Unwritten

Rating: Mature
Archive Warning: Graphic Depictions Of Violence
Category: F/M
Fandom: Dragon Age: Inquisition
Relationship: Fen'Harel | Solas/Original Female Character(s)
Character: Fen'Harel | Solas, Cassandra Pentaghast, Varric Tethras, Vivienne (Dragon Age), Sera (Dragon Age), Blackwall | Thom Rainier, The Iron Bull, multiple original characters, All Origins will eventually be involved, From DAI not DAO just to make that clear
Additional Tags: Fix-It of Sorts, I'm basically just using Canon as a jumping off point so Alternate Universe - Canon Divergence, Alternate Universes, Social Justice, a lot of it, So don't come into my comments and say there's too much. This story is basically all social justice one way or another Romance, Slow Burn, Themes of BDSM, Light BDSM, Nurturing Femdom, And a Sub that needs lots of therapy Rewrite of a rewrite of a rewrite of a rewrite of a rewrite, Implied/Referenced Child Abuse, Abuse Mentions, Main Character experiences both abuse and battle, So yeah, Violence, Rape Mentions, Rapists get killed or castrated, Pedophiles just straight up die, Not a self insert
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Summary

Nik's landed in a world she never should've existed in.

But now that she's here...why not try and...change a few things?

Notes

I told ya'll it was coming. Those of you who are hopping over from Rewritten and Rewritten, Revised-- I told you I was writing it!

See the end of the work for more notes
I'd cuss out whatever deity, power-that-be or mystical convergence of spheres that brought me here- only I can't remember exactly what it was and cursing at the universe in general is just asking for something nasty to happen.

I wouldn't have believed that before, but you know. I'd never been unceremoniously scooped out of my own reality and dropped into a new one, before.

"Ah! Shit, fuck, god damn it." I like cussing a lot when I'm confused or in pain.

It used to be a seldom occurrence.

Leaning on a tree, I inspect the bottom of my bare foot with a grimace. Yeah, that's gross. Not only did I just cut my foot on a sharp rock- it's not even the first time today. And if I don't find a place with medical supplies soon…I might get an infection and die.

Before that though, I'll be unable to walk anymore- which is why I'm basically jogging through the woods to begin with. Have to get where I'm going as fast as possible.

Except I have no idea where I'm going.

I mean, I know where I need to go, if I want to get help- I need to go someplace that has people.

But I'm in the middle of the fucking Storm Coast, so…

Yeah, the first clue I had was when I appeared here, and saw a dead Deepstalker. Then the entire area just…it just looks familiar. The pebbly ground, interspersed with actual dirt- the plants…the trees…

The constant rain.

I was still in denial before I saw the Dragon, though.

It flew overhead just this morning, which is when I 'woke up' and felt all the pain I was in.

Up till then, I'd been wandering around in a daze, convinced I was dreaming. But the dragon, the dragon woke me up. I stopped dissociating and wished I hadn't.

Cause while, you know, this is the most amazing thing that has or will ever happen to me…it's also the most terrifying and painful.

It's not just my feet, but my legs and my back, too.

My feet are cut, my legs are tired and bruised from falling down so much- and my back just always hurts. It's a regular problem of mine. I was going to go to a chiropractor soon, but I guess that's off now…

Ugh, not to mention the hunger pains that have started now that it's evening and I haven't eaten anything because I don't trust the mushrooms here.

Deep Mushrooms make poison of some kind, and like…I'm not taking my chances that there's other mushrooms on the surface that people just don't normally use because they're less potent.
And all I've been able to find. Are. Mushrooms.

They're everywhere in this beautiful but terrible place.

If I had shoes on, it wouldn't be so terrible. I've always liked the rain, it…makes me feel this deep calm inside. But now it's just making everything slick and my hair feels weird and it's sticking to my skin- ugh.

Feeling exposed like this is also just…I don't like it, and never have. I've never been a nudist.

Walking around my tiny trailer without pants? With a sports bra and underwear on? Sure.

Going completely buck naked out in public? Hell no. Not even in front of my grandmother, mother or any of my other female relatives. I've never felt comfortable with that.

And now I've got my arms crossed over my boobs as I jog, holding them in place as much as hiding them.

Wait-

Wait, is that-

Hot fucking damn! It's a cabin.

Looks broken down and kind of reclaimed by nature but fuck- there might be a bed inside or old, dirty sheets I can wash and rip up for bandages and like…to use as a toga or something…

And it's shelter from the damn rain!

So I pick up the pace and ignore the twinges of discomfort from my feet and legs, just focused on putting one foot in front of the other and making sure I don't slip on or trip over anything.

I stumble once or twice and end up catching myself on trees, like I've been doing since my legs started to shake- around noon, I think? My forearms and hands are all fucked up. Abrasions, blood oozing from them…

If I don't find somewhere to tend my wounds soon and get shoes and clothes somehow…I'm fucked.

Ah! Level ground- actual dirt!

Stepping carefully across the overgrown 'yard', I keep my eyes peeled for wildlife and other possible dangers.

I want to just…curl up in a ball and sleep. But I can't, because I might not get back up again. I might…no. No, I won't lie down and wait to die, I won't waste my energy on things like crying, I won't give up. I can't.

Beating back the negative thoughts is always difficult when my situation is actually bleak and doesn't just look that way…but I can use the same techniques.

After an entire lifetime spent wishing I could go to another world, I'm not gonna let that dream-come-true, kill me. Not when I can do something with it instead. If that means I have to be extra exhausted all the time from fighting off my anxiety and depression, then so be it.

Just have to…find out when I am, to go with the where.
I won't survive without a plan and when you plan…you should plan big and small.

So for now, I need medical attention and food and water. For later…I'll…need to think on that some more.

Do I try to change everything? And if so, how? Am I too late to change anything?

Do I leave everything as it was and just try to hang on for the ride and enjoy the world and characters? Do I watch as everything crumbles?

Nah. I'm no NPC, not anymore.

I used to stand by and do nothing while others did things for me, but recently I'd been able to get up and do things for myself. I felt so proud of that, too…

And now this. After years of struggle and self-improvement and just when I was getting to be at my best-

I can keep going. This is nothing. I can still be the best version of myself. I just have to…

Stopping in the doorway of the old, broken-down shack- I survey the entirety of the place in one sweep of my eyes back and forth across the large space inside.

The ceiling is mostly intact, though it drips here and there. Floor is water damaged but holding together…

And there's a chest, over there to the side, at the foot of a dry cot.

Someone lives here. Or at least hides away here.

I need to be done doing what I need to do before they get back, if they're coming.

Which means I'll be walking in the dark if I don't hurry- possibly all night long. Ugh.

Thinking about that reminds me of the big blank space in my memories. The hole, the…abyss. It's just…dark. There are fleeting bits of color and light but nothing makes sense to my brain.

Sighing, I hobble over to the cot and sit down, opening the chest at the foot of it pretty easily.

Here I was expecting it to be locked. Well, if it wasn't, that could mean there's nothing in it, or at least nothing of value.

'Or maybe it's just owned by someone who has plenty of money to buy more stuff…' I muse as I look down into the chest.

Medical supplies, more specifically an injury kit and poultice jar are just…sitting on top of a spare set of…light or medium armor, I can't tell in this low light.

And there in the other corner is a small sack, that when opened, reveals some jerky.

This is probably someone's post or something. I need to get dressed and get out of here…but if I don't tend my wounds, I might get infected and…and I'll bleed all over the inside of the armor.

Picking up the sack, the kit and the bundle of armor, I take each individually over to the doorway to inspect them.
There's a pair of boots down in the bottom of the chest, too, so I take those as well.

The armor and boots are worn-out and old. Someone's spare, I'd have to guess. I don't really care as long as it covers my ass.

Turning my attention to the injury kit, I find some linens that could be used for bandages…and groan. Because I'm going to have to use that damn sheet on the cot to clean myself off if I want the bandages for my wounds.

There's a bottle of some kind of alcohol on a desk when I inspect the cabin further and it just smells terrible.

Using the sheet as a washcloth, I carefully clean my body of dirt and blood around my wounds and then brace myself.

Pouring that shit over my bleeding arms and legs is agonizing but at least I'm relatively certain I'll be better off with having done it.

"Nngh, god…" I moan and catch my breath while wiping myself dry with the other end of the sheet. "Fucking gross…"

After pouring some poultice onto the bandages and winding them around my wounds, it soon becomes apparent that there's some kind of painkiller in them. Something to numb you, I guess.

And it's fantastic.

I still feel the pain in my joints and everything aches, but it's much more manageable now.

Have to rip up the sheets and wind them around the bandages to hold them in place in order to have enough clean bandage to cover all my injuries.

Getting into the armor is hard when the light is dying but I manage to get the tunic, leather vest and pants on without much trouble.

I leave the boots for last and wind the scarf around my neck, pulling it up over my head like a hood and across my face like a mask.

It's better if I go unnoticed, but even if I am, no one will be able to describe my face or hair this way.

Bracing myself once again, I carefully step into the boots and hiss at the slight pain of fastening them up and walking around in them.

I can tell this set of armor was made for a man, or at least with one in mind, anyway. The bust is a little tight and it's difficult to move my arms without the shirt bunching in an uncomfortable way.

Time to move. No bag and the sheets are ruined so I have to carry the kit and the jerky.

Good thing this belt can hold both, and-

Hey, there's a potion in this pouch! It's half-drained, but still!

Pulling the potion out, I uncork it and take a small mouthful.

It's kind of gross in texture, but not that bad in flavor. I can choke it down pretty easily and quickly, at least. The aftertaste leaves much to be desired, but…at least I'm not dead.
Chapter 2

Well…this is terrible.

"What have we here?" a Blade of Hessarian, circles around me. In armor that matches mine.

His is newer, better. I didn't even realize mine was Blade of Hessarian armor until I was woken up and saw theirs and mine in full sunlight.

"New blood?" the woman with him speculates. "Looks like your armor is fallin' apart. Where'd you get it?"

I was trying to walk as far from the cabin as I could. Even deep into the night- and then…I fell asleep against a tree. I was so exhausted and the potion I'd been drinking had run out so I was also in pain.

Still, it was thoughtless of me. I could've been attacked by a bear or a wolf or something!

Or these two could've just straight-up killed me.

"Some guy gave it to me," I say. "Told me I should join up. I was on my way to your base when I had to stop and rest." It seems a small group if they think I'm new just because they don't recognize me. Is it like in the game where there's only like a dozen of them or less?

"How long have you been walkin' then?" the man circles around the other side of me. "It's barely daylight, can't imagine you'd need rest if you started out this morning."

"I was trying to get here under cover of darkness mostly," I reply. "Can never be too careful with enemies all about."

I'm bullshitting so hard right now…I think Varric'd be proud.

"Too true," the woman laughs. "Welcome then, initiate. We'll escort you to the compound so you can get…properly outfitted."

"Is this not proper?" I ask. Feigning surprise is too easy for me. I hate how easy it is. "The man who gave the armor to me said that it would get me in the base and that someone would train me."

Don't stretch too far, just…just enough.

The man hums, "that's true, but the armor isn't meant to be used. It's beaten up, dirty- it's obvious he only meant you to have proof of your claim to a place among us. He couldn't possibly expect you to gallivant about in that."

"Oh…well, alright then," I shrug. "I don't know much about fighting, though, I'll warn you. I was recruited for first aid skills."

"A surgeon?" the woman says; As the man says, "a healer?"

They're so in sync there, it's actually kinda funny. "I've got basic first aid skills, nothing fancy or involved…but I guess he thought you needed more medics?"

The woman inclines her head, "indeed we do. Our own was just…killed, recently. We're badly in need of a new one. Well. A doctor, a real one, but you'll do. For now."
Oh my god, what is even my luck right now? Probably more terrible than it seems.

Whoever this armor belonged to is probably going to be looking for it. Which means I might run into the guy I stole it from.

Maybe he doesn't know it's gone yet, but he will absolutely recognize it.

"Is everyone in the base at the moment, or are they out on their patrol routes?" They have those, right?

"Pff," the man huffs. "The base is basically dead unless we're eating, celebrating or transporting wounded for treatment."

Well that's…a relief, I guess? "Are there many of us?"

"Not too many at the moment," the woman sighs. "Oh damn, I forgot."

She pulls up to a stop and turns to me with a smile. "My name is Navette. This is Ben."

"Oh I'm…” I trail off and blank for a moment. "I'm Nik."

I don't want to use my real name but…well, for one thing- I can't just go blank for a whole minute wracking my brains for a name. Even that pause could've been suspicious.

And this is probably the only time I could get someone to call me by the name I like instead of the one they know.

"Good to meet you, Nik," Ben says with a smile. "It's always good to have new blood around…"

His expression darkens a bit but Navette takes over seamlessly, "so what was it that drew you to the Blades to begin with? How'd your benefactor find you?"

And it occurs to me…that this is perfect. "Oh he was bleeding from some wounds and I offered to patch him up." I reply. "It seemed like he'd already tried to treat them but they were…ah…not really that well looked after. He gave me the armor and told me where to go. Though his directions were rubbish, I think."

I could pull off an accent if I wanted to, but they'd notice that I suddenly had one. Damn, why didn't I think to- 

No, this is good. I know more about Kirkwall than anywhere in Ferelden, I can just say that's where I'm from. And everyone will think I'm really authentic, even a native Kirkwaller, based on my accent and knowledge.

…so long as the things I know are true.

"So what are you hopin' to accomplish?" Ben asks. "You want to get rich? Or did you come for the lifestyle…?"

"I need to learn to fight," I answer. So relieved to be able to tell the truth. "I want to save lives and protect people. Blades do that, right?"

Navette and Ben both look away and nod, but their jaws are tight.

Their leader is making them into bandits and they don't like it.
Not at all.

So these two are good, then. Good people, good to befriend.

Now I just have to figure out which of the others are good and which are bad and...work around all of them.

"And I heard Blades travel some too, and I need to find someone to apprentice myself to, a healer or something," I go on. "I could probably find someone who could help out around the base if I'm given leave to look."

"Oh I'm sure the boss will send you with a whole squad if you've an inkling where a healer might be," Ben says. Still a little sullen in his bearing but sunny in his tone. "Do you know if one might be nearby?"

"Not as such, but I mean...we'll probably hear of one eventually, right?" I say. "There'll be people talking about them, people we trade with who have loose lips. Or who'll loosen their lips for coin, at least."

They look at me with surprise.

Navette tilts her head and opens her mouth, then closes it.

It's Ben who asks. "So you've got experience with...err, that sort of thing, then?"

"Not really," I respond. "I just know it's done and I'm...usually pretty good at reading people. I could probably figure out how to do it smoothly and make them believe I'm doing them a favor while talking them into accepting less than they'd get from someone else. That's the goal, right?"

"Aye, that is the goal," Navette replies. Smiling fondly in a way that's familiar.

Everyone is always so surprised when I'm worldly instead of innocent. It's my cute face that's the problem. And my usually kind disposition.

I say 'usually' because there are times when I'm too tired to put up a front of friendliness and social grace. Those days, everyone is convinced I must be sick.

Well I guess I am. Sick of their bullshit, anyway.

"Here we are!" Navette says.

And when I look up, because I was watching the ground to avoid tripping in my oversized boots-I see the compound. Guarded by two people, archers, one on each side of the opening to the base.

"Navette, what've you got there?" the very muscular woman to the right calls out.

"New initiate, she's a medic!" Navette calls back as we approach. "Amateur, but better than nothing!"

The other guard is sighing at their antics.

They're such an eclectic bunch. Navette herself sounds vaguely Orlesian-Ferelden while Ben is undoubtedly just Ferelden.

The new guard sounds...Nevarran? Maybe? It's very subtle.
I'm mostly comparing their accents to the people I know so it's possible I'm completely wrong. Navette sounds a *lot* like a less-Orlesian Leliana, though. It's the lilt of her speech.

"Sorcha's cooking lunch," the vaguely Nevarran guard says with a grimace. "Stew again."

That makes me snort a little.

Everyone looks at me and why shouldn't they? "Sorry I…used to know someone who made terrible stew."

Remembering Alistair and his stew makes me remember the Blight and…the other characters around. I don't think this could be around the time of the Blight, but who knows.

"He says if *we* want to make lunch, we're welcome," Nevarran guard huffs. "But I don't have the patience to stand around and chop vegetables or whatever. And he knows it…"

Oh thank god, I'm just a little weird instead of suspicious.

Wait…

"I could make lunch," I say. This is something I can do to make myself invaluable. If I can cook better than whoever is doing it now- they'll have twice as many reasons not to kill me when that other guy comes around looking for his armor. They'll pause and actually might buy my story. "I was taught how to cook and bake by my grandmother. And she was the best."

Ben chuckles and clasps my shoulder and tugs me along, "we'll see how that works out, then, won't we? Oh Soorchaaa~"
Chapter 3

As it turns out, Sorcha is a bad enemy to have.

All the food I've been given for meals has been...limited and kind of out there.

He even threw in some mushrooms that I wasn't sure how to prepare the afternoon after I'd arrived. I didn't want to risk poisoning anyone, so I put them away and grilled the vegetables and small strips of meat, chopping them up into pieces and making kebabs.

We had enough seasoning- I just had to go looking for it, as Sorcha neglected to instruct me on where they were or which ones were which.

Going by smell and taste, I was able to cook up some not-so-bad foods and he seems to have given up trying to sabotage me.

Still glares at me a lot, though.

My wounds have mostly healed up into scars- but they're very sensitive and moving the wrong way can make my leg throb or my body shake. Still, it's better than it was. And now that I've got a supply of potions, I can take a small sip whenever the pain gets to be too much. Not too much, though- the supply isn't that...plentiful.

In-between mealtimes, I've been able to keep my medic work to a bare minimum. Seems like these guys aren't going up against anyone they can't handle. Meaning it's probably a lot of innocent people dying, like merchants and maybe...

Gripping the book in my hands a little tightly, I breathe to calm myself.

At the moment I'm studying a manual that Navette was able to buy off a peddler for me. It has all manner of plants drawn in it- with information written on the adjacent page about them. Probably as accurate as it gets.

I hope.

I've finally managed to figure out that the mushrooms Sorcha gave me were actually non-toxic. They just taste terrible if you don't cook them in the right way. I was right not to roast them, they have to soak up the juices from meat like in a stew.

That was probably his attempt at getting me to make stew- he probably really thinks everyone just hates stew instead of just hating his stew. He's a scary kind of guy, I can imagine why they wouldn't want to piss him off, especially as he was in charge of their meals...

So many things in Thedas are different. The food, the animals...even the way you prepare dough with flour and yeast is a little different. Or so I discovered after my rolls came out just a tad bit too fluffy.

Everybody loved them, because they were soft and their biscuits are usually hard and rough, but like...I wasn't going for cotton candy consistency. And I'm pretty sure too much yeast can be bad for you? Or something?

I discovered where I am in the timeline, too. A few months before the Conclave. Which is both fortuitous and terrible. Because I'd need years to build up enough contacts to be useful to the
Inquisition, I think. But also, at least it's not that far off?

Years until the Conclave could've meant the Blight. Or everything that happens in Kirkwall- and I would never have survived then. Especially not without help- and while the Warden and Hawke might be wonderful people-

They also might've been the Ruthless ones. That would've sucked. Especially with my interfering ass being around because if Hawke tried to out Anders, give Isabela to the Qunari- I'd find a way to kill him dead.

I just would.

Not to mention if the Warden were the type to kill Zev…

I can't even think about that without wanting to cry. Or Fenris getting handed over to Danarius- that makes me both sad and angry.

As it is now, I can gather information, formulate a plan of action and…

And what? What am I even planning on doing? Go to the Conclave, warn the Divine?

No, I'd just get thrown in the jail under Haven. Then Cassandra might have me executed in her grief, believing I was in on it.

So do I divert things without telling anyone? How? And if I do manage to divert everything, what happens after that?

Messing with timelines too much can really fuck up the future. And like…things I remember could be completely wrong. What if in this universe, the Divine isn't the sacrifice? What if it all goes to plan like how Solas wanted and he's able to scoop up the orb and tear down the Veil because I was off on a mission to stop something that would never happen in this world!? 

God, I'm making myself tired with all this speculation.

"Oi, where's that fekkin…" Ugh. "Where's at elf?"

'The leader of the Hessarians, ladies and gentlemen. Gaze upon him and shudder with disgust.' God I hate him.

The only servant in camp is an Elven man. Sweet, kind-natured and mistreated by the leader and his…well, the people who like being bandits. Not many of them, but there's enough that they keep everyone else under their heel.

They tend to smack him around if he doesn't do what they want fast enough- but he's been pretty chipper since I've been here to help. Probably because we get things done so fast that Andras doesn't even notice anything being done most of the time anymore.

"Miles is cleaning the bedrooms at the moment," I reply from my place at one of the tables out in front of the barracks. "Something you were needing, sir?"

I resist every fiber of my being that screams at me to make that address as sarcastic as possible.

"M'room is filthy," he says petulantly. Which means he threw up in there again and is upset that it didn't immediately disappear. "You clean it!" he says and walks briskly away, stumbling a bit as his drunkenness asserts itself.
It's amazing that this guy can keep a hold on this gang as well as he does. But it's populated mostly with nice people who are afraid of him- and a few who are just happy they get to be disgustingly terrible with his permission.

The bad apples have taken over, like everywhere else.

As I watch the blonde axe-wielder stumble off toward the water troughs, I begin to think that maybe…

Maybe I do know what to do first.

It won't be easy and I might end up getting myself killed instead of actually fixing anything, but it beats sitting around doing nothing. I don't want to end up spiraling again.

First of all…I need to neutralize his secret weapons. Which means I have to either kill or befriend his hounds. The Mabari he sickns on the Inquisitor, in-game.

I've seen them being trained to attack targets- but other Mabari were trained that way and with their masters they were lovable and sweet.

So it should be possible to get them to like me enough that they don't want to kill me. And I don't want to kill innocent animals, for any reason. To survive…I'd do it but I'd feel guilty for the rest of my life. There's a difference between hunting and killing for food and…doing that.

I probably wouldn't be able to turn them against him, but I could keep them from ripping my throat out and that'd be enough.

Closing the book and stowing it away in the pack I was given with my new armor that I have laid out on the table- I stand up. Slinging it on my back and fastening it so it doesn't jostle around, I walk into the barracks and call out for Miles.

He comes out of Jericho's room. "Yes, Serah?"

"His royal highness, the esteemed Andras, requests you clean his room." I reply. "And he told me to help you." Not quite the truth, not quite a lie. I mean, it's a lie, straight up, no bones about it.

But it's kinda true? God, I just want to never have to lie again.

Miles smiles widely, ears flicking a little and gestures back into Jericho's room, "just let me grab my supplies."

It's amazing to come to Thedas expecting Elves to basically be humans-with-pointed-ears and be totally completely wrong.

Miles's ears move for one. With his smiles, with his emotions- it's very cool. And also, his eyes- they're nothing like human eyes or the DA2 elf eyes. They are a little bigger and wider but not by a huge margin- the biggest difference is the colors in them.

He has very pretty blue eyes that have specks of green and a rim of brown around the pupil. I asked him about them and he said they're normal for Elf eyes, so…there's that.

The high cheekbones of the Elvhen aren't…present- but he's still got a more defined and pointy face than any of the humans. I dunno if that's an Elven trait or a Miles trait, though. Could also be because he's kind of skinny and malnourished.
I'd have to meet more Elves to find out.

He comes out of Jericho's room, walks past me out of the Barracks and I follow after him.

If you walk with confidence, nobody usually looks twice at you. So we make it inside the Boss's room on the other end of the compound without anyone calling out to us or asking us what we're doing. We're just a servant and an initiate.

I've been asked to help Miles before, so it shouldn't look strange. I'm the newbie and I've gotta seem as agreeable as possible just in case the actual owner of my armor finds me here.

My lessons with Ben and Jericho aren't until later, anyway.

I decided to learn the Bow and how to throw knives- as well as how to use a sword, though minimally. Ben is teaching me to use a particularly short sword- almost a dagger. It's very...small and light. It's a last resort when I can't use my knives or bow anymore.

I have to at least be able to hunt or something by the time I'm found out, in case they throw me out or try to kill me and I have to run.

I hid a pair of lockpicks in every one of the three prisoner cages just in case. I've since been taught to use them, albeit kind of ineptly so...

Probably should've hidden more than a pair each.

"Ugh," Miles groans and makes a face at the puddle of sick on the floor. "Get a bucket and some water, I'll get the mop."

And while he's scrubbing, I'll be surveying the room in between changing the water for his bucket. I need to know some things and the key to those things might be here.

If I could find out if Andras has a secret stash of wine, or...something else that might help me in my plans, whatever they might be in the future...
Chapter 4

Chapter Summary

Warnings for abuse and emotional reactions to said abuse.

(This story is still gonna be mostly fluff and triumph, I swear.)

Chapter Notes

I was gonna update yesterday and fuckin' forgot.

I'm trying to keep up with an update schedule but I need leeway, so I'm updating on weekends instead of a specific day so that when shit like this happens, I am still technically on schedule.

"There were mages getting off one of the ships?" I just can't stay silent anymore. This is huge.

"Headed to that Conclave," Navette says and flicks her wrist carelessly. "Asked around and they don't have anything. Boss said they'd be a waste of time so they're not a target. Gave the last of their coin to the captain for the trip, apparently."

That really makes me wanna smack myself in the forehead. What were they thinking!? How are they going to survive the whole journey to Haven? Without coin?

Miserably, if at all.

But this is good. If I wanted, I could travel right behind them and follow them all the way to Haven. Or hell, I could hire myself out as a mercenary to them and travel alongside- in return for enchantments or something.

They wouldn't have to know that I can't fight yet. But then what if we got attacked? Urgh. I don't want to deceive a bunch of mages in order to get ahead. I can't. It's just…gross.

And what would I even do once I got there? Tell the Divine that there are Gray Wardens being controlled by a sentient Darkspawn who wants to sacrifice her? Every eventuality I can think of where I warn someone, I can only see myself getting thrown in the dungeon.

"No, we're to go after the merchants who just got off the ships, instead," Ben says with a tight jaw. "Anyone want my route? I just want to stay in at the compound today."

"Afraid of the bodyguards, are you?" Jericho sneers. "More spoils for the rest of us to share, I say."

"So you want it?" Ben asks. "Take it, then. And think what you like."

This is…a good opportunity.
Getting up from the table, I throw my plate into the sudsy bucket that Miles and I use to wash dishes. They're all some kind of metal or something- soft and pliable. Probably not Iron or anything else that could be used for armor materials- likely some other, 'lesser' metal.

Passing the tables by and walking into the barracks- I walk all the way to the end and into my room.

It's the same one the doctor before me was using and it still has some of his stuff lying around. Mine now, I guess.

Apparently he had a dispute with Andras while the axe-wielder was drunk and got killed for his lip. Then Andras blamed everyone else for not stopping the doctor from back-talking- the story was so fucked up I blocked half of it out and marked Andras down as 'needs to die as soon as possible'.

I already knew he had to die and someone else had to take over- I mean, that's the point of the Cleaning House quest in-game. But now I'm thinking I'm the one who needs to take him down. But for who?

*I* can't lead a band of mercenaries.

…

…but then, that's not what the Blades of Hessarian are *supposed* to be, is it? I wouldn't be able to keep a handle on them regardless, as they'd probably depose me the first chance they got.

Or at least, the people who like Andras would.

…hm.

And the rest? How would I even begin to convince-

A knock on the door interrupts my musing and my distracted search through my pack for my book of herbs.

When I open it up, Hermea is on the other side. The guard who was at the gates when I first came. The Nevarran. I haven't spoken much with her since I got here but she seems…okay.

"Andras wants to see you," she says with a grim face.

From what I've seen, Hermea is usually a smiling, joyous person. So this is *not* good.

"Is someone injured?" I ask.

"Someone's gonna be, I think," she replies. She's clenching her teeth. I don't like that.

And soon I'm being marched out of my room, one of Hermea's hands firmly holding my shoulder.

I just know this isn't going to go well.

We walk out of the barracks and people are lined up, waiting for us to pass through them.

I glance around, but Navette and Ben are nowhere to be seen. There's not many of us, so that either means they went somewhere or they're deliberately avoiding the proceedings.

Which is also a bad sign.
Not to mention that when we approach Andras' cabin, we can hear shouting.

Part of me wants to run, even though I know I'd never make it. But the rest of me whispers to stay calm and assess the situation even as my anxiety begins to make me shake and feel sick.

I haven't made many friends here, but I'm at least cordial with everyone. I don't stick out, I don't start fights and I bite my tongue when Andras is an asshole.

When we enter the cabin, I'm a little shocked to see both Ben and Navette there, fighting with another Hessarian. Arguing, rather. Not fighting. If they were fighting, someone'd be dead by now.

"Ahhh," Andras stands and the rest of the room goes quiet as he walks past them to get to me. "There's the troublemaker, now."

"Troublemaker-" I get slapped across the face before I can even finish the word.

It stings and I'm sent to the floor with the blow, my ears ringing and my body going into panic-mode.

I have to physically restrain myself from using my legs to trip him and grab something sharp to start stabbing him with- it's a herculean effort that only I am aware of.

Because if I attack him, I don't have confidence that everyone in this room wouldn't immediately attack me in return. Or that he wouldn't just roll over and bash my head into the ground. Damn it. I hate feeling this powerless.

"Andras-" Navette lurches toward me but Ben holds her back. She could get hurt trying to defend me- if that's what she was doing. But it's really upsetting to see a man holding onto a woman like that, as if…as if he has some right to decide what she does. I hate it.

And I'm feeling so overly emotional, that that nearly sends me over the edge. I almost snarl at him. I hate it when I get like this! Any little thing can make me snap when I'm this riled up. But because I'm aware of that and what's causing it…it's a little easier to control.

"Now…little rat…" Andras bends down, squatting before my prone form as I hold my face and stare at him with wide eyes. "You want to try telling me how you came by your armor, again?"

I blink, trying to look as confused as possible. "I…I got it from a man-

Another slap- but I can't change my story- he might kill me!

"Andras stop!" Navette shouts. "You won't get any answers from her if she's too injured to speak!"

"You be quiet," he turns and snaps at her. "I've 'ad about all I can take of your back-talk."

Ben pulls Navette further into his arms and covers her mouth, "be quiet, Navvy."

They're family. Literally. Ben is Navette's cousin and they ran away from home together while Navette's family was visiting Ben's- to find adventure. And then ended up here. Lots of fairy tales avoid showing this kind of ending but if they didn't, I bet a lot less people would do it.

The sight of him holding her and gagging her almost undoes me. I can feel my control fraying. The only thing that keeps it in place is the sting from my face being smacked twice and the pain in my body from falling to the floor so hard.

"So this is the vagrant that stole my spare armor?" a man steps into view and he's…
He's perfectly ordinary-looking, like most everyone here. But he's got an Orlesian accent, much thicker than Navette's.

"I didn't steal-" I lurch backwards when the hit comes for me and curl into a ball. "I didn't steal anything!"

Technically, I borrowed it, as he's probably got it back in his possession now.

I didn't expect him to kick me, but I should've. Usually when people try to avoid abuse, it only ends up in more intense abuse. And god, does it hurt…but I can't move.

Can't do anything, actually. Because if I do, I could die. I could be killed, right here, right now. So…

So what do I do?

"Andras," Hermea says softly. "There is another explanation."

"Oh and what's that?" he asks, standing to loom over her.

She swallows roughly and squares her jaw. "Some guy stole the armor, and then gave it to her to throw us off his trail. You said he stole potions and rations, too? If he was already in armor, he wouldn't have needed the spare…and it was so beaten up, it was useless to sell…" she goes on to say.

"So some thief stole the armor and then recruited for the Blades?" Andras laughs mockingly. "Why the fuck would he do that?"

I can think of a reason, but I can't say anything. I'd just make him notice me, make him angry. I don't want to get kicked again. It feels almost like I couldn't talk even if I wanted to. I hate that.

Navette elbows Ben until he releases her and she scoffs, "isn't it obvious? He sent her to us so we'd kill her and think the thief was already dead. So we wouldn't come looking."

And there's dead silence in the room at that revelation.

I had a different reason, but hers is more plausible and less reliant on honorable-ness and morality. So I like it. I like it a lot.

"Whatever, just throw her in a cage," Andras says and flicks his wrist. "If we need her, we'll let her out."

And then he leans down to glare in my face from inches away and I can't move or he'll probably hit me again. He smells like ale, ugh. "You're on thin. Fuckin'. Ice. Girl."

I cough and clear my throat. "I understand. Sir."

The urge to be sarcastic is fought down, once again. And it's just so apt. He doesn't deserve to be addressed with any respect. He's a lowlife piece of shit who needs to die.

I'm resolved in this course of action even more than I was before.

Before, it was a hazy dream- something to prepare for but not really think about doing. I wasn't serious- I was more…planning for every eventuality and circumstance.

And now I'm glad I've been feeding the dogs my leftover meat at every meal and helping Durago
when he takes them out for exercise.

I'm glad I've become at least pleasant acquaintances with Ben and Navette and other decent people in the camp.

I'm glad I ripped out the pages in that herbal book of poisonous mushrooms and hid them where they wouldn't be found so I could use them.

Now all I have to do is pick my moment- and make more friends.

As Hermea escorts me out of the cabin on wobbling legs, I shake my head and crack my neck. Waiting for the door to close behind us and for us to get a fair distance away…

"I don't blame you," I say, quietly.

"What did you say?" she stops to turn me with a firm hand on my arm.

"I said I don't blame you, for thinking I was a traitor," I reply. I look earnestly up into her eyes and then down away from her gaze. "I've been betrayed by friends before…so I understand."

Her lips purse and she continues marching me to the jail cells- if they can be called that. What did he call them? The cages?

Yeah, that's basically what they are. Hay lines the floor and if you know how itchy and scratchy and just plain uncomfortable it is- you know it's not a kindness. And since I grew up on farms, playing in hay- I know all too well.

They put it here so you won't freeze to death, but they don't give a fig about your comfort.

"Inside," she says as she opens the door.

And since I can't do anything else…I walk into it. "Do you think Andras will feed me or am I supposed to die in here?" I ask.

She shuts the door and gives me a strange look for my frankness.

I shrug, "just wanna know my odds of actually surviving this."

She stares at her hands on the door to the cage, "I don't know." And then she turns and walks away. Leaving me alone.
Chapter 5

Chapter Summary

Actually updated when I meant to, this time...

Chapter Notes

ANNOUNCEMENT:
I finished the prologue for my interactive romance novel, Aetherial Identity.

The link's at the bottom!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Being imprisoned is boring.

Other than the hygiene, cold and possible starvation issues, that's all it is. Straight-up boredom.

I'm just sitting here, trying to come up with ideas, all day.

Not many of the people here get hurt that often, so they don't really need me. They can just slap poultice on their wounds themselves.

It's daybreak on the morning after I've been thrown in here and I'm already so hungry. But I have to ignore it and think. I won't be this coherent for long. As hunger begins to gnaw away at me- not to mention thirst -I'll lose more and more of my lucidity.

So what do I do? How do I get people to come over here and bond with me, since I'm not getting out? They can all play games with each other, so that's out. Can't offer to play a game if I'm not bringing anything to the table that they can't just run off with after I teach them about it.

Ugh…

Leaning back against the far wall of my cell, I lace my fingers over my abdomen and escape into my mind. Running through imaginary scenarios and escape routes as I hum quietly to myself.

Use the lock picks hidden in the hay to get out while everyone's sleeping?

No. There are night guards who'd catch me because I'd have to leave out the front gate. Everywhere else is too high and I'm a shit climber so I couldn't even get on top of a cabin to get over the damn wall.

Wait for a slow day and sneak out of camp when the gate guards aren't looking?

Nah, even when she's drunk, Hermea has fantastic aim with her axe and if Ben's on guard duty he might look the other way…but he also might not.
He might realize I lied and shoot me in the back for putting him and Navette in danger and like…

...okay. Fair. I did.

They're nice people, good and kind. Even if Ben's sexist, I think if I explained to him why it's terrible what he does…he might stop.

He also might wave me off, tell me I'm making something out of nothing, but hell. Everyone always does. Doesn't mean he'd deserve the treatment Andras heaps on him and everyone else…

I just need to get people to like me enough so that when I suggest that Andras, Jericho and a few others who delight in the carnage need to die…

…they'll agree with me.

How the fuck do I do that?

"What song is that you're hummin'?"

I jolt and my eyes shoot open. To see Navette standing in front of my cage with Ben anxiously hovering behind her.

"Huh?" It takes a second to understand what she just asked. Sometimes words are like that with me. "Oh. It's a song that I heard a bard sing once…from their personal collection," I say.

And it's not a lie, so much as an obfuscation. But like…how else would I even say it? What else would they understand?

"What are the words?" Navette asks.

"What you, want me to sing it?" I ask, skeptically. People usually never ask me to sing unless they've already heard me sing once. And then it's usually just because there's silence that needs filling up…

"It's nice to learn new songs every once in a while…and it sounded pretty…" she says.

"Navvy…" Ben mutters.

It tweaks me that he manhandled her yesterday and that he seems to think he can haul her around and do whatever he likes under the guise of concern for her. And also that she seems to think it's just fine because from what I've seen, she hasn't ignored him or pushed him away for what he did—no what he's constantly doing all the time, I should say.

And maybe it's just the way they've been raised and maybe he might be different if he knew better—but…that's not really an excuse. He doesn't get a pass for his possible future actions. And his now-actions are pissing me off a lot, lately.

So I smile, "sure. I can do that."

Oooohhhh, I know how to swing this!

"Just keep in mind that this is an experimental song they were working on, and it's meant to be from Andraste's point of view- she sings of Maferath and the Maker." This is heresy, but they don't have to know that.

Navette's eyes get big and she leans in close to listen while Ben glances around and stands like he's
guarding.

At least he's not dragging her off, but…

I'm still pissed.

"According to you…I'm stupid. I'm useless. I can't do anything right~"

That got their attention right off the bat.

"According to you, I'm difficult, hard to please, forever changing my mind~"

Navette is engrossed already and Ben is glancing over his shoulder at me, dubiously.

"I'm a mess in a dress- can't show up on time. Even if it would save my life~"

Standing up, I sing strong, from my diaphragm. Cause I just figured out what I can use to get them all to come to me.

I sing through the entire song with Navette staring at me, wide-eyed and Ben slowly but reluctantly turning around to listen. Both of them sway a little like they're trying not to like it but can't help themselves.

And by the time I've finished, there's a few other people wandering near us, to hear.

When Navette asks me to sing it again, I ask for water. And something to eat.

They bring it to me.

It's just…incredible. Baffling. That something so small could be so appreciated and so missed that they'd basically ignore that Andras might be miffed and just…do it.

Then I remember that they probably haven't had a bard around…ever? Maybe just in a long while? And music is…it's a unifying human- sentient being- experience. Connecting through song is just…what we do.

So maybe it's not that strange after all.

After they get me some food and water to snarf and guzzle down- I repeat the song. Twice.

At that point I have to ask for more water because my throat is irritated. It's been a long time since I've sung this much.

"Wha's goin' on out 'ere!" Andras is drunk again.

It's not like he's an alcoholic- he just 'celebrates' when his men bring in a big haul.

Forgets to invite everyone else to the party, and then walks around in a drunken swagger so everyone knows what's up. It's a status thing.

I think.

"Nothin' sir…just singin' round the campfire," one of the blades replies. "You need help gettin' back to your Cabin, sir?"

"I can walk back to m' own damn cabin…" he grumbles and gripes as he turns and stumbles off
back toward said cabin.

There's silence until he manages to fall inside his doorway and shut it behind him. And then I'm getting requests to sing again.

It's draining and my throat hurts, but I promise them one more time before I'll have to stop- so I can sing to them the next night before bed too, and not lose my voice completely.

After that's finished… I'm wrung-out, but I'm full and hydrated and I feel accomplished.

I found a way to get them to need me, even from a prison cell. And if people need something from you, they're more likely to do things for you.

Ugh, I hate knowing this. I hate knowing how to do this and…the fact that I'm doing it.

But if it's this or die…I choose this.

Getting to sleep after all that is actually pretty easy. I normally have insomnia back home on earth, but since I got here and there's always something to do and always someone asking me to do it…

Everything's just better.

Executive dysfunction makes it so I can't do things on my own or if I can, it's only at certain times when my motivation and energy are both peaked.

Otherwise, I have to have someone tell me what to do. Which, you know, I hate- but so long as it's someone who is supposed to be telling me what to do. Someone I asked to tell me what to do, it doesn't usually chafe me.

I mentally had to give permission to like twenty people just so I wouldn't get locked up and frozen and get yelled at for being obstinate. I really do not want that shit starting up.

Kinda moot now, that I'm in a cage. That's actually kind of a relief…

No more chores- though poor Miles is going to have to do it all himself again, now.

Haven't seen him since I got tossed in here. Wonder if he'll come tomorrow to hear the songs.

Eh, if he doesn't, it's probably because he's afraid of getting in trouble for being seen near me and he's the one the most in danger of that.

"Psst," a soft voice from the front of my cage.

When I lift my head and see the barest outline of a very thin body on the other side, I sigh. "Miles."

"Shh," he hushes me quietly. "I have the keys."

That makes me stand and walk over to the door.

I think he's surprised when I reach through and stop his hands before he can unlock it. "No, Miles."

"What?" I can her the incredulity in his quiet voice. "Why not?"

"Because you're an elf and they'll be harder on you than they were on me, and they…beat me up a little, it was unpleasant. And they weren't even sure if I'd done anything," I say. "Also because the only way out for me is the front gate and it's guarded."
"I can boost you up on top of a cabin and over the wall," he says. But I can feel him drooping.

"Miles…" I reach up and eventually grasp his shoulder, squeezing lightly. So damn hard to see in the dark out here. "You're a brave person and I appreciate the thought, but you should put those back before anyone catches you with them. I still intend to stay if I can and since I know I've done nothing wrong…I have faith it'll work out okay."

I have plans. So many plans. But he doesn't- and can't -know that.

…can he?

He sighs, "alright."

I release his hands and he puts the keys into his pocket, I think. Can't really see more than his silhouette and even that's…shaky.

"I'm going to start bringing you food, though," he says. "No arguments."

"Not arguing," I say with a grin. "Just don't get caught."

He huffs and turns to slip off into the night, muttering to himself.

Okay, so, food source aside from people who want me to sing- acquired!

God I hope it all keeps going this well. But knowing me I'll somehow find a way to fuck it up. Guess I'll just have to watch and see.

'Just don't try to be too clever. Let things progress naturally and don't stick your nose in every bit of business that goes around. Be aware but don't interfere…not unless it can help you.'

That's going to be…something.

Lying back down in the straw and trying to ignore the smells and the cold and everything else that's terrible, I just…curl up and close my eyes. Hoping that tomorrow will be a brighter day and maybe that I'll be better at whatever it is I'm doing by then.

I know how to ingratiate myself to people, it's something all people like me learn, from a young age. How to be small, quiet and unassuming. How to charm people when it's necessary to keep them from being mad at you…

…but I'm scared.

Chapter End Notes

http://philome.la/UnrealRomances/aetherial-identity
Chapter 6

Chapter Summary

Apparently I CAN keep to a schedule under certain circumstances...

Happy Saturday Binches!

I don't know who did it or how it happened, but Jericho was brought back with a massive wound in his chest.

At the moment I'm practicing what to say when he inevitably dies.

Even doing my absolute damnedest, I am not a surgeon or a healer…

But I do know where to find some.

And that is how I ended up asking Navette and Ben to run and hire a healer from among the mages that got off that ship to heal him for us.

The most I can do is close up the wound with a lot of poultice packed into it and get him to drink some potion.

I'd normally, just let him die. He's an asshole and thinks it's funny to trip Miles and whistle and catcall at the girls in camp. I don't want to even think about his female opponents, because if I do, I really will just let him die. But this is the first time I've been out of my cage since I got tossed into it and I have to be better than good. If he dies, Andras might assume I let him die on purpose and kill me.

And…it's started happening again.

Every once in a while, I'll get an urge that isn't mine.

This used to happen when we lived on the farm and the animals were making strange noises or behaving erratically and somehow I just knew what it meant.

It also happened in the city when I'd encounter a bit of graffiti or a specific building and get the urge to caress it or go inside or something.

The dead are trying to talk to me again.

Yeah it's not as dramatic and exciting as Tv shows and movies make it out to be. Most of the time it's just them syncing up with me somehow in some way and…showing me how and when to do things. Telling me with a gut feeling what's going on and how to alleviate the situation if it's…undesirable.

I used to make 'predictions' when I was a kid.

Always knew when my father was going to come and see me- he and my mother were divorced, but he'd come visit and pick me up for stuff a lot through my childhood, even though he lived in
another state.

Apparently I even predicted a time when my grandfather ended up somehow in prison and nobody else knew where he was- but since I was so young, I said it pretty cryptically and no one knew what I was talking about until later on.

Then there's the incident where one of my toys started working without batteries in it and all the times mom got fucked with by the dead and it only ended after I told them to knock it off.

Yeah my life has always been flavored with odd. Not enough to really seem magical or real, though. At least, not to me.

After all, what if it was all circumstance, coincidence, or…what if we just imagined it? People can make up the most amazing things in their heads- in their memories to make themselves feel less bored and dissatisfied with life.

I mostly call it 'communing with the dead' for that purpose, after all.

I'm pretty sure it's just my thin slicing picking up on things I wouldn't consciously notice, but…eh. More fun to think of dead people trying to communicate with me.

Sometimes I get a good tip, like- 'time to change the bandages' will tug at my gut or 'another potion couldn't hurt' will pull my hands to the tiny bottles on the shelf- of which we don't really have many.

They're not really words, just sensations and urges, so I don't normally call it 'talking' but, you know. Other people probably would, regardless.

How do you describe something that's just been part of your life since before you can remember?

"How long ago did they leave?" I keep asking Miles.

He answers, patiently, "about three hours ago."

And I begin pacing again.

"You know, I don't understand you," Miles says.

I give him a warning look and glance at Jericho on the table. I know what he's talking about, or at least, I think I do- and we don't know if he can still hear us.

He holds up his hands and gestures with his head toward my office which is on the other side of the barracks. I'm right across the hall from the clinic so I have places to stash equipment, get away from the patients who are sleeping so I don't disturb them-

It's a setup that makes sense and I'm guessing the last guy was the one to set it up that way.

Since I can't really do anything but pace and he's mostly stable for now, I shrug and follow him as he leads the way into my office.

Closing the door behind me, I lean back against it and sigh. "What don't you understand?"

"I offered you a way out," he says and sits on the edge of my bed. "But you were more concerned with what would happen to me if I got caught…and you seem to be really…” he gestures helplessly. "…good at figuring out how to do things in…strange ways that nobody ever thinks of."
"I don't- what are you talking about?" I ask with a quirked eyebrow.

He scoffs, "mages? You really think anyone here would've thought to hire a healer from among a bunch of rebel mages?"

"That's just prejudice, not-" I flick my fingers and huff, "I'm not any more innovative than the rest of you guys, you just let your worldview be tainted by other people's opinions and your culture and...I've been learning how not, to do that. I'm sure I still fail sometimes."

"Point is, you're more practiced at whatever it is that is that, than we are." He seems confused, but he's not arguing with me over the whole 'naturally better at stuff' thing so I'll take it. "I have no doubt you could've thought of something, to escape."

"I could've, but then...you'd still be here, with Andras," I reply.

His ears flick back a bit and he tilts his head, "what, you got so attached to a bunch of mercenaries and their pet elf that you just-"

"Don't do that," I fall a little into the door. "Don't put yourself down just to express disbelief like you're the only part of this that doesn't make sense."

"As far as I've ever known, no human puts their ass on the line for an elf," he says.

"I know," I reply. "But if I told you I already knew you all were here and I came specifically to liberate everyone from Andras- and that I did steal that armor...what would you say?"

It would be true if I'd had any time to orient myself or figure things out. I would've done it, just because I felt it needed to be done.

A bit disingenuous to imply that I am doing that and have been from the beginning but...haven't I been planning this since I got here? Even if I told myself I could never do it?

Isn't it actually more true than anything I've said since I got here?

No. And lying to myself won't make it so. It won't make me not a liar. But there has to be a reason I'm here, and if this will get me his help, it's necessary.

Miles stares at me for several long moments and then asks... "Why? Why would you do that, why come here, for us?"

And the implied message in his tone is 'why save a bunch of worthless mercenaries who've done nothing but pillage, steal and kill people, who are we to you, to anyone?'.

"Because the Blades of Hessarian used to be something, and they can be, again." I say. "But I need help, because I can't...I can't get rid of Andras on my own, and I can't do it honorably. But if he and his men aren't killed- I can't save the rest of you."

"What-what are you talking about, do it honorably?" he stands up and gestures with his hands. "Are you talking about challenging Andras? To a fight? Are you insane?"

"Yes, clinically," I deadpan with an unamused look on my face. "But this is about taking down Andras in a one-on-one fight so that he can't command his followers in battle against us if we were to fight him head-on."

He opens his mouth, then closes it while rubbing his face with his hands. "What would you need?"
he asks, through gritted teeth.

Obviously in disbelief that he's even asking.

"Firstly, we need to find a slow-acting poison I can feed him the morning before I challenge him. So that by the time we're suited up and fighting, it'll be already working and slowing him down. And he needs to be drunk, if possible. Even just from two or three tankards- the more intoxicated he is, the better."

"Poisoned and drunk…" he mutters to himself. "And you'll still probably get killed."

"Not if I use a dagger coated with a fast-acting poison to finish him off on the first cut- then it's just a matter of avoiding his attacks till he goes down," I reply.

"You've really thought this out, hey?" he says and sighs. "I can help you with the food and drink and adding the poison to it but I don't know where you'd get some."

I shrug and smile, "that's…kind of the second reason I sent for a mage healer. They're bound to be good with herbalism- and if not they might just have some on hand from someone who is…so…"

He's staring at me with a sort of…strange expression. "You've planned every step of this and no one can see it from the outside. That's mad."

"That's good planning," I retort with a grin.

I think these little bits of casual ableism are gonna drive me up the wall, soon. If only because I can't give anyone the stink eye over it.
The healer who comes back with the others is…

Tied up.

"Why is he tied up?" I ask, a slow curl of guilt and regret and a hot flame of rage settling in my gut. It's like a heavy coal set on fire in there.

"Andras told us not to take any chances," Ben says with a face that looks like it wants to grimace but can't.

Andras seems to have sent two of his most loyal men with them and they're the ones with the mage between them.

He lifts his head and I see he's an elf, with bouncy red-brown hair. He seems to be calm, but there's a storm brewing in his hazel eyes.

"Well fine, untie him so I can take him into the-"

"'f we untie him, he's gonna get away," the left man states. I think his name was…L-something… or maybe E-l- something…

"If you don't untie him, he can't work his magic," I reply. "I will take personal responsibility for him, I promise you that. I'm already on thin ice, I don't think he's going anywhere with me watching him."

God, I hate this.

They slowly unwind his bonds and I can see his body tensing slowly, probably in preparation for some kind of attack. I wonder if they used something to capture him- why hasn't he used his magic yet?

I bend over to get close in his face and stare into his eyes, muttering under my breath, "attacking the whole camp now would just end up with you dead, you should save your energy."

His eyes narrow, but when he's freed, he doesn't do anything, so I guess he listened to me?

We walk into the barracks and as soon as he's in the room with Jericho, I close the door and fall to my knees.

"I'm so sorry," I rest my head on my forearms on the floor and try to control my self-loathing. It's not productive, it'll just put me down and I might not get back up. "I told them to hire a healer, not steal one- Andras-"

"Why are you on the floor?" he looks so puzzled and kind of embarrassed when I look up.

"I'm apologizing," I reply. "I mean, I guess I don't need to be on the floor but I feel pretty low."

His head dips and his shoulders spike upward as he snorts and tries to control the laughter that escapes him.

"I'll just…get up, now." I say and stand up, smiling at him when I'm on my feet again. "If you can help me save this man and maybe…with something else…I can help you get out of here."
The laughter dries up and he stares at me very seriously. "Even if I get injured, I could fight my way out of here."

"And do what?" I gesture behind me. "Lead them back to the mages again where everyone will get into a big fight and kill each other? Half the people here don't even want to be doing this. You'd be dooming both sides. Even if the mages came out on top, there'd be significant casualties."

His brows scrunch, "what would you suggest?"

As though he knew I would have a suggestion and he just can't wait to hear it.

"...I..." I look at Jericho and gesture at him, then tug on my ear.

The mage lifts his hand and drifts it over Jericho, who sighs deeply in his sleep. "He won't wake until I want him to. Now, what?"

"I've been planning to kill the man in charge here," I reply.

He seems a little surprised by my sudden seriousness. "To what end?"

"These are the Blades of Hessarian," I say and gesture around us. "They're meant to be a force of mercy and justice in the world, and they've been reduced to mercenaries because of Andras."

Turning around, I open the door and peek my head out, seeing a couple blades guarding the entrance to the barracks.

I slip easily back inside before they can see me and give the mage a very direct look. "I wanted to save them all from him, and...and maybe get them into doing what they should've been doing all along. Helping people. But I can't do it without help- and I need more than one thing from more than one person. So I figured, once they'd hired you, I could buy something off you that I needed. But since you're captured, I'll figure you want out as badly as I want to free everyone else here."

He sighs through his nose and crosses his arms, "and that's the only way out, isn't it? To be released? Otherwise the rest will attack me on sight and I might not get away?" His questioning tone implies that he thinks this is what I'm trying to tell him.

"No," I do hate to be predictable, but he's actually wrong. "I could sneak you out or you could break out on your own and you'd probably be fine. Fine enough, anyway. As you're a healer, you'd likely have a better chance than anyone."

He's watching me with intense curiosity, now. "But?"

"But I'm hoping you'll stay to help me and all the people here who just want the banditry to stop," I reply. "I'll help you leave, either way. I just need two different kinds of poison before you go and my plans will go on without you...but if you stay and help..."

And now for the second part of my incredibly long, convoluted-as-fuck plan.

"I'll join you and the other mages with the men left over here and we'll protect you on your way to Haven." I put my fist over my heart. "I'd promise either way, but who knows if I'd actually be able to pull this off without you or find you guys afterwards- or if we'd even be welcome then without you in tow. So...that's my offer."

He stares at the fist over my heart for a few moments and then turns to Jericho with a sigh. "It's not like I've got much else to do, is it?"
I grin so hard I think my face might split in two. "Thank you! Oh. I forgot to ask your name."

He turns to look at me, one edge of his mouth pulling up slightly. "It's Ren."

"Also," I step over to his side and stop when he begins to tense up. "There's another elf here, Miles. He knows about this plan, but no one else does. He's my...other help."

He quirks a brow at me. "Trusting all the elves and none of the humans. That's...curious."

"The humans are dead ass afraid of Andras," I shrug. "And they're...not the type you trust with things like this, anyway. Not yet, at least."

"Hoping to change that?" he says as light glows on the underside of his palms and begins to encompass Jericho's limp frame.

"Hoping to make them want to change it themselves," I reply. "How is he doing? He's an ass but if he dies, I'm dead. Also probably dead soon enough anyway."

He blinks and looks at me with wide eyes, "what do you mean?"

"Now that they've got you, Andras is going to want to get rid of me. I'm only hoping everyone else kicks up enough of a fuss to get him to back down without making him angry." It makes sense. He's a real, knowledgeable healer.

I'm just the stand-in. Who is under suspicion of theft and deception. Betrayal.

"What are you going to do if he decides to get rid of you anyway?" he asks.

"Well that depends how he plans to do so. If he just wants me gone and throws me out, I can sneak back in, get my friends and you, and leave. If they want to come... I mutter that last part uncertainly. "If he wants to kill me...then it'll depend on when and how. If he wants me killed on the spot, I'll have to challenge him then and there just to survive."

"Challenge him?" he asks.

"You have to challenge the leader of the Blades to combat if you want to kill him and take over leadership without getting killed by everyone afterwards," I reply. "Hence all the help I've been needing."

"I see..." he trails off and stares down at Jericho. "And what do you want with the Blades once you've won them?" he asks.

"I'll let them decide what they want to do next," I say. "I just don't want Andras bullying them all anymore. Any that want to come with me and travel with you and the rest of the mages, will. Anyone that wants to leave, will finally be able to."

"Well, I don't know what to do other than play along at the moment," he says. His eyes cutting to me and piercing me with their stark suspicion. "But if I suspect you're throwing me to the wolves or lying to me, I will try to escape on my own, consequences be damned. I will not be caged here."

'...wolves...'

"I'd imagine you'd rather die," I respond.

He looks at me straight-on, the light in his hands dying away as he finishes whatever he was doing. "I would indeed."
I still make the meals around camp, and everyone is glad for it.

Andras had to let me out after Jericho got injured, but was talked into letting me stay out, when Sorcha began cooking the meals again…so I'm guessing he made stew…

Or something worse, though I can't fathom what that might be.

Which means I do have access to Andras' food…but he's got his men watching me when I'm not in the clinic, so…I really do need Miles to slip the poison in when the time comes. And the time is coming soon, because Andras is getting antsy and wants to expand their territory.

He's gone completely stone-cold sober for the time being, so I might have to wait till their first push out into the wilds before he'll come back and drink himself sick in celebration.

Why can't I just kill him in his sleep again? Oh, right. I might get caught and then have to be hung by his loyalists and no one will help me because they'd have to fight them.

I'm feeling incredibly cranky just thinking about it.

"Something wrong?" Hermea is being somber at me usually if she speaks to me at all. Now is no different.

It's so weird to see her turn cold after being so warm and open with the others- I can see them from afar, usually. Laughing and joking around until I walk over and she clams up.

"I wish we had better spices," I stir the stew- because that's all I could make with what Sorcha gave me and I felt like being petty in my incredibly bad mood. Prove I can make better stew than him any day of the week…or something like that, anyway. "More varieties of meat. Different vegetables…I could do so much with so little but it's…only so much."

She hums and dumps the chopped vegetables into the pot one bowl at a time. "This is all we have. Best to get used to it. Unless we get some kind of windfall, it's all we'll have for the foreseeable future."

"It's too bad we're tethered down to one place," I say. Musingly. "If we could travel the countryside and just have a bunch of different bases to bed down in-"

"Andras isn't likely to do anything like that any time soon," she interrupts while aggressively skinning some carrots into the pot. "He's more of the homebody type."
"Hm," so Hermea isn't happy with Andras either, really. Good to know.

"Anyway…you were singing the other night," she says. Segueing into a topic I hadn't expected. "What was that song?"

"You'll have to be more specific," I reply. I've been singing every night for the past…I dunno, three days? And I've mixed it up some in there.

"You were singing about a place called…" she's blushing? "Wonderland?"

"Oh!" That Natalia Kills song. "It's a song about the yearning and simultaneous rejection of the fairytale romance. The fairytale are from my home, very local." How the hell do you explain your fairytale coming from a whole bunch of different countries, all of which technically don't exist?

Jesus.

"Would you tell us the…fairytale at the fire tonight?" she asks.

And since it's the only thing she's ever asked of me, I scramble to agree.

It only takes about…say…an hour, to get everyone together, bowls put in their hands and settle them down in front of the fire.

I tell them all the story of snow white, first. Seeing as that's one of the fairytale in the song that Hermea asked me about and it has dwarves in it, which seems more like normalcy to them than fantasy.

Changing a few things on the fly, I tell the story of Snow like it's never been told before. Or at least like I've never heard it before.

A young girl named Snow White lives with her abusive stepmother who is obsessed with her own beauty and jealous of Snow's youth. The queen wants to gain eternal youth by eating the hearts of young women like Snow and when Snow finds out what she's been doing, she runs away to find help.

The Queen enlists the captain of the guard to find her a mercenary, disguising her sinister plans. She tells the captain that she wants a mercenary because she believes someone stole Snow away and a mercenary would likely be the type to be able to find her in the seedy underbelly of the kingdom below.

So he brought her a huntsman who also takes bounty contracts. He's horrified when the Queen instructs him to preserve the girl's heart in a jar, but doesn't show it on his face. He accepts the contract to buy time and finds Snow.

He's realized that the Queen is behind the deaths of all the peasant girls in the village, found with their hearts cut out of their bodies. So now his mission is to protect Snow while she builds an uprising against her mother and spreads the word that she's been eating the hearts of the young and beautiful.

"Why does the Queen believe eating their hearts will work?" Navette is skeptical. "That's not how magic works, is it? And is she even a mage?"

"In some version of the tales she has magic, but in others, she's just…" I flick my wrist. "Suffering from a delusion of sorts. Though that's not what made her evil. People have harmless and harmful delusions both but still manage not to act on them most of the time, back where I'm from. There
are a few people who don't get help and end up doing so anyway, but...oh! We had a historical figure a while back ago who would bathe in the blood of young girls, believing it would give her youth and beauty." I shrug. "Some people become so obsessed with eternal life and they do... terrible things. Even if it doesn't work, they keep trying, just in case it eventually will...it's terrible."

Miles is sitting at the fire, looking distinctly disgusted, like he's lost his appetite.

Hermea sits forward with gleaming eyes, "tell the rest. Everybody stop interrupting!"

So I do. And by the time Andras comes out of his cabin with a swagger, dinner is done.

I should've known from the look on his face that I wasn't going to like what came next.

It's all kind of fuzzy after a certain point. Andras hit me in the head before I could react, and then it was a bunch of shouting and arguments and moving, shifting bodies, pulling and pushing me and...

And then I was on my own healers cot, with Ren pale above me, muttering to himself in...was it Elvhen?

I think I may have babbled that question at him, and tried to analyze the words, which is why he looked so surprised- though that may be that I was even cognizant enough to speak at all.

There's a stretch of time that was all darkness, then. And I didn't know what was happening or who was around me, but when I woke up-

When I woke up, there was Ren, and Miles. Hermea was also there, standing off the side of my bed, looking fraught as she paced.

Navette and Ben were leaning against each other on the floor, sleeping.

There are several others just kinda standing around in the doorway and probably out in the hall.

I'm so confused by it all, I just close my eyes and go back to sleep.

'I'm not making sense of this shit right now. I can deal in the morning.'

And so I do.

And the next time I wake, the very **moment** I wake up, Miles is there, looking soft and sorrowful with something burning in his eyes. "Hey. Can you hear me? Do you understand me?"

It's a lot easier than it was before, when it felt like there were cottonballs in my ears...when Ren was muttering in Elvhen that felt so...far away.

I remember it distinctly, but not with any clarity. Ugh.

Making a face, I flick my wrist, "what happened?"

"You were right," Ren mutters as he walks around Miles, checking me over with his magic-

Though the most curious thing happens.

I scream.
And I'm not even sure why until the magic goes away and I blink away the tears and dancing lights in my eyes—seeing both Ren and Miles staring at me. Hands up, eyes wide, ears flicked back.

The magic felt…it felt like it was like…his hands…in my insides. "Don't…do that again, please. At least not while I'm conscious."

"I didn't know you had a fear of magical healing," Ren's brow is furrowed. "It's going to be hard to get you better in any kind of time without it."

"Andras wanted to kill you last night," Miles cuts in. Looking a little frantic in his eyes. "I've already begun giving him small doses of the poison Ren gave me, but it might take a few days for the buildup to have any effect if I don't-"

"What, why?" I blink and sit up, then fall back down. I'm so weak. "Ugh. Why did you start-"

"Because he's calling for your execution. Your public execution—in front of everyone. We were able to stop him from beating you to death-" Ren's ears go rigid and flex as he works his jaw. "But he only relented long enough to say he was going to hang you as soon as you could stand on your own two feet."

A bucket of ice water sluices down my spine, waking me the rest of the way up. "I can't yet, so we've got time. How impatient is he?"

"He asked after your status, but when I told him you were still unconscious, he lost interest. He's been pal-ing around with his loyalists while everyone else has been worried over you." Miles sighs. "It's going to be obvious soon that this divide he created is a threat to his power and he'll probably march in here with a sword to get it over with already at some point. But for now…"

"Spike his drinks, every one," I groan and sit up. Forcing myself backward and lean against the headboard. I'm shaking, but I'm upright. "If you think you'll get caught, let that one go. But anytime he wants you to fetch him one, drop in one of the pellets."

I asked Ren specifically to make them easily dissolved pellets, so that we wouldn't have to carry around vials or anything. For this first part, he just has to get sick enough to be slow. But he's a merc, so he's probably got some kinda resistance to poisons.

"I have been, just…slowly," he replies. "I'll keep going, and when he's sick enough…you'll challenge him?"

"You're not in any condition to be challenging anybody," Ren asserts. "Maybe in a few days, but-"

"It'll take a few days to get him sick enough she might actually win, anyway," Miles mutters, cutting him off.

"Put me out." I stare into Ren's startled eyes when he looks at me. "If the stipulation is that I have to be up on my feet, then put me out for two days—and for a day or so after you wake me up, I can make a show of being too weak to walk."

"What about what just happened?" He asks. "You screamed when I tried to use magic."

"Yeah well, it felt like you were juggling my organs," I reply. "But if you just knock me out in a quick burst—I mean you've been healing me up till now, right? So you can focus all your energy on healing my body while Andras is being weakened. And if you wouldn't mind finding me a crossbow and a dagger and coating them both with the fast acting poison so they'll be dried and ready to use when I face him…that'd be great."
Ren and Miles exchange a look.

And then I…don't remember anymore, because everything just kind of went black at that point.
"You can't be serious," Ben says. "Andras will kill us all."

"Oh shut up, Ben!" Navette snaps. "I'd rather die than go another day living like this. You promised me the Blades were honorable and that we would be helping people, and if you'll recall- I wanted to run away that first night when we were ordered to rob merchants on their way through and you convinced me not to. They killed a whole family, Ben! A mother, a father, two grown sons-"

"He would've just hunted us down, Navvy!" Ben exclaims. "And I'll beg your pardon for protecting myself and my family before everyone else!"

This is all giving me a headache.

"Run away if you want, nobody cares," Miles deadpans. "Andras wouldn't devote resources to that, you're just spineless."

"Sp-" Ben stands from the circle we were sitting in to discuss things. "How dare-"

"Well he's not fuckin' wrong, is he!?" Navette exclaims. Also standing up.

Hermea stands and plants a hand on both of their shoulders, firmly shoving until they're both sitting on the floor again. "Both of you hush. I want to hear the rest of this!"

They settle into sullen silence.

It's been my experience that no one will stick their neck out for those who are different, unless they've got something to gain. But it's ALSO been my experience that people will band together for the right leader under the right cause if you just give them the slightest push.

They'll band together for the wrong people and wrong reasons too. So I just have to be convincing.

"She needed a way into the compound, so she stole the armor from a nearby cabin where she knew a blade had been spending a lot of time," I lie.

She hasn't told me any of this, but I can guess from what Miles has told me that the real story would likely not impress any of them, or get them to follow her.

"Why would she go to all that trouble?" Navette asks. "Don't misunderstand, I'm grateful for the thought and all, but why put herself in danger like that?"

"She’s a bleeding heart," Miles says. Rolling his eyes, he goes on, "I tried to help her escape and she refused because I might be caught and punished for it."

That was interesting to hear about, once I'd put her under.

Andras has gone off on a job with his loyalists, so we didn't need to guard her, but...

Looking over at the bed where she sleeps, I slump back into the wall behind me. "She offered the Blades to be protectors for the mages if I could help her pull this off. She wanted to get you all out
of here and away from this place if she could defeat Andras."

"She said-" Hermea begins and then cuts herself off. "She looked right at me and said she didn't blame me for believing she'd betrayed us."

"Well she didn't, exactly, did she?" Navette muse. "She betrayed Andras. But we hate that arse. If she really came here to get rid of him and save us from him, then there was no betrayal to begin with."

Hermea stews in that revelation while Ben works himself up until he can finally speak again.

"I won't do it, I refuse-" his eyes are too wide and his lips are trembling.

"Then go, Ben," Navette snaps. "Run away and leave us to deal with him."

His mouth opens and closes like a fish out of water. "You…you won't come with me? Why not!?"

"He made us do horrible things Ben, all because I was afraid to die and afraid to leave you." Her eyes narrow. "I will not make those mistakes ever again. If I have to die to redeem myself, so be it. But I am through attacking families and the poor as they travel along the road."

Ben looks down at his lap and I wonder if Miles and I will have to do something about him.

But then he lifts his head, eyes glittering with tears. "I go where you go, Navvy."

"Don't put that on me, Ben," she snaps. "Make a decision for yourself, not for me. You can't blame it on me if it all goes south or you end up regretting it."

His jaw works but he nods. "I will help."

"Hermea?" Miles gestures at the sullen axe wielder. "You don't have to stay afterwards, we're just making sure we aren't all killed once Andras goes down. That's all."

She inhales through her nose, sharply. "I intend to leave as soon as this is over, but I will fight if it comes to that."

Good enough answer, I suppose.

"So what do we do about the rest of them?" Navette asks. "The loyalists? Shouldn't we…put at least some of them out of commission too?"

"Well…" Ben says slowly. "Sorcha is…one of his loyalists, is he not?"

"Yes, and?" I don't see where he's going with this, though I've only known anyone here for…a grand total of a week now, I think? And I don't speak often with the sullen cook.

"We'll have to get past him, but…it if we poison the night's meal enough the night before she wakes up, we can pass it off as food poisoning. The rest of us will simply not eat, but we'll appear to. It'll just look like we managed to get the good parts of the food." Ben says. Softly, anxiously.

He isn't certain about this, but he is trying his best to be useful.

"Miles can't do it, nobody would believe he'd be that careless," Navette asserts. "One of us has to cook and drop the poison in so they assume it's just our inexperience or somethin'."

"There's Sorcha to deal with," Miles replies. Then gets a thoughtful look on his face. "Or…we
could use him for further cover."

"What are you thinking?" I ask. "Don't keep it to yourself, unless you have to."

He shakes his head and waves me off, laughing. "Well, Ben…if you really want to be useful…”

Miles POV

One small vial of sleeping potion that could put a Druffalo out for a full day is probably a bit too powerful to use on a bunch of Mabari. But Ren assured me that one small drop would suffice in each of their water bowls.

The morning before we wake her, I'm to put the mabari out- just in case Andras wants them to join him in the fight.

I don't know why she's so certain he'll try to use them, but then- Andras is a contemptible bastard. It's likely he'll try to break the rules, one way or another.

That's likely why she decided to start poisoning him to begin with. I think if he could be trusted to do the honorable thing and fight head on…well, we likely wouldn't be enacting a coup to begin with, would we?

So cheating a cheater before he can even think about it…

That woman is a bit terrifying. And sort of adorable. That's…confusing.

You want to wrap her up in blankets and set her somewhere safe but you're also afraid if you try, she might slip a knife between your ribs. Or at least, I am. I wasn't. Before.

When I tried to help her escape, she just seemed…normal. Sort of small and soft and too innocent for the Blades. Now I realize she was the leader we were waiting for. Well. Not we. They.

I haven't been allowed to learn any sort of combat skill. I've tried training on my own after watching them, and I know enough to be starting with…but I'm nowhere near any level of competency.

All my life I lived in an alienage and when I finally got out- I wanted to join up with a mercenary company. Learn to fight, earn money. Maybe send some to my family. But it's more complicated than that, here. With the Blades.

I'm not paid so much as I'm simply fed and sheltered and protected in exchange for services. Which is fine, but I asked before if I could learn to use a sword and Andras laughed in my face.

("What's a scrawny little knife-ear like you gonna do with a sword, hey? Besides, Blades have always been human. S'not gonna change anytime soon.")

So I killed my dreams of becoming a mercenary and kept up with what little training I'd been able to glean…hoping for…something.

Never occurred to me that I could just…do all this on my own.

That I could poison the people whose food I handle, sow dissent against them among their allies, both willing and otherwise- fight them without a sword.

Like I never have before, not even when I left the alienage so long ago.

So whether she terrifies me or not, I'm grateful to her. For coming here, for doing what she is. Even if that wasn't originally the plan, and something tells me it isn't, no matter what she implied…

I'm glad she came.

"Miles, d'you mind grabbing that?" Navette huffs from nearby.

I have to turn around to see what she's pointing at.

Seems she's misjudged a throw and now one of her knives is sitting atop one of the roofs.

"No problem," I trot over to the targets and grasp some footholds in the siding. Scaling my way up, I pluck the knife from its inconvenient position and climb down.

"Thanks, Miles," Navette says. Smiling so pretty, like she always does when I do her a favor. "I could never climb things like you."

"I think you could if you wanted to learn," I reply. "It isn't really all that complicated, to be honest. You just practice and eventually it becomes second nature."

"Maybe that's only true for Elves," she says with a grimace. "Cause trust me, I tried a few times and I was equally horrible with every single attempt."

I laugh. "You can't just quit. You have to be dedicated to learning it, like anything else. Even big clunky brutes like you Humans can manage it if you can keep on it."

She snorts back at me, "Oi I'm more graceful than a damn swan."

"You are the picture of elegance, of course," I deadpan. And receive a smack to the arm for my trouble.

I don't fall for Navette's pretty smiles anymore, but it's always nice to have friends. No matter how shallowly the bonds may run.

I don't think anyone likes being totally alone.

Chapter End Notes

There's so many things different about this version that I am both anticipating and dreading your reactions to them in equal measure.
Okay. So today's the day.

Ren's done all he can with my body, and I'm...at at least ninety-percent. If not ninety-five.

I still feel kinda funny, but Andras is chomping at the bit to have me executed now that I've been woken up, and they can barely hold him off long enough to give me the Mercy's Crest I had them craft while I was unconscious.

They have to strap the crossbow and daggers onto my body for me as I slowly wake from my magic slumber.

Ren tried to use a dispel, but it just kinda made things worse in a different way.

"I don't understand, it's like your body's never encountered magic before!" He huffs as he hands me a stamina potion to hopefully wake me the fuck up. "Even farm hands have contact with magic occasionally. It's part of nature. Wherever you live, the Veil must be very thick."

"Yeah probably," I mutter a little bitterly. Everyone in other universes get like, magic and science advancement to a ridiculous degree and we got...Earth. Our Earth. No magic, no sci-fi advances in medical technology or robotics...

This is a weird feeling, being so high on magic that I'm cranky about it.

I take about half the amount Ren recommended because my tolerance for any kind of medicine is low as fuck- and feel instantly better.

Energized, even.

'It'd be incredibly easy for me to become dependent on these...' I cork the vial and shove it into the pouch on my belt. I've always been kind of paranoid that I would end up hooked on something. My family is full of alcoholics and drug abusers.

Some of them chill....others, not so chill.

Miles pokes his head in through the door. "You need to come out soon or Andras is going to have you dragged out and that...would not look good for you."

Sighing, I tuck the Crest into my belt and walk to the door...before pausing and turning to look back at Ren. "Is there any magic you could work without anyone noticing?"

Ren tilts his head and says, "I could heal your injuries...or put a barrier over you. But the Barrier would be noticed."

"Wait until I need it, then and only healing magic, nothing else." Taking a deep breath, I walk out of the room with Miles before me and Ren behind me.

I'm probably gonna die here. I mean, I have no skill whatsoever. The little bits of things I learned in the time before my theft was found out...well, it's not nearly enough to defeat someone like Andras. Which is why the poison on everything.

But even with that, I might have a hard time with him. I mean, I more than likely will.
Especially as we come out of the barracks to see him posturing for his men, looking none the worse for wear. But then, poison has a very subtle effect if you want it to.

I didn't want the effect to be too noticeable because it would probably put him in bed if I got too overzealous. And I wanted him functional.

Functional enough to put on a good show and lose in a fight.

Could've probably just poisoned him and his men to death, as it is a bunch of them are out there looking sick but determined to see my head roll anyway.

But I think the others want to see what I'm made of. Either that or it just didn't occur to them, or they thought it'd be too dishonorable to do. Any which way you slice it, it doesn't really matter.

This is my job, and I'm going to do it. I wouldn't have asked them to do all the work for me even if I'd thought of it earlier. After all...if you can't do a job yourself, and you ask someone else, it should be because you're incapable of that task...not because you just don't wanna do it.

It took me a long time to grow into the knowledge that asking for help is okay and even longer to learn the nuances of when it's appropriate.

I disliked how some people in my family would make me do things because they didn't want to, not because they couldn't- even things that were their responsibility. I was a small child and could be manipulated and used however they liked.

And as I was an especially obedient and quiet child...they could get away with quite a bit more than the norm. I can still remember being grounded from TV and carefully looking away from the living room TV any time I passed through because I was a 'good girl' who minded her punishments.

God, I hate remembering that.

"Well!" Andras has his axe out. "There's the little thief now. I see you gave her some weapons, eh? Up for a little blood sport, are ya?" He grins at me.

He's obviously assuming they gave me the equipment because I'm going to request some kind of fight to the death. For my honor.

That's actually a thing.

"A bit yes, but not for the purpose you think," I step forward into the open circle- an empty space in which Andras and I can stand, staring at each other. "I challenge you for control of the Blades."

Andras laughs, "oh you do?" He swings his axe a little, and shakes his head. "Do yah have the Crest?"

He asks it so smugly that I feel some vindication when I reach down and tap the Crest on my belt and Andras reacts with surprise.

"Who gave that to her!?" He looks around the crowd and his eyes land on Miles and Ren. Who were just outfitting me. Of course.

"I made it before this even happened!" I snap. Drawing his attention back to me.

If I die today, I'm not taking anyone down with me but Andras.
Miles POV

I don't know how she thinks she's capable of this. Andras is going to toy with her until she's too tired to move and then go in for the kill once it stops being fun.

I've seen him do the same with his sparring partners, all of whom he doesn't see as a serious threat to him, either.

Though, judging from the way she watches him and darts out of his grasp at the last moment when he makes a grab for her or swipes at her with his axe...she's just waiting for the opportunity to cut him. Just once.

The poison that Ren made reacts with the other poison we've been feeding Andras. It should...damn it, I remember what he said, but not the exact words.

It'll make all the poison in his system up till now suddenly act like it's ten times more poison than it was. Basically. I think.

I've a head for numbers, not herbs and poisons.

"You goin' to attack at any point?" Andras taunts. "Or you just gonna bide your time and hope I get bored enough to let you go?"

"If I'm gonna die either way, I'd rather die fighting for power than because people think I'm a thief," she says.

Completely convincingly.

She is shockingly good at lying. If I hadn't heard from her personally what her motivations were and that she actually did steal that armor, I would've bought that.

Andras certainly does.

"Ha! Well then come on and put on a good show for my men!" He leaps toward her and everything happens very quickly.

Andras is apparently done playing.

My throat tightens and Ren, Navette, Ben and I all tense as he pounces and swings his axe.

We're all standing next to each other and the stark divide of us vs them is shocking to see illustrated in front of my very eyes, to say the least.

Nik is agile and quick, even a little flexible- but Andras has experience, age and strength that she does not.

It's over faster than any of us could've imagined.

She's lying on the ground, with Andras's hand on her throat, staring up at him as he draws back his axe.

Ren shifts, moving forward, but stops when she begins to spit out words.

"I'm shocked that you don't want to choke the life from my body and watch my eyes go dark," she
says. "People like you always seem to enjoy that kind of thing."

What is she doing?

And then I see her other hand clutching at one of the daggers, the point dug just barely into the back of his thigh. He doesn't even seem to have noticed it!

Andras grins and puts down his axe and I realize with some nausea that she was intending to give him *ideas* and stall for time.

It takes longer to choke someone to death than to put an axe through their skull.

Her look of shock and fear is very convincing- but I know that had to have been deliberate. She had us coat those daggers so thickly that I'm sure that poison is in his system, a lot of it- and it must be just about ready to spring the reaction.

But she needed time for that reaction to occur. So she grasped at anything to stall for time that she could.

And now Andras is holding her down by the throat and staring gleefully into her eyes and I think-the entire time, that she's going to *let* him choke her half to death before the poison can even kick in-

But then one of her feet is planted in his abdomen and she shoves him up and off of her.

'Oh thank the Maker. She was pulling a trick.' The relief I can feel in every bone and muscle in my body is overwhelming in its magnitude.

For as long as we've been acquainted, she's been…more than kind to me.

She didn't have to help me clean up or offer to cook for us or talk me out of helping her escape. She didn't have to sing to us or tell us that we deserved better and then fight for us.

Nik doesn't have to do or be anything that she is, but she is and does. And that is a bit suspicious, to be quite frank.

Part of me is still waiting to find out that she lied to us all as well as to Andras and his men. To find out that she came here to take over and make us do even more horrid, degrading things than Andras would ask us to do.

But most of me remembers the moments when she'd hold out an arm to help me up after tripping and falling over my own feet. Or when she'd offer to do something for me because I was too short to reach without overextending myself. And the times when she would secret away a bit of extra dinner for me because I'm 'malnourished'.

That woman is sneaky and a lying schemer but…I don't believe for one moment it's for any nefarious purpose.

She gasps for air as Andras flounders, finally feeling the effects of the poison and clawing at the ground as he attempts to get his bearings.

And that is when I am utterly shocked, because I never knew she had it in her to leap upon a man and shove a dagger up through his head from underneath his chin.

It's such a swift, smooth movement, that I almost miss it entirely.
Thankfully she doesn't yank the blade back out, and from this angle all I can see is the hilt protruding from under his chin, and that is upsetting enough without-

"Ren-" she croaks. "He-…healing, please?"

'Maker, the pain she must be in.'

The utter silence around us, prompts me to look around.

Andras's men, the few who attended today's bout- are staring at her in complete shock.

None of them know of the poison or the plans she made for this fight. To them it seems a completely inexperienced rookie just killed a seasoned veteran after a lucky hit to the gut and also after almost having her throat crushed.

And that's when it hits me.

'She did it. We're free.'
I make my move, once she's down.

The Elven healer attends to her and Miles rushes to her side with Navette and Ben like the loyal dogs they are.

But I stand before Andras's men and those of the Blades Miles and the Healer hadn't turned to their cause and I speak.

"Blades! Hear me!" I say. With as much conviction as I can put into my voice. "This woman is not qualified to lead you!"

"Hermea!" I can hear Navette and a struggle behind me, but I do not turn to look. Ben will have her in hand- he can never resist the urge to throw himself between her and danger. And if he fails, I also have an axe and Navette is an amateur.

"She has tricked and cheated her way into this win today, but you have yet another option!" I raise my fist. "I never believed this woman's lies! I uncovered her plot- but alas, too late to stop this."

I wanted to be free of Andras, but I will not bind myself to someone else in his stead. If there is to be a leader, let it be me.

"Follow me, and we will restore the glory of the blades!" I shout and throw my fist higher. "Follow me and we will become what we were meant to be without Andras's toxic influence or the lies of a leader we cannot trust."

