forward determinedly.

And this Venatori knew her, knew her Mark, on sight. “Inquisitor,” he greeted her, “What an unexpected pleasure. Lord Livius Erimond, at your service.”

“You are no Warden!” Stroud accused.

“But you are,” Lord Erimond sighed, “the one Clarel let slip. And you found the Inquisitor and came to stop me…shall we see how that goes?” he wondered.

Ellie took that as leave to state her business, “Wardens—this man is lying to you! He serves an ancient Tevinter Magister who wants to unleash a Blight.”

The Lord looked on her with put-upon concern, “That’s a serious accusation, little girl. Let’s see what the Wardens think…” and then, “Wardens. Hands up.”

…Every Warden gathered that remained standing, those who had demons bound to them? Raised their hands in time with Erimonds, puppets following their master as they raised the same hand he did, “Hands down.”

Hands down it was somehow more horrifying a sight than their deceased…now seemingly lucky brethren.

“Corypheus has taken their minds,” Stroud confirmed with Ellie, aghast.

“They did this to themselves,” Erimond informed them, “You see, the Calling had the Wardens terrified. They looked everywhere for help. Of course since it was my Master who put the Calling into their little heads, we in the Venatori were prepared. I went to Clarel full of sympathy, and together we came up with a plan. Raise a demon army, march into the Deep
Roads, and kill the Old gods before they wake.”
Ellie looked to Dorian who nodded, the Tevinter man quietly confirming, “The
demon-riddled future we saw.”

“Envy gave me a preview of your plans,” Ellie said to Erimond.
“Now you know how it begins. Sadly for the Wardens, the binding rituals I taught
their Mages has a side effect. They are now my Master’s slaves.”

The man sounded crazed, his words did anyway—he spoke as if he was laying out a
perfectly rational plan, something anyone would find reasonable, insisted the Wardens chose
this, that his Master’s plying motivation was inconsequential. They were going to take down
the Old gods and put Corypheus on the Golden Throne.

“This is madness!” Solas insisted, rather ironically appealing to the man’s sense, “For
all we know, killing the Old gods could make things even worse!” They knew very well that
that was, in fact, the case.

That was only met with the mans insistence that Corypheus would rule and the
Venatori would be god-kings of the world. So. His sanity was intact, truly.

Maker, this was all very…hopeless. Terrifying—Corypheus was laying claim to the
entirety of the Wardens’ minds, binding an army of demons to his will and Erimond was
horrifically correct about one thing—Demons did not need to eat or sleep, they did not need to
heal or have convictions or conscious. Their Forces were strong and they were coming to have
the Inquisitor’s back but they weren’t here yet and…oh Maker, what if they weren’t enough?
He wasn’t certain how they were leaving this lovely…conversation? Altercation? The man
was touting his rhetoric he’d yet to attack, did he expect them to just walk away from this?
He shouldn’t.

Ellie stared at the Tevinter mage, fierce and hard as she spoke, “Release the Wardens
from their binding and surrender. I won’t ask twice.”

The man sneered at her. “No, you won’t.”

Weapons were drawn by every member of the Inquisitor’s party the moment this-
this bastard did something, some awful spell that sent Ellie’s Mark blazing, the girl to her
knees, screaming in pain.

“The Elder One showed me how to deal with you in the event you were foolish
enough to interfere again. The Mark you bear? The Anchor that lets you pass safely through
the veil? You stole that from my Master. He’s been forced to seek other ways to access the
Fade. When I bring him your head, his gratitude will be—” he cried out in surprise.

Because through his assault, Ellie pushed to rise up and stand on her own two feet,
Marked hand raised and tugging to tear a hole in the Veil, a Rift that cracked open before the
Tevinter Mage and blasting him onto his back side, scrambling to his feet and wincing as he
clutched at his side and ordered, “Kill them!” before fleeing. Like a coward.

Ellie drew her staff and cast Barrier over their numbers, falling back to join her fellow
Mages. Wardens backed by Demons were formidable and he prayed his Forces were prepared
—he felt confident in their abilities, but Maker preserve them all.

“Ellie?” Cullen’s voice overlapped Marehis and Sera’s,
“Da’vehnan—”
“Inky!” as their party rounded on their Inquisitor.
“Da’len, let me see,” Solas pled, reaching for Ellie’s Marked hand.

The girl was pale, and breathless from battle but she held out her hand for him to
examine, the Elf calling Fade magic into his hand even as she assured, “I’m alright, it doesn’t
hurt anymore he…I dunno, it felt like kind of like what Corypheus did in Haven, but my Mark
doesn’t feel weird or different, I don’t think it has any new tricks or anything—all the ouch
with none of the reward,” she supposed, “so that’s fun,” she offered with false cheer, a
sardonic grin.

“You did very well against his attack I…I am proud of you, da’vehnan. I detect
nothing different in the Mark,” Solas reported to their relief, gently squeezing her hand a few
times and raising it to press a kiss to her knuckles, looking very much the epitome of remorse.

“You’re certain you’re alright sweet girl?” Marehis fretted.

Ellie nodded. “I really am okay—is anyone hurt?”

“We’re well, Eleanor,” Cassandra assured, resting a hand on the girl’s back in a need to make contact with the girl.

“Okay, what now? The Wardens are…in it really deep,” she sighed, looking to Stroud, “Now what?”

“He said this was just a test,” Stroud said, “there is an abandoned Warden fortress near by, a place he could properly unleash an entire army—Adamant Fortress.”

Ellie nodded, “If you can give us a location, we can have scouts lay eyes on the Fortress, give our soldiers orders to meet us there.” And then, sympathetic, she rested a hand on his forearm, “I’m really sorry, Stroud. About all of this, I know that can’t have been easy to see. Thank you—for being so brave, and going for help. We will help them, I promise.”

Hawke...looked like he was holding his tongue, flinching as he caught himself quite literally from speaking for a moment before saying, “C’mon half-pint. Let’s get out of here.”

Sera wrapped the younger girl up in a hug—cheek to cheek with the girl as she hoisted her up to hold her high against her chest and walk the bridge from the Ritual Tower to head for camp.

“Sera!”

“No Seraing!” Sera insisted. “I’m a ruddy hypocrite but I don’t freaking care! You’re not allowed to Inquisitor until we get back to base and you gotta be all ‘official letter writing’. Right now you’re my little sister who just got Mark tortured by some piss-bucket sack of shite I’m freaking freezing on sight and blasting full of arrows the next time I see him, I fucking swear.” She did indeed.