There is a hush as the Blades look to each other and at their newly blooded leader- deciding between tradition and common sense.

"A dishonorable victory is no victory at all!" I remind them.

"You despicable bi-" Navette is silenced but there was no scuffle.

I glance behind me, and see that the lying traitor is sitting up, holding onto Navette's leg. Just a touch, to pause her.

She lifts her head and smiles in a tired, vacant fashion. "You can have the camp…Herm…ea…we were…leaving…anyway. Just…let them come…if they want to, please. Or…let them…go home?"

Every word spoken from her lips is a struggle, and the mage appears to be a bit shocked she is even speaking to begin with.

Blinking heavily, smiling, speaking with effort, she strikes me as being particularly small. Smaller than I've ever thought her before.

"I have no reason to keep them against their will," I reply. "All who wish to follow a competent and honest leader, you will stay with me! Everyone else may go where their whims take them. I care not."

"Honest my arse," Navette mutters and glares at me.

"S'okay, s'okay," the traitor pats Navette's leg. "We need…find the mages…"
Her blinking is becoming heavier and as we watch- she falls asleep against the Healer, slumping into his hold.

"She's right," Miles says. Shaking his head, he throws me a volatile look that I have never seen on his face before. "We can find the mages and make our way with them. They will likely be happy to receive an escort to Haven."

"So?" Navette turns to the Blades. "This woman just risked life and limb for your dumb arses to kill the man holding you captive. I know at least three or four of you personally who wanted to go home to your wives. And more of you who wished the Blades could be more than they were. So those of you who want to uphold what the Blade of Mercy is truly meant for- come with us. Gather your things and meet us outside the camp."

She turns to me then. "That alright with you, you backstabbing joke?"

I incline my head. "I do not wish to be at odds with you Navette. But I will not follow a liar and a cheat."

A bark of a laugh escapes her as she steps a bit closer and lowers her voice. "You and I both know you're no better. You let her get rid of Andras for you and then you threw her to the wolves. Well fuck you. She was more honest with all of us than you were- even if she did lie, I trust it was for a good reason. You? This is obviously just about you needing to grasp the power before someone else could."

Navette looks at me with eyes filled with rage and I cannot contradict her.

She is wrong, but she will not listen to reason.

The traitor understood, even in her stupor. There is no point in fighting over these scraps. Everyone is free to do as they like, now. And so we will.

I will. And I will never be chained under someone else's authority again.

"C'mon Navvy," Ben is sporting what looks to be the beginnings of a black eye. I wonder when she managed that. Probably when I first began to speak. "Let's just get our things and go."

She glares at him as well, but moves around the lot of them toward the barracks. "All of you, get her out of here before that traitorous swine decides to kill her. I'll get all our things and meet you outside with the others."

There is not a significant amount of Blades leaves, but it is enough to pause me when I notice them. I knew most of us were dissatisfied with Andras, but I had no idea so many simply wished to go home or were so beholden to tradition they would follow an obviously inexperienced and unqualified leader…

Navette disappears into the barracks with at least five men behind her- while the Healer and Miles support the unconscious girl between them and Ben nervously follows after them, glancing back at the Barracks as if he wishes to run to Navette's side.

"I'll not harm anyone leaving this camp. I just want this all over with," I say to them, crossing my arms. "Just don't come back, or I can't keep that promise."

"Why?" Ben asks. "She would've let us go our separate ways anyway, so why even do this?"
"Because I didn't trust that, Ben, and neither should you," I respond. "You're all so quick to put your faith into a woman who lied and stole and cheated. You should think about that."

"What else should she have done, Hermea?" Miles is looking at me in a way I am...uncomfortable with.

It is far more pointed and careless than any expression he has ever had on his face before.

"Should she have left us at Andras's mercy?" he asks. "Fought fairly and died without accomplishing anything? Come to camp without any claim to our ranks and possibly been harmed or executed by Andras who was a suspicious man on the best of days?"

They only pause long enough for Miles to deliver that with his unnerving expression and then they are moving on toward the gates again.

'Fighting honorably means being honest and fighting fairly. I let her kill Andras because Andras was a thorn in my side, not because I wished to allow her the power she sought. And I could not have stopped this. Not without bloodshed. Not a single word I spoke was a lie. I care not what they think.'

Still, as Navette leaves with a bare handful and a half of men, some of them already going on their way, most of them staying to follow behind her- and I see the hatred for me in her eyes...I feel no regret, but I do feel melancholy at the loss of what I once considered to be a great friendship.

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Nik POV

The next time I open my eyes, I'm a little surprised that it's to the inside of a tent and not the interior of one of the cabins that I've been sleeping in for the past two weeks.

It takes me a couple minutes of hazily blinking at the world around me to even realize I'm in a tent but when I do, I shoot up into a sitting position and try to take stock of whatever I can comprehend before anyone comes to check on me.

And I know they will eventually because I didn't set up this tent. I don't even know how to do that.

Modern day tents are different than these ones. You use wires and pipes, not poles made of wood tied to the cloth walls with actual rope.

What reasons could there be for me being in a tent instead of in camp? Am I not badly injured anymore?

Cracking my neck and then every other joint I have in my body, I take stock of the fact that nothing is throbbing or feels achy and sore anymore.

Checking my torso for the bruises I would assume were there from the way Andras pummeled me before- I'm a little surprised to see no evidence of them.

I'm super fucking tired, but I'm not all banged up. I'm sure most people would absolutely take that trade-off. But I feel like I did back in my depression fugue when I wanted to sleep forever.

I hate that feeling.

So I carefully maneuver out of the blankets and crawl on top of them- on my knees, keeping myself...
upright mostly by sheer force of will.

Don't know how long I sit there on my knees before my brain clears up a little, but it's long enough for someone to walk into the tent and startle me. I think I startled them too, because they jerk to a stop as soon as they see me.

I realize after a moment of us staring at each other, that it's Miles.

"You're up!" he says with relief and excitement mingling in his tone. "How do you feel?"

"How long have I been out?" I cough, clear my throat, and ask my second question. "And where's Ren?"

"Two days, just about," he says with a grimace. "I wanted to wake you sooner, but Ren insisted you had to heal completely first. That you'd wake on your own. I guess he was right."

It's so hard to focus on the words he's saying and his face and really anything besides being a creature made up of primordial ooze forced to gain corporeal form.

Ugh. I feel like I took one of those pain pills the dentist gives you after surgery and most of the loopy has worn off but now you've got cotton in your brain.

"Say that again?" I missed the second thing he said. About where Ren is. Which was an important question.

"Focus, brain!"

"Ren went off to find some Elfroot and maybe some other herbs in the area. He told us to wait here for him." Miles walks over to sit across from me on the bedroll, also on his knees, staring at me intently.

I get the feeling he's maybe waiting for something or…

"You alright, Miles?" I rasp and *again* have to clear my throat.

"You killed Andras," he says.

And like a lightning bolt, it hits me that *that* is exactly what I did.

"I…killed…Andras," I say. This time having trouble articulating the facts instead of working through the lingering huskiness in my throat.

I will probably never regret that Andras is dead and can't hurt anyone anymore, but I've never killed anyone before in my life. The only fights I ever really got in were with bullies on the playground when I was protecting my friends and that never went past me chasing after them and them running away.

And *that* was in elementary school.

That moment is so fuzzy but I remember the utter *rage* that filled me when I'd finally gotten him off me. When I saw he was finally open for attack.

I always suppress my anger because when it overwhelms me…I don't want to get it under control. It feels…*good*. And that's…terrifying.

And I know that's incredibly unhealthy, but I've *tried* to control it and let it out constructively
and nothing works.

"Don't pass out again," Miles has a hand on my shoulder when I blink myself back into the moment. Staring intently like he expects me to pitch over at any second and he's prepared to catch my ass before my head hits the floor.

"I'm just...still exhausted, but...I hate this feeling. I know I should sleep..." tears are springing to my eyes.

And to my great shock, Miles hugs me. And it's a shock because to my knowledge, Miles is not a big hugger.

"You can rest. We are watching," he says softly. "Sleep, milady. And we will find the Mages in the morning."

"MAKER SAVE US!" a shriek from outside pulls us apart and startles me to some alertness.

"Miles, where's my stamina potion?" I grasp his arm as he goes to leave and he pauses, pointing to the corner where my armor and weapons from the fight with Andras are sitting, arranged.

I release him and crawl for the belt as he leaves the tent to assess the situation.

It's not difficult to find, but trying to get my hands to grip it with any strength is a bitch- and eventually I just have to gnaw until my teeth catch on the cork so I can yank it out by squeezing the belt around it to hold it still.

I hate being sick. I know this is different, probably due to my body healing but I'm still weakened and I still hate it.

Gulping down a full mouthfull of the stuff and then leaving the vial standing up in the nest of leather that is the belt, I stagger outside the tent.

The screaming had mysteriously started and then stopped and once I step outside, I see why.

There's a green mist covering everything and even Miles is just a few steps away, wheezing on his hands and knees.

Moving as quickly as I can, I rush to grab him, holding my breath and drag him back into my tent with extreme effort.

The tent is unaffected and I wonder why until I see the sigils in the dirt outside when I peek out again.

'Ren set up a barrier? Is this mist magical, then? It works on physical attacks but a gas bomb shouldn't set it off, should it?" Damn it, I don't know.

I do know this tent is safe, though, and there's at least seven people in camp at the moment who are collapsed or collapsing.

"Everyone here!" I shout at the few that are still kind of moving. "To my tent! Now!"

Three people stagger and crawl toward me, the promise of safety or at least- a direction to go in.

The rest are all on the ground, unresponsive.

So I take a deep breath, and run for them.
"Nik…" I run my magic over her insensate body one more time. "Take the healing magic, damn you."

"Is she going to be alright?" Serah Trevelyan has been hovering ever since she called off the attack. She's a powerful entropy mage. And while I'm touched that she tried to attack the Blades over me- she attacked the wrong ones.

"I don't know, Serah," I respond. "She apparently ran into your mist at least five consecutive times to pull people out of it and ended up taking a lot of damage as a result. I can barely get her body to accept the healing- it's like it soaked up all the entropy magic and now it doesn't have room for anything else."

"I've never heard of anything like that happening before," she says. Worrying her hands in a knot in her lap.

And if she hasn't heard of it, that's… alarming. She was all set to become the next Grand Enchanter when the old one retired before the Circles fell. She would've been one of the best educated mages in the entirety of her Circle.

I know there are always strange things you can't explain about magic but… this…

"Don't you dare die on us now," I order her as I shove magic into her body- trying to displace the toxic entropic energy. "Miles is going to be- Navette is so angry- None of them can move well yet, so it's not like she could've actually-"

I'm not sure what I'm even saying anymore or why this is even so important to me.

All I know is I've never had a human bow to me with her face to the floor in my entire life. And if you'd asked me before meeting her if that would ever happen, I would've laughed in your face unless threat of force was involved.

It's the whole reason I decided to hear her out to begin with. I was so shocked I just.

I just stood there and then it was just so absurd. I-

I like this girl. I respect her. She didn't even have to do much, in hindsight. It was all in the way she talked, about how she'd kill Andras and get everyone out from under his thumb. Like there was never a doubt that she'd manage it.

Did she ever doubt it for a single moment? I want to know that. I want to know what she was thinking while this was all going on and I can't know if I don't ask. And I can't ask if she's dead.

She inhales sharply and her heart beats wildly- so I have to stop. I have to pull back and wait for her body to adjust to all the magic. I have to wait for it to force the entropic energy out naturally. Doing any more will overtax her body too much.

If I try to help her any further right now, I'll kill her.

Breathing deeply, I stand from my place beside her on the floor of the tent and wave to Serah
Trevelyan to follow me. "Let's leave her for a few hours. I'll keep checking in on her but rest will be good for her body."

I have to jump in at every chance to shove that poison out of her system but too much at once will be dangerous. I'm not going to be sleeping tonight, am I?

She's damn lucky the wards I put up and the barrier I erected around them weren't effected by all her movement. It was supposed to protect her so in truth she's the only one who could've gone out and come back in like that.

Anyone else would've been trapped on the outside.

It's because of her that they're alive and they all know it. Which is why they're all ringed outside her tent, around the firepit. They wanted to make it as close to her as possible so she might benefit from the heat.

I'll put some heating runes around in her tent, but it's a nice thought, I guess.

Miles is sitting right outside, curled up into a tight little ball, looking forlorn. As far as I can tell, they're closest out of everyone. I mean, she did let him in on her plans first, after all. And we were the ones to tell everyone else.

I wonder what's going through his mind right now. He was the first person she saved.

"The mages have set up camp a bit further away from here," Serah Trevelyan mutters to me. "I assumed no one here would want us any closer, but if you need help with healing everyone-"

"No one is as difficult as Nik, the rest will be fine under my care," I say. Then sigh. "I don't hold this against you, Serah, but...they don't understand."

She dips her head, "I would leave, but I want to apologize to her directly when she wakes up."

"You can go on over to your camp till then," Navette is strong enough to snap and snap she does. "None of the rest of us want to look at you."

I can't say anything in her defense. She should've looked and listened before making her attack. What if we'd just been travelers dressed up in similar colors? She could've massacred an entire innocent party. And as she hasn't offered anything in her own defense, I think perhaps she knows that.

All I can wonder is what's going to happen when Nik wakes up. Everyone is bound and determined to follow her now even if they weren't before. And they were...to a certain extent. But after having their lives saved by a girl who was barely recovered from fighting for their lives to begin with?

I'd be surprised if any of them wanted to leave now.

Our entire purpose was to find the mages though. Will we still travel together, with this distrust and anger swirling around us? I just don't know.

Miles POV
I don't know how to feel about any of this.

We almost died. Nik is still asleep- I was so relieved when she woke up before but now-

Now I half-wish she'd just slept through it. I could've escaped the attack, all I had to do was walk into her tent, which I would've done just to check on her.

Or I could've run before the mist reached us…

Why is she always doing these things? Putting her life on the line for a bunch of people who don't deserve it or…who she just doesn't know one way or another.

…for me…

That mage is still here, and I don't really recall why. Everything is a bit hazy. I think Ren told me it would be for a while but I can't…

It doesn't matter. It keeps some of the thoughts from circling me like buzzards over a corpse.

Still I'm stuck in this rut of…thinking what could've happened and how it all could've been avoided. I don't think I've ever dwelled on something this hard that wasn't about me or my family or…

Why is she so important all of a sudden. That's what I want to know. Her saving my life, that's something, but it's…it's not the reason.

There are so many little things that shouldn't matter this much to me. The moments in-between, the smiles and the hands up and…just every single moment I've known her and all the moments after I knew what I could do, what I could've…done.

I feel like I'm discovering this whole world of power I could've held and been aware of and also…all the culpability that goes with not discovering it sooner.

If I'd just killed Andras a long time ago, poisoned his food- Nik wouldn't have needed to come to us to begin with. Or if she had, she would've been welcomed as a friend and comrade with no contention between us all.

Maybe Hermea would've taken over then, too…

No. She was too timid before. She saw a chance and jumped on it, but…that was after a protracted amount of time under Andras. Getting angry for a long time and feeling powerless can push you into…a lot of things you never thought you were capable of before.

If I'd gotten rid of Andras and the rest of his men, we'd have been left bereft. Not knowing what to do next.

…and whose fault was that exactly?

It's so confusing. How do people who lead know how to do it? How does it just…come naturally to them? And if it doesn't, then how is it stripped from the rest of us?

"Miles…" Ben is one of the most recovered, as he was closest to her tent, next to me. The both of us were effected…differently. "You feel alright?"

"No," I reply. "You?"
He shakes his head and then turns a little green. "Ugh. No."

"We almost died," I say. Frankly. Blank and a bit...amused? "She would've been fine. If she'd just...stayed. In that tent." I'm finding it difficult to parse my thoughts. As a result everything is coming out halting and probably sounds strange.

But Ben understands enough to respond, I guess. "I'm beginning to see a pattern with her."

I laugh, a bit unsteadily. It takes me a little by surprise. "I don't...understand her. It's not just the kindness or the respectfulness or whatever else you can name that's different about her. I just..."

"She feels warm, doesn't she?" Ben says. "It's...the strangest thing."

"If she were a mage, I'd say it was some kind of...spell," I say. "But it's so subtle it's...it's like I can't even decide if it's real or my imagination. Even though you say you feel it too."

It's not as though I feel like I can't dislike her. Some of the things she says and does do grate on me, though it's...little things. Affectations in her speech that I don't understand and that she never explains.

I suppose I should ask but some part of me is afraid to find out what it all means. Or where she's from and who she really is. I can't really explain it, it's just...some part of the back of my mind, my instincts- whatever it is, it doesn't want to know.

And I haven't lived this long by ignoring my instincts.
Nik POV, Miles POV, Navette POV

Ughhh…I feel like I got hit by a truck and buried in dung.
I feel greasy and itchy and my whole body kinda aches. "Mmmghrossss…"

"She's waking up!" Ren's voice is too loud.

I make a face and reach out with my hand, smacking him in the face with my palm. "Shhhh." I'm slurring but who cares. Ow, that hurt.

"Ow," Ren mutters as he removes my hand from his face. "Nik, open your eyes so I can check them."

"Mmmmmnooo…." I whine and wriggle under the blankets, clutching them to my face.

Ren easily removes them, still being gentle.

But it hurts because my entire body is as sensitive as the tips of my fingers usually are- times a thousand. I whimper a little at the feeling of the abrasive material being pulled out of my hands and curl into a ball.

"She still has too much magic in her system, I can't examine her like this."

"Have you tried a dispel?"

"Don't!"

"I wasn't-"

"I've done that, it just makes everything worse in different ways!"

"Alright, fine. Then what? I'm no healer but this is going to take time to recover from and we need to get moving toward Haven."

I have no idea who the second voice is and it's incredibly hard to follow their conversation. I barely recognize Ren's voice. Can't even tell who's saying what.

"Then we'll travel toward Haven together. It was her original plan, and even if she does hold a grudge, it makes sense to travel in numbers."

That was Ren. I think.

"Well then who's leading your merry band till we get there? If that woman who hates me is in the running, she'll just end up picking a fight."

What? What's goin' on?

I can't seem to make sense of any of it, but I gather that somebody needs to be in charge. After leaving Andras's place, I knew I needed somebody to lead the people because I am not…leader-y. So I gave it thought enough that I know the right answer. Or as close to the right answer as I can get while drugged and confused.

"Miles," I just kind of blurt it, and I think it startles them. "Miles is in charge."
There's a pause.

"Who's Miles?" the other voice asks.

"The…Elven Servant." That is definitely Ren's voice.

"Will the others follow him?"

"Not even a chance. Discounting the fact that he's the servant, he's also an Elf. Being passed over by the boss for an Elf…even if we spin it like she's just not in her right mind right now, they might rebel."

"Really? Seems a silly thing to get hung up over. Is he competent?"

Ugh. "Go. Away. Be quiet." I curl into a ball and feel someone's hand press gently into my back.

"We're going to go, but we'll be back later, alright? Don't move from here, just rest." Pretty sure that's definitely Ren.

"Come on, we have to figure out what to do next," the other voice says. And then it's quiet enough I can fall back asleep.

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Miles POV

"Well obviously that's not going to work," I say. A little bowled over at the mere suggestion.

Me? Lead anyone anywhere? I've never so much as managed a kitchen!

"I believe she's just…a bit impaired, by the magic," Ren says. "You might be a fine leader, who knows. But those humans out there aren't going to want to follow one of us. Even the mages might have a problem with it."

"I'll have you know, Mages are much more open-minded about these things," Dahlia says. Affronted. "We've had many Elven Grand Enchanters."

"Oh? And how many of those did people just not like for 'personal reasons'/?" Ren goads.

"Both of you, shut up," I'm tired of their sniping. "Either fight it out or stop talking about it."

They both scoff, but at least they're giving me a moment to think on this.

Nik impaired by magic? Apparently too much can make her a bit loopy but how does that even happen? Never even heard of people getting like that. If it were a thing, you'd think more people would be flocking to mage towers. Lyrium, Elfroot, certain kinds of weed- all provide a sort of loopy feeling and that's why people want it.

Why is it effecting her like this? And furthermore, why did she recommend me even when she's out of it like this? You'd assume her mind would go immediately to someone who's already a leader.

Navette would be a bad choice as she's chomping at the bit to drive the mages out right now but Ben. Ben is malleable. Spineless and easy to manipulate. Using Ben, whom would likely give up the power gladly when the time came…would make more sense.
I suppose she could think such things of me. Or that—

Wait. Hold a moment. I doubt the thought ever crossed her mind, guileless as she sometimes seems to be, but…yes. I could work with that.

"I see," I say and look up to see both Dahlia and Ren staring at me. "What?"

"You were muttering and your expression went all funny," Dahlia says.

Embarrassing as that is- "I figured out how to make this work. That way when she wakes up, she'll know we did like she asked and kept everyone from rioting. And she won't have to admit she was wrong." Humans hate realizing they made a mistake.

She's different in a lot of ways, but eh…that's always been true, no matter how kind the human in question.

"Great!" Dahlia says. "So what's the plan?"

"The plan is we seal off her tent and tell everyone she's still calling the shots, but she's so weak she can't take any visitors but me and Ren." I gesture at her. "This will mean you can't come in here any more either, to really sell that no one else is allowed inside."

"So you'll be in charge, but they won't know," Ren muses. "As good a solution as any right now, I think. Navette, Ben…all the other men whose names I never bothered to learn— they don't really seem like the impartial leader-types so whoever else we might choose…"

It would end badly.

"So what's your first order of business, Boss?" Dahlia is obviously joking, but.

I'm technically the boss right now. I could order anything and say it came from Nik and they would listen.

But that sudden odd euphoria is tempered with the need to do well. She just saved my life, I don't want to smear her name—or diminish my sudden authority by making her seem incompetent.

"First of all, we need to make it seem like sticking with the mages is tactically sound…and in fact…I have an idea for that." I look between Ren and Dahlia before elaborating. "If we tell them that Nik's accepted an offer for Atonement of some kind, they'd probably accept that. I mean, maybe not Navette. She'd probably still hate them, but at least she wouldn't argue if the order came from someone she respects and feels gratitude towards."

"I'd offer that anyway, but the terms would have to be fair. If she wakes up and enforces it, I want to be sure we're not being 'bought' by agreeing." Dahlia looks incredibly uncomfortable to even be considering it.

"You'd just join the Blades until we reach Haven. Become part of the command structure, like contract mercenaries." I shrug. "We'd be stronger and less likely to fall to random roving bandits or patrols of Templar forces that way."

"Most of the people out there have never had to fight anything more than a particularly mangy mongrel or something," she says.

"We'll run some drills, alright? It's for show. The most you'd probably be expected to do is barrier and heal the Blades." I explain. "Nik would probably see the tactical advantage in that, and
wouldn't send you out to fight with your little sticks and no experience either."

"Hey, my little stick knocked a whole camp of you on your ass," she says. "Nobody said none of us could fight. I can create a fog around us that'll weaken our opponents, at least."

"That's great, but I'd reign that in," I say. "Even if they scoff or insult you, don't remind them about that thing you did that pisses them all off. Right?"

She inhales deeply and sighs through her nose. "Yeah. Right."

---

Navette POV

"So she'll fully recover soon?" I can't say I'm thrilled about being barred entrance, but even the Mage who tried to kill us all is staying away from the tent now, whereas before she was practically hovering.

Snivelling, piteous thing that she is, I imagine she wanted to ingratiate herself.

"Yes, but in the meantime, she's formed a contract with the mages." Miles is apparently relaying orders for her while she's in bed and that's the only reason he's allowed in. I suppose that makes sense in a way. After all, if Ren is healing her, he has to focus on that. But why is it always Miles?

Miles and Ren were the first to get in on the coup and while I understand why she'd want a healer on her side, why the servant? He's always with her and now he's her runner for orders too? That's a lieutenant's job. A right-hand man's responsibility.

"What sort of contract?" I can't believe she'd still want these damn things traveling with us. They bring nothing but danger and ruination with them. Before it was just a job we were gonna take to get out from under Andras.

"Because Dahlia afflicted us all so badly, she feels remorse and wants to atone," Miles says. "Nik approved a recruitment contract in exchange for no more bad blood between us. They become blades till we reach Haven, then they go their own way."

"So they'll have to work for it, at least," I say. Not happy at all. "But why can't we just leave them behind? We could protect ourselves fine enough out on the roads. It's not like we need them. Hell, we were gonna get paid to protect them, that was the plan, right?"

"And we still will be," Miles insists. "They've offered to tend our wounds, barrier us in battle and Dahlia herself will put her immense skill with Entropy magic to work on our opponents. They will also enchant armor and weaponry for us as well as make whatever potions we might need on the way to Haven."

That's a bit more acceptable, I guess. "So long as we don't have to see their faces again after this is over, I don't care about the details. If she wants them along, we'll play nice." I glance aside at the mage walking off to her side of camp, apparently satisfied with their little 'deal'. "For now."

"We need to get on our way as soon as possible, but Nik is still recovering and moving around too much will disturb her rest," Miles says. "So we'll start tomorrow, but we'll be moving slow and we'll likely have to forage and hunt along the way, since we can't rely on traders turning up on the roads."

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"Ben and I can handle that. As spineless as he is, he's a good tracker," I say. "So long as we only find deer and nugs out there in the wild, we should be fine."

"You can take one of the mages with you. I know you don't trust Dahlia, but-"

I cut him off before he can finish. "No."

And then I walk away.

Tolerating being given orders I don't like, that's…that's almost the norm for me now. And at least this time it won't end up in anyone's murder. But I am not trusting one of those abominations waitin' to happen with my back.

Ben and I will be fine on our own. We always have been.
Nik POV, Dahlia POV

Chapter Summary

Nik's waking up soon I swear. I have no idea what's going on, I think Miles, Ren, Dahlia and Navette have all completely taken over.

"So she's awake but..." the lady with the braided black hair is back.

"What was your name again?" I ask. Sorta slurring.

"Dahlia, Messere." She replies.

"Yes she's...a bit lost, still." Ren is checking my body for bruises. The light is all tingly. "I have to be incredibly careful not to use too much magic or she'll shriek. Also her body can barely handle the amount in it now, so I can't talk. I need to concentrate."

"Alright, but Navette and Ben just brought back a deer and a brace of wild turkey. None of us know how to cook." Da...Doll, says.

Ren sighs, "where's Miles? You're not supposed to be in here."

"Took off into the woods to play sword, I guess?" Doll says. "He had something that looked like a stick carved up a bit to look like one."

"Well, go and get him, he knows how to cook at least enough to make everything edible." Ren says.

"I cook!" I say. "I can make a stew! Or jerky. I love Jerky."

"How long is she going to be like this for, do you think?" Doll looks at Ren and twists her hands together.

I try to mimic the action and get distracted by how tingly it feels.

"Another few days at least. She's recovering well physically, but...Nik, what are you doing?"

"My hands are tingly," I inform him.

"...she's not at her best, let's leave it at that. Having her out among the Blades right now wouldn't be wise." Ren's voice behind me is strained. Is he laughing at me? No. It sounds tired.

"Ren, are you sleeping?" I ask. Suddenly turning to look at him with squinted eyes. I can't really see all that well. Everything's there, but it's...not there in the right place. Or something.

"What? No, of course-" he seems confused. It must be the lack of sleep.

"You sleep, right now." I say very firmly. "Magic needs sleep more than...you need Fade juice."

There's a sound like smothered choking behind me but I ignore it.
Ren is staring at me with his brows raised and he lasts for a few moments before bowing his head and agreeing. "Alright then…Milady…" he sounds weird and his body is shaking. He must be really tired. "I will go and sleep in my bedroll forthwith, if you do the same."

"Okay!" I chirp and crawl over to curl up in my bedroll, under the covers. It's so warm~

Dahlia POV

"Everyone is so bored and listless. We need to give them all things to do or they're going to be at each others' throats," I tell him. "Since you're in charge right now, you should be the one to decide what happens and how we keep everyone busy. I'll spread the word among my camp, you and Ben will in yours, and everyone will be too busy to fight."

"Giving them busy work to exhaust them is just going to make everyone more irritable," he rotates the skewer slowly over the fire and glances around. "And be careful what you say out here."

"Oh I erected a barrier," I scoff. "I'm not a child or an incompetent. I know better than to let people eavesdrop on me." Just because he can't feel it because he's not a mage doesn't mean he shouldn't assume or at least ask if it's there.

"Barriers block out sound, do they?" he asks in an interested murmur. "That could be useful."

"Yes yes, terribly useful for clandestine meetings in the moonlight- now what can we do about this problem?" I feel so useless, just standing around, doing nothing. Enchanting weapons and armor doesn't really take much energy or attention as we've been doing it for the Chantry for…our entire lives.

We need something to do.

"I suppose we'll need a project," Miles says. Distracted as he tends to the meat in the firepit and the stew in the pot. "Something we can collaborate on. Nik would likely disapprove of us going back to banditry and Navette would never stand for it. But we could find a target worthy of ire and set upon them after much planning and scouting. That would keep them busy and it would give Nik time enough to heal to maybe make an appearance soon."

"A target worthy of ire? Like who?" I don't like the sound of this.

"Bandits." Miles replies simply. "We find some, we defeat them, we take their ill-gotten gains and we either keep or sell it. If bandits are the only targets, Navette will feel good about defeating them and everyone else will finally be able to fight again after a whole week of inactivity."

Well that's a bit of a relief, really. Killing bandits and taken stolen goods from them is more moral than actual banditry or preying on mages. Not that I thought Miles would ask us to do so…

Not that I didn't, either.

"So you and some of the other mages will have to disguise yourselves in regular clothes and go looking for information in the nearby towns and villages," he says. "I'll send Ben with you to escort and you can find a target for us."

"Well…let's just hope Ben doesn't take fright and run off at first sign of trouble," I mutter.
Miles chuckles, "as long as it's just a few people with a bunch of mages backing him up, he'll probably be fine. He didn't like going after the caravans, but they put up next to no fight, so he never ran. It was only when he'd be expected to fight someone stronger or in equal or greater number that he balked."

So the reason they all call him a coward is that he was just fine picking on smaller and weaker targets but he tried to refuse fighting someone stronger than him? Strange. That seems sensible. Trying to only tackle the enemies you can handle.

"Why does everyone call him a coward if he's just…cautious?" I ask.

The elf twists his mouth in a peculiar fashion. "In order to win in a fight, you have to risk it all. The only time you don't actually risk anything is against an unworthy challenge. Ben made a good lackey for bullying and massacring civilians, but he's a coward because when faced with a fair fight, he refused."

"But he didn't like doing all that, did he?" I ask.

Miles barks a laugh, surprising me. "And what did he do about it? Navette only kept quiet to protect him, and when the opportunity arose to fight her way out came up, she took it. And she'll probably feel terrible about what she did and try to correct it for the rest of her life. Even if it means taking risks. But Ben? Ben barely did more than whine about it and then go back out to do it again anyway."

"Why did Ben and Navette even join up?" It seems so strange that they'd join a mercenary band when they hate banditry. Mercenaries are usually just glorified bandits for hire, aren't they?

"Ben'd heard stories about the Blades of Hessarian when he was younger. Assumed they still applied when he caught wind of rumors. Talked Navette into running away to join them." Miles shakes his head. "Then they regretted it once they'd gotten there. But Ben was too afraid to run or fight. So Navette stayed quiet."

That sounds horrible. Having to bite your tongue, every day…I know what that's like.

…perhaps Navette and I have more in common than I thought.
Chapter 15

Chapter Summary

It is still technically the weekend. So I'm not technically late with this chapter.

Chapter Notes

Apparently my new pattern is updating Unwritten once a week alongside two other updates to whatever random-ass stories I've got the inspiration for that week. Lmao. Here's a new one for you.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"You decided to join us, Navette?" the treacherous snake asks me.

"I wasn't going to leave my cousin alone with all of you," I snap. "Now hush. We should be inconspicuous."

I'll not fail the first mission my lady has given me. Especially not for such an important cause. Destroying bandit camps is worthwhile. I will not make up for what was done, but I can stop it from happening to other people in the future.

There are just so many. We've heard of at least three since we first walked into the village. They're being bled dry, the people here. Destroying even one bandit camp could ease the pressure for them. But which one should it be?

Miles will likely relay information about all of the camps to the lady and she will choose, but I want more information before I bring anything back to her.

"We should ask some more people about the bandits, where they're coming from and what they seem to want." I decide. "If they're attacking merchants, it's likely they need supplies. If they attack mages or templars on the road, they could have some kind of political association or have been hired by somebody. Be best to know before going in."

"That is a good idea," the snake says. "Nik will likely want all of the information we can find. I have heard she is very...thorough."

"We don't know what she is, yet," I reply bitterly. "Haven't even gotten to know her that much outside what we knew before she got thrown in jail and then knocked out for days. And then another few days. And then a whole week."

The snake shrinks into herself at the reminder of what she's done, but says nothing in her defense.

"So let's go, then, shall we!" Ben interjects anxiously. He's never done well with conflict. He can face up to someone directly calling him out with some balls but they disappear when other people are fighting around him. Don't have any idea why.
"Ben, you go ask some of the farmers in the fields. We'll go and talk to the ladies spinning on their
spindles and the rest of you lot," I turn around and survey the many disguised mage women we
brought with us. "Remember what Miles said about eyes and ears."

Everyone breaks up into their groupings and I watch Ben rush off to bullshit with the men tilling
the fields. I bet he'll be helping out with a hoe before long while he talks to 'em. He can never pass
up an opportunity to ingratiate himself to somebody.

Hadn't seen this particular thing about him in a while, it almost seemed like it'd died while we
served Andras. Good to see it didn't. He might be a weaselly little coward, but he's my favorite
cousin and he's a soft-hearted man by nature. If he could've been a farmer or perhaps some sort of
traveling merchant, he probably would've been happier.

But he's always dreamed of adventure. That was what led us here. Well, now I know better than to
follow him off into the horizon, chasing childish dreams.

I only wish I'd learned that lesson well before Andras. Though maybe I shouldn't. After all, I
wouldn't be serving My Lady now if I hadn't served Andras first.

I still regret all the death, and the pain and the guilt. But if it led me here? To someone who would
risk their life for mine? For my cousin, for everyone I know and care for in our company? Then I
suppose life has led me to a leader worthy of following and I should be grateful.

Did it have to happen like this?

I walk alongside the snake as we take our time, leisurely strolling down the lane toward the women
spinning thread from distaffs wrapped with leather strips to keep the fluff on the top in place. The
ladies are very sociable, chatting to each other as we approach, one hand drawing the thread, the
other spinning it round the spindle.

I remember the ladies in my mother's embroidery talking about spinning their own thread and yarn
from dyed wool…hm. I thought I was finished missing home a long time ago. It's not like I was
ever happy there.

"Are you alright, Navette?" The snake asks.

"Fine. Let's go." It's time to gather information. I can't get distracted. This is my mission.

Nik POV

"Ugh, when is this going to wear all the way off?" I'm past the loopy stage and now I'm just achy,
disconnected and cranky.

"Another day or two, I'd say," Ren says. Then grins. "Can't say I'm not a little disappointed. You're
cute when you're drugged."

"Bite me," I grouse. "Where's Miles?"

"Out in the woods again," he says, shrugging. "I think he's trying to teach himself how to use a
sword."

"Why the fuck isn't someone in camp teaching him?" Jesus, if everyone's treating Miles like crap
because he's an Elf, I'm gonna rip some ass.

"I don't think he's asked," Ren says. "Maybe he wants to learn all by himself? I have no idea."

"Go get him and I'll ask," I say. Then rub my eyes vigorously when my vision doubles and then goes back to normal. A fuzzy normal. "What's everyone doing, anyway?"

"Plans to hit a nearby bandit camp to gather supplies and stop them from harassing the locals is already underway," he says.

And I blink a little hard. "Why? Did someone ask for help? Or are we just hurting for supplies?"

"Miles thought it'd be best if we had some kind of project for everyone to focus on so that everybody wasn't at each other's throats." He explains.

Confusing the fuck out of me. "What do you mean? Why weren't we getting along?"

"I guess you're lucid enough now you'll actually retain the information, so...allow me to explain."

---

Miles POV

'No. No, not like that. His hip shifted differently.' I move into the maneuver and swing my weight around to execute a sweeping motion with my 'sword'. Something similar to what the Soldiers practice every morning in their exercises, to keep sharp.

Similar, but not the same. Something about the movements is off. I think I don't weigh enough. Elves are just...too small for this kind of thing, I guess.

Sighing in exasperation, I settle into my stance again and then pause when I hear the underbrush being crushed under foot. And then cursing from a very familiar voice.

"Mother fucker. Why are there so many damn sticker bushes."

I can't help the grin that splits my face, but I do try to compose myself as I shift out of position and turn to face Nik as she enters the clearing. "Milady."

"How the hell am I in charge?" She asks. "Ren just told me everything. I assumed after we left that everyone was going their separate ways but now I'm the boss? What the fuck, Miles?"

It's just so absurd. She's covered in stickers and leaves and there's a twig in her hair. I laugh. So hard that it hurts.

"I'll give you somethin' to laugh about, asshole," if her face weren't quivering on the edge of a smile, I might take that seriously and be worried she's actually mad at me. "And why is everyone mad at the Mages? We literally kidnapped one of their people, of course they tried to kill us! Ren informed me that if I try to go back on the whole atonement thing, it'd cause problems for you but-"

"Wait, what?" that dries up my mirth almost instantly. "You aren't angry the mages tried to kill us all?"

"No," she replies, simply. "I'm a little miffed they didn't do more recon and figure out we weren't the bad guys, but I can't blame them either. They were trying to save their friend."
The depths of compassion in this woman are unfathomable. No one I know wouldn't be at least angry with someone who tried to kill them, no matter the reason. "You are the strangest woman in existence."

"So I've heard multiple times now," she replies. "Now, why are you training all by yourself?"

I swallow and shrug, looking at the ground and shuffling my weight from foot to foot. "Elves aren't usually allowed to learn to fight and when they are, they use daggers or bows…I like the sword. But I'm…just not built for it."

"Not built for it?" she asks. Confused, obviously.

I gesture to myself. "I'm scrawny and short. I've never really heard of an Elven swordsman as capable as a human with a longsword…but I still like to…" I'm blushing up to my ears. I can't help it, I just…I like to have a dream. Even if it's unattainable.

She utters a snort that's so loud and abrupt I wonder if it hurt coming out. "What!? Oh fuck's sake Miles, of course you can learn to use a longsword. Hell, one of the best swordsmen in Kirkwall was an Elf with a Greatsword."

My eyes leap to hers and the honest confusion and amusement in them is enough to convince me that she isn't lying, but… "I've…never heard of any." I shrug. "Who…are they?"

"Fenris?" She says with a tone filled with meaning. I have no idea. "Escaped slave from Tevinter? Killed his ex-master with the help of his companions?" Still no. "Companion to the Champion of Kirkwall?"

"The Champion of Kirkwall had an Elven companion?" I'm…a bit floored. I'd heard of the mages, sort of…but really in detail-

"More than one!" she says. Seeming a bit indignant. "Fenris was a warrior, Merrill was a Dalish Mage…jesus, we really gotta talk to the others so I can tell them all what happened in Kirkwall but-" She shakes her head. "Tomorrow morning you're starting training with the others. Let's go."

Something lights up in my chest and my spine straightens. "Yes, Commander!"

"Don't be cheeky, you ass."

"Not at all, Milady." Will I ever stop smiling? I don't know. I sincerely hope not.

Chapter End Notes

The general idea here is that everyone ignored any nonhumans that fought with Hawke because in the DA universe, there's a bias against them. So because they don't really talk about them, the only people who know anything about the nonhuman companions of Hawke are either A: people who were there, or B: People who've read Varric's book.

Miles hasn't read it, nor had anyone else when he left home because it hadn't been written yet. In case you were confused about how Miles didn't know about Fenris and Merrill.
"So you lied to us," Navette throws up her hands. "I've had it with all this lying!"

"Truthfully, so have I, but Miles is not to blame for this." I'm currently standing between a whole camp of mercenaries and my newly appointed Lieutenant- that didn't make anyone happy -because I decided that manipulation and lies weren't a great way to build trust between the leadership and those under them.

Miles went along with it rather like a man walking to the gallows.

"Then who is to blame?" Navette demands, all the men and women under my leadership- till now apparently -squared up behind her.

"You are," I say simply and gesture at them.

"This is going well," Miles sighs whimsically. Obviously still expecting cataclysm.

Ren and Dahlia are also behind me and I can hear them muttering their agreements.

"US!?" Navette is nearly purple at this point. "How's this our fault!?"

"Because Miles knew you'd never follow him or his orders even if I had appointed him, and I did- and why is that?" I step a little closer to her until we're face to face. "Why is that, Navette?"

There's an energy building in camp. I don't know how this'll end up, but I know I'm done lying and deceiving the people who're supposed to be my friends. If that means a lot of them or all of them leave? Then fine.

Her jaw works. "He's a servant," she says. "Why should he lead us into battle?"

I make a face and tilt my head at her. "Who the fuck is talking about battle? From what I hear, you lead that charge while Miles stayed behind with everyone else. I'm talking about the day-to-day. Organization. Morale. Why shouldn't Miles be in charge of those things?"

That seems to draw her up a bit short for a moment, but she recovers quickly. "He's the one who suggested the run on the bandit camps!"

"Yes, but only after other people had come to him expressing discontentment with sitting around doing nothing, waiting on me to heal. He did what any good leader does. He found a way around the problem of you not wanting to listen to him in order to ensure harmony in camp. He was doing a damn fine job. But I couldn't let the lies stand because I am tired of lying."

Stepping back I point out of camp. "You want to leave, go. But this wasn't Miles's fault. If Miles was more confident in your own acceptance, this wouldn't have happened. Everything would've gone smoothly, nobody's feelings would've gotten hurt and we still would've gotten all this from
the bandit camp." I gesture to the loot lying around. "Absolutely nothing would've changed, except you would've known your orders came from an Elf. But he didn't because you wouldn't follow him."

"Like Navvy said-" Ben abruptly blurs. "He's just not qualified."

"Again I ask, qualified to do what?" And I let that hang on the air, because no one wants to offer an interjection.

Not even Navette seems to have an answer beyond what she's already said.

Taking a deep breath, I put my hands up and sigh before speaking. "Look, I get it. You've been told these things are true your whole life. 'Mages are evil because magic is evil' and 'Elves are inferior' and 'Dwarves are all shifty criminals' and 'Qunari are animalistic' and all that shit. You've taken it for gospel because why would your parents and your priests and your favorite teachers lie to you?"

Everyone glances around at each other, and at me.

"Well I've got a radical thought for you, they didn't lie- they were also misled," I say. This is a lot easier for people to accept than their friends and family being malicious. If they can blame it on ignorance or misinformation, everything goes a lot more smoothly. "Are all of you aware of the Chantry's founding?"

"Of course we are!" Navette snaps. "We are the blades of Hessarian."

"Yes and what did Hessarian do?" I ask. "He burned Andraste at the stake."

There's a stillness to everything that I think hints more at a mounting eruption than anything else. So I say what I want to say quickly, in the hope that I can...put off that eruption if nothing else.

"He burned her at the stake and then he decided...to convert to Andrastianism. But not only that, he decided that converting was enough- that he could wash away all his sins by living by her principles and imparting them onto others and it's still debated to this fucking day whether or not his conversion was actually genuine!" I remember that much from codex entries about him.

"Was it a lie when you said we were supposed to be more?" Navette asks.

"No," I respond. "Do you want to know the difference between the person who creates a thing and the people who follow it?" I look around at the people arrayed against me, and they are against me right now, make no mistake about that. "It's the interpretation. And me, honestly, I always interpreted that the Blades of Hessarian should be a blade of mercy. That in the end, you do what you do out of kindness to others, instead of a need for honor or glory or wealth."

"That's what I want it to mean," Navette says. With a furor in her eyes and voice. "But what does that have to do with anything?"

"Is it a kindness to disallow others growth because you're afraid they might surpass you?" I ask. "Is it merciful to treat those at a disadvantage in life with less respect than you'd treat someone you see as equal to you in terms of class or race? Furthermore, can prejudice and mercy and kindness all exist within the same person at the same time without making that person a hypocrite?"

I think I might've confused them enough that maybe they're actually trying to think, now. I'm not sure. I could just be waiting in the lull before an attack. Ren, Miles and Dahlia all have their orders if that happens. We're gonna run, not fight.
But Navette steps forward and I'm a little blown away when she gets down on one knee and *bows her head*: "You're trying to teach us something with this and I didn't see it before. I still don't understand, but I'd like to."

And because Navette is bowing, so is everyone else.

This is the moment I *realize* I've started a cult and start to feel *gross*. 
Maybe concluding that I'd created a cult was a little bit of an overdramatization.

That's the road I'm headed down, but it hasn't happened yet. I was just so overwhelmed with the possibility- with the reality staring up at me from down on their knees-

"Ugh, I feel sick," I groan and curl into a tighter ball.

"You're the only human I know who's not totally thrilled to have loyal followers," Miles says. "I'm not sure why that's endearing. Doesn't make any sense."

"You wouldn't understand if I explained it to you," I reply.

I used to start trends in high school all by my lonesome. And it freaked me out then. It wasn't because I was so cool or popular that people wanted to emulate me, either and that somehow made it worse.

I just knew how to walk, how to talk, how to behave in a way that people picked up on and liked. And I had no idea I was even doing it until I got older and looked back. I mean fuck, I was so depressed in high school I couldn't see past my own nose.

But my depression gave me mystique- fuck that fictional trope -because I was constantly with my nose in a book and could talk like I actually knew a thing or two but only when words needed to be said. I didn't talk a lot, so my words gained weight.

Plus, I had begun feverishly researching psychological conditions because the mind fascinated me and after learning I had depression I was suddenly convinced that I had to know everything about it in order to get better.

I was weird that way.

So I came off as wise and clever and mature and people ate that shit up. When I looked back and realized all of it had been because I was literally too sad to muster up the energy to be anything but totally blank and kind of edgy it was…not only really befuddling but terrifying.

How do you realize you could've held entire lives in the palm of your hand and not be effected by it? Teenagers are easy. I could've ruined them all in some way without even meaning to, that's what I was most afraid of.

It took me years of therapy to realize I was putting too much weight to a bunch of teenagers watching the same shows as me and taking up hobbies I took part in. It all seemed so sinister in hindsight but when given distance and time for introspection, I realized that half of the equation was that they just didn't know any better than to not follow any trend that wended their way.

And that's the problem right now, isn't it?

It's not that I'm so charismatic or popular or wise or mature- it's that they needed someone to look up to and aspire to be and I gave them that. Hell, I saved their lives and now? Now it'll take some serious convincing to get them to leave me behind.

And I would try, if that wouldn't mean that Ren, Dahlia, Miles and the mages would be left defenseless. I mean, mages have magic. But having magic and knowing that you can throw fire or
lightning with your fingertips doesn't mean you can use it reliably or with any degree of skill.

Only Dahlia seems to have any idea what she's doing in combat.

"So what's next, Commander?" Miles has taken to calling me that, lately.

"I'm not a commander. I'm seriously considering running off into the woods, never to be seen again." I'm mostly joking. "Why is it that when I made you my lieutenant, Navette couldn't bark about qualifications enough but when choosing to follow me, she had no questions about mine whatsoever." It's not really a question. We both know a huge reason why. "How am I supposed to lead without any experience?"

"Get experience by doing, don't you?" Miles asks. "So are you gonna 'do', or not?"

"Ummm," a timid voice from the front of the tent says.

I peek out of my nest of blankets like the hobgoblin I am and see Dahlia standing in the entrance. "Oh right, I was supposed to talk to you. Miles?"

"Yeah I'll be back when she leaves," he says. He carefully holds his new sword and oiling rag out before him as he leaves the tent. He's been maintaining and cleaning that thing after every practice session. He's just so damn happy to have a sword.

He also hasn't really left my side a lot since I woke up and I'm starting to get worried about that. At least Ben stopped whining about having to train him. I just need him to teach him the basics and then I can get one of the others to spar with him regularly and correct him and he'll probably learn fast. Having so much passion for something really springboards your aptitude.

"So what did you wish to discuss, milady?" Dahlia sits down on the bedroll across from mine, where Miles usually sleeps. Apparently it's where Ren slept before I was coherent, to keep an eye on me.

Shoving myself upright and grumbling to myself in discontentment, I pull the covers around myself to keep the heat in. I have bad circulation. I used to take hot showers to get my body heat up when it'd drop too low in my extremities, but now I've just gotta keep my body as warm as possible at all times when it's cold out.

It's starting to suck.

"You're not atoning anymore, I told everyone that. You were there, and you seemed…upset," I say. "Why?"

She takes a big breath, slowly. "Well. If we're not here to repay the debt we owe you for trying to kill you, then-"

"You owe me nothing," I reply. "We stole Ren. I didn't intend that when I told them to go and get him, but that's what ended up happening and we were responsible for it. Your murder attempt was understandable. You were just…eh. Sloppy. We're gonna work on that, though, don't worry."

She stares at me for a while. "My. Murder attempt. Was. Understandable."

I quirk my brow, "hoping I'll hear some kinda nonsense in my own words? I know you're not used to being treated like people, Dahlia, but you are. And I understand why you did what you did. No apologies should be necessary, except that you weren't more thorough before you decided to go on the attack."
She bows her head, "I am sorry for that…"

"Alright, then we're gonna start your new training and everybody will treat you like the teammates you are." I say.

She blinks and looks at me with a quizzical expression.

"Your combat, and new magic training?" I say with a grin. "I may not be a mage, but I do know what it's like to finally be free after a lifetime of being dead inside. There's things I can teach you. And things others can teach you. In this camp and outside it."

She frowns, "you mean to train us and use us as mercenaries?"

"No." I perch my chin on my knees. "I mean to teach you to survive so that even if you're being hunted, you stand a chance of staying alive and free."

"Why?" she asks. Frowning even harder now. "Why would you do that for us?"

She's wondering what I get out of this.

"I've loved lots of people in my lifetime," I say. "One of them just so happened to be a mage who loved freedom. Another was a Dalish mage who just wanted to serve her people. Even more were mages desperately seeking a purpose." I shrug. "What I do for you, I do for them. It can be as simple and as complicated as that."

She's staring at me, "how could you have known so many? Apostates?"

"Most of 'em, yeah," I reply with a little quirk of my mouth. "Some were circle mages, though. Just like you. I'm from Kirkwall." I tack on that bit at the end- a lie that isn't quite a lie. I'm not from there, but I've technically been from there. "I've met, loved and been at odds with all kinds."

It's the one lie I'll have to keep telling forever, because no one would ever believe the truth.
"I just don't see the point of this," I grouse. "I've been doing these tiny tasks all day. It's not even enough to tax my mana, and they're so nonsensical!"

"Ever occur to you that she's testing your limits?" Miles is cleaning his sword again. "And from what you're describing, they're getting slowly bigger and weirder. She's got some kinda challenge in mind that she's building up to. Seems pretty obvious."

He really is too brilliant to be a servant. Never would've guessed. That scheme with pretending to give orders from Lady Nik, that was just…the regular amount of clever I'd expect from someone but Miles has been…talking. A lot more lately.

It's like, now that he has a sword and knows how to use it, he's more confident. So he shows off his brilliance whenever he can, instead of biting his tongue.

Some people are getting tired of it, though Lady Nik seems to delight in every off-hand observation.

I suppose it's just proof that she was right that she's all excited about.

"Well it'd be nice if she'd let me know what challenge it is I'm working toward," I grumble.

"Did you even ask or did you just assume she wouldn't answer you?" he asks.

And at that, I have to pause and fight down the flush in my face because indeed, I did not. "I'll go ask her now, then!"

"You do that," he says.

I leave the training grounds, in search of Lady Nik. The tents are set up in such a way that if anyone attacks from outside, we'll have cover in all directions. I thought she was paranoid, but I have to admit, it also makes it easier to know where I'm going.

There are at least thirty mages with me. Add that to her small band of fifteen mercenaries and we have at least forty-five, give or take a few. Which means a lot of tents. And a lot of people in the tents who have different functions that other people might have need of.

Our enchanters were set up in the inner ring of tents. Our life mages between them in an alternating pattern with the least trained of the Mercenaries. Second ring is elemental mages and more mercenaries. Third ring is those of us with the most experience in a fight, or with healing- and the commander and her lieutenant.

Navette wasn't happy about being passed over for that job, but she seems to have taken it as a challenge to prove herself. Which could be good…or really really bad. Depending how far she tries to go with it.

As I approach Nik's tent on the outer edge of the opposite side of camp, I find her speaking with a few other mages.

"That's okay, we can start new tomorrow. The point of the tasks wasn't to complete them all, just to complete as many as you could. Now I can tailor the next level to further gauge your strength." She smiles at them with warmth. "With as much as you've done today, your skills could be useful for a
variety of things. Other people being able to last longer or do more, doesn't mean you're useless. It just means your skillset will be different."

I pause and shift into the shadow of a tent nearby to watch and listen. It's a habit. I would do this in the Circle, to keep ahead of things. I'd always know when they were going to crack down, either because I overheard something or because someone else did.

Leading the mages all this way...was hard. We lost a lot along the way. Our coin, a few of our number...a lot of hope.

But when she smiles, they smile back and a tightness eases in my chest.

She told me I'm still in charge of the mages. She just wants to see what we can and can't do, so she can better know what to ask for and what not to. It made no sense at the time, not to me.

Mages are expected to follow orders and push themselves to their limits to comply. Being given the benefit of a Commander who understands what those limits are and how not to overtax you beyond them is...new. Different.

I'm not sure whether she intends that, though. She could, for all I know, be intending to throw the weakest of us away on cannon fodder jobs, while using the strongest of us for other means. But somehow I just...don't think so. I want her to be better. I want to trust her.

Only time will tell if I can.

"Doll?" she calls out and I startle. "Sorry, didn't see you there till now. Something wrong?"

I cough to clear my throat and play with the braid hanging over my shoulder. "I...I was wondering...what these tasks are for?"

A small quirk at the edge of her mouth and she tilts her head. "Took you half a day to ask me. Everyone else started complaining a long time ago."

Covering my flush, I shrug. "I suppose I just don't get bothered easy."

"Hm, no. You're falling in line," she corrects. "Part of the point of a lot of my training going forward will be breaking you of your more servile habits. They've been beaten into you." She crosses her arms. "I will try to help you break free. I have experience with it."

So she has implied before. "Are you a mage?"

She laughs. "No. I wish. I was just a very, very good, little girl."

I've never in my life heard a non-mage say they wish to be like us. It's baffling. Also a bit insulting. Does she not understand what that would mean?

"You seem angry," she observes wryly.

I carefully ease the entropic energy back within myself. It had begun to...escape me. In little tendrils. I need to be more careful, more controlled. It's just so hard, knowing that there are no Templars about and that I can let it out-

I don't want to shove it back in.

"Why would you want to be a mage?" I ask. Power, perhaps? Or maybe she worships demons like the Avvarian tribes. Never thought to ask if she were Avvar, in heritage or otherwise. What other
"It's magic," she says simply. As if that explains everything. "If I could make a flower sprout everywhere I stepped, and heal the sick with a wave of my hand..." She's musing. Sighing. Wistfully. "The power to help people and grow things. To protect others and myself. I can gain those same things with study, of course. Become a doctor, a farmer, a fighter. But magic...well, it's different. Where I'm from, it's just a fantasy. A story."

The expression on her face is indecipherable when she looks at me. "Knowing it really exists is enough. I always wanted to know there was more magic in the world. And you give that to me, every day. Just by existing."

I'm not even sure how to feel about that.

"Anyway, the point is that I want to establish a baseline. A norm. In the amount of mana you have as well as the range of abilities you can use, individually." She tilts her head. "I have given everyone tasks to do in every category I could think of except necromancy. Don't wanna have any accidents or disturb graves that aren't ours. Dalish might've buried some people anywhere around us. It'd be rude to awaken them without permission."

Why is she so strange? "And my tasks? I am not being pushed at all."

"I gave you tasks that were normal but then you weren't even phased, so I stepped it up a few notches," she says. "I guess that's still not doing anything for ya. Alright. Grow me a tree."

I blink. "A tree? Life magic is not...my specialty."

"That's exactly the point. Do as much as you can. And if you manage, try to grow another." She smiles. "Let me know when you hit your limit. Don't go beyond it. Alright? This is important."

So I nod, and...go off to grow a tree.
Chapter Summary

Sorry I'm late. Forgot to update on Saturday, felt sick through the weekend and it was snowing heavy today. Had to go out and sweep it off the dish.

"Another raid, so soon?" Navette walks into my tent with Ben behind her.

"Lovely to see you two are getting along again, but Ben is supposed to be hunting, not fighting," I remind them. "So it's really not necessary that he be here."

"Maybe Ben wants to prove himself," Navette says. "Why not let him?"

"Because Ben isn't suited to combat," I reply and nudge Miles. He's sharpening his blade and that sound makes my teeth grit. "Quit that while we're talking, please. If Ben wants to be useful in combat, he should hone his tracking and Archery skills. That'll be a hell of a lot more useful in coming campaigns than anything else."

"So I'll be fighting after all?" he asks. And I can't tell if he's happy or nervous.

"At some point. But you need to impress me with your hunting and tracking before that happens," I say. "That's how you prove yourself."

He bows immediately with a murmured assent and leaves the tent. Navette doesn't look happy though she doesn't say anything.

And that can't stand.

"Navette, come sit with me." I invite her to sit on the cushion across from me. We bought some comfort items with the stuff we were able to find at the first mercenary camp. After they raided it, I went picking through and picked up things they thought were useless or too damaged to use and set some of our mages and less experienced fighters to repairing them.

They're skills that'll come in handy.

She settles on the cushion easily and watches me with rapt attention.

Navette is a soldier. Or I suppose, to be more accurate, Navette desperately wants to be a soldier. So the best way to help and teach her is through discipline and trials. She enjoys it when I challenge her. Mentally or physically.

"Before we discuss the plans, Navette…how do you see assassins?" I ask.

She makes a funny face, "how do I see…assassins?"

I nod, "what is your full assessment. Tactical advantages, disadvantages and personal opinion."

She sits up a little straighter, "well, as far as I see it. Assassins have the advantage over foot soldiers, but a disadvantage against rangers. They're quick, but so are the bowmen- especially with
crossbows. It takes them time to attack, move away, throw another smoke bomb, and then escape. That's time the bowmen can use to line up their shots and hit their target. So far as I've seen, using this strategy works so long as the assassins aren't simply harrying the enemy as a distraction. They move much more swiftly and with less margin of error, then."

"And your assessment of them, personally?" I ask.

She scoffs a little, like it's a funny question. "Well, they're cowards. They don't come out of the shadows except to strike and once they have, they go back into them."

"And meeting you head to head on the battlefield would prove their bravery?" I ask.

"...yes?" she doesn't seem so certain anymore. Probably just confused by the question.

"I see. And what if you are outnumbered, outgunned, outmaneuvered? How do you respond? By running straight into the enemy's line of fire?" I ask.

She frowns, "no…I would use my wits and whatever tools were at my disposal to attempt to turn the situation to my favor. If I could not win, I would at least take as many down with me as I could."

"And you don't consider using tools and wits to be cowardly when you do it?" I ask, lifting my brows.

Her expression becomes irritable. "You're not gonna tell me that assassins aren't cowards, now, are you? Because I will never believe that."

"What is the best course of action for a person who is not naturally gifted with strength and who has no weapons training, when they've been cornered?" I ask.

She makes another face, this one confused. "I- run away?"

"I said, cornered." I reply. "Nowhere to run. But plenty of cover, places to hide. So what should they do?"

She thinks for a moment and then says, "that's different. They wouldn't have a choice otherwise."

"And we reach the meat of your beliefs," I say. Then point at her chest, right over her heart. "The courage inside you, is only as valuable as the restraint and skill you use with it. Dying for the cause is all well and good, but then what? One more dead soldier. One less resource for your people to use to defend themselves."

She shrugs and bows her head a little, "I still don't see how--"

"You have the choice to do things the clever way, or the way you get dead the fastest. Your choice to do things so that you clash head on will have ramifications for people in the field. For us as a whole. You are choosing wrong. Honor is not facing your opponent openly and dying. Honor is defending the men beside you with your life and whatever else you have at your disposal."

She looks up at me, still seeming lost. "But Assassins fight for nothing."

"They fight for something," I reply. "You just don't know what it is. It could just be money, but what does money mean? Safety. Comfort. Survival. To impress someone, maybe. For love? For a legacy. To uphold their beliefs? The why is as important as anything else. And just because you have the choice to charge in headfirst and maybe win the day, it doesn't make you superior."
Everyone has that choice. The people who don't make that choice, are the winners."

She sighs. "I don't agree. But I understand what you mean."

"That's all I wanted." I shrug. "So. Now onto the next raid. We need to thin these mercs around this area to help the people at the Crossroads. I know you guys aren't used to doing things gratis, but as I said before-"

"Mercy and Compassion before Glory and Profit," she recites.

I nod and smile. "Exactly."

If I'm going to have followers willing to die for me, I'm gonna teach them how not to die. A lot of them already have the skills, but people like Navette…I worry about them. Because in the end, it is the sneaky and the clever who win battles and wars. Sheer force only accounts for so much.

It does help, but eh…numbers, power and strategy combined make for a good ending.

And this next operation is pretty damn important to me. So I'm going to be part of the plan.

Here's hoping Navette and Miles don't just decide to tie me up and go alone.
"Oof!" I grunt and grimace at the pain that radiates up from my knees. Being shoved in the dirt is no fun at all. Especially in a dress.

"Found another. Some poor farmer's wife or daughter. Put her with the others," says my captor.

The other men in the camp all wear the same kind of armor. All with very chic styled hair. Both the kind on their head and the kind on their face. Some have facial tattoos that look like snakes or dragons or something. They look rougher than Dorian or that other guy from Inquisition…uh…Erimond? But still a lot more sleek than any Ferelden I've seen so far.

It's a little hard to concentrate on anything that's not the gag in my mouth. Ugh, I hate this. It tastes like cloth.

They did sorta what I expected. Knocking me out and then gagging me- but I expected maybe a spell or even a potion that'd dry my voice up.

Nope. They went old school. The most uncomfortable way, too, I'd wager. A bundle of cloth in my mouth, then another across my mouth to hold it in. This could kill me, I could choke on it. I am very carefully keeping my tongue pressed against it to keep it as far from my throat as possible.

Which is just…nope nope nope against my teeth. Ugh.

Another of them picks me up and drags me over to a trailer hitched up to some horses and of course I struggle a little. Mostly just trying to get my footing, but I also have to at least seem resistant.

He drops me inside the trailer and shuts it behind me.

Luckily I fall on something soft. Unluckily, that something is so still and quiet it makes me worry for a second that I might've fallen on a corpse.

But when I lift my head, I stare into the terrified eyes of another bound captive. And then I see at least ten more packed into the cramped quarters, all sitting or lying down. Probably trying to rest before they travel in this trailer over the bumpy-ass road tomorrow.

Sitting up as well as I can, I move my tongue around until I've got the band around my mouth up and covering my teeth on the top- and very carefully spit out the gag from underneath it. "Herro Erryone."

God, I sound ridiculous.

They're all staring at me with wide eyes, so I guess they're not gonna be very communicative. Especially as they all seem to also have gags in their mouths.

Well. This is gonna be a little difficult, but it's not like I didn't know that going in.

The tears on my face probably look a little strange with the way I smile at them through the gag. I didn't have to fake being completely terrified- but I had to do this.

Look at them all…so vulnerable and already so scared and hopeless. Some of them just stare at me with blank eyes and I…
I have to save them. So in order to do that, I have to ignore the fear screaming in the back of my mind, the tears that are still very slowly tracking down my face- and smile.

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Miles POV

Navette is pacing. Dahlia is jittery and Ben looks unconvinced that he's tracking the caravan in the right direction.

Not even mentioning how Ren is casually lounging against a tree with his eyes darting in the direction of every small sound in the forest- ears flicking this way and that, so much that it's beginning to irritate me.

"Ben, do we have a heading?" I am tired of standing around, doing nothing. I have to at least move my mouth or I'll lose my head entirely.

"Yes, but...they're slowing down. As if they're reaching their destination or tiring- but they're on carts, with at least two horses pulling them." He paces back and forth, surveying the markings in the dirt again. "You'd need a lot of weight to tire and slow the horses like this. They must have many people in those carts."

"And we're going to save them all," Navette says. She is very bright when she's inspired. "She should have managed to tell them all what's happening by now, come up with some sort of plan to keep them safe from the inside, like she said. All we must do is fight them."

"Yes, but how?" Dahlia is squeezing her staff and fidgeting with it. "If we just run in there, they could kill them all, like Nik said they might. We could also be outmatched and not even know it. It's just us out here..."

She whispers the last part, urgently.

Nik insisted it only be us who come to her rescue for this. Not the full company in its entire number.

"That's why we're going to be clever about it, instead of rushing in like a pack of starving wolves," I say. "There are ways to lure people into the woods without raising an alarm with anyone else. They'll need to replenish their supplies soon. They have many slaves they have to feed- even a minimal amount, to keep them alive. Add that to what they need to eat to stay in top condition and they will at least need to stop in a village- or hunt."

"While they're out hunting, I can put traps in their path back to their camp!" Ben offers, nearly bursting. "I can make them the sort of trap that you have to trigger manually or I can put a string across the path for them to bumble into. I can even make hole traps if Dahlia can use her magic for hole-digging."

Dahlia huffs but she shrugs and nods in acquiescence. "It would be the best way. We could make spears to skewer them on in the trap and I could put a silencing charm on the trap so their screams wouldn't alert anyone in the camp."

"Then we just cover the tops of the traps with leaves and dirt and branches," I say slowly. Nodding. "And when a party comes looking for their missing hunters- we jump them."

"And then?" Ren stands straight and squares his shoulders. "There will still be some in camp,
"We steal their armor and walk into camp like we're them," I say. "We attack before they have a chance to react- and then we get Nik the hell out of there. And rescue everyone else in the process."

I will never be comfortable with watching that soft woman get snatched up by enemies much bigger and stronger than her.

She had to scream and beg them to stop when they captured her, to make it look good. We had to watch. They laughed at her.

It made my skin crawl.

"Let's just hope your brilliant plans don't fall through," Navette gripes. "For all our sakes, I hope you're half as impressive as she thinks you are."

I draw myself up and turn to Navette with a smile. "If you've got ideas, I'm all ears."

But she just pff's in my general direction and turns away. "You're the idea man, aren't you? This is your show. Let's get a move on, I'm anxious to get this done already."
"Get back!" One of the slavers is brandishing a knife- a dagger, actually- and he's pointing it right at my throat.

I sat up when the doors opened and I was the closest to them, so I was the one who got dragged out. So now I'm being used as a human shield for the last slaver left alive.

Or I'd assume so, I don't see any more but some might've run, who knows.

And you know, I didn't plan for this…

But as I see Ben, with his bowstring pulled back but refusing to fire because I'm in danger- Navette standing apart but ready to pounce- and Dahlia and Ren both looking kind of out of their depth at the back of the group, still maintaining barriers and healing spells…and Miles, standing off in the shadows- mostly going unnoticed, also ready to pounce but probably a lot more successfully.

I realize this is a teaching moment. And also that maybe that shouldn't be my first priority in this situation and it's really fucked up that it is.

"Ben, fire," I say. I got that damn thing off my mouth not long ago, with the help of some of the captives who wanted to hear what I had to say when I kept fucking up the word 'rescue' around the band in my mouth.

"Shut up, you!" The dagger presses into my skin and draws blood.

"I'm his only bargaining chip right now. He kills me, you can kill him before he grabs another slave." I continue, trying not to think about the warmth I feel where the blade is cutting into me. "Or you can get him before he gets me."

"I said shut up!" he moves the dagger away from my throat, but only to bash me in the face with the other end.

It hurts! A lot! But I don't think he broke my nose, thank god. I've been bashed in the face before. It's nothing new. I grew up with brothers who liked climbing things.

Dull pain is familiar.

It is a blow to my head though and my vision swims- as well as my entire consciousness, really. Not enough to knock me out but enough to really discombobulate me for a while. So I close my eyes and try to breathe through it. I might go a little limp, though.

Long enough that when I blink open my eyes, I'm being held by Miles who's checking my vitals like I taught him to do. And I think I can see Navette pacing off to the side with Ben standing by looking haunted- but Ren and Dahlia aren't there.

"Where'd they go?" I croak.

"They're all dead, don't worry about it," Miles replies. "We're freeing the prisoners now, so just relax. Try not to sleep, though."

Well he did hit me in the head, I guess…

"Hard to stay awake with nothing to do," I mumble and blink heavily. "Talk to me?"
"I am talking to you," he says cheekily while hauling me up in his arms and carrying me closer to the camp fire. "But if you want me to pick a particular topic, you'll have to specify."

"Anything," I yawn. "I need to focus to stay awake."

Not only am I suffering an injury, which makes anyone tired, I'm also just plain exhausted. Physically, mentally, emotionally. It's been a taxing day.

But I won. They're free.

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Ren POV

Never seen anything like this in my life and considering the amount of injuries I used to heal on a weekly basis, that's saying something.

A tiny boy, maybe no more than fourteen. Scratched, beaten and cut all over. The degree of his injuries isn't really surprising, considering the circumstances. But for some reason I assumed slavers usually treat their captives better. Damaging the merchandise brings down the price you can get for them, doesn't it?

Looking at him now, I suppose not.

"They dragged us through bramble patches," his mother whispers as she strokes his hair. "He fought back and they hurt him."

"Well, they're dead now," I reply. Focusing on the light pressure I feel in his abdomen- alleviating it and pulling the blood in the right direction until the internal bleeding is finally fixed.

I breathe heavily when it's done- a bit winded. I sometimes forget to breathe when I'm concentrating really hard.

"Here," Dahlia says.

I'd startle, but I'm a bit off-center to begin with. I might fall over.

"What?" I reach up and grasp the small cup being handed to me. "Water?"

"And some food," she hands me a few strips of meat and a roll. "We're giving what we can find of the food to the…um…people that we rescued," she says. Stumbling over her words. "But you need to keep healing so food and water are important."

"I…" Not strange that a mage would look out for another mage, I guess. Still strange. Usually I was always the one doing this sort of thing. "Thank you."

She nods and looks vaguely embarrassed before turning away and heading back over to where Navette and Ben are arguing about what to take and how much they can get for selling…some strange ornamental statue or amulet or something.

"Why?"

That does startle me a little, now that I've had a moment to gather myself. "Beg pardon?"

The boy's mother is looking at me with something close to suspicion but…I think she's a bit too
wrung out for it. "Why did you do this?"

I shrug, "we follow her." I point toward the fire where Miles is settling Nik down on a stump, talking to her in a low, murmuring voice. "She wanted us to come here before they could get away with you. So if you want an answer, you'll have to wait for a bit, I think."

Already checked her injuries before. Minor. Nothing worth wasting mana on if there are worse injuries to be healed around here, first. She'll likely be fine till I can get to her.

Miles seems to be doing an able job of keeping her awake, so I need to get to the next group of captives. Even if all of them weren't beaten, they've each got matching rope burns that need healing.

Going to be a long night.
Chapter 22

Chapter Summary

Sorry for the lateness. I feel all kinds of fuzzy and sorta bad lately and I totally forgot to write this update till like the day it was supposed to be updated.

They warned me. Walking right into the crossroads with a bunch of mages was definitely a bad idea.

Cajoling, the throwing of fruit and vegetables.

I just told the Mages to pick up the shit that was thrown at them or catch it and consider it a donation. They stopped throwing things pretty quickly. Seemed even more pissed off, though.

Well fine, they can stew in their totally misplaced fury. If they come after us, I've instructed everyone to disarm and beat them up only enough to make them rethink it. No killing villagers that've been misled by the Chantry.

Not unless they do something really horrible. Because principles aside if they try to kill, kidnap or imprison any of the mages with me I will full on murder them. I know every single one of them and bar like a handful? They're the nicest, kindest people I've ever met.

This is one of those times when someone on the internet would post a picture of them with a caption of 'I would die for u' and I'd like and reblog.

"Well, we're almost there," Dahlia sighs. "Remind me again why Redcliffe is important? I know there are Mages sheltering there, but we couldn't just keep heading for Haven? I'm sure they'd send whoever was necessary on their own."

"I want to recruit some of them," I reply. "They should have more options than 'starve in the snow', 'be at someone's mercy' and 'go back to the circle'."

"So you want them to be at your mercy, like that's somehow different," she says.

And I pause to look over at her, and everyone else pauses with me.

Dahlia looks like a deer caught in the headlights.

I'm just genuinely surprised. "Is that how you feel?" I think my stomach wants to rip itself apart.

"Well…no!" she exclaims. "Or…not exactly."

"You don't have to be afraid to speak your mind, Dahlia," I say. As gently as I can. "If there's any way I can help you to feel more free, you can tell me."

She's worrying her staff in her hands. "It's not. It's not you. It's just…without you we would still be dying on the road one by one. We wouldn't be safe with your warriors and learning to care for ourselves. And if we were suddenly without you- If you died or if we got separated, we'd be… pretty much doomed. It's hard to feel…free, when you know that."
I nod slowly. "Sure. Especially since you don't really realize all the ways you could've taken care of yourselves this whole time. I mean, you've been giving us enchantments for free but you could probably sell to merc gangs all over the place, you know?"

Her mouth opens, and then closes. "I…wouldn't that just…end up the same way as it did with Ren?"

"Not if you're a united front and show no fear. They picked up Ren because they saw you were weak and hungry and they thought they could get away with it," I reply. "If you could make them fear you, in a healthy sense and not just as mages- but because you're strong and confident and you wouldn't stand the insult- they'd likely just be happy to have a source of protection they can buy."

And then I roll my eyes and shrug. "I mean, not all, not every single one, but enough that you would probably only have to be fighting off about, I dunno, a tenth of the number you were thinking?"

"Mercenaries understand strength," Elliot speaks up from the middle of our little procession.

He's a fairly young mage with burn scarring on his face. His aptitude is with fire and he apparently did it to himself after a spell gone awry. He was pretty chagrined about it, like getting a spell wrong with your affinity is the most embarrassing thing ever.

"That's right," I smile. "They'd probably be confrontational and uppity, but there are ways you could forestall any plots against you. Miles could probably help with that."

Miles looks up from off the path where he's picking some of the Embrium and Elfroot growing along there and quirks a brow at me. "Going to pawn me off on the mages, are you?"

"Maybe," I reply. "Got any bigger aspirations you wanna enlighten me to?"

He snorts and goes back to putting the herbs away in his pockets. "You're not going to get me to admit to a secret desire to rule the world, Commander. Might as well give up."

I sigh at that and start the procession moving forward again. I asked him what his dreams were for the future and he seemed reluctant to have any. So I guess I'll keep asking and poking every now and then just to remind him that he's got options.

It's just me, Dahlia, Elliot, Miles and a few other mages and a couple of the Blades. Small group, hopefully enough that we won't make anyone nervous.

Navette has strict instructions to keep everyone in camp safe, if she's gotta personally beat the ass of every one of the villagers at the Crossroads to keep them the fuck away. She seemed overly enthused about that, but I think it's just the extra responsibility.

Gotta know if I can trust her with guarding the mages and shit and I'd rather know now than later if I can't.

Ren is still tending some of the worst off of the people we saved. The rest were sent home with some supplies for the journey and a blade to escort them.

They know where we're going, they'll make it back to Haven fine on their own.

I hope.

"You're doing that thing again," Miles says.
I puff out my cheeks and then exhale. "What thing? You'll have to be more specific."

"That thing where you're worrying about something so loud, everyone can tell." He says.

Stepping sideways so I can grab his arm and drop my head on his shoulder, I groan. "I sent them without any kind of idea what they might meet on the road."

"You have many many ideas, I doubt you had nothing in mind when you sent them off." He pats my hand that's hooked around the bend of his elbow. "They'll be fine. You've been teaching them how to move in the woods so they don't make as much noise and they know those people are their first priority."

"Sure, I guess," I mumble.

"Just out of curiosity though…" he pauses until I glance up at him and stares down at my face while we walk and talk. Searching my expression for answers as he asks: "You sent whole teams off somewhere and didn't tell me where or why."

"There's things I can't say or tell anyone," I reply. "They have a vague idea of what they're supposed to do, but any more than that could put me in a bad position."

He nods and returns to paying attention to the road ahead. "I see. You always did seem to have more going on than we could see. Guess that's just confirmed now."

"It won't hurt anyone. We might save a few people, in fact." I shrug. "Whatever happens, it's on me. Not you."

"I'm your lieutenant, so half the blame is just automatically mine, isn't it?"

I can't really answer him. My body stops and he gets pulled to a stop with me.

"Nik?"

It's hard to hear anything but the lament in my ears. Someone is crying out for help, crying in pain-

Releasing Miles, I take a step off the path and then another and another until I'm running, running through the trees toward the noise.

I think they're following me, shouting at me to stop, but I know if I let it go, I won't be able to hear it anymore. I can't not follow it.

It's not like a voice, it's more like a tug deep inside myself that just…interprets itself as a voice.

Someone needs me.
I don't like this.

She's never just taken off running like that, even when we were imperiled. Either something spooked her or she's running toward something and I can't think of what it could be.

We're barely keeping up with her, it's ridiculous how fast she is—especially as she seems so out of it she should be tripping over every root and tree branch and she just…simply isn't.

I got ahead of her at one point and stopped to look at her, to see what she looked like. Afraid, or determined or what-

But her face was blank. Utterly blank. It actually sent a shiver down my spine.

Several times, I questioned why we weren't just grabbing and pulling her to a stop. One part of me was leery to touch her while she was going through some sort of…I dunno, something that was effecting her mind. Who knows how she would react.

She could hurt herself, or one of us, or we could hurt her by accident.

And so, instead of chasing her down and tackling her or grabbing her, I decided we should wait for her to stop, unless she was about to run off a cliff or something. So at the moment we're just following.

Well, Dahlia and I are. Elliot stayed behind with the others when I shouted at him to take over leading them up to Redcliffe.

It comes as a complete surprise when Nik halts in the middle of the forest, on a very…faint path. Like a marionette whose strings were jerked, violently.

Dahlia is gasping for breath, lagging behind us, and she collapses in the dirt when she sees we've stopped. Even I'm a bit winded. But Nik doesn't seem effected at all.

She walks very slowly toward…toward something in the underbrush.

It's a lump that is revealed to be a body when she kneels down and pulls it into her arms.

A Dalish woman, dead. Body torn up by something, looks like a sword might've done it.

How did she know.'

Lots of things about Nik terrify me, but this is the first time I've suspected her to be somehow supernatural. The mages say she doesn't feel like a mage, and they're the experts, but how else do you explain something like this.

"Where is he?" she whispers to the corpse in her arms. "I'm sorry I couldn't save you. But I can save him if you tell me where."

"Who are you talking-" I take a step forward and then stumble back.

Nik's head has dropped back and she stares sightless at the sky for a long, drawn-out moment before coming back to herself and breathing heavily, like she just woke from some kind of nightmare. "Okay…I…I can do this…"
She carefully settles the woman's body back on the ground and looks up, starting a bit in surprise to see both myself and Dahlia staring at her.

Clearing her throat, she looks away from us. "Dahlia, can you…take her back to the others? We should give her back to her clan."

Dahlia glances from Nik to me and back again. "I…I could carry her, I suppose. But I'm so tired from following you, I-"

"That's alright, take your time," Nik says. Standing from where she's been kneeling beside the body. "Miles…I'm going to need your help with…something else."

And here I was, thinking this day couldn't get any stranger.

Following Nik as she walks down the very light path and glancing back only once to be certain Dahlia could handle the weight of the body she had to carry back to camp- I wonder if perhaps I'm actually dreaming.

Everything is very vivid, very real, but…so incredibly strange that I want to wake up and find it was a fantasy.

She darts down the path, but not because she's taken by the same fervor. No, this time, she's in complete control of herself as she sprints down the trail and shouts directions at me.

"Whatever happens, just follow my lead! Don't get confused, just go along with what I'm doing. Don't ask questions, don't pause, just go with it! Got me?" She shouts as we run along the trail.

"I don't think I could even begin to formulate the questions necessary to get an explanation for what just happened," I shout back.

She laughs in a sort of uneven, breathless way. "You can ask them all later when you come up with them, I promise!"

We run, but not for that much longer.

What we come upon when we reach the place she's been searching for, I stop dead in my tracks and experience an onset of fear and rage so sudden it nearly makes me sick.

But I dart forward again when it's clear Nik isn't stopping. Don't really know why I did, I just. The shock, of seeing such a thing, I guess.

I mean, I've seen humans brutalizing elves before. Back home it's all that would ever happen to any Elves that got too loud, too clumsy or too…pretty. It's part of why I left. I couldn't stand being closed in that damn place anymore with all the misery and the death and…

And now here I am, staring down this sort of situation again.

We're running across the expanse of a very large clearing, where a Dalish elf is being cajoled by two men in armor. Two human men, and…I think those are Templars.

I can hear them laughing and insulting him, telling him to get up and asking him where his 'pride' is and Nik is still not stopping.

Knowing she would throw herself into dangerous situations- I still would've assumed she'd want to walk around the clearing, take them by surprise, something else other than running straight at
"Who in the blazes do you think you are!" she stops near enough to shout at them and stands her ground when they turn to face her. "What are you doing!?"

Her entire accent has become upper class Ferelden. The way she's holding herself says Nobility and the glint in her eye screams rage.

The men pause, swords in their hands and looking confused. "Eh…you lost, miss?"

"Yes, in fact I am and you are currently pummeling one of my guides. Are you responsible for the other one, as well?" Her tone is incredulous, haughty. "Do you have any idea how much work I had to do to get Dalish guides through this region!?"

The Templars are seeming uncertain of themselves. One of them coughs and says, "beg pardon milady, we didn't know they was yours."

I flinch a little internally. But I get what she meant now about following her lead.

"Milady has come all this way to experience nature, bought these grubby clothes and walked all this way and now she'll have to wait days before that guide is well enough to lead her on the rest of the trail!" I huff as if I'm her servant.

She turns away from them with her arms crossed to communicate displeasure. "And here I thought Templars were supposed to exemplify the Virtues. And yet here I find you beating a non-mage Dalish guide for seemingly no reason. There are no arrows pointing out of your armor. In fact you do not even seem scuffed. So pray tell what did my guides do to incur such wrath?"