“Sissy I’m o—”

“That wasn’t okay.”

The air around Sera felt caustic, trembling with her fright-mixed-outrage, Ellie managed to wrap her arms around Sera’s middle and let her sister...deal with the things she was feeling, the overwhelming need to put the girl in a place of protection. She only relinquished her hold to place the girl on her feet when they got to camp and intoning, “Stay with muma,” before helping her into Russel’s saddle before Marehis climbed up after her.

“Cole—carino, they’re all gone, nobody’s going to hurt you,” Ellie called from astride her steed as she waited for her party members to mount their own horses. Cole...did not make an appearance but Ellie nodded as if in response to someone.

Everyone was silent as they made their return to Griffon Wing Keep.

...it was the quiet before the storm.

Marehis helped Ellie down from Russel, and Cassandra went to her, putting an arm around her shoulders to walk with her to the Keep’s requisitions table so she could send word to Leliana. Their party followed through the Keep...part way—to the first level above the small marketplace set up just inside the Keep’s gate while Cassandra and Ellie continued onward and up, to the highest level while everyone else came to a stop—some out of necessity, and some out of curiosity of just what that necessity was.

Several things broke out at once.

Cullen startled when it started—quite literally all in the same moment. Marehis was railing at Solas—he’d sensed the Orb’s power near! Why hadn’t he been prepared to defend the girl! How had he not warned them the Orb could perform such a horrifying ritual—binding people! Honestly! Hawke was getting into it with Stroud, rounding on the man and asking what the bloody hell was wrong with the Wardens?! How could they have gotten caught up in all this mess! How could they stand idle by and willingly participate in the murder of their brethren, let Corypheus lay claim to their minds?! Stroud wanted to save them? He should be more concerned with stopping them!

And over it all—volume wise—was Sera screaming, “Cole! What the fuck?!”
“Sera—” Cullen started—Ellie was certain to hear and she would be swift to defend
the boy, he felt certain.

“No—no I want to know!” Sera snapped, shouting at the sky, “I want to know why
the hell you left Inky! You left her to face that shite bastard! He hurt her! You’re her friend—
her ally! You’re ruddy not supposed to run away when things go sideways! So why the hell
did you—”

“I’m sorry I’m sorry I’m sorry I’m sorry!” dropped from the boy’s lips as
he materialized before Sera, clutching at his head as if he were in pain, “I- I was scared I
would hurt you! All of you! Th-th- they were binding demons—if they bound me I would
have to do whatever they said and they would say to hurt you! I- I’m sorry!”

Sera looked a bit winded at the notion. “Oh.” And then, “Cuddly I…shite, okay. I
didn’t- I didn’t think about that frig. Well I did—I—“

“You wanted to protect me, and then you were mad at me when I ran away,” Cole
said, “I wanted to protect you too, more than I want you to not be mad with me.”

Sera nodded. “I…m’not mad at you anymore. I’m sorry I yelled at you, binding shite
was scary.”

“I’m sorry you yelled at me too—your throat is sore now. Can I make it tea? Papa
taught me tea. He taught me breakfast food! For Maryden, but she isn’t here, and you eat
breakfast too. Do you think she would be mad at me for making another girl breakfast?”

“…s’long as we’re not bumpin’ bits, I don’t think she’ll mind,” Sera supposed,
looking to the adults still…well. It was rather the quarrel…near-brawl they were witnessing.
Varric was in the mix with Stroud and Thom was coming to the Warden’s defense, while
Vivienne backed Marehis in her tirade against Solas…and the fights seemed to be coming
together as Solas had heard Stroud make some defence of his brethren—that they were scared
and this seemed like their only option, and the Dalish man interjected that their plan was
foolhearty and cowardly.

Which Madam de Fer met with the remark that that was certainly the pot calling the
kettle black.

Dorian turned to the Iron Bull, pushing his lover by the chest as he yelled, “I’m
outraged with you too!”

“…what I do?” the Qunari wondered.

“Nothing of note—but everyone’s fighting except us and you know I love a good
heated argument, it really does check all my boxes.”

“Hell yeah it checks all your boxes!” the Iron Bull returned as if railing at the man,
engaging him in his…put upon…heated argument. Sunglasses did little to shield his eyes from
the sight.

Sera seemed equally disturbed, “Yeah Cuddly lets go get tea—you can make me n’
Inky toast and let these aresholes cool off or…have a mass orgy, whatever they’re doing.”

“I believe I’ll join you,” Cullen said, slipping past the other adults and following Sera
and Cole to saner ground.

Thankfully, the higher levels of their Keep were quieter, the arguments unfolding
below rather muted, inaudible to Cullen’s ears, and Ellie was rather absorbed in her letter
writing as Cullen joined she and Cassandra, wrapping his arms around the Seeker’s waist and
resting his chin on her shoulder to watch the girl be lost in her work, so much so she was half
way through with another sheet of parchment before she stopped herself, set down her quill,
and looked up at him, clearing her throat.

“Papi. This is for you. My brain is not working,” she deduced as she handed him half
a letter addressed…to him. With orders he be prepared that his Forces may well be rerouted to
Adamant. Which…Leliana would handle, and too uh…well, Cullen would do so with her
when he received confirmation from her scouts—he knew to do this as he was, in fact,
present.

“Your brain works just wonderfully mija,” he encouraged as he released hold of
Cassandra to rub circles on the girl’s back.

“Here Inky—brain toast!” Sera said, as she and Cole came to the Requisitions table, Sera set a plate of warm toast on the Requisitions table and the Spirit slipping around Cullen to come up behind Ellie and wrap his arms around her middle, cheek resting atop her head,

“I’m sorry I abandoned you,” he offered, sounding miserable with himself.

“Oh Carino!” Ellie sympathized, “I’m proud of you for protecting yourself—I would never want you to go into a situation you weren’t wiling to face. If The Iron Bull had woken up this morning and didn’t wanna go dragon slaying? He was free to stay in camp! We discovered demon binding today—that’s scary enough as a Human, so it’s probably at least a little extra scary for someone on the demon-Spirit spectrum.”

“He lied.”

“Who?”