The other Templar clears his throat, seeming to be taking charge of this situation. "We were tracking them for a bit, miss. Wanted to catch the Mages they hide away with them. Sure to be abominations and blood mages, they are."

Nik turns on them so quickly and with such vehemence that I nearly stumble away from her. "So are you telling me that you could not track, hunt and kill a mage without incurring civilian casualties!? Is that not what you're for!?!"

There's a very obvious grimace on the lead Templar's face. "Eh…as it were…we assumed we would have to fight through them. It's…usually the case."

I hear the Dalish take a breath and groan nearly silently.

None of them react, so I don't think they can hear it.

"Be that as it may, I have an agreement with this particular clan," Nik waves them off with a flapping hand. "Shouldn't you be getting to that, eh. What was it, a soiree at the village in the mountains? The peace summit thing," she gestures for them to correct her.

"Th-the conclave, yes. Of course my lady, we'll be off on our way as soon as we can find the road. So sorry to have disturbed you." He bows and turns, hurrying off with the other Templar in tow.

"Miles, get him. Carry him? I can't or they'll see," she mutters urgently to me. "I have to keep playing the prissy Noble until we're sure we're not being followed anymore."

"I can't believe that worked," I am almost bursting with confusion. "I- yes, I'll. We've got to hurry."
Rushing to the prone body lying in the grass, I flinch at first seeing his injuries but quickly kneel down. "Oi, we're here to help. The Templars are gone."

There's a hissed intake of air and then a pair of bright blue eyes blink open to stare at me. Not much, just enough that he can see me. And some tension seems to go out of his body. His eyes flick as far past me as they can, but I don't think he can see Nik.

"She's human," I explain. "But she's not actually a Noble. We're helping you get away. Can I carry you? I'm not gonna lie, lookin' at you, it…it's gonna hurt. But we have a healer back at our camp that we can get you to. He's not too far away."

The Dalish looks at me and then closes his eyes, sighing deeply. Muttering in the Elven language before answering a bit louder. "Doesn't seem I've much of a choice, does it."
Chapter 24

Sooo…this is awkward.

Our newest 'friend' is sitting in the middle of camp, angrily carving arrows from sticks while nearby mages watch him with nervousness.

He's got the prettiest long, snow white hair. It's braided from the front of his hairline, to down around his ears and then back around his head. The braids frame his ears, prominently displaying them. The rest is all loose and flowing.

This man could pretty much be the prettiest guy I've ever seen in my own world. I mean, I'm not attracted to men I don't know, as my attraction pretty much hinges on personality traits but…I'm an artist and I know symmetry when I see it.

"I see you're up," I walk over and greet him. "And filled with vengeance and righteous anger…but you're still kinda injured…you're not gonna run off and try to kill those guys or anything, are you?"

He huffs and mutters to himself in Elvhen.

It's really too bad for him that I know a bit of Elvhen and I recognize like half the words. And that I've always been good at figuring out the rest from context clues…

"I'd appreciate it if you don't disparage me when you think I can't understand you." I say. "Call me a Halla's ass to my face."

He looks at me like I just snapped all his little sticks right in front of him. Not really angry or shocked but filled with bewilderment.

"I've been friends with Dalish before," I respond to his look. "And like, I understand that you don't really wanna talk to me and all, but I am worried about what happens to your clan if you run off and get yourself killed."

He draws up almost like he's gonna argue or snap at me but then he deflates. "We'd be left without any seasoned hunters." Not like he's been scolded, but like he's just remembered they're a hunter short.

"You and she were the only experienced hunters in your clan?" I ask, gently as I can.

"Vellathas and I were the only ones left," he says. "Now…it's just me."

"And you are?" I ask, tilting my head.

He looks up at me and squints, possibly due to the sun's glare, also possibly because he's deliberating over whether or not to answer.

I just smile a little and try to look as nonthreatening as possible, sitting on the ground across from him and re-arranging his sticks into orderly piles. Up till now he's just kinda been tossin’’em to the ground. I think it's mostly a thing he's using to cope. The rhythm of a much-practiced activity can help you shut your brain off.

"Shivanas," he says after a moment's pause.

"Duty," I say. "But as a name it's like 'the dutiful one' or something I'd assume?"
He stares at me for a moment before sighing and carving at his arrows some more. "I suppose you must've been close to the Dalish you've known, then."

We were practically family as Merrill and Hawke. And Velanna was always a fun companion to my Warden, sort of. Surly and closed off...but then that's kinda my thing most of the time.

"I mostly learned about Elvhen from independent study and listening to the Dalish speak it," I reply. "I was never formally taught. I just know a handful of words here and there. It's a beautiful language."

He hums.

"I don't know if those Templars left, but I'd like to err on the side of caution," I say. "I wanna send Miles with you, to help you get Vellathas home and to help protect your clan on the move. I think you're probably going to want to move them, so-"

"And if I refuse?" he asks. Twirling an arrow in his fingers and staring at it.

I spread my hands in a conciliatory gesture. "You're not a prisoner here. I want to help, but I understand that you don't trust humans, that most Dalish don't. That's mostly why I offered to send Miles and not Navette or...any of the other humans."

Speaking to people in their own language can annoy them sometimes- especially when you're not really fluent. And I don't want to be disrespectful or anything but Shivanas mostly just seems puzzled every time I speak Elvhen, not bothered. And if I'm going to learn any more of it, I gotta start speaking it.

No matter what happens next, any skills I can pick up could be useful in saving Thedas from the Breach. And then...what comes after that.

"Is he not so fine a warrior you would not send him anyway?" he asks.

"He's just beginning to learn to be a warrior, actually." I pause and think for a moment. "Do you know how to use a sword, like in an Elvhen style and not a human one?"

He reaches behind him and draws a short sword from a sheath, then puts it back. "My training has been with daggers and shorter blades. What he carries is a greatsword."

I sigh, "none of the human styles are suited to Miles. They make him feel awkward and clumsy, or like he shouldn't have a sword in his hands, even though I can tell he really loves it. The only Elf I knew who could wield a greatsword is in the wind. I suspect out killing slavers near the Tevinter border, but he could be anywhere."

"There is someone among us who could teach him," he says. "But only if he were to be adopted into the clan. I'm sorry but your friend is not one of us. Teaching our ways to outsiders is strictly forbidden. Especially those whom we do not know the intentions of."

"Understandable," I say. "It was just a thought. Anyway you can take him or not- I've already asked and he's willing to help. But if not, then." I shrug. "I wish you all the best and you can do as you like."

He squints at me again. "You're a very strange Shemlen."

"You know, I've heard that a lot lately," I say a little whimsically. "I think maybe all the other humans are weird. The things I do at least make perfect sense."
That earns me the smallest huff of amusement.

"Nik!" Ren is waiting at the end of camp, pack on his back. "I'm ready, let's go!"

"I gotta go find my mages that I basically left all alone. Miles is staying here, so if you wanna get to know him and see if you could stand him on a road trip all the way back home, you should talk to him." I stand up and smile, waving as I back away from Shivanas and his little piles of arrow-sticks. "See ya!"

Ren waits for me to come abreast of him and then turns to keep pace with me. "I didn't know you knew any Elvhen. Or Dalish for that matter."

"Nobody ever really seems to ask me about myself," I reply. "I kind of enjoy that, seeing as most of what I could talk about is kind of horrible to remember. But they never ask what skills I have or any other innocuous questions. Do you think they're afraid of me?"

He snorts as we walk. "Afraid is not the word I'd use, Commander."
"So you are a Mercenary Commander," Teagan addresses me when I walk into his, eh…throne room? Audience chamber? "I don't often give audiences or get requests from Mercenaries…not unless they're being hired to fight in a battle."

"I understand this is a strange circumstance," I come to rest just far enough away that his guards won't get antsy. But close enough I don't have to strain to hear him or be heard. "But strange times create strange things, and oftentimes the best people are forged in them. After all, the first blight was a strange, terrible time, but it did give us the Gray Wardens."

"Indeed, I suppose it did," he replies. "And so you are here for…aid, or perhaps employment?"

I shake my head. "No. I'm bringing an offer for the mages and anyone else who might want to join my new order."

"A new order of Mercenaries, recruiting through proper channels," Teagan muses. "And now I've seen everything."

"We aren't mercenaries. We don't really work for coin," I shrug. "We're more a group of concerned citizens who try to do our best to look out for everyone else. It's a lot of work and it's difficult, but it is very rewarding."

"And what is the creed of your new order, then?" he asks.

Before we even took this path, I discussed this with everyone. Before even walking down that dirt path toward Redcliffe.

Not everyone is enthusiastic, but no one really objected. Even Navette seemed ambivalent about what we call ourselves.


"So you are a guard force for hire who don't accept payment?" He asks. And he seems a bit incredulous, or amused.

"No. Not for hire. We choose who we protect based upon who is in the right or who most needs defending." I shrug. "We're more an organization of individual participants who use our own best judgment to attempt to bring about a peaceful solution to hostile situations. Barring that, we kick the ass of the biggest asshole in the room."

I think one of his servants snickered but I could be wrong. Maybe they just have a cough.

"And what exactly are your parameters for…who needs defending?" He's really trying hard to avoid asking about the ass kicking, I can tell.

"The people at a disadvantage in a situation. It requires understanding the situation with all the nuance that goes into it. First and foremost, we protect the people who've done nothing wrong, or at the very least, those who only did wrong in order to defend themselves from someone worse." I crack my neck and stretch my back a little. "The reason I'm here is that I'm headed for Haven. We're going to attempt to petition the Divine to allow Mages to join our order with the blessings of the Chantry. And I'm here because I heard you've a close relationship with King Alistair."
"We are family, after all," he says.

"That's not really saying much about your relationship," I reply. "Family is circumstantial. Friends and comrades are…different."

"I suppose they are," he allows. "And so you hope I can pass your petition to the king."

"Yes. The Templars, the Gray Wardens, the Seekers of Truth…basically every organization that's sprung up in the past has had a particular function. To combat Evil, to Contain it. To Watch it closely. In whatever form they perceived that evil to be in the most abundance at the time. At first, it was just Darkspawn. Then it became mages. And now we're at the point where we could tip the scales in one direction or the other."

"And what directions are those?" he asks. Leaning forward to tent his fingers and rest his elbows on his knees.

"Well. We can push back harder against the mages and incur a long, bloody rebellion in which many people die- Mages are killed simply for existing on either side and in the end, our world is a bit less harmonious than it was before." I hate having to put this in such simple terms and appeal to people's sense of self preservation and…just watering down the issue so people will agree with me when they should anyway.

"And your alternative is to give them power." He says.

"No," I reply. "My alternative is to give them responsibility."

Taking a quick walk, a short circuit in a circle around the throne room, I try to shake off my exhaustion from traveling for so long. Plus all that running yesterday and then the long walk this morning, ugh.

"Instead of imparting the mages with the idea that they're terrible evil monsters who can't help but eventually implode into a demonic abomination…I'd instead offer the idea that they're servants of the people who choose their own path and if that path is sinister, they will be destroyed along with all other criminals who harm the innocent. But if the path is innocent and virtuous, they will continue to hunt that filth alongside their compatriots in our ranks."

Ending my little walk right before the 'throne' once again, I straighten up, incline my head.

"In the end, caging the mages will either make them so miserable they all want to die, or make them so angry they want to kill us all. Giving them responsibility might end badly in a few small cases, but if they're given enough honor and prestige that they would regret losing it, they would be less likely to revolt."

I'm feeling a little petty so I smile without any real mirth and finish with. "You know. Make them feel happy and fulfilled and maybe they'll have no reason to fight you. Seems like a simple solution, doesn't it?"

"I cannot promise you any sort of…agreement," Teagan finally says. "But as you seem to be seeking an official sanction from the crown, then it is only right that your petition is heard, but…you realize you require a noble or two, preferably more, to give their support for you."

"I figured as much, yeah," I reply. "I'm hoping to have all the support I need in the next few months to make my order a full, legally recognized part of Thedosian society. And if you would allow me the opportunity to prove myself and my men to you, I would like to secure your support, first."
He chuckles, "well I suppose we’ve much to discuss, then."
Well, I couldn't really expect much more than a tentative agreement to 'think on it' from Fiona but I was at least hoping she'd seem…

I dunno, more enthused about the mages having another option? Even if it seemed unlikely, it's just. I mean, I love having options open to me, even if I'd never take that road, knowing it's there is incredibly relieving.

But then, Fiona is looking for mage independence outside policing forces and such and even if I offered for her people to be protected whether they wanted to join up or not- I mean, she could've just, not believed me.

"You would welcome the Tranquil into your order?" Clemence intones with no emotional quality to his voice whatsoever. "What would you have them do?"

"Well, that would be up to you. What you want to do, what you're good at. My order isn't just filled with warriors and it shouldn't be. We should have a full range of skills from all walks of life. So I suppose you'd tell me what you're the most efficient and practiced at, or what you find enjoyable and I assign you jobs that take the skill that you're most used to or most like."

He tilts his head. "Tranquil do not find what most would call enjoyment, in things."

"You have your own kind, like anyone does," I reply. "I know you don't feel emotions exactly the way we do, but the brain interprets things you do and gives your body feedback based on those things. You can still interpret those signals, can't you?"

He nods very slowly once. "It is difficult to describe to one who is not Tranquil. It is different, that you understand. Very different."

"I hope it's a good different," I smile. "Anyway, if you and your people feel like you'd want to join up, you can head toward our camp just outside Redcliffe or even make your way to Haven where the Conclave is taking place. My people would welcome and protect anyone from your number they come into contact with. Even if you're not joining up and you just need protection."

"Your order sounds like an honorable one and I hope your petition is approved by the King." He says. "As for us, we wish to stay and see what happens next at the Conclave before making a decision."

"That's prudent," I shrug. "Still, I'm leaving some people down outside Redcliffe to lead anyone who wants to go to Haven there, once the Conclave is underway. So if it starts to look like you need to jump ship, you'll have an option. Anyway, I hope you enjoy the rest of your evening."

"And you, Commander," he responds.

I get up from the table with a smile and drift back to the table at the back of the Tavern where all my mages are sitting and talking to the Redcliffe mages they've befriended since they got here without me.

Though when they see me coming, they all kinda scatter. I'm used to that. Apparently since I'm the
Commander here and I've technically got command of Dahlia's mages at the moment and whatnot, I'm basically on the same level as a Templar to them.

I mean, ouch. But whatever. If it makes them more comfortable to think they're sneaking around under my radar, why not.

"Hey Doll," I greet and sit in the booth beside Dahlia. "Ren."

"This is so strange," Dahlia says. Humming a little as she swirls the drink in her tankard. "It's almost like living in a village for real instead of, you know, taking shelter in a time of war."

"Some of the mages here already want to leave and head for Haven with us," Ren informs me. Looking like he's not taken a single sip of his own drink. "But they're too afraid to face the Templars there or don't want to leave the other Mages here."

"You can inform them that the others can take them anywhere along the path to Haven and I'll find them after everything is over," I say distractedly while pulling out some paper and that quill and bottle of ink that I'd requested from the Arl earlier. "Now, I need your help, you guys. Can either of you read and write in Common?"

They both answer in the affirmative, though Ren makes a hand gesture that basically universally means 'kinda sorta'.

"Okay, well I need to learn. My people wrote with an entirely different alphabet." I write down the alphabet on the front of the first page, one letter at a time. "I'll start with showing you my alphabet and you can both teach me the runes for Common."

"You're going to teach us your language while you're learning ours?" Dahlia asks. "Why?"

"No one else in Thedas would probably be able to read it without some serious study first, and until we come up with codes of our own- this'll be a good way for us to communicate without anyone else being the wiser." I explain. "Who wants to go first?"

"Come over here," Ren moves aside and gestures to his right. "Dahlia's too drunk for this right now. Show me your language and I'll show you what I know of Common, then Dahlia can correct my work tomorrow."

Dahlia sighs but nods in agreement. "I probably wouldn't be much help right now. I'm not only slightly sloppy, I'm also just dead tired."

"You should go and get some sleep then," I pat her on the back. "We've still got traveling to do once we leave here and it's best you're well-rested."

She grumbles but gets up from the table after I've shifted around to sit with Ren. Throwing frowny faces at me until she's left the tavern.

"What's up with her?" I ask.

Ren shrugs and rolls his eyes, "who knows? Now show me this...what did you call it?"


And the rest of the night before bed is spent that way, showing how the Alphabet is just a way of phonetically spelling out spoken words in Common.
Miles POV

This is hopeless.

"You really are new to this," my adversary says, circling me. "What did your Commander think you could protect me from, really?"

I huff and cross my arms over my chest, refusing to get up from the ground where he last threw me onto my back. "The Commander values my disappearing and sneaking skills, and thought it best I learn to defend myself once she learned I wanted to wield a sword. She also thinks I'm tactically... acceptable. She likely thought there was simply more safety in numbers. After all, you can't both carry your friend *and* fight off hungry animals and Templars at the same time."

"Hmph," he collapses in the dirt next to me in a cross-legged position. Staring down at me, with his fist supporting his cheek, his elbow on his knee. "She asked me about someone to train you in my clan."

I skewed my mouth to the side a bit. "Yes, I know. She told me she was going to ask."

"Why didn't you?" he asks.

It's difficult to concentrate when a man more beautiful than the fairest depictions of Andraste is staring at you with so much focus. It's like trying to catch smoke with your hands. You can certainly grasp at it, but it's lost as soon as you've done so.

"I dunno, didn't really see the point," I shrug. "I know that Dalish elves only rarely ever take converts from outside and I dunno what I'd have to offer."

"An alliance with a human mercenary commander who might lend us aid in times of need?" he muses slowly.

I purse my lips and scrunch my nose a bit. "Damn her. I didn't even realize- and she thinks me the master tactician."

"She seems content to allow you to choose as you will," he says. "Would you want to be part of a clan?"

I sigh. "I want to be a warrior. It's what I always wanted. To protect myself, the people close to me..." I can't follow that train of thought.

I lost them all. That's why I left.

Never again.

"But I don't know about joining a Clan. I also want to be free from...obligations," I say. "If I wanted to travel the world, what then? I'd be stuck having to protect an entire clan of people. Not that such a thing isn't fulfilling in and of itself, but...what if it's not what I want?"

He listens patiently, still watching me with that bland expression on his face. "Sounds as though you don't know what you want."

"Ha!" I cross my arms a bit tighter and turn my head away from him, smiling. "No. No it doesn't seem as though I do, does it?"
"The clans accept more of the people from outside the clans than you think," he says. "It wouldn't take much convincing, with your position as that woman's lieutenant and some sort of formal alliance that meant we could call on your people in a time of need. And you'd be expected to travel between us, being a formal go-between in that case. You wouldn't necessarily be tied down there."

"You seem awfully keen," I turn my head back and smirk. "Didn't think I made all that striking a first impression."

I think he's blushing. "My people are down a defender, I'm only thinking of what could close the gap in our defenses."

I hum, "sure."

He pouts and it's as pretty as the rest of him. "And I don't...find you terribly objectionable, either. I suppose."

I snort at that a bit, one of my hands lashing out to smack him in the side. "Arse. Next you'll be declaring your undying love for me because that has to be the nicest thing I've heard come out of your mouth since we picked you up."

He huffs and stands, offering a hand up. "Whatever." He's still a little pink.

I take it and 'stumble' a bit so I'm standing a bit closer than I think he intended. "Mmmn, you know I wouldn't mind joining up if it meant I could keep looking at you."

He releases my hand and moves away, redder than before. "I am not that easy."

Ohhh, fun.

Chapter End Notes

Ya know. I knew Miles was gay.

I did NOT know he was Gay Casanova.
"You're staying?" I ask with some trepidation. "It might not be safe for much longer."

"I know," Dahlia replies. "But that's why I have to stay. Fiona is trying to wrangle all these mages mostly on her own. I didn't find a single other Grand Enchanter here that was worth anything. They're all too old, too young, too selfish or..." She shrugs and sighs. "I need to stay."

"Well alright, but promise me you'll come to Haven if anything happens?" I ask. "Even if you've heard I've moved on, people there could point you to where I've gone and I'd make sure to leave some kind of message for you."

"I promise," she replies. Smiling. "I'll also bring about a dozen dozen or so mages with me when I do, too."

"The more the merrier," I say and shrug. "Be careful, Doll."

"And you as well, Commander," she bows her head a little. "My people will follow Ren's orders until I come back. He'll do ably, I'm sure."

"I don't know that he loves the idea, but he was willing enough not to turn it down." I shrug. "So we'll see, I guess."

"Come on, Commander!" Ren is walking past us as we say our goodbyes, lugging a huge pack. "I've gotten some supplies and our business is done here. If we want to make it to Haven before the Conclave, we should get moving."

"Not gonna say goodbye to Dahlia?" I ask as he stalks by me.

"We'll be seeing each other again, soon enough, but it'll be longer if you don't get moving," he says.

I sigh and turn back to pat Dahlia on the shoulder. She seems kind of melancholy at the refusal of a goodbye. "See you, Doll. Be safe."

Taking off down the path after Ren, I catch up to him just as he comes abreast of our little group of mages that are headed for the camp down the road.

"Alright, how many of you are recruits and how many are just being escorted?" I call out as I approach.

Half of them break off and salute me the way I've seen Inquisition scouts in the game do, so I guess those are mine. They all look familiar, anyway and Elliot is over there.

Turning my attention to the slightly smaller half, I smile. "Recruits, go over there with the others."

About a third of them walk over to stand with my people and what's left are some very scared and very blank-looking people. One or two with a starburst, so I guess some of the tranquil decided to take me up on my offer early.

It's not a huge number of people, and I might end up only saving about a handful from their respective fates in both Haven and Redcliffe but...eh, that's better than saving no one and doing nothing.

"So you guys are headed to Haven or somewhere else?" I ask.
One of the young men steps out of the crowd and lifts his hand. A blonde Elven man. Very young, like...maybe near his early twenties? Maybe less? "I need to get to the Crossroads to check on my parents. But everyone else is going to Haven."


*Hyndel.*

Clearing my throat, I reassure him. "That's fine, I can make sure you make it there. But while we're traveling, would you mind helping out with whatever you can around camp? All of you?"

"I can help with guard duty," one of them says. "I'm good with runes and barriers."

"I suppose I can help with whatever herbal mixtures need to be made," Maybe-Hyndel says.

"The rest of them are all lower-level apprentices who hadn't been through their harrowing yet." Elliot interjects. "They'd be better off just observing and assisting."

I take a second look at the apprentices and realize they all look unbearably young. Maybe a little younger than maybe-Hyndel, not by much. But that's *too* young, in my opinion.

Remembering that the Circle steals babies and separates them from their families causes that familiar flare of heat under my skin to rear its head. Like I'm burning from the inside out.

I smile and nod, "absolutely. And maybe our mages back at camp can teach them while they're traveling with us. It never hurts to have a little extra knowledge or skill."

There's an air of relief around them and I don't know why or what they thought I'd say but thinking about it will probably just depress me. So.

"Alright, let's go!" I move to the front of the procession and start leading the way down the path. And am I glad this path is a straight shot down to our camp- seeing as my sense of direction is so terrible I never know where I'm going.

And since this isn't a game anymore, that means there's no map to rely on.

"Miles?" I'm a little surprised to see the two figures ahead on the road, especially since I could swear they weren't there a second ago. "What's up?"

Miles and our new Dalish friend walk over to us at a sedate pace so I'm guessing there's no disaster back in camp. Which calms my frayed nerves. Which frayed just about immediately after seeing them on the road.

"I wanted to let you know before we left, though I suppose I could've simply waited a bit and you'd be back, apparently." He says.

"I am not waiting any longer to warn my clan of the Templars roving in this area," Shivanas says. "I must go."

" Totally understand," I reply. "Do you have everything you need to make the trip back?"

"I grabbed a small pack of supplies while we were in camp," Miles replies. "We won't starve or dehydrate on our way there, at least."

"Medical supplies?" I check.
Miles rolls his eyes, "as if I'd forget."

"Just making sure," I defend with my hands up. "You coming back soon?"

He shrugs, "don't know how long it'll take to get there. If I am, I know to head for Haven."

I grin. "Then I guess I'll see you later. Can I hug you goodbye?"

His ears flick a little bit, like he's surprised. "I-sure?"

"Is that a question?" I tilt my head and squint. "You can say no."

He snorts, "will you shut up and hug me you ridiculous woman?"

I laugh and step forward, both of our arms wrapping tightly around each other.

Miles was the first real ally I made in this world. The first person I identified with, saw myself in. Even if he's only gone a while, I'm going to miss him like hell. "Be safe, Miles."

He laughs a little. "That is just the exact opposite of what I want."

I pop him in the side with a closed fist. "You can kick ass without getting bits cut off of you, jackass. I'd better find you intact when you get back."

"Are you going to inspect my hide?" He asks cheekily.

I scoff a little, pulling away and punching him again lightly on the chest this time. "Just don't die and we'll call it even."

He grins in a flash of teeth and a glimmer of mischievous eyes. "No promises, but I'll give it my best shot."
Ren POV

Miles had described this to me, and Dahlia had tried in her own words- but this is...something else.

"What's she doing?" Some of the others are watching their Commander walk dead-eyed across a barren battlefield, the grass still wet with blood.

Most of us though, we're standing back, watching everywhere else.

Sighing to myself, I exchange a glance with Navette who looks incredibly unsettled. "She's done this before. When she found the Dalish. I suppose someone out there might still be alive."

"How would she know?" Navette whispers. "What is she following?"

"I don't know. Miles and Dahlia said it was like she was hearing a voice and talking to someone," I reply. "Maybe the dead lead her to them."

It's a daunting prospect, to consider the possibility. After all, Nik isn't a mage. Not even remotely.

"There are those with subtle magic," one of the mages from Redcliffe speaks. "Those who are considered witches and such but don't have any flashy abilities. It was written down in some of the books back in my Circle that some could speak to the dead, see the future...things like that. They aren't usually taken to the circle because when the Templars check, there's no proof of actual magic. People usually think they're just charlatans."

Nik stops in the middle of the field and bends down to grasp something. She pulls a small dagger free from where it had fallen into the ground and examines it before walking back toward us.

Her eyes blink and suddenly she is present in the world again. "Hey guys...anyone here know how to make an antidote for poisons they find?"

"I...could try?" That same person from Redcliffe- what was his name? "Though I don't have the equipment for it."

"Anyone have any empty, clean vials? I'll reimburse you." She calls out. "Also anything else he needs. I promise everyone will get paid for whatever they volunteer." And then she turns to walk back out into the battlefield. "I'll find you a vial or two of the poison on somebody. I'm sure there's one here somewhere."

"Is anyone still alive out there?" I call after her.

She glances back at me. "I don't think so, but you're welcome to check."

Then why is this important? What is she wanting this antidote for?

I continue to ask myself those questions as we wade through countless bodies. Picking up supplies, coins and whatever else we can find that might be helpful.

When she said we'd make plenty enough money to keep afloat just looting the bodies of our adversaries, I was skeptical. But seeing as there's altogether about two hundred royals worth of loot here in coins, weapons and armor we can sell as well as other small valuables- I have to admit she's probably right.

Not taking money from the populace will mean people don't have to pay to be rescued, which
means everyone is equally protected in theory. Though I wonder if this wouldn't mean a rogue couldn’t just-

"Justicars, eyes and ears!" the Commander shouts.

We all instantly fall into defensive positions and survey our surroundings.

This is a training drill, she does it several times through our daily travels. It's a command that needs to become as easy to obey as breathing. And it's one of the only ones she says must be obeyed every single time.

Anything else? You can disagree with your commanding officer if you think they're morally wrong or refuse to follow the order for the same reason.

But the only command you must always obey is to be alert.

This woman is one of the strangest I've ever met. Not only because of her odd ideas about leadership and serving the people first- which truth be told, I am curious to see come to fruition… but also because of her mannerisms and style of leadership.

So many moments when someone wasn't certain what they should do and she behaved as if the answer was right before them. And then faltered and explained when she realized we had no idea what she was thinking.

I believe the Commander has the very faulty assumption that all people are on the same level as her, or at the least that she believes if she gives them the chance, they can be. Suppose we'll see if she turns out to be right.

"As you were!" she counter-commands.

And people begin pawing through the battlefield again.

It was actually good to do this here, as there very well could be stragglers from this battle hanging about. But she's been doing it at odd moments, to test readiness. This time, everyone seemed to realize the command had been shouted in good time and followed it- but there were still a few who took a moment before settling into a defensive stance.

I believe she wants to keep going until we're perfectly in sync. I'm not certain where she learned to train people this way, but-

"Hey Ren, can you help me with these?" She's carrying a handful of something all bundled up in a blanket from her pack. "I can't find my cleaning kit but I saw you can make blood disappear or evaporate or whatever."

"Sure," I reply. Taking the bundle from her arms and carefully settling it all down on the ground.

I peel the blanket open and pass a hand over it. Focusing on the blood covering everything and pulling it away from the cloth, leather and metal. It runs in a river of red down one side of the blanket and off into the grass where I leave it as I bundle it back together and hand it to Nik.

She takes it and seems to deliberate for a moment. "Can I ask you questions about magic? Sensitive ones?"

Strange that she should ask, seeing as she's been asking about magic since we met, but… Sensitive…
" Depends what you're wanting to know," I reply cautiously.

" What is blood magic? " she asks. " It's not just magic where you do something to blood or use blood, right? Cause the Chantry doesn't classify the Phylactery's as blood magic…"

I'm a little caught off guard.

Not that she'd ask, but that she's asking me. " I'm a healer, I don't know anything about Blood Magic."

" I'll ask one of the other Circle mages, then." She smiles. " I know what blood magic would be intellectually but seeing as some things are and aren't allowed involving blood and spirits, I figure it's best to be informed on what is and isn't considered blood magic. You know, by the Chantry."

It is better that she inform herself on issues she's directly involving herself in, yes. But… " Why Blood Magic?"

" Why blood magic what? " She asks. Lifting both her brows.

" Of all things you'd be curious about, why that? " I clarify.

" Well it's a pretty big fearmongery deal that the Chantry uses to justify basically everything they do. That and Demons, but well- I can ask about that, too. " She shrugs. " I just wanna know everything I need to so that if it comes down to it and words can be used to help- a good argument can get us out of something… I need to be able to do that."

I cross my arms. " It's just about beyond that point, now."

" Probably," she says and nods. " But I like to have my options open just in case."

" What drew you here? " I find myself asking, apropos of nothing. " You seemed almost in a trance."

She looks a bit embarrassed now. " Oh that's…I don't really know what that is, but I usually call it my find-it sense. Sometimes it's people I need to find, things I need to find… but it's usually always important. It's not magic, though. It's like… an instinct. Or like my brain picks up on cues in the world around me that I don't consciously recognize? It's hard to explain."

" Not magic, but strange," I remark.

She snorts. " Story of my fucking life."
Miles POV

Chapter Notes

This update is kinda short, so I'm splurging and updating twice today.

Translations will be at the end of the chapter when I use Elvhen. I'm just gonna start now even for the very sparse Elvhen I've got here.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"They were this close the whole time?" I can't believe it.

"Did you really think I was going to let on while your Shemlen Boss was around?" Shivanas passes me a bowl of some stew.

Can't say his clan took me in with open arms, but after Shivanas explained the situation…well, they still weren't happy but at least they looked less ready to murder me if I blinked wrong.

"Nik wouldn't hurt your clan," I say. "She just wanted to be sure you got home safely."

"Forgive me if I don't give a Shemlen the benefit of the doubt when two of them just tried to kill me," he replies.

"I could mention we saved you from those two Shems but I'll refrain," I say. And then take a bite of my stew.

Shivanas gives me a deadpan look. "Thank you ever so much for not mentioning it."

"You are so very welcome," I say. And wink.

He's turning pink already, he's too easy to fluster.

"Try not to pester everyone in the Clan before it's time for you to move on back to your Mercenary group," he tries to save face by being overly serious and scowly. It's adorable, really it is. "You might've helped me, but that doesn't make you one of us. I'd tread lightly if I were you."

"You're referring to that thing this morning?" I ask. "That was not my fault."

"I didn't say anything was your fault, I said to tread lightly," he rebuts. "And goading other young hunters into sparring with you is not treading lightly."

"Dunno why anyone'd have space to complain, they kicked my arse." Just remembering is enough to make my body ache. "I usually have a whole group of mercenaries to spar with, as you've said. How else am I supposed to get better, if I don't practice at every available opportunity?"

"Just spar with me," he says. Glaring sideways at me. "Don't bother the other hunters."

"Another thing, you said you didn't have any other hunters," I observe. "I distinctly remember Nik mentioning that at one point. So what, you'd hoped to lure her in with promises of an easy kill and then pounce?"
Shivanas shrugs. "I meant adult hunters. These children have no Vallaslin yet, and only go hunting. We don't send them scouting or put them on guard rotations for the most part unless we suspect danger and we're short-handed." And then he looks at me again, tilting his head a bit. "But that isn't a terrible plan, now that you mention it."

"Suppose that's why Nik made me her Lieutenant," I reply. Looking down into my lap, I stare at the stew, like it holds the answers to all life's questions. "Before I didn't really understand. She told me I was 'sneaky and cunning and all kinds of underhanded' and I thought for a moment, that it might've been an insult. But it wasn't."

"Why would she call you underhanded?" Shivanas asks, narrowing his eyes. "I understand sneaky and cunning, but…"

"I asked the same question, though I was a bit insulted about all of them." I shrug. "She said the term implies being deceptive as well as clever. And well, it fits. I did deceive the whole camp into thinking I was giving them orders directly from her when I wasn't. Could've just told them she was unconscious and named Navette leader while she was out."

But I'd wanted that position of power. I'd wanted to be in control, even if I hadn't realized the desire at the time.

Wanted to prove something, I guess. That she hadn't made a mistake and it wasn't all some kind of fever-induced decision.

(Miles, I made that choice before we even left the Blades Camp. You were always going to be one of my main advisors, even if you didn't end up being good at combat- I still wanted to hear your ideas. They're good ideas!)

A hand on my shoulder shakes me from my reverie.

Shivanas is giving me a stern look. "You'll learn soon enough that looking to Shemlen for their opinion of you is much less important than your own. We've had city elves before, adopted them into the Clan. They all had to unlearn a lot of habits. If you stayed, we could help you do the same."

"Mmm, you just don't want me to go," I say. Narrowing my eyes, playfully.

He's turning red again, but doesn't move and keeps looking into my eyes. "And if I don't?"

"I still don't want to be held back," I reply. "So we're going to have to work something out with your Keeper if I'm going to consider it at all. But…"

Reaching up, I catch his hand with mine, pulling it up to lay a kiss on his knuckles before he can pull it away. Maker, he's cute when he's flustered.

I grin at the scandalized look on his face. I think he's trying to look like he enjoys it less than he actually does. The way he's cradling his hand so close to his body but still kind of leaning toward me with wide eyes, it's just.

'Stop that, or I'll kiss you and then we'll really be in trouble here.'

"If you want me to stay, I could see myself hanging around a while."
Shemlen - Means 'Human'. Literal translation is 'quickling' which just means something akin to 'mortal'. It's a throwback to the times of Arlathan.

Shem - It's just a shortened version of Shemlen. It's City Elf Vernacular.
"Everybody stay calm and keep back a bit," I say as I walk out in the space between us and her.

The Qunari woman sitting against the tree just off the beaten path- she's watching me, hand gripped around her staff. Probably a mage. Ready to fight even though I know she's probably really close to dying right now.

There's blood everywhere, all around her. A couple of dead Templars on the ground that I walk past just to get to her.

I stop before I'm within striking distance and slowly lower myself down onto my knees.

We sit there staring at each other for a few moments before I speak. "I have a healer with me, if you'd like to survive this."

She stares at me balefully out from underneath a swath of snow-white hair stained with her own blood as well as her enemies, I'd guess.

"All you've gotta do is signal that's what you want, somehow." I say. And then think a little further on what else I can say before it occurs to me that she's probably waiting for the catch. "We're a new order of people dedicated to helping others. No price will be paid or asked for."

She moves a little, and spits blood on the ground next to her. "...happens...to me after?"

"We don't arrest mages for the Chantry or anyone else. You can go your way and we'll go ours." I shift and settle back on my haunches. "But we need to heal you fast or you're a goner. Alright with you?"

She grunts and drops her head in a nod. "Keep...my staff..."

"Sure, Ren probably won't mind." I stand slowly and turn around to walk back toward the group, pointing to Ren and signaling that he should move toward me.

He rushes a little fast over the grass, but I don't think she minds at this point.

"This is Ren," I introduce as he comes close enough for her to see. "He's a mage and he's gonna use some healing magic on you now, okay?"

I watch as he approaches her, then sits on the side opposite her staff hand, and places his palm over her biggest wound. A gash in her side. "Hold still and breathe, this should be over soon enough- I'll have the largest wounds closed enough they won't continue to bleed but we'll still need bandages and poultices to wrap her up with."

So I nod and turn around to walk back toward the others. "I'll get the supplies."

When I crest the little hill where our people have been waiting, I see they've all decided to set out their bedrolls on the road to sit on and chat.

They look up when they see me and some start to get up but I wave them down. "Everybody's fine, you can stay. Just need some medical supplies. Bandages and poultice-"

"For what?" a woman's voice asks.
But she asks it *imperiously*.

It sets my hackles up immediately and I turn slowly toward the mage who spoke with something burning up inside me already. Because I know what that tone means. Either she's questioning my authority, which is fine-

Or.

"You wanna travel this stretch of road alone?" I ask.

She makes a face at me, "we don't need an ox-"

I take a few very quick steps over to her, startling her into scrambling backwards off her bedroll. "I meant do you want us to *eject* you." I clarify. "Oh." I turn around to face the bulk of the group, a lot of which has gone tense. "Did you think I was limiting you to just not disrespecting *Elves*? If I hear one more fucking slur, I will throw your ass into the wilderness and let you fend for yourselves. And before you question me about tending to someone, I want you to ask yourself if you'd have a problem if that person was the same race as you. If you wouldn't, then shut up and keep it to yourselves."

Everyone is very quiet and very still. And while it doesn't make me feel good, I at least know they're listening.

I turn back to the woman that spoke before and she looks terrified.

"You feel free now and that's wonderful," I say. Steadily looking into her eyes. "But using your newfound freedom to oppress others or deny them the treatment they rightfully deserve is doing a disservice to the spirit in which you were freed. If you are deserving of good treatment, everyone is. If you don't believe that. Leave now."

She's shaking, so I take my attention off of her and turn to the rest of the group again. "Medical Supplies." I say, lowly.

A few mages and some of my own people scramble to get together a pack filled with bandages, poultices and some small sewing kits for stitches. Which I didn't ask for, but might be needed, so great.

I walk to the edge of the hill and only look back one more time to say, "I want you all with me. But if you can't uphold the moral standards you wish others to have, how can you not consider yourselves hypocrites? And as for the soldiers here, how can you consider yourselves *just*?"

And then I leave them, to tend the woman bleeding all over a tree.

Ren is glad for the supplies when I set them next to him but the look in her eyes tells me that Qunari hearing is at least near as good as Elven hearing. And she caught maybe some of that, maybe all of it.

"What's your name?" I ask.

She inclines her head a little, struggling. "Ar…Ari…sala…"

"Arisala," I say. "Welcome to our camp for as long as you need to recuperate."

She groans, dropping her head.
"Is she alright?" I ask quietly as Ren continues to tend to her wounds.

"She's passed out from the blood loss and pain but she should survive." He says. "I've been meaning to ask you something," he continues.

"Ask," I invite. Ren so rarely asks things. He's been doing it more lately. Does that mean he's starting to trust me or just that he's more comfortable with his place here?

Either way. It's good.

"Why 'The Justicars'?" he asks. "Of all the names you could've chosen, an old word for a Justiciary office that no longer exists…"

"I hope it'll remind every single one of them who they are and what they're supposed to represent every time they have to say it," I reply. "Also where I'm from there's a fictional story with Justicars in it. They go by a very strict code of honor and ethics. That's kind of what I'm hoping to achieve. So it's a good goal to shoot for."

He makes a noise, like a huff under his breath. "For every normal answer you give you have to give a strange one, too."

"Just who I am," I shrug and grin. "Now…I forget, how far out are we from Haven?"

"Few days now," he replies. "We should be able to help her heal enough she'll be able to split off from us by then. Maybe even before. These wounds are grievous but with magic she'll recover quickly. Especially as I suspect she'll likely help the process along herself." He eyes the staff on the other side of her body. "She hasn't let go, even unconscious."

"She's probably Tal'Vashoth," I reply. "Or at least was trained by Tal'Vashoth. I mean…I haven't seen a single Qunari mage among the circle mages."

I remember some obscure piece of information about Qunari being captured by the circle and… experimented on. But I can't remember if it was a headcanon that got passed around or if it was a real codex entry…

"Probably for the best," Ren says. "They'd probably be treated with more caution and fear than all the rest. It's better to die fighting than live like that."

"Some people would prefer to live like that and find a way to fight from within," I reply. A little lost in my thoughts. "But I don't think they give the Qunari an option."
Chapter 31

Chapter Summary

Trigger warning for physical abuse, mentions of physical abuse and emotional distress portrayed by the main character that reflects the subject.

I probably should've brought someone with me.

After all, I can't fight worth shit and if I'm discovered before I do what I need to do- well. Then I won't have even done what I went in for.

But we got here a little later than I thought. The Divine is already here.

I have to see if the Wardens- if Corypheus -got here a little early, or if I'm later than I thought.

So I'm playing the part of a servant. I went straight to Threnn, in threadbare clothes and told her someone had stolen my uniform so I'd need a new one I'd be happy to pay for.

I was worried the quartermaster would be someone different, but apparently I had nothing to be worried about.

It didn't take long for me to get into the Temple, telling everyone at the door that I was assigned there but didn't know where I was needed. I was to report to whoever was in charge.

Never thought my usual air of constant dissociation would come in handy for convincing a bunch of guardsmen I was just an exhausted, out of it servant. But hey, it worked.

Been a while since I've been like that, though. Ever since coming to Thedas, I've had to be on my toes. In the moment. And for the most part, that's been…so great. But I can remember why I slipped into that state of mind.

Everything was terrible.

"Ya drop those plates and ye'll have lashes!" the head servant barks at the rest of us. "We need ta have this room ready for the Divine's dinner in no less than an hour. Which means ya gotta work fast and careful!"

I really hate this place. After being the Commander of a growing military force for a few weeks, being a servant is excruciating. Not because of the lack of respect, I expected that. Not even because of the shouted abuse and threatened physical abuse- no I expected that too.

It's the worst mostly because I'm terrible at everything they've tried to get me to do. I've somehow gotten through by the skin of my teeth but I'm exhausted, I feel…drained…

And I know I'm going to screw up sooner or later. Which will lead to me getting 'disciplined' I.E. beaten- and then who knows if I'll have the energy to do what I need to do.

I barely have that energy now, as I place doilies and forks and spoons in their correct positions on the table. It wasn't hard to figure out how they went, after surveying the others doing it.
"Ah!" a girl down the line trips and nearly drops her plate, but rolls with the fall to keep it in one piece, allowing her body to take the full impact. "Augh."

I step out of the line to walk over and help her up, as it seems she's frozen in pain for a moment—but apparently that's a no-no.

"Get back in line!" the head servant almost seems to appear out of nowhere behind me and I feel-

"Ack!" I go down on my hands and knees, in complete shock at the fact that he just…

I knew 'discipline' meant beatings, but I always thought that was limited to lashes or smacking for back-talk. Never occurred to me to worry about getting punched in the back for trying to help a fellow servant.

Shouldn't be surprised.

"On your feet and back in line!" he shouts. "And you, get that plate on the table!"

It doesn't occur to me until after I've moved back into place that I probably just saved that girl a beating. If he punched me for just trying to help her, he probably would've hit her for falling in the first place.

Feels a lot like back when I was a kid, screwing up even bigger than my brothers so they wouldn't get yelled at. But at least then I knew what I was doing. This time I got hit and I wasn't expecting it.

As much of a piece of crap as my stepfather was, he never exactly hit me. Mom used to pop me in the mouth when I was being 'smart', which discouraged me from speaking at all. And my dad… well, it's really difficult to get past that block in my mind that doesn't consider spankings to be the same as beatings.

It is, but I was told for so long that it wasn't…

Now as we all step away from the table and wait for the other servants to put the food out on their trays and light the candles…I wonder if I'm in shock.

It's been years since anyone hit me in any kind of domestic setting. I can feel myself shutting down, shutting off. But I can't shut off.

I need to be in the moment, be alert.

So I bite the inside of my cheek until the pain in my back has all but melted away and a new rush of endorphins has left me feeling a little cool and numb in both places.

It's an old trick I used for pain management when I was younger, so I didn't have to take actual meds from my grandma. She never seemed to have enough. When my teeth went bad or I twisted my ankle or anything- I would squeeze different parts of my body with my nails, bite down on my arm or my cheek or something- and it would help.

So when something hurts, it's always my first instinct to cause a sharper pain somewhere else to drown out the pain signals from the first injury. But it hasn't been necessary for a while now. I guess I'm relearning all kinds of things since I came to Thedas.

"Alright, everyone out and get started on the dishes!" the head servant shouts.

I still can't remember his name. Don't really need to.
We walk in straight lines out different doors, all far from the entry point of the Divine and all the people sitting down to sup with her this evening.

Namely a bunch of Mage and Templar leaders. Not anyone whose names I'd recognize except…

Well. It'll have to wait till some other time, if I'm going to get through this.

"Um…” I pause on my way to one of the sinks and turn back to face the voice behind me.

It's the girl from the dining room. "Something wrong, hon?” I feel protective of all the servants here, but this girl is so small. Not only short but skinny. So skinny I know she probably isn't eating much.

She bites her lip and looks up at me, wide-eyed. "I'm…I'm sorry you got hit…thank you for trying to help me."

Her skin is a light brown and her ears are tucked under a cap but I can tell they're pointed now that I'm looking closer. Her accent is sort of…Antivan?

"We're family, by virtue of the trials we go through together. The same as a company of soldiers," I reply. "I will always help you."

She seems like she doesn't know what to say to that. So I smile and grasp her shoulder, squeezing a little before letting go.

And then it's time to get back to work.

God, I hate doing the dishes.
"So when do we leave for Haven?" one of my soldiers- my soldiers -asks me.

"The Commander instructed we get as many mages out of Redcliffe as possible. She seemed to think the Conclave would be the catalyst for great change. No matter how it ends, she believes they'll have need of safe harbor, so we're to give it to them." I reply. "We'll wait at least another week. If something big happens, we'll extract what mages we can and move then."

Never would have thought myself the type to do a Templar's job, of protecting Mages. Or protecting the world from them. But…if this is the sort of thing we must do to ensure the future of our order and cement our place in Thedas, then it is necessary and I will do it.

I was given my own company of soldiers, though I've been told the hierarchy still places me below Miles…this is my opportunity to show what a good leader I can be. How I can rise to the occasion.

Second Lieutenant…and soon, a Lieutenant in my own right, I hope.

As long as I'm serving the Commander.

I wasn't certain about her at first, or if her intentions were even what she said they were. But after so long spent in her service and seeing what she would ask of us, I am finally settled. She may be a bit of a sneak and a liar at times but it's always in service of the greater good. I can get behind that.

"Should we begin preparing things for departure, to be safe?" he asks. "In case sooner is sooner than we think?" He's a bit green, eager to please.

"We all have our…go-bags," I reply. She called them that. Go-bags. Seemed to think it was the proper term for it, like it was a common thing to have where she's from. And I wonder again how she knows of such things when she was never a Soldier before. "We can grab them and leave everything else in camp. If you're worried about leaving something behind, keep it on your person."

"I'm worried we'll be leaving behind a lot of our provisions scattered around camp if someone doesn't secure them," he explains. "But I need an order from someone important to get people to listen and give them over to put on the wagon."

(NAVETTE, listen very carefully to me. Half the job of being a leader is listening to your men. Sometimes they'll have good ideas, things you didn't consider. Commend them for their quick thinking and effort. Listen to them. If you think it might be a bad idea, then explain why. Converse, engage. Just don't be a tyrant, stomping around telling everyone what to do.)

It would be a good idea to have everything essential ready to leave at a moment's notice. In fact, didn't Nik usually keep the provisions in one place and hand out food only around mealtimes? Why are they scattered to begin with?

"What provisions are scattered exactly and why?" I ask, turning my full attention to him.

He stands a bit straighter. "Ah well…we've got lots of new people, who…have their own stock."

"And why are you tryin' to steal their stock, then?" I ask suspiciously.

Paling, he hurries to explain himself. "Not stealin', Serah! I want to store it away so we don't lose
it. I heard tell the commander pools our food together to feed everyone when rations are thin. If I could just get them to hand over what they've got, everyone'd be a lot less likely to starve."

I cross my arms and think about that. Seems like a good argument but the Commander is against anyone making anyone do something they don't want. I mean besides making them stop being assholes, or saying words that she thinks are offensive. All that has to do with stopping people from doing some kind of harm, though.

Withholding food could cause harm, but I think the Commander would…do somethin' sneaky. To make 'em think it was their idea.

Ugghhh, I wish Miles were here. I haven't the sneakiness required for this.

It occurs to me that that's probably why the Commander won't put me in charge of more than a single squad. She believes sneakiness is necessary to be a good leader and survive and win wars.

She had a point, about how if you're smaller and weaker, you've gotta go for the sneaky way to do things to win and live. I just always hated the way that Ben and other rogues-

BEN!

"Give me some time to figure out how to do this and we'll see what we can do," I tell the soldier.

He salutes, then turns about-face and walks away.

I survey the camp, looking for any trace of my fool cousin's presence and don't find anythin' till I start asking around.

Went off hunting, they say. Probably left at the break of dawn as he's wont to do. I won't be able to find him, he's the tracker, not I.

But at least now when he gets back I'll have someone I can ask about the sneaky shite. It might be cheating, as I'd not thought of it myself, but I can't exactly just pull a brilliant idea out of a mind with no sneaky material, now can I?

Ben POV

I've been turning this offer over in my mind for a while now. Wondering if it's really the best I'm ever going to get, or be.

Leaving with Navvy, seeking out the Blades, it was supposed to be…an adventure. Fun, excitement, danger.

Well, I got the danger part. Even a little bit of the excitement. But when it came time to do something about the heinous deeds I'd been forced into, I almost refused. If it hadn't been for Navette pushing me into it, we'd still be trapped where we were before.

The Commander freed us and now we can atone for the things we did. Problem is, I don't really feel like it was my fault. I was a weak man being threatened into doing things he hated.

And yet no sympathy for that? For the things I had to do with my own hands, against my own will?

(Truth is, Ben. I don't trust you in a position of power. You'd be too afraid to do something to make
people dislike you. Navette is workable, she'll learn to be what she needs to lead someday, but you
are more of a lone agent type, I think. So be my agent and I can promise you fun, exciting jobs with
little risk. In the meantime, hunt for my people out there, feed them and teach them if they ask to
know how to use a bow or a knife or how to track a trail. If you choose not to undertake this new
position, you can still keep your old one, or leave as you like.)

I suppose I can't blame anyone for assuming I'm a coward. After all, I've behaved like one.

No one really knows what was going through my mind when we were plotting against him, though.
I'm the only one who knows what I was thinking.

And the truth of it is- Nik's victory was a fluke. It was a shock, to everyone. No matter that they'd
tried to give her every advantage, no matter that she'd set everything in motion. No matter that
they'd cheated behind the scenes.

Because in the end, Nik should have lost. It made no sense that she won. Even with all her
advantages, it was still…

And yet she did. She seemed convinced that she could, the entire time. Never showing a hint of
doubt as to the outcome.

Oh she had plans to enact in the event of her death, to protect the others and myself, but they were
all said with the air of someone who doubted you'd have to use the information they were
imparting on you.

Perhaps she's just overconfident. But I don't think it cowardly that I knew I was no match for him.
That I knew everyone would turn on us if we weren't successful and that everything hinged on a
mere stranger with no training in swordplay or even weaponless combat.

If Navette had been the one to challenge him, or even Hermea- but then Nik wouldn't have a loyal
following, would she?

Suppose the only question is, did she mean to imply none of us would have been suitable for that
job…or did she know we would be a better choice than her and that is why she did not ask?

"Ben!" Navette walks up to me as I re-enter camp.

There are a few rabbits and birds slung over my shoulder, but I drop them in front of the first tent
on the outer ring. It's where they salt and preserve the meats and jar all the vegetables and fruits
and berries we find in the woods. One of the mages quickly begins dividing the animals up and
plucking feathers while another takes the rabbits to begin skinning them.

"What is it?" I ask tiredly, slumping into camp with the weight of exhaustion pulling me down.
Thinking, hunting and hours of walking have tired me out to the point I might just fall over if I
don't find my bedroll and tent soon.

She stop before me and takes stock of my appearance. "Come, we will speak in your tent."

Thank the Maker.

It isn't a long walk, as we're all mostly in the outer one to two rings of camp. Warriors on the
outside, leaders on the outside. We're supposed to protect everyone with our lives, and our screams
if it comes to that.

I dislike that. Navette doesn't.
Navette opens the flap and I follow her inside, tossing down my equipment and slowly removing my armor a piece at a time as she flops on my bedroll and begins to speak.

"I need your advice," she says.

"Oh my advice is worth something now?" I ask as I sit to begin cleaning the metal bits of my armor. Can't let rust set in. "I thought I was a coward and a cad."

"You are," Navette snaps. "But if you would actually lend me your ear you might become something more."

"More than what, Navette?" I ask her and look up to lift my brows in her direction. "A man who'd rather do as he is told than die? Who would rather wait for an opportunity to run than fight and survive another day? You call it cowardice, but all I can see is you'd have died without me to hold you back from attacking him head on. Nik should've died. It was a mistake. An accident. Just because I didn't foresee it, that does not make me a coward."

She frowns and crosses her arms at me, "that is, my Cousin, the very definition. Being unwilling to die for your principles is a very cowardly thing indeed."

"I never said I wouldn't die for my principles," I snap back. "Only that I ask for a more sure fight that they may be carried out, rather than buried and forgotten a moment after I am gone!"

Taking a moment to breathe, I turn and face my cousin more fully to tell her my thoughts with all the seriousness I can muster. "Have you thought about what would have happened had Nik died? Her plans for afterward were basically 'trust the mage and run'. And if he'd have hunted us, what then? We keep trusting the mage and keep running until his fellows had killed us because there would've been no Nik to save us from the poison smoke? Or perhaps if we'd gotten farther we then die of starvation or perhaps some random bandit attack on the road? There were only four of us!"

"Hermea might have left too, whatever that's worth," Navette grumbles. "Two warriors, an archer and a mage would've been able to stave off starvation and adequately protect ourselves."

"Do you really believe that?" I ask her. "Knowing what you believe of me, I can't even conceive that you might think me capable enough to watch your flank in a fight. And I shouldn't have had to, either. It wasn't a fight we would've chosen for ourselves, but one that would happen to us."

"Fights happen to people, Ben!" She jumps to her feet and I follow, unthinkingly. "What if the Orlesians declared full war on Ferelden and tried to take it back? Eh? What would you do? Run and hide while all your family and friends and loved ones were conquered or killed!?"

"Of course not!" I shout. "I would fight for my country, same as any man in any army! BUT I WILL NOT FIGHT A LOSING BATTLE FOR A-"

I cut myself off, realizing that I'm shouting. I take a step away from Navette and breathe. "Get out of my tent. I don't want to help you, and I can't believe you'd even ask after everything you've said to me, or about me."

Sitting down and facing my armor now, I pick up another piece and start to polish it.

I hear Navette stomp out, but pay it no mind.

I have armor to polish and arrows to make, daggers to sharpen.
"We haven't seen anyone suspicious, but we'll let you know," Tevea says and nods. "I had no idea the Divine was under so much threat. I knew this would likely be dangerous for her, but for anyone to attack the Divine, it's... inconceivable!"

"I'm sure it's not someone who worships the Maker or considers her sacred at all, so there's that," I reply with a small smile. "Just be sure to look out for anyone out of the ordinary. Even Templars, Mages, or any other prestigious officers of any kind that show up out of nowhere and seek an audience with the Divine."

"I will let you know, commander-" she halts and corrects herself. "Nik."

"Just be sure not to slip up in front of anyone and I don't mind," I flick my wrist. "And if you do, just pretend exhaustion and confusion and excuse yourself. No big deal."

"What if something does happen to the Divine?" she asks nervously. "What'll we do?"

"We'll do what people always do in times of adversity. Adapt and survive," I reply. "Besides... what is she actually doing? She's mostly just a figurehead for the Chantry's power, isn't she? It's the belief of the people that she's holy which empowers her. So I guess if anything happens to her, they'll just find a new target."

"I can't imagine that," she says. Subtly horrified. "The Divine was chosen by the Chantry and her power must come from the Maker, mustn't it?"

"If that is what you believe, that is the case. I believe differently, but that's mostly because of my... unique perspective." Thedas itself works mostly in reality with flashes of Fade Stuff here and there. And the Fade Stuff works how you expect it to work. That's part of it all. Your unconscious mind, subconscious desires- your thoughts and feelings about something. It shapes everything. "Funny thing about religions is, they can be interpreted any number of ways. Which is usually why we even have priests and such, to decipher the true message. And even then sometimes there's contention over something. There is no one way that is true and good with Religion, not really."

She tilts her head and seems to think about it for a moment, but then shakes her head and gestures back at the supply closet's door behind her. "You think we should be getting back?"

"Yeah, before we're caught." I'd only decided this morning to alert Tevea as to my mission here. She's sweet, hard-working and seems trustworthy enough that I can at least get her help as another pair of eyes and ears, if nothing else. She's also an elf, so she can hear further and see better in the dark than I can. If she glimpses something or hears something that I wouldn't- well, let's just say she'll probably see or hear something before I ever will.

And with her asking others she thinks might be of some help to also watch out, I've now got at least five or six other sets of eyes and ears. That's how many names she gave me, anyway. I told her to make sure only to tell people she thinks would believe her and only once she's absolutely sure they won't rat out my mission to someone in charge.

If I get caught by somebody before I can save the Divine, I'm doubly screwed. I'll die in the explosion.

"The Head Servant wants us to clean and replace the bedsheets in all the rooms today. Do you know how?" she asks.
"I know how to remove and replace bedsheets but I'm afraid I'm out of practice with the laundry. I learn fast, though." I smile. Still dreading the moment someone asks me to do the dishes. God I hate doing the dishes. Give me laundry any day.

She smiles shyly back and turns to open the door. "Don't worry, I'll show you how."

Dahlia POV

"I did not rebel against the Circles, only to be trapped in a new institution." Fiona has barely entertained the thought of joining the Commander's new order. And has only engaged as much as she is now because I have kept asking. "My people will have their own lives, or I will die trying to give it to them."

I always imagined this woman as being larger than life. And she does have a certain presence, I will not deny that. But she is so...small. Thin and short, with slightly curling black hair and light brown skin. Her eyes a light shade of...green? Or perhaps a subtle blue. Maybe even gray. I think it depends on how the light hits.

"But that's what I'm telling you, she wants to give them the choices they don't have!" I burst a bit.

She startles at my vehemence and gives me a very unimpressed look.

"Well you haven't been listening to me!" I snap. "How do you expect me to react when you finally seem to be hearing the words coming out of my mouth? What Nik proposes isn't an institution to hold you, it's a framework through which we might protect ourselves. Using the laws of this land to do so."

"Being beholden to an order means there will be rules, requirements-" Fiona gestures grandly. "So what might be asked of us within this order?"

"To protect the people," I reply. "And not the way the Templars or City Guardsmen do. Unselfishly, for no reward. And not in the service of Nobility. Specifically trained and specially instructed to help those like us. Elves and Dwarves, Mages...whoever else needs it."

"And how exactly does she intend to enforce these rules and guidelines?" She tents her fingertips on the desk before her. "Another order meant to check our power?"

"No!" I make a gesture of my own, and it's much more filled with frustration than hers. "That's what I've been telling you. We would check our own power. Mages in charge of mage power abuses. Elves to judge elves, Dwarves to judge Dwarves." I explain and wrap my arms around myself. "We can't have open freedom yet. They'll either cage us again or kill us. Or we'll wage a centuries-long war that won't end well for either side. For now what we have to do, what is most advantageous for us- is to start the process by gaining our freedom-"

I unwrap one hand to make a sweeping gesture. "While providing the illusion that we are still under someone else's control."

"It will not be an illusion," she argues. "We will be under her control, can't you see that?"

And I smile with triumph because I have an answer to that, too. "No. We won't. The Justicars will work in cells. And the only time they will ever unite is in the face of a threat that requires them. And when that time comes, we will choose our own leader. And Nik has promised that she won't
be in the running after the war is decided. She wants to retire after having started everything. Hand the reigns over to the people who will run the individual cells."

I swallow roughly at the skeptical look on Fiona's face.

"And until the war is decided, she is in power over us," she says.

"Not in power. Leading," I reply. "She's given us the option of not following her orders if we think them unjust. She has promised no punishment for desertion."

"Well that all sounds very pretty," Fiona replies. "But you'll forgive me if the promises of a non-mage human woman to the poor and desperate does not move me."

"If you don't believe, that's fine. But allow your people who do, to go." I insist. "Even if it ends badly, this is a choice, and you have to let them make it."

"I believe a paltry few already left with your Commander," she says as she pulls a scroll out of her desk. "But none more went, and none more have requested leave from me- and they are free to do as they like. You wish to imagine that I am keeping them here, but I am not."

"You are," I reply. "Because you lead them and they don't want to leave you. They've been taught to follow and obey. You have to give them permission or they won't feel like they can go."

"I am not holding them here," she says. Standing, staring me down. Clutching the scroll in her fist tightly with offense. "If they choose to stay out of Loyalty, that is their choice." Her head dips as she stares into my eyes. "And you must let them make it."
Chapter Summary

Gotta set up a lot of shit in a short amount of time, but just to let everyone know, not all of these things from other POV's are happening on the same days or after the same days as the Nik POV's.

These are moments stolen from before and after Nik leaves Redcliffe and arrives at Haven. Interludes before the main event, and also to set up the characters in the places they'll be when it happens.

(Wait just outside Haven. Either I'll come back, or I won't and something bad will have happened.)

Great. Wonderful. I'll just sit here like a good Elf and wait for your return then, shall I?

(If I don't come back, the war might begin with oomph again because of what's going on at the Conclave. You might get hurt if you stay. Go find the other Justicar pockets, consolidate them and band together for protection. Stay out of sight. Don't let the Chantry find you. Use magic if you have to, to hide yourselves away. Just don't get caught.)

As if that was ever part of the plan.

(Until I do come back, Consider Ren in charge of this Cell. Just like Navette is in command of hers. Miles still has Authority to command all the Cells but until he comes back, listen to Ren.)

What exactly have I done to engender such confidence in my leadership skills? At least Miles is a clever schemer, what am I? An Elven mage in a ratty old robe.

"Sir?" Elliot prods my shoulder a bit to get my attention. "What should we do about the problem?"

"Which one?" I ask. Tired and completely lacking motivation to care.

"The most recent one," he says and gestures toward our newest member. "She hasn't left yet."

"She isn't well enough to leave yet," I correct him. "And we all know what the Commander thinks of people trying to oust her because she's a Qunari."

"Vashoth," comes a correction from the cot in the corner of my tent. "And I can go, anytime."

"No. You can't." I insist. "Your leg will crumple right underneath you, you'll be a sitting duck. We're too near Haven for you to go hobbling around in full view with a mage staff."

She rolls her eyes, "I've gotten around on worse injuries."

"And made them worse for the effort, no doubt," I snap. "She isn't going until I'm certain she can both run and defend herself without getting further injuries just from the action itself."

Elliot nods, "yes I know. But those people out there are afraid of Qunari, Vashoth, whatever you want to call her or them. They've only ever heard tales passed on through Tevinter. Whoever or
whatever she is, they're scared of her."

"Reassure them I'll be on my way just as soon as my leg is repaired," she speaks lowly and with purpose. "I have a mercenary company of my own to get back to."

"And until then, they should remember the Commander doesn't look kindly on those who deny healing to someone on the basis of their race." That is something the Commander and I both agree very strongly on. Everyone should have access to healing. Medicine. Treatment of any kind.

Even if I don't feel that comfortable with a...Vashoth, so close to us. I have come upon Tal'Vashoth before. I don't know if leaving off the 'Tal' actually means anything but no two Tal'Vashoth bands of mercenaries are the same so far as I can recall. There is no guarantee she isn't dangerous.

Also no signs that she is, either.

Until she proves herself to be, I think we should do as the Commander instructed and treat her like any other member of camp.

(When she's well enough to move around but not leave, she might get antsy and want something to do. Let her do things she's familiar with. Things that won't hurt her. Things that might make people see her as a regular, average person, just like them.)

Questioning the Commander's methods is allowed but I usually don't feel the need to. It's obvious what she's looking to accomplish if you think about it for a moment.

Well, usually. Sometimes she's just...incomprehensible. She doesn't spell things out for you and then seems confused when you don't know what she was getting at. Not meanly but you get the feeling you're missing something simple.

Infuriating that, when you're trying to ask a question and she has no idea how to answer because you don't know any of the words she uses to explain.

"Tell the hunters to bring the night's kills to me," I tell Elliot. "You up for skinning something?" I ask her.

She sits up a bit straighter in bed and inclines her head. Horns brushing the tent behind her. "If it means doing something other than nothing. I can also tan the hide and turn the offal into bait to catch bigger beasts. As well as use the bone and marrow for other things."

Nik was always upset we couldn't do more with the pieces we had than eat the meat, tan the hide and throw the rest to the wolves. Though she seemed to take some consolation in the idea that a starving animal might benefit from our waste.

The commander is strange, I will never argue that. But she is the kind of strange all people can get used to and live with. Compassionate but not to the point of foolishness. Happy to help anyone in need but suspicious enough to check that the person isn't a threat first.

Even with the Qunari-Vashoth. Even with her, she had me and other mages scan the area with spells to be certain she was the only one left alive before approaching her.

Sometimes I believe I know the Commander, know her mind and methods and morals. And then she'll do something unexpected. Something that makes me question everything I thought I knew.

Suppose I shouldn't assume I know anything until she stops surprising me.
"I don't know," I say. Curling my hands together in my lap around a clay mug of tea. "I want to travel, see everything, work under the Commander. But...part of me has always wanted to belong somewhere. Somewhere I could come home to. I thought this could be the Commander and the motley band of Blades- the Justicars."

"And so you are torn between a wish for family and community and that which would give you the most freedom, disconnected from those things." The Keeper observes. "Many of our young hunters-to-be also have this problem. This dilemma. The problem lies not in what you want, but what you perceive."

"What is the problem with my perception, then?" I ask. "Because as far as I can tell, being tied down to one place is the same, no matter how you look at it."

"Tethers can be any length," the Keeper replies. "Regardless, you are not tied down by anyone but yourself. It will not be a collar around your neck, but an anchor to hold you in the storm. That is all that is offered by being part of a clan. I have had many wanderers come home after years of searching and exploring only to settle in and have their families or live out their retirements, giving their wisdom to the next generation."

"So it wouldn't be unprecedented, then," I say. Hopefully, though I try not to be. Damn me and my stubbornness and wanderlust too, while I'm at it.

"Not unprecedented, no." She speaks slowly and with deliberation. "We would however, require a few things to make the arrangement worthwhile, otherwise you are simply a traveler claiming to be part of our clan."

"What would these things be?" I ask.

"Come back to the Clan when calamity might befall it or when we have great need of you. Answer the call to Arlathvhen. And of course you must learn of the gods, and be given your Vallaslin once you have performed the rite of passage." She lists. "And if you've any mage children, they must be raised to be the first or second of the clan."

"I don't know what that means," I flick my wrist. "I know the first is who's going to succeed you, but what's a second?"

"First, second and third are the positions a mage occupies within Dalish clans. Leaders. Healers. If there are too many, then they are sent to a clan without a first or may even be raised to start their own." She explains. "Any other questions?"

"Too many to really count," I mutter. "Who are these gods? I've heard of some of them, in passing. Heard things from the Hahren of the Alienage..."

"Mythal is the great mother," the Keeper explains. "She has dominion over justice and the moon."

I remember that one. The moon part is new though.

"Elgar'nan is the father, god of vengeance and the sun." She says, while gesturing at the sun shining in from the Aravel's doorway. "Dirthamen is the god of secrets. Falon'Din the god of the Afterlife. Ghilan'nan the halla mother, Andruil the Huntress."
Some of these I think I've heard of from the Hahren, but they only vaguely tickle my memory.

"Then there is June, the Craftsman. And Sylaise the Hearthkeeper." She pauses then. Seems to draw strength for something. "And lastly…Fen'Harel. The Trickster and Betrayer."

"I don't think I've ever heard of him," I say and frown. "The rest, I at least have a familiarity with their names, but I dunno if the Hahren ever mentioned Fen'Harel."

She seems to go a bit pale. "Foolish. Fen'Harel dislikes being ignored and forgotten more than being ridiculed and insulted. You must never forget to pay tribute to the one who may cause the greatest trouble simply on a whim to sate his boredom."

"Why do you worship someone so terrible?" I ask.

Her intake of breath is sharp and speaks of fear. "The alternative is to ignore or turn our backs on him. He does not like that. And bringing down the wrath of the Dread Wolf on our people is the very last thing any Dalish ever wishes to do."

'A god that throws a hissy fit when no one pays attention to him. How can you even be scared of that? He sounds like one of the Noble brats who'd run around doing whatever they wanted and complained your yelping was too loud and hurt their ears after they'd just yanked yours almost clear off your head.'

I take a deep breath and sigh slowly. "I'm not saying yes…but I'll think about it. I have to report back to Nik before I can do anything."

"Your Commander must be fierce to command such loyalty," Keeper Ledin says.

And I have to cough to cover a snort because while 'fierce' is an apt description of my Commander…

I can tell she's imagining Nik as tall and muscular with a sword in her hand and maybe a shield on her arm. Or perhaps a rogue with a bow in hand or maybe even a fearsome mage.

But what Nik is…I don't know what to call it. Scheming, compassionate, hot-headed but slow to act…she decides on a course of action in a snap judgment but then could take weeks or maybe even months to implement it if given the chance.

I have a feeling everything that happened with Andras happened a lot faster than she was comfortable with. The fact that she could just…modify her plans and keep going anyway…

"She is fierce, I will give you that."
Chapter Summary

Things are getting more exciting...

Navette doesn't understand, will never understand.

She was raised with rules in place for her conduct. I wasn't. Oh sure, we're noble down here in Ferelden in terms of bloodline and our ties to Orlais keep us important, but my family...we were never rich and never ruled anything. We were a simple family, and I used to hate it.

As it is now, I still hate the thought of going back. But also can't stand the thought of staying here. With Navette and Nik and the rest of them.

I know something lurks behind that warm smile of hers, I just don't know what it is, it just. It gets my back all up against a wall that isn't even there. And Navette...Navette stopped caring what happens to me the day I tried to stop them all from going against Andras.

The both of us are going through the motions, trying to be like we were- but it's just not possible.

My cousin thinks I'm a coward and I think she's a hotheaded arse.

Nothing will ever be the same between us. And that's why I have to leave.

"You can't do this!" Navette chases us down the side of the road and into the woods. "Ben!"

"It's already done, Navvy," I call back over my shoulder. "Tell the Commander I took another position."

Only five people decided to join me in the end, but that's fine. A company of spies is already an oddity, having a small number of them just makes sense, in the end.

We have a mage, even. A mage, two Elves from Redcliffe who are good with a bow and two humans who are trained in swords and daggers respectively.

And me.

I'm not the leader type, but an organizer? I can be an organizer. I can line up jobs, collect payments from wealthy employers and train all of them to be as good a tracker as I am. Our skills will merge as we teach each other and soon we'll be the most versatile group of spies there are.

We won't be assassins, I couldn't...stomach that sort of job. But we will kill when it is necessary to defend ourselves and only then.

"Ben!" I can hear she's stopped and she's just shouting my name now, hoping I'll come crawling back.

But I'm never going back. I can't. Going back would mean I really am a coward and that I can't follow through on anything.
"S'gonna be alright, mate," the Rogue- what was her name? Avery? "My family didn't understand how I didn't wanna be a great warrior either."

The warrior laughs and it almost covers Navette's voice calling out for me. "I fit the Warrior bit, but not the soldier bit. I'm better suited to bodyguarding and armed escorts than war. Father didn't like that." Wasn't his name something like…Marron…right?

The two elves walking with us, are strangely silent. But I suppose they can't really relate to familial expectations of greatness. In the Alienage, they'd be expected to do their job and keep their head down.

I can still remember the Alienage in the village nearby. Separated from the rest of the village with a waist-high stone wall. Didn't really keep anyone in or out, it was just a reminder that that is where the other people lived.

So I wonder… "You two, eh…Vaya and Dixen," I address them. "What did you always want to be?"

They exchange glances. And Vaya answers for them both. "Dreams are dangerous in an Alienage, Serah. You only ever expect to survive to tomorrow, and even that isn't certain."

"Well, maybe this will change that. You'll have the skill, know-how and coin to do anything you want." I encourage. "Do you have any ideas, at least?"

Dixen speaks then, in a low tone. "I was a woodworker. I'd like to learn blacksmithing to make blades. Instead of little wooden ones for kids."

Vaya seems encouraged by this. "Perhaps I'd like to learn embroidery. I know I never want to clean another chamber pot for a fussy Noblewoman again."

We all shiver at that thought.

"I wanted to be a warrior," the mage says in the space between. "But the way I know how to fight is with a very weak fireball. I'm better suited to healing. I'd still like to learn a sword style, though. Just to know it."

It's then I realize we're far enough that Navette's voice no longer carries to us. And I feel… something. Deep inside, that tells me this was the right choice. The both of us need to live our lives. And now we can, without obligation to each other.

'Be safe Navette. I hope someday I can show you what I've become.'

Nik POV

'Nothing strange on my end' Tevea's friends report to me. One after another. 'Not even important Noble guests, really. Just Mages and Templars butting heads and the Divine stepping in to mediate.'

I know the Gray Wardens and Corypheus are close to making their move. I don't know how close, but.

"When the time comes, we have to find a way to evacuate everyone." Tevea and I are in the broom closet again, rearranging things so as to look busy if anyone stumbles upon us. "I have ideas but
"Well I've one, if you think it could work," she offers timidly. "If the servants could get into everyone's rooms- I've got this powder that will irritate their skin and give them a rash. We'll spread the word that there's an infectious disease and-

"But infectious diseases mean quarantine," I put a hand up in apology. "Sorry didn't mean to cut in- I think it could work, but you'd have to apply the powder only to people who'd be useful for defending the Divine. Like the Templars, for instance. Everyone else would be evacuated to get away from them."

"So we target people to put the dust in their drawers and everyone without a rash will be sent to Haven so we can isolate the sick. And... then what do we do?" she asks.

"We inform the Templars of the deception," I reply. "We begin by telling them there's a threat on the Divine's life, tell them we put itching powder into their clothes so they'd be left behind while everyone evacuated and tell them to go and save the Divine."

"What if they don't like that, though?" Tevea asks. "Or what if they try to kill us or lock us up?"

"Good point," I reply. "Maybe just tell them we heard the Divine calling for help."

"Then do we evacuate?" she asks.

"You do, yes. I'll have to take the Templars up the stairs and show them where we heard her calling out from." I tell her. "I'm counting on you to make sure everyone else is getting out because I will be far behind you and moving quickly."

"So you'll evacuate last? What if you get hurt?" she asks. "Who will help you?"

"Don't worry, if I get nicked by a sword or something, I can keep running. I've twisted ankles before and I'm able to get around good on them for the first hour or so after I injure them before they tighten up. It's not good for it, but it'd be worse to stop and get caught, right?" I smile.

She smiles back, reluctantly. "I wish you the best, Commander."

"Be safe, Tevea," I smile more warmly. "If anything happened to any of you, it would distress me. Be sure to tell Lady Nightingale what really happened. No one else. Just her, alright?"

She nods resolutely. "I will, my la-Nik."

I grin. "You only ever mess that up when we're alone, that's funny."

Her face flushes a warmer shade of brown as she ducks her head. "We should get back to work!"

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Dahlia POV

"They are amassing, just outside the gates," Bann Teagan informs us. "They are demanding we release you to them."

"What do we do?" I turn to Fiona with a grave expression. "We can't ask these innocent people to shelter us when it might mean their deaths, but we can't just surrender either."
She seems lost in thought but her eyes sharpen after a moment and she steps forward to face Bann Teagan head-on. "We will face these Templars, but our fight will cover your people's escape. We will not ask you to fight, but we cannot surrender, as the young lady says. And as you were harboring mages until this moment, it is likely these Templars will not care that you handed us over. They may well come for you, regardless."

Bann Teagan nods once, then stands. "All due respect to your wisdom and experience, Grand Enchanter…but you won't stand a chance. All you have is your magic, and they can take that from you. Once that happens, you are left defenseless, while they have swords. If there is any fighting to be had, it will be with Redcliffe soldiers beside you. We can send the infirm, the children and the civilians away as we do battle."

"I appreciate your dedication to carrying out the King's order, my lord," Fiona replies. "But are you certain?"

"I am certain that the reason I agreed to shelter you was not only because the King asked me, and that I will not allow innocent refugees to come to harm under my care." He squares his shoulders. "Guards! Fetch my armor and begin evacuating the people- I don't care where you send them, so long as it's away from here. Then be ready to fight."

There's a loud hurrah in the hall and while I am a bit overcome at the thought that people are going to fight for and with us, because they believe it's right- I am present enough to remember-

"My Lord, Lady Nik would gladly shelter any refugees in Haven. She was to make camp there, and I'm certain they would be safer with the Justicars than they would be alone. We can send them along to Navette's detachment and they can escort them there."

The Bann thinks it over for a moment and then nods. "Very well, then. I expect your mistress to protect my people as if they were her own."

"I don't believe she knows another way, my lord," I answer. Very honestly. Nik seems the type to become protective of all who require defense. I saw it when she argued for us against her own men, and then again and again on our travels as we walked battlefields and fended off the wildlife.

"Now we must speak of our strategy," Fiona says. "Where would you have us, my lord?"

"I'm not entirely certain, Grand Enchanter," he replies. "Any suggestions as to where you would all work best?"

"Many of my people are skilled healers, not many of them have any combat experience," Fiona says. "A few are more familiar with casting spells that might augment your men's weapons and armor for a short time."

"I have a few ideas, actually," I cut in and they both glance over at me. "I am technically here as an envoy from the Justicars, not simply as a mage, so I believe I've the right to speak?"

"Indeed, any ideas you have could be helpful," Bann Teagan replies, turning to give me his full attention.

"Lady Nik had us doing these…strange exercises before we arrived. Things that tested our limits and…sort of forced us to think outside the usual Circle-approved methods of doing things." I speak slowly as I think back to it. "She had me growing trees at one point. As life magic is not my forte, it did not go well. But I was able to do it after several days of trying different approaches and I finally discovered a way to siphon energy and life force from the surroundings and put it into
something else. I killed about four trees in order to grow just the one, but I believe-

"What you speak of is a branch of dark magic almost akin to blood magic." Fiona interrupts me. "It is separated only by degrees."

"It's Entropy magic," I snap. "Which you damn well know I do. Do you imply something untoward about me simply because of my alignment?"

"I-" Fiona falters and her ears flicker downward and back just a bit. "My apologies, Lady Trevelyan. I had forgotten you were an Entropy mage."

"I notice you don't imply any sort of apology for assuming Entropy magic is evil," I say. "But we have more important things to argue over right now. I can pull energy from the Templars and supply it to the soldiers or the Mages, so long as I'm not silenced."

And then I resolutely turn to Bann Teagan again, determined not to lose my temper.

I've always been a little bit out of place in the Circle because of my specialization. The Templars watched me more closely, the mages didn't trust me…

"I believe if we count on the mages only being able to attack once each, the battle may go much better," I explain. "I will siphon the energy to the soldiers from somewhere in cover and they will meet the enemy head on in surges. They'll pull back and one wave of mages, hidden in cover somewhere else, will come out for one great combined attack of magic. I'd recommend Fire. Their shields can block the spells to some extent but an attack that great will at least singe them and maybe immolate a few. Then, we can pull them back, send the soldiers in again, and then so on and so forth."

The Bann is smiling just a little when I'm finished. "That Commander of yours has an eye for talent, I think. Yes, I believe your plan would work. We will keep healers stationed in one of the houses nearby, and take the injured there, but otherwise…" He turns to Fiona. "Ready all you can for battle. Those who cannot do anything useful in a fight or for healing…they should go with my people, Fiona."

She inhales a long breath and then releases it, eyes closed. When she opens them, she draws up to her full height and nods. "Very well. I do not like relying on the mercy of someone I do not yet know but I suppose we've no other choice."

I'm still going over 'that commander of yours' in my mind, though.

My Commander. My Lady.

Yes, I think so. I wonder when that happened?
"Okay, nobody panic. We've gone over this." I grasp Tevea's shoulder and squeeze, as she seems to almost be prone to fainting dead away right now and that would be dangerous for her. "Hey, somebody take Tevea with you when you go? I don't think she can make it on her own."

She looks like she wants to argue, but can't get the words out, but I know that look she's giving me is 'what about you'. So I answer the unspoken question.

"I'll be fine," I soothe. "I'm still gonna go with the plan, it'll just be alone at the first part now. Not a big difference."

"We've finished dusting the inside of all the Templar's armors," says one of Tevea's friends. What was his name...? Rael or something? "But we got it all over our hands and arms," he says.

"Grab a couple of the poultices and treat yourselves with some of that aloe- if it doesn't work, treat it with the poultices." I instruct. "When you get to Haven and Tevea informs the lady Nightingale that there's no real plague, it won't be a big deal if everyone sees your rashes, so you can go to a healer then if it still persists."

"Until then, wear long sleeves?" One of them asks, distractedly rubbing at their arm.

"Yes, and don't itch. You'll make yourselves bleed. Rubbing will just make it worse." I had them steal the Aloe from the Divine's private stash, as it's apparently a luxury item here. It grows in places like Rivain, Antiva and Tevinter, but not in Ferelden or the Free Marches.

"You all know your parts," the head cook is wringing his hands. "We've just got to play this right, and we'll all be out before they figure out what's going on."

"I still think this is a terrible idea," one of the servants mutters in the group and several others mutter their agreements.

"It probably is, but then what other options do we have, really?" I shrug and pop my hands up. "Stay here and die because you're just background noise to these kinds of people- collateral damage. Or run now without explanation and be chased because they think you stole something or did something or know something?"

"She's right, whatever's happening, if we don't do something we'll be blamed if we leave like we knew it was happening and said nothin'." 'Rael' supports me with a sweeping hand gesture. "So we wait till everyone starts noticing their rashes, then we take everyone and go, and say that a healer from Haven declared a quarantine. Then the Commander takes care of the rest."

"That's right, so...let's get to our stations, and try to be calm. Take it just one step at a time, and remember- don't tell any other servants about this. They might squeal on us, and then we're all screwed," I remind them.

"Who has access to the messages from here to Haven, again?" 'Rael' asks. Damn it I've gotta confirm that that's his name but I can't remember and asking right now would be kind of rude.

"I do," another servant raises their hand and says. "I'll make sure the fake note about the outbreak and quarantine are switched in instead of whatever response the head healer really sent. I just have to match the handwriting and names as much as I can and hope for the best."
"If any of us gets caught, that's it. We'll be hacked in two. No questions, none." Another says.

I've only got like five people in on this besides me and Tevea but they're all vital. They're also terrified.

"What's your job?" I ask them. "I remember it had something to do with escorting the wounded, right?"

"That's right," they reply.

"You'll be one of the first groups out," I say. "Even if I get caught, the rest of you will have been either long gone or at least out of the Temple by then."

"Something's been bothering me," the man in charge of making sure there are no mage stragglers suddenly bursts out. "If you're a mercenary, why don't you have any calluses or scars?"

"That's cause I'm not a mercenary." I reply. "I'm a Justicar. We don't work for coin. And I only recently began building my company in the past few weeks when I first learned of the threat to the Divine. I knew something was coming and I had to prepare for it, but those preparations didn't involve fighting or getting scars. Though I do have some, they're just small and in places you can't see."

"What did the preparations involve?" Tevea asks timidly.

"Making alliances, formal petitions and gathering recruits," I reply. "Also we freed a couple of camps of slaves from Tevinter slavers. I might have marks on my wrists where they bound me, come to think of it…" I reach down for my sleeve-

But Tevea stops me, "that's not necessary my lady."

Oh, right. That's supposed to be something traumatizing. It probably should've traumatized me. My brain shuts down anything like that, though. That's the reason I'm always so open and don't really care if everyone knows everything that's ever happened to me.

Knowing that doesn't make it go away, of course. And it doesn't help me emulate how real people would react to having memories that hurt them. My brain just scrubs it all away until all that's left is the vaguest suggestion of what happened, so I don't usually have that problem unless the stimuli is…powerful.

"Right. Anyway, if anyone has anymore questions, I'd be glad to answer them. I know you're risking a lot here. I want to save as many as possible, but I understand if you decide to save yourselves and run." I say. "These people wouldn't care about you if the situation was reversed, and I don't blame you if you're having second thoughts."

"You care about us," Tevea says, seeming to regain some color. "That's enough for me."

"We'll do it, we just don't like it," 'Rael' explains. "Saying aloud how dangerous and shitty it is, sometimes makes it feel less so. Dunno why."

"Yeah I'm still in," says another.

Everyone chimes in with their agreement to go along with the plan and I smile, with a little bit of a tear in my eyes because…

Well, it's always surprising when people trust me. It's a new feeling and I like it.
And then it's time for everyone to get in their places. So we all stream out of the closet we'd been hiding in and head to our stations.

It doesn't take five minutes for the Templars to start whining and bug the head servant and the Scout in charge of the Ravens into sending a missive to the mages at their massive rash outbreaks.

It takes about thirty for the response to come back and our servant friend to change the message and burn the actual one.

Then about twenty minutes while the head servant instructs everyone to pick up and head for Haven while sweating and wringing his hands, obviously having been told to be silent about what's happening.

That doesn't last long though, as my people seed the rumors of an infectious disease and people start moving much more quickly.

I'm already down the hall from the room the Divine locked herself in with the Gray Wardens who came to parlay with her. She did so not five minutes ago, so this is good timing.

Pretending to sweep a pretty pristine floor is kind of ridiculous but if it gives me an excuse I can just say the head servant was punishing me. People would believe that.

We began to move when someone reported seeing a Gray Warden in the woods just outside the Temple, and Tevea thought I should know. She was surprised when it actually turned out to be who I was looking for though.

Calmed down a lot when I said they might've been coerced, lied to or somehow controlled- or possibly were just people in Warden armor.

Warden hero-worship is real and annoying. Where was all this admiration when I was trekking Thedas as a Mage Warden trying kick your asses into shape? Also, when trying to convince someone that an individual who just happens to be a Warden might be doing something bad- you've gotta imply they've been coerced because no one can conceive of it ever happening.

Like, first of all. Anders was a Warden and he blew up a Chantry. Sophia Dryden tried to depose a king, or something. And whether or not those actions are actually good or bad, they're both things a Warden did that people would instantly decry when talking about anyone else.

Come to think of it, why doesn't anyone ever mention Anders to the Wardens in Inquisition? Strange.

When I hear the first noise of distress, I streak like a bolt of lightning down those stairs to the first contingent of itchy Templars I can find and shriek that the Divine is being attacked- I heard her calling out for help!

And as itchy as they are, you've gotta admit they moved pretty damn fast to get up there while the attack was still happening.

Groaning, gritting their teeth and running. It'd be super funny if I wasn't so sure we'd all blow up in a second.

'The last lie I told to an ally was to you, Tevea, and I'm so sorry.' I rush up the stairs after the Templars and watch as they fight the Wardens that try to stop them from entering the room. Darting behind the silver-and-blue mind-controlled men, I stride into the room just as Corypheus prepares to sacrifice the Divine to unlock the Orb.
'I won't be coming back.' I whisper in my mind as the Divine moves, knocking the Orb out of Corypheus's grip and sending it straight at me.

Grasping it in my left hand is all I can do. Stepping aside would only allow it to either shatter or find another target and that wouldn't be good for multiple reasons. I don't know what would happen in any scenario other than the one that happened.

So to be safe, I...have to do this.

"Ahhh!" I don't realize it's me screaming until the ground rushes up to smack me in the knees.

And then everything is kind of exploding. But not like a bomb. It's like everything suddenly gets yanked inside out and-

'Herald of Andraste, here I come. And I am going to hate every single second of it.'
Dahlia POV, Miles POV

Chapter Notes

Those of you who read across fandoms and know I've been updating three stories each a week for a while, I'm sorry to inform you that I'm just doing one this week.

I managed to stretch out my arms in a very uncomfortable way carrying groceries over here from next door where our driveway is (yes it is weird) so my arms hurt more than usual more quickly than usual. Plus I've been spacy and out of it all week. I might manage to somehow post two more tomorrow or I might not, but here's your warning.

I wish I could put out announcements without having to post a new chapter and that I could make it viewable to my whole readerbase. *sigh*

EDIT: Oh my fucking god I forgot to hit post yesterday. Well, there's the proof in the pudding of what my brain is like rn.

"I think we've lost them," I huff into my hands, warming my chilled fingers. They've almost gone numb.

Using too much magic, not eating a whole lot while being on the run, barely getting any sleep- it'll all stack up against you in temperatures like these.

"Damn mages bringing Templars down on our heads," Navette mutters. "Can't understand why the Commander still wants you around. I bet you she'd take offense to you putting all the rest of these people in danger."

"I've met your commander," Bann Teagan interjects. "And frankly I'm shocked that one of her lieutenants so openly espouses beliefs she confesses to hate. How on earth did you even get appointed by one such as her?"

That makes Navette stutter in her movements a bit and a frown coalesces on her face. "What the hell d'you mean by that? I've got loads of experience in combat and leading small groups around. Naturally, I'd be promoted."

"Yes but did your promotion come before your Commander discovered your opinions or after, is what I'm wondering," Teagan replies. "Because if it's after I have to wonder if your Commander is as much a Viper as any other. If Before, I anticipate you won't be holding that position for long."

Navette's mouth drops open but Fiona intercedes before it can become a fight. "Enough! We are all exhausted and hungry. We still have walking left to do and it will be an even more miserable trip if we are all at each other's throats. It will also make it more difficult to pay attention to our surroundings. So if you would kindly both shut up and walk, I'd be much obliged to do the same."

"Agreed," I chime. "I'm so exhausted, just listening to people talk is tiring."

There are more votes for everyone shutting up coming from the scattered, tired mouths of mages and civilians and guardsmen alike. Mostly in the form of grunts and noises that indicate agreement,
less in words.

Navette goes silent, but the look on her face is stony and irritable so that may not last long. As for Bann Teagan, he seems to be in good enough spirits to take the admonition well.

Fiona sidles up beside me, then. "We will have to stop, eat and rest soon. The people with us are not soldiers and many of mine have never run this hard- they will not survive this pace."

I sigh and my shoulders drop, "we stay still too long and they might catch up to us. If they're even still following us at all. And there's no way to know that without sending a recon scout or two that way and then they'll know exactly which way to find us, especially if they're taken captive."

"Then let us hope the Crossroads are near enough we can take shelter at the end of our long walk. Otherwise some of the children and the older among us may fall ill." She observes them as she speaks, looking over her shoulder at the small mass of elderly, ill and children who are falling a bit behind us all.

"I don't know what else to do. Stopping could mean death, walking could mean death, what is the alternative, here." I'm not really asking…

I'm thinking.

"You look as though you've had an idea," Fiona says.

"More like an inkling but yeah…" I say slowly. "What if we built a village?"

"Beg pardon?" Bann Teagan is close enough to overhear. "Build a village?"

"A fake village. We could use fallen trees, and some magic- we have lyrium we could use- we could make them look like very basic houses from the outside. On the inside we would put everyone on their bedrolls, set up traps along the walls so they'd fall if anyone came too close and perhaps flash bright to wake us all up and blind our attackers. We could feel secure in our sleep and get out of the cold for a bit."

"Did your Commander teach you this?" Bann Teagan asks.

I shake my head. "No. I mean, she always had us plant some traps around camp, runes and actual traps together in patterns, but we did that even before meeting her."

"No I meant the eh, fake village part," he says with a slight smile.

"Oh, well I suppose?" I reply. "She did urge us to think differently and look for strange solutions to simple problems. I just figure, they'll try to creep up on the houses, or maybe knock thinking there might be actual townsfolk who could direct them our way, who knows. But it'd be walls between them and us until the moment we'd be ready to attack and tear them down."

"It's a good plan, and our people will be warm and safe for the first time since we began running," Fiona smiles brightly at me. "You are very clever, Serah Trevelyan. We are privileged to have you with us."

"Indeed," Bann Teagan agrees.

I feel a bit overcome with all the attention and stride forward to the front of the pack to inform Navette of our plans. "Navette, we've a plan, we can find a spot and stop for the night."
"Well thank the Maker and Andraste for that, but what's the plan?" she asks.

"Find a place that's mostly free of trees, and we'll show you," I reply. "We'll be out of the wind and safe from pursuers, at any rate."

"Right, whatever. So long as we get some sleep," she grumbles. "I can't stand to be upright another moment."

So we find a clearing not far from where we were walking and those of us not totally drained drink some Lyrium before clearing out the snow and beginning to set up fallen trees as our supports- and fell a few more for the walls.

We don't use as much wood as you'd usually use to build a house. It's more of a loose collection of shacks, really. The Nature mages are able to grow a canopy of branches from the felled trees to serve as a roof and it's not very warm- but at least we're not freezing to death.

Three shacks of large size do not a village make, but we can create more in the morning when we're better recovered. This place could work out as a hideaway for a bit until everyone is well enough to leave.

We pushed them very hard.

"Did you feel that?" Fiona stops short in the middle of laying a Rune and I look over to her-

Just noticing that my heart fluttered the instant before she asked and is still…what is this fee-

CRACK

The world seems to shiver and shake, the ground beneath us staying perfectly still but the air, our bodies, my magic- everything wobbles in that instant and I feel something.

I feel a bit more powerful than I did a moment before. Like the Veil is right there ready for me to grasp it.

And then I look up, in tandem with Fiona. At the…gaping hole in the sky.

Right in the direction we were heading.

"Commander…"

Miles POV

"Today you join with us and tomorrow you are one of us." The Keeper intones with solemn gravitas as she walks around me. Swinging a staff with a ball on the end, filled with incense-gesturing in spiraling patterns.

"The Clan welcomes family into the fold with the warm embrace of Mythal," she says.

The incense represents Mythal. I can't remember what it is, but it is a warm, soothing scent. Next is…Elgar'nan, right?

"The Clan vows vengeance on those who threaten the family, granted by Elgar'nan." She flicks her wrist and lights a torch. There are four of them ringed around me in the center of this ritual.
She lights each one as she circles around me again.

And now, the Craftsman and the Hearthkeeper.

"Our Hearth and our Arms belong to one and all of the People," she says. "Given to us by our lovely Sylaise and Brilliant June."

She lays a simple sword before me, not mine. One of Dalish make. And a single piece of bread in a beautifully decorated bowl. The sides are scrawled with Elvhen, I think.

The Huntress and her lover are next, I think. Yes. Andruil and Ghilan'nain.

"The family has a sacred duty, as all Dalish do, to revere that which was given us by the Halla Mother, and use it well as we are taught by the Great Huntress. Andruil and Ghilan'nain be praised for the bounty you bring to your people and the plenty we give in return."

She places a set of simple armor made from Halla leather and ironbark next to the sword and bread. Along with a water skin, corked. Already filled with water.

The twins are next.

I'm nearly vibrating with tension and anticipation but there's also this…heavy sleepiness within my limbs.

I am at once awake and asleep, waiting to be reborn anew. She told me it would feel this way but it is still…strange.

"May the eyes of Dirthamen only look upon your enemies and may their secrets only be whispered in your ear. Grant Falon'Din an anchor in your soul and you will find him in the afterlife, and be guided to where all our people rest."

She moves to sit before me, far enough away from the things she's been presenting that she doesn't disturb them. Then she slowly paints my face with a small brush dipped in rich emerald paint.

"And may the Dread Wolf never catch your scent, hear your steps or follow you home." She whispers, reverent and careful in her movements.

The Clan around us begin to hum a melody then as she continues to paint the intricate designs upon my face.

This is only the first step. I must have my Vallaslin after the hunt that will be my rite of passage. You must prove yourself ready to accept the responsibilities of adulthood.

I'm ready.

The hum gets steadily louder and more meandering as time goes on, until everything feels hazy like a dream.

"Join the Family, brother and become a Clanmate to me." The Keeper speaks as she stands, finished with the designs she has painted upon my face.

After learning about all of the Gods- two of them stuck out to me. A god of death and a god of secrets. I don't know why, but I felt…a connection. A moment where everything inside of me screamed yes for the first time in my life.

My brow is painted with the markings of Falon'Din- but my bottom lip and chin are painted for
Dirthamen.

I follow the Keepers’ direction and begin the next stage of the coming of age ritual.

I put the waterskin and bread aside, picking up the armor and carefully covering my nearly nude body with each individual piece. Then sheathe the sword at my hip.

Tying the waterskin to the other side of my belt, I pick up the bread and take a bite.

"This will be the last meal you eat before you can find something to bring home to your Clan. Do you accept this?" she asks.

"I will not eat until my Clan has been provided for," I reply. I don't know how I remembered that, everything is…very strange at the moment.

"Then you are ready to begin. Dareth Shiral and may you be successful in this hunt." The Keeper steps aside.

I walk past her and through the corridor of Clansmen, who reach out to touch me as I pass. Like a last farewell. In case the Clanmate does not return.

The danger was not lost on me when the Keeper informed me of the Hunt. But I've been learning from Shivanas, and I feel confident.

My eyes seek him out as I reach the edge of the wood, glancing over my shoulder for a final look at my Clan before venturing into the darkness.

His beautiful eyes almost glow in the light of the torches and I yearn to be finished already, so I can return to him.

Then I turn and step into the forest.

CRACK

A loud noise and a feeling like a rattling in your bones has me turned around and sprinting back to camp to check on everyone before I can think to do anything else.

Shivanas grasps my hands when I find him and we twine our fingers as we weave through the panicked bodies to get to the Keeper.

She stares upward and off in the distance, so we turn to look with her.

And there is a hole in the sky.

"Mythal'enaste," The Keeper whispers, pale. "Great Mother, protect my people."

"Isn't that…" Shivanas pauses and glances at me. "Isn't that…the direction-"

"No," sighs out of me. I feel as though I can't breathe.

Chapter End Notes

Shit's goin' down.
Ren POV, Arisala POV

Chapter Summary

I fucking forgot to put the pov's up. XP Well they're there now.

Chapter Notes

I was able to update two stories this week! Unwritten and Unexpected. We'll see if I can get another one finished before the day is out, though I probably won't, lol.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Everything went out of control much more quickly than I could handle at first.

There were barriers and runes to put up, walls to build and then reinforce around our own camp—and then we came up on a food shortage because being trapped behind flimsy walls for days while you're constantly battling demons means you can't exactly go out hunting or picking berries.

So I made an executive decision, and I escorted everyone into Haven. It was difficult, and they didn't want to admit more refugees, as they were about full to bursting.

But I played the Mercenary card, and asked to speak to their commanding officer to give service in return for shelter for those of us who couldn't fight and a safe place to sleep.

It turns out, their commander is a Templar. Which I was not expecting…but am not really surprised by.

"I'm told you've offered a mercenary force for defense of the gates," he says. Walking into the very small area my people were given to wait for the Commander in.

He isn't the tallest of humans I've seen, but tall enough to tower over me. Dark skin, warm eyes and a suit of near-pristine armor. Not devoid of scratches and dings, just clean- immaculately maintained.

"We are few in number and will need to rest before we can begin, but yes. And I…am a healer," I say. Being found to be a mage in hiding is worse than simply admitting to it in a small, enclosed camp like this. If they assumed I meant harm because I kept it a secret…

There is a surprising amount of relief on his face at the disclosure of my status as a mage. "Thank the maker, we are badly in need of your skills. I am Commander Delrin Barris, and if you've got the manpower to help us push the demons back away from the gates and rotate out with our regular soldiers and scouts, we're happy to have you. Even happier if you happen to be particularly adept with potion making and healing spells."

"I do happen to be good with both of those things," I reply. "So my people can stay if the warriors fight and I heal?"
He nods. "I regret that we can't simply accept everyone who needs protection, it is supposed to be what we are for. But any space and resources taken up by refugees is more not going to the soldiers and Templars protecting Haven."

A thought occurs to me, then. "Anyone else...you can send them to our old camp. It has walls. Flimsy ones, but...they can defend themselves at least a bit there," I disclose.

He smiles then, softly but fiercely. "Thank you, I will have the men sweep the area to find it and they will escort people there."

I nod.

"As for you, I'll have you escorted over to Adan and you can take over his duties effective immediately. He is not a healer or an herbalist but has had to function as one for two days now." The commander says.

I grimace. "Lovely. I'll get to work immediately and let you know if I come across any problems. And I guarantee I will. My luck speaks for itself, I think."

The Commander makes a commiserating face and pats me on the shoulder, calling for a runner to take me where I need to go.

Arisala POV

As the ginger elf suggested, I have not revealed my status as a mage just yet.

I was barely healed when we made camp at Haven, but I recovered in time to help with defense of the perimeter while the ginger elf decided on what we should do. In the end he chose the security of a larger fortress.

That would be wise if there were not mage-hunters crawling over every inch of it. No matter. I gained an assignment to scout the temple grounds for any remaining survivors. That should keep me away from the templars for a bit.

Remembering the human woman with steel in her spine and fire in her eyes is a mixed bag. I am sorry she was lost, angry that she was taken from her people unjustly as she seemed a very wise leader with upstanding morals. I am also guilty for being injured while she was in danger when I should have been defending her to repay the debt I owed for her saving my life.

I do not know why she did it but regardless I am alive because of her and the ginger elf. If I am to call myself honorable, I must honor that.

So I am here to search for her. Or any sign of her. Her body, a piece of jewelry, a scrap of fabric—anything that will confirm her death and give the ginger elf something to lay her to rest.

I still cannot remember his name. Or if he ever gave it to me. We simply looked and nodded and spoke to each other without need of names while in camp together. There was no reason to ask.

"Over here! Look!" One of the scouts gets low and hisses at me.

I follow as stealthily as I can manage. There is no cover, but I make little sound.

The rift ahead is fluctuating, and we should be running from it lest it spit more demons at us. But
the light is different. Golden- like a yellow flame bursting forth-

And then there is a body falling through it, slamming into the ground beneath and all is quiet for a moment as we stare.

I recognize the hair, but how…

Moving forward, even before I realize what I intend to do- I grasp her shoulder and roll her over.

She whimpers in pain, but her eyes remain closed and I can confirm. This is the Commander.

"It's her," I whisper and turn to the scouts. "Run quickly to camp and tell the Templar Commander that the Justicar Commander has been found. She is alive and she…fell from a rift. I will be carrying her behind you. Clear the way forward."

They glance at each other but turn and run.

Leaving me to my task.

I crouch and pull the still-crying human into my arms. "You will be with the healer soon, Commander. He will be happy to see you."

Taking a few steps, I shift her until she's nearly immobile and then begin moving faster.

"You will explain to the others how you survived when you wake," I say. "I am not surprised you found a way. You are strong. But this was also strong magic. And you have no magic within you, at least not since last I checked."

I do a cursory inspection of her body with my mana as I run and nearly drop her when I encounter it.

A shining beacon of power, somehow…lodged into her left hand.

"Ah…that is troublesome."

Chapter End Notes

Yes, I have changed things around a bit. Cullen is still in the story and I still want to give him a redemption, but I feel like...he didn't really want or deserve it yet and he hadn't actually hit his rock bottom in DA2. I feel like that was a mid-point.

So you will be seeing Cullen, he's just not the Commander anymore.
Ren POV, Tevea POV

Chapter Notes

oh boy oh boy, we're so close to Nik waking up.

I can't wait for next week. *eyebrow waggle* You guys get to see something new, then.

Having a Seeker of Truth breathing down my neck was not something I'd ever anticipated.

I'd expected Templars. Maybe not many of them, but enough to be suspicious and keep a close watch on us- after all, whatever that explosion was, it was magical in nature.

I felt it in my bones.

But a Seeker. So much worse than the worst scenario. And this one is angry. You can feel it vibrating in the air around her, she projects it in a way that is nearly magical. Certain people tend to give off differing levels of emotional…vibrations, in the air around them. Differing from the non-mages and mages both. They're a sort of in-between.

I believe the Seeker is an in-between. And it's interfering with my concentration.

"Glaring at the back of my head will not make my work go faster, Seeker Cassandra." I intone boredly as I once again run my magic through Nik's body. The very lightest touch I can muster.

"I am beginning to become impatient with the lack of progress, Lieutenant," the Seeker responds. And I'm still getting used to that title.

"I already told you I can't heal her all at once and I already told you exactly why. What precisely do you propose I do? Kill her with an overabundance of magical energy when she's likely our only hope for understanding what's happening?" I sense a few more places are healing- taking in the energy and doing the work for me, really. I think her body just…takes time to accept what you put into it. It has a delayed reaction…or something like that.

"I propose you move quickly enough that our world does not die while we wait for her to wake," she snaps. Standing and stalking from the room.

The mage that accompanied her grimaces when I glance back to watch her dramatic exit. He makes an apologetic gesture and follows after her. "Cass, you know that isn't going to inspire anyone to…"

His voice trails off as they leave the dungeon together.

Everyone was quite adamant that the Commander could've had nothing to do with the explosion. The servants, the mages who'd met her even momentarily- all of them gave glowing commendations on her character and even her work ethic.
Apparently the Commander didn't only go undercover, she took it seriously and did the hard, back-breaking labor of the servants.

Which is likely why I can see so many muscle and tendon strains as well as injuries, days old- it's likely she made mistakes and was disciplined for it. Which would have been wonderful to know before beginning.

I can only focus my magic on the life-threatening injuries and hope it takes. Ignoring the smaller injuries that might cause discomfort but aren't really dangerous.

Everyone in Haven is so tense. Angry, vengeful, spiteful and terrified. It's not great living here at the moment, but thankfully my duties tending to Nik keep me away from other people most of the time. I'm so tired of having rotten food hurled at me as I walk down the street.

One mage is bad, all mages are bad. That's how the common man thinks. And humans don't hesitate to apply the same rule to anyone different from them. And lucky me I fit two categories of people they don't like.

If this were the days of old, perhaps I'd have been an honored healer in a temple to whomever was ruling the Elvhen Empire. Or perhaps I'd still have been a mercenary in a band filled with Elves. Who knows.

And since when did I become a Justicar, exactly? I know Nik said it was only until she got back, but why in the first place? Why give me command of the whole unit?

Telling me that I'm emotionally stable and kind of a hardass does not really clear things up for me.

Tevea POV

"She was aware there was going to be an attack on the Divine's life?" lady Nightingale questions with her dagger-point eyes.

I nod nervously. "Yes, my lady. She told us she'd heard that someone important was going to use their influence to get in to see her- or perhaps that it would be someone pretending to be important. That someone-"

"Why didn't she stop this, then!?!" the lady Seeker shouts and stomps around the interrogation table to face me.

I am already shrinking back in my seat.

The Lady Nightingale stands and shoves the Seeker back. "Cassandra. Control yourself or leave. Do not make me use a dart."

The Seeker glowers at her and they stand staring into each others' eyes for a long moment, but finally the Seeker turns around and punches the wall of the interrogation room.

Lady Nightingale sits back in her seat across from me. "Do not mind Cassandra. I will not allow her to hurt you. I only need to know what this Commander of yours knew and how she knew it."

I breathe and blink- just being silent for a moment, adjusting myself in the chair. "Sh...She didn't tell me. She just...she said she had contacts. That's all. And she...she's not my Commander, my
"And why would she do that, exactly?" The Seeker asks. Imperious and still humming with anger. Arms crossed over her chest. "Ask a bunch of servants for assistance instead of the Templars or the Agents that were stationed everywhere?"

"She said she wasn't important enough yet for them to listen to her," I reply. "And even if she were, they'd have to be surprised in the end, or they would alert the people coming for the Divine that they knew of their presence and intentions. She said they wouldn't stop. They'd slaughter everyone and then move on the Divine anyway. The best way to try and stop them was evacuate everyone quietly in a way they wouldn't suspect was evacuation, and then tell the Templars what was going on and react as quickly as possible to get the Divine out."

"If she did not think the Templars could stop the assailants if the Templars knew of them, why then would they be able to stop them if they didn't?" Lady Nightingale asks.

I swallow. "They wouldn't, My Lady. But they could die in the effort of saving the Divine, instead of defending the tower, trying to keep her within. If she stayed, she would die. So the Commander thought, the only way to save her, was to have her removed and then hidden before they could escape the tower to come looking for her."

The Seeker inhales long and loud, as if she is attempting to hold something in.

Lady Nightingale reaches up, a hand in the air, signaling her to be silent. "Where did the Commander believe she could hide the Divine?"

"She didn't have any ideas of where the Divine was going to go because the less people who would know where she went, the better. She was convinced the Divine would know what to do. Where to go." I respond.

Lady Nightingale stands and walks up to the Seeker. "One of her agents? Not possible, she would have allowed her entry."

"Someone else's then, perhaps," the Seeker replies quietly.

I don't know whether I'm supposed to hear or not, so I keep my expression blank and try to focus on something else. The wood grain in the table is very pretty.

"It doesn't matter, one way or another we will have no answers on this until she awakes," Lady Nightingale says.

Then turns back to me and gestures for me to stand. "You are free to go, Serah Tevea. We will question the Commander when she wakes and hope for a clearer picture."

I blink a bit rapidly. "But--. You haven't asked about the Grey Wardens yet!" I blurt it in shock, as I remember I have neglected an entire detail. But the fact that they have not asked even once who it was…

"What Gray Wardens?" The Seeker steps up next to Lady Nightingale and as their combined attention settles on me, I wilt a bit.

"The…the people in Gray Warden uniforms or Wardens themselves, I don't know…but when she heard about them coming near, she seemed to know that they were the ones." I explain.

Lady Nightingale and The Lady Seeker give each other a long, lingering look. Indecipherable to
And then the Lady Nightingale nods once, sharply. "Thank you for that information. You are free to leave now, and we will look into this. If you recall anything else, inform Lady Montilyet."

I bow my head, then get up from the table and leave the room with my hands clasped tightly before me.

The Commander said they likely wouldn't hurt me so long as I told them everything I knew- but she also said I may want to pass this task to one of the Human servants...just to be sure.

I didn't want anyone else to go in my place. But she was right. I could feel they wanted to pick me apart for answers, and if I were human- perhaps it wouldn't have been so obvious. Perhaps they only had restraint because they feared I would say nothing at all.

All I know for certain is that I am safe and away from them and now...I need to lie down for a bit. I do hope that is allowed. There isn't much to be done at the moment by people like me aside from latrine and fetching duties. I should have time.

I only hope no one catches me and tells the Head Servant I was being lazy. He will have my hide.

Chapter End Notes

Anyone here a Zev fan? Check out my new story titled Lover, Mine!

Also anyone thirsty for Aaravos? Sunkissed and Startouched!
"Shit. Wore the wrong boots for this."

One Crossbow bolt to the face and the Wraith that jumped me from the treeline dissolves. Glad I splurged on those supplies. Seems without 'em I'd be up shit creek without a paddle about now.

I'm still not close enough to Haven to really relax but I'm getting closer with every step. Just wish I could've bought or rented a horse in the Crossroads. Would've needed a pony, though. Those aren't very common around these parts, I'd wager.

I was on my way out when the sky split open. Knew I shoulda left before things started happening. But once they had…couldn't turn my back on it.

Same old story, different cover.

Wonder what the twist ending will be.

"Behind you!" A voice shouts from behind and I whirl on my heel just in time to see a rage demon frozen solid.

Happened so fast it almost seems like it was instant. Hawke and Daisy used to have to work at it. Even Blondie couldn't do something like that unless Justice came out to play.

Slamming into the ice sculpture of the demon- I shatter it and it dissolves into that smoky black and green stuff that all the demons have been poofing into lately.

I see the face of a stranger once it's gone, though one I glimpsed a few times in the Tavern down in the Crossroads.

Hood covering a bald head, points of his ears poking out of the sides- piercing eyes set in a thin face. Nothing about him stands out. And that's strange. It's always the really bland looking people who don't want to be noticed. Usually means something.

What it means in this situation, really can't say.

"Thanks," I call out and lift a hand. "My goose was almost cooked there, friend. Varric Tethras. You are?"

He walks a little closer and I notice something else. He walks kind of like the Elf back in Kirkwall. No shoes, but graceful. Slow and practiced movements. Ready to move in any direction at any time.

Stopping a short distance away from me, he smiles pleasantly. "I am Solas. And I was also headed toward Haven. I thought to ask if we might travel together."

"Sounds like a plan," I reply. "But eh, just so you know, I'm not used to working with all kinds of mages. I used to run with a Healer, a Blood Mage and a sort of…generalist- back in Kirkwall. They had…different styles. I adapted to 'em. Like you do."

He nods, and his smile sparks something in his eyes. The smile comes off a little more genuine
now. "You will find me utterly different, though I do have a rudimentary understanding of all schools of magic, my specialization is the Veil and the Fade."

I squint, "isn't that every mage's specialization, technically?"

He chuckles. A soft, rolling sound, ending on a sharp inhale. Almost like he wants to take it back as soon as it escapes. "No. I mean to say that I use pure energy and am quite adept at Fade-Walking."

"Dreaming or…" I ask.

He lifts both brows. "Most people would not think to ask that question."

"Most people have probably never been in a Dalish Fade ritual and freed a dreamer from the grip of three demons by going into the Fade consciously," I reply.

Something sharpens in his eyes, can't really put my finger on it until-

"That is fascinating," he says. "Would you mind if I asked you questions about that experience?"

I laugh and turn, gesturing up the path. "We've got a while to walk. It'll give us somethin' to do to pass the time between demon attacks."

That chuckle again and we walk together up the path, side by side.

And I'm intensely aware that this person is curious. Above everything else, the thing that made him perk up was the promise of strange, new information. Or the chance to share it with someone else.

I'm getting this image in my mind of a guy who'd be at home in some kind of university. A teacher and a student at different times in his life. Maybe some kind of researcher. But that fake smile, followed by the real one- his bland appearance…

This guy either doesn't usually fit into normal social groups or he tries specifically not to. A loner?

"When did this ritual take place?" he asks.

"Back in Kirkwall before everything went to hell," I reply. "There was this Dalish Keeper, and a… damn, what was that word…" I pull out my personal journal and start scribbling a few lines about that kid- just what I can remember and- ah. That sparked something. "Som..nah…something?"

"Somniari," he replies. "I suppose you could apply that term to me if you were to be so generous. So you met another? Curious. We are quite rare. You must be a truly interesting individual."

"You don't have to butter me up to get me to tell a story, Chuckles," I say.

Something in the way he looks at me then, from beside me is…weird. Usually when you catch people in a manipulation, or something like that, they don't like it. They get even more cagey and suspicious.

But he's smiling. With his whole face this time.

"Chuckles?" he asks.

"A personal foible of mine," I reply. "I nickname all the people I like."
"Shall I take it as an overture of friendship, then?" he asks. A little cheekily.

"Dunno yet, but you'll know when I do," I reply.

We share a chuckle, then. Looks like this trip just got more entertaining.

"Approaching," he pauses in the road and his ears flicker. "From the west, they'll be coming out of the trees soon."

"Damn," I pull Bianca off my back. "Forgot how useful Elf hearing is on jobs like this."

"Jobs?" he asks as the demons break the treeline.

"Technically everything I do anywhere is a job for me," I take aim.

"An interesting thought," he replies. Getting into position with his staff. "I would also like to know about that."

"Heh, you're just full of questions, aren't ya?" I ask.

And fire.

Chapter End Notes

How'd you guys like this alternate Solas intro? I feel like it's more organic-- and I figured, since they were both in the same Tavern in that trailer and the game devs confirmed that character absolutely was Solas-- then why not have them travel to Haven together from there?
"What in- Andraste's name is going on?" I ask when I reach the front of the very small, but very loud crowd outside the gates. "Lady Cassandra?"

She stands before a man I've never seen before- no, two men. The other is half-hidden by her looming presence. She glares down at the Dwarf before her with a sort of cold familiarity.

She calls back with a handwave, "everyone keep behind the boundaries of Haven's walls."

"You aren't my Commander, Seeker," I reply as I walk over to stand beside her. "I just got word we were offered a new Healer with expertise on Nik's particular condition and that you were attempting to chase him off, so what in-"

"Do not trifle with me, mage," she turns her head to growl at me. "Get behind the boundary!"

The Dwarf looks content to disappear into the background for the moment, but he does look on the verge of saying something. I'm a bit surprised he hasn't simply shrunk to the ground in fear like most of Haven does when the Lady Seeker rages.

"I will not," I reply. "You may have tasked me with the job of tending to Nik but I certainly didn't need your permission. And I don't need it now."

I turn to the second person- an Elven mage it would seem. And his attire and relative comfort in the presence of a Seeker- he must be an apostate. No ratty robes, but definitely frayed clothing. Dirty like he knows how to scrounge for things.

Thank the heavens that no gods or men would send me another Circle mage to deal with on top of all the ones already here. Bunch of headless chickens, the lot of them.

"You know something of what's happened to the Commander?" I ask.

He opens his mouth and Cassandra lashes out again, this time turning to loom over me and glare. "It does not matter! He will not come inside Haven's walls!"

"He doesn't need to," I agree airily. "I can bring Nik to him. In fact, I can just take Nik and leave right now. You've no right to hold her against her will and I am the only person here who can speak for her, at least till Miles shows up."

"She caused this!" She shouts and points to the Breach. "She will answer for that if I have to cut you both down, so be it!"

"Cassandra, that is enough." That mage that keeps following her around and attempting to mend broken fences has appeared once more and is standing behind her. She has to twist to look at him and she does, with a surprised look on her face. "Yes, I am speaking to you. The officer shouting at a healer that he can't do his job and telling a refugee that has skills to be put to use that he cannot come inside to fix the woman you want answers from." He speaks firmly and without doubt. "If you want her dead, by all means, allow her to die in that dungeon. But I thought, my lady, the entire point of giving her treatment was so you could ask her what happened when she woke up?"
The Seeker snaps to a standing position, breathing roughly as her eyes seem to clear and she gazes around at those gathered to watch this interaction.

There's a measly few Templars left after the explosion but they watch her with wide eyes. Not frightened, but shocked. The Seeker is many things but this illogical amount of anger is now getting in the way of her duty and for one so storied and decorated as the Lady Seeker Pentaghast...well, it must be very shocking.

And the Dwarf, well- he just watches. With attentive eyes and ears, as if he's soaking in the moment.

She inhales sharply and narrows her eyes at him but doesn't snap this time. "Regalyan, I require your assistance with a task I must see to." Turning her head only, she speaks in my direction next. "I trust you can handle this?"

I nod my head deferentially, if not sarcastically- and she is off. To pester someone else with her presence until she explodes again, no doubt.

"Well," I turn with a sigh and a clap of my hands. "Please tell me you actually have some idea of what's going on here so I won't have just spent an afternoon facing off with the Lady Seeker for nothing?"

The mage is already watching me, actually seeming amused. Or by that glimmer in his eyes, I'd say delighted. "I specialize in the Fade and Fade walking. Magics that use the raw energy of it. I daresay I know a bit more than any of the mages enclosed here, unless you happen to have a Rift mage."

"Rift mage?" I ask. I've never heard of that specialization.

"These are not the first rifts to appear, you understand." He says. "They occur naturally in many places. They are usually easy to close once you've found the reason they opened to begin with. I have the feeling these will be more difficult." He gazes up at the Breach. "Especially that one. But I believe I have the knowledge you need to find the answer. So I offer my assistance."

"Best news I've had all week," I reply.

"Eh-hem," the Dwarf clears his throat. "Varric Tethras."

I quirk an eyebrow at him and tilt my head. "That's a mighty strange cough you've got there, Messere."

He chuckles, "ouch. No need to 'Messere' me. Just call me Varric. And you are?"

"Ren," I reply shortly. "And you?" I turn to the mage and shrug my shoulders up with my eyebrows.

His lips twitch at one edge and he replies, "if there are to be introductions...then, I am Solas. Pleased to meet you. Now, where is the patient?"

Cassandra POV
"I dislike it when you undermine me in front of the men," I grouse.

"I dislike having to undermine you in front of anyone, anywhere, at any time," Galyan replies. "As I've said before, I will follow you anywhere, Cassandra. That doesn't mean I won't yank you back when you throw yourself into turmoil like this. Or never disagree. It means pretty much the exact opposite." He gives me a rakish grin and a wink. "Now, what are we doing here?"

"Following leads," I respond. Looking at the Tavern with distaste. "Many of the Justicars stay in that outer camp with the refugees, 'protecting them'," I scoff. "But some have stayed with the mage Lieutenant, and they take their breaks within the Tavern more often than not. Mercenaries are all the same."

"Why are you so hesitant to accept the Justicars for who they say they are?" he pauses me just outside the door with a hand on my shoulder. "Some healthy suspicion is fine, but Cassandra, you're becoming obsessed with proving these people guilty. One who cannot see the path before them will mistake every pebble for a snake nipping their toes."

Ah Regalyan, and his ridiculous metaphors. It halts my mood and makes me huff, almost in laughter. But not quite.

"Are you trying to lecture me?" I ask.

"I'm trying to warn you not to narrow your perceptions to your own idea of what happened. We don't know what happened up there. By all indications, this Commander was trying to help the Divine. If it turns out not to be true, we'll deal with that," he says. "But all evidence points to her attempting to save the Divine and the entire Conclave from someone she thought was threatening them."

"And how did she know this?" I ask him. "Why employ the servants if she had a company of mercenaries at her back? Why not ask to see the Divine directly and warn her of the threat?"

"If you think the Divine had time to give audience to every mercenary that came to her door," he says. "You are mistaken. Lovely, but mistaken."

I punch him in the shoulder and he winces. "Stop flattering me, and make your point."

"I already have, Cassandra," he pouts. "You weren't listening."

"Oh? Then you should repeat yourself, perhaps you were mumbling," I taunt.

"Well I never!" he huffs, eyes dancing with mirth. "Alright then, if you'll be so kind as to actually listen this time…"

"I make no promises," I reply.

"Cruel woman," he shakes his head and sighs. "Well, my point was- the Divine was very busy. Not only with her usual duties, but with overseeing all of Haven. Lady Montilyet had not yet arrived until mere days before the Breach. You and the Lady Nightingale, did not arrive till the day after. She was left in charge of approving and overseeing everything. She barely had time for the peace talks."

"Why was Josephine so late?" I ask. "I meant to ask her but-"

"You got caught up in the Dragon hunt?" he asks.
Gently enough, but it puts a rock in my throat.

"I only want to know what happened," I reply dully. "I want to know who did this."

"And we will find out, love." He steps close to me and presses a hand to the center of my back, steadying me. But pulls away before anyone can see. "But we need to do so with a clear head. The both of us."

I sigh and reach out to push open the door. "I still need to question them."

"And I will be right behind you," he replies.

"Lady Seeker!" Someone calls out to me and Regalyan and I both back out of the Tavern to face the messenger. "Someone is at the gates! He claims to be the Justicar Lieutenant-Commander!"

"He is the direct successor to the Commander of the Justicar forces?" I ask. "Where has he been!?"

"On a mission, my lady, or so he says." The messenger scrunches their nose. "S'a Knife-ear, one of the wild ones."

"A Dalish elf?" Regalyan asks, intrigued. "How interesting. She does have an Elven mage lieutenant, I don't see how it's so unbelievable."

"An Elven mage and a Dalish elf are two different things, Regalyan," I reply. "Dalish Elves can sometimes be savage. Attacking all humans who come within range."

"Well I'd attack people who keep trying to chase me off my own property, too," he says.

"This isn't the time for joking, Regalyan," I snap. "If this man is her lieutenant, he could take control of these Justicars and do whatever it was they came here to do. If he is not, then he is wasting our time attempting to grasp at power that is not his and must be dealt with."

Galyan sighs, "why not go and talk to him and figure out who he is before you decide he's the harbinger of all evil, hmm?"

Feeling chastised but not discouraged, I make a decision. "Fine. I will. But you will stay here. Watch these Justicars and tell me if they do anything strange."

Galyan raises a hand and places the other over his heart. "On my honor, they shall not clip a toenail without your say so, my lady."

I huff a disgusted noise and stomp off after the Messenger who turns to lead me back toward the main gates.

Glancing back over my shoulder, I see Galyan walk into the Tavern.

He nearly died in the Breach. It was a matter of minutes. It is not lost on me that if this Commander killed the Divine, she also saved the only man I have ever loved.

And if she did not kill the Divine-

Well, I am not prepared to accept that yet. She is the only one that makes sense. Certainly more sense than a Gray Warden attempting to do such a thing.

I am grateful Regalyan lived, but I will never forget or forgive what happened to Justinia.
"There he is, Lady Seeker." The messenger points out a pair of Dalish Elves conversing with Commander Delrin Barris.

One is taller than the other and broader, but he stands behind the shorter, thinner one. Almost as if he is a bodyguard. Long white hair, intricately braided to keep his hair out of his face.

The smaller one is brunette and as the messenger said, he does look wild. Dirty, mussed and vaguely irritated. But he is standing tall and does not seem to be deferring to the Commander. He is either unaware they are of different ranks or he does not care.

That chafes me. A leader from an upstart organization is not equal to a well-established hand of the state. Not even if their ranks in their respective places are the same. They lack legitimacy, they should bloody well act like it.

"What is this, Commander?" I ask as I step to his side. "Why are we entertaining the lies of what is obviously a commoner seeking asylum?"

These Elves, neither of them in any armor that could be recognized as Mercenary at all…surely this is a deception. One of them wields a worn bow, the other has a very old looking sword on his hip. And while their order may not be well-funded, the Justicars at least seem to have good equipment, at least those I have met and seen.

All but Ren, who is a mage and wears robes.

"I'm the Lieutenant-Commander of the Justicar forces, just like I told your messenger and your army commander," the brunette elf intones with an air of aggravation. "Nik sent me on a mission to take a Dalish elf back to his Clan. But I saw the Breach and I came back."

I scoff and gesture to his face, "you speak as though you are not Dalish."

"I wasn't until a few days ago," he replies irritably while touching his cheek. Caressing the tattoos there as if he can feel them on his skin. "Before then I was a City elf. If you want to check with her-"

"She is unavailable for the asking and isn't that convenient?" I say. "No. You will not enter Haven until I know your identity, your intentions-"

"My Identity has been given to you," he interrupts. "My Intentions are to find the Commander and what comes next will depend entirely on what in the Maker's name is going on here."

Too many contradictions, he is not even a bit consistent in his identity. How can he expect me to accept any of this?

"I've had enough, Commander you have your orders." I turn on my heel and leave.

"Is there anyone else who could verify your identity? Anyone at all?" Barris questions the charlatan, but I've already moved out of hearing range before his answer.

No doubt he will either turn up to be a liar or he really is a part of her organization and he has less than favorable intentions. For now I do not want him in the Village.

And I will watch the others to see how they react to this. If there is to be some uprising, I will squash it before it starts.

Lieutenant Ren will need an escort after that scene this morning.
Cassie's got a lot of unresolved feelings and complex emotions going on right now. Wonder how that'll effect things...
Delrin Barris POV

Chapter Notes

I know you guys probably feel like this story is taking forever and we'll never get to the romance but I swear I cannot control the pace of the story or which characters take center stage at what time. My brain says this is how the story goes, and that's how it flows from my fingertips.

I hope you still like it, even if my brain is taking it's sweet fucking time.

It'd seem I was right to double-check the Lady Seeker's supposition.

Ren confirmed Miles' identity as the Lieutenant-Commander. I can only hope we didn't cause a major incident by denying him entry where his superior officer was being treated and possibly dying.

Lady Josephine is in a tizzy over it, though Seeker Cassandra seems...content that he's not within Haven's walls. Can't really put my finger on it, but she seems strange lately. Almost like a snapping turtle, lashing out at everything coming anywhere near her shell.

I directed him to the mostly-abandoned Justicar camp that we'd been sending refugees to when we were full up. It's probably cramped there, but at least it's a place with other people where you can go to get warm.

Taking a contingent of men around the perimeter every few hours provides them with some safety, even though we can't really fight off all the Demons that appear, we cut down on their numbers. Push them back.

We'll have to retreat behind our walls before long if this keeps up and then what will happen to all of them?

Times like these, I'm glad I left the order. Something about it just never fit. It was...grandiose and self-important to be a Templar. We kept the mages, protected them from the people and also the other way around...but mostly my fellow Templars never really seemed interested in protecting anyone.

They wanted to know what perks came with the job and if one of those perks was the mages, to do with as they pleased, all the better.

I couldn't stand it anymore. Especially not after everything that happened in Kirkwall, the Spire...I heard left and right about the 'evil' mages doing terrible things but not one person spoke up about the Templars who should've been protecting and guiding them. Except to express disappointment that they didn't kill all the mages before it could happen.

Not one comment about how the Templars should've done their job as protectors better, and listened to the mages. How they should've been punished for abuses of power.

Not. One.
No, instead the questions revolved around the mages.

'What pushed Orsino to declare war like this?'

'How did Anders accomplish his terrorist act?'

'Did the Champion kill Meredith?'

Everyone is always so quick to blame a mage for some infraction they may not have even known they were making. Or punish them for having dreams for the future and wanting children and a loving family.

That's why I left. I just...couldn't be part of it anymore.

So here I am, joining up with the new Inquisition by request of the Divine's left and right hands...helping to settle things between the mages and Templars. Hoping against hope that maybe I could make a difference. Me and the few men who followed me because they also couldn't stand it any longer.

And now I'm walking around the outside of our village walls, hoping to find some people alive so I can be sure we didn't just piss off a military company who might hold a grudge-

"I think we can fit more along this wall!" a voice shouts from within the camp. Halting me and the two men with me.

"If you can't fit something, don't shove it there," a second voice replies. "Just leave the space open for storage of small belongings."

"Got it!" the first voice responds to the second.

Last I saw this place, it was packed full of refugees, miserable and cold and afraid.

But when I approach the side of the constructed wall they made for themselves- I see it stretches further than before. The gate is still on this side, but…

"Oi, what do you want?" A young woman steps into the gate opening to eye us suspiciously. "We're still constructing here, we don't need anybody gettin' in the way."

My brow furrows. "Constructing what, exactly?"

"Our village!" she replies, shrilly. "Seemin' as we wasn't welcome in yours."

"I...see...is Miles around?" I ask. "I've confirmed his identity, I just need to speak with him, now."

She huffs. "And what, take him back to your nice little Village with its healers and actual beds while the rest of us are left without leadership and go back to bein' cold and hungry?"

I blink and my mouth opens but I can't...understand what she is saying. I have no idea why she believes removing one mercenary would compromise their village. Though I suppose that is one less person to fight demons...?

"Will ya just tell him we're here?" one of my men barks. "Not going to let-"

"Lloyd, stop," I reach a hand out physically and grasp his shoulder. "These people are not technically under our protection, they have no reason to obey our orders. Behave yourself."
"Yeah!" The woman says. Indignant. "S'not enough that you don't let us into your fancy village with all the-"

"What the hell is going on over there?" It's that second voice from before. I recognize the commanding tone. And it seems…familiar besides that…

Miles, Lieutenant-Commander of the Justicars, steps out from behind the young woman. Drawing to his full height and looking me in the eye as he does so. "Something you needed, Commander?"

"I confirmed your identity with Ren. I apologize for the confusion, but…what is going on here, exactly?" I ask.

He lifts an eyebrow and steps backwards, gently taking the young woman's arm and tugging her along. "Why not come in and see for yourself, Commander? If you're so curious…"

I am curious…but why not answer the question? Can't be that shocking.

So I wave my men back and step inside…taking a good look around and…I was wrong.

"How..." I stare in awe of the newly expanded walls that are still flimsy but firm enough to provide protection and declare a definite perimeter.

Even moreso at the small shacks that each hold one person or a whole family depending on its size and relative placement along the walls. The middle of the space is governed by a healer's area, long and wide- with cots lined down the entire length of it. Tended by everyone who's not currently working on the walls, the shacks or…

"What are they doing over there?" I point to a corner in which there is an abundance of large stumps. They look like they've been ripped up out of the ground.

"We had to fell a lot of trees for all this wood," Miles replies. "We decided to use every bit of it. At the moment they're cutting off excess roots, smoothing everything they can, coating it with a mixture of beeswax and tree resin- and then we'll be storing our food inside them."

"You cut out a cavity in the wood and…” I gesture at the little circles of wood being fitted with iron hinges. "Where did you get those?"

"Well Haven wasn't really in need of any hinges and nails at the moment, but they do need Elfroot," he replies. Scratching his jaw, almost unconcerned with everything around him. "So we made a trade. Had to find a lot of Elfroot to get them to agree, but well." He shrugs. "We got enough."

"That's where the Elfroot shipment came from?" I ask, surprised. "I was told that some villagers supplied it in exchange for non-essential goods, but I didn't know that was you folks."

He nods, "I imagine that admitting we saved that many lives even though we've been kicked out and told to rough it on our own would be embarrassing."

It's irritating to hear that. Not because I doubt it's true, pretty much the opposite. I can't believe I still have work to do with these men- not only with their combat prowess, that I could live with. But matters of honor? Why are all the men who've joined the Inquisition till now…honorless men who couldn't care less about the affairs of others?

What is it about this organization we're starting that draws them in?
"How are you going to keep your food preserved inside a hollowed-out tree stump?" I ask.

"We've got mages in here," he says simply. Shrugging. "They can cast preservation spells and keep the insides of the stump under the lid cold- freeze everything. Renew the spell a few times when necessary. But you must've come over here for a reason besides asking me about all this, since you don't really seem to have known about it beforehand…"

I clear my throat and nod. "I came to invite you into Haven. As your identity has been confirmed, to serve with the rest of the guardsmen and maybe see your Commander."

He hums and seems to think on it for a moment before replying with a headshake. "Can't. If Nik wakes up and finds out I left a bunch of helpless refugees to fend for themselves when I could've stayed to help them, she'll have my ass on a plate."

"You think she'd be upset that you decided to stay near and protect her?" That's a bit strange. He snorts. "I…have you met her yet?"

"No, not as such," I reply. "She's been unconscious this whole time…"

"Explains that, then," he says. Amused tone of voice leaking through every word. "Nik doesn't have what you'd call a uh…self-preservation instinct. Her first and only concern is helping people who need help. And screw everything else, even her own health. Did Ren tell you she nearly died saving our entire camp when Dahlia attacked us by mistake?"

My brows lift as surprise blooms within me. "I haven't heard that story, no."

"Yeah well, Dahlia was a mage. Ren was traveling with them, we kidnapped him, yadda yadda," he gestures with his hand as if the story is of no or little consequence. "Point is, when the Entropic Fog rolled over our camp, her tent was the only one that was safe. People could walk into her tent, but not without her. They had to be touching her or something…so when she ran out and grabbed us all, dragging us inside…"

His eyes get a bit faraway. "She exposed herself to the toxic fumes and she was in bed for…days, afterward. She didn't need to. Staying in that tent, she would've been safe. But she dragged, carried or otherwise helped all of the people in that camp into her own tent. It was cramped and stifling and terrifying, but we survived till Ren could come back and…"

Coughing once, he ends the story with a shrug. "Nik wouldn't like coming out here and seeing this camp in disarray with little or no protection. I'm acting on the orders I think she'd give me if she were conscious."

I nod once, decisively. "I wish we had more space in Haven but if this is really gonna become a second village…we should definitely open up some kind of trade and labor agreement between us. Guardsmen to patrol both territories, herbs traded among us. Clothing, food."

The Lieutenant-Commander looks irritable about it, but he agrees. "Sure. But don't think I didn't notice most of the people over there are human and mages that could be useful and out here are the elves, the dwarves and the less useful magic users. If there's gonna be any trade, it's going to be fair or I don't care how many demons there are, we aren't helping you with anything."

"That's a fair condition," I reply and hold out a hand.

He blinks, almost as if surprised and reaches out to grasp my hand. We share one short shake before breaking apart.
"Lemme ask you something else," I begin. "How...how did you get this wall built without Demons ripping it down as you were doing it?"

He chuckles. "We timed the waves and moved in between them. Setting up the bare bones and leaving them behind when a new wave started. We got quiet and rode it out, then we started again. Speaking of, there's another wave starting in a few minutes. You'll want to get into position."

I straighten and nod, backing away and then slipping out of their front gates as they move in to close them behind me.

Gesturing to my men with a jerk of my head, I rush to the front of Haven with one thought on my mind.

'If this is the kinda person the Commander of the Justicars appoints as her second in command, I can only imagine how incredible the woman herself must be.' Though to be honest, it wouldn't be shocking to discover that Miles is the real force behind everything. Humans take credit for their servants' accomplishments a lot.

If that woman wakes up and wows me, I'll be in awe. I mean, someone more proactive, commanding and honorable than Miles seems almost impossible to me right now. He's...different, from my men. Like he took up the mantle with the gravitas it deserves instead of the flippancy most soldiers enter armies with. For money or love of the concept of your country.

I wonder why he fights.

But if she doesn't live up to that image, I'll know who the real leader is. And that's the important part. Knowing who to talk to, to get things done.

Still, just from that one story about her from Miles...woman must have some kind of steel in her spine, that's for sure. All the stories about how sweet and small and cute she is from the servants...

Well, guess we'll find out who she really is when she wakes up.
The mark bearer is a curious woman. With even curioser followers.

Some of them believe her to be a ferocious warrior of sorts. Ardent and brave.

Others see her as a nurturing, motherly influence. Soft, kind and firm.

"Me personally? I dunno I barely met the woman." The Vashoth traveling with the Justicars is the one who found her in the rubble.

"I find it hard to believe you insisted to go and find a perfect stranger," I had replied. Just like this. "Unless you are particularly virtuous, which I have no way of knowing."

She had huffed, like that. "She saved my life. But I wasn't conscious for most of the journey to Haven and she left camp before I woke up. I had to repay that debt however I could, it was only right."

In short, an honorable mercenary sought to repay another honorable mercenary for their kind actions.

Look how the world turns on kindness if you simply allow it to do so.

"Well, we both got here once she was marked and unconscious, but..." Varric had confided to me in an aside just earlier this morning. "I've heard from a few separate sources that the reason she's in charge of the Justicars, is because she rescued them. And then apparently saved the entire company's life, again when a mage attacked their camp. Then she recruited the mage and her entire company and now that's the Justicars."

"Strange," I had replied. "That she would go to such lengths for people who were not yet sworn to her service. Why did she rescue them?"

"That part's even weirder," he'd said. "Nobody knows. Apparently she didn't have an answer besides 'you needed rescuing' which most people can't really accept. But after spending time with her, it seems like they just...did for some reason."

Hm.

I flick my wrist and banish the images as someone presses in on my space. Seeking permission to enter.

Disguising myself as a shadow, I turn to face the disturbance and open myself to it. Carefully, always carefully.

It is one of my agents within the ranks of the scouts. The highest ranking agent takes all the intelligence from lower level agents and parses it together before making a report. These reports are usually lengthy and filled with guesswork, but that is where I usually work best.

Being given the whole picture sometimes can mislead, but putting the pieces together yourself has less a chance of doing so, especially if you verify the information yourself rather than assuming
you have it right the first time around.

"Sir," the scout salutes. A different salute than the human soldiers do. Something very old. "I've gathered what information I can, and it seems the front lines are about to fall soon. If there are no new reinforcements, the Commander will have to charge up with his men personally to hold back the waves...and Haven will be left mostly defenseless until they can return."

Unacceptable. I cannot be caught up in this when everything comes crashing down.

"Keep your eye on the camp and await further instruction. I will see what is to be done about this situation," I reply. "And find whatever new information you can about the mark bearer."

"Yessir," they respond, and melt away as I release their form from my dream.

I suppose it can't be helped. As much as I would like to stay and attempt to keep the mark bearer alive, to see if there is any way to still harness its power...that could be dangerous. I could be caught up in an attack on the Village. She may die anyway.

Sighing to myself and rubbing my forehead with my fingertips, I awaken.

It is not often I wake with a headache, but I see this is one of those days.

Curling into a sitting position on the cot I was afforded in the dungeon, I take one last look at the woman lain out on the stuffed mattress- one of the only they had to spare -and wash my hands of her recovery.

I've done all I can. She will either recover or she will not. And as she has yet to wake...I gather she will not.

Galling to admit, after so many mistakes that I cannot fix this one. But I will move on and life will continue. I will find a way to seal these rifts or...

Or I will leave. I suppose. I haven't the faintest idea where I might go to escape it. Across the sea perhaps? If I go far enough will the veil end somewhere?

I do hate the sea...but if it is necessary, I will not hesitate.

What I must do now, is examine the rifts further. Compare my notes from before entering Haven, see if the changes can tell me anything. And then get as far from Haven as I possibly can.

Picking up my pack and slinging it on, I grasp my staff and flinch.

It's begun to splinter. I will need a new one soon. Or I will need to learn to contain the powers I hold enough to keep it from breaking in my grasp after a few uses.

After a year of being awake, I still find it difficult to completely adjust. I have been able to make do, as of yet. But soon I may need more than simple makeshift strategy and action.

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Varric POV

When I saw Chuckles sneaking out of the village with nothing but his pack and his staff, heading
off in the direction of the Breach…well, I knew I had to follow. It was all too familiar.

"You followed me," Chuckles says. Staring me down. "Why?"

I got caught. Sharp, this one.

"I know the look of someone about to do somethin' dangerous and when I saw you were going alone, I figured it couldn't hurt to give you some backup." I glance aside at the still smoking remains of a tree that had hidden a demon behind it just a minute ago. "Though I guess you're a lot more capable than most mages. I mean, apostates usually are."

"If you understand that, you understand I do not require your assistance," he insists.

"I don't know about requiring, but it couldn't hurt, now could it?" I ask. Then add in a muttered aside, "plus I could use some time away from the Book-stabber…"

His entire demeanor instantly changes. It's funny to watch. "Ah, well far be it from me to refuse such a generous offer."

This guy is such a little shit.

I had a feeling he was only saying no because he didn't wanna imply he needed help. Some people and their egos…

"So where are we headed, the Breach?" I ask as I trudge up next to him.

"Perhaps, but for now, I need to find a rift," he replies. "Any rift would do. I will measure the readings I am able to glean from them against those I found further from Haven before I arrived in the Crossroads- the naturally occurring sort. Then I will compare these to those closer to the Breach, if I can."

"What about the Commander?" I ask. "She doin' alright?"

"No," he replies. "I doubt she will survive. With or without assistance. The Lieutenant will tend to her in my absence."

"That's…kind of terrible, Chuckles," I say. "What are we gonna do without her? And that…mark she has? It was supposed to be some kinda clue."

"It was, just…not in the way we were hoping," he replies. A sad smile curves across his mouth for a moment before disappearing. "I will find some way to fix this…or we will all die, I suppose."

"You're awfully calm about that," I observe. "But you seem calm about most things. Especially things like this."

"Things like this?" he prompts.

"The Fade leaking out into the world. Even Mages are freakin' out about that. But not you," I say. "And there were some other things. I heard you talkin' to some people in Haven about Spirits and Demons and they seemed pretty scandalized. You didn't seem all that concerned with their reactions."

"Should I have been?" he asks.

"Most would've been," I reply. "But not you. And I wonder why that is."
"Hm," he hums. "Perhaps I simply do not care what they think."

"Perhaps you're acting like you've got nothing to fear because you figure we're all gonna die anyway," I take a stab in the dark.

He chuckles. "If I'd thought that, I would not be here."

"Yeah I suppose the world ending would." I halt when he reaches out a hand in the air in front of me and stops in his tracks. "Another, already?"

He listens intensely for a moment. "The pulses are becoming faster…I wasn't certain before it was by so small a margin…the Breach is getting bigger."

"Shit. Did you tell anyone about that?" we just left Haven, and I don't think he's going to want to turn around.

"I told the Seeker of my suspicions. It will become clear in the next few hours that I was correct. As it slowly accelerates faster and faster, the Breach noticeably widening." He says. Staring up even as a couple demons drift onto the path ahead of us. Mostly shades and wraiths.

"Alright, I'll take the guys on the right?" I ask as I pull Bianca back into my arms. "Just don't burn down any more trees. Last thing we need right now is a forest fire."

"I would have to put more effort in to burn the entire forest," he says. Shrugging his shoulder and somehow flipping his staff off his back, over his shoulder and into his hand. "It took enough just to burn the one tree that I might need to eat soon."

"Well that's a relief I guess, that you can't just accidentally cause more chaos in the middle of a torrential downpour of demons, but why?" I take aim and fire an incendiary shot into the clustered midst of shades.

It makes a loud crackling noise when it goes off.

"These trees are covered in snow. Snow turns to water when you melt it. Water is a fire deterrent," he says it slow as he spins and twirls the staff around his body. Switching hands, flourishing- not overly showy as styles go, but still…

I get the sense he's showing off. Not for anybody, just…in general.

"Right, right," sounds like the very simple lectures Blondie and Daisy used to give me and Isabela when we didn't understand why they couldn't just snap their fingers and make something happen. "Well, we're not getting there any faster just standin' around talking. Let's go."

Chuckles smirks to himself as we forge up the path, past the rapidly deteriorating demon bodies and says, "do, let's."

Chapter End Notes

Sorry if those transitions in Solas's POV seem weird, but I really wanted to emphasize how the Fade and Waking seem like kind of the same thing to him, so there's no huge transition-y sequence for him.
Ohh it's been *days* since we found the Lady Commander of the Justicar Order- as some entirely too proper types have been referring to her in their gossip…and she hasn't woken even once.

There were mutterings in her sleep, thrashing at times when she was most agitated, but no waking.

And now the only person that could help her has gone off on some errand or other, leaving myself to tend to her as Lieutenant Ren is…well, rather occupied at the moment. He can't waste time and energy trying to heal her when all it will really do is fill her up with magic…which is bad?

I don't understand half the things he tried to explain to me, but apparently he can't just lay a spell over her all willy-nilly.

Figures that a woman like her would be so fragile, I guess. She's too thin and pale. Even the Nobility of Ferelden have some color in their cheeks, but even before she was in this long sleep, she was…well. Like freshly fallen snow. You can see those little blue veins under her skin very easily.

Just doesn't seem healthy.

Well, it's fine that no one else is here about now. It's time to wash her off, anyhow. Havin' a bunch of men hoverin' just outside the door is bad enough- and they do hover…

Picking up one of her arms, I use a nice, warm cloth that's been wet and wrung to scrub very gently at her skin.

As far as duties go, this is a rather light one. I like to take my time so I don't have to get back to…everything else, quite so quickly.

Seeing that much death and pain, and having to clean up the worst of the mess- not only blood and bile but…

It's just all too much. It's so much work just to keep this place clean and keep everyone alive and…

Swallowing roughly, I move on to her other arm and try to keep my breathing even. After all, crying about it won't change anything. I can't just leave here, I'll surely die. Even if I could, I wouldn't leave my friends and many of them are pretty chummy with some of the soldiers and the other servants- if we left we'd have to take them with us.

And the soldiers are certainly not free to go.

I lean on the bed, sinking down on the mattress next to her as a wave of dizziness overcomes me. Everything spins just a bit, so I close my eyes and squeeze Nik's hand, to center myself.

My eyes pop open with shock when I feel her squeeze back.

Silently I watch her in complete stillness as she blinks away a few tears, scrunching up her face at the light of the sun coming through the window. "Nn… ngh…"

"Nik?" I move suddenly forward and lean over her to block the light so she can see my face. "Can
"T...vea?" she asks weakly with a confused expression. "'s...s'g...n...on?"

"I'll get Lieutenant Ren!" I stand up and rush for the door. "Stay awake, my lady!"

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Nik POV

'Uggghhhh, do we have to do this now?' I grumble silently to myself while finishing the last of an entire goblet of tea.

"You will explain yourself!" Cassandra commands and slams her hands on the table. And it hurts me. I've had enough.

So I stand up and throw my goblet out the damn doorway and hold one finger up at Cassandra as it makes a crashing noise down the hall. Not as loud as she is but definitely loud enough to still make me wince.

She moves around the table as I speak to loom over me and look threatening. She's very close.

"See? I can be obnoxiously loud and destructive too. Stop trying to measure dicks and be considerate of my pounding headache if you actually want any kind of coherent response. Otherwise I swear to god I will curl up in a ball on this floor-" I point down at the floor next to me "-and you will hear shit from me till I inevitably keel over from oversensitivity." I don't shout. I don't speak emphatically. I state the facts, calmly- well, other than throwing that empty goblet.

She's still just glaring and not moving.

So I lean in a little and tilt up my chin. "If you're going to try and intimidate me, Cassandra- you'll need better tactics. My parents were really good at glaring down at me with a threat of violence in their eyes."

I settle back into my seat when I'm done with the game she wants to play and have stopped glaring back at her. "And sometimes it wasn't just a threat." I'm totally rational right now, but that might not last if she goes around banging on the walls.

Cassandra moves around the table once again after pausing to glare at me some more and then sits down across from me. Much more quietly this time, though I suppose that could be just her rage manifesting as a stonewall.

"Now first of all, I understand the situation is dire," I begin. Trying not to vomit with the effort of speaking. "But I also understand that apparently this," I point to my left hand where the mark is sputtering away. "Is important. And I don't know exactly what it is? But I know it's magic."

Cassandra is still staying silent, giving me the stink eye.

"What I remember from before everything went dark was like...ugh, what was it?" I use one of my hands to prop up my head by cupping my face and leaning on my elbow. "That morning we were turning down sheets...I'd gotten reports of a Grey Warden...and then..."
Honestly. Nothing. I know what I'm supposed to remember. Corypheus, the Divine…all of it, I know intellectually what is supposed to be there.

But it's all a huge blank. I knew that was gonna happen, but it's still unnerving as fuck.

"Well, that's a problem," I groan.

"What is?" Cassandra snaps.

I lift my head to glare at her balefully in silence.

She inhales deeply and then exhales as if I'm the most difficult person in the world and then repeats more quietly, a bit through gritted teeth. "What. Is. A. Problem?"

"Well first of all, I know what I was going to do. But my memory of that plan being carried out is entirely gone." I reply. "Not lost. Gone. Stolen. It's like someone scooped it out of my head. I can remember everything before it with perfect clarity. There's no degradation as time goes on, no fuzziness. Just darkness in my mind."

"Meaning what?" she asks.

There's a sound that's amplified in the hallway, that I think might belong to Leliana. It's the faintest footstep and I can only pick up like one for every five steps she takes, and even then I think it's because she's being careless.

"Meaning I was right," I reply. "I had heard reports and gathered information on some important Tevinter mage or other, someone who'd been in the south for quite some time so I'd heard telling influential people around him but not willingly gathering them, if you catch my drift?"

Cassandra sits up straighter.

The footstep noises have stopped.

"You going to join us, lady Nightingale?" I call out to the door.

The door slips almost silently open for a slight creak, to allow the passage of Leliana. Slim and ginger, as always.

"You heard me, then. I will assume your skills are a result of training, but the question is, where were you trained?"

See, I was worried she might not look even remotely the same because between Cassandra and the new Commander who greeted me and escorted me to an interrogation room- I wasn't sure anyone was who they were supposed to be.

Delrin Barris! He actually makes sense as the Commander of the Inquisition forces. I mean, Cullen was the favorite and he was privileged by his superiors to some extent so it made sense why he'd be here in terms of nepotism and corruption but…

One has to wonder…

"I wasn't," I reply. "I grew up in a house with some very nasty people who got even nastier if you disturbed their rest at night. I learned young to stay quiet and be alert."

"One might question why you were up in the night," she says.
"One might come out and ask like a normal person and one might learn I have chronic insomnia," I reply.

"Enough! Tell us about this mage," Cassandra thankfully says this at an almost-normal volume so I don't have to glare or clam up this time. I hate having to train people to treat me like a person…

Her face is much more muscular, with a square jaw and jutting cheekbones- same as her game face but also not the same? Much rougher-looking. Still breathtakingly beautiful, though. I suppose she is still a princess. They usually turn eugenics of a sort to keep their line as pure and strong as possible. Which usually includes making their princesses and queens the most beautiful in the land.

Or at least that's my assumption of my own world's royals. I have no idea how Nevarra does things…

"Alright, well…" I cough and clear my throat, wincing at the burn in my esophagus and the throbbing in my head. "I don't know much more about it except that he was going to 'visit' the Divine. I figured he probably had something sinister in mind, and I couldn't just let him like… puppeteer or murder the Divine to create chaos, so I figured I'd do something."

"And why not inform the guards?" Cassandra asks. "Why not say anything to anyone? Why leave your forces outside Haven?"

"My dear Seeker, you assume all too much," I say. Having entirely too much fun right now. I need to do something to keep my mind off the pain, so fuck it. "Firstly you assume I only devised this plan after gaining said forces- or that I gained such forces to serve my plan, but neither of these things are true."

Leliana is watching me with glittering, interested eyes. But Cassandra still glares menacingly.

"In fact, I'd put this plan into motion the second I heard about all this and was able to get where I needed to go to start my journey toward Haven. The forces happened. The end. I helped them, now they help me for some reason. They seem to think I'm some kind of leader-type but really all I've been is kinda loud and bossy. If that's what 'charisma' is, I'm gonna be so disappointed."

"You also assume the guards and Templars and such would listen to me. I had to do things the way I did or no one would've gone up to check on the Divine at the time I was certain she was visiting with the bespelled Grey Wardens."

"Bespelled," Leliana says. Sitting next to Cassandra now, and leaning forward, elbows on the table with her hands clasped before her. A very 'villainess' look. "How do you know this?"

"Like I said before, I have sources and reports." I reply. "Also, the Gray Wardens might be more political than anyone thinks but the whole lot of them would die before selling Ferelden out to a Tevinter. At least not on purpose, anyway." I mutter the last part, but really only because I'm perfectly aware that the whole 'Erimond' thing is probably still happening.

"So your subterfuge and tricks were intended to bring about a result, but what result were you intending to bring about?" Leliana asks.

"Don't do the repeating thing, I hate that," I groan. "I have a limited amount of talking energy right now and you're gonna waste all of it. I still need to know what exactly happened and where my people are. I've already told you everything once, I'm not going through it all again until after you reciprocate."

"You-!" Cassandra slams her hands on the table and stands again.
I'm already on the floor, curled into a ball by the time she makes it to her feet. Hands clamped over my ears.

"Cassandra," Leliana cautions. "Violence in this situation would not be helpful to us. We still must take her to the Rift."

"Who's afraid of violence?" I call brokenly. "She won't stop making noise and I feel like my body is ripping apart, WHICH INCLUDES MY HEAD." I shout that last part while curling into a tighter ball. "Ugh…I'm gonna throw up. I warned you this would happen."

"Leliana, I've had enough with this-" Cassandra makes a grunting noise and I hear her armor rustle, so I think she's gesturing at me pretty emphatically. "She refuses to be cooperative at every turn."

"Liar," I reply. "You're the one trying to intimidate me when it's not even necessary. How are you any kind of interrogator if you can't even read your subject?"

"Cassandra, you still have preparations to make. We have very few resources to spend on this last march up to the Temple. Do not waste time here. I will send her out to you when it is time to take her to the Rift." Leliana dismisses Cassandra.

Then a very stompy Seeker leaves the room and once her loud-ass footsteps are far enough away, I sigh in relief. "Thank you." It comes out weak, but hey it's the thought that counts.

"Can you sit up?" She asks.

"Sure...just as soon...as the room stops...sp...inning..." I shove myself into a sitting position, closing my eyes tight and hugging my knees as my entire world whirls. "Ugh, god..."

"You weren't joking," Leliana says. Coming around the side of the table to kneel down on my level. "You are turning green, you know."

I flip her the bird in response and she giggles.

"I am assuming that is a rude gesture," she says. "I suppose I would also feel quite rude in your position."

"What? Being interrogated by people who should rightfully be trying to take care of and reassure me? You've got no evidence that I was ever involved in whatever happened. In fact you've got conflicting evidence that says I was helping, or trying to- and yet you ignore it in favor of your personal feelings." I lift my head and give her a look. "And I know good cop, bad cop, you know. Maybe if you tried just a normal person talking to your subjects first, you'd get better results. Lots of people clam up under pressure, others can't handle friendliness from strangers. You have to tailor it to your subject."

She nods very slowly as she listens to me. "You seem to know much about it," she observes.

"There was like...a lot of books, on a lot of subjects, back home." I err on the side of caution- I hate lying but twisting facts too much... "We'd done extensive research into interrogation, medical research, etcetera. But the records were open to the public. It's not much and I didn't learn all of it- but I got the gist."

"And your people's research stated that knowing your subject and tailoring the interrogation to them, was the best approach?" she asks.

"You should already know this," I reply grumpily. "Stop testing me. I'm just well-read. I can't fight
worth shit, which anyone in the Justicars can tell you. So where are my people?"

She hums, while staring into my eyes. "We have the ones who originally came with you in Haven. Others who came after the explosion, looking for you- brought refugees. We couldn't take all of them. But Lieutenant Ren and the other Justicars had left a small fortified area behind that we could send them to. It was not much, but it kept them out of the cold and mostly protected them from the demons. And then your Lieutenant-Commander arrived."

"Miles is here?" I blink. "How long was I out?"

"A few days," she replies. "He seems to have taken charge of the camp and they are…much better off than they were before."

I grin, "yeah he's good at thinking around problems. He didn't understand why I'd made him my Lieutenant to begin with, but you get it, right?"

She hums again in affirmation. "I do. He is quite competent. It seems you've a talent for finding it. As Lieutenant Ren is the only man, mage or otherwise, I've seen stand up to Seeker Cassandra."

I giggle a little, I can't help it. "I wish I could've seen that."

She opens her mouth to speak again, but the running footsteps of someone in the hallway draws her attention. She stands and waits for the door to be slammed open.

I groan and curl in a ball, but try to listen to what's going on, even if my head is throbbing…

"Lady Nightingale, we've got more Justicars! And…and a legion of mages and civilians- and Bann Teagan!" Says whoever it is. A scout?

I sit straight up when I comprehend what they just said. "Redcliffe's been evacuated? Are Dahlia and Navette there? Or did they part ways before then? I need to see them!" I say very emphatically.

Leliana gives me a very long stare and nods once. "Scout, get all the Justicar Lieutenants from outside the gates and within the small settlement outside Haven and bring them to the front gate. Bann Teagan should be taken in, with his people, but we haven't the space. Tell them they will have to stay in the settlement as well. If there's room."

"There will be when I'm done talking to everyone," I reply.

Miles has done a great job leading so far but there is no way in hell I'm going up that mountain with Cassandra, alone.
Dahlia POV

Chapter Summary

Only two updates this week, unwritten and A new order because I feel terrible and I couldn't finish a third. Ugh...

The moment I see Nik walking around unaided and with a clear look in her eyes, I feel a wave of relief sweep over my body.

Somehow I'd convinced myself that she was dead all this time. That huge explosion was definitely over the temple, but if she's been in the Village all that time, then I worried for nothing!

I rush forward to stand next to the Grand Enchanter and Bann Teagan- and while Fiona gives me a reproachful look, Teagan is approving. Even sparing me a smile as Nik, some very tall and angry looking woman- and Ren!

"Ren, you're alright!" I dunno what came over me, really I just sort of…popped over and threw my arms around him. It's a few moments before I realize I'm hugging him and by that time I'm so embarrassed I could die.

I pull away and step back to stand in line with the Grand Enchanter and Bann Teagan, feeling I've somehow disgraced my position. Professional Justicar Lieutenants shouldn't behave that way, should they?

Peeking up from the ground I've been staring at while the rest of the party approached, I see Ren with a confused look on his face and Nik…seems amused.

"We're glad to see you in one piece, too," she says and then steps across the divide between us to pull me suddenly into her arms. "Anybody who thought their friends were dead all week would probably react the same way. If they didn't, I'd question they were ever really friends."

Ah, my lady…

Her embrace is firm and warm, but I can feel her shivering. I pull back and grasp her shoulders. "Are you cold? You are shaking."

She snorts a bit at that. "I kind of blew up. Or well, part of me blew up, apparently." And then she holds her hand aloft, showing off…a very strange glowing mark in the palm of her hand. Like a fissure in her palm that-

Oh!

"This is the energy we sensed, Fiona!" I turn and gesture her forward. "That big hole in the sky is too far away to be what we were sensing."

The Grand Enchanter steps forward to examine Nik's palm with me. Nik stands stoic and allows our scrutiny even as the angry looking woman beside her clears her throat and addresses Ban Teagan.
"Bann Teagan, I have heard that you had to evacuate Redcliffe after an attack on the city but our sources were not clear on what happened and why you had to abandon it," she says.

He sighs deeply and replies. "Templars. Rogues, too many of them to count. Unconcerned with innocent bystanders as far as I could see. They killed many before we could get the gates shut. And many more when they broke them open."

"Each time we barricaded the entrance," Fiona intones next to me. "And each time they broke through yet again."

"I was not speaking to you, Mage." The woman says in a stern tone. "When I ask for your report-"

"Shove your superiority complex up your ass, Cassandra," Lady Nik says. Very flatly. "That's Fiona, the Grand Enchanter of her circle and Leader of the Mage Rebellion. Show respect for her station if nothing else."

"I am used to Chantry Folk and their…” Fiona pauses for a moment to think of an appropriate term. "Attitudes, toward mages. I can defend myself well enough."

"If that's what you want," Nik replies easily. "I'll wait for you to say something next time before jumping in. I've been hearing shit all morning that's got me on edge and time is already wonky for me." She grimaces.

"I can imagine," Bann Teagan says sympathetically. "The world seems to be on the verge of ending, it all must be very upsetting for you."

The angry lady that Nik called 'Cassandra' seems to be silently fuming.

"Oh that?" Nik asks with a blink. "No we've got plans for that, even if they fall through I'm good with plans. Plans are good. What upsets me is the rampant abuse I've seen all over the place. Servants getting beaten, mages being overworked with absolutely no consideration, women getting groped in broad daylight and nobody stepping up to do shit to stop it but me."

Bann Teagan's face flushes, but I think it's with anger. He doesn't look very embarrassed, at least. "I understand how that could also be upsetting. I am very sorry to say I haven't even broken my own men of the desire to carouse like a pack of dogs."

"Get them fixed," she replies in a deadpan while lifting an eyebrow.

"Nik!" 'Cassandra' scolds.

But Bann Teagan laughs loudly. "I suppose I should! After all, those insistent upon acting like dogs should be treated like one. I do detest harming those in my employ, though."

"That speaks well of you," she replies. "It would speak even better of you if you were able to muscle past that and do the justice that is necessary no matter how distasteful you find it. I hate hurting people but I will suplex a fucker if he touches one of my girls."

"Bann Teagan." 'Cassandra' cuts into the conversation with gritted teeth. "If you would follow me to the War Room, we will brief you and receive your report?"

"Are the Commander and Grand Enchanter joining us?" he asks.

She looks put off by the question but jerks her head in a nod. "I must watch Nik, and the Grand Enchanter may have answers to questions we-"
"My Lady!" Navette shoves her way through the throng and arrives at the front with us. "Thank the Maker you're alright. These damn mages have almost gotten us killed so many times since you left us, do we really have to keep them even now? We could just leave this mess behind us, couldn't we? It's theirs anyway, they should clean it up."

She's nearly bursting with all the things she's wanted to say to Nik since since our journey began. It's all basically a mash of things she's been complaining about the whole journey here. It...irritates me to hear her be so bold and loud about it here, though.

There is a dead silence as Nik stares into Navette's face with flat eyes. "Navette, report to my cabin, one of the servants will show you. We have shit to talk about before I leave."

Navette startles at the rare severity of her Lady's tone but bows and salutes deferentially as if addressing a Noble Lady and a Military Commander at the same time. "I will go now, My Lady."

Navette moves away from the group and Nik takes a deep breath, counting in a low voice until she's certain Navette is far enough away.

Ren mutters something to himself as she goes that sounds like 'someone's in deep shit...'

Then she moves forward, toward the grouping of mages that came with us and-

And bows. At the waist. Very low. "My apologies for the actions of my Lieutenant. I thought she'd come into her own as a leader, but it seems I was mistaken about what her role should be. Any discomfort you experienced while having to put up with her is entirely my fault."

"It's not your fault that Navette is an ass, My Lady.- I stop and nearly choke on my words.

I can't believe I just said 'ass' to my Commander.

Nik stands straight and tall once again and turns to me. "I'm her leader and her teacher. If she has failed it is because I failed her first. Ass or no."