“Erimond. He said he was full of sympathy when he approached Clarel. He was full of Pride, felt boastful and triumphant, glad at their suffering. You are full of sympathy—compassion. You are my best friend. I wish I had not left you with him—I should have stayed and warned you! I did not realize until too late he was going to use it, but I saw his thoughts he-“ Cole shuddered, “he was pleased you showed up, he was hoping to use the Mark against you, he wanted to hand you over to Corypheus himself,” he flinched when Ellie blanched at his words, “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to make it worse!”

“Mmm…no worries,” Ellie decided as she swung about in her chair to rise and take her friends hands. “We’ve handled everything we can for now, we’ll figure this out and get through it,” she promised before wondering, “You made tea right?”

“Oh, yeah—bit hot out for it, huh?”

“Oh no that’s perfect!” Ellie assured. And then, “Let’s see if everyone feels like a cup to soothe their throats—I’m pretty sure they’re argued out by now, huh?” she suggested, giggling as she pulled Sera and Cole along to gather their…squabbling party members Ellie was apparently well aware of.

Which left Cullen privy to a sound he’d only heard less than a handful of occasions in the time he’d come to know her—Cassandra dissolved into giggles.

Over some private amusement, apparently, but she said, “Ahh, Eleanor does so have a way of making me feel I am not the sole Seeker of Truth left in the Inquisition.”

Adamant Fortress was full of surprises.
Some great—absolutely amazing, in Ellie's opinion.
Some…bad surprises—very bad.
The first surprise?…they found all their missing Wardens. Every last one. Great-bad, that. Maker, she prayed there were those who could be saved. For now, they all appeared to be enemies, tough ones at that, her shoulder still smarted from where a demon possessed mage came down on her staff with his sword to force her back.

Her Mark still…it didn't hurt worse, not really, but it still burned a bit harsher when she looked on Adamant. Psychological pain, she thought—the fear of the potential for the Mark to be tested, tormented waited within its walls and she was not looking forward to that.

The second surprise? Kind of proved it was just her brain psyching itself out because she definitely didn’t notice her Mark so much anymore once the following occurred.

Papi had just finished giving off orders—he was in his element*, had his trebuchets calibrated just right and their soldiers already working the breach the walls of Adamant, sounds of chaos and battle breaking out all around, her gaze was still trained on a Dalish soldier climbing the ladder to the top of Adamant’s walls as Cullen led the battering ram forward to work on breaking down the gate—she recognized him from Haven and she let up a silent prayer for him, one of many she’d just been cycling through since they got here.

Until a strong arm wrapped around her waist, a…a somehow familiarly unfamiliar
voice in her ear greeting, “What’s a beautiful girl like doing on a battlefield like this?”

“A what?”

“Excuse you-“ she stopped as she was whirled about to look at- “Cremisius!” He-! He was here! And his voice!

He smiled warmly, brown eyes alight with amusement as he chuckled as she popped up on her toes to kiss him! He was getting all the kisses! Within reason because they…they were doing something right? Oh yeah. Wardens, demon mind control, all that. But Cremisius was here! And that was amazing and terrifying because he was here and if anything happened to him she might actually lose her entire mind.

“Did I startle you?” he wondered, albeit apologetic.

Ellie giggled, “Your voice, guapo! I didn’t realize you were you! I mean you still sound like you just- like-“

Oh he was smiling so big! “Deeper now, right? You uh…you like it?” he wondered, “s’only just starting out, Healer Goode says.”

“I’ve always loved your voice, but I love it now too, even more since you love it more! You sound so handsome!”

He was blushing! And he looked proud! He was so cute! “Yeah?” he checked.

“Yeah!”

“Maker, I’ve missed you El. But uh…got our work cut out for us, don’t we?” he supposed.

“Mmm, here to report to me, Lieutenant?” Ellie asked.

He nodded, “Yes, Inquisitor. Chargers will head up the second wave once you and your party move on the fortress. We move at your command.”

“Not to sexually harass a subordinate but that sounds like a great deal more fun if we were in a completely different context.”

He laughed softly at that, “Well, not to be a sexually harassed subordinate, but I move at your command in all contexts,” he assured, and then, pressing a kiss to her forehead.

Gosh, she loved this.

And gosh, she hated this, “Be careful,” please please please.

“You too, lovely.”

“I’ll certainly try.”

A hand rested on her shoulder as Cremisius let her go, Cassandra. "Lieutenant," she greeted, pleased to see him, he smiled and nodded to the Seeker before jogging off to regroup with the Chargers, lead the next wave. "Are you ready, Eleanor?"

Nope! But there was no turning back now, the Wardens needed stopped. Corypheus needed stopped. And the battering ram was doing its thing, so, "Let’s do it.”

They did it. They really did.

She could not be more grateful for the Rune bracer, Maker. Maker. There were so many Rifts! Freshly torn and tearing, demons everywhere. Thankfully there were some Wardens who saw reason—Ellie was able to actually speak to them, and they listened! Had already wanted nothing to do with whatever was going on and she was relieved her talk with Papi hadn’t been in vain—she’d had an on-the-road War Room meeting, speaking to him as her Commander and making certain their Forces wouldn’t kill Wardens on sight, that if they saw any retreat or not fighting to leave them in peace, let them pass, fight at their side.

Unfortunately- oh Maker, she felt like- just horrible. The ritual had already begun by the time they broke through to the center of the fortress, in time to see another horrible binding in progress, a Warden slitting another Warden’s throat, a sacrifice for this- this garbage. She was so relieved that the Wardens stopped after that—that Clarel listened when Stroud spoke, told them they had been tricked.

And then…just as the Wardens were seeing sense, just when she thought yes, the Wardens would be on their side now, they could detain Erimond and figure out how to move forward from here…double surprise. A surprise guest. And a surprise trip.
“My Master thought you might come here Inquisitor,” Erimond called out to Ellie, stamping the butt of his staff against the stone underfoot with a metallic thunk…thunk…thunk “he sent me this to welcome you!”

So. The surprise guest was Corypheus’s dragon. She felt badly when they had to slay dragons—it wasn’t their fault! They were big and dangerous, that’s how the Maker made them! But she didn’t necessarily feel quite so badly about Corypheus’s dragon…or maybe it was that she felt badly for it and wanted it freed one way or another—it was full of Red Lyrium, under Corypheus’s control, bound to him probably in the same way the Wardens would’ve ended up, poor thing. Poor scary thing—yikes! Tia said braiding her hair was a protective thing, would help save it from the desert’s heat, but she didn’t think that applied to the heat of Dragon fire pouring into the halls of Adamant! Holy crap!