"We must move quickly, we-" Cassandra tries to usher us all inside Haven but-

Nik screams and falls to her knees. The mark on her hand rippling with power and- and the hole in the sky, it's...it's widening!

"This has been happening since she woke, we must move quickly to get her to the Rift, which means we cannot delay our talks any further!" Cassandra shouts over the loud booming of the hole in the sky.

She stomps over to where Ren and I are holding her up and swings her into her arms. "Agghhhh! It hurts!"

The sound of Nik's voice pinched in pain and fear is almost enough to make my heart break.

"Alright, quickly then!" Bann Teagan gestures for myself and Fiona to follow them. "Is there any place our people might go? I heard that Haven was full and they were refusing Refugees. Sending them somewhere else. Where?"

Ah, we met people coming up the path who'd refused the other shelter. Something about it being poorly managed and something of a sty? I'll take anything if it means I have some sort of bed or pallet to lie on and perhaps barricades for our soldiers to use to defend us with.
Cassandra gestures with her head toward the side of Haven, off to where the walls bend around the side of the village. "Around there. You'll find it without issue."

Bann Teagan instructs one of his men to offer his assistance wherever they go for guard rotations and to keep the civilians safe.

Fiona had backed away when Nik started screaming. Watching her with wide, suspicious eyes. Now she turns and addresses the mages. "Make camp not far from here. We will likely not be staying. You all know how by now."

She turns and follows after Cassandra as she carries Nik into Haven. The screaming has stopped but she's now somewhat limp in the woman's arms and it alarms me.

I step forward but stop and realize that there is a group of Justicars and recruits clustering up behind me as the other groups leave. They're awaiting orders.

So I turn and run over to grab Ren by the arm when I see him rushing after Nik and the others. "Where do I put the Justicars?"

He pauses only long enough to point where Bann Teagan's men were going. "Give them to Miles."

"Miles is here!?"

Best news I've heard all day. I can stop playing secret leader.
Navette POV, Nik POV

Well, apparently I stepped in it.

Lady Nik is as protective of the Mages as she ever was. Still don't get why. All I could hear when she was trying to explain it to me is 'blah blah mages are oppressed so you should let them get away with shite, blah blah you can't talk down to them because their widdle feelings will get hurt'. My Lady is a soft-hearted woman, that is for certain.

Still can't understand how she can order executions for anyone who molests, rapes or otherwise sexually harms another person in our camps- especially children- and then turn around and have such sympathy for murderous snakes like Dahlia her royal highness, princess of Rebel Mages.

Suppose I just have to accept that My Lady has a soft spot for Mages and try to keep her out of trouble with 'em.

I am excited about my new position she talked about.

(For now, just guard Haven with the other soldiers. I've got a job to do and we'll talk more at length later, but I have this feeling like leadership isn't what you're meant for. I think you'd do better in a solitary position, at least for now.)

I'm a bit upset I'm not to be a leader anymore, but she can't be that upset with me if I'm not being demoted or kicked out, right? She just acted like she thought I'd be better suited to somethin' else.

Why is it she said I was bad at leadership? 'Blah blah, you can't talk about your charges like that even though they're bein' whiny babies, blah blah' somethin' or other I think.

"Hold the line here! Don't let them through!" I'm far back behind the first few lines of defense, but I can still hear the commanders at the front shouting orders. That's good. I'll hear when they need us to rush up.

Each wave isn't many demons, and it doesn't last long- and there's big pauses between 'em. But we have to keep switching out defenders so nobody's too banged up or exhausted. I haven't gotten to kill much since Lady Nik left. Just a rage demon and some shades. But it's been good practice for fighting demons.

It's different than fighting people, that's for certain.

(Don't let anyone harass the servants. Make it clear, privately, that the head servant is not to beat or harass the servants under him unless he wants to deal directly with me- or possibly your blade, whichever comes first.)

Now that's somethin' I can get behind. Hard workin' folk needing protection from something. Even if it's something I don't really think is all that out of the ordinary, I mean- what's she enforcin' here? You can't discipline people who work for you for messin' up?

Whatever, if the Lady says so, there's got to be a purpose. There's no mages involved in this one so there must be a lesson to be learned here somewhere. Already did that job earlier. Had that head servant shakin' in his boots the second I mentioned the Justicar Commander. Somethin' about her scares him. Dunno what.

Something following the Lady has taught me is she thinks everything she does should teach you
somethin'. I've started to look back over things she did before and try to figure them out. She's just difficult to figure, though.

Miles manages to do it somehow, that's obvious. Otherwise he wouldn't be directly under her in the chain of command.

I used to be friends with Miles, but once the Lady showed up and started instructing and everythin'...we sort of fell out of touch with each other even though we were in the same camp. Miles never took to my flirting which just made me like him more. He always talked to me like I was his friend, and not a piece of ass like I was used to back in Orlais with Mum.

Oh they were always real cultured about it, talking about my 'heaving bosom' with the most flowery language possible. If I was real lucky they focused on my eyes and my hair instead but I wasn't usually that lucky.

Lady Nik said Miles is around and will be back with her when they're done sealin' that Breach in the sky. I can ask him then, if he'll teach me to understand the Lady's ways. Maybe he'll be busy but I bet an extra pair of hands to help him work will free up at least his tongue.

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Nik POV

"Is she going to be like this the whole way to the Rift?" I can hear Cassandra asking Ren as we walk along the path.


"I'm not loopy, I'm tipsy!" I respond and promptly lose my balance for no reason at all.

Arisala's hand darts out quick and steadies me. "Watch your feet, Commander."

"Pretty sure that'd make it worse," I reply. "Is the world wobbly or am I? Cause...cause I dunno with the Breach..."

"It's you," Miles sighs and walks up next to me. Hooking my arm with his own. "Here. Now you won't totally fall over."

I giggle a little, "thanks!"

"So why are we all here, again?" Ren asks. "I mean, I understand bringing me, I'm one of your two healers and I might be needed. But why Miles and Arisala?"

"I asked to come," Arisala replies.

"And I wanted Miles to protect me from Cassandra," I say. Frankly and openly.

"You do not need protection from me," Cassandra grumps.

"Do so!" I chime. "You were bein' mean to me in the dungeons!"

Being alone with an angry person yelling at me a lot might make me cry. People are less likely to do that in groups. I feel so emotional right now, the slightest thing might set me off, no matter how
good my control has become in recent years…

"Considering the fact you are our main suspect in a terrorist investigation, I believe I was being rather civil," she grits.

"If that's your idea of civil, I feel bad for your friends," I reply. "Was that a rude thing to say? I feel like that was rude."

"That was definitely rude, but she probably deserved it," Miles replies. "You hardly get mad at anybody, even Dahlia and she tried to kill you. What'd she do?"

"I interrogated her, that is all," Cassandra snaps back. "I even attempted to do as she asked and lower my voice when it was apparent she was in pain."

"Liar. You made noise to hurt me, then made me feel like you were doing me a favor by being quiet, then made a loud noise again even though it made me nauseous and it hurt!" I ramble in a quivery little voice. "At least Dahlia was tryin' to rescue somebody. All you wanted was to hurt me because you were mad about stuff."

The whole group subsides into awkward silence.

I feel like that was my fault but I can't put my finger on why. I told the truth and I used the right words, right? Did I do the thing where I say a truth other people don't wanna hear again? I'm always doin' that! Why is it so bad to say things like that anyway?

I'd get it if I was wrong, but nobody ever says 'you're wrong' and then tells me why and how. They just insist I'm wrong without explaining. Which sometimes means-not always-that I'm right and they don't like it.

I don't think I'm wrong this time.

"Hey, look, a bridge-" Ren points ahead. "Does that mean we're halfway there? I remember you mentioning that as a landmark."

Cassandra lets out a loud sigh, "yes. That is the halfway mark for our trek up to the Rift. Thank the Maker this is nearly halfway over."

A bridge…I remember the bridge…but why do I remember the bridge? I know…something important…something…in a box?

Oh! It's where the inquisitor gets their weapons, right? And was there potions or something? I don't...everything is so fuzzy when Magic is filling me up like this…

As we approach the end of the Bridge we're nearest to, I start to feel the mark build up energy again. I dunno why I can tell when it's gonna explode again now, but I can.

So I stop and cling to Miles's side tightly. "It's happening again!"

And as the mark starts to pulse again and the Breach with it- I remember suddenly why the Bridge is important.

Grabbing hold of Miles' hand instead, I dash off of the very edge of the bridge, shouting for everyone to get away from it, now! I can't really hear myself over the pounding in my ears.

And then there's a crash and a bang and I'm lying face down in the snow for a while, trying to stop
the world from spinning.

"...-ik! Nik! Can you...ear..."

Voices drift in and out around me. Everything is very wibbly-wobbly and strange.

Then I'm being lifted into a sitting position and smacked very lightly on my cheeks a few times. The pain isn't much but it does focus me on one point of pain instead of my whole body- so the world comes into focus again.

Miles is kneeling in front of me, he's the slapper I think. Just hard enough to sting, not hard enough to really hurt. I don't like slapping people who are hurt but I don't think they know of any alternatives...I should be teaching them that stuff...

"Just carry her!" I can hear Cassandra shouting. "We can't stay here, we-"

I look over to see what cut her off and blink at the much-higher amount of demons attacking us than I remember being normal.

"What, are we in nightmare mode!?"

"Miles cover her flank!!" I reach out and grasp his shoulder. "She can't watch her own back! And Arisala- what's your thing? What do you do?"

Ren is mostly covering Cassandra with healing spells in between trying to check me out and make sure I'm not broken.

Arisala is tossing out spells of fire and ice left and right. "Necromancy is my specialty but-"

Oooh, wait, didn't necromancy hurt spirits? "If you think we're being overwhelmed, use it." I tell her. "But if you think we can do without- throw a barrier over the warriors and just try to maintain it."

"You are not in charge here," Cassandra bellows as she strikes down a rage demon.

And then Miles steps up behind her and cuts down the shade that was about to claw her from behind. "It's not like she was givin' you orders, your 'holiness'. We're all Justicars. You mind your business and we'll mind ours."

Ooohhh I don't think Cassandra liked that.

"Or we can work together to stop the world from ending and stop acting like a bunch of children," Ren calls out into the fray. "That option works best for me, personally!"

I think even Miles might've felt the parental disapproval in that one, cause he flinches a little and there aren't any demons close enough to be responsible at that precise moment.

"Oooh, what he said!" I chime energetically. "Also, how are we getting over the broken bridge now?"

Cassandra growls and keeps hacking away at demons, not answering. I wouldn't really expect an answer, anyway, I just kinda wanted the question out there so people'd think about it.

I wish I could fight and help protect everyone, or...or if I was a mage I could use magic and make a barrier or-
Something inside me feels like it's breaking, but it's not the Breach widening this time.

"Agh!" I choke on a scream.

"Nik!" Ren pulls me in close and tries to shield my body from whatever is happening to me with a barrier around my body, but it doesn't take- in fact his barrier is broken as something explodes out of my whole body…but mostly, I think, my left hand…
I spaced this week after writing two updates for this story so that's all I'm updating this week, I guess.

I'm so tired and I've been binging Star Trek Discovery. I thought that was important to say for some reason.

"I think we should head back, Chuckles. We're gonna get overwhelmed soon, and...I don't think you're makin' much headway there," Varric observes.

I stand before the rift, fists clenched and head bowed as I struggle to accept that I cannot...fix this.

Everything I have done, was in vain. When the Veil comes down now, it will be with fire and flood and ice. It will not be a controlled descent and it will not discriminate between Elves and Humans, Dwarves and Qunari- it will not even spare the Mages or the Spirits.

Every plan I have ever made has ended this way, I do not know why I continue to be surprised.

Now I have to get away from here, which means either slipping away from Varric or following him to the Village and escaping from there...I do not like either option. Varric has been watching me, interested in what I do and why.

I know he is a storyteller and tends to fixate on details...but of what importance will I be in the end? Someone who failed to save the last hope for Thedas- or even if I did, I would simply be one of two healers.

Something about his interest irks me, though I am delighted to have the conversation and the stories. I know there is no way for him to discover who I am and yet my back feels as though it's against a wall nonetheless.

"Chuckles, get away from it!" he calls out as the Rift fluctuates once again.

I take a step back, assisted with a slight fade-step and breathe deeply once I see this wave is larger than the others. "Retreat may be our only option," I say.

"Gonna have to run now, then-"

"Rrrragh!" A roar from behind us and as we turn to look, the Seeker overtakes us with her shield held aloft. Charging into the demons with all the force of a stampeding Druffalo.

"You know," a whimsical voice interjects as he trots along behind her. "It'd be helpful if we had about a hundred corpses fighting with us right now."

"Not unless we're about to die," another voice from further back.

Cradled gently in the arms of- is that...Arisala, was it? And in her arms is...
"Ha-hey!" Varric calls out with cheer. "The little Lady's awake!"

"I am not!" she speaks very deliberately as she sits up a bit in the Qunari's arms. "A Lady!"

That person before, I recognize his description from reports- that is the Lieutenant-Commander of the Justicar order.

Watching him fight, I do not see anything particularly special about his skill level. He seems to be a novice, in fact.

Then he uses his superior agility and flexibility to climb a broken wall nearby, and scramble over it.

When the demon comes looking for him, he rushes out the other side, just as it comes around the edge.

The demon is not clever enough to double back around- it must go around the whole side of the wall to reach him once again.

And he is already engaging another attacking the Seeker from behind. Drawing its attention and… leading it another direction where he climbs a slight incline and waits for the Shade to glide up to him before pouncing upon it with a powerful strike of his sword.

There is definitely potential there, I see that much at least. He has found the least-dangerous way to face a Demon without consciousness. Keep it at a distance, harry it with small attacks and when necessary, strike it down with a strong blow as quickly as possible.

"You could put me down, you know," The Commander tells the Vashoth. "I'll just sit here and wait till the fight is over."

Another companion appears from behind the rest of them, looking winded. "Well…I can watch her, I suppose. You'd be more help here in this situation."

And the Vashoth hands the Commander off to the Lieutenant. Who helps the Commander to sit down and clears a patch of snow so she doesn't freeze.

"We should probably…help," Varric observes.

I believe we're a bit dazed, the both of us. This was a bit…unexpected. And a bit much.

But he is right.

I step up next to Cassandra on her left side and the Lieutenant-Commander immediately compensates on the right.

A quick learner, with good instincts. Yes, I can see the potential there, indeed.

Varric moves to get an angle on the demons and suddenly…everything is much easier.

Where I falter, Cassandra covers me. Where Cassandra would normally get a claw in the back or the side, I and the Lieutenant-Commander block for her.

And all through the fight, the Vashoth very masterfully lays paralyzing runes and conserves her energy, should she need it to call upon the dead.

We do not pay attention to what is happening behind us, because all the demons are here.
Nonetheless I hear the Commander conversing with her Lieutenant in the background as we fight. Chattering about nothing, in a way that is actually quite alarming.

I know they told me that magic…intoxicates her. But I did not think it was so apt a description!

As we reach the end of the fight, she instructs her Lieutenant to take her closer to the Rift.

"They're almost done and I have to do something with this damn glow-stick stuck in my hand, come on."

I would caution her against getting too close but I am a bit busy at the moment.

Regardless they do not appear beside us until the last shade has dissolved into nothing.

Turning to help the Lieutenant heft her weight, as he seems…quite ill? I grasp her hand and pull it up and out toward the Rift. "Close it, quickly before more come through!"

She blinks owlishly at me as if not comprehending but then replies, "how…do I do that? Exactly?"

I have no idea how to answer her.

Turning her attention to the Rift, she steps out of our hold and inches closer and closer to it. "I wonder if…"

And to my shock and dismay, she reaches out to touch it. With her marked hand.

There is something like a snap in the air and suddenly-

Suddenly the Rift connects to the mark in her hand and begins to shrink almost as if the mark is a very small whirlpool sucking in everything around it.

It is…strange to watch.

When it is over, she turns around with a bright smile, "wasn't so bad."

But the Lieutenant collapses, clutching at his chest.

"Ren!?!" she drops next to him as he gasps for air.

I'm rooted in place, but my magic reaches out and examines-

Ah.

"Let her go, Ren. I will fix it," I drop to one knee next to them both. "If you do not, it is likely the strain might kill you."

He takes as deep a breath as he is capable of and slowly sags in relief as his magic releases its grip on the Commander's body.

It would appear that he was attempting to suppress the injuries the mark had dealt to her body, but-

"Agh!" she shrieks and curls in on herself in pain and shock. "What-"

"Relax as much as you can," I speak in a low, soothing cadence. "I will attempt to repair the damage, but it will be difficult."

This one as well, much potential. He could not use magic to heal her so he simply sealed
everything closed for as long as he possibly could, holding it all in place with sheer willpower. It slowly built up more and more magic in her system, but it was the better of two bad options.

The only alternative was to pour magic into her until her wounds healed enough to survive and… well. I am the only one who can do that, as I have a technique to remove the excess. But if he had done that… closing the rift may well have ripped her apart even worse.

And she is… terribly gored, as it is.

Her insides have very small cuts here and there. But many of them. Everywhere. It is all I can do to reach inside, seal them closed with a bit of fire and hope there will be time later to heal everything properly.

All the while she is clutching my arm where it is holding her up and making pained noises as though she is trying to be quiet but cannot. Her chest and stomach are relaxed, no matter what I do. But her arms and legs…

She is channeling her clenching into different parts of her body, so as not to disrupt my work. Intoxicated, in pain and confused- and she-

"Is it over?" she asks in a very small voice once I have sealed the last of the worst injuries.

"No. But for now, that… should hold you together." I reply.

She sighs and collapses sideways into my body. I grasp her with both hands by the shoulders and stand, heaving her up onto her feet. "Can you walk?"

Her body weight sags into me as she shakes her head.

"I've got her," the Vashoth reaches for me to pass her over.

As much as she should be fatigued, she seems to heft the Commander in her arms quite easily.

"Gotta move fast before the next one," she says, turning to the Seeker. "She might really die before we make it to the Breach."

The Seeker sighs and nods.

I stand and follow as they continue walking up the path, and Varric falls in line next to me.

"So…" he says. "Is she going to survive this?"

"I don't know," I reply.

He sighs, sorrowful and serious. "Damn."
"Can't believe we got stuck with hunting while everyone else defends the camp," one of the men with me mutters.

A woman answers him. "Are you joking? Packed in tight like a can of sardines or free to move through the forest where there's boundless room? I'd say the choice is clear."

"They're expanding as fast as they can," I say while crouching down to take notice of some tracks. "I think there are Druffalos around here somewhere. Must've lost them when the attacks started happening. We find them, we can get milk for the camp. Maybe slaughter one for meat if we get desperate."

"Why are you still here, if you don't mind my asking," the woman asks. "You're Dalish aren't you? Couldn't you just go home?"

"This Breach is a threat to my people as well as yours," I reply. Slinking along the path. Becoming quieter as I go. "And I cannot return without Miles…he is part of the Clan, now."

"Right, the Lieutenant-Commander," another man remarks. "How's that work, anyhow? How do you know where someone's loyalties lie when they've got more than one?"

"I was assured that the Commander would prefer-" I cut off and make a silencing motion. We've found the Druffalos.

They're conveniently hiding out in a rocky clearing where we're able to wrap some ropes around tree trunks and jutting rocks to sort of box them in. Can't leave them here, or the Demons will get them, but…for the hour it takes to get back to camp, report their position, take a party out to get them and bring them back to a pen that will have been at least halfway built before we get back…It will hopefully hold.

"I think this is enough for today. We shouldn't overtax ourselves when we're low on food. There are six Druffalo in that clearing," I say. "Slaughtering one for its meat and hide, using the rest for their milk- we'll be providing a lot of nutrition for the camp just getting them all back in one piece. You, and you-" I point to two of the more experienced hunters. "Stay here and try to defend the Druffalo. Demons might not even be interested in them, I don't know- but if they are, do what you can. The rest of you, with me."

There's only three others, the man and woman that almost constantly argue, bicker or talk about something- and a man who mostly keeps to himself. He and I understand each other in a single glance when the other two are going on and on- please. Please make it stop we telegraph with a single look.

It's nothing like the way Miles and I seem to…work together, it's just…nice to know there's someone else in the group who hates groups.

Thinking about Miles is a good way to get distracted, I should stop doing that when I've got things to do.

…it's just so strange. We just met a few weeks ago. But as soon as we met, it was like something reached out from within and snapped into place. I don't know what to call it.
I can tell he wants it to be…at the very least, something physical. I don't know if he feels for me. He seems to, at least…as a person. But as a partner? There's no way to tell this early in.

We're…getting closer all the time, though. I feel like it's all going too fast, but also that it bothers me that it doesn't bother me that we're going too fast.

The Keeper says it only means he belongs in the clan, that we have a good rapport and that I should take the friendship and camaraderie he offers. That it will make me feel less alone when out amongst the wolves in human society.

But I was a bit embarrassed to tell the Keeper that it felt like something within me was connected to him. It makes no sense. We have no stories of mystical bonds or love at first sight or…whatever this is. No stories of people just coming together and working like they were always meant to be.

"Hey, Shiv do you-" one of the humans addresses me.

"Shivanas," I snap. "My name is Shivanas."

"And my name's Beauregard, but I usually don't complain when people wanna call me Beau." He says, huffy and offended at my sharpness.

"Beau is still a name. A shiv is an object. And my name is Elvhen, it cannot be shortened this way without sounding ridiculous like nonsense." I reply. "It is not that hard to pronounce three syllables, I know you can do it, so I'm not replying when you call me by an epithet that is not my name."

"You let the Justicar Commander call you that," another interjects.

I sigh loudly and tromp ahead. "The Commander saved my life once, I feel she's earned a bit of familiarity. Calling me by a ridiculous nonsense name is a privilege, not a right. You don't get to do it just because she does."

There is also some strange kind of resonance with that woman that I can't explain. I'm not attracted to her, don't trust her, don't know her…and yet it's like I'm a lute with easily plucked strings always producing a different note.

For Miles it's a low-pitched, thrumming note that's reminiscent of a love song or an ode to passionate lovers.

With her? I can't even tell…it feels like the plucky little note that wants to stand on its own but can't.

…I have no idea what that means.

For some reason, I feel comfortable with her. It's not only that she saved my life, or showed so much compassion and reason- it isn't that I trust her. Something about her just beckons you closer, like the glow of a fire almost swallowed by a snowstorm.

I don't trust that either. But for now, I will let it be. My instincts have never failed me before. Even Vellathas' death could have been avoided if she'd listened when I told her I could feel other people moving around nearby.

"I think it's a fine name," the one who also doesn't like groups says. "As is Beauregard. But we call you Beau because you prefer it, not because it's easier."
Beau makes a noncommittal noise that doesn't reassure me in the slightest, but he seems to be backing down from that argument, so…

I glance aside at my new ally and dip my head in a respectful nod, just once.

He returns the gesture.
Hey guys, I'm thinking I might take a break for a few weeks. Build up a backlog, take it easy for a bit and then come back when I'm ready. Won't be more than a few, maybe a month, I dunno. But I think I need to rest, relax and recharge my batteries.

I know you guys'll understand, so thanks in advance for being so patient! I hope to be back soon.

Life is pretty good right now.

Cassandra pins the Templar to the wall very calmly. "Say again?"

"My -my apologies," he stutters. "Lady Seeker, I hadn't realized-"

"That I was here to see your reprehensible behavior?" she asks in a dangerous tone. "We are low on everything and you would seek to threaten and bribe one of our very few precious resources into your own hands rather than share it with your brethren?"

"I-I, of course! But we get so little, Lady Seeker, it's not enough!" he exclaims.

"It is enough because it is keeping you alive and on your feet," she growls. "If you cannot go without even a small dose of Lyrium and stay the course, how am I to trust you?"

Sigh. Well, it was great while it lasted.

"Cassandra, put him down. We got more important shit to do." I remind her.

She throws me a very nasty sideways look but she drops him obligingly and he runs off.

"Also everything about him is kind of your fault," I say once he's gone. "Wouldn't be jonesing for Lyrium if the Chantry didn't need to get the Templars hooked in order to control them. And the Chantry wouldn't be able to do that kind of shit if the Seekers did their jobs."

"I beg your pardon?" she rounds on me. "The Seekers of Truth-"

"Are supposed to seek Truth, yeah. I got that part," I interrupt. "They're also supposed to watch the highest level of Templar and Mage ranks to ferret out corruption and foster a healthy system. They didn't. Ergo," I gesture around the camp where we see both Templars and Mages running around doing errands. "Your fault. Oh, the general 'you', in this case. Whether you had any personal part in doing this, you're still a Seeker. Their failures and corruption are yours, too."

"Cassandra," a very monotone but also somehow frail voice interrupts us.

It's that Tranquil that was carrying around the Lyrium for the mages to keep healing- the Templar was hassling her.
She looks so familiar. Blonde hair, lavender eyes…Elven…

No. No mcfreakin' way.

"Avexis," Cassandra softens. It's a hell of a thing to watch. "Are you alright?"

"He did not injure me," she replies, flatly. "Thank you for your assistance. I must get these potions to the healers."

And then she turns around and walks off with the potions in her little basket, heading toward the healer's area.

She walks past the little group that was standing with us when Cassandra nyoom'd over to beat up the Templar a bit so I can see their reactions.

Solas doesn't seem to realize anyone is watching him, so that weirdly sorrowful-but-angry look on his face is displayed for the world to see for all of two seconds before he schools his face back into pleasantly neutral lines.

Miles stares at the woman and then after her, like he's watching something dangerous or maybe keeping an eye on a child toddling too close to something sharp. I can't really make sense of it.

Arisala's only reaction is to grip her staff tighter. Ren watches the whole scene with a blank expression but stormy eyes.

"That was the girl who talks to dragons, wasn't it?" I ask. Watching her go.

Cassandra steps up next to me as she does the same. "Yes. How do you know about that?"

"Sources," I say again. "This is what I'm talking about though, do you see it? This girl in any other system might've been able to foster that skill- tame dragons so we could coexist with them, or something. But in this one, she was tranquilized, for a talent that…” I shake my head. "I mean oh my god, speaking to dragons, what I wouldn't give for a chance to save a dragon instead of having to kill them."

"Avexis asked to be Tranquil," Cassandra huffs. "You know nothing."

"Mages can't consent to shit in this system you created," I snap. "Whether it's what she thinks she wanted or not, we'll never know because most mages see Tranquilization as a saving grace. To 'cure' their 'affliction' of magic. Magic isn't a disease. It's a natural force in the universe and trying to control it by ripping it out or shoving it down is unhealthy."

I turn and stare up into Cassandra's very unhappy face. "If you tell a child all their life that their blonde hair is the cause of all their misfortune and one day they hack it all off, it's not because they don't want blonde hair. It's because they think no one else wants them to have blonde hair and they think that's why bad things happen to them. Which is entirely different, I assure you."

And then I turn on my heel and start marching through the camp.

Solas, did something. I dunno what, but he took all the excess magic from my body? It stopped fucking with my head enough that I can walk now. It's excruciating, but I like being able to walk under my own power- seeing as I might actually be going to my death and all.

He healed me as much as was possible, but it still hurts like a son of a bitch.
"Ren! Head after Avexis and help out in the healing area. If we need you, I'll send somebody. I think you'll be more helpful there, though." I instruct.

He nods his head once and takes off after the willowy elf in the direction she was heading.

"And keep an eye on her, if you wouldn't mind!" I call after him.

He waves his hand up, to signal he heard me.

And now…on to Roderick, I guess.

"And just what do you mean by 'coexisting' with Dragons?" Cassandra demands while stomping after me.

"Coexisting. To live in peace and harmony with," I recite monotonously. "To find some common ground and build a foundation of peace, etcetera."

"Dragons cannot be reasoned with, they are a force of nature!" Cassandra says. "That is like asking a monsoon to please go back to the ocean."

"Avexis could talk to them," I reiterate. "Therefore there is some way to communicate, therefore there is a way to coexist. And as for natural disasters- we can get around those too with enough preparation and warning time. Being angry at a tornado will do you no good. You have to learn what it does, why it does it and then work around it."

Cassandra makes a noise. Not the 'ugh' noise, but still similarly disagreeable.

"That's a lovely sentiment and all, Commander…" Miles interjects. "But seeing as Dragons seemed to like wiping out whole villages when they were at their peak in numbers, maybe keepin' the population down and away from populated centers is the only way to coexist."

"Dragons wiped out villages because they're predators who claim territory and then Humans go stomping into said territory. But if we had a symbiotic relationship, that wouldn't be a problem. Hell, Haven used to have a village that worshiped a dragon. It didn't eat or destroy them."

"How did you know about that!?? Cassandra stops in front of me and forces me to stop with her. "That is not common knowledge!"

"No, but there were people at the time who heard about it who were willing to part with the information," I intone. "I've got eclectic interests, Cassandra. I researched a whole bunch of shit nobody else thought was important. It's not impressive I know things you just had to ask the right people about."

"No one was supposed to know about that besides the Hero of Ferelden, her companions and the bannorn! The Divine was told in the strictest of confidence!" She insists.

I sigh. "Do you recall perhaps that the Hero of Ferelden had a rather strange bunch of companions, none of whom really owed any allegiance to Ferelden or the Bannorn besides the King, their healer and Leliana?"

"Who told, then?" she asks, demanding and irate. "That is supposed to be privileged information!"

"You really think I'm gonna tell you?" I reply. "One of the ways you stop getting information from anonymous and known sources alike is if you start telling everyone where you got it. Plus, you're forgetting all those people who know have servants who are all capable of overhearing
conversations during dinners they're catering."

Cassandra grinds her teeth, I can see the muscle popping in her jaw.

"I'd be careful were I you, Seeker," Arisala speaks with a quiet cadence. "There is still one Justicar and two other people dedicated to keeping her unharmed in this group, albeit likely for entirely different reasons."

"Oh don't worry about that," I flick my wrist and walk around Cassandra. "If she were the type to hit people for being disagreeable, she likely wouldn't be in her position as one of the hands of the divine. You've gotta have some self control, I'd imagine."

She turns around and stomps after me. "So you admit you're being disagreeable?"

"I admit that's what it would look like to you," I reply.

This time she does make the disgusted noise.

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Solas POV

Every moment spent with this woman is more baffling than the last. She speaks of things most other Fereldens consider blasphemy but does so with a disaffected bearing and matter-of-fact tone.

I find myself more often than not fighting the urge to gape when she opens her mouth or moves to take action in a situation which most others would not impose themselves.

"Hey, hey you, yeah-" she calls out to one of the servants and waves them over. "You're weaving on your feet, take a fuckin' break and I don't care if the Maker himself calls you lazy and tells you to get up, you tell them Seeker Cassandra and the Justicar Commander don't want people keeling over because that's no fucking help right now, alright? And tell all the other Servants and mages too."

Turning to the Seeker she harrumphs, "don't look at me like that. Them dying from overexertion helps how?"

The Seeker rolls her eyes and shrugs the moment off but that in itself is quite an accomplishment. Seeker Cassandra is rarely talked into anything, even by her usually ever-present mage companion. He usually has to harangue her for hours…

The Commander speaks in this very authoritative, nearly bossy tone- but it is best that way. After all, it's very difficult to argue that someone should go against the word of someone who commands such presence.

The bossier she is and the more people see her being bossy, the easier it will be for the people she's helping to use her as a shield against anyone who might disagree.

But is she aware of this? Is this purposeful or a by-product of her natural personality?

She wields her power like she is acutely aware of it and in ways that indicate profound thought before action is taken. But I have not met anyone like this who did not belong to some oppressed group in Thedas. She is human. Not a mage.
She is even well-spoken when she chooses to be and is therefore educated. And according to the standards of modern Fereldens, she may or may not be a great beauty.

I'm uncertain because beauty standards tend to…include things. Cosmetics, clothing, the way one stands and walks…

She is the most perfect example of a person who should never have to worry about oppression or judgment from anyone and yet…

Perhaps I'm missing something. There is some piece of the puzzle I've not yet unlocked.

That is exciting. Regardless of the guilt I feel for putting her through all this pain and her eventual death…she is fascinating and I am enjoying watching her, learning about her, predicting her movements.

I cannot, and that is…I would not say 'fun' but it has been a while since someone could surprise me in every possible way.

Ah, we are approaching the Nightingale on the bridge. She is arguing with that Chancellor from the Chantry who barged into the dungeons and demanded the Commander be executed.

I had to paralyze him and send someone for the Seeker. I wouldn't have put it past that zealot to attempt murdering her himself and dooming us all to oblivion.

"I refuse to be party to this!" I can hear him exclaiming to the Nightingale. "She should be executed, she should be drawn-and-quartered, she should-"

"Aw shucks, I didn't know I was so popular," the Commander drawls as we approach their disagreement. "Miles why didn't you tell me I had a fan club?"

"Figured it'd go to your head," he replies, not missing a single beat.

"You!" the Chancellor takes notice of us.

Seeker Cassandra steps out to meet him as he advances on us and they squabble for a few moments as the Commander sighs and makes a show of being impatient.

I believe Miles is trying very valiantly not to join in on her bad behavior. Strange. He seems to follow her lead in nearly everything. It is…nice that he has things that are his own.

A bit disappointing those things do not involve making fun of pompous Chantry officials, but…

"It isn't the safest route, and we are trying to keep her alive," Lady Nightingale is now involved in the discussion and the Chancellor has subsided into silence, though he is so flushed I think it because he is too angry to speak.

"You know what?" the Commander speaks as they argue over our intended route. "I've got a better idea. And by 'better' I mean, let's do both."

"What are you talking about?" the Seeker rounds on her. "We cannot do both, that is why we are-"

"I see," the Nightingale taps a finger delicately against her bottom lip, elbow of that hand held elegantly in the other. "A distraction?"

"More a distract and retreat," the Commander replies. "We don't know what's waiting for us, or whether it knows where we're going- hell for all we know, rifts can think and send out more
demons on command."

Unlikely, but then again…everything happening now is rather unlikely on the whole.

"Until we know there's not an intelligence behind this, we should behave as though there is. Nothing to lose," she shrugs. "Miles, can you and Arisala help the Commander charge in, and then lead the Demons backwards? Or would you rather help with the evacuation?"

"We aren't going with you?" Miles asks.

"You can go wherever you want, but this is where I think you'll be needed," She replies.

"The Commander's right," Arisala breaks her silence for the first time since we entered camp. "I can defend on the front lines by using stunning magic to slow the waves down. You can defend from further back, and help people get out."

"While you're doing that- Cassandra, Solas, Varric and I can all take the mountain path," she says. "With…all the ladders..." her eyes go faraway as if recalling something and she stiffens in response.

"How do you know of the mountain path and how you get to it?" the Nightingale asks.

The Commander quirks an eyebrow at her. "I played servant for days, you really think I never overheard anything about the mountain path?"

The Nightingale narrows her eyes but the Commander responds by raising her brows and half-lidding hers. A slip of a smile curving her lips.

Ahh, this will be a problem. I have run into many in Thedas who remind me of myself, in some small way, but this woman…

Is so entirely both like and unlike me…it's rather unsettling.

I wouldn't concern myself with running about and tending to the common members of my organization if I had someone to delegate that to. Not that the job was ever beneath me, or is now, but…how is it she has not worked herself into an early grave? I concern myself with only the most important of work and I am still nearly exhausted by the time I am finished. I cannot imagine taking on extra work for no other reason but that I can.

But I want to.

I suppose we shall see if she manages to handle it, and if she does…perhaps there is something to learn from her.

If I had my way, I would never stop learning.

"Oh!" the Chancellor bursts. "You cannot be serious! You're going to allow her to make your plans now?"

Varric coughs on a chuckle. "They're good plans. I'd like to see you do better."

"I was not speaking to you," the Chancellor replies in a very different tone. Flicking his wrist as if to dismiss Varric entirely.

"Talk to one o' my companions like that again and you'll be wearing your teeth on the back o' your head," the Commander says.
But quietly. With feeling. Flat eyes and a determined cant to her head. It isn't an angry declaration.

It is a promise.

Wait. She was slurring her words a bit-

"AHHHHH!" she shrieks and goes down on one knee. Gritting her teeth as the mark erupts again.

I rush forward and grasp her wrist, shoving the power back in on itself and containing the damage as best I can.

We need to move more quickly.

Chapter End Notes

In case anyone is confused about why Nik seemed happy and then mad at Cassandra for hassling the Templar, it was because at first, Cassandra seemed to be doing her job and protecting mages from Templars-- but then she realized she was just hassling an addict for withdrawing and being unable to handle it and got very disappointed very fast.
Cassandra POV, Miles POV

Chapter Summary

I'm BAAA-aaack.

I've got a few weeks backlog for Unwritten and that means I'll have a headstart on some other stories so I'll again be updating every weekend!

My hands and wrists still hurt a bit if i write for too long or something but I have mostly recovered from my issues, I think. It'll take time and I'll take it slow.

I cannot stand this.

"Hey there, now, little lady-" Varric supports Nik's left side as she stumbles. "Take it easy, try and…balance, here."

"Thanks, Varric," she says in a thin, reedy voice. Unstable and wobbly, just like her body right now.

Solas sweeps up on her right and takes her hand, winding it around his arm like a gentleman escorting a lady to a ball. "If you stay in contact with me, I can perhaps keep you on your feet."

"Uh- alright," she says. Still fuzzy and unfocused, but now also tense.

A part of me sympathizes with her. He is a strange man, and though he is helping, he is also a strange man touching her.

Every other part shouts and screams and gnashes its teeth in her direction. Every moment I am not allowed to strike her down for what she has most certainly done is like a year of torturous agony.

All the opinions she has expressed, the words she has spoken, they have painted a clear picture for me.

She is a hate-monger and heathen. She denounces the Chantry at every available opportunity- denounces its servants- denounces ME! As if she has the right to judge, as if she is sitting atop some sort of moral high ground!

"Ugh…are we almost to the ladders?" she asks.

"They're right over there," Varric says and points ahead.

She lifts her chin to stare into the distance and admits in a meek voice, "I…can't see very well right now."

"We are no more than thirty seconds walking away from them now," Solas says in a small aside.

Some tension goes out of her frame. "I think me not being able to see is a good thing, really. I'm afraid of heights. Not being able to look down and see how far I am from the ground will be… better, than the alternative."
"Why did you suggest this route if you knew it would be a problem for you?" I ask. "Surely that is an oversight in your plan."

"Cassandra, question," she says.

"Yes?" Why is she refusing to answer?

"If there were a way to save everyone you love in the world from a horrible demise, would you let fear stop you?" she asks. Matter-of-factly.

Ah. "No. I would not."

"Yeah, I didn't think so." She intones, darkly. "I'm going up that fucking mountain, I just might have a panic attack once we're up there. You can carry me though, can't you."

It is not a question. It is an assertion that no matter what, we will keep moving forward. Even if she finds herself unable to, we will take her with us.

And for a small, traitorous moment, I feel a glimmer of respect awaken deep inside of me. I try to smother it, but it's difficult to do. Denying myself the truth has never been who I am and the truth is, this one small thing…I can respect.

She is still a heathen and a hate-monger, that will not change no matter how brave she is.

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Miles POV

It's always fun to go out into the world and know that I have a sword that I can use, that I can swing at people trying to kill me or the people I'm traveling with. Usually because I'm remembering a time that wasn't true and I'm…

I'm really glad Nik told me about that Elf in Kirkwall because otherwise I was about ready to give up on my dreams of wielding a greatsword someday. I mean, I could barely wield a regular sword. And I didn't know of any other Elves who could heft that heavy of a sword…

But it's less fun actually having to go out and use the sword when you halfway don't know what you're doing. I imagine it'd be more entertaining if I didn't keep fucking up my footwork.

"Ahh!" I shout and crawl backwards because I just slipped and tripped over myself while a DEMON is coming straight at me- and watch on in stunned shock when it gets shield-bashed by a nearby man in Templar armor.

He cuts straight through the thing to the core with the tip of his sword and it slowly dissolves into that goop and ash that most demons leave behind when they…for lack of a better word…die.

Then he turns to me and offers his shield hand after shrugging it momentarily onto his back and I see it's Commander Barris.

I grasp his hand and he hauls me to my feet.

"I think you're paying too much attention to your feet. If you're not practiced enough at footwork yet, just keep your feet spaced adequately apart and try to focus on where your sword is going and
how to get away from their attacks." He instructs. "And you should probably have a shield, as most
demons like to throw fire, ice and lightning at you, depending on their types."

"I know less about shields than I do about swords and I know very little about swords," I admit.

"I can tell you've just begun your training," he replies. "You make some of the same mistakes my
new recruits do. So trust me when I tell you, you've got talent- you just have to survive to be able to
use it."

I feel a small frisson of warmth and excitement at the compliment and duck my head, coughing
into my fist. "Thank you, Commander. I eh…I want to use a Greatsword someday."

At the moment I've just got a regular short sword- until I can build up the muscle to move up to a
long sword and then after that, a great sword.

Shivanas says there's not a big difference in weight between short and long swords, but that I'd be
less likely to cut my own foot off with a short sword and that was the important bit.

"A greatsword, huh?" he turns to watch as the soldiers rush forward to engage once again and as
we ready to back them up when they retreat this time. "I've got a few people you could train with to
learn the techniques even if you can't lift one yet. We'll get you a wooden one to train with, it'll be
lighter."

I'm a little nonplussed at the offer. Before Nik I'd not met any humans in any order that were…
well, willing to put a blade in an Elf's hand.

Is it just the strange times we're in or is this just him, like it is for Nik?

I glance aside and smile as I reply, "I'd like that, thank you."

He returns my smile with a bright grin and I know we've forged some kind of connection, though I
know not the breadth and depth of it…it feels good to have made one more comrade in arms that
might be trustworthy enough to guard my back.

'And it feels a great deal safer to be able to trust someone who can hold their own in a fight and not
a small, soft woman who'd throw herself in front of a blade for me and die.'

The Demons are upon us again and as I leap forward, guarding with my short sword and just
keeping their attention- not trying to do more than distract them-

It occurs to me that before now I hadn't had such a strong conviction that she would die for me, but
after everything we've been through and having been given time to think on it…

I think Nik would die for near anybody and that's a bit alarming.

Suppose once this is over, I should talk to her about that…
It's…it's too much.

Nik named me liaison between the mages and the rest of Haven- because I'm now officially a Justicar and this is the kind of jobs a Justicar does, apparently.

(Doll, I'm gonna level with you. Justicars are my solution to basically every problem there is inherent in Thedas. It's not about being mercenaries, it's not about fighting or killing, it's not even about being part of the group. It's about protecting the most vulnerable people in the world from the most powerful by presenting a front of reasonableness…then tilting the scales in favor of the person who doesn't have a whole-ass head start.)

But we're not supposed to talk about it except with each other and only under very specific circumstances. It's all about tricking the people in power into thinking you're impartial and on their side, and then helping the person who actually needs it.

No more Templars getting their way just because they said so. She promised, even if the Circles come back, even if we have to go back to them, there will be Justicars now, and not just Templars.

She said she'd be willing to go to war over it, which…at the time, I didn't believe. We were in her tent and talking about just about anything while we waited for dinner to be done.

Fidgeting, on her end. Wanted to help prepare the meal but was summarily chased off by Miles with a wooden spoon because she was still a bit weak.

When she explained all her plans for the Justicars in Thedas, I thought…that couldn't possibly work. And she'll give up when she hits the first hurdle, as most do. Anyone fighting for mage rights in Thedas who is not a mage, just…eventually gives up.

But when she came to meet us out in front of that gate, and later when she came into Eth'an and began giving orders and handing out assignments to everyone there who'd been recruited- and when she looked me in the eye and she said-

(I might die here Doll. I need you, Miles and Ren to take your places in the hierarchy and not let go. You are the Justicars now. Stand together. And if you need a non-mage human figurehead, go get one. Don't feel bad about being sneaky and deceptive. Do what you have to to survive.)

Knowing there's a person out there, willing to fight for mages, up to and then after her own death… someone who isn't a mage…it…

I don't know, I'm overcome with some emotion but I don't know what to call it. It's good, but also nervous and sort of pessimistic.

I've never wanted to believe in something more in my life.

If this works, it would mean…it would mean we would be safe. Finally, totally safe. Maybe not forever- but there'd be a precedent for protecting us even from our protectors. There would no longer be two different offices in the circle for Templars and Grand Enchanters to occupy, but a whole council of Justicars that would discuss the best course of action- both Templars and Mages,
but this time with an equal power structure instead of one where the more dominant position would come out on top.

No more power binaries.

"Ugh," a man on the street sneers at me as I walk by. "Look at the shameless prancin' these sinful sods do in the street. Knowin' we can't do anythin' about it. Sickenin', if you ask me."

The sudden drop from hopeful optimism to frightened pessimism…snaps something, inside me. So deep inside, I didn't know it was there.

I stop completely in the street and I turn to this man and his companion who are already walking away and I shout after him- "Well it's a good thing no one asked you, then isn't it?"

They both come to a shuddering, surprised stop and wheel about to look at me with wide eyes. Like they never expected me to say anything.

"If you had your way, we wouldn't be here, would we?" I say. "Wouldn't be putting warmth enchantments on your houses to keep you from catching cold, or healing your wounds, or seeing to the various smaller jobs that keep this whole camp running- that keep you comfortable and alive!"

They're still staring at me, like fish out of water. Like I'm a Mabari that sat up and spoke instead of barking.

"Well that's just fine," I make a snap decision. I have the authority. Even Fiona has to listen to me, at least for now, while she's in Inquisition territory where Nik has control of the Justicars and the Justicars are the go-betweens- the Lady Nightingale approved our appointment as peacekeepers and diplomats and guardsmen here.

"See, we'll get along just fine without you. But you'll probably be begging for us to come back before too long," I say. Lifting my chin and staring around the now large crowd of onlookers. "But until then…effective immediately- all mages are to report to Eth'an until further notice. No more healing of anyone but the troops- no more protection charms for anyone but the troops and no more comfort magic for anyone but the troops!"

There's a shockwave that goes through the crowds then, and people start to argue and shout as if I'm going to…to just sit here and listen to them!

Well, I'm not going to.

(Sometimes the most powerful move you can make is no move at all. Ignoring the right person or people can say more than your words can, at times. Just remember you don't have to engage with every asshole in camp, Doll- and you'll be fine.)

I've never been called 'Doll' by anyone who actually knew my name, it was…it was more a jeer or a way to address me to make me feel intensely uncomfortable because I was trapped in a tower with them- it was never just…an endearment that was also a shortening of my name.

The first time she called me that, it was obvious she didn't quite have the wherewithal to remember my whole name- after all she was still magic-drunk. So I took no offense. But then it happened again and again- and she would call me by my full name occasionally, so I knew she knew it.

It had just…become something else. When I wasn't looking. And I just…felt no threat. Felt no mocking tone or shift in intentions. It wasn't meant to belittle or depersonalize me.
The purpose behind it, for once, was just affection. Affection from a person who gave me protection, forgiveness and assistance. For both me and all the people I had to take care of.

She took the reins without taking control. I felt so...free. For the first time I wasn't shackled by anything. Not even responsibility. I could leave them with her, I felt- after a while, not at first- and...and they'd be taken care of. I didn't have to stay.

I chose to, anyway. But it was my choice.

And now, I'm making another. I just have to find all the other Justicars in Haven, inform them of the change and...take the mages back to Eth'an.

Shivanas named it. It means 'safe place' or 'safe home'...can't remember the exact translation but... that is what is has become.

So that is where we will go. And the Elves and Dwarves and Tal'Vashoth who live there will be far more grateful and gracious about our help to make them comfortable than the humans here ever were.

---

Tevea POV

I've just heard from everyone in Haven that the Mages have left.

Which is a bit...disheartening, to say the least.

They kept the beds warm and the blood cleaned up more easily than we could. We'll have to work twice as hard to keep everything up to a magical standard now that they're gone.

A part of me wants to be angry, but...after the fifth time today someone has shouted at me for making their bed wrong or giving them the wrong food ration or whatever it is they think I've Screwed up-

I can't even blame them for wanting to leave. I just wish...

It's pointless to speculate or think about what could be or could not be. I have to keep up with the work or I might get in trouble...though it's strange...

I've heard the head servant has stopped all physical punishments and has resorted to assigning extra chores for people who misbehave.

Grueling and cruel as that punishment may be, at least we're not suffering from so many bruises anymore. I can finally relax at least a little and when I drop something, I only freeze for a moment before bending to pick it up, clean the mess and realizing that nothing bad happened.

Soon, I hope I won't freeze at all. I hope all I will ever have to fear is an extra kitchen shift.

The Lady had something to do with this, I know she did. It only stopped when she woke up and ran off toward the Rift. Seeing as she was one of the people being beaten for tripping while working with us, well...

Maybe it just sort of brought her attention to it? She seems the kind of person who likes to fix
problems right in front of her, before everything else.

Most humans do, really. Though they usually shout for a servant if they're not one- rather than doing it themselves and she...she seems to prefer to get in there and mess about with her hands when something needs to be done.

Even before she left, she stopped to speak to each and every servant that was head of a respective duty and find out how much work they do, for how long each day and what they get paid- I didn't really understand why, but she spoke with the Lady Montilyet before she left...

Perhaps she really does want to know all of this so she can be a better leader, as Navette was telling people. Saying that she likes to know everyone's skills and abilities so she can command better.

If that will extend to the Servants, I suppose that means we'll be more efficient, though I shudder to think what that might look like.

Navette has assured anyone who asks that her Lady would be a far better leader than they were expecting. But also cautioned us about her tendency to teach.

I rather like learning but I hope she doesn't stop to explain mopping to me or any such thing, I believe I'd be the expert on that. It would be so tiresome for yet another person to stop me and tell me how to do a job I'd been doing since I was eight. Or ten, rather- but eight is about as young as we are when we begin to learn from our parents.

Playing in the house with the broom and cloths, doing as mummy and daddy do because you think it's all some game and part of everyone's lives and then you grow up and...

You realize it's only part of yours.

And it was never a game.

That's the worst realization of all.

"Oi, we need an extra pair of hands here!" someone shouts across camp. "This blood is not comin' up from the wood and the surgeons need it as sterile as possible in 'ere!"

"Wait wait, we need help with the fireplaces and the bedwarmers!" someone else shouts from the opposite end. "If anyone goes to bed cold tonight, we might have to deal with colds and vomit in our near future."

I shudder at that thought.

There's not enough of us- we're too small in number, too overworked, we'll never be able to do everything.

My eyes drift traitorously to the boundaries of Haven, where Eth'an lay beyond…waiting…welcoming…

I'll just have to go there when my shift is over and enjoy some time spent with warmth and laughter and safety all around me. That'll be a treat for getting all my work done.

After all, the servants can't just leave, not like the Mages could…

It's a completely ridiculous idea to think that we have that- that we could!

I walk over to the surgeon's area, get on my hands and knees and scrub at the blood stains, resolved
to just…try to make up the difference as much as possible, for everyone I can.

To try and keep us in the place we are, somehow, where a mistake doesn't mean a fist to the back-after all, who knows how far the head servants' mercy will stretch, even goaded by the Lady?

Have to do my best to keep everything…

Have to do my best.

Chapter End Notes

Part of the reason my story was so flat before is because Nik was doing everything. I just thought of things that should be done, and couldn't figure out which canon characters should be doing them, so I just said well 'Nik'll do 'em'.

And of course that created the White Savior Problem so I had to figure out what to do to make it less offensive and I finally gave my desires to make more OC's voice and now I know how it was supposed to go all along.

Dahlia and Tevea are very important for that. As are Ren, Miles, Shivanas, Arisala and any other OC's I've created.
In the end, I do have to be carried every once in a while, here at the end of our journey.

But I didn't need to be carried at the top of the stairs. That was...a proud moment.

...it was also mostly because I forced myself to dissociate in order to stay calm and not look down. It's been a while since I did that on purpose.

But then the rift with the Scouts happened and...well, after closing it up, Solas said I was being torn apart a little at a time and closing the rifts only made it worse...

He said even if there were more on the path, we should bypass them in favor of the Breach. And like...

I agree. I mean, how can you not. But also, it's difficult to resist that impulse to reach out your hand and just...

It's like a compulsion, like something else has control. A lot like my sixth senses, to be honest. My find-it sense, my feel-it sense...they just kind of take over because...I don't want to control them or wrestle them into submission- I want to go with them. Flow with them.

And this feels like the same kind of thing, but different from any other sense. A rift-closer sense?

So now, every once in a while...my legs just stop working for a bit, and I have to be picked up and toted forward by Cassandra.

It's a signal now, I just... go down on my knees and lift my arms so she can scoop me up before I fall. And then I start moving my legs when they're working again and she puts me down.

I think she understands the need to keep walking as long as I can- to have some control over my body...

And everywhere I am, so too is Solas...which I mean...I had been expecting him to be there- but not quite so close.

Nearly always touching me, taking the pain away almost completely- I don't know if he's cutting off my nerves or actually healing stuff but either way, it's...I can't not accept the help or I'll be a screaming ball on the ground.

As it is, the pain has settled into the background of my mind, but it's still there. Every second of my existence, it's there.

We're walking through the Temple of Sacred Ashes now. And...stepping down on hard rock beneath my feet instead of soft snow is...jarring. To the point that I have to start walking on my tiptoes in an effort to keep as much of my feet off the ground as possible.

I'm wearing shoes, but it doesn't feel like it. It's...my feet are so sensitive, my whole body is so sensitive- I can feel the wind like a cutting edge on my face, and every breath is like needles in my lungs.

Every step is like smacking my foot dully with a hammer. It hurts...so much.

Solas is still walking next to me, hand over mine where it rests in the crook of his arm. This is the
way we've been walking since the start. Whenever Cassandra puts me down, he's there, to my right.

And it is so incredibly weird, I just feel so...fucking flustered. I mean, not only is he like this world's coming Ragnarok all on his own, but...

Every time I look at him or hear him speak, it reminds me of the way I always felt about him. Not the crushy feelings, no I don't know him actually- personally, enough for that. This is more the whole... 'he's got such good stories, I can't wait to see what he has to say about this thing' and 'he stopped to help someone on the side of the road and did it out of sight of anyone because he just likes to help and it's not part of the long con on the Inquisition' and 'he lit his coattails on fire once and hoped no one would notice'...

*I know him* too intimately for a first meeting and it's getting to me.

At least...knowing that some things are different here, kind of puts a buffer between him and those feelings.

He might not be *that* Solas.

But what does that even mean? For me, going forward, for Thedas?

Who really is he, if he's not what I was expecting?

"Careful," he mutters and pulls me away from a vein of Red Lyrium poking up through the ground. "It is everywhere."

I inhale deeply and try to keep focused on the ground before me. "I know...and I can hear it singing..."

"Yeah, it's creepy isn't it?" Varric is slightly behind and to the side of us. Studying the Red Lyrium with suspicion and wariness. "Nobody touch it, it'll drive you crazy."

"I'm too tired to get on your case about the 'crazy' thing right now, but remind me to give you a whole lecture later," I say. "Cause it's a good one."

"Can't wait," Varric says cheerily. "You're uh...kinda listing to the side there, little lady."

Oh.

I correct, but I do it too much and end up almost falling over onto Solas and he has to fix me back upright.

"Perhaps the Seeker should carry you from here, so you can preserve your strength for the Breach."

He suggests.

And he's right, so I just...let go of him, drop to my knees and wait for Cassandra to walk over and pick me up.

She's a lot more gentle now than she was before, but my increased sensitivity still makes me flinch and hiss when she scoops me into her armored arms.

"My apologies," she says, as she has been saying every time she picks me up.

"It's fine," I say, as I say every time she picks me up.
Then we're walking the last few steps we can walk in the uh…Temple's antechamber? And we're…so close.

And this damn singing is so loud. It's like white noise right in your ear, but instead of being soothing or even dropping into the background, it's…high-pitched and clings to your eardrum.

I cover my ears, that changes nothing.

Humming a discordant tune, changes nothing.

So I groan to myself and curl my hands tighter to my head, twining my fingers in my hair and I hum with the tune, trying to cover it up-

And I thought that this also, changed nothing…

Until I opened my eyes. Because I felt Cassandra gasp and go still.

"It's…it's…green," Varric stutters. "What the hell did you do?"

"I was just humming to try and drown it out!" I say, breathless.

It is green. The Lyrium all around us, that was just red- it's all green. But only in a small circle here, around me and extending outward a bit.

Everything beyond that, is still red.

'...The emerald waters of the Fade…'

"That wasn't me, that can't have been me!" I curl into a tighter ball in Cassandra's arms.

If that was me, then I'm totally out of control and don't know what I'm doing.

I hate that.

When I glance around, I see that Varric looks really freaked out and Solas…Solas just has this blank-eyed stare as he gazes into the green glow of the newly changed Lyrium. Like he's seeing something else.

A razorwire of pain rips through my insides and I convulse in Cassandra's arms until Solas's hand is once again making contact with my skin- and it all…fades a little.

I'm still in so much excruciating pain I can't even respond when they ask me if I'm okay, but I can comprehend what they're saying. A little. Mostly I just get the gist.

We're moving on. They're afraid I might die before we get to the Breach…

I'm afraid I might die before we get to the Breach.

Why am I so different? Was the Inquisitor in this much pain? Because it didn't seem like they got this pain unless the Mark was pulsing, not all the time and not….not like it was ripping them apart from the inside.

What's different about me?
I watch in complete silence as the shadow of the Divine calls out for help.

As the shadowy figure points toward the shade of Nik, who stands resolute before his order to kill her. Eyes determined and spine straight.

Everything about it is…strange. The only figure wreathed in shadow is the attacker. Nik is translucent and faded to some degree, but still vibrant and easily identifiable. And the Divine…she glows with light and color.

Why? Is it real? If Nik was really there, and the Divine looked to her for help…

And then it is over and I turn to look for the real Nik, only to find her collapsed on the ground. Solas holding her up and administering more magic to keep her from falling apart. This place almost seems to hurt her worse than the Breach itself.

I am struck, suddenly with…not regret, exactly. Not guilt, exactly.

But Regalyan was right. I settled on the easiest answer, the fastest and most expedient, and looked no further. I still believe she is a heathen and a hate-monger- but a brave one who tried her best to help the Divine.

As far as I have seen, Nik has a deep appreciation for life, all life around her. She hates the Chantry, but perhaps…perhaps that did not extend to the people in it. For whatever reason, she still sees them as people worthy of saving.

It is possible she is just a living contradiction, like many I have known in my life. Like Regalyan himself. Like…like Avexis.

People who were supposed to be something else but ended up the way they are.

Perhaps she can still be saved. Redeemed. It will have to wait, but it is something to think on.

"The Rift is sealed," Solas stands from her side and walks over to me. Speaking in hushed tones. "We must open it before we can close it. It will rip her apart!"

"Then let us hope this seals the Breach," I respond.

"And if it does not?" he challenges. "What then?"

I do not know. But we have no other options. "Prepare her to open the rift."

His jaw ticks but he steps away from me. "This will attract attention from the other side, Seeker."

"Stand ready for Demons!" I turn and shout to the men.

This is…all we can do. She decided to give her life for Thedas if it was necessary. I am abiding by her wishes, whether any of us likes it or not.

I can admit it will not pain me to make this decision. I no longer believe she has killed the Divine, but…something about her frightens me. As if she could only cause destruction to everything I have ever known, simply by existing.
That is a feeling I do not like. Even moreso because I do not know why I feel it. Something about her is just…wrong.

Varric POV

The fight is brutal.

All the way through, the Pride Demon roars and shoots lightning that's more powerful than any other demon I ever faced with Hawke.

"It must be very old," Chuckles mutters in-between attacks. "Or a concept that is very broad." Almost seems kinda sad about it. And not ‘it's killing a bunch of people’ kinda sad, either. I heard he was pretty demon positive, but I didn't really believe it much till now.

He's mostly gotta stay back with the Little Lady at the moment. Hold together her quickly unraveling body…poor kid.

She can't even be in her thirties yet. At least Hawke had time to build up to what he was. Time to get stronger, time to make friends to help him out…

How long has she had? A day?

Not even a full one, either.

Guess the only thing to do is support her best we can…and hope to the Void this works.

The Demon takes an eternity to put down. And when it's finally died and wisped away in the breeze- we've got a LOT less Scouts down there. Even fewer soldiers.

It's difficult to watch Chuckles prop the Little Lady up on her feet and walk her forward. Especially when her feet go out from under her and he's got to pick her up to keep her from falling.

He's gotta carry her eight agonizing steps forward before they're even in range- and they are agonizing. I can tell by the way she makes a small pained noise every time he takes a step.

Somehow his footsteps get more fluid and even then, she's just a squirming, whimpering mess.

I'm shadowing them, Bianca's nose up and ready to fire if anything else appears before they can get to that rift. So I can hear every little noise she makes.

I can also hear Chuckles whispering and muttering encouragement and promises that it won't be much longer.

Never would've guessed that guy was so soft. Always presents this hard outer shell, or a flippant face that deflects anything besides the most inconsequential questions… Only other people I've ever met like that have been real shifty types and people guarding soft fluffy centers.

I'm still not really sure which camp he fits into at the moment. But it's looking like the fluffy center is possible, at least.

Still, he carries her up to the Rift. Settles her down on her knees and lifts her left hand. Even
though she tries to curl in a ball and probably unconsciously pulls at that arm, he doesn't let go.

His expression is something to see. Brows kinked up, eyes with a look in 'em I can't really decipher…

Mouth grim but set.

And then he lifts her hand up as high as it'll go- and does something to the Mark. Prods it with magic, I'd guess…

Light shoots from the mark up to the rift above.

It's almost like lightning. Green, crackly lightning.

It connects. And I brace myself for what happens next because for all I know…this is the one that breaks the kid.

This is the one that rips her apart.

But the strangest thing happens.

After the rift shudders, and finally closes with a harsh tug on Chuckles' end…

Amidst all the celebration…

He's staring down at her, hand hovering over her chest with a light golden glow about it…and he looks confused.

She still seems to be breathin' so I sidle over and ask.

"What's up?"

He shakes his head and his lips part. Then his mouth closes, he swallows and they part again. "She isn't any worse than she was a moment ago."

"Well, that's good, right?" The way he's looking at her, I don't think it's as good as it should be.

"No, not…not exactly," he says. "I thought I knew what was causing it. Now I…we must get her back to Haven if she is to have any chance at surviving. Did the Breach-"

He lifts his head up and I follow. But…I already knew it hadn't.

I mean, the light around here is still tinged with green…

It's still up there…but…it's not pulsating anymore, is it?

"So the Breach has stopped expanding…but it has not yet closed," he says. Staring up at it like he can't look away. "We have time…for her to recover, I think."

"Well that's a relief," I shoulder Bianca and sit down in the slush next to him and her. "I felt like a monster this whole time, you know. Expecting someone to die for me and the rest of the world. Couldn't think of any alternatives, but I didn't want it."

So it's a damn relief that she'll live.

"Yes, well..." He stands slowly, carefully arranging her in his arms so she isn't jostling too much
when he walks. "We need to get her back to Haven and begin the very involved process of healing her from the inside out, or she won't survive much longer."

"Well, there's the Seeker," I observe. She's stomping her way over as we speak. "Hopefully rallying the troops for a march back won't be too...time-consuming."
Solas POV

I've never seen such devastation in a Human body before.

Or an Elvhen, Dwarven or Qunari body, for that matter.

Her skin is riddled with small fissures through which blood flows sluggishly. Her insides have them in greater number- over every organ and bit of muscle. Even her bones are fragile and prone to cracking.

"Hey, you're pouring too much magic into her," the Lieutenant Healer moves close to my side to say. Staring down at her with a healer's eye. "She can't take it."

"I am not pouring it in, so much as…cycling it through," I reply. "I have devised a spell to pull the magic out of her body as soon as I put it in. I allow it to run along her injuries, healing them by increments- and then I retake it."

There are a few moments of silence before he moves into position and puts his hands over her body. "Teach me."

I give him a sideways glance, but he stubbornly meets my eyes.

"I'm not abandoning her to a new healer she doesn't know. I'm the one and only person who was usually allowed to tend to her. When she wakes up, I should be there. And she should know I was here the whole time, doing what needed to be done. She's welcoming but also leery of new people." He says. "Her comfort is paramount, as my patient. My skillset should grow to accommodate her if it can."

I tilt my head and feel my lips curl at the edges. "I trust you will not need much direction. It is a simple thing, albeit nothing like what you would have learned in a circle."

"Just tell me how it works and I'll figure it out," he replies.

A sort of flicker of respect rises in me. Fingertips of warmth and camaraderie wrapping around my chest and clinging tight.

This is always my favorite part of being around people. Watching them grow, seeing the lengths they will go to, feeling the emotion that flows through them when they decide to go against everything they've been taught and help.

"There is an ebb and flow to the energy," I begin. "In all people, as in her. But hers is like a tidepool. Pulling everything in and down to the depths of herself, rather than circulating it out. It is almost as if it is attempting to gorge on energy in order to feed a starved body."

"Starved of what?" he asks.

Smiling a bit more, perhaps, I respond. "That is the question, isn't it?"

I am no longer afraid that she will die. We are not quite…out of the woods, as of yet. But I have seen her determination and strength in the face of impossible odds. I highly doubt this will be the end of her.

The spirit is what determines these things, after all. Will it cling to her body at all costs or cast
itself away? That is the question that she answered for me when she pushed herself up a straight cliff, shaking in fear. And again when she strode forward through excruciating pain.

Her spirit is one of endurance, though I do not know if that is her core nature.

For now, I am consumed with the mystery.

"You seem to look at her, at all of this, like some kind of big game," he observes. Eyes closed with his hands outstretched, searching for the tidepool of Nik's energy.

"That is because it is," I reply, blithely. "All life is a game. All life is serious and dangerous but fun and filled with mystery." Chuckling a bit, I move my hands and my magic to another part of her body that requires more attention than the one I've currently been working on. "If you focus so hard on your patient's possible death rather than the thrill of discovery and unlocking the puzzle- you will find you hesitate at critical times."

"I don't believe replacing caution with a none-may-care attitude is really the answer to Healing jitters," he replies.

I glance over at him and raise a brow when he opens his eyes to meets my gaze. "It is fascinating how often people confuse hesitation with caution. They are not the same thing. There are different words for them because they are different concepts. Hesitation is born not of caution but of fear. Caution itself pushes you forward more slowly-- it does not halt you altogether."

He considers this with a faraway look in his eyes and sighs deeply. "You are a strange one Solas, but you make about as much sense as she always does. Absolutely none and all the sense in the world at the same time. Never met anyone like you two. Now it seems as though you're multiplying."

I mull that over with a hum. "I've heard many tales about her, but none have painted a consistent picture."

"And none will, she's…not a particularly consistent person to most people's minds." He says. "She directs her anger where it needs to go, and doesn't allow it to bleed out all over others who didn't inflict the wounds. I found this strange at first, too. She is…very controlled. She doesn't seem it, but everything about the way she acts and how she teaches is about control. Not the usual kind, though. I don't know how to describe it."

There is silence as he begins to push energy into the ebb and flow of her soul- and then tries to pull it back out.

"Choice," he says finally. "She doesn't like it when your emotions and perceptions rule you. If you make a choice to do something, I think she believes that's just…better."

Fascinating. The freedom of choice is the rallying cry of all oppressed or trapped people. But to go further than that and make choice the very core of your beliefs and behavior…

If he is right, it will soon become apparent. And it will mean she and I are far more different than I believed.

Choice is imperative and important to me. But it is not what drives me forward.

That is a relief. I was beginning to feel some sort of connection, a parallel. Something that might prove difficult to break at the appropriate time.
The wispy threads of our tenuous bond wither a bit—but they're still there.

Why?

Bonds made through magic and the understanding and closeness of others are not supposed to form this quickly or easily. Even if it is not complete, if it is a wisp of color and shadow...it is not supposed to be there at all.

It is almost as if...

No, that's not likely. She seems...perturbed by my presence. I'm not certain why. Two of her Lieutenants are Elves and one of them is an Elven Mage. It isn't the usual problem I have with those who fear me because of what I am or hate me when they see my Elven features.

It makes no sense at all that this bond is coming from her-reaching across to me. If there were any bond to be had between us one would think it would feel tentative, new and...

Not like this.

Adversarial but affectionate.

I need the ear of the 'Herald of Andraste' if I am to steer the course of this Inquisition but to be bound by magical bonds is unnecessary. Still, it is not something one can stop. It is as natural and inexorable as the tide on the shore.

I hum as I think of the newly-bestowed title the people of Thedas have given her.

Some of her Justicars are fanning the flames of Zealotry.

More specifically one in particular with a very small following...

"How do you think she will react?" I ask, musingly. "To the knowledge that half of Thedas now views her as a Religious Icon?"

The Lieutenant snorts almost violently and holds back what I assume is laughter. "Oh she's going to hate it. She didn't even want to be the Justicar Commander. She threatened to run off into the woods on more than one occasion. I think she only didn't because she felt responsible for them. Us."

"How strange," I muse. "She seems to wield her power and influence like it is second nature. With forethought and expertise."

"I was confused about that, too," he replies. "I asked if she used to be a Noblewoman or something. She's so clean and unscarred and...she seems so fragile. Pale. Like she's never worked a day in her life. Know what she told me?" He speaks as if it is some great revelation.

Meanwhile his distraction has allowed him to at last grasp the purpose and function of the spell and also follow the flow of her energy without thinking.

"What?" I prompt, smirking a bit to myself.

These mages in these times...they think too hard about their magic. They never realize that all they need is to let go. Stop perceiving it as something else, and see it as their true self. See the truth that is right before them.

"She said, 'my father was a holy man in a dominant religion in the region. My mother was poor and
tried to do menial labor but could never work anywhere for long’ and she said ‘the holy men where I am from might become rich or powerful but in our personal corner of that religion, they didn't. He was well-off to a certain extent, enough to live comfortably but that was because of his Masonry work, not because he was a holy man.’ And I think she felt the need to explain that because of the Chantry and how it works here.”

"Why did she speak of her parents that way?” I ask. "As if they were separate?"

"Where she's from, there's something called 'Divorce'. Basically you sunder the bonds made between you in a religious or lawful ceremony and you are free to pursue other marriages. Her mother and father lived apart and had different relationships." He chuckles a bit under his breath. "Imagine such a thing. Must have been a small village in an ignored corner of Thedas. Allowing people to forsake their holy vows of Union, it's…not something the Chantry would do lightly and likely only for a King or Emperor. To protect the royal line if someone wasn't fertile or something. I remember hearing whispers that Cailan was going to set his wife aside for that very reason."

"It sounds rather prudent, I think," I say. "To allow others to make and break bonds as they see fit."

Magical bonds can only be broken if you find yourself at odds with the person you were friends with before. Or if you become friends with an enemy. Even then, it is simply replaced with a different kind of bond.

Being free of all bonds you yourself do not choose…that does sound…lovely.

"Sure, but it's not gonna happen any time soon anywhere the Chantry holds power," he replies.

I look down upon the small woman lying on a medical cot in a cabin that has been made hers while she slumbers and remember her conviction. Her determination. Her charisma.

Remember how she stood against many in our path who questioned her authority to give servants ease and mages protection.

The look in her eyes.

"Mmh. Perhaps not."
"There are tracks," I softly call out.

The snow-haired Dalish joins me and kneels next to me to examine them. "More Druffalo? Should we hunt it or bring it back?"

He is always very crisp in scent. Something sharp but also earthy. It hides his predator-scent well. I do not know who taught him to use pine needles this way but it is a well done job. I can barely detect him and what I scent is that of a tree that shouldn't be here.

Animals will not figure out that the tree scent does not belong.

"If we bring it back, we will have more next season when the mothers give birth- if this one is female. If it is male, we can slaughter it as we have enough." We do not need many this season.

"Mhm," he hums in agreement. "But we'll take it back before we slaughter it. So we don't have to drag the carcass."

I grunt in assent. I do not begrudge him his need to state the obvious. He has been teaching foundling humans for days. Likely, they did not think about things such as needing to drag a carcass all the way back home.

Many young hunters make the mistake of trying to carry their prey. For Deer this is not so dire, as you can carry them for a ways before needing to stop and rest. If you are strong. But it is impossible for Druffalo.

What horrors has the young hunter seen in his time with the Human foundlings?

It matters not. I am here to aid him now and we have only the need of one other on occasions in which we are not enough to handle the hunt- and he may call upon a human foundling that is not quite so prone to bumbling about in the woods.

The other Dalish is too busy running the new settlement just outside Haven. It has grown since its inception and now with no Demon attacks, can do so much more quickly and easily. And he is not quite a hunter, either.

We find the Druffalo and it is male, so we loop some rope about its neck and take it back to camp.

The meat will be given to the cooks and distributed to everyone in Haven who can pay for meals. A small portion of it will be given to our settlement and the other Dalish will decide what to do with it.

The hide is all ours. It was part of our agreement. We can hunt for more meat if we do not have enough- and there are other things to eat, besides. But the Hide was essential. Our people need warmth, clothing, cloaks- and armor. Leather armor may not be as good as metal but it is more protection than cloth affords.

And some of the Justicars need new armor.

So we will take the Hides to the Tanner, and from there to the Armorsmiths- some of whom make the armor for the Inquisition and some of whom can be paid to commission new suits. And we will have everyone who defends camp well-outfitted likely well before the Soft Lady wakes.
"I feel restless today. I'm going to go hunting the smaller game, you coming with?" the snow-haired Dalish asks.

He shifts his weight nearly soundlessly, back and forth as if waiting to dash off into the trees on the tips of his toes. Going without boots, I do not understand how he traverses the woods. So many thorny things and fallen branches that might bruise or cut your soles…

"I would ask for their bones," I reply. "I can make and sell tools from them."

"Sure, have at them," he says. "I'm gonna skin 'em up and take the meat. I dunno why we need this agreement with Haven to take the Druffalo and Deer we hunt, anyhow. We could do it all and use it all ourselves."

"Your leader said that this agreement allowed for a trade of other supplies," I say. "I do not know which ones, but he was adamant it was important."

The snow-haired Dalish sighs. "Well they can have the big game if it's so damn important but I'm keeping the squirrel and rabbit hides. And Nugs, I'm hunting a lot of Nugs."

"Nug bones would be perfect for tool-crafting," I agree. "Where shall we begin?"

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Miles POV

So many damn trade agreements with Haven. So many damn provisos to keep track and be on top of.

I have to be, or the damn fools try to cheat us. Last time I caught them trying to trick one of my people, I had to send a summons to Commander Barris and now we're both irritated with his men.

Doesn't help much, though. They know their jobs are secure so long as there are Rifts and so long as that Breach sits in the sky. So there is no penalty bad enough to keep them from trying.

They can't beat them, and I don't think Barris wants to, which is actually quite a bit more civilized than I was expecting from a Human commander.

All the ones I know from back home are…well, beastly, really. Like Andras. He seemed…normal to me, at the time.

Now that I'm here, seeing all these somewhat-honorable people doing their jobs without constantly being drunk or beating the people under them, I've begun to question everything.

I knew before that it was wrong. I just didn't think it could be any different. Nik herself seemed like some kind of exception that proved the rule, instead of a new rule being established altogether.

And now there's Barris who at least tries to punish his men for bad behavior though he refuses to meet the lowness even of Andras's better days. And the Seeker who has softened somewhat since coming back from stopping the Breach's expansion for whatever reason— who is still angry that Dahlia pulled the Mages out of Haven but mostly leaves it be as they're still providing for the Inquisition soldiers at least.

That was a brilliant stroke, that. You can leave the common man out to the cold and elements and
no one will care except the common man- but leave the Military too and they'd have been in
danger.

She was trying to make some point about how convenient it is to have mages around- but they
mostly don't see that.

At the moment all we're really getting are a bunch of complaints about how hard it is now that
they're 'shirking' work. Which is funny because they work in Eth'an just fine.

Shivanas actually named the place though he'll swear up and down he was just talking about it
in Elvhen and didn't actually call it by a real name, just… that safe place. He said. But he said half
of it in Elvhen and it sounded…

I don't know, something about it rang in my ears like it was perfect. So perfect I named it that
immediately.

Well, just about everything Shivanas says rings perfect in my ears, that's nothing new.

"Oi, Lieutenant-Commander!" my most vocal and abrasive ally in Eth'an calls out to me.

She's a small human woman, somewhat like the Commander- soft looking but with a mean streak
that shows in her every feature. Sharp narrowed eyes, shoulders that are always tight and drawn up,
back always straight.

"What is it, Lutetia?" I ask while rounding one of our newly constructed shelters- that does not
quite have a finished roof yet.

I see she's standing in front of a very large, burly man. Crossed arms and scowl in place.

"He's tryin' to reallocate resources without approval!" she shouts.

He chuffs and reaches out to grab onto her and move her aside.

I'm beside him before he's finished putting her down. She's squawked and beat his arms with her
hands the whole way- and once his hands are no longer touching her, I go for the low blow.

Nik taught me that when someone is fighting to kill you, or is hurting someone else and you don't
think you can win traditionally- then honor doesn't matter. Your personal honor as someone who
doesn't kick other men's balls, doesn't matter.

Protecting yourself and the people around you, matters.

So once he's down on his knees and I can safely crack him in the head with the hilt of my sword-it's over pretty quickly.

And there's a silence in the camp.

I look up and just about everyone has stopped to watch. Looking agape, most of them.

It's quiet. So I take advantage of it and raise my sword to get their attention. "Next person to put
their hands on someone to move them or otherwise force them into doing something is going to get
worse than knocked unconscious with the end of my pommel. I will cut you and you will be ejected
from Eth'an. Like this one."

I nudge the unconscious lump with my foot. He groans in his throat, but he's still unconscious.
"Someone gather his things and have him carried back to Haven. Tell them they're to inform him that he's no longer welcome in Eth'an and exactly why." I leave it at that.

Nik always said you have to act like you're sure someone will take your orders, even if you're not certain. 'Your confidence may often spur people to action' She'd said.

I can't let even small things like this go. Nik couldn't in camp, or everyone would run wild and do whatever they wanted.

She had to kick two men and one woman out of our group on the way to Redcliffe and I heard she got rid of two more on the way to Haven.

Dunno what those other two did but the people I saw her get rid of were mean arseholes who didn't know how to be polite. Nik was sick of correcting their behavior. Especially that woman, she…did not like being told she couldn't do what she wanted with me and the mages- telling us to do her chores and the like…

Nik fumed when she found out she was flirting with me on top of everything.

I know what that means, and it seems Nik isn't a stranger to the concept either.

She hadn't done anything yet, so Nik wasn't sure if she'd have done anything or if she was just daft and didn't know that hitting on someone you treat like dirt wasn't going to get her anywhere- so she split the difference and told her to get lost in the woods.

Said she hoped something ate her so if she was wrong not to have her executed, no one would get hurt.

I think she did the best she could, really. You can't punish people for things they haven't done yet. That's…that seems wrong, to me.

When I finally get back to where I was, tending to my duties and signing off on paperwork at the giant desk I had to have made in the middle of everything because there was no office space at all and who cares when you can just shut everything inside a drawer, really-

I can hear everyone going back about their business and hearing it, calms me.

"Got you something for lunch, ey?" Lutetia is there at my elbow, suddenly.

I hadn't even thought to check on her. I can't even remember glancing at her after I dealt with the Brute.

She's proffering a bowl filled with vegetable stew- small meat shreds floating inside the brown broth.

My mouth waters. "Ah. Thank you, Lutetia." I feel a bit guilty for forgetting all about her. But then I forget just about everything a moment after it's done- at least recently.

This job is too much for me all on my own. I'm glad I was able to delegate tasks to Dahlia and Ren. Shivanas is happy to lead hunting expeditions as is Arisala so that is also covered…

Now I just need someone who'll help me with all my damn paperwork.

"Can't have our leader dropping dead from hunger, now can we." She states and then walks away after I take the bowl.
Lutetia is a hard woman, but a kind one, too. And my number one supporter, as strange as it seems.

I've got…a few of those. Really, almost everyone or nothing would get done. But some of them are pretty vocal about how I'm the 'Leader' of Eth'an and…

It's all a bit much at times. It's like I'm the Hahren of my own Alienage. Except there are Humans, Dwarves, Qunari and Mages, here too.

So I suppose it's more like I'm a mayor or…hell, an Arl, if we were bigger.

That's a bit…strange to think about. I think I'd like to focus on eating instead.
My feet are tired. My hair is escaping my bun all over the place.

My hands ache, my back hurts, my shoulders and hips feel...strange.

Disconnected, like they're not even there.

I'm so exhausted that I fall face-first into bed when I make it back to the Servant's Quarters, even though I know I have a few more hours in my shift.

I simply cannot get up. I cannot do anymore. I cannot even muster the energy to get under my meagre blankets.

Apparently the lady - the Herald, gave permission to the servants present at the front lines of battle to take breaks to sleep when they had been spent. And now we have to make up the difference when they've decided they've had enough.

I'm all for respecting and honoring those who've put their lives in danger but at this point I'm nearly ready to strangle them all.

Perhaps if the Head servant could find a way to better balance us all, it wouldn't be so bad. We could take shifts so everyone could have a rest now and then.

But I suppose I shouldn't complain, as I know I also could've been one of the servants on the front lines who was targeted by demons and killed...

Still.

"Oi!" a very loud, human man stomps into the servants quarters. "I wanna know who cleaned me room! Ya little thieves!"

Something...something deep inside...snaps.

I don't know what it is, but it's like a physical feeling of a tether being yanked until it frayed and then finally...

Getting out of bed with energy I didn't realize I had, I shove my pillow into my blanket and wrap it up tight.

Hanging the tied blanket off my arm, I shove my few effects in on top of the pillow and then pull the mattress over my head.

"Tevea?" Raizel appears at my side and helps me with the mattress, whispering. "What are you doing?"

I didn't really know till it came spilling out of my mouth. "Can't take this anymore, I'm going to Eth'an, least over there the man in charge is an elf and probably keeps mouthy humans out the servants barracks."

"Wait a moment," he disappears and then reappears a few moments later with his own mattress on
his back and his effects all tied up in his blanket, hanging off his arm. He says not a word about my 'mouthy humans' crack, though he is one. A human, I mean.

…Raizel is quite the opposite of mouthy. Thank Andraste.

Together we march past the loud human who is still demanding someone pay attention to him and I think I spy a few other people copying us and following us out- but I can't be sure if they were wrapping up their things to come with us or to avoid this man going through them and stealing something and declaring it was his.

It's happened before.

So we leave the servants barracks and march our way across the whole of Haven. Ignoring people who shout at us to stop or ask us what we're doing and just keep moving, at a slow, steady pace. Until we reach the front gates and the guards try to stop us- because of course they would.