—

Surprise trip? Most of Ellie’s trips were surprises.
One right into the Fade in physical form? Was a new definition of surprise trip.
A very trippy trip!

As in she wasn’t sure if she was upside down or the world was because she was…standing and hanging? And everyone else was—she had to crane her neck around to lay eyes on as many of her party members as possible, everyone voicing their confusion, standing on different dimensional planes—some sideways some on the sky ground? Which was the ground ground? She couldn’t think over the sound and sensation of her rune bracer having a total meltdown because uhh…well. They were inside a Rift. Oh crap, crap! She tried to keep her cool but her breathing was panicky as she hastily tugged at her bracer to pull it off her wrist, breathing a short raspy sigh of relief when the Runestones stopped reacting the moment they were no longer in direct contact with her Mark-

Ouch ouch ouch ouch! Okay—Lyrium burns are more serious than magical ones, she had to remind herself—that was all she would be getting out of putting the bracer back on, the stones were already beginning to crack, they needed replacing before she put it back on again holy crap. She would just have to suck it up she affirmed as she tucked the bracer safely away—it wasn’t like there wasn’t plenty of things going on right now to distract her.

“No,” she heard Cole’s voice beneath her on…she was pretty sure it was the actual ground. He started quiet but growing louder with panic, “no no no no no no! This is the Fade! B-b-but I’m stuck!” he moved, pacing and then stretching like the movement was supposed to make him portal but, “I can’t-! Why can’t I?” He looked up, his eyes meeting Ellie’s, oh carino! He was so scared! “This place is wrong! I made myself forget when I made myself real, but I know it wasn’t like this!” he insisted.

Sera had let out a startled shriek and Ellie had reached out toward her and she learned very quickly where the ground was. not under her feet, very much under her head, “Shit shit shit!” she screamed as the Fade dropped her on her head, flopping onto her back—ouch! The Fade real-hurt! Rude!

Everyone was on the same level now though, so, that was nice. Cassandra was already on her feet, “Eleanor?! Sera?!”

“Da’lens, are you hurt?” Marehis implored as she stood, going to Sera and helping her stand, rubbing her arms to comfort the Elf girl as she stared wide eyed at their surroundings. “Come here da’mi, stay calm,” she invited Cole to join them, wrapping an arm around his shoulders.

Cassandra was at Ellie’s side, holding out her hand for Ellie, she groaned as she rose to her feet, leaning against the woman for a second, “Ouch. Is everyone alright?” Ellie asked. “Alright definitely isn’t on the scale anymore babe,” the Iron Bull said. “What the fuck happened?”

“I’m so sorry I-! We were falling and it seemed like either getting crushed to death or crushed to death. I just kind of…it felt like a reflex more than a clear intentional thought—I
opened a Rift and we fell through.” Crap crap crap! It had been such a stupid move—what if she’d accidentally killed them all?! She’d…she’d gone through the Fade physically once before right?

“Peace, da’vehnan,”…okay, deeper voices all around. Solas’s voice was strange and-holy crap! Or holy…Wolf? He was kind of…glowing. And his eyes were fiery in a literal sense, black flames consuming them.

“P-papi?” Ellie gulped, only slightly reassured by Cassandra’s quiet assurance, “He is alright, he behaved similarly at the Quarry.”

“Your solution was sound, we have found a way into the Fade, and we will certainly find a way out—we need only find a Rift.”

…Like the great honking one they want their demon army to come busting through. Okay. Yeah. “I’m beyond sorry you guys—we’ll stick together and find our way out, I promise.”

“This is wholly unpleasant Eleanor but at least we are alive, there is…hope yet,” Vivienne allowed, strained but she was trying for comfort.

Varric sighed as he ran a hand over his face, “Anything ringing any bells for you, Tumbles? You were here like this once before already?”

She tried to think—really she did! But…nothing! Ugh! “I’m sorry, I still don’t remember anything, not between arriving at the Conclave and waking up in Haven’s cells.”

But she’d also been here recently, the um, more natural way. And…nope. Ellie tried banishing the never ending walkways of burning stone that wound the landscape before them, the Breach-green sky overhead, replace them with- with something! Anything! Haven? Ava’s cabin? Um…her quarters? Skyhold—papi’s office! A chilly afternoon in the upstairs part, warm and safe, bundled and taking a break from it all, warm cocoa, and books—sometimes reading hurt papi’s eyes but when he could, he always picked the best stories to read, ones he’d enjoyed when he was around her age, and when he couldn’t? She’d read, feel this heady pride that she could…pretty well now, if she did say so herself! C’mon—focusing on the feelings associated with a place made it easier to shape, but…no such luck.

Being in the Fade physically royally sucked.

“Oh—lets take stock,” Ellie said, taking Cassandra’s hand and reaching for Sera’s, everyone Circled up and joined hands. “We’re alive. No one’s badly hurt?” she checked, looking around and everyone nodded, “We’re not hurt. We’re together. We’re in the Fade—my portal opened in Adamant, so. We’re still there just…on the other side of the veil. We’ll get our bearings, and find the Rift out.” She squeezed Cassandra’s hand, “I have it on good authority that the Maker is with us, even in the Fade.”

Cassandra smiled gently, squeezing her hand back, “The Inquisitor is correct. We will find a way.”

Ellie took a deep breath and led them forward—right now their best bet was the great honking portal they could see all the way on the other side of this place, something like the Breach swirling in the sky above what she hoped would be their way out.

There was this conflict, where her mind was blanking but she had this feeling, head to toe, her body racked with this sense of overwhelming deja vu every hair stood on end, her skin broken out entirely in gooseflesh and she felt the imperative need to run and keep going because- something. It was the weirdest thing, her body remembering something her brain couldn’t even produce a scrap of memory to support what.

And if she wasn’t already scared…she definitely was when mami—Cassandra, a woman who ran headlong at Dragons and would spit in Corypheus’s eye if given the chance—stopped dead in her tracks, pale and wide-eyed, Stroud stopping to stare at…an elderly Chantry Mother? No…her headdress was a little different. Bigger like…

“…is that?” Stroud breathed.

“I greet you Warden,” the woman spoke with a thick Orlesian accent. Oh her voice
was nice, soothing. “And you, Champion.”


…Divine-

Wait what?!

Oh, she smiled so warmly at mami, “Cassandra.”

This- this was impossible, wasn’t it? It’d been months since the Conclave there was no way someone survived that long abandoned anywhere let alone the Fade, right? And it would be just like some horrible demon to take a trustworthy shape to trick them. “Mami, you knew the Divine—is this really her?” Ellie asked.

“I- I don’t know,” Cassandra confessed, “it is said that sometimes souls of the dead will sometimes linger in the Fade but we know demons lie—beware Inquisitor.”

“I fear the Divine is indeed dead,” Stroud said, “it is likely we face a spirit or a demon.”

“You think my survival impossible yet here you stand alive in the Fade yourselves. In truth, proving my existence either way would require time we do not have,” this Maybe Justinia reasoned, looking to Ellie. “I am here to help you—you do not remember what happened at the Temple of Sacred Ashes, Inquisitor.”

Ellie nodded, “No, I don’t.”

“The memories you lost were taken by the demon that serves Corypheus. It is the nightmare you forget upon waking, it feeds off memories of fear and darkness, growing fat upon the terror. The false Calling that terrifies the Wardens into making such a grave mistakes—it’s work.”

“I would gladly avenge the insult this nightmare has dealt my brethren,” Stroud swore.

“You will have your chance Grey Warden. This place of darkness is its lair.”

“Corypheus seems to have a lot of demons at his disposal,” Ellie spoke up, “do you have any idea how he’s got control over so many?”

“I know not how he commands an army of demons. It may come from the Blight itself but the Nightmare serves willingly for Corypheus has brought much terror to this world. He was one of the Magisters who unleashed the Blight on this world, was he not?” that had Dorian swearing under his breath, a quiet Kaffas that had Vivienne smacking him on the arm with the back of her hand for saying a swear in front of the might-be Divine. “Now every child’s cry as the archdemon circles, every Dwarf’s whimper in the Deep Roads—the Nightmare has fed well.”

“Well, we’re doing our best to put a stop to him,” Ellie promised, “we just have to get out of here.”

“That is why I found you,” she explained, “when you entered the Fade at Haven, the demon took a part of you. Before you do anything else, you must recover it.”…a part of her? Ellie didn’t feel quite so bad about startling when Sera yelped and the Iron Bull let off a quiet fuck shit fuck that earned Vivienne a reproachful oi! Look from Dorian for the woman not getting smacky with the Qunari for his swears, but maybe that was because it was jarring for everyone—the several pops sounding around them like Rifts tearing all around as tiny Rift-esque orbs appeared at the could-be Justinia’s words, “These, are your memories, Inquisitor.”

…

Well she wasn’t sure she wanted them now. Maker. And what if it was some kind of trap? They weren’t her memories they were little…Fade…poison balls? Ellie cleared her throat, looking tentatively to Solas, gosh he still looked scary but he was still, “Papi?”

He held up his hand toward one of the orbs, palm glowing green momentarily as he examined it and announced, “I cannot access their contents but they are benign, da’vehnan. They do come from you—something belonging to you is in them, this is merely how they have been preserved in the Fade. interact with them how you would a Rift and when you’ve done so with them all, they will piece together their contents in your mind,” he was certain.
“If those things hurt her…” Marehis spoke in warning, glaring at Solas, awe. Go mami! Solas chuckled as if he found the threat endearing.

“Be careful Ellie-girl,” Thom said.

“If they hurt you I’m puttin’ arrows right in Justin-ie-frig’s tits!” Sera warned their group, bow at the ready.

Ellie smiled reassuringly and then…went for it. Okay. Gosh, there were a lot of them. Just what had she gotten up to in the Temple of Sacred Ashes? Were they all different memories or were they just part of one big memory? Her Mark thrummed, burned a little as she cast on them and collected them, like sealing the teeniest Rifts. Awe, that was kind of cute!

…the sensation of being stabbed in the brain and punched in the stomach was not cute. Her memory…how much of it she saw, was definitely not cute.

Wardens standing idle by while Justinia floated several feet above the ground, arms held outstretched by some kind of awful magic trapping her as Corypheus approached. Keep the sacrifice still did not sound any less frightening than it had the first time Ellie heard this at the Breach…

Though these were her memories so. She supposed the Breach was her second time hearing it. Gosh this was a literal mindfuck.

Corypheus had the Orb, activating it and green light shot out to Justinia, seemed to be pulling on her as she cried for someone to help her.

And what she got, was Ellie.

“What’s going on here?!”

“No, Eleanor! Run while you can! Warn them!”

And Corypheus’s attention turned on Ellie, “We have an intruder. Kill her now.”

Justinia took that as an opening, summoning all her might into resisting the hold of her bindings, she slapped the Orb of Destruction from Corypheus’s hand and Ellie—She—she just meant to— it was a weapon—his weapon. She’d done what she might have done any time she faced someone dangerous, if they lost their weapon and she could grab it, keep it away from them? that made sense right? But this just…she felt like she was watching a complete idiot. Because in the moment before it happened, Ellie knew exactly how this ended.

Ellie chased after the Orb of Destruction like it was a ball she was supposed to catch. Took it in her hands.

And it was in her hand—her now-Marked hand that the Orb—Her ears were ringing though the sound subsided as, “-vehnan?!” Marehis’s hands were on her shoulders as her voice warped into focus along with Sera’s screaming,

“You’re fucking dead you freaking ghost!”

“Sera, control yourself!” Cassandra snapped, “Eleanor?”

She—

It was her—

Something sort of…quieted in her mind. It was pushed to the forefront of her brain that right now they needed to get out of here. She had to get them home safe and— and they could deal with her later. She cleared her throat, blinking away tears, her voice felt raw as she spoke*, “I saw the Temple of Sacred Ashes—what we heard at the Breach? Wardens… Wardens were with Corypheus and he was holding the Divine captive, sacrificing her to the Orb and she was calling for help and I…I guess I was the only one who heard her,” what good that did her. “I interrupted them.”