We're taking only the mattresses and things that belong to us, but of course it would be too much for our hands to hold without-

"Ay ay," a Justicar who has been staying near the Lady's cabin shouts at the gate guards. "Let 'em go ya daft gits, they ain't gettin' far with mattresses on their backs. What's it to ya if they're movin' to Eth'an, be less crowded 'ere, then won't it?"

Of course it's obvious what we're doing. It's obvious we couldn't walk far with Mattresses on our backs- no matter how light they are, they're unwieldy and itch in places when I touch where the straw is exposed.

It's surprising that anyone spoke to our defense. Though if anyone would, I suppose it would be a Justicar. Trained by her to look out for us, as much as possible. That's what she said they were for.

Looking out for people who get the worst in life. Not just elves, but all nonhumans. The poor. Everyone. She seemed to have a burning hatred for the Nobility whenever we spoke of them.

So I suppose it makes some sort of sense that it was a Justicar to speak and allow us through the gates. Shouting sense into a pair of guardsmen who likely thought their conduct unwatched and unjudged.

Now that they are hailing her the Herald of Andraste- do they fear her judgment?

I know she isn't Andrastian. But whether that means she is or isn't the Herald of Andraste is yet to be seen. Sometimes people are called to service of the Maker with or without asking.

Only time will tell.

We pass that woman who was kicked out of Haven with her loyal following- she's camping in a small ring with them just between Eth'an and Haven's gates.

"You!" she calls out as we pass by. "If you are children of Andraste you will repent at the feet of her Herald!" Her blonde hair is free in the wind, as if she found the confines of her usual style too much for her fervor. Or perhaps as though she was readying for bed when we happened upon her.

Her armor is still gleaming in the light of the setting sun and I think I have never seen her without it.

She keeps shouting such things at us as we pick up our speed toward Eth'an. Obviously hoping we
will join her, or stop to talk, or anything. But we cannot.

Whether she is right or wrong, she is somewhat…zealous. And Zealotry is never the sign of a calm, rational mind.

And I am so tired…if I stop, I may fall over in a dead faint.

There's guards posted to keep her away from their settlement and when I see it- I…

It's so much bigger than I thought it was.

"Seems the Lieutenant-Commander has expanded his borders a bit," Raizel comments. "That's almost twice the size of Haven!"

If they had turned Refugees away completely, Eth'an would never have existed. The entire reason it did at all, even before it was named- is because of Lieutenant Ren. He gave their shelter away when they entered Haven-

And because of Commander Barris, of course. I recall that the Seeker and Nightingale were too involved with investigations to see to the policing of Haven and its people- or to the care of Refugees.

Truthfully, many times we were sent to Eth'an before it was named- to take the starving refugees some food that the Justicars had managed to hunt or forage in the woods while out on patrol.

Apparently the lady trained them to feed everyone they could by having them learn to hunt at the feet of someone in their group who is gone now.

I wonder who they were?

Whoever they were, none of the Justicars I spoke to on the matter knew their name- or rather, I suppose some refuse to speak it.

They seemed incensed that they would leave the company of their Commander to start their own. I wonder how the Commander feels?

We walk past the gates into Eth'an and I see that Raizel was wrong. It is not almost twice the size of Haven- it is Three Times the size of Haven.

Raizel and I stop and stare. Gawping in shock, in awe.

The entire wall is reinforced with homes. Small ones, big ones- tiny ones…meant for children without parents, I think.

The homes themselves are thicker at the back- padding between the homes and the wall- making it more difficult to break through them.

The entire center of the space is dominated by Market stalls, little circles of people on rugs and cushions talking and working together- spinning thread and whatnot.

There is an area near the back that seems to be closed off with curtains, curtains painted with Runes that I think say… 'Healers'.

In another corner, there are…tree trunks? All set on top of each other and glimmering with different light as if they have been enchanted for some purpose…
"New Arrivals?" A very loud human woman stomps over. "We didn't get no warning, but of course not. Come on, then, I'll show you to the empty houses and you can have your pick. Families get the big homes near the front- single people get the smaller houses. Yes, a couple counts as a family as there's more than one person. No, you and your pet do not count as a family."

She keeps chattering on about rules and conduct and behavior as we follow her along the outside walls to a bunch of homes that…

Wait. All of the rest have been painted on- a symbol or a slash of color or something, but these haven't.

"What's the name we're puttin' on this one?" she asks while dipping a quill in ink and holding it poised over a notebook in her hands.

I stammer a bit. "Tev…Tevea. I am a servant in Haven."

"Right right, next!" she says, pushing me gently toward the house nearest us.

It is small, but big enough for me- and when I walk in and set everything down…I realize it is actually a house, in truth. A small, one-person house. But a house nonetheless.

And it was simply given to me!

I have a house…

And when I look outside, I see Raizel and I were indeed followed by many more, many more who are being shown to their own small houses within Eth'an's walls.

I feel something then- besides the anger that sent me here and the exhaustion that weighs down my limbs.

Something light in my chest, something shivering up my spine- but I know not what to call it.

…

I hope it never goes away.

Chapter End Notes

Nik is almost awake you guys.

Just another few chapters.

This is killing me more than you.

Why do I love slow burns and fleshing things out so much???
Navette POV, Solas POV

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It's good that so many have begun to see the truth.

The Herald of Andraste is in our midst and she will see us into a brighter age!

I have told them of her teachings, and they are overjoyed to bask in the light of Andraste through whatever means are available- and that is good. Because the Lady Herald of Andraste is akin to her incarnation!

She who fought to free her people from a tyrant! She who took allies of the wretched, the valorous and the unremarkable alike and marched them toward the field of battle where the survival of all was at stake and made them every single one into something more!

Always knew the Lady was important, something about her…she *glows* if you look at her just right- and I always knew there was something-

I just didn't know till now what the something was.

But it *must* be Divinity. The power of the Maker and Andraste, another of our people blessed with it. The light is so warm and welcoming, that *has* to be it.

It's the only thing that makes sense about her!

"Ser Navette," one of the faithful calls to me. "When will we find a place for ourselves within walls once more? I am so cold."

"As soon as the Lady wakes, I know she will not turn us away from the Gates of Haven. If they refuse her, she will find us a place to settle." I reply. "The Lady Herald would *never* leave people out in the cold, especially not those who know the truth of her power."

The believer is reassured and smiles even as she shivers.

They are all, all of them, so happy to follow the way of the Herald of Andraste. So many from Haven and *Eth'an* both- have begun to whisper of her.

Even if they kick out the very loudest voices, they can't stop what's happening. They can't stop us from speaking the truth and crying her name in glory!

"Mayhaps we should simply make our own place," one of the men says. "As the unbelievers in *Eth'an* did. I'm sure they couldn't stop us."

"No, we must wait," I reply. "For the Herald to deliver us. Until then, we must be here, waiting for her inevitable waking. If she were to require our service and we were further away than this- we might not be able to render it in time to be of use. And we are surrounded by snakes!"

The mages, the Seeker who seemed quite irate even at the *sight* of my lady…

So many people who might betray her, as Maferath betrayed Andraste, leading to her ultimate downfall.
I won't let that happen.

"For now, let us pray."

And we join together in song and prayer, awaiting the day when our Lady wakes and announces our superiority to the world.

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Solas POV

"I do not like this," I mutter as I enter the Gates of Haven beside the Lieutenant-Commander. "They will start to cause trouble soon if something more isn't done."

"What would you have them do?" he asks. "Chase them further off? It'd only cause more problems."

"I don't believe they should have been thrown from Haven to begin with," I reply. "They may be fanatics, but they were preaching words of love and acceptance—whether they understand it or not. Nothing about them was yet dangerous. But of course…"

"The Chantry officials didn't like it. They still don't," he says. "Exalting some nobody to the position of saint in service to divine powers without the appointment of a Divine at all? The people don't usually decide these things. It makes them nervous."

"Do you believe she can stop it before it gets out of hand?" I ask.

We've reached the first inner ring of Haven and this is where we would usually split off. He to see the Commander, Seeker or Nightingale and myself to go to either my hut or to look in on Nik.

But today we've both been called in for some sort of…consultation.

"I think taking one look at Navette and the little ring of followers she's built up will make her literally ill and she'll…I dunno. She might exile Navette, kick her out. She might have her jailed…it all depends."

"You think she might go to such extremes against one of your own? And what of the followers?" I ask.

"I don't know. I only know she's uncomfortable with her own authority. I don't even really know why. So…it's possible nothing will happen. She might let them set up their own little village and religion if that's what they want. Who knows," He shrugs and grimaces. "She just might ask them to pretty please not worship her, I…can't predict the things she does. She's too weird."

I chuckle. "Weird?"

"Yeah, not like how you're weird," he says. Jibing me good-naturedly. "I mean, she likes magic and all that shite, but at least we know she can't do any. With her it's more…she seems to be a different person day-to-day and hour-to-hour, and it's…"

Pausing on the path just outside the Chantry, he turns to me. "It's more or less like she's not a real person. She's just…whoever it is she needs to be that day. That hour. That conversation. And it isn't as though she feels ingenuous," he says. "It's more the sense that she hasn't quite figured out who
she is either? But also that she has, and she is all those people. It's...confusing. Weird."

"I see," I reply. "Do you have an example of this? I have asked, but...no one but you seems to have the full picture. Even the Mage Lieutenants couldn't explain it."

I need to know who she will be when she opens her eyes. Before then. I would have liked to know long before now, but-

It is as if she simply appeared one day. There is no record of her existence anywhere. No spoken words, no written ones, no dreams.

Though I suppose I will have to wait and search for those myself if I can get away to the Storm Coast somehow without being missed...

"You've already been told about how she saved us and how she reacted to what Dahlia did, isn't that enough?" He asks.

I suppose for them, it would be.

So long only experiencing the cruelty and degradation of one leader, only to find a new one that dwelled not only in a place of righteous and deadly justice but also within one of mercy and compassion for another's circumstance...must seem strange.

It is as if a person shot someone with a crossbow, and then simply decided not to shoot the person behind them for no reason at all.

"Did she explain to you her reasons for doing both of those things?" I ask.

Miles shrugs. "She explained Dahlia. Don't really...understand how she separates things, or when she decides to have mercy. It seems almost arbitrary sometimes but still...I find myself agreeing with most of her choices in some sort of gut reaction to the situation. Not all, just...most."

"You do not agree with choices she has made?" This is a new piece of information. "All I have heard is that she is wise and makes good decisions, not at all that her decisions could be seen as divisive in any way."

Sighing, he rolls his shoulders. "It isn't really that the issue is so complicated...only...I believe she and I see things differently where it pertains to learning and the times when it is appropriate to teach someone something. She nearly died in one of our raids because she thought to impart a lesson on one of us when she saw us faltering because she was in danger."

"I had heard about that," I reply.

Getting oneself captured by slavers and being willing to die to save the people you are liberating is commendable. However, I have heard many versions of this tale, some heroic and some matter-of-fact...but I have never heard someone speak of it negatively.

I am beginning to think this woman has no thought to her own preservation and sees life as some merry game. As if she is actually in no danger at all. Even when she is afraid she does not stop.

Respect swelled in me with every step of our journey before, but now...I'm forced to reevaluate the context.

The door to the Chantry opens.
"You two!" The Seeker barks. "What is taking so long?"

We exchange a look and follow the Seeker into the Chantry without a word. It would be unwise to irritate her further.

That does not stop me from wanting to.

Chapter End Notes

I need to say, because it worries me, that Navette is not right. She is a zealot right now. I keep worrying I might've accidentally framed her wrong.

Everybody let me know if you think I could do anything to improve her framing, or if you think it's good, tell me why!
"You have to wash her at least once a day because she doesn't move from the bed and if you don't wash her every day, the sweat gets in the linens and you'll have to launder them much more frequently," a voice says.

Very loudly in the disembodied darkness, I might add.

"Just once a day?" another voice asks. Timid and small.

"Depends on how much she sweats, and that in turn depends how hot you keep this room and her bed. Be sure to keep it just warm enough she's not cold, but not so warm that she's burnin' up."

And after that, my consciousness fades again into the blackness and the nightmares.

Not really nightmares, actually, but then…I haven't had actual nightmares in a long time.

It's more this, confusing disjointed waterfall of images that are supposed to be scary that only either mildly irritate or fascinate me.

At some point, I remember this is supposed to be the Nightmare, trying to terrify me.

Maybe internal laughter shouldn't have been my reaction, but I didn't expect him to just up and fuck off.

Regretted that almost immediately when it meant I'd surface to consciousness before shortly passing out thereafter due to pain.

Pretty sure it took a long time to get myself together enough to actually open my eyes. Like, days. And I was supposed to be preoccupied with the Nightmare for days already if Canon still holds true.

A week? A week and a half? Longer? I don't know. I have no way of knowing.

But today, I think it's morning? And I feel...like I have the energy to get up.

Still no motivation to do so, of course. As per usual. Ugh. Come on.

I used to trick myself into getting up to use the bathroom, take a shower, get breakfast- and then I'd refuse to get back into bed and just go off to school.

Right now I'm reluctant to do just about anything so tricking myself will be basically impossible.

And then it's like, the universe heard my pleas for my body to just fucking move and obey my commands because I hear a very big crashing noise and my body instantly bolts up and plants my feet on the floor- but I have to take a minute because...

Oh god, it hurts!

It's not really a minute, more like maybe twenty seconds? But it feels like much, much longer.
Shoving myself to my feet and walking as carefully as I can- I head to the door and open it to get a look at what's going on outside.

'What in the complete fuck is going on?' I ask myself as I stare at the spectacle out by the gates.

There's a huge crowd of people standing at the Gates, shouting and being shoved toward them by guards.

Civilians being kicked out of Haven? That big a crowd? Why!?

"What the hell is going on?" I step out and basically shout.

It doesn't go quiet right away, but the people nearby take notice of me and either back away with wide eyes or stand stock still, staring at me. Agape.

"Hey!" I shout at the guards. "Guardsmen, you will answer me!" I don't know that I have the authority to demand answers just yet, but I do know if I sound like I do- well, people usually just go with it.

Dunno if it's the authority in my tone or the anger, but one of them does turn and then it all snowballs from there.

I'm almost knocked over by a sudden wave of people. They basically just…swarm around me. Then…drop to their knees and start babbling all at once like they're all begging me for something. They basically trampled a few of those guardsmen.

"SHUT. UP!" I shout at the top of my lungs.

There's a collective gasp, but…well at least everyone isn't talking at once and I can get a word in edgewise, here.

"I need one person, one, to explain what the hell is going on- and you! Get those men to the Healer's area immediately. They may not seem hurt, but trampling can cause lots of injuries that kill people if you're not careful to treat them afterward."

The Guardsmen were confused and kind of just standing around, recovering from the stampede and probably in shock. But at my snapped commands- half of them start helping up those still on the ground and ushering the men who just got stomped all over, back toward the healer's hut.

The other half stood around still looking confused. I'm guessing they have their orders, but now there's another authority in play and they don't know what to do with that.

Or hell, maybe they don't see me as an authority at all. Maybe it's just the weirdness of this whole situation.

"Okay, uh…you?" I point to one of the people around me, whose down on their knees. Looking up at me with a beseeching face. "Tell me what's happening here."

They have tears in their eyes, like my choosing them to give me current events is either some great curse or terrible blessing.

"My Lady Herald," they declare in a warbling voice. "They're goin' to excommunicate us!"

Yeah that title feels as gross as I thought it might.

I blink. Slowly. A few times. "I'm sorry, what does excommunication have to do with kicking you
out of Haven?"

"They say this is a holy village of the Maker, and that we despoil it with our Heathenry!" They reply. "They already sent out a whole group of us into the snow, days ago! We know only that they stay out there, in the snow, in tents- we don't want to live in tents, milady." They stop to cough a bit.

"Alright." I put my hands up and take a deep breath. "Why are they excommunicating you? What is it that you're doing that they find so offensive?"

They clear their throat. "We believe in the Herald of Andraste. We praise her-your name and glorify her teachings under the Maker and Andraste."

...ah. Wait.

No, that makes no sense. They played up the Herald shit in the game…but lots of things aren't like the game, here.

I don't see a reason to excommunicate these people…logistically? It makes no sense. Using the fervor the Herald of Andraste creates to get the people to cooperate and fall in line is the exact kind of thing I'd expect from Leliana…

This must be Cassandra's doing. Or at the very least, she didn't put up a fight when someone else suggested it- gave it her approval. And Leliana went along with it?

She had to have.

I realize I'm just standing here thinking while all these people are sitting there on their knees and get a frisson of discomfort because I'm realizing they're not just kneeling to beg for help- they're worshiping me.

Coughing and lifting a hand to my mouth, I see that I'm…kinda bleeding internally.

There's a soft murmur of concern that goes around the kneeling group at that.

In this moment I know three things.

I'm not going to last long on my feet today. I need to find a way to resolve this problem before I drop. And…well, I'm supposed to be talking to the Inner Circle right now, to formally begin the Inquisition.

First thing that needs to get done is the thing that maximizes my energy, keeps me working longer and hopefully helps me to resolve my problems without too much effort on my part- physically, anyway.

"Hey, guys can you stand up for me, please?" I ask them.

They glance around at each other but slowly move to stand in a ring around me instead of kneel.

"Great, that's wonderful, thanks. Now I need you to do me a favor- and I promise to help resolve this issue, but I will need you to trust me."

Chapter End Notes
She's awwwaaaa-aaaake.
Tevea, bless her soul, came straight to me when called for.

I had no idea how else to get everything done if I didn't delegate a few tasks- but when I saw her-

"What the hell happened to you?" I ask while dragging her into the war room and nudging her into one of the seats. "You look like you haven't slept in days and you're pale as hell, are you ill?"

She takes a deep breath and seems to wilt at the way I'm staring at her. "No…milady. I haven't slept much even since moving to Eth'an and taking up separate duties. I've still got to…"

Glancing around the room, she clams up and clears her throat. "Still got…a lot of work to do, today."

"Is this a 'hasn't slept due to personal issues' problem or 'hasn't slept due to work' problem?" I ask.

She swallows and again her gaze darts around like one of the people in the war room is going to punish her for speaking out of turn.

"Tevvy, they don't care," I lean into the table and block her view of half the room. The half containing Cassandra and Barris, specifically. "You telling me that you're being overworked isn't going to get you disciplined. If that is what's happening, I need to know."

Don't really need to ask, I can tell that's what it is. Her whole body is shaking, she's got bruised hands and eye-bags as black as a new shiner. Everything about the way she looks screams 'I've been driven to work past the point of healthiness'.

But I can't just jump to conclusions and throw my weight around. I have to let Tevea be the one to decide exactly how this should go.

"I-it's not- it's just…the other servants that you told to take breaks- we've had to cover for their shifts. And they've been taking a lot of them-"

She stops when I flick my hand up to pause her, and seems to be cringing internally a little.

But I, in the meanwhile, am just…filled. With Rage. But I know it's not showing on my face.

I've practiced not showing anger on my face. Back when I was a kid, I was constantly accused of making faces at my mother when she was chewing me out.

Realized years later it was just an excuse to further emotionally, mentally and verbally abuse me. But I got really good at the stone-face before that.

It's really good in situations like this when I don't want the person I'm talking to, to think I'm angry with them when really it's the subject of our whole conversation.

"I'm sorry. Are you telling me…that the head servant didn't let the rest of you rest, but he let the others?" I ask. In as sweet a voice as I can manage.

Tevea blinks. "Didn't…didn't you tell them to?"
"Yes, in fact I did." I reply. "I also got one of my Justicars to threaten to beat the living hell out of the Head Servant if he beat you guys anymore. She got sidetracked being some kinda Cult Leader and he found a loophole." I hiss in through my teeth. "He's been torturing you guys this whole time because he couldn't beat you anymore. He deliberately misinterpreted an order and- Josephine."

I lift my head and meet the eyes of a very frowny-faced Ambassador. "Yes, Lady Nik?"

"I reinforced my order with Cassandra's name and he still disobeyed. This man has worked more than half of our servants almost to death- I believe it's time you replaced him." I say.

"That is not your decision," Cassandra says.

Not as snippy as before but still touchy.

"When at any time did I say it was?" I turn my head and glare at her. "Seeker of Truth, you need to stop imagining words in my mouth that were never said."

Then I turn my back again and return my attention to Josephine. "He's overworked our most precious resource. Servants make it possible to live our everyday lives and he's nearly broken their bodies down to the bone!" Lifting up one of Tevea's hands, I gently stroke her knuckles with one fingertip while Josephine watches on with narrowed eyes. "Look at this. This shouldn't be as extensive as it is only from one days' work. He's forced them to work through serious injury, Josephine."

She inhales sharply through her nose. "I agree, this is a heinously flagrant disregard for the chain of command, and a terrible misuse of authority. I will have him replaced immediately."

"The servants need a few days off so they can sleep and recover. I'll get the mages on their healing, but I think a week is the absolute least we could ask for them." I say. "The Servants who are well-rested can do a full shift with a few breaks to clean up the very worst messes but for everything else, people will have to do it themselves."

"I agree that we should tend to their wounds, but perhaps we should hire other servants to bolster the number that will be left working," Josephine says. "There are many in Haven without occupation- refugees. They would appreciate the income even if it is only a short job."

I beam at her. "That is an excellent idea. What do you think, Tevvy?"

Tevea doesn't seem to realize I've spoken to her for a moment and I almost repeat it with her full name, wondering if I just went too far with the affectionate nicknaming- when her head lifts and she blinks her large honey-and-cinnamon eyes at me.

"What…do I think?" It's like there's a complex equation going on behind her eyes that she just can't figure out.

"Yeah, I mean, you've been worked as hard as everyone else, right? So you'd know if we needed to add an extra week or so to the rest time before we let everyone come back for light duty." I'd rather just give them a whole ass month off for reparations- regardless of magical healing, to make up for everything. But the last time I gave an order about breaks, this mess happened.

I've got to figure this out with them, not just about or around them.

She swallows hard. "I…I want to sleep rather a lot right now, so I may misjudge…"

"More time than you need is perfectly okay," I reply. "Josephine explained before you got here that
I'm getting wages now, I can just use them to pay for your guys' meals because I doubt we've got room in the budget to keep paying you while you're on break, but I won't let you starve or anything. So keep that in mind."

She's staring at me and I don't know how to decipher that look in any way other than skepticism and maybe the feeling like someone's playing some huge joke on you.

I've felt that feel. It oofs you right in the solar plexus.

And at that I turn my head and look Cassandra dead in the eye - "And I can promise you that you won't lose your jobs. We might have to shuffle the new people to the crossroads if they work out alright, but I'm not going to let anyone fire you just because you're hurt and need time to heal." - the entire time I speak.

Her jaw ticks at my presumption but she doesn't seem to disagree with me, so she stays silent. Just staring swords into my eyes.

"I believe perhaps that a week with allowances for some to break for longer depending on their health, would be enough," Josephine interjects. "What say you…" she pauses, apparently realizing the name I've been using isn't her actual name. "Tevea, yes?"

Wow, Josie's on top of shit if she remembers one random servants' name amongst like, what, dozens?

I knew she was awesome, I just didn't know she was that particular flavor of awesome.

Tevea takes a moment to ponder that and then meekly nods. "I…I think that would be good enough, yes."

"Great! You go and get the head servant, and tell him we wanna see him," I address one of the guards at the door. We have them both inside and outside the room. Which is also a thing we need to talk about… "And Tevea, go to bed and spread the word that all the servants that had to work their fingers to the bone now have a week off, to start. Josie can start getting people interested in the temporary positions later, one afternoon without servants isn't going to kill anyone."

Tevea gets up and leaves the room with the most confused look on her face.

Well hopefully she gets that I wanted her to go to bed and sleep, at least.

Chapter End Notes

I'm so sick, you guys...ugh...
Solas POV

Chapter Notes

READ THIS FIRST:
Okay so first of all, Got sick. Now I'm on my cycle which always makes me sluggish and lethargic, so that is two of the three reasons this took so long to make.

The third is that it's fuck-off long and isn't even done yet. This is only PART ONE of this sequence. Read the afternote when you're done and I'll explain why.

Also I've gotta update with only two stories this week, see reasons one and two for lateness above.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

I cannot see everything she does, every detail, gather all the pertinent information—during the day.

She's seen to it that I have far more responsibilities now than simply watching the Mark for signs of build-up or healing her body.

No, Ren has been given the role of Physician and he visits her in her cabin at least three times daily if he cannot do more.

This meant I had free time. Though I suppose some of it was bound to be snapped up, I hadn't expected her to be the one to assign me duties.

The mages in Haven answer to the Justicars almost exclusively. I knew that, before she awoke I had taken notice of many of the Justicars and Mages taking time together and standing as a unit. Not all of them, but enough that it was worthy of notice.

Lady Dahlia Trevelyan of the Rebel Mages is now also a Justicar Lieutenant. It was made official not long after the 'Herald' woke. She is head of all Mage-Justicar relations, though the bulk of the Rebel Mage army still answers to the Grand Enchanter. Independent of all forces.

After the Herald awoke, she had a meeting with the Grand Enchanter which I am anxious to review tonight. Something that lead to an agreement between Haven and the Rebel Mages.

They answer to the Grand Enchanter, but they Parley with the Herald and her Justicars. The Seeker is unhappy about the arrangement, though the Nightingale seems oddly delighted…and the Ambassador is happy to lend her ear and talents to keeping the peace. The Inquisition Commander himself seems undecided on what should be done and content to do whatever necessary to make everyone happy while he puzzles it over.

Ren himself is also a Lieutenant, but it seems he has a more limited sphere of influence. He is head of the Healers in Haven, and is given even higher authority in matters of healing than the Herald herself.

He's already decommissioned many leech purveyors and such in Haven. I believe the Herald called them…snake oil salesmen. Strange turn of phrase…
And Lady Trevelyan has been given higher Authority in matters where agreements are made between the Mages and the rest of Haven. Work contracts, healing duties, anything that might require them to leave their new settlement goes through her.

Lieutenant-Commander Miles likewise has higher Authority over all in Eth'an and their agreements with other parties. Which now includes the free rebel mages under the Grand Enchanter.

Eth'an now has several contracts with the new Mage village, what was it they named it?

It comes to me after a murky moment of confusion- ah, yes. Somnitempus. A time of sleeping. Rest. Waiting. To give the impression they are lying in wait but that they have not given up or been tamed.

I found that choice amusing, I will admit.

Even Navette has been given new duties, though her Authority is reduced and she is rather sullen lately. But I will look into that situation as well…as soon as I am finished with this…

Spectacle is not quite the word for it.

"Lady Commander," the former Templar Lieutenant and current Inquisition Lieutenant-Commander had greeted her. Quite neutrally. Perhaps a bit brusquely.

Her reaction is difficult to decipher, but there are twinges of surprise or shock, followed by elation, affection, recognition…

"Raleigh Samson?" she had asked. "I'd heard, back in Kirkwall- that you were disavowed from the Templar Order. What are you doing here?"

The Lieutenant made a face as if he'd smelled something rotten. "Aye, I suppose disavowed is the word for it if you're not fond of 'kicked out on my arse'. Makes it all sound a bit more grand, I would say."

Her smile was nearly blinding. "I'm so glad to see you're alright. You're one of the few Templars I remember who weren't complete shit."

He searched her face as he responded. "The Templars of Kirkwall were as manipulated and abused as the mages, milady."

"That doesn't excuse their behavior, I'm afraid," she had replied. "Snappishness, alright. The odd emotional outburst, okay. But the rape? The abuse? The illegal tranquilization of mages? I don't believe a comparison can be made. Templars are used by the Chantry, but in the end a Templar can stop being a Templar- withdrawal notwithstanding- and their position affords them respect. A mage can never stop being a mage, and all their position affords them is fear and anger."

His expression had remained stony as he weighed her arguments. "I believe a man will do many things he would not normally do, for a taste of Lyrium. Or because he's gone mad with the lack of it. But you have a point, I suppose. Regardless, that is not what I am here to discuss."

"Then I guess we'll be discussing it later," she had replied. With a small twist of her lips. The scar over the side of her mouth from the long trek to suppress the Breach turning the lopsided smile into a mischievous smirk.

The twisted smirk suits her so well, it is as if it should have always been there. But it is a small shock to see it. Here and now. Not an interpretation, but a full representation of how she actually
smiled and knowing that is within her.

I had decided at some point in my investigations that she was simply a loud, opinionated woman with good intentions. This expression is not any of those things.

This is a smile that communicates delights in mischief and conflict. And while the scar may be responsible for the twist at the end being quite as pronounced as it is, the fact that she is smirking at all is new.

Before she would smile, sweetly. Or she was angry, and her face would communicate that fact. The simplest of ways to show one's emotions, without any genuine personality added to them at all. No twists, no lopsided expressions.

Until now, until here. Why…?

"Will we? I find not many enjoy arguing in circles unless they hail from Orlais," he had replied. "Though I suppose I shall indulge you if you've a mind to listen to reason."

"Oh I love arguing with people who don't agree with me. But I won't be the one learning a lesson," she had replied.

They shared what can only be called a look of pleasant rivalry, and then began to discuss business.

All the while I circle them, lips slightly parted as I watch.

How does she do it?

He nearly smiled at her- and this is their first meeting. I have not seen this man smile at anyone since I arrived. Perhaps a wry twist of his lips when he's made a witty observation or a cutting remark. But that is always at someone else's expense.

Even I, were I to apply myself to the issue of endearing myself to him- it would be slow. A slow, encroaching dance of careful steps.

She simply steps in front of people and smiles, speaks- and they are hers.

And if not hers at first meeting, soon to be.

"Oh before I forget. Barris said you had need of a new assistant, but you were having trouble finding someone." She had said to him.

"Aye, but I'll not be accepting any of yours," he had replied. "Don't need divided loyalties."

"A Justicar's loyalties should never be divided," she had replied. "They should always be to the people. No matter what job they're doing. But I wasn't thinking one of mine, anyway. There's a Templar recruit, Lysette…"

"I'm aware of her," he had said. "Talented, but unskilled. It would take time to make her into what I need."

"You know what I think?" she had replied with that same twisted smirk. "I think it'd take a hell of a lot longer to teach a skilled Templar the right mindset than it would take to teach Lysette the skills necessary to do her job. She's like you and Barris, but many of the others here aren't. Whether they play that role in front of you or not, behind closed doors, they don't have the opinions that we would all consider…honorable or just."
He had squinted at her and pursed his lips. "Mayhap you have a point, milady. I'll think on it."

Her smile, again, was blinding. "I've gotta go check on some other shit now, but I am anticipating our next argument will be interesting."

His lips had twitched upward for a moment. "Perhaps it will, milady. By your leave."

The vision fades as I shift my attention to a later interaction. Her conversation with Samson happened not long after she'd woken. On a day she felt well enough to get out of bed.

But here, here she is in bed as she addresses Navette.

"Navette," Nik had greeted her fellow Justicar as she entered her cabin. "We need to talk about this cult-ish business that's been going on."

Swaddled in blankets, with every possible amenity put on a table by her bed. Fruits, candies, candied everything, in fact…

"Cultesh?" Navette blinks. "Forgive me, my lady but I've no knowledge of this…Cultesh."

Nik sighed in consternation. "This thing where you're trying to convince people to worship me? It stops. Now."

Navette gaped at Nik in shock and dropped to the floor on her knees. "Have I displeased you? I thought I had done everything right, this time! Please, tell me what I've done wrong. I can fix it, I promise!"

There was a heartbeat of silence wherein Nik simply stared at Navette with a sickened look on her face.

"Jesus H. Christ," She had muttered. "Navette, stand the hell up and knock it off. You know damn well I'm not a deity or affiliated with one, stop being a jackass."

Something seemed to click into place and Navette hauled herself to her feet. She looked…sheepish, but also confused. "...I...I dunno what else to do. I've been obedient, I've tried to follow the teachings, and I even tried to help others find their way. What could I possibly be missing? How do you want me to serve!?"

"First lesson here should probably have been that I don't want you to serve me at all," she had replied. "I want you to serve the people, but you've never known what that really means, have you?"

Her demeanor had shifted then from annoyed and disgusted to pained and understanding. She seemed to have only just realized that her Vassal had never come to the right conclusions because she had never been taught the steps to reach it.

The transformation is instantaneous, and fascinating.

I can feel through the spirits re-enacting this scene that the Herald holds affection for Navette. Hope, tentative but firm, is rooted into her feelings toward her Vassal. But there are also feelings of doubt.

She wants very badly for Navette to become…something.

"Serving the people is the first thing you're taught, in all Orlesian and Ferelden families the way
"No, you're taught to think the way Nobles do in Noble families. You're taught to see everything you do as serving the people, but you have to know by now that it's not true." The Herald had replied. "Nobility. Rich people. Governing bodies. All the same. They say they do something for you, but in reality they're just a framework you use to help yourself and then they use that framework to bleed you dry."

"I…I don’t understand," Navette replied. Blinking quickly and swallowing hard. "Nobles serve the people by ruling over their lands. They ensure we have jobs and trade. What would we do without them?"

"I wonder," the Herald said. "The point is, they have forgotten Noblesse Oblige. Do you know what that is?"

Navette snapped to attention then. "Yes!" Then seems to have lost her confidence. "I…it is the responsibility of all Nobility to act with grace, dignity and honor."

"Close," the Herald replied. "It is all those things, but nobody seems to remember what those words mean. Grace isn't just a cool head under pressure. When a servant gives you the wrong food and you throw it in their face, that isn't grace no matter how calmly you do it and yet people seem to think it is, for some reason. But it's rather the opposite. Dignity isn't protecting your family name at the expense of your actual family. It's knowing who you are and fighting for that. And Honor?"

The Herald was overcome with a wave of dizziness for a moment, then. But Navette did not notice. Navette being as unobservant as she is, was still aided in her unawareness by the Herald's astounding skill for pretending she is fine.

I can feel the room tilting around her, the nausea building up- but she closes her eyes for a moment and takes a few breaths, and it is over. As if it never happened.

And to Navette, it merely seems an emotional outburst was just averted.

"As for honor," she stated with disgust. "People seem to think that it has something to do with whether or not someone insults you and whether or not you answer them with a duel more than whether or not you're always acting with decency, kindness and chivalry."

"I don't…really understand, my lady. Honor isn't just about what you do, it's about who you are!" Navette countered. "If you haven't any honor and you don't protect it, then who are you?"

"I dunno, Navette," she replied. "A kind, compassionate, humble person who puts others before themselves?"

Navette didn't seem to have a response to that.

The vision blurs around the edges and I huff in frustration.

I wanted to see more. But the Spirits here have lost interest. It seems this was the most intense part of their conversation.

Strange that Navette seemed to snap out of her state of overzealous worship so easily.

What caused that state of fervor to begin with?

…I suppose there would be no harm in discovering that while I am investigating the Justicars as a
But my curiosity will have to wait a bit, as my next observation will be of those I believe the Herald is grooming into future Justicars.

The Servants she employs for some of her little schemes. The one she seems to favor, above all the rest. Yes, I can see her recruiting her for the Justicars. The Herald of Andraste seems to be of the mind that a good soldier or leader can come from anywhere and be of any race, as long as they have the attributes she favors and are willing to take her counsel.

It's much less…hm. What is the word…I have been speaking common for all of a few centuries, even if that was only in dreams- and yet the words and verb tenses, the structure of the language, it changes over time. As all do.

In Elvhenan it was easier to flow with the changes, as I was engaged in society at all levels. I am having to learn to use my words in an entirely different language with only the very base knowledge of it. I do not have the easy, indolent familiarity that Master Tethras does. Nor do I hold the bold conviction that the Seeker employs.

My words are simple and delivered quietly. It is not often enough, but I have become more confident in my persona of late.

Ah, there she is.

It is not so simple a thing to simply want to see something in particular and make it happen. I have to press my will into the Fade around me, and shape it to my needs. But Spirits are capricious and if they find no interest in something, you will not convince them with anything less than an exchange of memory, labor or something else they value.

They might ask you to pick some flowers and burn them in Veilfire, simply because they are their favorite and burning things in Veilfire does tend to simply split its existence between reality and the Fade.

Or perhaps they'd like to glimpse your fondest memories of an emotion, the emotion they embody. They can see within, but not as deeply as they'd like without permission. If they simply try to take it, they may twist and the vessel may be strong enough to deny them, regardless.

So I tread carefully here, offering only moments of no importance that hold a sliver of emotion to these poor creatures who are starved and will accept very little as long as it is not nothing.

There is something villainous about it, but I cannot risk anything being revealed to anyone in great detail.

Knowing who and what I am, that is trivial. Spirits speak in riddles and metaphors, it is unlikely anyone would take them at their word if they were to reveal my identity. But specifics of my character, my plans, my feelings- these things would be dangerous in the wrong hands and spirits are not…secret keepers. Not usually.

Not excepting the ones that are meant to be, of course.

"I can't believe it," the young servant mutters at the letter in her hands. "Why…?"

"Don't look a gift horse in the mouth, Tevea," a human servant advises. "Head Servant! This could change things in Haven. The last Head was a right arse and had no care for us but you, you're one of us. It'll be a lot better to work for you."
Tevea looks green around the edges. I can feel her disbelief and disorientation. "I just. I feel there's been some mistake."

"If there has, don't tell anyone about it," the human replies. "Just take the job and y'know. Act casual."

My mouth curls up at one edge.

"Raizel..." she sighs. "I'm not...I can't do this job. I haven't the experience!"

"You had to do half the things he had to do because he was too lazy to do them at times, and the other half everyone else had to take a stab at. You're not alone. We won't leave you out to dry."
The human reassured her. "And I'm sure the Ambassador has a reason for choosing you. Right?"

"Mmn," she replied.

The emotional swirl around the both of them clashes against itself. Tentative hope and excitement contrasted against stark terror.

It's so thick between both of them, I can't tell what is coming from whom.

I am certain this was the Herald's doing. While out on an errand, I overheard her speaking with someone- a servant- about who they'd like to be in charge now.

While I couldn't stay to listen, I had filed the conversation away as it was...strange.

It shouldn't be, but it would be a lie to say that it is not.

So Tevea was chosen by the servants themselves after the Herald spoke with them, presumably because she didn't desire anyone similar to the last Head being appointed.

I was called in for his dismissal, as was Master Tethras, Lady Trevelyan, Ren, Miles, Shivanas and even the Mercenary... Serah Adaar, I believe? Strange as all the rest, she also invited the Grand Enchanter.

Nik was adamant the Inquisition not be run like a kingdom, and proposed instead- a Council.

Everything this woman does surprises me. She has limited her own power, any she may gain in the future will now be through relationships with other people.

But perhaps that only means she is most powerful of all, the way she can bend people to her whim so easily.

Thinking of the meeting- the scene around me begins to change.

I was there, but...the Herald is an enigma at the best of times. Practiced at hiding her pain- who is to say she is not also practiced at hiding everything else?

The war room settles around me and I stand in the place I stood before, simply observing this time.

I will only have to speak as I did before to keep up the illusion. If I fail to shift in the exact right spot in the exact right way, it will go unnoticed and the spirits will continue. Spirits are not much for details that are not...emotional.

"You want a what?" The Seeker is as nonplussed as everyone else in the room.
"The people of Thedas have been ruled by kings, empresses and Inquisitors in the past. Even if we appoint one at some point, I just feel like...maybe they'd see us in a softer light if they all felt represented in what is essentially our government. We're not a nation, but we're going to have to function like one, aren't we? We have to make alliances, secure trade agreements, labor agreements, etcetera." She'd flicked her wrist as if to gesture at everything around all of us.

I can feel the emotion practically spilling out of her into the Fade around her. Eclipsing almost everything else in the room.

That is unexpected. Every other time I have watched one of these memories, her emotions were tightly locked away, within herself. I could feel them- but...not like this.

What she is feeling now, is akin to frustration. Different. Flavored with...something melancholic.

"It would make the people of Thedas more approving of us if we had many experts consulting rather than simply one leader over everyone," Josephine said. "They will still feel more secure with someone at the top, and as the Herald says we may appoint them later. But having a strong voice that the people trust is important...and not all people trust all of us equally, I should think."

"The mages of Thedas might feel better about us if we've got two different mages from two different organizations on our council," the Herald remarked. "And having Elves consulting on Elven matters will help with relations between our races."

The frustration is building. Why? She is making a fine case, and she wins this argument. What is it that frustrates her so much that it spills out into the air and nearly strangles everyone?

Her expression doesn't change much from moment to moment. She is open, she is reasonable, she is kind. This is the face she shows when she is among strangers, or in a large group of people.

One or two people, she...changes more often. I wonder why that is the case.

"Is that why I'm here?" Miles questioned with a quirk of his eyebrow. "You called Shivanas, too..."

"You're both Dalish, but you used to be a City Elf," she said to him. "You're not an expert on Dalish culture yet, but you've always been a City Elf. You'd have more an idea of what's good for them than Shivanas would and he'd know better what the Dalish need."

They exchange a glance. Miles looks merely tired, and I can feel his inner weariness leaking out very weakly.

Shivanas for his part merely looks skeptical.

"This would, of course, mean that you'd have to appoint someone else to run Eth'an in your stead and they should be able to work under you and only bring you issues that require your direct input," she continues. Her lips tick up at one edge.

Not quite the lopsided smirk I saw earlier, but it's clear she knows he's tired of leadership.

There's relief and excitement- but also trepidation coming off of Miles now. "Wouldn't the Council position just be basically the same job?"

"We have not even agreed that there must be a council, yet," the Seeker cuts in. "I am reluctant to agree to this. We have no knowledge of the capabilities of the people you seem to think you have the power to appoint."
"The facts as I see them are: I can do whatever I damn well please and you know it," the Herald had replied.

It had been a surprise to see her own her power this way. It isn't surprising to feel the self-loathing start rolling off of her as she does, as she seems to hate the power she's been given…but it does make me feel more reassured to feel it. Tangible and real, here.

"I'm a fucking holy icon. Someone tried to start a cult for me and it kinda worked. People are going to want me to save them and I don't need the Inquisition for that. I could snap my fingers and half the Inquisition forces would follow me because they think I'm the Herald of Andraste." She demonstrates with a snap of her fingers when she says that. "I choose to divide my power and allow you all into this because I think it's only fair, not because I need your authority or approval to do anything. If you do agree to this, I'd assume you'd take control and authority over the Templar forces, as you are directly above them in rank."

The Seeker radiates surprise at this turn of events, though a moment ago she was nearly seething with rage.

"And Commander," she turns to Barris. "As you're no longer a Templar, I should think you would take control of the regular soldiers and be the authority over them and all issues pertaining to them. Yes?"

The Commander blinks and there is a somewhat bewildered air about him. "Me, your Holiness?"

The Herald sighs. "I have a name, dudes. Use it. But yes, you. You're not currently a Templar so putting you over them might make some of them chafe, but Cassandra currently is a Seeker and they're naturally above Templars in rank, so it shouldn't cause too much of a stutter or anything."

"No I understand, your Holiness," he says. "Only...would it not be better if the Seeker were to be authority over all the soldiers, even the footsoldiers?"

"No," she replies. "Not only would that give one person too much power, the footsoldiers don't know or like her. They know and like you. You'd be better for morale. The Seeker is better for the Templars because they look up to Seekers. See them as legends and heroes."

And then she turns her attention completely to the Seeker herself. "And I need to know you're willing to work to right the wrongs the Seekers have done by completely ignoring their duty to the Mages and letting the Templars get away with all the abuses they've dealt."

There's a silence born of anticipation and anxiety in the wake of that pronouncement as the Herald and the Seeker stare each other down.

Unlike most other times they've done this, the Seeker isn't glaring and the Herald's expression is stern, but open.

There is no animosity between them in this moment, only friction born of past interactions coloring their perceptions.

The Seeker has no reason to refuse. Not a real reason, at least. She dislikes the Herald, but as the Herald has noted before...she is more sensible than people seem to think.

She agrees to the proposition after much negotiation and even a few letters are sent by way of the Nightingale's scouts, to make the positions as official as possible. Requesting permission from the
king to form the council and act with his authority in matters of the Breach and the Chaos it has caused.

A petition from the Herald to legitimize the Justicars in hopes they'll be able to last beyond the Inquisition…

Everything has been set in place, set in motion.

At this point in time, they stand upon the brink of change.

Will they leap, or fall?

Chapter End Notes

You guessed it, it's a Fade chapter.

I think this is how Solas always uses the Fade. To understand the world around him in ways he can't in the waking anymore.

The reason it's going on so long is because he can just do that weird fucky time thing where a dream can last days in the span of an hour. He's...really going after it you guys.

I have no control over this, someone send help.

** I almost posted the chapters in the wrong stories, ugh.
Solas POV

Chapter Summary

WHOOO!!!!

Finally finished this one!

Hopefully from now on it'll be regular-length chapters so I might be able to actually have them finished on time.

I'm mostly shaken off my cough, I'm finally sleeping at night instead of the day, I think I'm rolling good now.

Now that I have satisfied some of my curiosity on the matters that are less…pressing. I turn my attention to something I have been waiting to see since its happening.

I was not allowed to attend the meeting between the Herald and the Grand Enchanter. No one was.

They sat, alone, in an abandoned cabin not far from Haven. Something that used to belong to a healer of sorts, or so I am told.

The Herald used that cabin as a base for the construction of 'Little Haven' as she is calling it.

Little Haven is the place where she has decided to build homes and businesses for her Cultists to occupy. Though she adamantly refuses to allow them any sort of worship of herself, they are allowed to believe what they like and practice in any way they choose.

Just as long as no one is harmed in that practice and they all remember she is as mortal as they are.

She seems to fight with them more on the matter of whether she is divine or not more than anything else. Everything else she asks, they will follow her words unquestioningly.

To the point she's had to make certain to ask now, whether something would be viable before she tells them to do it, because they refused to speak up at first.

Navette is not the one who made them into this. She simply gave them an entirely new target for their confusion and fervor. Before it may have been the Maker and no one would have noticed their zeal, truly.

Now that it is the Herald, it is obvious and only too easy to ostracize them.

But I will leave Little Haven for later, as well.

For now…

Pressing my will into the air around me is second nature. But if I want to direct them to something specific at a certain time and in a certain place- I have to have focus. Even if for me, it is a paltry wasted moment of staring into the air ahead of me, it is still a necessary step.

Thinking on how in this world, it may take someone an entire lifetime to learn this one particular
skill- and they may only enjoy it a handful of years before they die…

'No. Focus. Do not allow the thoughts that frighten and sadden you, to distract you.'

The Herald is more well-known to me than the Grand Enchanter. But I have acquainted myself with her energy. For just this sort of purpose.

The scene takes longer to resolve itself, which means that not only is it emotional and intricate- it is also long.

Spirits are deliberating over every facet of it before they will agree to act it out. That is fine.

I do not wish a half-done vision of what might have happened.

I want to see what it was that did happen. Even if there is variation in how it is seen and felt. The facts, I need those, and I will sift them from the emotional tangle, myself.

So I wait, and while I wait, I allow part of my attention to drift.

Reaching out toward the Herald's dreams…or rather, where they should be.

It is like a bubble of pure abyss. As if nothing has ever been nor ever will be there. Strange.

Were I trying, could I penetrate it? Find my way inside?

Something tells me the answer is no, and I…

"So." The Grand Enchanter's voice draws me from my reverie. "What is it you wished to discuss?"

"I heard you were planning to leave Haven soon. Go somewhere to try and find asylum- from anyone but the Chantry, yeah?" The Herald replied.

"Indeed," the Grand Enchanter confirmed.

"What if I could give you an alternative?" the Herald asked. "No sovereignty over you, no allegiance pledged. The ability to be independent…while still being protected by something. Well…at least till you can better protect yourselves, anyway."

"And how would you manage such a miraculous feat, if I may ask?" the Grand Enchanter questioned. Expression tightly controlled. There is a whisper of irritation in the spirit that is enacting this moment.

There are only ever whispers- or at least there were until I began viewing the Herald directly.

"Look, you've got more power right here, right now than you know." The Herald shines with emotion in every moment. It is held within herself, more often than not, but it radiates. "Allow me to illustrate."

I believe that is the 'glow' that Navette spoke of before. Non-mages and those with no magical inheritance in their line, should not be able to detect it. And of those who have any magical blood at all, only those who can actively use magic should be able to perceive any light or color at all.

Her emotions are just so powerful, they are impossible to ignore. Even for those who shouldn't see them.

The Herald pulled a small chess board out from under the table. "I brought this because I am
terrible at describing and explaining things unless I have tools to do it with."

She placed all the pieces on the table, but…

"You seem to have only packed pawns, your Holiness," the Grand Enchanter observed.

"Well I only need the pawns right now," she said and smiled. "More pieces might make an appearance soon, though."

She straightened up in her seat and shifted in discomfort, then. Very slightly.

I feel the waves of pain that rolled over her. The nausea isn't as terrible in that moment as it was before, but the dizziness…

And yet she concealed her unwellness the same as before.

Then she smiled. "Okay, so imagine these pawns are people. They aren't on the board yet, and we're going to try and figure out how to get them there." Then she tapped the set of pure black pawns. "These guys are the really useful people. While these guys…" And then the white ones. "Are just people you've been told you have to impress. They're actually kinda useless without these other guys."

There are less white pawns than black. Five to one, I would say.

…ah. I see where this is going.

The Grand Enchanter seemed to catch on quickly as well. "Nobles, I would gather. But you seem to be under the impression that they are of no use to you. I am curious how you came to this conclusion."

"They're not of no use, they're just useless without the other guys," she replied. "See, there's a truth behind every Noble house and that is that they're only Noble because their people allow them to be. If they really wanted, the people could rise up and depose their rulers. Nobles became really good at keeping people down, making them believe they couldn't. But they can. And because they can, the Nobles have to at least pay some attention to what these people want."

She picked up the pieces and set them up in groupings of one white to five black.

She then pointed to the group closest to the Grand Enchanter and remarked, "Okay so here we have a Noble with lands and everything. Each of those black pieces represents someone they need to do a job so they can continue to be rich and powerful. Servants. Farmers. Textile people who make clothing and whatnot. You get the gist. So, there's a famine and now the Noble has to find out a way to fix it. Do they do so because they fear their people will go hungry and starve? Not usually. They do it because they're afraid the people will be angry enough at them for not fixing it, that they'll be deposed."

"And how does that help me?" the Grand Enchanter asked. "It will be the Nobles who decide the fate of any large movements in Thedas. More specifically the Rulers."

"Yeah but they decide on things based on how they want to direct society, and they can't direct society if they're being violently mobbed and murdered because their people are unhappy with them." The Herald reiterates. "So they talk to others. Other nobles, most specifically. And each individual noble has their own reasons for getting involved or not getting involved with certain things. They may stay out of something because it would tax their resources and make them look
weak, thereby making their people angry with them and opening them up to attack from outside-"

She picked up one of the white pieces and all the requisite black pieces and moved them to the board. "Or if they do get involved…it's because they have something to gain. Not only personally- but something that will make the people happy."

And then she puts her fingertip on the next row in line but on a black piece first this time. "However…if you were to please the people first, it would become very difficult for the Noble in question not to support you."

She removes three black pieces from the table and transfers them to the board. Leaving the white piece with only two other pieces behind it.

And then she makes eye contact with the Grand Enchanter, flicks the white piece over and transfers the additional two black pieces to the board.

"See how that works?" She asks.

The Grand Enchanter looks at the black pieces on the board and then glances at the one white piece, turning her eyes to the Herald. Calm and collected. Her emotions do not even whisper, she is so controlled. But that makes the spirits all the more excited for what is likely to come.

This usually points toward some sort of explosion. Or at the very least, an outpouring of emotion.

Then the Herald pulled another piece out from under the table and held it high, aloft in the air. "Surveying this, the split seems pretty even. The people are divided and what I choose is Fucked either way," she said. "However," she replaced it beneath the table and then moved two more groupings of pawns to the board. Until there were only two left off of it.

Then she lifted the piece once again. "When it seems the people are all mostly in favor of something and the Nobles are following suit because they want to keep them happy- no matter how many detractors are left, if they're less than half the number of the people for the new decision…"

She smacks the piece down onto the board. Revealing that it is a Queen. "Then they have no choice but to also move in favor of the people's opinion, or face a revolt."

"The people are unwinnable, Your Holiness," the Grand Enchanter said. Softly. But firm in her conviction. "They have feared Mages for too long. They have heard too many tales of what we can do when we are crossed. We are too dangerous to them."

"See, that's exactly the thing," the Herald said. "This is the only time, the only time, they might actually see another side to the story. Right now, they're as afraid of Templars as they are mages. And if mages made a reputation for themselves, saving people- saving the world while the Templars sat on their ass and laughed and watched as it burned…well, the common folk are easily swayed by what they're told and what they experience." The Herald sighed and discontentment rolled off of her in waves. "They're so easily led, and they've been trained to be. Specifically for the purpose of keeping them down."

"And you are saying that I can use this to my own purpose," the Grand Enchanter intoned. "What you have not said, is how."

"Magic, duh," she said. Completely unbridled and uncaring of how she comes off. "Do you even realize the amount of bullshit the common man could fix with magic? A lot. Healers in every corner of Thedas would win the damned loyalty of the people if they were just allowed to help out
and show everyone how useful they could be. Let alone the amount of enchanted objects that mages could create for self-defense, help with household chores, things that would make your crops grow faster or yield more at harvest. The trick there is, though...that they've never been allowed. And so the people don't know how useful this shit is for them. You catch my drift?"

"And how will we get them to allow us to help?" The Grand Enchanter asked. "When they are so afraid of us and our magic?"

"That's where I come in," the Herald remarked. Smirk twisting across her mouth.

Again it strikes me that it suits her. It is not sinister, merely hints at a deeper, darker nature.

"See, I'm going to need a lot of people producing a lot of food for me. As well as a lot of people tending to a lot of other things, like say...the healing of my troops, the protection of my civilians. And as there are rifts kind of everywhere...I'll be able to spread my influence as far as I need to in order to close the Breach and deal with them." She said, so casually. As if it were not a realization that should have staggered her.

Here, this. Is the most powerful person in Thedas. And she knows it. And it is almost as if it is of no consequence.

Or, no. As if it is to be expected, somehow. But it isn't arrogance. Pride spirits don't seem to want to go near her.

The bulk of the spirits re-enacting this scene are of smaller but happier things. Warmth that is generated from kindness. The heat made in the inferno of anger and disobedience toward authority. Something cool and calming... deceptively so.

"I am not interested in my mages becoming a subservient order under the Inquisition," The Grand Enchanter stated.

"Well then it's a pretty good thing that's not what I'm asking for, isn't it?" The Herald replied. Smiling as if this is all so amusing. "The idea is actually, you become independent contractors of sorts. You can make communities of your own, with some of your people doing labor outside those communities to provide for the whole. Children and those not suited to that type of work would be supported by those who could fight, enchant, etcetera..."

The Grand Enchanter stares at the Herald for a long moment.

"What sort of compensation could we expect from this arrangement, then?" the Grand Enchanter asked. As though braced for something.

"I...money?" the Herald said, clearly thrown.

I snort. I cannot help it.

"Also probably security, I mean I'd have to protect you if you were doing me a service," the Herald continued. "But I'd keep it to Justicars or regular Inquisition soldiers and they wouldn't be allowed within your settlements- and they also wouldn't be allowed to interfere in the running of said settlements. Even if people are practicing blood magic by sacrificing chickens under a full moon, they'll be expected to report to me and protect you from outside attack and that's it. Also maybe they might instruct some of your more capable fighters in some weapon disciplines. That'd be handy for when you wanna pass as a non-mage and hide but don't want to give up your ability to fight."
The Grand Enchanter didn't seem to know what to do with this offer. "If you are protecting us, teaching us, using our magic for the benefit of your people...how is this different from the circle?"

"Well, you can say no, for starters." The Herald said. "You can say no to anything you want. And if someone tries to force you into anything, anything, you can grab a Justicar and contact me. And if it's the Justicars that are making the trouble, you can just send up a flare. Like, explode a fireball in the sky, I'll have to come investigate that."

Her expression was reminiscent of amusement but...different. As though she was joking but also absolutely serious.

"You said...settlements," the Grand Enchanter remarked. "What do you intend for us to do, exactly? Build homes? We haven't the skill for that. Even with the help of your people we were able to build only mock homes. Reminiscent of shelter and held together with magic."

"I mean, they'd be Inquisition settlements technically, I guess. Since we'd build them for you. But once you'd learned how, you could always move and we could fill them up with refugees, no problem." The Herald replied. "Plus, I mean. Held together with magic isn't necessarily a bad thing. So long as we make sure they can function as homes even without it, it could improve your comfort and security."

The Grand Enchanter seemed flustered by the idea that not only was she allowed to modify her hypothetical home with magic, she was being encouraged to do so. "What exactly is it you would expect of us?" She questioned.

"Well that would depend on what you're willing to do. I don't really want any of you guys out there fighting. I think you've had enough of that and sending you out to die is not only really sad but also a total waste. You're far more useful as tactical assets as healers and people who can enchant things and- I mean, I'd like a research division, too. Some people well learned in magic who can work together to find solutions to problems."

Again, that frustration. Where is it coming from? This worked. It was a good argument. What secret agenda is not being served?

The Grand Enchanter's hand fluttered as it rose to her throat, which she then cleared. "I see. Then I suppose we should begin writing up agreements between our people."

It was said in disbelief. As though she expected the Herald to object. Or as if she couldn't believe it was something she was saying at all.

"Sure! Though, I'm sure your people don't have much experience in like, lawyering, right? I don't really either. So the contracts or whatever will probably be simply worded. And if you don't like the wording, let me know and we'll fix it even if it seems like a small thing, alright?"

As the Grand Enchanter nodded with an expression that was businesslike once again, the vision dissolves.

I am left alone to think and I still do not know what to make of any of this. It is almost...almost as if the Herald knew precisely what concessions the Grand Enchanter would ask for, and gave them willingly.

This whole conversation...it reminds me of what she said to me when she began giving me new tasks and orders.
(Look, Solas. I don't like giving orders or thinking of people as my underlings. You don't like being one of those underlings and following orders, I get that. But you're in a dangerous situation here and you've gotta look like you're under somebody's control. It can be me, who is totally not actually going to control you at all. Or it can be Cassandra, the threat-heavy Seeker who thinks mages are all abominations waiting to happen and probably has a bad case of human supremacy based thinking. I'll ask you to do stuff, but you can tell me no. Would you tell Cassandra no?)

I had to concede the point. The Herald values freedom, which is a boon. It means my movements are not as closely monitored as they would have been had she set her Justicars to watch me as the Nightingale has done with her Scouts.

They are easily dodged when necessary and usually harmless. Watchers who do not interfere.

The Seeker…may have assigned me a Templar watcher. Or at the very least, she may have viewed my every action with suspicion. She already thought I was failing to heal the Herald on purpose before she woke.

I could not…live through a repeat of that situation. It went beyond the level of stress I can regularly work under while still being at my best.

So I agreed to the Herald's terms and was quite surprised to find that the Inner Circle had decided to count me among its members.

More visibility than I'd like…but also more say than I could have hoped for in their general operations. If I am careful, I can control much more of what happens than I could have done from the shadows. I only…

Must remain inconspicuous. As much as possible. Or I will be forced to change my face again when I leave this place, I think.

I hadn't really thought anyone would be alive to recognize me, but even still…I made my features softer and less distinctly Ancient. Kept the same…general appearance. Because I am a vain fool. I could not let go of the pieces of myself that tied me to the past. My eyes, my nose, my chin and jawline. Less sharp now than they were before, but the basic forms…still there.

Now…I could watch Navette a bit more. Her story is compelling to me. The way she seemed to fall and then catch herself with the Herald's prompting was…interesting.

It was jarring, sudden. Strangely…ephemeral, of her. I have known spirits to change their minds so quickly based upon new information, but not Humans, Elves, Dwarves or Qunari.

People who go through short phases are common. It lasts days, weeks, perhaps months.

But for Navette, the days she spent…they did not slowly convince her of the error of her beliefs. She was inundated with it and then a snap of the Herald's fingers and-

"I dunno, Damien, I dunno what to believe anymore." Her voice echoes and I turn to see her discussing something with an unfamiliar…no, not unfamiliar…a man I know but did not previously know the name of. He is one of the Cultists in Little Haven, is he not?

"We have to figure it out soon. We're all going to die, can't you see?" he said, eyes wide and fearful. "The end is upon us. It's as obvious as that tear in the sky. The Maker is punishing us, or is bringing us home."

"But that doesn't mean the Breach is gonna end the world. It might've before, but she's fixing it!"
Navette denied and insisted. "We just...we just have to do what she says, and everything will be alright. We'll just...just..."

She struggled for words then.

"What? What does she desire? How can we win her favor?" Damien begged for answers.

"Well...I mean, she. She's pretty fond of Elves, and Mages. She likes nonhumans in general, I think. She's always talking about how they're oppressed. So I guess, I dunno. We could try preaching kindness, she might like that. She's very forgiving toward wrong-doers, but only if they're sorry before they're being punished...um..."

Navette wracked her mind, anxiety pulsing out of her being. Not as strongly as the Herald, but...there is something similar, there. Her emotions are powerful and erratic, but not quite so much as the Herald's have the potential to be.

"She had a rule back in camp that rapists just got executed. If they were caught in the act, we killed them. If we just suspected they were dangerous, they got exiled into the woods, out of the group. So...uh, what did she say...consent is key?" the young Disciple seemed to struggle with her memories for a moment. "I think..."

Her expression cleared. She stood straight and at attention. And what radiated from her, then. Was a calm and surety that I have not beheld from her since I began watching the Justicars.

Warm, soothing and confident. She felt powerful in this moment.

"I understand, now." Navette said. "Everything she teaches, it's...in the chant, to some degree. Some of it is strange, and different, but most of it. Most of it is there. I think...I think we've been doing it wrong. I think..."

I can almost see the realization come over her in that moment. That everything she has ever believed could be wrong.

But then.

"I think we were right about what to do, but...but just not about how. I think maybe...she just knows how we're supposed to do the things we've been told. Maybe the Maker is just...picky," she blurted.

And a part of herself closed off. Shuttering in the emotion more firmly this time.

Ah. I see.

Navette adhered so tightly to the teachings of her 'Herald' because she wanted to believe that what she had to teach was simply a modified version of what she already knew.

She thought if she simply worshiped the Herald the same way she did the Maker, as if she were some Avatar brought to earth- she would learn the true way. The Maker would have mercy on her for not knowing the true way, because she was so eager to learn it. Because she couldn't possibly have known it if everyone else was also wrong.

It never occurred to her that a god could not want to be worshiped or that a mortal couldn't be imbued with divine power. Or even that perhaps even if her Herald was godlike, that she could want her followers to question her and be free of worship altogether.

Navette was confused, so she turned to what she knew. When the Herald took her to task, she
reverted back to her natural state of confusion…but…

Somehow her confusion faced with the reality of the Herald was different from the confusion she experienced outside her influence. Softer, safer…less frantic.

"I don't understand…” Navette's voice issues from nearby again.

I glance over to see her standing at the Gates of Haven with the Herald as she returned from her inspection of Little Haven.

"Okay…what don't you understand?" The Herald asked.

"If you're allowing the Scions to go on and even become a legitimate religion- why do I have to be separate from them?" she questioned.

Ah yes. That is what they called themselves. The Scions of the Maker's Will.

"I feel like if I explain that to you, you won't get it," the Herald replied. "Maybe once you've done your new job and everything for a while, you'll just understand. Right now it just isn't healthy for you. It isn't really for them either, but I can't really tell them what to do about their own faith. I can't even tell you not to believe in whatever you want. But I can keep you both from influencing each other and help you to grow into your own…things. Then, once you've grown into the new person you are, you can go back, if that's what you really want."

Navette seemed pleased to know she would not be kept from the Scions forever.

The Herald noticed how pleased she seemed and despondency colored the air before she smiled, sadly.

"For now, just guard the new Head Servant as if she were the most precious and irreplaceable person in the Inquisition, because she is." Her shoulders roll as she tries to fight off another, much smaller, wave of pain. "Without the servants, everything goes to hell. We need to keep them safe, happy and secure. Which means you also have to learn how to talk to her and her people without offending them. So tell me again, what should you do?"

Navette huffed, but recited the rules that had apparently been drilled into her. "No slurs, not even affectionately, not even if you hear the nonhumans using them for themselves, somehow it's different. When the decision isn't immediately obvious, wait for more information or think deeper on everything. Don't act without thinking or react without consideration."

She continues to list some very…reasonable rules as they traverse Haven and the Herald makes several purchases.

Spices, vegetables, fruit…anything that was brought in from outside and is not produced locally.

Fish and Druffalo meat purchased in smaller amounts, but chosen with care. Sniffing the packages they come in, having them opened so she can inspect their quality.

The scene drifts away as if tugged off-course by a breeze and I sigh.

Nothing more of use, but…

Something makes me want to see more, even if I cannot find anything else of use. As if examining every waking moment of the Herald's life, will allow me insight into her mind.
But I cannot bring myself to cross that threshold. Some moments are private and being watched every moment without your knowledge…

I cannot do that to her. Or anyone else. The important, public moments are fair game, however.

Ah, there is still one more thing I wish to see.

Little Haven slowly takes form around me. First the bare bones of the homes being set up—then the walls and floors and roofs taking shape enough that people could comfortably sleep in them without worry of the cold seeping in.

After that, more and more homes are built, but they're in varying stages of construction, even now.

There are a few longer buildings, communal housing for those who'd prefer not to live apart from other people. The houses themselves are for families and those who cannot handle living with others. Or so I'd been told.

Everything she does seems to center around what will make others most comfortable and happy, but it is also done in such a way that it is also productive and helpful to the community at large.

Though everything is overshadowed by this feeling of frustration I cannot pin down. Why is she so frustrated?

Everything is going her way, is it not?

Or perhaps…

"We will begin, immediately!" One of the Scions bowed low to the Herald. "We should be self-sustaining to some degree in just a couple of months. Is that sufficient?"

This must be just after the construction of the extra homes began, the area is reflecting the timeframe. In the normal flow of time, that longer building over there…the construction has progressed beyond that point. Perhaps a few days ago?

"That's great, but can you guys stop bowing and scraping?" The Herald asked. "If you feel like you need to like, salute or something, just do the same kind the Scouts and Soldiers do. You know, the fist over your sternum thing? That's…less creepy. Still don't like it, but much much less creepy."

"Oh, yes of course," the Scion stood to attention then and salutes immediately. "Will you teach us why bowing is creepy later?"

The Herald tries valiantly not to make a face. "I will…definitely try."

I cannot help another snort. Covering the lower half of my face with my hand and trying to keep my eyes and ears attentively perked while I indulge the urge to laugh.

Or chuckle, I suppose.

Is that the reason why he calls me 'Chuckles'? I thought perhaps it was some ironic statement about my grim countenance. I 'chuckle' so rarely, that basing a nickname on it seemed…a bit strange.

"We have need for many things we do not yet have a way to produce ourselves. We spoke with the Lieutenant-Commander and the Lady Ambassador but they both refused to trade with us." The Scion said. "What do we do now, milady?"

The Herald sighed explosively. "Wellll shit. Okay, I get it. You guys are cultists, but isolating you
will only make it worse! Isolation is what makes a cult more cult-y!" She furiously mussed her own hair and then spoke again. "Know what, that's fine. I'll talk to Fiona for you. And I'll try to persuade Dahlia to at least buy your stuff later even if they absolutely won't sell to you."

"Thank you, Milady!" the Scion saluted again and ran off to tell everyone of the kindness and forbearance of their lady.

…I'm not certain if they assume she would have taken more action if she hadn't held herself back, or if they were referring to her tolerance of others denying her followers.

The scene centers on the Herald then, not at all surprisingly.

Spirits…well, there is no other word, they adore her. She indulges in her emotions to a degree that makes them feel…well gorged, in her presence.

She is open to them, completely.

And yet there are things I cannot get them to tell me, even if I offer them payment. As I refuse to threaten them or use other means of coercion, I don't know if that would work, but my gut says…no.

They have been able to confirm that everything she tells us of who she is and where she is from is essentially the truth. It is only filtered- for our understanding.

Apparently the Herald believes we would not understand much of her life and upbringing before the Inquisition and so she changes words or situations to more echo our own experiences.

She tells the truth, but in a way that is guaranteed to avoid confusion and endear others to her through identification with her.

Brilliant, really.

The emotions she feels in that moment, are complex. Disappointment tinged with hope, anger edged with affection, something else I cannot name that tastes like regret but feels as soft as grief.

Sighing, I realize I can feel the sun on my physical body's face.

I used to be able to stretch these dreams for far longer. Decades in a night. Now I can barely manage two nights worth of memories in one- and it exhausts me.

Even as I slip from the dreaming into the waking I know I am completely spent already.

And I have an entire day of work to do, as well.

Wonderful.
"Alright, Josephine," the Herald addresses me. "I got a meeting with the newly appointed Head Servant, specifically to discuss enough of them coming back into Haven to live so they can work more efficiently."

Oh, my! "But we've been asking them to come back for ages now, even before the head servant was retired. What has changed?" Truly I have been a bit overwrought about the problem. The Servants' time off is still not finished as it is, and the new servants are working out well in their stead…but they are small in number and if we are to have everything back in working order…

When the time comes, we will need everyone to come back in force. We are struggling even now. Though…the Herald has been surprisingly involved in smoothing the transition.

"You were open to Tevea as the new Head Servant, for one thing," she replies. "I think they see that you're trying to make amends for mistakes made in the past, and they can't capitulate- but they can negotiate and find an arrangement that suits everyone."

I am surprised…I had not expected the new Head Servant to be so adept, truly.

Recognizing this gambit for what it is, I smile and stand from my seat behind my desk. "Where shall we be meeting?"

"In Little Haven, because it's a fairly neutral location and you can both see what's been done over there. I won't have to like, fill you in or anything," she replies with a smile in return.

The Herald is so expeditious. Always finding ways to finish more than one task at a time. It is a trait that I value highly, as the more tasks she finishes in good time, the less I must take up myself.

If only our Commander and Lady Seeker could finish all their tasks without a helping hand to guide them…ah well.

At least with the newly established Council of Laymen, I have people to delegate tasks to when it concerns something outside of my particular abilities and knowledge. I do not simply have to work through things that I may bungle in my own way because of my ignorance. And indeed, I learn much by working with the Council!

Being a part of two different leadership circles seemed daunting at first, but I am actually doing less work now!

"Lead the way, then!" I encourage her with a gesture.

She turns on her heel with a little flourish, and I giggle a bit at the showmanship. The Herald is certainly delightful for conversation on mundane subjects and everyday tasks become much more fun in her presence. Small touches like a flourish or a certain emphasis on certain words rather than others and suddenly she is very much the center of your attention.

I am aware that this is a well-cultivated skill, but is she?

At times, it is difficult to say. The Herald is such a naturally endearing person, it is like she is
cloaked in happiness and comfort and the soothing feeling of relief.

But she does not use it for the purpose of manipulation, that I have seen. She becomes…different, for that.

This is what she shows to me, to Leliana…to set us at ease, perhaps?

We pass through the Chantry on our way out, as my office cannot really be anywhere else. There are few buildings and it made sense at the time for the Chantry-established Inquisition to make its office in the Chantry.

But now with the Herald the way she is…

"Heretic!" the mothers shout as she passes. Spitting at her feet. "Demon!"

"Now I resent that one," she quips as we leave through the doors. "Demons have got better shit to do than menace you little shitheads."

They squawk with insult as the doors close behind us and I give her a long suffering stare.

"What?" She asks. Brows lifting. "Am I supposed to sit there and take verbal abuse and say nothing in response?"

"They would not be so angry if you did not belittle the Chantry so much," I say. "You make a mockery of everything they have worked for and everything they believe in."

"I could feel bad about that if they actually had a pious bone in their bodies," she replies. "Reacting to words of doubt and dissension like a toddler being told that your hair looks funny is just ridiculous. My words are never more vehement than they need to be to get my point or my emotions about the situation across. They know exactly what they're doing. They're manipulating the fears of the people of Thedas. They accuse me of being a demon or abomination, the people start to fear me- then boom. Riots. Mobs. We're gonna have to do something about them, soon."

While I do acknowledge that this is a valid fear, I am still leery of what she means by 'do something about them'. The Herald seems to favor directness…

"What…exactly would you have us do?" I question.

"We're not affiliated with the Chantry anymore," she says. "That's something you guys are going to have to face, sooner or later. The Divine is no longer with us, and the Sisters and Mothers here want no part of what we're doing. They have to leave. Go to a Chantry somewhere they can be of some use in, or something. Here, they're totally useless to us as well as being a pain in my ass. If they fed the hungry I could put up with the name calling. If they housed the homeless, I could stand a little fearmongering. I could."

She glances aside at me as we walk through Haven. "But they don't do those things. They're supposed to, but the most I've seen them do is feed the 'Maker's Children', I.E. Humans who are devout enough to visit them every day- and even that doesn't happen often. Elves and other nonhumans aren't allowed in Chantries, usually. So they get nothing."

Ah, well…that is very reasonable, as far as concerns go. And as far as ideas are concerned—sending them to another Chantry where they may not encounter and annoy the Herald and her followers…would be more convenient.

"I fear if the Mothers and Sisters and Brothers are to leave," I begin. "That the people will not
I...never considered that.

We pass the Tavern and the Herald's eyes turn to Solas's home for a moment. Her eyes flicker over the cabin and then away.

She catches me watching her and I clear my throat. "What is it? You seem distressed."

"Solas has been cranky lately," she replies. "I'm wondering if people have been harassing him or interrupting his sleep or something. Can I post a guard in this area, one of my Justicars?"

"Ah...of course," I agree. "But there are guards already nearby."

"Not any that give a shit about Elven Mages," she replies.

The very matter-of-fact statement is...uncomfortable. I've no way to respond that will not sound argumentative or impolitic.

So I regress back to our earlier topic. "If we can find someone to head the flock, someone influential and commanding. Perhaps they will become less useless? We would not have to send them anywhere, then."

The Herald hums. "I'm going to meet with someone Chantry-ish in the Crossroads, right? When I'm well enough to travel. I'll ask them if they know anybody."

There is a bit of a knowing smile on her face, but as I know not what she could possibly know, I simply hum in response and continue to follow.

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Tevea POV

'Breathe, she told me to breathe. Just breathe. Remember what we went over.'

I just wish the Commander could do this!

(It has to be you, Tevvy. You can't just seem in control, you have to actually be in control. I can give you some techniques to calm yourself and everything...but I can't come up with the demands. You have to keep them 'reasonable' but also give yourselves room to breathe. Anticipate that you'll have to let something go and be ready with something 'unreasonable' you can give them to reject outright. You can do this. You know what your people here need. You're perfect for this job, whether you know it or not.)

Her words ring in my ears as I recall them. Like she's standing right next to me, repeating herself.
'Why didn't I turn down the job when she asked if I wanted to take it? Why didn't I just say no?'

Lady Josephine and the Commander enter the door on the far side of the room and I have only a moment to soothe my frightened nerves and pretend I didn't just flinch.

The Commander smoothly struts across the room to the back where I'm seated with refreshments and a small plate of snacks. Smiling approvingly—though I know not at what.

"Serah Laslantos," the Ambassador greets.

"Lady Montilyet. Commander." I greet in return.

"You can call me lady, too if it'll differentiate me from Barris," the Commander says. Wrinkling her nose in amusement. "I'll bet that's caused some confusion."

I giggle nervously. "I suppose… Lady Nik."

Appreciating the attempt at breaking the tension, but not knowing what to say, I sit…still and quiet. Waiting for them to begin.

"Well," the Ambassador sits up with a smile. "I suppose we should get straight to business, then."

"Of course," I reply. "We should go over your own hopes for this arrangement, first."

Lady Nik said I had to keep it 'reasonable' and then come up with something 'unreasonable' I was willing to let them shoot down.

I can understand why. If you're part of a negotiation and you feel as though you've been bullied and pushed about, you're less likely to make concessions. I remember that from back when my mother used to take me to work with her and I'd slink around listening to the noble children with their private tutors.

Never really been able to put those tidbits I'd learned into practice, or even really thought of ways to do so outside of fanciful daydreams…but here we go.

"Well, we do wish for the Servants to come back to Haven when their rest is up. To live and work in closer proximity. Eth'an is close enough, of course—but we find that efficiency has not quite been the same since you moved there." The Ambassador explains. "So we would like a full complement of Servants as we had before, living in Haven again. That is all."

I take a moment to think and glance nervously at the Commander now and then…but she is silent. Watching the proceedings with a careless but attentive air. As if this matters little to her, but she is curious of the outcome.

(The point of the Justicars is going to be to mediate disputes in favor of the marginalized people probably being run all over by the other party. To protect them, look out for their interests, even provide for them in times when they've been…cut off from traditional help. I can't encourage you during the meeting or give you leading statements to follow. I can only back you up.)

"I really don't want to go back to Haven," I say. Slowly. "Do you know why I left? Why we left?"

It wouldn't surprise me if they knew nothing about the why's and wherefore's. We're beneath their notice.

"I heard nothing of your reasons, and after you left and we requested you come back, all the
servants would respond with was 'no, we're not coming back',' the Ambassador replies. "No explanations at all."

"A human man came into our lodgings to harass us about something," I say. I cannot even remember exactly what it was. "I was exhausted from working on my feet for much much longer than I was used to. Trying to sleep. And someone came into our lodgings, and started shouting." I shrug. "I couldn't stand it anymore. I was tired of people not only demanding me every other moment, but also the moments that were supposed to only be for me. To sleep, to rest. So I left. And a bunch of other people saw me, and I suppose…they just got the same idea."

The Ambassador's lips are twisted up a bit, now. It makes me nervous.

"I see," she says. "So you would require us to keep this from happening again."

I inhale slowly to keep myself from reacting to that.

In truth I hadn't even thought to ask for that particular boon. I was going to ask for other things. Privacy seems…impossible. I've never had privacy. Even in the Alienage, you're surrounded by other people and a human might just walk in any time they like and do whatever they like, wherever they like.

The concept is so foreign, I lose my voice for a moment.

For some reason, living in Eth'an just felt like living in the Alienage. People were…everywhere. People aren't allowed to go into each others' houses without permission, though. I just…I guess I never locked my door and I never really thought about it because it felt the same as everywhere else.

It wasn't till this very moment that I…I realize I have a door. That I can lock. To keep people out. And they'll stay out there.

I don't want to lose that before I've even begun to enjoy it!

My eyes slip to the Commander again. No encouragement, like she said- but she is looking at me like she's attentively awaiting my response.

"I…believe that would be the only way we could open the discussion at all," I say. "If people believe they're only moving buildings and they'd lose none of their newfound…privacy…we might discuss moving back."

"Might?" Lady Josephine asks. "What else would your people ask for?"

"Well," I begin. Swallowing and breathing- and remembering the discussion I had with Raizel and the others just this morning. "We'd have to set down rules, so we aren't ever worked this hard again. Once we took stock and were able to rest, we realized some of us were missing. They were in the healer's cabin. They'd collapsed from exhaustion and we hadn't even noticed."

"Mmm, sounds like overworking them was bad for them and the rest of the Inquisition, then," Lady Nik concludes in nonchalance. "After all, we had need of those resources, and because we didn't take better care of our people, we ended up using more of them than we needed to."

The Ambassador nods. "Of course. This was a detriment to both sides, and we should be certain it cannot happen again."

I can't believe this is going so well. I'm still shaking. It's getting worse. Why is it getting worse?
"A…and…also…a few of the servants…have come to me with…particular concerns…" I wish I could curl up and die rather than talk about this.

"Concerns of a delicate nature?" the Lady Ambassador questions.

I swallow, and nod. "Something…I'd rather not mention in detail…but suffice to say…we want guards. Specifically, we want…"

My eyes dart to the Commander, whose eyes have dropped to the table. She looks faraway.

Then I return my attention to the Ambassador. "We'd like Justicars, My Lady. Posted in all public areas where a servant can find them, quickly and easily- to stave off…aggressive Nobles and disgruntled townsfolk and…other sorts."

"Well, that would be the Commander's decision," the Lady Ambassador turns to the Commander. "What do you think?"

"It's our job, they'll go where they're needed. If we need to saturate Haven with them to keep the Servants safe, or just to make them feel safe- that's what we'll do," she says.

A tremendous weight is lifted from my shoulders.

Not all of them are well-trained mercenaries, I know that. But sometimes having someone with any authority in any way at all to stand for you is enough. Even if they couldn't hold their own in a fight, their presence alone would deter…a lot of unwanted attention, if we were to seek them out.

"Well, then!" Lady Josephine says with a smile. "Do we have an accord?"

I glance at the Commander who is looking very intently at me, as if she's prompting me to ask for more.

But she's already agreed to my stipulations. I've nothing else to ask for. I know she wants me to ask for something unreasonable, so that the Lady Ambassador can feel as though she's won something, but…

Should I risk the already good agreement for it?

Or is she simply waiting for me to accept?

I'm left floundering for a moment, before… "The housing." I say. Sudden and cut-off, oddly. I know. "Part of the reason we're so reluctant to leave is that…we have our own space. Not only cut off from the people in Haven, but. We have doors we can lock, a space…that is ours. And no one else's. Could we get that in Haven?"

The Lady Ambassador mulls that over with a very slowly furrowing brow.

The Commander hums and says, "are we talking houses or rooms?"

I blink. "I…either, really?"

"A dormitory, then?" she turns to the Ambassador to ask. "A bigger building, with individual rooms, instead of one big room with a bunch of beds in it? Honestly don't know how they stood living that way for so long. I'd die without privacy and a lockable door."

"Our budget is strained as it is," the Ambassador says. Obviously regretful. "I'm not certain if we could manage that at this time."
"Oh," I reply. "I suppose…"

I hadn't really expected that to be agreed to, but... somehow remembering our living conditions and how different they are now- it makes me sad that it was truly unreasonable to ask for such a thing.

"Eh, the Justicars'll do it," Lady Nik says. Leaning back in her seat and lolling her head a bit. "Like they did in Little Haven and for Eth'an itself. Having the Servants move back will also mean more room for refugees, which is always good."

"But..." the Ambassador glances at the Commander. "Have they not been working uncompensated, all this time?"

"We're not literal mercenaries. Even the Blades weren't supposed to be," the Commander says. "We do things now, because people need them to be done. Besides... we make money off of everything we do anyway. In some way or another. Building homes means more people, more people means more industry and shopping- and some of my Justicars are already selling goods and services in order to fund the whole Order. It's not a big deal."

"Ah. Alright then," the Ambassador smiles and turns to me again. "Anything else?"

I can't believe it.

"I...ah...no?" I reply. "I believe... that's all our concerns... as of this time."

"Good!" she claps her hands together excitedly. "When your rest period is up, we will expect you to move into Haven once again. And the Justicars will begin on Construction, but... you may have to stay in the old building for a few days..."

"That's fine!" I assure her, though it most certainly is not. I cannot reject such a reasonable request. That would make me seem... no, I must. "We will simply..."

"Or they could stay in Eth'an even while they work, till the Dormitory is done," the Commander says. "I mean, you wouldn't ask the soldiers to sleep on the ground until the Tents got there if there were perfectly serviceable tents not that far away from them, right?"

"I suppose you have a point," the Ambassador agrees. "After all, it was our neglect that led to so many of the servants leaving and becoming ill or injured. If this would soothe their minds and ease the transition, it is only reasonable."

I... I've lost my voice.

I nod numbly and the Lady Ambassador stands. "Well, then! I'll be going. I'll send you a written agreement that you can look over and sign in a few days."

Nodding again, like the empty-headed ninny I am, I watch her sweep elegantly out of the room.

The Commander sighs and slumps forward against the table. "Wow. We have a lot of work to do."

And now I feel guilty. "I... I'm sorry, my lady. I honestly thought she'd just shoot that idea down."

She blinks and glances up at me. "I meant with you, hon."

I feel my mouth open and close. And open again. "What?"

"You could've asked for so many things. You only asked for privacy and security. I need to work on your confidence and show you exactly how important the Servants are to the Inquisition. To
everyone. Maybe then you'll see." She says.

"See what, my lady?" I ask. "What else could I possibly ask for? A pay rise? That wouldn't be possible. She couldn't even afford to build the Dormitory out of pocket."

"You're so close," she says with a sigh. "But you're right. Right now, it wouldn't have been good to ask for everything. I was just expecting you to ask for more, even if it wasn't feasible."

"I don't…I don't like asking for things, it's…uncomfortable," I reply miserably.

I'm already so terrible at this job!

"God, same," the Commander replies.

I blink. "What?"

"I hate asking for things. It always made me feel unworthy." She says.

The word almost stabs me through the heart with its aptness.

"But this is part of what you need to learn to do your job and serve your people," she says. "You are effectively the ruler of a small kingdom right now. A kingdom dependent on other people to make money, with a lot of needs that haven't been met for a very long time. Your goal should be to make the best deals possible for them. And for that, you need more confidence and information about stuff like…" she trails off. "You know what? I'm gonna get someone for you. Someone who can do business and law stuff for you. Varric has to know somebody. They'll do what you can't, teach you what you can learn, it'll be great."

Thank the Maker! "Certainly, I would…welcome whatever help you could give, my lady."

"But would you, really?" she asks. Peering at my face. "You can always say no, or tell me to butt out of your business."

"No, really!" I say. "I am…ill-suited to this position. Any help would be appreciated."

She squints. "Ill-suited? I was told by many of the servants that you were the only person for the job. You organized them even before you were given the Head Servant position. It's part of the reason I recruited you when we were in the Temple together."

I blink at her as my mouth falls open. I can't speak. I can only stare.

"Don't you remember the way you used to rally everybody when they were exhausted?" she asks. "How you'd give them something to do that was soothing when they were overwrought?"

"B-but!" I splutter. "That's just what you do for people when they need help!"

She quirks an eyebrow at me. "And yet, nobody else was doing it."

I've…no idea how to respond to that.

Chapter End Notes

If anyone has any tips for how to write this story better or if you wanna let me know
about an offensive thing or whatever, I'm totally always open to that!
Almost forgot today was saturday, the day I update on. Be thankful I got paranoid and checked my calendar, lmao.

"You seem to be getting up and around more often nowadays," I observe. "Are you feeling any better?"

Nik huffs and crosses her arms, slumping in the well-padded chair. Tucking her blankets more securely around herself. "Not really. But don't tell anyone I still feel like shit or I won't be allowed to do anything."

I give her a sideways glance, and take in the dark circles under her eyes that have gotten worse since the last time I saw her. They were always there…but not like that.

"Maybe you shouldn't be doing things?" I ask. Then yawn. "I mean, you gave a lot of people a lot of different jobs specifically so the load is lighter on all of us."

We're in my house, or…rather my room? It's a single room house. Rather it's a house with no rooms. I have a bed and all the furnishings that go into a bedroom…but the building isn't connected to any others, so it's…well.

There's not a lot of space, and Nik is taking up a lot of it in the corner over there with all her work spread on that little table and sitting in that huge, padded chair.

But I'm not much better, sitting over here in bed with a thick slab of wood on my lap, looking over reports that are half scattered all over my bed and side-table.

"Like you're one to talk," she says. "You still seem to be refusing to delegate anything beyond the most mundane tasks. And only to that one lady. The…the angry one, what the hell is her name?"

She doesn't seem to be asking me. She staring off into space with her brows furrowed.

I give it a minute. Waiting patiently as she works back through her memories.

"Luh…something. Lou-something?" She scoffs and grabs at her hair with her hands like she's about to rip it out. "God, I can barely function normally and now I've got injury-brain!"

"Lutetia," I say.

"Right, that's the one!" she snaps, points at me and grins.

I snort and pick up another piece of paper. "Most of the people in Eth'an are civilians. The only soldiers or leaders here are already in place, doing what needs to be done. But all these issues seem too important to just, hand off." No matter how much I'd love to.

"Sure, and there's also the control thing," she says.
I hum and start ticking off tasks that have been accomplished this week. "Control thing?"

"You know that thing where your whole life has been controlled by someone else," she says. "And now that you've got power and authority, it's hard to let go."

When I lift my head, she's just staring at me. No emotion on her face. No judgment, no thoughts at all. Or so she'd have me believe.

"Oh this isn't gonna be one of those discussions where you lead me to some kind of religious epiphany, is it?" I ask. "Because I haven't the time for that. Also I think we're in different Temples, now."

She snorts, and it shatters her cold facade. "Why does everyone associate self-awareness with religion? God, the religious people back home that I knew were the least self-aware assholes…" she mutters to herself. "Well, the Christians, anyway…"

"I dunno what a Christian is," I reply. "But the Maker wants his flock to spread the Chant across Thedas- and the Creators, so far as I know…just exist to guide the people in their times of hardship. So I dunno really. Maybe just because it feels mystical to know yourself?"

"God Miles, that was deep," she says. "You're gonna get me philosophizing if you're not careful."

"Oh Maker forbid-" I cut myself off and sigh. "I don't think I'll ever get used to not calling out to the Maker anymore."

"Technically you could consider using the Maker's name to curse, blasphemy," she says. "So you're probably still good."

I laugh at that. "Suppose in that light, calling out to **Dirthamen** or **Falon'Din** would be downright disrespectful."

"Those are the gods you worship?" she asks. "I could tell part of your Vallaslin was Dirthamen, but the other one was giving me trouble. I just knew they weren't the same one."

There go her sharp eyes again.

"They are. The Secret Keeper and the Friend of the Dead. Dunno why, but…they spoke to me, a bit." How to even explain the feeling that came over me? "It was almost as if, in the moment I learned of them…they decided to…smile on me. I…felt it."

"Like an awakening? A warmth in your soul that radiates out into your body," she says. "I cried when I found my god. A little, anyway."

I lift my head and eye the way she sifts through her paperwork. So casual.

"And who is, your god?" I ask.

"His name is Loki," she replies. "A god of painful truths and the twisting of the truth- chaos and disorder and the punishment of those who deserve it or need it and a lot of other things. Or at least that's who he is to me. Other people have different interpretations of him."

"A fellow Heathen God, then," I reply.

She snickers. "They're only Heathens to the Children of the Maker and in my case, the Christians. To us, they're just gods. But I have to admit I take some pleasure in having a Heathen God over
anything else. Feels right to me."

It would.

Can't say I disagree.

"I still don't know what they want from me," I say. "I didn't get to learn much from the Keeper before I was adopted- she thought I could learn while I went. Like everyone else did. I wasn't going to be a first or anything, so a dedicated study wasn't necessary. I just needed to learn what it meant to be Dalish. Not how to lead them. Just to…be one with my clan."

"You can always go back, you know," she says. "I can put other people in charge of your position on the Council of Laymen. I probably should at some point, as you're Dalish now. But…Tevea isn't ready yet."

"Tevea? That new Head Servant?" I ask. "I noticed everyone seems upset about having to go back to Haven…but more optimistic about their leader than they were before. Good job on that one."

"Don't congratulate me," she says. "The Servants voted and she was chosen by a majority of them. Or well. There were a few different candidates voted for, and she was the one with the most votes out of all of them. We'll figure out a better system, later."

"Voted?" I ask.

"I asked them who they wanted, and by a large margin they said 'Tevea'," she replies. "After the clusterfuck that was the last Head Servant, I thought it only natural we ask what they want."

"Only natural she says," I mutter. "And I couldn't go back. My entire role in the Clan is supposed to be liaison to you and the Justicars. And now to the entirety of the Inquisition, I'd wager. So the Keeper would likely prefer I remain and help Shivanas make the case of the Dalish to the Inquisition and handle the interactions therein."

"So long as you wanna stay here, then…you could always form up with the other displaced Dalish and practice your religious ceremonies together," she says. "Start up a church of Dalish worship that the Inquisition Dalish can go to when there are services. Be nice for them to have a place they can go for spiritual succor and whatnot."

I snort. "Succor and whatnot, really."

"You don't have to be in charge," she says. Eyeballing me like she knows what I'm about. "Just ask someone else to lead services, whoever knows the most. They can coordinate with everyone and make sure everybody knows what days and what might be expected of them. Hell, Shivanas should probably do that, I should talk to him about it."

"You do that," I reply. "God knows we're not both busy enough."

"Speaking of you two being busy," she says. "I noticed you spend a lot of time together. Did you become good friends when you became adopted?"

I stare at her for a moment. But she has no idea all the things she just implied. She's being perfectly sincere.

"I'm hoping we become much better friends soon," I reply. "But yeah, we're closer than we were when we left. You could say that."
"That's good, I was hoping you'd get along," she says. Going back to her paperwork. "But now I need to ask for your advice about something."

"Oh yeah?" seguing from that, I dunno if I can handle what she has to ask.

"I want the Justicars to operate in Cells. A commander, a lieutenant commander, a lieutenant and several other people taking up separate duties," she says.

"That's your subject change," I mutter and put everything aside on my bedside table or on my bed as I stand to walk over to lean against the end of it. "Why do you need my opinion on that?"

"Because you're the Lieutenant-Commander, Miles," she replies. "So tell me, what do you think of the leaders of a cell not inheriting their position, but having to take a qualification exam of sorts? So that we can keep people from murdering their superior officers in order to gain power."

I think about that for a moment, decide this is going to be a LONG conversation…and sit on the floor.
And yet again I didn't know it was saturday till the day was almost over. Ugh.

Good news is, I have three weeks worth of backlog built up. So I will definitely be back next week and the week after that. And that means I have more time to finish more-- which means I am back on my roll, baby.

Everything still kinda hurts. But I'm dealing.

"Hand me that…whatever that is," I point at the little containers of herbs that these people use for spicing up their meals.

"It's the spices, milady," one of the servants assigned to our camp informs me. "I really think you should let me-"

"I know what spices are, hon," I say and smile at her. "I just need to know which one it is. Can you tell me that?"

She goes silent and shakes her head, looking down. "I'm not a cook, milady. I...usually clean things up and prepare the meal according to my instructions."

"Alright, guess I'm finding out the hard way, then." I reply. Opening the container, picking up a few bits of…leaf? And popping them in my mouth.

Oh it barely tastes like anything. I can't figure out what it is.

If this is our troop rations, I feel for our troops. I'm figuring out a better way to get food and spices out to them. They're facing god damn demons and in some places dragons and bandits and giants and shit.

The least we can do is make sure their sleeping arrangements are good and that their food is actually tasty.

"Ugh," I say and make a face. "That's terrible. Are our funds so bad we can't afford some salt and pepper for the troops?"

"Oh we've salt and pepper milady!" the servant exclaims. "But the salt is all supposed to be used on the meat for preservation. And the pepper…well. It's rather an acquired taste."

"The pepper is an acquired taste?" I ask. "Hang on, what kinda pepper?"

"Red ones, milady," she replies.

Oh. Peppers. Not what I meant, but close enough.

"Can you get me like, a good spoonful of salt, one of those peppers and some meat and…do we have any milk and biscuits?" I ask.
"Oh…well, milk is a bit hard to come by out here, but I can go and requisition some!" she replies.

"Sure you can do that, but do we have any kinda…cooking oil?" I ask.

"Of course milady, we've some lard and you can heat it till it's…well, it melts- sort of." She says.

"Good okay. I can make biscuits and gravy from all of that if we at least have some flour," I say.

She dithers for a moment. "We use it to make the biscuits, so we'll be short."

"Ask the men in camp if they'd prefer a good meal tonight and restricted rations till tomorrow evening when the replacement rations get here- or if they'd prefer I leave it alone." I wave her off and put the 'spices' back where they belong.

"You don't have to do this," Solas reminds me from a nearby log. Where he's very intently reading a very large book. "I know you are still in pain."

"I guess you'd be the one to know that," I reply. "But I can't sit still. I literally cannot do it. If you don't want me exploring forest trails for herbs and shit, you have to deal with me cooking dinner."

I think I see him smirk out of the corner of my eye, but when I turn my head to look- he's just placidly reading his book.

Smartass.

"Biscuits and gravy," Varric intones from the other side of the campfire. "Haven't had that in a while."

"Really? Why not?" I ask.

"Eh, just tastes like mush to me," he says. "Mush with hard, teeth-cracking biscuits in it."

I grin a little. "Nobody ever let the biscuits soften up before serving it to you before?" I know what the biscuits are like here. Not terribly soft. But they are still a type of bread. I'll find a way to soften them up or die trying.

"Nah, pretty sure they're just rocks people throw in the gravy." He quips while taking out his little chest-book that usually sits in a pocket in his coat. He scribbles a few furious lines before putting it back.

"Getting some inspiration?" I ask. "Campfire really do it for you?"

He laughs, then clears his throat. "The light of the campfire illuminated her soft features. Filled with determination, her eyes shone and her fingers twitched. She would make a culinary masterpiece to impress everyone."

I snort and pick up the nearby skillet, putting it over the fire on the grate. "You got one detail wrong."

"And that is?" he asks.

"I don't do things to impress people. Impressing people is a by-product of the things I do, or it doesn't happen and it definitely doesn't concern me. I'm doing busywork to keep myself from losing my shit. Very different." I explain.

He shrugs. "Artistic interpretation."
"If it's about me, I hope your artistic interpretation at least interprets things as close to the truth as possible, Varric." I eye him. "Because it's gonna probably be what people remember me from."

He purses his lips. "I'll do my best to represent you as truthfully as possible. You think I should start with how a lowly civilian scholar-type rescued an entire camp of mercenaries from their tyrannical boss, or should I start from when you became a religious icon?"

"Haha, yes, I get it. My life is ridiculous," I reply. "As close as possible, Varric. I mean it."

He flicks his wrist and the servant arrives with my supplies.

Time for dinner!

Solas POV

How to describe the Herald of Andraste? If I were speaking of her to someone else, what would I say…?

That she's loud and overbearing? Quiet and contemplative? Kind? Harsh?

Every descriptive word that comes to mind could possibly fit. And somehow they're all… inadequate.

That is what worries me.

"You think too heavily on this," Wisdom drifts through the hallways of a very old school. A place of learning and fulfillment for the Elvhen. Vast and beautiful. "You have known her for a paltry amount of time. Most of that time, she was not conscious. You will know her better as you speak to her. Spend time together. Even the most enigmatic people eventually show their every facet."

"That is just it," I reply. "She has. She is entirely transparent. Even the spirits I have asked, agree that she has no ulterior motives."

"But this bothers you," they say. "Because no one has no ulterior motives."

Inhaling deeply and exhaling slowly…I try to bring calm to my mind. "Even I…in my capacity as a leader, trying to do my best for my people…even I have…temptations. Things I want, things I wish to do. Things I fear. But it seems almost as though there is nothing that scares her badly enough to actually deter her. Nothing that tempts her to the point of distraction. Nothing she wants, nothing she fears. It is like she is not even a person."

"I suppose it can seem that way now. When you know nothing about her," Wisdom replies. "But there is not a person alive who is not afraid of something. Who does not want something. Even a simple thing. Even a concept like peace or happiness."

"Are you referring to fears or wants?" I reply.

"Both," they reply.

And then something…feels wrong.

"The mark is pulsating," I stare into the distance- but Nik's dream-void is not there. She is awake. And that means the mark is pulsating because she is…doing something. But what, it's a…regular
pulsation.

Not at all like when she had an overly emotional reaction to her inability to help the servants in the kitchen—when she cried and it sparked haphazardly.

This is more…like a signal. Or a…

"She is calling me," I say. A bit shocked.

"How very clever," I can hear Wisdom say as the dream dissipates.

Nik is not the type to attempt something she thinks may disturb me in the middle of the night for no reason.

The Herald does not waste resources and she does not disrespect the time and space in which her underlings sleep and recover from their daily toils. She's very meticulous about making certain people are comfortable and safe.

I sit up on my bedroll and notice Varric snoring next to me as I get up and move to the tent opening.

She hasn't moved from her Tent. I can feel her there.

As the Herald, she was expected to have the biggest, most luxurious tent in camp.

She proceeded to use the tent for excess storage and gave away nearly all her excess blankets and pillows to the rest of us.

When I step inside, she is lying on her back—left hand outstretched while the mark pulses.

And when I get close enough to see her face, I notice—

There are tears running over the sides of her face. But her face itself, it is…blank.

Her eyes flick to me and I see terror in them. What is going on?

"Herald?" I ask, quietly.

"There…there's a snake in my bedroll, and I can't move. Please help me," she says. Quietly. Softly. Without moving an inch.

I would almost think this is a joke, but…the look in her eyes tells me she is genuinely terrified.

So I walk to her side and kneel. Stretching an arm out so my palm hovers over her.

"Don't…" she pauses and breathes slowly, keeping her movements minimal. "Don't kill it."

I blink and I feel my fingers twitch in surprise. "Why?"

I wouldn't have. Still I want to know the answer.

"It's not its fault that…it freaks me out," she replies.

The very quick application of a paralyzing rune and the extraction of the snake— it all happens within moments. But she stays still as I leave her tent and throw the snake back into the woods.

When I return, she has moved. On top of a stack of crates. Curled into a ball, she shivers, with
blankets wrapped around her.

It is…shocking to see.

If you had asked me before this, I would have said she could simply master her fear and deal with it herself.

Why didn't she?

"Are you alright?" I ask.

"No," she replies. "But you can go back to bed. There's nothing you can do for me. I just need…to feel safe. And I'm not going to as long as I'm sleeping in a tent."

I pause as I half-step backward but stop and tap my fingertips against my thigh.

(It's not its fault that…it freaks me out.)

"Perhaps there is something I can do."

Kneeling on the ground, I draw a very complex rune into the dirt. It starts to glow but the light dies away as it is completed. "I believe this is similar to what Ren did to your tent before. He told me of the barrier he erected around your tent when Dahlia attacked your camp. I found the fact that he was able to key it to you and your energy so easily, fascinating. Considering Circles usually restrict that sort of research."

She's staring at the rune, but then she looks up at me with eyes still glimmering with tears and my breath catches for a moment.

I clear my throat. "No one and nothing will be able to enter this tent unless you're touching it while crossing the threshold. I can take it down in the morning so that the servants can continue using this tent for storage during the day."

"Thank you," she mutters. "Now go back to bed. You'll be cranky if you don't get more sleep."

I scoff, "cranky?"

"You've been snapping a lot more easily the past few days," she says. "I think you haven't gotten enough sleep."

…she is not…entirely wrong.

Still disconcerting that she noticed.
"Well, I'm certain the servants will be able to take care of that once we're all moved into our newly constructed quarters. But for now, we cannot accommodate-"

"This is your job!" Messere Relios shouts at me. "You're supposed to clean up the messes here, and this is a mess!"

"Yes, our duties include cleaning and cooking and even tending to small children while their parents are away fighting or doing their other duties," I patiently recite. "But we are not well versed in this matter and we must."

"You're gonna fix this, now-" he reaches out-

But before he can grab me, Navette is there.

Grasping his wrist and squeezing hard enough to make him yelp. "You've been told that this situation is out of the servant's hands for now. Shut up and leave before I throw you out. You have been afforded the courtesy of speaking to the Head Servant but you squander it with petty bickering." And then she throws him backward by releasing him, violently.

He stumbles and manages to keep his feet, opening his mouth again.

But Navette has drawn her sword and levels it at him. "I have full authority in all matters concerning the protection of the Head Servant of the Inquisition. I am Knight-Class Justicar: Navette. Threaten my charge and face my blade."

He growls and turns on his heel, but he grumbles all the way out the door. Insults of varying kinds. My ears burn and tick back.

Am I not doing a good enough job? Everyone is always so angry with me. But I really can't order the servants to handle situations they've never been trained for. We're not the fancy servants from Orlais, or the high court servants that serve the king!

We're just normal people. Doing our jobs.

"I think you need to stop entertaining this shite," Navette comments as she re-sheathes her sword. "They're just here to yell at you and get you to do what they want."

"The Commander is always so open, though," I reply. "Her leadership abilities are like nothing I've seen before. I thought perhaps, if I did things the way she does-"

"The Herald's way isn't for you," Navette says. Cutting me off. "You don't have the steel for it. You need something different. You can't stand up to those people, so you have to find a way to beat them that makes them think they're getting what they want."

I blink. "Make them think they're getting what they want?"

"Yeah it's one of the things the Herald used to teach us," she replies. "People just want to feel heard. If you know what their complaints are already, and you don't want to keep wasting
time talking about something you already know- then all the people with the same complaints can be placated- to make room for the people who haven't voiced their complaints yet."

…I have been getting an awful lot of the same complaints. Over and over again.

It makes me so tired. To listen to the same whining and complaining and yelling, over and over and over again.

"What…" I turn and cup my hands together before me. Trying to contain my panic and my weariness and my pain. "What did you have in mind?"

Cassandra POV

I don't understand anything she does. Nothing makes sense. I know she is not purely soft-hearted. I have seen her make hard decisions, sacrifice herself for the good of Thedas.

On the way to the rift, that is all she did. Push forward regardless of the pain. The suffering she was going through.

Part of me even respects her for it.

But everything else she does…

I have spoken to Regalyan about it. He seems to be less concerned with her motives than I am. It is infuriating.

Just before we left, he kept telling me to 'keep an open mind' as if a Seeker is not taught to do exactly that. As if I have not dedicated my whole life to the pursuit of truth and justice.

"You seem out of sorts, Seeker," Solas addresses me. "Is something wrong?"

Snorting in derision, I cross my arms. "Everything is wrong. Nothing makes sense when I am with her. She’s throwing away so many resources on these people. We could send them to Haven, to Eth’an or Little Haven to live- but she insists we take them along to the Crossroads. Provide for them, with supplies that are meant to feed our soldiers. Blankets meant to keep us warm. It is almost as if she wants us to die out here. Cold and hungry and feeble."

"I too questioned the wisdom of taking on so many mouths to feed, but I also dislike the idea of sending them on their way alone," he replies. "To face an army of templars or rebel mages all on their own in the wilds we have yet to conquer seems…cruel. Still, I understand your concerns. Perhaps she does as well and simply chose what she thought was the best of two terrible options."

"These people are not our direct responsibility," I reply. "They are refugees, and we should take them in. That is true. But they could travel to Haven on their own. They came from the Crossroads to get to Haven. All without us to protect them."

"Yes, and look at them," he says. "Some are ill, some are injured. A few died on the way. I am not saying your concerns are not perfectly logical, Seeker. I am only saying that the choice to take them along, was…probably not made lightly."

"We do not know that," I reply. "She may have never considered the ramifications of this. She can
be quite absent-minded at times. I have noticed she has a terrible memory where it concerns anything outside of what she considers important. She forgot her entire schedule, we had to write it down for her. Even now she has a piece of paper with our travel itinerary written on it."

"That does not mean she is thoughtless. Only that she sometimes forgets to think before she acts. But she always checks her work afterwards. And sometimes she changes her mind," he says. "If you are so concerned that she hasn't considered all sides of this issue, then let us ask her about it."

"And if she refuses to admit she has no idea what she is doing?" I say.

"She always at least admits that much," he mutters in amusement. "She is right there, simply ask."

"Ask who what?" Nik swivels around from where she has been attending to the wounded- a note stand like Josephine's clutched in her hands. "Oh ask me. What?"

Solas huffs and turns his head away, apparently fighting off mirth.

Everyone around me is unprofessional and careless. Even our world's last best hope. If she cannot find a shred of professionalism in her to be had- we are doomed.

"I wished to ask why we are not simply sending these refugees to Haven," I reply.

"Because they're defenseless and injured and ill and tired and scared?" she says. As if that is an answer all on its own.

"And what of our resources?" I ask. "What is left for us if they consume all our food and take all our blankets?"

Something in Nik's face changes, though it's so minute I cannot tell what it is. A twitch of a facial muscle here, a shift there.

"It was my understanding that nearly everyone in this group was able to protect themselves," she replies. "And that Varric and several others in our party are equipped with bows and crossbows that we can use to hunt for more supplies, which I've been asking them to do any time they go out of camp. Notice we've been eating a lot of Nug, lately? And I also assumed that you being a Seeker and Solas being a...whatever he is-" she shoots him a look. "Having been out in the cold before, and slept on the hard ground in terrible conditions as you both profess to having done...didn't seem like such a big deal when it would mean other people could be warm and comfortable. If I was wrong, please inform me."

Her words say she is open to counsel but her tone suggests that the very idea is abhorrent to her.

"We are on a mission to save all of Thedas. If we go hungry or become ill, if we die- we cannot do that job." I gesture expansively with my hands. I cannot help it, it is an old habit that cannot be controlled when I am feeling passionate. "Dying for these people will kill them as surely as it does us. If we send them to Haven, perhaps some of them die. But it will be less than would die if we were to fail our mission."

Nik stares into my eyes for so long that I become uncomfortable and stiffen.

She glances at Solas. "What's your opinion on this?"

"Oh I do not have one," he replies. "I see both sides of this issue and thankfully am not the one that has to make that choice. Whatever you decide, I will have to go along with."
"You could always leave," she says. "It might not be a good choice, but it is one. Choosing to stay means you're one of us and you're part of this. Don't distance yourself from the issues by claiming it has nothing to do with you. I want your opinion because I'm open to being wrong. But all I've heard so far is 'let these people die because taking care of them makes me uncomfortable'."

"That isn't what I said at all!" I deny.

"I know what you said, and I know what you meant," Nik replies. Like the lash of a whip. "What use is there in people who don't contribute, is what you meant. Why take in all these people when they can do nothing for us, is what you meant."

"And?" I reply. "They can do nothing for us. They are refugees. Civilians. We cannot rely on them, we haven't the resources to care for them- what is the alternative?"

"I just told you," Nik replies. Sharply. "I have people hunting for extra food. And some of those 'useless' civilians over there know this terrain better than we do. They know what berries are safe to eat and which mushrooms aren't poisonous. We're actually better off now that we've taken them in! And even if they weren't useful, I would still save them. A person's worth is not determined by what they can do for others."

She inhales sharply and turns on her heel. "I am not talking about this anymore right now unless you want me to lose control of the mark, please and thank you. I don't know how else I can phrase 'you should care about other people', either- to be quite honest."

And then she stalks off in a huff.

"Well, I suppose that answers that question," Solas says. "It seems she thought on it quite a lot."

"That does not mean she came to the right conclusion," I reply. "But if our supplies are actually being replenished somehow, then I am content for the moment to let her have her way. I would simply like a blanket to sleep with at night."

"I will set a rune in your tent, Seeker," Solas says. "You will be warm."

I admit to some surprise at the offer. "That is…kind of you, Solas. Thank you."

He smiles mysteriously as he usually does. "No problem at all, Seeker."

Chapter End Notes

I'm terrible at writing tired, down-and-out characters, I think.

I made Tevea come off as all...meek and sort of push-over-y when I just wanted her to be tired and a little bogged down by societal expectations.

I feel like I overdid it but I dunno how to fix it. She's going to change slowly over time, as all my characters will-- but I dunno if I should've started her out like this.
"I want you to take Mother Giselle a message," Nik stops one of the servants as they rush around trying to follow her orders to get all our refugees settled in and tended to by healers. "Tell her that I'll meet with her once I've stabilized the region, but until then I want her organizing a Potluck. It's a dinner that involves donated ingredients from everyone. You get donations, you make food from it, then you pass it out to everyone, so you feed everybody."

The servant nods and she removes her finger from their arm where she'd tapped them to get their attention. They take this as a signal to leave and then, go.

It's so easy for her, sometimes. The communication of ideas and concepts, just with her body. Leaning her head over just the slightest bit communicates 'I'm listening' better than words ever could.

And then people make gestures or movements that go completely over her head and I just have to stand there, staring at her. Wondering if she's missing the point on purpose or not.

But I'm starting to get the feeling that the Herald of Andraste doesn't miss much and when she does, it's genuine. She speaks her mind, even about things that might make people angry.

Doesn't make sense she'd just ignore people hitting on her or trying to proposition her when she could just tell 'em to go away.

Little moments like this, remind me how good she is at all this. But then moments like that remind me how many blind spots she has.

Like these potlucks. It's a good idea, and well-executed in Little Haven and Eth'an. But entrusting it to a Chantry official she's never met…isn't like her.

"Hey, you mind if I come with?" I chase after her when she goes to leave the area. "Just to be sure the Seeker and Chuckles aren't miffed that you're out of sight?"

She snorts. "Do what you want, I'm not leaving the village."

"So what are we doin'?" I ask.

"Gonna go and survey the area, figure out what needs to be done to keep this village afloat…then make a plan to do that," she replies.

She's kinda short, today. Brusk, I guess? And the Seeker and Chuckles have been avoiding her for some reason.

I heard about the disagreement they got into, but was it really that bad?

"So, explain this stuff to me," I say. "Usually when I meet Nobles and Mercenary leaders and others of that sort, they're not quite so concerned with uh…let's say, overseeing their operations."

"Doing their jobs, you mean," she says.

I snort a little. "I mean being…involved. Overly involved, some would say."

"Some would probably say that so they can get away with slacking off and letting people die so they can take a fat pay cut," she says. "So far as I've heard, you're pretty involved with your people.
How does that work for you?"

Hell, where does she get her information? She's got me, though.

"I'm not really a noble or a leader, though. I lead an organization that's more like a business. Is a business. Just... without a name or a purpose besides buying and selling and making coin." I say. "Nothing like running a whole village or multiple villages."

"It is, actually," she says. "It's just that so many have forgotten they're supposed to actually do their jobs, invest in infrastructure, protect their people- everything now is about your bloodline and how it makes you special and other bullshit like that."

Her gesturing gets more violent the more she curses, it's entertaining to watch, really. "So the way you see it, running a nation is like running a good business?"

"No. The way I see it, running a business is like running a nation," she says. "You take care of the people who make money for you in order to make their work environment better and safer and healthier for them and in order to pay all your bills. There shouldn't be such an emphasis on gaining personal power. Community is everything."

"So... you do all this because you see it as the only way things should be done," I reply.

"Well duh, that's why anyone does anything the way they do it. Either that or they just don't know any other way and they're making do," she replies.

Gotta hand that one to her, but...

"Not always," I reply. "Sometimes people wanna do something that way, but they can't. No money, no power, no time... there's always a reason."

"For people who aren't on the top, those reasons are valid," she says. "But nobility has no excuse for not helping. They have all of it, all the money. All the power, all the time. And they keep it, hoard it, for themselves. The point of a Noble is not to be rich and powerful. The point is a representative of the people does all the high-level work that's necessary to keep a region or kingdom or business going. A person who is supposed to have their best interests at heart. But it seems like the Nobles here don't even know what that is, anymore. They're too far removed, they've forgotten what it's like for normal people and every generation that's born nowadays? Doesn't forget, because they never knew in the first place."

"I guess... seeing it from that angle, it might seem that way," I reply.

"Explain it any other way," she says.

We're approaching that guy we're supposed to talk to, I think. About supplies.

Better make it fast, then.

"Well, people with a lot of money have a lot of responsibility. And sometimes investing your money poorly can mean your entire family pays the price." I say. "So if a noble doesn't invest in something, he probably thinks it's risky."

She shakes her head. "No, Varric. You're rich, but you're not wealthy, not like they are. For you, one bad investment might maybe make or break you- depending on how bad it is. But for them? A whole lot of them? It wouldn't be enough to put even a large dent in their money or their worth to the other nobles. Sure it'd be embarrassing for a while, but they've got connections and money and
power. Any who don't have that, aren't who I'm talking about."

Ah. Gotcha. She's talking about the really high up nobles. Not just the people with money and titles. The people with the MOST money and titles. The MOST influence and power.

"Maybe," I reply. "Hey, look. It's that guy we're supposed to find."

She shoots me a sideways glance.

I know she noticed that clumsy subject change, but she was meant to.

It's time I got a better idea of the Herald's negotiating capabilities. Figure out what she can and can't do. A few breadcrumbs here, a lead there…

It might even be fun.
Chapter Summary

In this chapter, you begin to see the changes I've made to canon Solas's character in order to make his character make a bit more sense to me.

Chapter Notes

I forgot it was Saturday till evening, again.

"What does a Justicar do, though?" one of the recruits asks. "You said we care for and protect our people, but you also said we can be anything we want."

The Herald turns to them with sparkling eyes and smiles. "Yes, I did. See, the care and protection of your people isn't all done on the battlefield or in a fight. Caring for your people also means providing for them. Hunting, cooking, making pelts into coats. That kind of thing. But it can also mean healing, caretaking of the elderly and the young. It can mean you write stories that reflect your people's culture and make them feel less alone."

The four recruits in front of her stare with unwavering gazes. Taking in her every word.

She sent some of her Justicars away during their long trek to Haven, or so I have now been informed. Long after their influence has already been leveraged.

Their primary function being to warn people of the impending decision made at the Conclave and what it could mean if one side was particularly unhappy with the negotiations. Or if perhaps a third party sought to intervene on behalf of either the Mages or Templars.

Crisis prevention plans handed around to the villagers who were still well-protected by their few guardsmen but still harried by the war that raged around them.

Before the Breach it was…not calm, but not as chaotic, either.

Still, the evacuation instructions and fortification recommendations and the Justicars added to the guardsmen- all of it served to easily and quickly instate the Herald as the new power in the Crossroads. Someone who showed even the slightest bit of concern for their welfare and risked their own very limited number of men to forewarn and care for these people.

And they are hers.

…

The thief not only stole my only means of empowering myself, but has also now misused it. Misused it so grievously that hundreds are dying by the day.

Many of those number are Demons. Spirits twisted by the explosion and the rifts that resulted.
I've become indirectly responsible for the deaths of...it will likely be hundreds of thousands before this is over. Perhaps millions. And many of them are my own people.

"...so that means that when you do anything, it should be for the good of yourself as part of the community. Meaning that anything you do should be for the community, but if it's not good for you, then it isn't good for everyone else. Considering you know, you are part of the community."

I shake my head and push away the guilt. For now, I must pay attention. Calculate.

Lamenting every single one of my shortcomings and mistakes can come later.

"But doesn't that mean that something that is good for me can also be bad for the community?" one of them asks. "How am I supposed to know?"

The Herald turns to them and stares for a long moment with a single raised eyebrow. "How can you not know? If you take that money, that means less for the orphans. If you take this food that means less for the others who haven't had any yet. Do you have enough money to live? Did you already eat? The choice is pretty simple and clear if you ask me. But if you ever find yourselves confused, ask yourselves these questions..."

...this is different.

"Who does this action help? If the answer is only you, ask a further question. Does this action help me to further help others or does it only help me and only me?" She gestures as she speaks. Small gestures. Tightly controlled and kept within her own space. "For instance. If other people are starving, but I am also starving. Do I take the last morsel of food? Well. Are you a hunter? Or could you find one to give it to, so they might go out and find more food so you're no longer starving?"

Leaders do not ask their followers to think for themselves. Even giving them leading questions, she's going to find them led to conclusions she could never account for.

"I..." one of them struggles for a moment. "What does that mean if you're a soldier, or you want to be a soldier? What do you do if your commander orders you to do something that you think might hurt the community?"

Her smile becomes impossibly wider. "You tell them so. And if they don't listen, you depose them."

Then she turns on her heel and marches off. I have to push off the nearby fencing and run at a trot to catch up. For a very soft woman with no real muscle to speak of, she is very fast.

"Come on, we're running laps!"

Ah. Must I follow for this?

Slipping into a shadow underneath a nearby house's porch awning- I wait for them to get out of range and then sigh miserably to myself.

Why must she take so active a part in the training of her men?

(And if they don't listen, you depose them.)

...I suppose it would be difficult to convince an acting commander to teach their own men to
disobey them if they think it necessary.

But what is the function of this? Where is the manipulation? It has to be there somewhere.

I care not that the spirits cannot detect it. It must exist. There are people who can trick them. Relying upon their perceptions would be folly.

Especially against an opponent like her.

Miles POV

It isn't exactly easy to dodge Lady Montilyet when she's on the warpath, but it's easier than dodging the Seeker. Thank the- Creators…that Nik took that particular problem along with her.

Didn't think she was going to, at first. But she seemed adamant that the Seeker accompany her to the Crossroads. The Seeker didn't argue but was obviously bothered.

Nik doesn't seem to like the Seeker much, so demanding her presence personally on a mission of what is essentially just retrieving a Chantry Sister…

It's suspicious. I wonder what she's up to.

"What are you doing here?" Shivanas looks up from his desk to see me sneaking in his window. And is very unappreciative of my presence, if you ask me. "Why didn't you use the door?"

I put a finger to my lips. "Shh. I'm hiding from Lady Montilyet and her many many forms."

He sighs and places his quill back in its inkwell. "Those forms are important."

"They'll still be important in an hour," I say. Reaching a hand out and wiggling my fingers.

Until he groans and acquiesces to my silent demand.

We both sneak out of his window and beyond the boundaries of Eth'an. Into the woods beyond. Walking and walking until we're both certain we're beyond short patrol range but much closer than the further patrol range.

….come to think of it, that is a sort of…gap in our defenses, isn't it? I'm going to have to talk to Barris about it, aren't I?

I moan in frustration and flop down on a bed of snowy moss. "Even now all I can think about is work!"

"Pretty sure that just means you're a responsible adult," Shivanas says. Sitting beside me and sprinkling snow on my hair.

I shiver but refuse to move. "Nik told me that all people need to think about something besides work every once in a while or they…what was it…" I trace shapes in the snow near my head as I think. "I think it was 'burn out'. Though you've got me on why burning has anything to do with it."

"What does that mean?" he drawls.

"You get so tired you never really recover. Everything is agony," I reply. "I used to think that's just
how...life was. How it was supposed to be. But she said it's not. It's not supposed to hurt inside, when all you're doing is living an ordinary life, doing ordinary things."

There's an awkward pause.

He clears his throat. "I could...tell you more about our culture, if you're taking time for yourself."

"I..." Honestly I would love to know more. But I'm already basically taking classes from Shivanas about that, regularly. "No. I'm not going to make you work on my break so I don't have to work. You have as much work to do as I do."

He hums. "You seem to hate this job more than being a servant."

I laugh. "I don't hate any job more than being a servant. But I've never...Nik tried to prepare me for all of this. Giving me tips in camp when I seemed stumped over how to handle something. Even if it was just 'you're in charge of them. Make sure they remember that. If they don't want you to be, they can leave' and...she was so good at just looming far enough behind me that you knew her authority went with me- but she didn't loom over me and swallow me in her shadow."

"Now that she's gone, it's...harder?" he asks.

"Hah," I laugh disparagingly at myself. "No. Now it's easier in all the wrong ways. Not only does no one really quibble over my authority- except for the odd complaint here and there -everyone is so quick to do everything I say that when someone screws up, it's immediately my fault. I didn't tell that bloody fool to do what he did in the exact way he did it. I told him to get the job done any way he saw fit and he took that and ran with it. Man is a carpenter! Should've been easy!"

A sigh and I'm being rolled over. Head pillowed on a warm lap. Shivanas glaring down at me. "You will not mention this to anyone. Ever. Or I will make you my new pincushion."

I wink and close my eyes, "s'not even happening."

Another long, beleaguered sigh. "So tell me about the carpenter."

"I don't know, we might be here all night, he really screwed up. Or he screwed up on purpose to make some kind of statement. Either way it was awful."

Taking a deep breath, I launch into the tale.

Of how a carpenter and all his minions managed to fuck up 'build a house' and ended up creating something unusable for shelter.
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Shit.

That doesn't look good.

"Hey!" The Herald, or Nik, or Commander- walks up to the grate before us and bangs on it. "What are you doing!?"

She rattles the grate as two men are marched up onto a high platform.

I know what this is. She's panicking so hard, she must know what this is…

Chuckles is standing behind her, looking irritable and…maybe a little forlorn? Maybe if he weren't so morose, he'd be bangin' on the grate too. He seems the type to get upset by things like this.

Most people'd just…walk on by. Not pay attention. Or at least they would if it were Templars or City Guardsmen doing the executing.

And that IS what we're watching. An execution.

From this far away, can't see much except the people up on the platform being marched up and someone else standing with them…I think saying a prayer?

Last rites.

"HEY!" she shouts and grips the bars on the grate.

"I do not like this either," the Seeker grasps her shoulder. "But we have no authority here. And if we alienate them, we may not find many friends in this place. Friends that could help us seal the Breach."

"How many people would you allow them to murder?" she asks. Staring at the platform. "How many would you stand back and watch die if it made you feel secure?"

The Seeker rips her hand back and stomps away to fume in silence, some distance from us.

It's not like the Seeker doesn't have a point…but I'm with the Herald on this one.

You let people get away with this kind of thing? They keep doing it. And where does it end? No one knows, not even them. It just keeps getting worse, and worse.

Never like that in Kirkwall in terms of people being allowed to execute whoever they wanted but for Hawke…

Knowing that he had that power always seemed to trip him up. He took prisoners when he could, but…when he couldn't-

Let's just say, going home and fearing no reprisals for rampant murder might make a good man break before long. And give a bad man license to do as he pleases.
Hawke tried not to be a bad man.

Looking at the Herald here, squeezing those grates, eyes ticking back and forth as she takes in details, mind going like a Nog on a tight track...

I think she's one of the good ones. Hope so. But this is the moment that might define that. Who she is and what she's willing to do, and we can do nothing to get in there.

This won't define anything but exactly how helpless you can feel as you watch someone die.

Can I get this thing open?

Glancing around, I see the mechanism up a bit higher. Exposed to the open air because...well, nobody's gonna climb up there and turn the crank backwards one little inch at a time.

But eh...I got a better idea.

"Hey uh...Chuckles?" I mutter as I move away from her and the Grate.

Last rites are still being spoken and somebody is giving a speech, we've got a minute.

He follows me with his eyes before moving to follow me. Glancing back at the Herald every few steps, like he's afraid she's going to try and climb it.

...hell, she might. There's footholds up there in that stone.

Guess that means I should work fast.

Speaking softly, I explain my idea to him.

His eyes are riveted to me the entire time I lay out the plan. And then they're not.

Pivoting on one foot, he turns back toward the gates and whips the staff off of his back in one smooth motion. When it hits the ground, a beam of electric, ice-blue magic has already smacked into the mechanism.

And then it starts to move.

The Herald lets go of the grate with a gasp and steps back until it's far enough up that she can duck under it.

"Go with her," Chuckles grits. "I will hold it up."

Shit, how much power does it take to hold a gate open?

...I guess it depends on how hard they're trying to keep it closed.

I run for the gate and only manage to get under it a moment before it drops.

The Seeker rushes over with Chuckles, both of them now just staring through the grate at us. The Seeker with murder in her eyes and Chuckles looking perturbed and kinda pissed off.

I turn around to see how far the Herald's gotten and I see what has them both so upset.

She's standing on the damn platform in-between the executioner and the two prisoners.

"Hold on a damn minute and you explain to me what authority you have to be executing Inquisition
citizens?" There's a lot of bravado and that air of 'I'm in charge here' that usually has people scrambling to please anyone else.

On her it's…well, it's kind of frightening. But she's so small, soft…cute and adorable in a way…

The woman who was giving the speech a moment ago steps around her executioner to come face to face with the Herald, but takes half a step back when she moves to meet her.

It's very obviously a struggle to demonstrate the power one holds over the other- that the Herald just won, I'd say.

The Herald doesn't step back when she's got people behind her. That's for damn certain. I've noticed it before but it didn't really settle into place in this moment as part of her. More a thing she did once or twice.

But I can say now, that this is a consistent pattern.

"Who are you?" the woman demands.

"I'm the Herald of fucking Andraste, who the hell are you?" the Herald fires back.

God I love it when she's doin' official shit and gets angry. The funniest collections of words get spit out of her mouth.

The crowd goes quiet but it doesn't last long. Murmurings and whisperings start that the woman on stage can't ignore. Her glances out toward everyone else make it very obvious that she knows how this is going.

"Are you?" she asks imperiously. "And what proof of this divine power do you have?"

"Whoa, never said I had divine power," the Herald replies. "I said my title is 'Herald of Andraste' but if you want power…"

She ungloves her left hand and lifts it up so everyone can see the mark sputtering in her palm.

"A rift in her hand!" someone nearby hisses.

"This is the Mark," she says. "It closes rifts. With some help from me, I guess."

The lady up on that platform glances around the crowd and back to the mark. And takes a chance.

"If you truly have power over the rifts, then prove it!" she declares. Turning, she gestures at the other end of the fortress- and someone opens a completely different grate to reveal a Rift.

"Shit, there's demons!" I take out my crossbow and get around the crowd as fast as possible to start pinning them down before they can get any further.

"The hell is wrong with you!?" the Herald shrieks and I can hear a thump behind me.

She's jumped off the platform.

Turning, she points imperiously at the executioner. "You touch them before I'm done with this and I will shove that sword up your ass."

Then she turns back, and pelts toward the open grate.
They're not opening the first one to let the Seeker and Chuckles in!

"Wait, we've got no back-up!" I shout after her.

She stops and glances back at the first grate. Then up at the woman on the platform.

"Don't need it so long as you can follow my lead," she says. Turning back to the demons. "If you can keep them pinned, I can close that Rift!"

Shit, really!?

"You don't need to go proving anything!" I shout as we rush toward the Demons. "It'll get you killed!"

She laughs breathlessly and gets closer to speak to me quietly, "oh I'm just giving Solas some motivation."

What is she talking-

I hear a loud groaning noise like a Dragon is ripping apart a mountainside and pin a few demons before turning back to look.

Holy shit.

Chuckles is leaning against the inner walls of the gate, gasping for air and looking worse for wear-but the Seeker is pelting toward us with her sword drawn. The people part for her like they're dodging a horse-drawn carriage.

Did he just rip that entire grate off!?

The Herald laughs a little louder now. "See? We've got some Cassandra-shaped backup now."

How far away can elf ears hear at the very furthest, is something I've always wondered. Apparently if you speak loud enough, halfway across an entire fortress.

She knew that, she applied it and she-

I'm beginning to see more of the picture, with everything she does. Maybe this time tomorrow, I'll have finally pinned her down enough to give her a nickname.

For now, though…demons.

Chapter End Notes

Nik just pulled one of her first real tricks on Solas. I wonder how he'll react to that when he finds out...
Chapter Notes

Sadly no smut for chapter 69, sorry to break all your hearts.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

I don't like this at all.

'What is she doing?'

Dahlia Trevelyan, very important mage Liaison to the Inquisition and Justicar Lieutenant…

Is walking around Haven, alone. Unescorted.

She's a fair better combat mage than I and many others- but one person against a crowd will always lose if the crowd is big enough. If the mage is attacked by Templars, many of whom still reside in Haven…the number wouldn't need to be that large to overwhelm a single mage.

Stomping across the road, I take up position beside her. "What in the void do you think you're doing?"

She jolts and nearly drops all the paperwork in her arms. Furiously gathering it against her and holding it tightly, she gives me a miserable look. "You startled me."

"And you're walking, alone. Through Haven, totally unaware of your surroundings, apparently," I reply. "Aren't you the one who made the rule that no less than three mages be walking about at a time? Where are your two other mages, Dahlia?"

She flushes bright red. "I…I made that rule for people who don't have any protection! I can fight!"

"Not against a Templar, you bloody well can't," I snap. "They take your magic and what are you left with? A pointy stick? Sure, you can use it as well as any other sharp weapon- but it's not what you're used to, is it?"

She pouts. "I'm good with my staff!"

"'Good' can still get you dead, Dahlia." I sigh and lean a hand on my hip. "At least come and get me at the Hospital and ask me to walk you somewhere. Or get someone to fetch me. I don't want anyone going alone anywhere, and that includes you. You know why?"

She stares at me with her lips parted and her eyes a little wide. "Why?" she whispers.

I dunno what that's about, but I finish my thought.

"Because I'm the arse who's got to stitch you back together again. Bit by bit, knit your flesh together," I reply. "The less you all get hurt, the less work I have to do, and I am overloaded with work, Dahlia."

Her expression drops and she kicks at the ground, forlorn. "Oh…alright. I suppose…if it means we
can talk while we walk?"

"We're certainly not going to stay completely silent forever," I reply. "You don't have to ask to talk to me, just talk. Now, where are we goin'?"

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Tevea POV

Master Tethras said she'd come and meet me at this hour, but I haven't seen her as of yet.

Drooping a bit over my pile of incredibly long and detailed complaints- I wonder if perhaps Navette wasn't right about her suggestions.

"Hmph."

I jolt and sit straight up. Blinking at the Dwarven woman standing beside my desk. "Ah-"

"Not very observant, are you?" she says.

Ashen black hair feathered about her face, pinned back in intricate braids with different colors of beads… are some of those made of Jade? And her eyes are the prettiest shade of hazel green. Almost like a patch of earth heavily spotted with grass or moss.

"I- Excuse me?" I stand up and back away. "Who-"

"Name's Cadash," she says. Proffering a hand. "M'your new business adviser."

"Oh!" I reach out and take her hand. Shaking it as firmly but shortly as I can. Navette says that shows you have presence and confidence.

She purses her lips as she steps back away from me, tilting her head to take me in. "Tethras was right, I got a lot of work to do with you." Is that… a Starkhaven accent? I think?

"Oh, well. Yes, we've much paperwork and-" I falter when she shakes her head at me.

"Nay, sweetness, I mean with you. Your stance is too slump-y, you've got no fire in your belly and no steel in your eyes!" She gestures at me. "You're important now, or you soon will be, soon as you learn how to wield all this new power you been given. Need to act like you own that power, like you've claimed it for your own."

"I- I don't… understand?" I'm so confused. "I thought you were a finance adviser."

"Business Adviser, sweetness." She cocks her hip and plants her hands on her waist. "Business and Finance are related but doing Finance is in the books and the numbers. Doin' Business is meeting people, gettin' what you want from 'em and expandin' your influence. So!"

She stalks over to my pile of complaints. "First things first, what is all this?"

"It's complaints," I reply. "From people in Haven."

"Right right," she says. "You know what you're doin' wrong, though?"

I frown and my brow furrows. "I…. no? Sorry?"
"You're readin' 'em," she says. "Darlin', nobles and townsfolk who don't do this work for a livin' like you- they don't know what they're talkin' about. They can complain that the house is too cold without realizin' they got bedwarmers they dunno how to use takin' up useless space in their closet."

That is true, things like that have happened… "But aren't I supposed to make them feel heard?"

"You make 'em feel listened to, by takin' the complaints," she explains. "Then you ignore their complaints and you go to your people doin' the work under you. If they've noticed anythin' amiss, it's an actual problem. If they haven't…well, you get the idea."

"But well." I lift a hand to my throat, toying with my collarbones nervously. I shouldn't, I scratch at times and the area gets all flushed and red.

Dropping my hand, I explain as she watches me discerningly. "The Commander- Herald…she…listens to everyone. And even if people get angry that she tells them off or something, they all respect her because of it."

"The Herald, I heard about her," a massive grin breaks over her face. "There was that one that complained to the servants about his boots, and she shined them up right in front of 'im to prove they couldn't possibly get any shinier, yeah? I heard about that in the Tavern, it was a stitch!"

Oh, yes. That. The Commander wasn't fully healed as of yet, and was…a tad bit cranky.

The dancing, snapping lightning in her eyes covered in a cold veneer of ice was terrifying. She shined those boots like she was wringing his neck.

…haven't gotten any more complaints from him, though.

"See the difference between her and you is that she's already got power," Serah Cadash says. "And she knows it. She uses it. She's good at it. But you've been given a lot of power without ever really bein' taught to use it. I can see you got what it takes, as you get your people doin' what they need to, and all. You're persuasive and your people trust ye."

I flush, even if it isn't exactly praise…people don't tell me I'm good at things.

"You just got no confidence or..." she thinks deeply for a moment, playing with her hair a bit. "I suppose you don't really need confidence as much as a Wicked Grace Mask."

"A...a what?" I don't play card games, I've no idea what that is.

"Wicked Grace Mask," she repeats. "It means no matter the hand you're dealt, you've gotta keep all your cards to your chest and not let anyone else see what's goin' on. Keep things secret and safe 'til you're ready to turn everythin' around to your advantage. Then, confidence won't matter. You've got what it takes to develop some steel, so we'll work on that, first."

"H...how do you do...that?" I ask.

She grins. "Ahhh, Darlin'. I wasnae bein' metaphorical about the Wicked Grace. Best way to learn."
This time around the OC’s are all equally important and their growth will be paid more attention to, I can promise you that.

Arisala is still hard to nail down for an arc but maybe that's just cause she's already a solid person for the most part. Maybe hers won't come till later. Who knows!
This chapter made me laugh my ass off as I was writing it.

Unbelievable.

It was a trap. I fell for a trap. An obvious trap.

Everything happened so quickly and I was so afraid of losing the mark, I forgot to account for Nik's…

For the Herald's propensity toward…manipulation.

Can I even call it that? She seems to set lures and traps as obviously as she possibly can, and…

people still walk right into them.

"You're still mad, huh?" she asks.

We're standing outside one of the many residences inside the keep.

"Oh no," I reply. With a gamely smile. "How could I possibly be angry with you?"

"Yeah I get it I'm hard to be mad at because I'm so manipulative, nice burn, now talk to me." She is being very demanding.

She doesn't usually mind when I go silent. Though I suppose I am not usually so angry with her. In truth I am mostly angry with myself. But I had…

I had not expected this from her. Not toward me. Not toward us, those of us in the inner circle. She is forthright, honest.

It almost…

"And what exactly would we talk about?" I reply. "Hm? Your recklessness? Your determination to do something dangerous because you thought I may be able to do something about it?"

"I didn't think, I knew," she replies. "You're constantly making yourself smaller so people aren't threatened. I know and understand that this is to protect yourself. But sometimes you're going to have to display great shows of strength to save someone. You might hesitate if you thought it would out you as a powerful magic user."

I stare at her from beside her. "And how exactly, does this fix that particular problem?" And how did you know that?

"If you're known to be able to pull off great feats, but only when in a dire situation, then nobody will think twice about it when we're in a REALLY bad place and need you to do something…bigger," she replies. "You keep hiding it all the time, people will be suspicious if you display it once. But every successive time, people…well, they get used to it. To most things, really."
"People do not get used to magic, or great displays of it," I reply. Not now, not in the past few centuries.

"They might not all the time, but if it's only when a lot of other hectic stuff is going on, they will," she says. "People will forget it even happened, then remember only the next time you do it."

I bite the inside of my lip on the side that is not facing her.

"You should not have been the one to make that decision," I say.

"No, probably not," she replies. "I am sorry. But I thought if I brought it up, you'd never do it for yourself. Because you'd think it was selfish or something. I had to illustrate how it could be good for more than just you, before you understood. As it is now, you don't have to keep up with it. You put on a good show of being exhausted—"

I cut her a sharp glance and she goes silent for a moment.

I stare her down for a few moments more, taking note of the way she looks down and away from me. As if intimidated or…

"We have barely spoken," I say. "How could you possibly predict how I would react upon such a suggestion?"

"I…just know," she says. "When I first met Varric and we had our first conversation," she begins. Her eyes darting further away and hazing over. As if she is remembering very deeply. "I knew. He was sort of shifty, but…the kind of shifty that exists because it has to. Not because you want to hurt anyone. In fact, pretty much the opposite. And when…when I met Cassandra. I knew she believed in things like righteousness and justice. But I could also tell she isn't really that disciplined in containing her emotions when it's something like anger or grief. Sadness, joy, maybe she can moderate those…"

And now she's muttering to herself.

Her eyes flick up and meet mine for a moment. Only a moment. But it…quietly jolts, something in me. As if my spirit jumped and then resettled.

Then they move away from me. "You're…confusing. But I can tell your main trait is probably going to be…compassion, or selflessness. Everything you do is for somebody else. I don't know who, exactly."

My hands tighten behind my back.

"But I figured if I tried to talk to you about this, you'd see it as my natural need to make other people comfortable- and you'd refuse, thinking there was no benefit for anyone but you. So it wouldn't be worth doing." She finishes.
This woman is dangerous.

More than ever, I realize this.

Without knowing you at all, she can pick you apart.

But now I know, for certain, how she is doing it.

"I would still prefer you speak to me and allow me to make these choices," I reply.

"Sure," she says. "I figured this wouldn't be a big deal, since you can still hide and this will seem… like an outlier. But I guess in hindsight, a mage showing any special power at all would probably be dangerous."

Her expression twists though I cannot tell with what. Before it smooths and she is once again calm. "I promise not to do it again. I was…probably not thinking clearly at the time. I'm…a little impulsive."

A little?

"I suppose the next time you are reckless, I will remind you that you said so," I say.

Part of me wants to believe her. She seems to take promises so seriously. But my…my trust, my foolishly placed trust in her, has been damaged.

It was a well-meaning act. But what that act revealed…

She sighs. "Are we gonna go in now? You don't have to talk to me, but…we'll probably need to at least in front of other people."

A good point. "If it pertains to our work, of course I will not stay silent."


Her eyes did not flash with power, and her energy stayed contained within herself.

But I felt it. Her soul reached out and plucked at mine.

What does it mean?
Cassandra POV

Chapter Notes

Yes! I am now going to start updating on both Wednesdays and Saturdays if I can. If I can't, then only on Saturdays. I'll probably be able to let you know when I can't update that coming Wednesday.

See, I get a lot of backlog built up and then I don't have to write for weeks. But then I realized I was having trouble remembering some stuff and also...you guys only get two chapters from other stories besides Unwritten once a week and they're not usually even the same stories.

So every Wednesday I'll update with 3 stories that AREN'T Unwritten plus two stories WITH Unwritten on Saturdays.

I have only four weeks of saturday updates for the moment so the next two weeks will be Unwritten plus 2 others on both wednesday and saturday but after that, only others on wednesday and unwritten plus 2 on saturday.

(god I hope I wrote that clear enough.)

I feel a burning inside. Deep and unabating, every time I see her face or hear her voice, now.

(No more cult-ish bullshit. You wanna worship the rifts, I've got no problem with that, but you will not use worship as a weapon to murder people. I swear I'll kill anyone who tries.)

She put an end to the executions, but not to their heathen religion. Their...their...blasphemy.

I am somewhat mollified by the fact that the leader was taken into custody for the attempted murder of Inquisition citizens.

Or as the Herald so aptly put it…

(People within range of rifts are my people, because the rifts are my responsibility. Meaning anything within that area is also my responsibility. You just tried to murder two people within spitting distance of a rift!)

The very idea that she is laying claim to all areas within a certain effected distance from the rifts offends me even as I know that is what we were going to do, regardless.

She takes up the mantle of the Holy Messenger of Andraste- The Herald- only when it suits her! Otherwise she denies she holds any power of any divine origin.

Defeating the Terror demons was no easy task. But it became much easier when I was able to channel my rage at her. For running in without thinking, for thinking she could fight- for putting all of these people in danger to save two.

And then I saw the frightened and hopeful faces of those two men as they were released and put
under the Herald's direct protection.

My anger grew, but so did my respect.

She never thinks before she acts, or so it would seem. But I am always discovering there is more thought to everything she does than I have thought there could be.

How could she have known there was a rift nearby?

She did mention a strange feeling in the area. Something like a tug. Though she waved it off and described it as something her 'find-it sense' was…pinging.

I still do not know what that means.

Even Solas seemed surprised to see a Rift, here. He said they must have been suppressing it with barriers. To keep the demons in the other courtyard.

And then he gave her a look as though he couldn't understand how she knew it to be there either.

It is possible she was simply speaking of the rifts near the Crossroads and in the surrounding areas…but somehow it feels like she was not.

Rrrngh!

I walk up to one of the Cultists as they pass me by. "You there, are you so determined to abandon the Maker for this foolishness?"

They startle and nearly drop the bundle that was in their arms. Likely a sleeping bag. The Herald has informed them they must either make room for more refugees or leave for Haven with us when it is time.

This fortress belongs to Bann Teagan and his people have been in cramped quarters, staying in Eth'an, Haven and Little Haven in large groups. It was abandoned largely long ago- taken by bandits. But as the cult has reclaimed this place, there is no reason not to give it back to its rightful owners.

I agreed with that decision, at least.

"I-I-" they backpedal away from me and trip over something. A stone, I think. Lying flat on their back for a moment before recovering and sitting up. "My- beg…your pardon, my lady?"


"Yes, you intend to abandon the Maker?" I ask for clarification.

"N-no!" they shout, then scurry backward away from me.

There are others nearby, but I needn't worry about Nik walking out to lecture me about it. She's been put into an induced sleep by Solas, so he can heal the damage she did to herself by sealing the Rift, here.

She wouldn't let him until everything was settled here. She was in agony. Why is she so stubborn? Someone else could have handled it!
"So what is this, then?" I ask. Gesturing at the shrines that were made to worship the Breach. "This is not how you worship the Maker."

"The Maker created the Veil, didn't he?" they shoot back. Suddenly filled with energy. "Anything that can pierce it either must be him, or must be stronger!"

The sheer heresy in their words sickens me. "And so you will follow whoever is strongest?"

"Of course!" they say. "This is the god we must have displeased, isn't it? We must appease them! Or the world will surely fall to ruin!"

"And yet you follow the Herald of Andraste!" I snap. "How easily your whims are bent!"

"Andraste is the one who gave her the power over the rifts, so Andraste must be the goddess of the Rifts," it says. "The Herald is her voice in Thedas!"

"Pfa!" I throw up my hands and stalk away from the crude heretic.

The only comfort I have is that Nik would be horrified at the idea of being the voice of a god. Of having any divine power.

I wondered before, why she would not simply accept it with honor, with ease. As we have all been taught to do.

Then I saw the Cult Leader here attempt to kill two men- and no one trying to stop her aside from the Herald.

And then I understood. Nik only sees the very worst in our religion or in every religion.

The powerful who are turned astray and those who use the name of their gods in vain. That is what she sees.

That is not all there is to Andrastianism, or worship of the maker. I know it in my heart. There is not only corruption or sin here.

But how to make the Herald see such a thing is beyond me.

I stop beside the gate and wonder at the strength mages have hidden inside. Even one so meek as Solas sometimes can be.

His staff was ripped apart by the power he unleashed just to open it. To get me inside.

He will likely need a new one before we leave, and there are no shops here.

Sighing, I plant my hands on my hips.

'Focus on the practical. The things you can fix. Everything else will come in its own time. The Maker will make her see. Andraste will show her Herald the way if she is truly holy. And if she is not. I will know.'
You know, I was surprised when she let the Herald Cult in Little Haven settle and worship as they wanted.

Was less surprised when she recommended the Dalish and the City Elves worship the Creators in Eth'an.

And yet I was totally shocked that she let the Rift Cult become an actual religion.

See, to me there's a difference between letting people practice a different religion and letting Cults run around to do their thing- just without the authority they had before.

She always cuts off the positions of power and assigns her own people to look after the uh… 'flock' as it were. Lets them set their own meetings, come up with their own rules of worship- but then she makes it completely unenforceable.

Can't beat people, even your children, if they fail to meet your religious standards. Can't lock them in anywhere. Can't starve them. Can't punish them at all. You've got to let them come to the realization that they need to follow whatever rules are there in their own time, or let them go.

Lot of people aren't happy about it, but since in the two cults there are basically just people worshiping the Herald and her Rift hand, right now…

Well, they take it as a divine edict.

So mostly it's just the Chantry that has a problem with her dictating what they can and can't do.

She doesn't really have the power to stop them…but she does have the power to go over to the Head Servant, Head of Eth'an, Head of Little Haven and the Mage emissary and inform them all that the Chantry isn't to be serviced if they step one toe out of line.

It all started coming together when I saw everything as a tapestry, instead of moves on a chess board.

See, tapestry is more subtle. It has more…precision to it. Chess, there's really only so many moves you can make.

But a tapestry can be woven in a lot of different ways, with different colors, in different styles. No two will be the exact same, even if you do your damnedest to get them as close as possible, there'll be a tiny variation.

The Herald, the Commander, she doesn't play chess. She weaves tapestries.

She put the Mages in their own place and gave them independence. Probably just out of the kindness of her heart, but also maybe-

Maybe because now they remember who gave them that independence and who should definitely stay in power if they wanna keep it.

As underhanded motives go…keeping power only so you can empower others…isn't really that bad, actually. She's like the little bits of thread that are wrapped around the loom, enabling the other threads to become a beautiful picture.
Or maybe she's the frame itself. Or the person weaving on it. I still haven't nailed her down.

"Still haven't figured out what the Justicars are for," I start by making conversation. "I mean, I get their function, sure. But it seems like you've got plans for what they're supposed to do outside of what their jobs will be, and I just can't figure out what it is."

"What you mean 'do' as in the effect I want them to have?" she asks.

She's always so damn blunt. I love it. Don't have to dance around subjects with her.

"Yeah," I reply. "So what is it?"

Chuckles slows down a bit from ahead of us. Still walkin' with the Seeker, having a discussion with her. But I can tell he's paying attention.

Truth is, you should beware of people who can hold a whole conversation and listen to another one, take everything in and only have to slow by half a step.

But as far as I can tell, Elves are just built like that. They can do more than one thing at a time, see and hear further than Humans and Dwarves…

Dwarves though, we have a very singular kind of focus. But what we can do with that singular focus, that's what makes us stand out. And I'm pretty sure our sense of touch is…different. We can feel things even without having to touch them. Can just look at something, and know what it'll feel like. Me less so than other Dwarves, but still.

"Normalization," she says. "It's the process through which things become considered… well, normal. Because normal is relative and subjective. To me, a lot of things are normal that would be downright bizarre to you, and vice versa. Because we grew up believing different things were normal."

"So…their effect is that they make things seem…normal? Which things?" I ask.

"Not things. Themselves," she replies. "The Justicars will seem normal. They'll come from all walks of life, and be held to the very normal standard of 'care about other people and don't let tyrants come into power' which…if people think it's normal and no matter what job you do or who you are, you can have those values…it'll seem normal to do so. Even for people who aren't Justicars."

"What…so you expect them to make other people believe it's normal to be a Justicar?" I'm still not really wrappin' my head around this.

"No." She sighs and slouches in her walk. "Nobody ever understands when I talk about shit in my head. I should've known it wouldn't be any different now. No matter how clever they are, they don't think like me, so it's useless."

Her demeanor has barely changed, but…there's something desolate and lonely about the way she says that.

"The Justicars will become heroic tales, soon." Chuckles is a lot closer than he was before. "People like to emulate heroic tales."

And then he walks a little faster to catch up with the Seeker again and the Herald looks like she's been slapped. But in a good way? And then I get it.
Normalization. Normalizing the Justicars. The Justicars will be heroes of the Breach, of the Inquisition, outside the Inquisition. Honorable and brave, but who can be anyone and come from anywhere- even more than the Gray Wardens.

They're the kind of people that you might look up to as a child and young adult. Model your behavior after.

Shit. That's…I don't have a word for what that is.

She's staring at the back of Chuckles' head when I glance up. The most shocked look on her face.

"Weird to have somebody figure you out so easy, Schemer?" I ask.

And it hits me full force.

Schemer. It's...perfect. Weaver isn't right, nothing to do with looms- she's not that...genteel. Or Elegant, or whatever.

But she is mischievous and filled with a lot of loud emotions. Scheming just seems more like something she'd do, over weaving.

She still weaves tapestries. But the pictures made with her weaving are loud and sometimes angry.

"Yeah..." she mutters. Then stops and turns to me. "Did you just give me a nickname? And was it-did you call me a schemer? Varric! Nobody's gonna underestimate my scheming if you put it out there that it's what I do! That's half of how I win!"

I laugh and we start walking after them again. "Guess you'll just have to find some other way to win then, Schemer."
Chapter 73

Chapter Summary

Let's all pretend I didn't forget till 12 a.m. to update today and just imagine it was still Wednesday when I did this.

Also, this is the last Wednesday Unwritten update. From here on, it's just on Saturdays that I'll update this story, and on Wednesdays it'll be everything BUT Unwritten. To try and even out my update schedule for the other stories.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"I see you decided not to wait after all," Giselle says. Pouring us both a cup of tea. "The region is more stable now, regardless and the people of the Crossroads will thank you for it."

"I wanted to wait till we had a better foothold in the region before this meeting but Cassandra was about to blow," I reply. I was gonna say 'gasket' but I can't remember if that relates to cars or not…

She chuckles charmingly and drops a sugar cube into my tea. "Two lumps?"

"I usually go for like, three or four, I think," I reply.

It was kind of surprising to see sugar cubes. But Thedosians have machines for some things, and not for others. Everything's kind of a grab-bag. They're pretty consistently in a post and pre-apocalyptic world. The only advancements they can make have to be made before the next Blight can ruin all their progress.

She hums and drops another two cubes into my tea before serving herself some. I guess those are Orlesian manners?

I'll have to remember that when I host Orlesians.

"Seeker Cassandra is a formidable woman," Giselle notes. "From a long line of dragonslayers, hand of the Divine and a Seeker as well."

"She's also a huge blowhard," I reply.

Her lips bow in a demure little smile. "What is it you have come to speak to me of that your Seeker could not wait for the outcome?"

"Well they want me to ask you what can be done about the Chantry over in Orlais- but personally I don't care," I gesture with a hand. "The Chantry is going to eat itself alive a little no matter what I do. People are grabbing for power and don't care who they step on to get there. Sure they might stir up resentment toward us. They'll also likely be stirring resentment toward their other rivals from within the Chantry." Then I shrug. "What I came here for, is to ask you to come back to Haven and help me out with the Chantry there. I already have a Dalish Adviser, an Arcane Adviser, a City Elf Adviser…having an Andrastian Adviser would probably be a good idea."
She thinks on this as she sips her tea.

I watch the way she holds it and do the same as she does. It's nothing like what I learned in my own world. You have to hold the drink with both hands when picking it up and putting it down. Sipping it, I don't know. It might be appropriate to do another way.

Maybe this is just the way she drinks tea. Who knows. But I'll remember it, anyway. Just in case.

"I think you are right," she says. Her Orlesian accent crisply curling around the words, very pleasantly. "But you could only benefit from further dividing them." Hands curling becomingly around her teacup, she goes on. "If some of them doubt, that is…less of their number, focused on destroying you. The Herald of Andraste…such a title, given by the people and not the Chantry…it is not often done."

"And when it is done, they get murdered, I know," I reply. "Or erased from the Chant of Light, if they were ever given a chapter."

"Hm…" she nods. "You speak of Shartan. The fall of the Dales was the beginning of many unkind practices in the Andrastian faith."

"Not the beginning," I say. "No way that's where it all started. But that is where they gained more popularity and frequency, I guess."

"No, I suppose not," she says. "In truth, it must have begun with Andrastianism itself."

"Yeah," I reply. "Andrastianism's problems stem from being started by a man who killed the Prophet, and not the Prophet herself."

"Why Hessarian did what he did, does not concern me," Giselle replies. "I would be Andrastian, whether it were Andraste who started the Chantry or not. What does concern me is…following Andraste's example…and not Hessarian's."

"I knew you'd have some rad opinions like that," I say. "Didn't expect them to be quite that good, to be honest. But see, this is why I want you as my Andrastian Adviser. I heard about that stunt you pulled with the Chantry to feed those people in…where was it…"

"Jader," she says. "The disease and the famine. I am most well-known for this. It is no surprise you have learned of it. But many do not approve."

"I'm not the many," I reply with a smile. "I think it was a genius move, and if they weren't all cowards who don't know how to take one for the team, they'd think so, too."

She squints at me. "This turn of phrase…take one for the team…what does it mean?"

"You gave up personal glory for the chance to help other people," I say. "That's what it means. It refers to a sport back where I come from. Sometimes you maneuver people into a place and the only way to win is to have them give up a chance at a big hit- and take a smaller one. So that they can get the pieces into position that will set everyone up for the win."

Nodding slowly, she smiles. "I believe I like this turn of phrase. Yes, I am quite well educated on the subject. As all Andrastians should be. But they are not educated as well as could be hoped. Perhaps you and I shall fix that?"

I reach out a hand over the table after putting down my teacup. "I was really hopin' you'd say that."
Her hand, when she reaches for mine- is soft and gentle. Strong, and resilient.

Chapter End Notes

Yes, Giselle is one of the characters I'm going to tweak slightly to be more consistent with the parts of her writing that I like.
"I can't believe you agreed to a mission without consulting me," Cassandra blusters. "Who exactly will you be taking with you? Do you not think we deserve a say in this?"

"Oh definitely," I reply. "Which is why I never planned to take you at all."

I'm still getting ready in my tent, and she's standing just outside. Cause even though she's angry as a hornet's nest that's just been kicked, she's still capable of not being a dick to the highest degree.

Good sign, I think.

"Who else could you take?" she asks in a huffy tone of voice.

"Varric and Solas, for one," I reply. "Solas feels bad for the wolves and Varric is always up for adventure, so they both said yes. But otherwise...you know I'm the Commander of like a whole Mercenary group, right?"

Not exactly mercenaries but it's the only applicable word right now.

"There's other people I could ask to help me out. Even Inquisition soldiers not currently on a job could be asked to assist if I were so inclined," I say.

"You are the Mark-bearer," Cassandra says. "Whatever or whoever else you might be, you require the best protection available. Especially as you have the tendency to run straight into danger."

I secure the straps on the leather armor I borrowed from one of our scouts and check to make sure the crossbow is easy enough for me to reload by drawing back the string a few times.

Have to use my foot to push down on it, but it's good.

"If other people had half the concern I did about those dangerous situations, they wouldn't need running into," I reply. "Also, Solas is kind of my unofficial bodyguard, isn't he? Aren't ya, Solas? I know you're out there. Listening, you're always listening to me."

"I don't believe 'Bodyguard' is my exact function," Solas's voice starts to get closer. "Healer and watcher, perhaps."

"Where did you come from?" Cassandra demands, aghast. "You were not there a moment ago!"

"He was out of your sight line, he does that," I reply.

Then I leave the tent and almost walk right into both of them. "Could ya'll hover like a few more feet away from the opening of my tent in the future?"

Solas takes one large step to the side, and settles.

Cassandra just backs up and crosses her arms. Still looking irritable.

"Look Cass, you don't like me," I say. "So you're gonna be kind of a terrible bodyguard because I keep wanting to turn around and spite you every ten seconds. You spur me into being irresponsible because you make me feel judged. So if you wanna come along, you're gonna have to either keep your mouth shut or only speak on mission-relevant details and without that tone in your voice. And you know which one I mean."
"You cannot tell me how and when to speak!" she says.

"No, but I can put conditions on you joining me on an incredibly risky mission that I myself am leading. You're the boss in charge of Inquisition Templars and can give orders to Soldiers. I'm not under you. I'm allied to you. So if I don't wanna bring you because I think it could be a detriment to the mission, I don't have to. Allowing you to come at all with conditions is me making a compromise."

Her lips press together and then she unfurls her arms, to clench her fists at her sides. "Fine then! I will not speak unless necessary. I find myself unwilling to talk to you, regardless."

And then she spins on her heel and takes off.

Solas is eyeballing my armor dubiously.

"Yes I know, there's metal bits, but I have no idea how to put them on, so unless you wanna help-"

I stop and sigh, as he's already ducked into my tent.

Of course he wants to help.

So I follow him in and stand sullenly as he attaches all the fiddly bits to my armor and readjusts the pieces I already put on.

"I had almost thought you a liar when we first met and you said you'd never been a combatant," he says. "Seeing how you put on armor, almost convinces me that it is true."

I sigh. "Dude, can I go now?"

He stops in the middle of fastening something and picks his head up to look at me. Squinting eyes and ears titled slightly forward. "What?"

"Can I go now?" I ask.

"No, what did you call me?" he asks.

"Oh, right." I'm so tired, I forgot 'Dude' wasn't a thing here. "Where I'm from it's slang, it just means 'person' or more specifically 'man'."

He quirks an eyebrow as he finishes and steps back. "Really? Here it is something far less flattering to all non-nobles. Perhaps you shouldn't use it."

"Oh that," I snort. "Where do you think it originated?"

He rolls his eyes and brushes past me.

I turn and follow him out.

Only wearing armor so I can be a little safer than I have been up to this point. So everyone will shut up about me jumping into danger, which is kind of literally my job right now!? 

"Since Cassandra is coming, I guess-"

"Milady Herald!" someone calls from across camp.

I turn and wave my hand at the frantic scout scrambling to find me. "Over here, guy!"
Solas gives me a look.

"What? I didn't say dude!" I reply.

"Lady Herald, I have news on our negotiations with the mages!" he says as he approaches.

Ohhhh, the mages I sent in to talk to the mages in Witchwood and other places around the crossroads area- about our alliance with the Rebels.

Solas leans against a tree nearby, but tries to look like he's not listening.

He knows that I know he's listening, but it seems to fool literally everybody else? I'm losing my faith in humanity again.

"We've been able to open negotiations, but their demands are rather unsightly," says the Scout.

"And they are?" I ask.

He clears his throat and hands me a scroll. "Dunno, but that's what I heard from the messenger who passed me this."

"Tip for the future," I say as I unscroll it. "Don't tell people how to feel about the contents of their messages, because if you're wrong, you'll look like an ass."

"Right Ser, yes ser." He says.

Well… let's see what…

Huh. Yeah, that's about what I expected.

"They want to make sure we have enough supplies to support them, that's what all this bullshit is," I say, gesturing at the list. "If we give them this, it's basically the same as just handing it out to other Inquisition citizens, I don't see the ridiculous or unsightly part."

Skimming downward, I see where the negotiator made a note that they've made no promises about joining up with us OR the rebels.

"Ohhh I get it," I nod slowly. "They want all this stuff and they make no promises about joining so everyone assumes the evil mages want something for nothing. Jesus Christ."

Solas makes a choked noise and rounds the tree before the Scout can see him when his head whips around to look.

"Don't worry about it, it's just lurking spies- ours," I reply to his frightened look. "Nightingale trains all kinds, right?"

"Ah, yes, milady." He says, visibly calming. "We have to get something in return, though, don't we? After all, food and blankets aren't free."

"Well, seeing as we won't be the ones supplying them directly, I rather think that's kind of irrelevant," I say.

"Milady?" he says questioningly.

"I set up a program with Josephine wherein Nobles can donate to the Inquisition in exchange for special prizes they can show off to all their friends. It's become kind of popular in Orlais," I say.
"Of course with the Chantry set against us, none of the devout families who still think I'm not really the Herald will donate…but we've gotten enough interested in the program that I think these demands won't be much of a stretch. They'll get everything they need, courtesy of the Orlesian Noble families who want to seem cooler than everybody else…"

A cough from nearby that the scout can't help but try to follow after, swiveling his head.

"Pay no mind," I say again. "Anyway, let them know the supplies will be coming to the main base in that cave around…eh…the end of this month. So if they can hold out until then, they'll have what they need. But first I'll need someone to send a message to Josephine, including this- scratch out the note at the bottom and put a note from me that just says, 'send them the stuff, will figure out compensation later for losses'."

He nods very quickly and sharply a few times, taking the scroll from me and scurrying off to the table over yonder where everyone writes their correspondence in camp.

"How exactly will you recoup that particular loss?" Solas says, rounding an entirely different tree.

I flinch a little. "Jesus, dude. I knew you were over there." Then sigh deeply as I rub my armor over my chest. "I dunno exactly, but I've got lots of ideas that will probably pan out. So long as I can get people interested."

"Ideas such as?" he prods.

"You know I'll probably be talking for hours once you get me going and we've got shit to do today, why would you start that?" I ask as I lead the way out of camp.

His chuckling is distracting, but I expected it.

Even I know I'm being ridiculous but I'm really tired of being interrupted during my infodumps.
It began easily enough in much the same way as any mission to wipe out a demon menace, does. We followed the wolves back to their caves…though it almost seemed like a trap once we had stepped inside.

(Of course it is,) she had answered. (There's a demon intelligence behind them and they retreated.) Put that way, it became obvious and I was the fool. But it is not as though it is something I shouldn't have known.

It was almost as if there was a vague fog over my thoughts. Things were confusing, I was…slower, than usual.

Or perhaps it was simply faster.

It certainly seemed to know what it was doing when it leapt upon us, directing the wolves to separate us from the Herald.

She was isolated, and there was nothing we could do. The Wolves knew to snap at us to keep us away, but stay back so we could not cut them with our swords.

Solas used paralyzing runes and sent them to sleep. He was one of the very few able to effect the flow of battle at all- he and the other mages…but even they seemed slowed, confused.

In the moment all I noticed was that he seemed to move much faster than I thought he could. But now I…

Perhaps he was using some form of demon repelling enchantment to keep himself from falling under its sway.

The sweat that poured from my brow, the shaking in my limbs…I knew it was a Terror demon when I realized what was happening to me.

And when it singled her out, I felt the first plucking of true fear over everything it was doing to me- and my head cleared.

I rallied the soldiers and scouts with me but they were still under its influence. I had to direct them very sternly and precisely or they were likely to stand there and simply shake.

"Nik, get away from it!" I shout at her.

But she is trapped in an area of the cave with no off-shoots.

She backs away from it, eyes connected with its own. Steps slow and careful. Measured.

It follows, almost as if in a trance.

They are only getting further away! "Not that way!"

But she seems to be unable to hear me. Not even flinching at my shouting.
Her eyes…they can't be. It can't be.

"Solas! Go!" I shoulder aside a line of wolves in my path to the left and swing hard at the ones on my right.