That got Hakwe and Stroud bickering again—that this was all the Warden’s fault, Stroud defending that they must have been under Corypheus’s mind control or something and—

“Hey! We can argue about whose fault this is later!” Ellie snapped, pointing to the breach-esque light over the distant portal, “Right now we have to move—there’s an assload of Fade between us and that Rift. We need to stay focused and work together!”
The men looked chagrined at that, “The Inquisitor’s correct,” Stroud allowed. “Sorry honey,” Hawke said. “I will prepare the path ahead,” Justinia’s spirit said as she vanished. Ellie turned on her heel and started leading them forward, Sera right on her heels, “You okay Inky? You need potion? That looked like it hurt.” Ellie felt like if she opened her mouth to speak again she might cry because—Sera was being so nice to her. Everyone was—she didn’t need Cole’s abilities, she could practically feel the waves of concern coming off her party members…her… People who loved her like family. She messed up. She messed it all up before it even began. They were going to hate her. Cremisius was going to hate her. She…she already hated her, so. Ellie just shook her head ‘no’, she didn’t need potion and kept it moving. She was going to do this—it hurt, felt like her memories were killing her and she wasn’t sure if that was literally or just the pure devastation of it all, but that wasn’t going to stop her from getting them out. They could do this—she could do this. She was good at that now, pain had helped when mami was hurt—she’d used it to keep her awake and focused, sharp so she could handle anything that happened, she could do the same with this for now.

Ahh, we have a visitor, a deep voice crooned, echoing through the Fade, some silly little girl has come to steal the fear I kindly lifted from her shoulders. You should have thanked me and left your fear where it lay forgotten. You think the pain will make you stronger. What fool filled your mind with such drivel?

She was. If he had a problem with that, he could fuck himself. He really could.

Not only was this place full of stupid demons and her stupid memories, it was full of this jerks creepy voice! Taunting them the whole way.

Are you afraid, Cole? I can help you forget. Just like you help other people. We’re so very much alike, you and I.

“You shut up!” Ellie snapped at the sky, it felt good to yell! “Cole is nothing like you! He’s brave—he doesn’t have to hide behind some ancient evil Magister and an army of demons! He’s strong enough to stand on his own and loving enough to know he doesn’t have to! He’s brave and compassionate and you’re a coward and cruel!”

He laughed at her! That was fine, he could laugh all he liked—he should enjoy himself in his final hours after all. Or maybe not. Your Inquisitor is a fraud, Cassandra. Yet more evidence there is no Maker, that all your ‘faith’ has been for naught.

“Don’t you talk about my mami*! It doesn’t matter what I am! There is a Maker and He’s with us!”

“Yeah—piss off!” Sera shouted though she whimpered when, Sera. Sera. Sera… If you shoot an arrow at me, I’ll know where you are.

Ellie took her hand, putting the older girl behind her as they marched, “If you know where she is you know where all of us are you’re just coming to get your ass beat! Not a thing yet has been able to beat us when we all work together!”

“We’re gonna shoot you right in the danglers!” Sera cheered.

Ah, there’s nothing like a Rainier. Like mother like son—turning over new leaves are we? You spent years fooling everyone you ever encountered, you know well you can just as easily fool yourself.

“Don’t listen to him,” Ellie said over her shoulder, “you have changed. You’re brave, and honest, and you’re atoning for what you’ve done, same as papi.”

Who Nightmare apparently knew all about. Dirh ma, harellan. Ma banal enasalin. Mar solas ena mar din. She didn’t quite get all of that but the gist? He called him out for being a Trickster—mocking him for surviving the fall of his people, that he continued on to
this day.

“Banal nadaas,” Solas assured.

“He is right—I don’t know all of what he just said but the persistent thing? You’re strong, papi, to have survived all that you have. He plays king in this place your—crap! She almost said ‘made’ but switched it around to, ‘ve mastered. We’ll show him whose boss, huh?”

“You’ll show him, Boss-girl,” the Iron Bull encouraged.

The Qunari will make a lovely host for one of my minions. Or maybe I will ride his body myself.

“Nobody rides the Iron Bull without permission—t’s called consent asshole! The Iron Bull’s way too strong to ever give in to you—he’s got the most brilliant mind of anyone I’ve ever met! He’s dependable and in control and you’re going to regret threatening him just you watch!”

He sounded like he was getting more and more frustrated, each time he spoke like…it reminded her the way Anya would growl when she was upset with a bone being snatched out of reach during play—she would be content as she almost got her teeth around it and then grumpy the moment it was just out of range. Huh…this asshole feeds off of fear, right? Well he can’t eat if there’s nothing to give him maybe…maybe this was helping? It wasn’t just a way to vent her frustrations—this jerk was trying to scare her friends, her family and she wasn’t going to let him!

Warden Stroud. How does it feel to have devoted your life to the Wardens, only to watch them fall? Or worse—to know that you were responsible for their destruction? When the next Blight comes, will they curse your name?

“The only destruction Stroud is to blame for is yours you big baby!” Ellie snapped, “It was brave of you to come for help—what you’ve done is our only shot at saving the Warden’s future.”

Did you think you mattered, Hawke? Did you think anything you ever did mattered? You couldn’t even save your city, how could you expect to strike down a god? Fenris is going to die, just like your family, and everyone you ever cared about.

“Have you met Hawke? His jawline could strike down a god!” Ellie assured, “Fenris is fine—and you still have family!”

“Yeah I do babe, thanks,” Hawkes said.

Once again, Hawke is in danger because of you, Varric. You found the Red Lyrium. You brought Hawke here.

“Hawke is in danger because of you, you demented freak! You and Corypheus—the only crimes Varric is guilty of is having devastating chest hair!”

“Hell yeah—you tell him Tumbles,” Varric encouraged.

What's it like living as an apostate, Vivienne? Do you really think you'll reclaim your power in the Circle... at your age?

“Tia—good people are like wine, they get better over time and you’re one of the finest people I know! Your beauty isn’t what dominates on the battlefield—it’s your magical control, and your experience is what will maintain your power in the Circle system when it starts up again—your flawless skin and snatched waistline are just sugar and cherries on top for you.”

“Thank you darling,” Vivienne said.

Greetings, Dorian... It is Dorian, isn’t it? For a moment, I mistook you for your father.

“That’s how genetics work genius—thankfully yours mean you’re super handsome tio! People aren’t their parents and parents aren’t perfect. What your father did was wrong—you’d never do that if you were a father. You’d never want to hurt someone you love.”

“Eleanor as much as I do appreciate your endeavors to quell our fears, the thought of fatherhood is the upmost terrifying thing,” Dorian sardonically informed her. He would be a
great papi some day if that was something he ever wanted!

*Mmm, Marehis. Your ward is doomed and you know it—you’ve been fooled at every turn, failed at every turn. Corypheus will take every one you love because you will hand them to him.*

“What the fuck did I say?!” Ellie shouted skyward, “Don’t you talk about my mami you stupid asshole! If I wasn’t already planning on killing you—you’re so dead now! Double dead!”

Ugh! He was going down! They were going to kill him and his stupid demon army! Even if they were made up of mostly Spiders!

Justinia was waiting for them at the final pass to the heart of the demon’s lair. More little memory orbs waiting with her. Oh Maker…did she have to?

She did. She knew it. So.

This time it wasn’t…she wasn’t sure. It wasn’t quite so bad? She kind of remembered it already, vaguely. Running—she’d been in a place like this before—in Nightmare’s realm, just like he claimed. It was how she escaped the Temple—she’d fallen into a portal, she and Justinia both and they ran, running for their lives from Fearlings, Spiders. They were almost to this Rift, it was this steep climb to it and Ellie almost didn’t make it but…but Justinia pulled her up—and then just before they could escape something grabbed a hold of the Divine, stronger than Ellie who grasped her arm and—

“Go,” the woman had pled, releasing her hold on Ellie’s arm and- and she couldn’t hold on to her! She…

She was too weak. In more ways than one. She hadn’t been strong enough to save her, hadn’t been strong enough to stay and try to fight she just…ran.

Ellie rubbed at her forehead as she looked to Justinia, “It…it was you. Or…it was JustiniaThey thought it was Andraste sending me from the Fade, but it was the Divine behind me,” but…there was no way anyone saw a woman standing directly behind Ellie in the Rift before she fell from it—Justinia had been snatched way. Unless…oh. Maybe that was when this…whatever this was, Spirit? Came to be. “And then you—she died.”

The Spirit stared at her for a long moment before admitting, “Yes.” The Divine’s visage dropped then, leaving a shimmering spirit in her wake.

“So this creature is nothing more than a Spirit?” Stroud asked.

“You don’t say!” Hawke snapped at him.

“I am sorry if I disappoint you.”

“No matter what you are, you’ve helped us today—thank you,” Ellie said.

Not…everyone was in a grateful mood. Hawke and Stroud went at it again—the Wardens were responsible for Justinia’s death! They were under Corypheus’s control! Ellie wanted to beat her head against a wall and it didn’t really help that everyone joined in—differing opinions on how to handle to Wardens! They should sent them away—they were dangerous! They should keep them around—what if the Blight returned?! “We can argue once we’ve escaped! I’m not saying it again!” Ellie warned.

“Inquisitor!” Stroud said…in warning too.

More fearlings. Yay. Because there weren’t enough of those, obviously.

They had to fight them, all the way to the Nightmare demons…nest? It looked like a nest and Papa Aclassi had lied—there was currently a spider as big as Skyhold’s castle Ellie was pretty sure.

"You must go, through the portal and slam the rift shut behind you," Justinia's Spirit ordered, "it is the only way to stop this, only then will Nightmare lose his hold on the Wardens!" And Justinia’s Spirit surged forward as she made one final request, "If you would, please tell Leliana: I am sorry, I failed you too," as she clashed a Fear demon already on the field, and then with the Nightmare itself, disappearing with a great explosion that blasted the thing good!

Just…not quite good enough.
The Fear demon was a literal nightmare to fight. Big and floating and swift to vanish just when it felt like they might be gaining ground on him, and Maker, those fearling things just kept coming and coming-

In droves. The moment Fear demon was down, demons began swarming in droves and the biggest one was staring them down with all its many eyes and Stroud called out, "We need to clear a path!" as everyone began hightailing it to the portal.

"Go! I'll cover you!" Hawke ordered.

"No! You were right, the Grey Wardens caused this, a Warden must-"

"A Warden must help them rebuild!" Hawke snapped, "That's your job!" he insisted as he looked upon Nightmare, "Corypheus is mine!"

She wished she could stay back, really. Someone had to and-

Hawke had a sister, a lover waiting for him, and Varric - Varric would be just- he already might never forgive her as it stood but he would never forgive her for killing his best friend and Stroud...there was this look in his eyes. Hawke was prepared to lay down his life, Stroud? He was ready to die.

The Inquisitor settled their arguing a third and final time. "Stroud."

"Go!" Ellie ordered, "Everyone move!"

"Da'len-" Mami reached for her.

"Go with Sera! Everyone out first that's an order!" Ellie shouted.

Marehis's eyes glistened as she nodded and moved forward, her hand on Sera's arm to pull her along safely through the Rift.

"For the Wardens!" Stroud roared.

Maker she was so sorry.

And angry.


She dropped from the Rift into the midst of Adamant and the battle still raging there, laid eyes on her party, Hawke before whipping around and raising her hand to seal the big stupid thing once and for all! See a demon army get through that!

Oh gosh, wow. See an army collapse because of that. Every demon in the vicinity dropped to the ground, dead, and the Wardens? Their Mages who had been mind-napped by Corypheus stopped...and saw sense, dropped their weapons.

"She was right," Hawke said, relieved, "without the Nightmare to control them, the mages are free and Corypheus loses his demon army." He met Ellie's gaze, speaking carefully, "And as far as everyone is concerned, the Inquisitor broke the spell with the blessing of the Maker."

Ellie nodded...she wasn't entirely sure how he knew otherwise, he was speaking like he was making sure if she was still playing along with the 'Mark being from Andraste' thing. She hadn't said a word about Solas or the Anchor or the Orb of Destruction. Varric must have...with permission, she hoped? Maker.

"Everyone needs something to believe in," she said with a little nod, and he nodded back, gesturing for her to go ahead.

"Inquisitor," a scout said as he approached, "the archdemon flew off as soon as you disappeared. The Venatori Magister is unconscious but alive. The Commander thought you might wish to deal with him yourself."

A Warden approached tentatively, questioning, "Where is Stroud?"

Her throat felt tight, tears stinging her eyes but the Inquisitor couldn't cry. Right now, anyway. She cleared her throat, "Warden Stroud died striking a blow against a servant of the Blight. We'll honor his sacrifice and remember how he was a living embodiment of the ideals of the Grey Wardens even as Corypheus tried to destroy you from within."

"Inquisitor," the Warden spoke on their order's behalf, "we have no one left of any significant rank," he said, "What do we do now?"

Well. They were fixing the rest of the Order. There was a matter of Corypheus still
possibly being able to send the Calling, to find some way to manipulate their minds further but... well. Everyone had just learned a harsh lesson in believing his manipulations and giving into fear. "You'll come with us and do whatever you can to help." Ouch. Okay. She could feel Solas's disapproval in the bond, his outrage at her decision and then the bond went quiet on his end which- she wasn't sure if it was supposed to feel like a slap or not, he was probably... she hoped he was just trying to shield her from that disappointment. Sera felt proud and that kind of helped. "Stroud died for the ideals of the Wardens. In war, victory. And we're still at war. Do you believe the Wardens can still help?"

"I do, Your Worship."
"You're still vulnerable to Corypheus and possibly his Venatori but there are still plenty of demons that need killing."
"While they do that, I'll inform the Wardens at Weisshaupt what's happened," Hawke said, "Best they don't get caught off guard."
"Thank you, your Worship," the Warden said, vowing, "We will not fail you."
Hawke drew near to speak quietly to her, "Been a real honor Half-pint," he said, lines of sadness in his face even as he offered a little smile and a wink, "Take care of Varric for me, yeah?"

She nodded but um, "Do you know where mami is?" she whispered.
"Oh, shit, yeah babe, c'mon," he said, wrapping an arm around her shoulders and walking her along the stone platform, down the stairs to where her party had moved. Cullen was just joining them, Cremisius too, relief breaking out in his face as she and Hawke approached, rushing to meet her.

"El! Holy shit, you- are you-" he didn't seem capable of forming a coherent sentence, he just wrapped his arms around her, Hawke just narrowly escaping the Tevinter man's hold as he swept Ellie up. She'd asked for mami but this was just as good. Or just as bad. She didn't- she didn't deserve to be- "I love you so much, thank the Maker you're safe."
"Are you okay?" she checked.
"Yeah El, barely a scratch on me," he assured. "What about you, lovely?" he started to let her go but her arms were around his neck and she held on tighter so his hands double backed, rubbing her back, "Ellie?"

Her chin quivered as she buried her face against his neck, tremors working through her and she knew if she spoke she would just... lose it.
She squeezed her arms around him three times.
"Okay honey, I got you," he said, and she wasn't on her feet anymore, his hands supporting her back as he took her up and started moving, pressing a kiss to her temple when he felt her tears on his skin. "Come on," he said to her party, "lets get the hell out of here."

Chapter End Notes

*Fun fact! You can pass any magic barrier without magic. The game advises using opposite magic to beat down barriers but you can also smack 'em to death, it helps if you lock onto them first and order your party to attack your target, but melee and ranged attacks all work, no magic required
*Idk how I missed this but I genuinely didn't realize Seekers were immune to possession, I dunno if I just blanked on it or it isn't really touched on, but yeah, it's a thing!
*which leads me to here: this is a plot point I didn't actually plan. In fact a great deal of writing this chapter was me realizing this *could* be a thing, that I accidentally
have Ellie going through a mini Seeker vigil and getting touched by the same sort of Spirit. I knew a Spirit was involved with becoming a Seeker but when I was researching for this chapter and saw Faith and screamed and anyway this happened and I hope it's genuinely a neat thing? Most plot things are things I've stewed on from the beginning and this is just one of those things that happened along the way and was an entire last minute decision so and maybe it's a bad idea? But I'm going with it!

Freedom from possession for everyone!

*If you take the virgins option, Ishmael will reveal he doesn't actually have any virgins on hand but if you've Cole in your party, Ishmael will concede that technically you already have one in Cole.

*Everyone sees different things in Fearlings based on their personal fears. In canon Cassandra sees Maggots, and her ultimate fear discovered in Nightmare's realm is helplessness, hence the fear of maggots being connected to our bodies being a form of helpless in death, something she observed a great deal in her youth in Nevarra. Sera sees nothingness and both Hawke and the Inquisitor see Spiders. In the Fade, gravestones can be found engraved with each of your companions' names and fears. This will be touched on more in the next chapter but everyone's fears are Bull:


*That's canon the backstory for Prophet's Laurel, people would lay it down along Adraste's path as she was led to the pyre, and after she burned her ashes blew across the leaves on the ground, blessing them. It's great for healing and regeneration potion upgrades!

*The Tower of Bone is a cool ass place if you look it up! These details are canon, they found a crap ton of bones in a chamber under the tower and had to bless.

*Raw egg proteins are glorious for hair if you're not against using eggs, I have personally brought my hair back from the brink of devastation with hair masks that involve the use of egg. (Egg, coconut oil, and keratin infused conditioner. Slap it on, let it sink in, rinse it out!)

*Edouard Desjardins is actually a long time friend of Josie! She calls on him to take over Suledin Keep!

*Michel is the only person who has been able to best Duke Gaspard in single combat

*Divine Justinia called for experiments on reversing the Rite of Tranquility. She commissions a Tranquil Mage, Pharamond who is a character in DA: Asunder. On the Chantry Trail is tribute to that, showing players where Pharamond was and a glimpse at what he was up to before the events of DA:I. This will also be touched on in the next chapter, a little side plot involving "the Right Hand not seeing what the Left Hand does".

*Professor Frederic can be recruited to Leliana to study Corypheus's dragon.

*Chocolate is great for cramps and my friends, there is nothing better than a cold glass of chocolate milk (or chocolaty dairy supplement of your choosing) post-mowing the lawn on a hot ass summer day. Or any workout in general!

*Sunglasses have been around since the Song Dynasty (12th Century), I promise.

*Cullen is mildly obsessed with calibrating the Inquisition's trebuchets, it's mentioned from time to time in idle War Room talk in game, this is a tip of the hat to Mass Effect's Garris always obsessing over calibrating his/the Normandy's weapons.

*I know in the game Hawke and Stroud see the inquisitor's memories but the others don't and it's only a catalyst for getting them to bicker in the Fade. My choice of catalyst is Ellie just saying what she remembers now because I find it kind of weird like, is the scene being projected? If so why can't the others see it? Inquisitor has to explain to them what happened. How do they see it? is is proximity? Dunno, it suited this story to do it this way!
*I need you to know this is 100% a John Mulaney Reference.

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