He darts past me when my arm retracts and I move in to protect his flank.

But he doesn't get far.

"Nik, drop the barrier!" He's standing not far from where they are, I see when I'm able to glance behind me. Stopped by a bright green bubble of energy. "Can you drop it? Do you even know you're doing this!?"

I can not hear her answer and I cannot pause in my endeavors to stop the wolves to look back. They have been whipped into a frenzy.

"Solas, I do not care if you must blast a hole in that barrier, get to her NOW!" I shout.

There is the feeling of magic being expelled behind me. A spell that mages use to get rid of the effects of other mages own spellwork.

Dispel? Dispel does not break down barriers…

But it can go through them. Of course. If the demon has Nik in its thrall, dispelling whatever magics it has used to do so may be the only way to wake her.

The feeling that follows is not the bursting of a barrier.

No, instead, I feel the hair on the back of my neck rise as the caves fill with energy.

The wolves back away and whimper, running for cover.

We turn to face the barrier where Nik is standing opposite the demon, her palm raised, the mark glowing…

Her eyes glowing a bright green, as well.

"No!" Solas steps close to the barrier and his new staff shatters with the wave of force he unleashes to try and break it. "Nik, do not tap into the Mark!"

So she is not possessed or enchanted.

I stare on in shock and helplessness as the Mark throws energy at the demon- but not to attack it.

It's the strangest, most gripping thing I have ever seen.

It is almost as if she is ensconcing it within its own barrier- but what happens within it-

The demons long limbs begin to shrink and its body becomes fuller and more luminous than it was before. Flesh becomes energy and its form becomes indistinct.

Before long, Nik falls to her knees and the glow dissipates from her eyes. She blinks languidly as the orb of energy drifts toward her upraised hand. And then…

Disappears into the mark.
Solas is the first person to her when the barrier falls, but I am the second.

His brow furrows as his hands glow with healing energy, but then his hands move away and he looks at her with more than confusion. "How?"

"What's happened?" I ask.

"The Mark…hasn't hurt her," he says.

Nik blinks slowly again and glances up at us, her eyes far away. "Mmm…S…olas?"

"What happened?" he asks.

"R's…s'a…" she slurs. "Person…'s a person…"

"Person?" I ask. Did a demon take control of her after all? Did it force her to do this?

And then she proffers the mark and gestures at it. "He did it."

"He?" Solas has gone pale.

"I dunno, the mark person," she says. Confused and obviously…drunk? "But he wanted me to help Excitement."

"Excitement?" I say. "That was a terror demon!"

"Nooo," she replies. "It was a spirit named Excitement who got turned into a Terror demon by a Rift."

Solas sits back on his heels and looks upward. "I…"

"Solas?" I ask.

But he turns on his heel and leaves. The cave. Us. Past the cowering wolves.

I wish I could also walk away to regain my calm but alas, Nik is listing dangerously to one side and we must get out of here before the Wolves become territorial and attack.

They should no longer trouble humans in this area. If they do, I suppose we will have to send a team once more.

But as for today.

I catch Nik as she falls and pick her up. "Everyone out, back to camp. Get your wounds tended and get some rest. We will pick up tomorrow."

I must get the Herald somewhere safe. And find Solas to be certain that demon is not now possessing her.
Solas POV, Varric POV

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

She has been sleeping for a very long time, but it has not been a day since she's fainted.

I suppose it only feels like an age, with…

Inhaling sharply, I twist the cloth to wring out the excess water and walk over to the cot she lies on. Placing it on her brow and doing another sweep of her body with magic.

She was unharmed by the Mark, this time.

That can only mean a few things. Either she has miraculously learned to use it already, which is unlikely…

Or someone else was in control.

It is also possible the Mark simply sensed her wishes and acted on its own, but it should not be able to do that, either.

So who else could have control of the mark?

Who else was feeling sorrowful and guilty over the lot of the spirits?

Who wanted to set things right and help them if possible?

The mark is still mine. If I feel something strongly enough, is it possible…

No, no I felt nothing. And I have to exert willpower to help Ni- to help the Herald use the mark. When we were walking up the mountain…it was not easy to help direct the power, to keep it from further ripping her apart.

Especially not from a distance.

It must have either been her, the mark, or someone else.

I hope.

If it were because of me, I…

The temptation to do it again, to see if I could simply use her as a living conduit to fix my mistakes is too great. I don't want it.

Those prone to corruption shouldn't have access to that kind of power. And all are prone to some form of it. That is precisely the reason I always kept mine in the orb and never absorbed it.

…it's why they never absorbed it either, until…

"...mmm…S…lluh," she groans and calls out for me, but with a slur in her voice.

I put a single hand on her head and will her back to sleep, murmuring comfortably as I do so.

She easily submits to the grip of my magic and subsides into relaxed sleep.
Well. She is waking, but not ready to wake. She may not be damaged by the Mark but there is damage. Of a different nature.

Excitement, as she called it, passed through her body. Rather, used her body to pass through the mark and into the Fade.

…why does she keep calling for me? Waking up from a dead sleep, alarmed at her surroundings and her first thought is the mark? That I should fix it, or that I will know what happened to make things the way they are?

I would almost think we were friendly with each other at times, but then-

Denying that I want to be friends with her would be lying to myself and that is the antithesis of Wisdom. It is the very essence of Pride and…I have worked too hard for too long to revert to that.

It doesn't help me in situations such as these when I wish to befriend the person who could very likely be my enemy in the future.

Pursuing that friendship would only make things more difficult.

"Nnn…" she struggles back to the surface.

She must be very distressed if she's shaking off magic-induced sleep…

And also very strong, somehow.

"What is the matter?" I mutter as she opens her eyes, lashes fluttering helplessly.

"S…las?" she asks and furrows her brow.

"Yes, I'm here," I reply.

And then her entire body relaxes and she slips back into the dreaming without any help at all.

...

I am confused at this turn of events, but not precisely surprised.

As far as I can tell, she was confused and wanted to know who was in the room with her- or otherwise wanted to know that I was nearby.

….or she wanted to know that I was there because the last thing she remembers is being trapped in a cave with a pacified demon and its newly freed wolf thralls- and my face.

It would be within her character to force herself from a dead sleep and insist upon knowing if everyone was alive.

But why only ask about me?

I allow magic to seep into my body, at key points. Eyes, ears and throat. Turning to the side I spot the spirit of Excitement hovering nearby.

I'd sensed it earlier but paid it no mind. Spirits often form attachments to certain humans based on how closely their natures fit- or in this case, based upon the fact that Nik saved its life.

"What did she want?" I speak half in and half out of the Fade.
"Oooh," it replies in a jubilant tone of voice. "You speak to me as the old ones! I miss them."

A pang of discomfiting pressure in my chest.

"Please, if you could tell me what she was thinking before she fell asleep," I say. "I would be happy to speak with you further."

The glowing form of the bright yellow spirit *wriggles* with delight. "It's all so complicated! And so far from excitement..."

The fact that they could know at all, means it was close enough. Fear, perhaps.

"What can you tell me?" I ask.

"She was afraid she did it wrong," they chitter. "Something...something bad could happen and she had to see it didn't."

Sighing, I nod my head and accept that answer. For now. I will have to ask her later.

"Thank you."

This is not a skill I use lightly or often. Being able to exist both within and without the Fade is not only a difficult magic, but a dangerous one.

Somniari are merely mages with a penchant for Fade magics- and I assume the ones who exist today can learn it with some ease.

Still, it wouldn't do to have anyone notice my usage of this particular skill. So I bid farewell to Excitement and let the magic seep back into the center of myself.

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Varric POV

You know, it's the damnedest thing.

Most of the time, a person just has to be nice to someone *once* for them to jump on their bandwagon.

The horror stories I could tell of the men and women who lied to protect prominent people in Kirkwall because Missus Fluffybottom gave them a copper once and they'd hate for harm to come to one of the *nice* nobles...

But with Schemer, it's different.

She's good in a way you have to really *think* about.

Sure, the actions she takes are good in themselves. But sometimes it's a more complicated, nuanced situation than the average bystander could figure out all by themselves at the moment it happens.

And she's abrasive as hell. So that contributes to people being wary about her longer.
But once they've been convinced?

"Alright, one more lap, just like she said," one of the recruits in the crossroads huffs and puffs as he and the rest walk leisurely in what Schemer calls a 'cool down lap'. "We run one more and then walk until we feel the shakiness go away and then we're done for the day."

"But we only did four yesterday!" One of them argues. "The lady Herald was supposed to supervise when we did five."

"I think we should go ahead without her, too," one of the others backs up the first. "Think how impressed she'll be if we manage to keep up with her training without her there to mind us."

The others grumble but agree with this and once they're done with their walking lap, they take off again, out of sight.

With Schemer, it takes longer for people to warm up to her in person, but once they do…

Shit, with me it took what, five minutes? Didn't totally understand her back then, but I knew she was worth following around.

The way she kept soldiering on, even though she was in so much pain I'd notice her staggering every once in a while because her legs were refusing to hold her up properly.

How she'd lean on Chuckles to get where she needed to go, but insist on walking on her own two feet because she refused to inconvenience anyone more than she absolutely needed to.

And even when she gets in people's faces, it's always for a good reason- even if she ends up being wrong and calms down because she misunderstood something, the misunderstanding was easy to make.

She always apologizes and explains what she thought was going on, too, so the same problem doesn't happen in the future.

But she never. Never. Gives excuses. Explanations, but never excuses. It's hard to know the difference with some people, but not with her.

For instance, that time someone said something- I can't even remember what, I wasn't close enough when they said it and she took 'em to task for it.

After their confused face, registered in her mind, she asked what they'd meant with their comment and they'd explained they were talking about something entirely different than what she had gotten upset about.

Apparently the word they used was exactly the same as something she knew, but meant something else here.

(Oh, shit. Sorry then. Back where I'm from, that word is indicative of a particular type of bigotry we have there. It might not exist here, I'm not sure. I should've thought a little harder about it before I responded but I didn't and I apologize for my snap judgment. Especially as some slurs back where I'm from are also just words used in a different context.)

Since up to that point, all I'd seen was her getting angry or being soft- her being remorseful, genuinely remorseful, was new.

It was a whole other side to her.
And it suddenly clicked in my mind, that she had such high standards of behavior because *it was easy for her to behave that way.*

She thinks 'because I'm able to do these things, other people must be able to, too'. Which made no sense because she's constantly saying other people have different strengths and weaknesses so if this was one of her talents-

But then I realized the next piece of the puzzle.

*It wasn't.*

It wasn't a talent, it wasn't something she was good at.

The reason she believed other people could put in the hard work necessary was because *she had.*

She probably had to work really hard to get to where she is in regards to her…self. So if other people aren't putting in that work, she doesn't look down at them so much as…sideways?

Does that make sense? Hm. I could use that for a story.

She looks at them like an equal who's not fulfilling their duties and paying no mind to their responsibilities. And like she takes personal offense because it's very, very important to her that she does so, herself.

Also, she seems to think *everyone* has duties and responsibilities about being a good person, and not just people with power. She gets really huffy when average people act like jerks and assholes but is usually a little softer on them- especially the nonhumans, when it comes to correcting their behavior.

Hell, she sometimes just lets it go when an Elf is telling a human off for getting in their space or something because she believes the behavior is reasonable- so why is she so peeved when people just snap at each other after a long day?

Only conclusion I can come to is she thinks the average person has both a right to be treated well and a duty to treat others well. It's the way she acts.

And it seems like an easy answer, because most people kinda believe that.

But it's not just a passing 'yes, that would be good' kind of idea to her. To her, it's the rules she lives her life by.

Those new Justicar recruits took days of complaining, whining and snapping before they all settled down and realized what she was really tryin' to teach them.

Every time they complained, she sat them out for long enough to rest and then put them back on their work out.

When they whined that it was too much, she tooled it back.

It took me a while to realize she was doing it on purpose.

Forcing them to trust in her in a moment of weakness and then validating that trust by listening to them.

Probably would've been hard to forge that kinda bond if she'd gone about it any other way. And we're not here for long, so she had to hook them somehow. If we leave and her recruits disband or
corrupt without her there—because she was no one to them but a trainer and recruiter—well. That’d be bad.

But if they knew her as a person they could trust, that they liked, that they could look up to and go to when times were hard…

Well, it'd be more difficult for them to do shit she'd disapprove of, then, wouldn't it?

Schemer was the right name to pick.

Still can't figure out if it was on purpose though. Guess that's the genius of it.

…but maybe.

Chapter End Notes

There's some minor changes and upgrades to the powers and abilities that Solas has, here. I've written him being able to perceive through the Fade before, but now I actually know how it works, I think? It comes to me in pieces but it seems like my brain knows what it's doing, lmao.

I might end up skipping wednesday's update this time, as I feel like shit and I might have to use that backlog for next saturday and maybe the saturday after that. Dunno, we'll see. Just wanted to warn everyone.
Solas POV

Chapter Notes

Cutting the update in half again. Sorry, but it's hella long.

Sitting on a recreation of a log in the Fade, I think deeply on what it is I wish to see.

I was there, for all of it. Most of it. But something about the situation is prickling at me. Tugging at my senses.

Watching it from other angles would give me new perspective. I could take in details I couldn't see before.

….I also simply want to see it again. Take it all in, see the…see the monumental changes she has made and how it all folds together perfectly.

Observing from within allows me liberties, but observing from without allows me objectivity to some degree. And both ways are vital for my mission. But should I dwell so long and so hard on this?

It means nothing, it matters not. Whether or not she is truly as dedicated to protecting the Elven people and other Nonhumans besides- shouldn't matter. It will change nothing about what I have to do.

…but I want to see it again, anyway.

One slight hand gesture and the scene is replicated.

Truthfully, I do not need the gestures. The movements. But…when the Fade and the Waking were one, we would use them to telegraph our intents to others around us.

Do the spirits still remember? Will it matter that I am showing courtesy to them in my way if they cannot understand it?

They understand my feelings well enough. My indulgence in a bit of hand-waving will hurt nothing.

The rift in the forest that suddenly opened without warning, waking both Nik and I in the night— that is what I am reliving. Focusing on the images of the moment of my waking…

The feeling of the rift's energy as a pressure pushing down on me, trying to coax me back to sleep, it was…overwhelming. Powerful, but…only for a moment. Then the energy died down and I was able to get up.

When I had stepped out of my tent, she was already dressing in a hurried frenzy, hopping and trying to put on her boots.

"Where are you going?” I had asked, just like this.
She had looked up at me and balked. Slapping her hands over her eyes, "Put a shirt on, oh my god!"

Rolling my eyes, I had ducked back into the tent and shrugged into my usual tunic, grabbing my pack, my vest and my newly bought staff as well.

…newly gifted staff. Bought by Varric and Nik and given to me with sheepish grins.

It is metal. Metal is harder to splinter. Not impossible, but harder. It still cannot hold all my power, but I am getting better at holding back.

Within the confines of my freedom in the dream, I inspect it once again as I had before. This time taking in details I hadn't noticed the first time.

I had gone to bed the night before, not paying particular attention to the staff after it was given to me. At the time, in the tent, only a cursory glance that led me to noting it was a stave with a blade at the bottom and a hard metal ball at the top for melee purposes.

But now I notice the shaft is carved with runes.

The Dwarvish runes used to channel Lyrium is the best I could have outside of-

Well, it is the best I could possibly get with my means and I reason that while Varric had likely paid quite a lot of money for it…Nik is likely the one who asked for the Runes and likely had a mage help her pick them out.

Instead of boosting my power, it would more easily direct it. Runes of control, running like a river over the whole staff as if to channel the power into the lines and then directly out of either end.

Something that requires for Nik to know exactly what sort of problem I am having. And after her little trick at the cultists' stronghold…it is not difficult to conclude she is aware of my difficulties suppressing my power.

…at the time I had only noted these details, I did not think about them. There was so much activity.

Rushing out of the tent, I'd followed after Nik and Varric who'd begun trekking into the woods. Irritated that they'd left without me, no matter how close behind they thought me.

Varric was sheepish, Nik was not.

She had asked me to track the source of it, as to her, it still felt as though it was coming from everywhere at once.

So I did.

And as we walked through the woods, I began to notice a pattern to her behavior.

Nothing I had not noticed before.

Listing very closely to me before backing off, doing the same in the general direction of Varric. Trying to keep within a good distance of us while still allowing herself space to roam and lag behind at times if she felt something.

And I knew she felt something.

Her body would jerk very slightly and she would glance about as if listening for something, head
tilting and eyes roving.

Varric didn't seem to take notice.

I suppose to him, it merely seemed as though she was keeping her eyes on our surroundings. But I was paying more attention to what her soul was doing.

Eyes infused with magic, I caught sight of the edges of herself as they flickered out in different directions, barely leaving her body before returning. Like a robe fluttering in the breeze.

It is astounding that I had never noticed before. But it is subtle, difficult to catch- and requires the usage of magic to peer through the Fade.

Somehow, this non-mage woman has learned a rudimentary method of using her soul as a perception device.

Using magic to peer through the Fade makes it easier to perceive things not easily detected in the waking world. But Nik…

Nik feels them. She is like a burrowing mole, navigating not by sight, but by the vibrations in the world around her.

It is a clumsy, fumbling way to guide yourself through the world.

But there is no way for her to know that, is there?

I do the same, but I do not only feel the world around me. I see it, hear it, taste it, smell it.

Shutting off or turning on each sense as I come to need it.

It…it is something only mages are supposed to be able to do.

The mark must be supplying her with enough magical energy that she is able to unconsciously manipulate her own soul. Something she should not be able to do.

Ah, and there was the rift.

Everything about the situation was familiar, even Nik rushing forward before anyone could stop her, was familiar.

But I had realized that she was not rushing toward the rift.

There were Dalish elves knocked insensate beneath it, and Demons slowly drifting about them. Despair and some form of…Torpor, or sleepiness of some kind.

Nik was running directly over to them, and we had to hurry to keep up.

Strangely enough as we approached, the demons did not attack. They drifted further from us- but…the Torpor demon stayed where it was. Lying prone, with the others.

She stopped not far from them and threw her arm out. "Don't get too close! I've heard Torpor demons can pull you into a dream or a nightmare and you might never get out if you don't know how. Solas, can you approach them?"

I had thought in the moment, that there was no danger to me in this situation at all. And immediately her plans included this assessment without needing to ask.
We have discussed my dreaming before, but she has never asked to make use of it before.

Which was surprising after asking me if I could assassinate people in their sleep. I had assumed she wanted to *use* the power.

But she told me to tell no one. To instead say that I was simply a dreamer. Who dreamed. Spoke to spirits. That I had no power to kill people in dreams. That I had no power to manipulate someone else's dream if they did not let me. That I have no power that would make me a prime target for others to use against their enemies.

I was a source of knowledge. Of perhaps safety when demons could be confronted directly in the Fade.

This is the only way she wanted to use me.

She asked me to gauge how ready I was to speak on my abilities and also to find out how exactly I could be used against her before implying she would have no use of my more...useful skills, at all.

At the time I was a bit surprised she wanted to use my particular abilities at all. But I moved within range of the Torpor demon's influence and that is when everything becomes different.

Instead of seeing the inside of the dream that Torpor had trapped the Dalish in- this time, I am treated to the happenings in the waking as I went down to my knees and then fell to the ground.

Nik lurched as if to rush over to me, but stopped herself before she could. "Damn it. I know he's fine." Muttered to herself as she clenches her fists.

How powerless must she feel to be completely useless in a situation like this? To have no ability to travel the Fade and accompany me as I seek to manipulate the demon into letting the Dalish go? When she herself puts so much stock in responsibility for your soldiers, mages and even servants?

I did not know she'd had such a reaction. There was a point to watching this after all.

"Hey, look," Varric turned and surveyed the treeline.

Dalish elves peeked out of the trees, staring at our party. Watching what we do.

Seeing Varric and Nik looking at them, they left the trees, bows drawn.

Varric slowly put down his crossbow, right at his feet. "Hey there, friends."

"You are no friends of ours," one of them spoke. With a high, reedy voice. A child.

Nik looked at them, and saw that they were all no more than children.

"Where are the oldest hunters in your clan? Shouldn't they be with you?" she asked.

The one to speak glances at the bodies under the rift.

"No, not those," Nik said to them. "The adults."

"We are adults," the speaker had huffed.

"I know some Dalish people, and while the customs might be different from Clan-to-Clan, I was given to believe that you don't become an Adult until you have your Vallaslin," Nik had replied. "So either your clan is anomalous or you're lying to me because you're afraid I pose a threat."
There is a tension in the clearing as the rift hisses and spits and the Demons nearby survey everything silently.

Such strange behavior. But then I found out why while within Torpor's dream.

It had seen its friends pulled through the rift and chased after them. As the only one to hold onto its consciousness…it attempted to control them, herd them back through the rift. The most it could do is make them dormant to a point.

The Elves were unfortunately within range of its abilities and were an oversight. Torpor had not maliciously grasped onto them.

In truth, it was a surprise that a demon of Torpor cared so much for spirits of sadness that it leapt through a rift and attempted to save them.

And it is a demon, not a spirit. It longed to come to this world and sleep in the sunshine.

Spirit and Demon are two sides of a coin- but there are many different classifications for each.

The Spirits wish to be and let be. Stay in the Fade. Interact with people only through memories and dreams. Dreams long past, not currently being dreamed.

Demons wish to interact directly with people, or the world.

But there is another division that the Chantry doesn't seem to recognize or understand.

The demons of despair that were once spirits of sadness, they have no effect area. They can only directly target their victims.

But Torpor is able to effect the area around itself with only its presence.

It doesn't intend to, but that is what it does.

Demons are not only those who wish to come to this world, interact with its people…but also those who would unwillingly or unknowingly inflict harm upon others if allowed to do so.

There are isolated places these demons could go, certainly. And demons such as Torpor would be happy to settle in them…

But how would you get them there? Torpor is sleepy and indolent. And anyone coming within its range would be rendered unconscious.

Regardless, Nik and Varric somehow managed to convince these people to take us all back to their camp with them and I wish to see how.
Nik's entire stance changed as she faced the child-hunters from the Dalish clan.

She was authoritative, but not intimidating. Warm, but not patronizing. "Is your clan close enough to be endangered by this Rift?"

"You don't need to know where our clan is, Shemlen," one of them from the back had responded.

"No, I don't," she replied. "I just want to know if you want me to leave this Rift alone or if you'd rather I close it so your people are no longer in danger."

They glanced between each other and then stared at her. "Even the Keeper doesn't know how to close these Rifts. She says they're different than usual. Are you saying you know?"

"Oh I have no freakin' idea," she said. "But I've got this magical artifact kind of stuck to me? And it seems to do the trick."

Then she had proffered her left hand and they had flinched and moved away from her. Obviously thinking she was a mage, about to attack them.

But a moment passed and the attack didn't come, so they watched her warily.

"See? It's the same color and everything," she had smiled charmingly.

One of the child-hunters approached then, slow but curious.

It brings a slight smile to my face.

My people, always so curious. I suppose we have that in common with most other races on Thedas.

Excepting perhaps the Qunari, though that seems to be a bit more…cultural in nature.

"It's alright, I'm not gonna bite," she says. Sing-songing a bit.

Ah, this is when the Rift's energy started getting to her.

We knew that sealing rifts would intoxicate her, and that magic itself could intoxicate her. But until this, we had no idea that simply being in the same area as a rift for too long would make her… drunk.

"Uh oh," Varric muttered. "Hey...you kids have a responsible adult you can fetch? I'm afraid my friend here is starting to experience a...magical complication. Your...uh, damn what was- Keeper! You think your Keeper could help with that? If we close the Rift for you?"

The children looked at each other and stepped away from them to confer.

Meanwhile Nik looked at Varric adoringly and said, "Varrriiiic, you're so good at words."

He sighed fondly and patted her right arm. "I'm a writer, comes with the territory."

"Not true," she claimed. "I'm a writer too, and I suck at talking words."

Well, that's...new. I suppose there was more to learn here than I thought.
"You're a writer?" Varric asked. Obviously surprised. "Uh...what do you write?"

"Stories," she said. "Sometimes poems. I don't like that as much. Songs before, I wrote like...four songs. And uh..." she thought on it rather hard for a moment. "I tried scripts."

"For plays?" he asked.

She blinked at him. "Oh yeah. That's what I have to call it."

"We'll take the two of you to our Keeper," one of them announces as they walk toward us.

Nik seemed to feel relieved and emboldened by this, but then-

Then her face falls in a way I can't read and she glances backward...at me. "I can't go," she said. "Solas is still trying to free them in the Fade."

"Your friend is lost to the demon," one of the children informed her.

"What?" she glanced at them and frowned. "No, he's a som...Varric, I dunno if I can pronounce the word right now."

"He's a dreamer," Varric helpfully supplied.

"Oh my god I coulda just said 'dreamer'," Nik berated herself.

And then smacked herself soundly in the face.

I bark with laughter, thankful that no one can hear me and this is simply a re-enactment. Grateful that the spirits simply go on with their roles despite my interruption. Coughing to regain control of myself, and perhaps some of my dignity.

"A dreamer?" the very first one to ever speak finally speaks again. "The Keeper will want to know about this. Tela, go get the Keeper and tell her what happened."

A young girl rushes off into the trees, leaving her other three companions behind to watch Nik, Varric...and I assume, my unconscious body.

"Why send your...dreamer, to help our hunters?" one of them asked.

Nik blinked and tilted her head at them. "Cause...it's...my job?"

She looked so confused...

"I think they mean more in general, why is a human going out of their way for Elves when we could've just sealed the Rift and been on our way," Varric said.

"No..." she replied. "I wasn't talkin' about Herald jobs. I was talkin' about Justicar jobs. It's my job to protect everyone."

She'd become a bit more incoherent, but she...

Usually in situations such as this, Nik will have wandered off by now. Not understanding why she couldn't look at pretty flowers and pick herbs along a forest path.

But her feet were fairly glued to the ground where they were. She barely shifted her weight at all, all this time.
Is it possible she still possesses some shred of self-control that she was clinging to it with everything she had? How can she always be so poised in these situations- or rather…

Why is it only ever in front of certain people?

In front of myself and Ren, her physicians, she isn't quite so reserved. She knows we need to know about her pain, her nausea, in order to treat them.

But anyone else…well, other than Miles, Dahlia and Varric, as far as I've been able to see- she hides. But it's always so seamless. So flawless in fact, that I wondered if perhaps the weakness she shows to the rest of us is an act.

I can feel the emotions she should be feeling now. But that is all they are. A 'should have been'. Her emotions do not exist in this moment.

And yet she smiles, she speaks, she is charming even in her delirium…and I wonder if the intoxication itself is an act.

But no, that would serve no purpose. Or at least none I can fathom. She seems irritable and disagreeable whenever anyone attempts to care for her while in this state, as if she takes offense at the very insinuation that she cannot care for herself.

Why on Earth would someone so independent pretend to be so drunk on magic that she requires someone's constant supervision?

No, I must assume it is genuine. That Nik is genuine.

Even in all her scheming tricks she usually tells you exactly what she intends to do. She may hide certain details, obfuscate them a bit…but I have yet to hear an outright lie from her yet.

…and at least, I do not think so.

"And I mean, I'm not doing anything, or risking anything…cept Solas. I'm risking Solas," this came to her like a dawning realization. "Shit, I didn't even think to ask what he could do in situations like this before telling him to go."

There was something very like terror and guilt running through the air in that moment, radiating outward with such speed and ferocity that it nearly knocked me back. And I am not in a physical body at the moment.

"Hey, look!" Varric exclaimed and turned to look at the two hunters now rising from their prone position beside me.

They were confused, disoriented. But the other child-hunters rushed to their sides and explained what was happening.

All the while, Nik stood near my body and frowned down at me. As if to say 'what's taking you so long in there?' All the while her emotions climbed and climbed in intensity.

Standing in the midst of it now, my teeth clenched and my fingers tightly wrapped about my replicated staff, I wonder how she hadn't burst into tears or perhaps simply collapsed in that moment.

"He's probably fine," Varric hedged. "Just in case though, you wanna close that Rift?"
"Not until he wakes up," she said. Staring at me still. Crouched down with her arms around her legs. Seemingly calm but with a worried expression.

This part, I hazily remember.

I woke, pushed myself onto my knees, and immediately collapsed.

What I don’t remember is how Nik lurched forward to catch me and turn me over so she could… what is she doing?

Her fingertips pull apart my eyelids and her frown has deepened. "He's…unconscious again."

"Shit, that must've taken a lot out of him," Varric observed.

In truth, I had spent one too many nights doing…exactly what I am doing now. I was exhausted.

…I must not focus too intensely on anything else I might remember or it may influence the spirits, but just recalling the way she-

(Stop fucking dreaming so much you complete ignoramus! Your brain needs rest from constant activity!)

Hm. Yes. That.

In the memory, the Dalish Elves are persuaded by Varric to help carry my insensate body to their camp where their Keeper might be able to help.

But before they can move- the demon of Sloth suddenly perks up. "Do not go without putting us back, please- he promised you could put us back." Said in the slow, indolent voice that I remember.

Nik halted and the Dalish sprang away, readying their bows. But she stepped between them, with a very vacant look in her eyes. "Okay."

They stare at each other silently for a moment before Sloth springs forward in a sudden movement-wrapping itself about her left hand and pulling the despair demons along with it.

And then Nik's hand lifted and the Mark connected to the rift…

After this, of course, Nik collapsed as well.

With me completely unconscious, Varric was the only member of our party cognizant enough to answer the Keeper's questions.

"This is Nik?" She had apparently asked rather incredulously. "The fearsome commander of the Justicars, the woman that Miles told me was fierce and clever and cunning enough to frighten even the most stolid and courageous of men and mercenaries-"

"Oh God was Miles bragging about me again?" Nik questioned drunkenly from her place within a bedroll in the Keeper's aravel.

And then precisely two seconds later- "Holy shit wait! You're Shivanas' clan! Wait, no you're supposed to be farther away," she said.

She looked so utterly perplexed by this turn of events, it nearly made me lose my composure again.
"We decided to try and find our two clanmates when it became apparent that the problem was not going to stay where it began," the Keeper replied. Very coldly. Perhaps unhappy at having to play host to not one, not two, but three outsiders.

I can feel the fear and the confusion and the irritation that rolled off of her in waves.

"Oh, the rifts showed up really close by and suddenly you thought 'shit, I just sent the only two adult hunters I have to investigate the magic thing but the real danger was here all along' right?" Nik asked.

The Keeper eyed her with contempt. "And what of it?"

Nik blinked in confusion. "…nothing? I was just imagining how you must've felt. I've made lots of mistakes but until lately I haven't had a lot of people depending on me. It must've been a really uncomfortable and mortifying moment, realizing you were wrong about something and that it might hurt somebody. I hate those."

The entire time she spoke, it was conversational. Casual. She was still addled.

The Keeper stared down at her with fear and contemplation. "And why would you wish to imagine such a thing if you know how terrible it is to feel?"

"People forget that other people are people who feel things," she said. "Feeling things with people or trying to imagine what they would feel in a given situation, can sometimes remind you to be more careful about stuff. I try not to hurt people on accident or on purpose but sometimes it just happens because you forget for a minute- that other people aren't like you. That they feel things when other people speak to them."

There is a moment of absolute silence as Varric seemed to come to some horrifying and saddening realization and the Keeper simply gaped in open shock.

Nik seemed to realize this was…not good. "Oh. Sorry, was I dumping my emotional baggage again? I do that a lot. See, that's another facet of not feeling things when other people speak to you. You have no embarrassment so you don't know what other people don't wanna know about you or what they might be comfortable hearing. It sucks."

Still said in the most conversational of tones.

And suddenly so many things, all at once, make perfect sense.

Nik isn't kind or thoughtful naturally. She forces herself into a mold that fits what she desires to be.

My heart squeezes in my chest and my stomach turns.

'It isn't the same, it isn't,' I attempt to convince myself as I stumble away from the dream.

But lying to oneself is not wisdom.
"I am surprised you asked me to come with you," Cassandra mentions as we walk. "I am further surprised that the…hunters, are also with us."

She was about to say 'children' but apparently outside the clan, being considered children by anybody was highly offensive to young Dalish Elves.

I mean, I can see why. Humans outside their clan probably infantilized all Elves a lot, adult or not. They had to present a strong outer front and not let anyone step all over them- even if their assessment is correct, if it might lead to disrespect of any kind, they have to head it off at the pass.

"Well, Leliana got a report of a Gray Warden around this area," I say. "Apparently trying to train the farmers in this area after having conscripted them…which is odd, since there's no Blight on."

It's the truth, too. After Tevea told Leliana about the Gray Wardens involved in Justinia's murder and the explosion at the Conclave, she found Blackwall a lot sooner than she did originally. Not by too much, I guess? Considering you can find him after coming back from the Val Royeaux mission.

But to me? This is like…what, a month early? A month and a half? God, I wish I had a sense of the passage of time.

"That does not explain why I and the hunters are here," Cassandra says.

Well, for one thing, that attack on the farmers won't happen for a while, so it's relatively safe. For another, if it's not safe- Cassandra is a lot better at holding off the enemy while someone else attacks from a distance than either Varric or Solas are.

And I had to leave them both behind because Varric was particularly pissy about everything today and Solas…has been acting weird.

"There were considerations I had in mind when choosing the people for this mission," I say. "The Hunters are here because I can't really…use them for much of anything- aside from like, body guarding. And Solas does that already. You also tend to jump in front of me when there's danger, along with everyone else. So they've got basically nothing to do. They're hunters in a Dalish Clan, they at least need experience in dealing with people in situations where you want something from them, even if I can't take them directly into battle with me."

"This is a teaching excursion, then," Cassandra sighs. "Could you not teach them back in camp?"

"I'm not teaching, they're observing and learning." I reply. "I don't have the right to teach them anything. I'm not their Keeper or their head…Hunter person." I falter with that, as I don't know what the title would even be.

"Master of the hunt," one of them says. Like they couldn't stand it being referred to that way. "I suppose the only one worthy of the title now, is Shivanas."

"Really?" I ask in surprise. "Why'd he leave if he had such a position in the Clan? That's really important, right? Shivanas didn't seem the type to not take that seriously."

"He does," the other says. Standing a little taller as he walks. "He left to protect the clan. But…we had no one to take his place."
"What about the Keeper?" I ask. "Do Keepers ever take up those duties?"

"If necessary," the first confirms. "But only if they've had the training and there is great need. Our Keeper has always had many hunters to take the position if the Master of the Hunt fell. But this year…has not been good to our people."

"I'd imagine the last decade or so has been pretty hard," I reply. "There was a Blight, a bunch of weird shit went down in Kirkwall…Templar-Mage war…"

"We weren't near any of those areas," the second says. "Mostly for us, it was bears, humans who didn't want to share their quarries and even dragons, strangely enough."

"Dragons!?" I ask excitedly. "What happened with the dragons- wait. Wait, what do you mean, 'humans who didn't want to share quarries'? Do you mean they pushed you out of your territory just because you were hunting there?"

"Aye, shooting and swinging their swords the whole way. We lost two hunters just gettin' away from them," the first confirms.

I stop and turn on my heel, holding my hands up. "I'm sorry, are you saying…that humans…see you in the woods…and shoot you, because they know you're hunting for food for your families and they don't want you to claim the meat? And then they chase off your Clan for sending you out to hunt?"

Need to clarify to make absolutely sure I'm mad about the right things.

They look at each other and then back to me. "Yes?"

So I nod and turn around again, this time walking off toward a tree where I sit down on a big unwieldy root and stare off into the distance.

"What's wrong with her?" one of them mutters to Cassandra.

"She is likely angry," the Seeker replies. "I have questions, however."

Oh that is almost enough to make me leap to my feet. What questions!?

"Were you on someone's private property?" Cassandra asks. "Or perhaps, was the meat lean that year?"

The Elves respond with negatives.

"What reason did they chase you out?" Cassandra asks.

And the Elves, I can tell…are totally nonplussed. They have no idea how to respond.

So I do. "Because they're Elves."

They both look at me, but they don't correct me.

Cassandra turns to look at me, too. "That makes no sense! If there was no reason to push them out, then they wouldn't have done such a thing."

"Other people aren't as rational as you and I are, Cassandra," I reply. "They do things without reason sometimes, because they think it's funny to torment someone they can get away with hurting. It's baffling and I still don't understand it, but it happens and you have to acknowledge that
fact. Hell, we have it happen in Haven all the time. Don't you remember that guy I brought in for trying to stake claim to 'territory' in the village? That was only so he could lord it over everyone and force them into doing what he wanted them to. And I'll bet he got away with it everywhere but there."

Cassandra stares at me like I'm speaking a foreign language. "People do not do things without reason."

I nod. "You're right. But if I explained their reasons to you, you'd say it wasn't a reason. It was justification. And you'd be right then, too. But reasons and justifications are about the same thing, viewed from different angles. Justifying your decisions and having reasons for doing things you did, are the same thing. Sometimes you just want to hurt someone and you do it. So afterwards you justify it because 'just cause I wanted to' isn't really a reason anyone will accept."

She stands there staring at me for so long, that I think maybe I broke her. But she huffs and stomps ahead. "That makes no sense!"

'Of course it doesn't, you're not the type of person to hurt people for funsies.'

But I mean, she is the type of person to hurt them because she thinks they deserve it for being affiliated with someone she thinks is evil, so…degrees of difference.

The hunters follow me when I get up to go after Cassandra.

"Is this why you're Vhenallin?" The first asks. "Because you have these opinions that other humans don't agree with? That's not usually enough."

"Your Keeper is very clever, that's why," I reply.

They glance at me from either side and the second makes an inquisitive noise.

It's adorable, and also probably a form of nonverbal Dalish communication which is fascinating.

"I'm the kind of person that takes responsibility for people directly under me and also connected to the people under me. She knew Miles was important to me because he told her. So taking him into the clan had no downside. He could prove a link to a powerful mercenary company and their commander might be predisposed toward protecting the whole clan if they valued Miles enough. So she doesn't mind what other people'd see as dual-loyalty because it gains her the possibility of security." I explain as I gesture with my hands.

I can't not for some reason, right now.

"So when she met me and saw that I take my duties to other people very seriously, she ensnared me with a connection to your clan that wasn't just through Miles. It'd be my connection to the Clan. Like I said, very clever. Even if it doesn't have the desired effect, there's a possibility it would and if it went wrong, all you'd have to do is leave."

That woman is pretty kickass, I need to learn some cost-benefit analysis shit from her, I think.

The Elves have stopped and I turn back to see them very subtly gaping at me.

The first says, "that's why you're Vhenallin?"

While the second just, "I… no, that's not. No…it…"
"Guys, calm down," I put my hands up. "I know it's supposed to be a super important special thing, okay? She picked me specifically because there was even a chance I'd feel the responsibility to your clan necessary to carry the weight of the title. If I hadn't been me, I wouldn't have been declared Vhenallin. Better?"

They both still look a little gray but they nod.

"Okay, let's catch up to Cassandra, then."

We all take off, finding Cassandra not super far ahead but far enough that she must've kept a steady pace the whole time we talked.

About the same time, we broke into the clearing where Blackwall was talking to a bunch of people. Training them to hold up weapons and giving them armor.

I could see from the distance I was standing in that he'd noticed Cassandra and looked a little suspicious, so I strode up next to her and did my best impression of a high born lady walking in unfamiliar armor. Hands clasped demurely, head tilted down, eyes glancing up at our surroundings through my lashes.

By the time we got to the group of young men and women that Blackwall was training, he'd loosened up some, but not all the way.

"Hullo," he greets as we stop at the end of the bridge we had to cross. "Might I ask what brings you folk here?"

"We came for you," Cassandra says. Jaw tightening.

Oh shit. She thinks the Gray Wardens had something to do with Justinia's death.

That never even fucking occurred to me. I assumed she was just mad at everyone in general right now, but the focus of her anger just wasn't around and now there's one right in front of us.

"Hello, Warden," I say haltingly and step forward. "I'm Nik, Commander of the Justicar Order and we'd like your help to clear the Gray Warden's name of suspicion."

Cassandra is probably shooting me a sharp look, but I go on before she can interject.

"After all, your order has always protected Thedas. So the idea of them being involved in the explosion at the Conclave is ludicrous, but…we do in fact have eyewitness accounts, telling us that they were there." I say.

Blackwall looks like he just got socked in the gut.

I can imagine. He's being told that the Gray Wardens are under suspicion of doing something nearly world ending and he isn't even one of them. He can't say shit to what they're doing, not honestly.

And what if they did do something wrong? What if they made some kind of mistake and he defended them when the people responsible should be brought to task?

That's gotta be upsetting.

"I…see," he says uncomfortably. "Unfortunately, you've come looking for answers in the wrong place. I haven't seen another Warden in years. I spend my time traveling and recruiting."
"You must know something!" Cassandra snaps.

I turn on her immediately. "No he mustn't know something just because he's a Gray Warden, what do you think he's fucking psychic!? This is why I don't bring you places!"

Cassandra pulls up short at my vehemence.

Even I'm a little surprised at how angry I am. "Anyone with even a little instinct knows you don't go off on people you want information from! You befriend them or manipulate them or even promise them something in return! Shouting at people makes them lock up and you never learn anything unless they're particularly cowardly. Do you think a Gray fucking Warden is going to be intimidated into giving you secrets, Cassandra!?"

Everything just comes spilling out, one thing after another. I can't stop it. Even if I could, I don't think I want to.

"I don't take you with me because I know how you'll talk to people and I know it's the Antithesis to everything I think a Seeker of Truth should be! Seekers of truth shouldn't just beat people up and hunt monsters and doggedly pursue leads! They should know how to talk to people, too!" I shout.

Cassandra comes out of her surprised stupor at about this time. "Why are you so upset? I barely said anything!"

"I'm manipulative and I have a sixth sense for people, Cassandra," I snap back. "The tone in your voice, the aggressive stance, you were looking at him like he was the enemy and you were about to stomp him!"

Her mouth flaps for a moment before she can respond. "And so what if I did! The Gray Wardens were involved-

"OH MY GOD!" I shriek at the top of my lungs. "IT DOESN'T FUCKING MATTER. MAGES DON'T HAVE A HIVE MIND. GRAY WARDENS DON'T HAVE A HIVE MIND. THEY'RE DIFFERENT, INDIVIDUAL PEOPLE YOU COMPLETE ASSHOLE!"

And then I stop short, holding up a hand.

Cassandra gapes at me. The hunters stare with wide eyes. And I feel…

"Oh crap," I lose all feeling in my body a moment before I hit the ground.
Everything went dark after my emotional explosion and I suddenly knew exactly what happened.

I got too close to the Lake and the Spirit in it sensed my emotions.

My pent up rage at Cassandra, my protective instincts toward Blackwall and everyone else she's menaced, my…everything.

And it did something to influence me. It was so subtle, I didn't even notice it. It's like it wasn't there.

Then, my tenuous control slipped.

"Can I get out of here, now?" I ask as I pace the bottom of the lake.

I know I'm not really here. This is just where they exist and they brought me here in the dreaming to talk to me. It's…beautifully eerie, which is usually just my aesthetic.

But you collapse in front of people after an episode like that and they tend to panic.

"Not until you choose a reward," they intone again.

God, someone save me from Spirits who don't understand the concept of 'you don't keep friends and allies prisoner just because you wanna do something nice for them'.

See, I was stuck down here, with a spirit who was convinced I had latent Valorous potential.

When I opened myself up for them, they told me that they didn't understand why I ever held my tongue when someone did wrong and why I was controlling myself then if I wanted to explode so badly.

So then I had to explain about people not being as malleable as spirits and how you have to work, often for a very long time and very hard, to get them to change. And how Cassandra has to come to her own conclusions about her behavior, otherwise she'd just think I'm being my usual critical self. I have to show her that her behavior is wrong and yes, always take her to task- but never like that.

That was wrong. I may have ruined our entire relationship, bad as it is- with that outburst.

They weren't sorry, because of course Spirits don't understand the concept of regret (What!?)- but they wanted to reward me for my Valor of course, because that's what Spirits do. Or well, what they used to do, I guess.

Nowadays this one just accepts offerings from the nearby village and watches over them, influencing people when they believe they need it most, pushing them into valorous action.

I sat with them a bit and hammered out when and how they were doing these things and concluded they had been mistaking latent rage for Valorous desire a WHILE now.

They were so shocked, because apparently Valor takes so many shapes, it's very easy to mistake one for another.
I helped them understand what I meant, by allowing them to use my mind to filter the experiences through- and now they insist on rewarding me not only for everything Valorous I've done in the past, but also for helping them to figure out what they were doing wrong.

Over and over, I told them it was okay and that I just wanted to go back, but...no dice.

Funniest thing in the damn world to see a spirit in the form of a suit of armor at the bottom of a lake where by all rights it should be rusted to hell and back, but really. I need to get back before Cassandra can send for Solas and really get everyone worried over me.

"I don't need a reward, Valor doesn't need rewards," I say.

"No, it does not seek them, but tis honorable to give them!" they reply.

Mmmmmngggghh, I am never getting out of here. I can't think of a single thing I need.

"A weapon perhaps to protect you when it is most dire? No, you could not wield it." They step around me, releasing small bubbles as they go. "A companion? No, you have enough."

"Yeah, see, I don't-" and then I pause and think hard for a moment.

Weapons and Companions makes me think of Solas.

The staff that Varric and I commissioned for him is probably not going to hold up much longer than his others did.

Question is, would the spirit accept my answer?

"I know what I need," I say.

It turns to me and straightens, looking like a knight addressing its queen. Cute, really.

"One of my companions, his weapon is...well, I tried to make it as sturdy as possible, but it's not going to hold his power, is it?" I ask.

"You think of the scholarly one," they say. "Pride or Solas, which is it?"

"Solas is Pride, so I don't think it matters what you call him, you'd be calling him both anyway." I reply.

"It matters," they whisper. "He runs, he runs, and Pride is still there..."

"Okay, so I'm fascinated by the lore here, but I've gotta stop you," I hold out my hands. "I want any knowledge of his personal feelings, to come straight from him. Okay? It's not honorable to talk about people behind their backs unless you also do it in front of their faces and even then, you shouldn't read their minds and give information to people who don't know that information."

The spirit slowly bobs their head in a nod. "The power he holds is too much for this world to contain or direct. Even were you to use old runes of our people to try, it wouldn't work. You have not the materials that-" they stopped and gasped. "The Blood of the Titans runs green again!"

They must've been sifting through my memories of materials and Lyrium was used in the staff, so they saw all thoughts and memories related to Lyrium.

Good to know how this works, for future reference.
"Yeah I have no idea how that happened, I just hummed along with it and it-"

They cut me off. "You harmonized the Fade and the Titan blood once more!" The voice it uses is hoarse and filled with emotion, though I don't know which one. "You must use it! Use it to forge a staff, encase it in ironbark and-" They stop and think for a moment. "I know of the last component you must use, but no one but him must touch it, not even you. Not even with that," they say, pointing to the mark.

"I'm guessing it'd explode me or something equally horrible," I say.

"Something horrible, something terrible," they say. "I will show you where it is, but he must be the one to take it from its place."

"Uh…okay sure, but…um. How do you forge Lyrium?" I ask. "Anyone who handles it becomes…'addled.'" God I hate that word.

I've had people studying it from a distance- in special protective gear. Cassandra didn't like it but she agreed that we needed to know what it was. What it could do.

Haven't gotten any word on it yet, strangely enough.

"Harmonized, it is harmless, only powerful," they say. "Blue Lyrium is sundered and sings half a song, if you sing along you feel you can complete it. Red Lyrium is tainted with darkness, but still sundered. Green Lyrium…is complete."

'The emerald waters of the Fade', like I thought before.

"So, does that mean I can have some sent down here, and use it without any consequences?" I ask. "This sounds…dangerous. Other people knowing about this-" I cut myself off.

Oh my god. This is why the Evanuris used Titan hearts- or so we think, to power their magic.

"You see, but there is no danger here." They step forward and stare down at me with glowing silver eyes. "Symphonies complete in your presence and as a result of your splendor, cannot be completed otherwise. The amount you have created is small. If you use it all and are unable to create more, it will be forgotten."

They sound so sorrowful at that. And I have to agree.

"Oh but what is this?" They ask as they peer down at me again. "Something is different. The Titans are not what they seem."

I frown. "Huh?"

"You know the titans but you know not what they are," they say. "You will discover. Soon. Now….I will show you where, and how."

And then my mind is filled with visions of a very hazy recollection of some place in the Hinterlands. And the feel of a Lyrium-infused staff in my hand.

I stand tall, powerful and unbeatable.

"And now you must decide…" They whisper over the messages. "If you wish to give him this power, knowing what comes next…oh! But you know very little…"
And then they're gone.

Chapter End Notes

It feels like this chapter is very abrupt and disjointed, but most of my Fade Chapters tend to be a little weird in some way, so maybe it's normal for my Fade Chapters?

If you've got any notes on how to fix it because you think I did actually make some kind of mistake, please do let me know.
Chapter 81

Chapter Summary

I am updating today, because I need your help. It's a real chapter update, but I want you to follow the link in the beginning chapter notes before you read it.

Chapter Notes

Please go to this link:
https://unrealromance.tumblr.com/post/61138435213836288/hey-so-i-need-your-help

It is very important.

READ TOP NOTE FIRST. GO TO LINK FIRST.

It was a few days before Solas finally cooled down enough that I could talk normally to him again.

And that's just fine, considering it took just that long for me to recover- and also for the Lyrium to arrive.

I had to get it out from under everyone's noses. Had to tell Leliana that I found a way to use it, but that we had to keep it absolutely secret- that it was a dangerous knowledge, even with the small amount we have.

Apparently when that Spirit interacted with me, my Mark started acting up and Cassandra had to send both my hunters down to get Solas- most likely because she didn't want either of them there if I was about to explode- and when he'd finally gotten there, I was conscious again.

Well, sort of.

Sitting in the Fade for like a half hour, talking to a Spirit, seemed to have accumulated a lot of magic in my body.

Solas was that kind of angry he gets where he's aggressively nice and complimentary? It's always slightly disconcerting.

…maybe kind of terrifying, too.

I never feel afraid of him, but…I am often afraid of what his moods mean.

What he thinks of me, of us- the people in the Inquisition. Have I set myself back on trying to convince him that their lives have meaning?
Don't know, can't calculate and then everything gets kind of sad in my brain for a while.

But now, well. Now I have all the materials and all we need to do is find that old Temple I saw in that vision the Spirit of Valor gave me.

Which means convincing an only slightly not-pissed Solas into coming with me to a secret location where there might be a magical artifact lying in wait.

And that would be difficult.

Oh he'd love the adventure, I'm sure, and the magical artifact. He may even like that I asked him along instead of going alone… but he's definitely still mad enough to ask me to give him directions and try to go himself without me.

The problem was, I wanted to take Cassandra along and give her the opportunity to not suck for a while. Try to form a bond, so she'd be less likely to fight me on every single little thing. So she'd ask before assuming and accusing.

Well, now she's been on continuous missions for days.

Apparently she's so upset she had to go out and find a lot of things to hit and I've heard she's even started help build buildings in the Crossroads like temporary and permanent shelters for people and animals alike.

I think she's putting her hands to work so she doesn't have to think about what happened.

I've done it, myself, in the past.

The only thing that kind of baffles me about that, is that... well, it mattered to her. Enough to make her so upset she had to spend days working off the... anger? Anxiety? What?

Cassandra doesn't put that much stock in my opinion. Even if she did, I was obviously influenced by a Spirit. Solas even explained to us all while we were there, that simply being in its presence and feeling the feelings I was feeling- triggered some kind of reaction. The Spirit didn't even have to want to influence me.

Usually when given an excuse to dismiss someone's feelings, people just do. Especially the violent and ugly ones. People want to believe that you didn't really mean it when you said something mean to them in a fit of emotion.

So her reaction puzzles me. But whatever.

I leave my tent in the quietest way possible and sneak across into the one I know he only just entered. And hope to god he doesn't just rip off his shirt when he does- because the last time I almost died of shock.

Thankfully, he's sitting on his bedroll, apparently examining his staff or something?

He looks up as I come in, frowning at me.

I put a finger over my mouth and gesture outside.

And now he's frowning deeper.

Rolling my eyes, I walk over and crouch in front of him. Mouthing, 'I need your help to sneak out.'
He stares at me with his mouth twisted up for a moment before indulging me. 'Why?'

Thank god for his curiosity. 'We'll take Varric, if you're so concerned,' I mouth. 'But there's something you have to see.'

And now that I've baited the hook…

His face goes on a very entertaining journey.

Irritation and suspicion melt into interest and inquisitiveness, then into something like that expression people make when they smell rotten cheese. Nose all wrinkled up like when he's disgusted by something.

Only thing is, what is it? Me? Or himself for being tempted?

Huffing through his nose once, not quite a snort but close enough to communicate his displeasure-he stands up and grabs my arm, dragging me with him.

I feel the magic envelop me, but I couldn't tell you what it's doing.

All I know is his hand is very very hot and it's kind of alarming for a second. What was he doing that needed-

Oh my god. Is his metal staff already splintering? He was melting the broken bits back together, wasn't he? Or like, forging them back into the whole or something.

Wait. Did he fix it every time his wooden staffs and staves started splintering? Is that why they lasted so long?

Shit.

I guess it's good we have those materials.

It wasn't easy to find Ironbark.

Even more difficult was having it smuggled in without my Hunters finding out about it.

I didn't want anyone thinking I was making something for me and using Ironbark to do it. I don't know if Dalish people might take offense to that, but I'm pretty sure if Solas is just using an Ironbark staff, even if he's not Dalish- it'd be less upsetting to them than to see it in the hands of a human. Any human, even one they're tentative allies with.

I'll tell the Keeper about it when we get back, but for now, I don't need anybody storming off and making trouble when we're in the middle of some important shit.

He drags me all the way to Varric's tent and when we step inside, the magic doesn't just surround the two of us anymore. "Speak freely, I have a barrier up," he says as he releases my wrist.

It's then I realize he probably tooted me around like that because it's night- it's dark. His tent is right across from mine, so of course I could find it in the dark, but Varric's…

Wow, even when he's pissed and suspicious he's still super considerate of other people. God, I hate that contradictory bullshit when I do it. How irritable must he be about the fact that he can't help but be good to people he dislikes?

Or maybe he prides himself on it. To him it might not just be another way in which people walk all
over you. To him, it might be a conscious effort instead of an instinct.

I have no way of knowing.

"What's going on?" Varric's sitting at a small desk- kind of like those…um…what were they called?

"You'll have to ask her," Solas says and then turns to look at me.

They're both staring at me now.

And now, I have to sell this.

"Okay, so nobody can know this," I begin. "But there's kind of a dangerous magical artifact nearby that we need to take charge of, but I'm the only one who knows where it is? And I can't give you directions, because it's…images."

"This one of your… 'find-it' things again?" Varric asks.

I shake my head. "The Spirit in the Lake told me about it."

"Why?" Solas asks. Sort of breathlessly, like he's been socked in the gut. "What sort of artifact?"

He must be thinking about the Veil measuring artifacts or something similar.

…except he hasn't mentioned those yet.

"Something powerful we don't want any apostates finding in the middle of a war," I reply. "I'm not telling you more than that, because I honestly don't know any more. If I were to tell you anything else, it'd be guesswork."

"So why not tell anybody else?" Varric stands up from the-

Kotatsu! Except it's not really like that, it's…just him kneeling at a low table with a blanket over his lap. But that's what I was thinking of when I first saw him.

"Cassandra would want to destroy it, no matter what it is- and since I don't know what it is, it might be wise to figure that out before we go around trying to crush it into powder." I explain. "Plus, it could be useful. What if it's some kind of healing apparatus, or a building tool of some kind that they used to use? It could be an Ancient Elven thing or even an Ancient Dwarven or Human thing- it could be infused with Lyrium, it could be the equivalent of a damn magic comb and I just…wanna know, okay?"

I finish with the bald-faced truth.

"I'm curious, I wanna see it, I wanna know why Valor thought it'd be a good reward for me, I wanna know what it is!" I say.

I think I'm bouncing, so I go still.

Varric is staring at me like I've lost my mind, so I probably was.

Strangely enough, when I glance over, I think Solas was smiling, but it's gone so fast I can't tell if I was imagining it.

Alright?" I ask.

"You have too many justifications, I can't decide where to begin arguing with you over it," he says. "So let us simply go and see what it is, and if something goes wrong, I suppose that will be an object lesson for you."

Oh. He's anticipating this all somehow going wrong and needing to be there to pick up the pieces so he'd rather go with me than let me sneak off on my own.

Actually the exact way I'd do it. Huh.
Solas POV

Truthfully, I should have known that simply admitting to myself that Nik was an enticing prospect for friendship would herald the beginning of...something.

I simply did not think it would be this.

"I dunno where it is, I just know where to go," she replies to Varric's probing questions. "There's like a sense of familiarity or something, I just know where I'm going, okay?"

"Sure sure, but you said it was different from your 'find-it' thing," he says.

"It is, I don't know where I'm going when I've got my find-it sense going off. I just follow it," she replies. "I know where I'm going now, even if it's just like...a memory that's kind of resurfacing after being lost. I definitely would've had to walk this path to know where to go, though. I can't tell you the steps ahead before we get to them, I'm sorry."

"I don't believe you'll need to," I cut in. Gesturing ahead when they look to me from either side of myself. "Look, there is a break in the stone."

Nik drifts closer to me, nearly touching my arm- falling a bit behind, as if to hide from whatever is coming. Strange, considering her predisposition toward running straight into danger. Perhaps it is because there is no one here to protect.

"Nik?" I ask as we get closer. "Are you certain it was a temple?"

"Even if it's improvised in a cave, it's still a temple if it was meant for worship and congregation," she says. "And it was. I saw people, coming and going. Leaving offerings, taking some kind of blessing of magic with them when they went..."

A memory jolts through my consciousness and I endeavor to hide it.

People worshiping at temples and receiving blessings in the absence of their gods. Leaving memories for the Spirits and physical tokens for the gods themselves, to honor all of the People in their many forms.

A Spirit in the area, knowing where the Temple is does not necessarily mean it is Elvhen.

"Let's go in, but...uh...Solas? Do you think you can hold a barrier over us?" Nik asks from slightly behind my left shoulder. "If there's any kind of traps...I at least want a warning before we're skewered or incinerated."

"Is that why you're hiding back there?" Varric asks in amusement.

Nik replies distractedly, "I can't push him out of the way from other angles from beside or in front of him."

It nearly makes me stop and turn around, but I ignore it.

Varric makes a wounded noise. "You don't wanna protect me?"

"You're a Rogue," she replies. Simply.
Varric waits.

She glances over at him, I can feel her move, she is...that close to me.

"Varric, you'll know where the traps are before we do," she says. "Or at least you'll feel them going off and dodge them better than we will. I don't need to protect you."

"I am a bit confused at why you believe you need to protect me," I say as we approach the jagged opening of the cave. "I am a mage. Far more capable of protecting myself than you are."

"Sure, but I'm also a hyperaware paranoid who's constantly unconsciously aware of her environment. And you ran straight into a woman yesterday even though you were looking right at her," she says.

We pass the entrance. "I was focused on something else."

"I know, you were thinking really hard. And that made you unfocused. I can't unfocus, it's not in me. So I'll just be aware and you'll hold up the barrier and between us, we should be fine." Her breath is very nearly brushing my throat.

"I see you unfocused all the time," Varric remarks. Stepping lightly.

"Not on my surroundings," she replies quietly. "I can stop noticing, but I can't stop sensing when something goes wrong. It's...hard to explain."

And then we are in the temple interior, far enough that I must create a magelight to illuminate the space.

Varric draws Bianca and shuffles backward a few steps...but we wait, and there is nothing.

"Solas, the Spirit said you had to be the one to touch it," she says from slightly behind me.

And as she's not hiding, I realize now she's hovering. I can't stand hovering, it makes me feel watched...but now, I feel only her presence.

She is not paying attention to me, but my surroundings. I suppose that makes a difference, somehow.

"To touch it, or get it?" Varric asks. "This isn't gonna be one of those things where we try to walk in and the whole place collapses, is it?"

Nik stills behind me. "...I don't know. They said touch, but I don't know."

"It said me?" I ask. Spine tightening. "Why?"

"It's a powerful artifact, I assumed it needed to be contained by a mage somehow," she replies. "Or maybe the Spirit knows you because you're a Dreamer and somehow they doubt anyone else could handle it. I dunno."

It's true it may have known me from memories of myself in the Fade...but they would not be memories connected to Solas. It must have sifted through her memories and chosen the Mage closest to her.

"I will go and get it," I say.

Before I can take a step, Nik has lightly grasped a small portion of the back of my pack. "I don't
like this plan."

My head dips and my ears tip back.

"Of course you don't, I think to myself. 'You're not the one running into a dangerous situation this time. How powerless you must feel. Does it occur to you at all, that this is how everyone feels about you, nearly constantly?'"

"I will be fine. Stay here," I turn and dislodge her hand from my pack, gently. "And think about this the next time you decide to pull someone out of the direct line of a sword."

She makes an offended noise as I turn and walk across the temple floor. "That happened once!"

"Twice, actually," Varric pipes up from beside her. "When you pulled that guy out of the way, you fell backwards into someone else and they both dodged death because you pushed them out of the way. Technically."

"That's still only once!" she insists. "I barely ever go anywhere without you two and Cassandra anyway, so it's not like I have no protection or back-up."

I approach the stone plinth on the far side of the Temple and my breath hitches in my chest. Recognition flares in my chest like a blooming flower.

"Okay but what about the time you almost stabbed a guy for hitting on one of Flissa's waitresses?" Varric asks.

"That was not one of my better days but he'd have deserved it," she replies. "He didn't just hit on her, he wouldn't take no for an answer and then put his hands on her. I should've cut them off."

As I reach out to the box on the plinth, my hands shake.

"He isn't moving," I can hear her mutter nervously.

"Give him a minute, Schemer, relax." Varric chides. "It's better to be careful in places like this."

Flipping open the box's lid, I find exactly what I thought I would find.

An Orb.

A small one, unclaimed by any one person. Likely created by many many smiths working together to attempt to recreate the power of the Gods for their village.

It is small and weak - but far more powerful than any magical tool currently at my disposal. And it will…grow, with me.

Orbs always grow with their owners. Most often with their makers…or I suppose with those who take them, to begin with.

Relics of the old world, almost entirely destroyed or hidden away.

"Solas?" Nik's quiet, worried voice- breaks me from my reverie.

"It is…a focus," I reply in a low tone. "A tool for channeling magical power."

"Yeah? No wonder the Spirit said it had to be him, then-" Varric begins and then cuts off. "Can
they just read your mind and tell you what you need? Creepy."

Nik replies, "invasive. But I don't think they can really control it? It seems like a side-effect of being magical and nonphysical. Have to interact with the world somehow, right?"

She isn't too forgiving, but not harsh, either. Her approach to these things is more nuanced than anyone else's. All things, really.

It is almost as if she can take her sense of self out of her…self- and view situations from an objective perspective as if she were standing outside the problem rather than inside it.

"I am going to remove it now," I say. "But…if I touch it, it will be mine. No one else will be able to use it."

"I mean, that's why we're here," she replies. "Valor said it could help with your…problem."

"Wait, you asked it about this?" Varric asks hurriedly. "About the whole…exploding staff thing? What did it make of that?"

"They just…gave me a solution. And I had to, they wouldn't let me out until I accepted a reward," she replies.

And a cold shiver goes down my spine.

Reaching into the box, I remove the Orb. It is small enough to fit in the palm of my hand easily. Fingertips curling almost entirely around it.

My magic reacts instantly, flooding a small amount into the Focus to take control of it.

It feels like coming home.

A warm pressure in my hand, slowly inching up my arm and into my torso. Spreading throughout my body as the Orb recognizes its new master.

No. I don't like that.

User. I can call it whatever I like now. Those days are…over. And I don't need to hide.

Cradling it close to my body, I turn and walk back over to them.

Nik is anticipatory, leaning forward as if she'd like to come running after me and meet me in the middle of the Temple.

Varric is watching our surroundings.

As she said, though…I do not believe her preoccupation means she does not realize the dangers still around her.

I remember when she nearly stabbed that man in the Herald's Rest. I do. And…also what nearly came after.

One of his friends was creeping up behind her, but she shoved a chair backwards into him and he tripped as she menaced the man.

She did not pause once in her speech or falter in her stance. It was a minor annoyance in the periphery of her attention.
As I stop next to them, I take a moment to gaze down at the Orb…and then up at Nik.

"Are you okay?" she asks.

"Thank you," I say.

I may say it with more emotion in my voice than I intended to.

But I will allow the small mistake, this once.

She has quite literally given me the world, though she does not know it.

The moment I resolved to try and become friends with Nik, I thought it would be difficult to bridge the gap between us.

That no matter how similar we were, it would be hard for me to get past her humanity, her manner…something.

But in this moment I know, finally that it was never going to be that difficult.

Nik will never see what's coming until it happens, because she is trusting. And I will endeavor not to blindside her so badly she cannot defend herself and her people because…

She is trustworthy.

"Oh…you're…welcome?" she says uncertainly. "But really are you okay?"

I think this is the first time I've genuinely smiled at her outside of jokes or banter. The first time it's meant something more than simple amusement.

She seems to balk, and steps back.

"I am fine," I tell her. "It feels…good to finally hold something that can handle my abilities."

"I'll bet," Varric says. "What are you gonna call it?"

I chuckle, "not everyone names their weapons."

"No, but you connected with it, I can see it," he encourages me. "Bianca isn't Bianca just because she's my weapon. It's because she's the weapon, for me. You get it? Otherwise I'd have named all my daggers and shit, too."

Orbs were not given names. Swords in human culture seem to have been given many names, and Crossbows and bows besides from Humans, Elves, Dwarves and even Qunari.

But Orbs were conduits between the divine and the mortal. Or more specifically between flesh and spirit.

"You could call it Pride," Nik says. "It's you but it isn't you."

I stare at her for a moment and tilt my head. "You sound so much like a Spirit when you talk," I tell her.

Her mouth falls open and her eyelashes flutter, almost as if-

"Did that flatter you?" I ask in confusion and I admit, some delight.
"Shut up," she says and turns on her heel- leaving the cave. "I'm going back to camp!"
Solas POV

Chapter Notes

**HEY GUYS**

Still in danger of becoming homeless, but thanks to all the people who are helping out.

I've decided to start posting the draft chapters of an original novel project I'm working on to my patreon. So go to my tumblr and follow the link in my sidebar and you should be able to find it if you wanna go there.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

If I was surprised and grateful after discovering that Nik had somehow found me a focus- that could not compare to the reaction I'd had when she'd taken us to a nearby hidden cache to show me Green Lyrium and Ironbark.

Ironbark is a naturally magic-infused material that is resistant to overflow. Elves don't only make armor out of it because it is hard as iron.

It has always been important to our people, both practically and spiritually.

Nik seemed to understand this, with the way she seemed so uncomfortable to be in possession of it- even for the purpose of passing it on to me.

It was exactly what I needed to hide the Focus away from prying eyes and energy.

And the Lyrium…she knew well enough that it shouldn't be seen or used by anyone…but she still gave me enough to make something with. Because she saw it as the only way I was going to be able to defend myself.

Every other bit of Green Lyrium was destroyed and officially it never existed. The Inquisition's Inner Circle agreed that studying the benefits or drawbacks of this strange new type of Lyrium could wait until the Breach was closed. Right now, it would only throw everything into chaos if we add another element.

Or so they believe.

It is times such as this I wish I could simply…

We could replace every inch of Red Lyrium with Green. Harmless, powerful, Green Lyrium.

I shall have to think on it further- as I was not…aware, that the Mark could create Green Lyrium at all. And for now, I should focus on Nik and keeping her alive.

After assuring her that I knew how to use these things, or rather that I could learn, from the Fade- she left me alone, taking Varric back to camp with her.

The next morning she said nothing of it and Varric was obviously sworn to secrecy and perfectly fine with that.
It made me want to do something for her.

I have never been very good at accepting gifts without recompense before. But then…well, then was different. I could simply heap gold and jewels upon whoever I liked if it was necessary.

They were not currency then, but adornments. Our method of rule was…different.

At least. At first.

"Go and get me something sharp, try and sterilize it with fire or something," Nik instructs as she looks over a recent injury to one of our soldiers.

"We've daggers, milady," the scout replies.

"No not a dagger- maybe a throwing knife? Something small," she says.

I walk over to where they lean over the prone figure and ask, "what are you doing?"

"Taking the arrowhead out before employing healing magic," she replies. "Our only surgeons are back in Haven and I need to somehow get this arrow out of him without ripping him up further. So. Knife. Small knife."

We are on our way back to Haven. Ambushes are common on this road, but as we cleared it before- there is very little in the way of enemies.

That does not mean there are none left, however.

"Are you a surgeon?" I ask curiously.

"No, but I've taken first aid classes and I know about the average amount anyone could be expected to know to remove something like this," she replies. Ripping apart the man's tunic so she can see the wound. "So somebody get me that knife, a poultice and a healer who knows how to close wounds this big."

"I will do that," I reply. "I've closed worse wounds on you from the rifts."

Her eyes flick up to me but she goes back to her task without a comment. "Still need the poultice and the throwing knife, a sterilized one."

Someone rushes over with a throwing knife, handing it off to me when I reach for it.

It takes barely any energy at all to heat it up enough to consider it sterilized- and less concentration than most tasks is required to keep it from melting.

Nik takes the blade from me just as the poultice arrives and she is able to remove the arrowhead, and apply the poultice in a matter of moments.

Remembering how she would visit the healer's area in Haven, Eth'an and Little Haven when she first woke from her slumber after the first rift and how I wondered what she could possibly be doing.

I recall thinking, rather uncharitably, that she was likely asking questions and getting in their way.

A fair assumption to make about nearly anyone else whom you assumed had no training in healing or surgery. No magic to speak of. But Nik, is…different.
I'm beginning to realize everything about Nik is different, not only her personality, her morals...her mind.

Her very existence is different. And I've begun to wonder...exactly how so.

The wound does not take long to close, but Nik kneels beside me for as long as it takes. Staring intently at the wound, taking everything in. As she usually does when experiencing something new.

She has never seen me heal from outside before. She has only ever been the subject of my healing. It must be fascinating to someone like her.

"Can you feel it?" I ask softly as I finish. "The magic?"

"Not the way mages do, if that's what you're asking," she replies. "Somebody take this dude to a tent and set him up for the night with water and food. We're moving on in the morning, we need to strap him to a gurney- just set that on top of a bedroll and throw a blanket over him, he doesn't need to be moving in his sleep anyway."

We both stand and step away as a few villagers pick the man up, shift him onto a gurney and then haul him away after strapping him into it.

Nik agreed to take many people back to Haven, to live in either Eth'an or Little Haven. She said that Haven was too small for the population and that splitting them up into groups could only be beneficial when one considers what one settlement might be lacking over another.

"As mages do?" I ask. "What do you mean? How else could you sense it?"

She glances over at me but avoids my eyes and then looks away, as she usually tends to do. "You know, light, heat, pressure, a sense of something. It's not like you're picking up on the magic itself, it's more like...sensing the effect that the magic has on the world around it."

When it takes me too long to respond, she looks at me, but seems to startle at my attention. "Jesus, Solas. Stop...doing that."

I tilt my head and frown. "Doing what, looking at you?"

"Yes, exactly, stop looking at me," she replies and spins on her heel.

I do not have to rush to keep up, but I am a bit startled she tried to walk off to begin with.

"You do not like to be looked at?" I ask.

"Not by somebody with eyes like daggers, I don't," she replies.

That startles a short chuckle and a small snort out of me, though I try to hide it with a cough and the clearing of my throat.

"Does it hurt, always trying to hide your genuine feelings from everyone all the time?" she asks as we walk. As bluntly as always. "You're gonna burst a blood vessel trying to hold in laughter. Why are you so secretive, anyway? You could accomplish not revealing personal details or behavior just fine by allowing yourself to feel and express. You hiding it, exposes a weakness."

That nearly stops me short. Because she is right. I am exposing myself as someone who does not wish anyone to know me. Which is suspicious to others.
"Thank you," I manage to say as we continue to walk through camp.

She startles as if not expecting me to speak.

It was…quite a pause before I was able to, after all. I hadn't realized that. At times when I think very hard, time loses all meaning to me.

"For what?" she asks, perplexed.

"Always speaking the truth," I reply. Smiling, I suppose. Though I know it does not reach my eyes. I don't allow myself to smile, and that impulse is much easier for me to control than the urge to laugh.

"When do we get back to Haven?" she asks abruptly. "I can't find my itinerary paper thing."

My lips twitch, but the urge is small. I can push it down easily.

Just this once, I decide not to, and chuckle, genuinely. "Day after tomorrow."

Chapter End Notes

I'm so stressed and anxious I literally wrote like eight or ten chapters for this fic in advance all in a matter of two or three days.

Those of you who've been here from the beginning remember my daily updates? Those were in a very fraught period of my life. Unwritten is like my comfort object.

For the next two saturdays you're getting nothing BUT Unwritten chapters-- but I promise wednesdays are still for other stories.
Chapter 84

We all made it back to Haven just in time for the bullshit to start. I hate when I miss the bullshit, you know.

My refugees weren't even allowed to go into Little Haven, Eth'an or even the Mage village, Somnitempus- because apparently all adjacent land belongs to the DuRellion family and while he's negotiating terms with the Inquisition Ambassador, no one is to be let past.

So you know what I said? Screw it. We need another Village anyway.

And that is how the new village on the road to Haven was born. Just a day ago.

I couldn't leave before everyone's tents were pitched, everybody had food and water and blankets- and before I knew I would be let in to sit in on the negotiations.

This morning, the guards from Haven that were keeping us out, walked into our camp and informed us that the Herald would be brought to task for her 'heresy'.

So here I am, sitting in the Chantry in Haven with Josephine, awaiting the appearance of Marquis DuRellion, stewing in my rage.

Before I made it into the Chantry, my people came streaming out of homes and businesses to greet me and beg me to save them. Because they knew what this meant. We were about to be ousted.

It made a big enough commotion I was able to pass notes that I'd written the night before to Tevea's direct underlings.

Basically her assistants and their own assistants- people who could be trusted because they'd proven themselves worthy of it by doing their job faithfully.

Also, people I picked personally out of the many who followed Tevea when she left. People loyal to her. People willing to do what needs to be done to enact change. Gotta love 'em.

Tevea and Miles will have to work together on this one- and the new head of Little Haven who takes over when I'm gone, what was her name…Callia. That was it.

Callia will have to do her part from Little Haven, and Fiona and her own second, Kelsey would have to do it from theirs.

I'm not expecting a whole lot. But if those refugees are left out in the cold for too long, they could get ill and die from their injuries or some kind of deadly form of flu.

Dahlia would facilitate the efforts from Somnitempus and Tevea would coordinate with the people in Little Haven.

The messages I sent should've been received by now. Which means everyone should be packing up the supplies our newest village will need.

I already decided when we walked up to that huge ass blockade that whether or not this would be the same- My people wouldn't be going anywhere.

So either Messere DuRellion capitulates, or he and his men are dead. Or at the very least, I'll chase them off and tell him he can petition the damn Empress for all I give a fuck.
I remember his rights were shaky in the game, but who knows here?

"You are very angry," Josephine mutters while smoothing her dress from her seat next to me. "Calm yourself. This must be handled delicately."

"I don't think he has many rights here," I reply. "We're in Ferelden, and Orlesians trying to lay claim to holy sites, whether they own them or not is going to rankle a lot of people. Especially if they're trying to do it while hundreds of refugees are flocking to our doors, seeking protection and shit."

"You are right, this is mostly a show of force to make us back down and do as he asks," Josephine replies. "But how we handle this, will reflect on our organization. I did not take you for the type to want others to look on us with fear."

"Only the right people," I reply shortly. "Assholes who bargain over land with the lives of hundreds of defenseless refugees hanging in the balance. If I have to eject him or kill him to keep my people safe, I will do it, Josephine."

She nods once, very slowly. "And the people may even laud you for it. However, it would not gain us much support from the gentry. I know your opinions of them and their excesses and egos. But using their power to change Thedas will be much easier than fighting a war on many fronts and attempting to batter it all into submission."

"I'm aware of that, Josephine," I reply. "But I am angry and there's no getting around that. He is wrong to do this, especially now, and there is no getting around that. No matter what I do or say, I am true to myself and that will not change. I gave up lying when I rescued the Blades. I had to lie so much to help them. Now I have the power and the influence to never have to be two-faced again. I can't go back to it, Josephine."

She thinks about this, probably hearing the shaking of my voice and seeing the way I scratch at my arm and taking it all in to consider my condition.

"Then we must work together," she says finally. "I know you are one to simply forge ahead and find solutions as you go along. But I am more of a meticulous planner than that."

"I plan, I just don't let my plans stop me when it comes time to act in a way that might ruin them," I reply. "I understand that you're uncomfortable with having no plan. So we'll make one. But you also have to agree that if the plan isn't working or it gets derailed somehow, that we have to adapt."

"Of course," she replies. "Only I wish you wouldn't ruin the plan and go off in a completely different direction. I can still remember how you failed to convince the Mothers here to do more than care for only the faithful and then forbid them to help anyone at all. I understand the reasoning behind it, but all you accomplished was forcing them underground in their efforts."

I tilt my head and give her a crossways look. "Yes? And now a whole bunch of frockless mothers and sisters are out among the general populace, spreading words of love and generosity to anyone who will hear them and handing out bread and purified water to everyone. I got what I wanted."

Josephine stares across at me for a moment before settling into her seat. "I hadn't realized you were so prepared to sacrifice your own reputation as a peacemaker and generous benefactor to see done what needed doing."

"I didn't sacrifice anything," I reply. "Some of those sisters and mothers work for me and they spread only the word of the Maker, not news of what I have or haven't done. They managed to
convince the rest that it would only give me undue attention that I didn't deserve. Like I said, I have plans. And back-up plans, and plans for the back-up plans going in at least five different directions. All to serve the same wants, needs and goals. But sometimes you've gotta shift what goals you're shooting for to hit the target. Are you willing to go that far? Get something completely different than what you want, because it serves what you need?"

Josephine stares at me again, giving nothing away. She folds her hands in her lap, primly. "If I were aware of more of these machinations, perhaps I would not be so worried."

"I talk them over with Leliana," I reply. "And Leliana's of the habit to keep these things to herself. I would've told you, or had her tell you, but it honestly never occurred to me." They're so close, I figured Leliana would've told her everything.

"Well, as you've said…" she begins. "Leliana is one to keep secrets. And she has been very busy of late. As have you. Mayhap we need someone as go-between to inform all parties involved of all goings-on?"

"I think that'd be a mistake, considering the chance of spies in our organization who might answer to a different master than us," I reply. "I'll just start sending you coded messages. You and Leliana understand my English shorthand by now. I am honestly shocked you two picked it up so quickly. I can just put them in with the paperwork and you can burn them after you see them and mention them to no one."

She nods. "That will do, for now. And I suppose…it is only easy for us as we know both Common the spoken tongue and the Orlesian written alphabet. Speaking aloud the sounds the letters make is a quick and easy way to decipher the message."

"Sure," I agree. "Now about that plan for DuRellion. We're gonna have to come up with one, fast."
The Herald of Andraste is... a strange woman.

She refuses to lie or obfuscate, but uses the feelings she has as a sort of shield to keep those she considers enemies at arms length.

When Marquis DuRellion did deign to bless us with his presence, she told him in no uncertain terms that if he were prepared to fight over Haven, she would destroy him.

And then she told him as he was reeling with shock, that if he preferred not to be humiliated by a resounding defeat at the hands of a holy icon, he should consider exactly what it is he is doing in Haven and why he felt the need to come in the first place.

It is in the nature of the Orlesian Nobility to sense an opportunity and grab at it when it comes.

So I proposed that while he was thinking on his reasons for being here, that he should also consider—though we have the means to destroy him, we would prefer not to. And that there was a more mutually beneficial answer to this particular problem.

That the Herald was the blessed and chosen of Andraste who would defend her people if called upon, no one could doubt. But his own intentions and family name would be tangled up with this business.

Would he rather be remembered as a friend to the Inquisition, that saved the world? Or as an enemy of the Herald of Andraste herself. So like the many people that Andraste herself fought and destroyed for the sake of her own people?

Negotiations became much easier after that, and I have to admit, her strategy was effective.

That is not to say it was over as quickly as we'd like. But once the Marquis took notice of all the people leaving Haven, Little Haven and Eth'an to take supplies to the newly established village down the road— he realized there was really no stopping the Herald.

It was entertaining to see the realization when he came into the next meeting. That she had simultaneously begun fortifying positions for a fight, gotten her new refugees supplies and also begun negotiations with him.

Suppose it had all been done over the course of two or three days. It would not have seemed quite so impressive. But the Herald has a network of people within all the settlements, and all of them have some stake in keeping her in power.

The mages want their independence and she gives it to them. The nonhumans in Eth'an are allowed to govern their own place. And those in Little Haven worship her to a lesser extent than they worship the Maker and Andraste.

And the people of Haven themselves may be uncertain about her, but they will side with her over an Orlesian trying to steal their homes from them, any day.

It was not only a show of force, but of solidarity. Loyalty. Devotion.

And it happened in one day. The organization of it all went through the proper channels, so it is not as if I would have expected a delay.
But the way Miles immediately got everyone in Eth’an together, discussed what needed to be done and then implemented those plans in a matter of hours was simply…

I understand now, what she sees in her lieutenants. Before I wasn't sure, I thought perhaps there was something I was missing about them or that perhaps she chose them for their loyalty.

But Dahlia managed to magically transport a number of supplies around the blockade lines by mobilizing the illusory mages and hiding everyone on a path with a rippling barrier to each side that simply showed more forest to anyone who would look.

They took three caravans of mages before they were caught and they even managed to split into two groups and evade capture from the blockading forces. All without killing a single one of them. So as to avoid sparking a fight that may not be necessary.

By the time Little Haven was ready to send their own supplies, the Marquis had cracked down on security. Without even truly realizing that the damage had already been done.

The people had gotten one over on him and they now looked on him not only with contempt but also a lack of respect. He was not frightening, or respectable or even one to be wary of.

He was simply an obstacle.

It was not much, in truth- the supplies only allowed for a large shelter to be erected and the people in the shelter to be fed and tended to by the healers they’d managed to get out to them.

Each cart the mages led through the blockade had four builders from Eth’an, two healers from Haven and one person each to enchant the shelter with heat- set up wards for protection, or stand guard with the few Justicar recruits that were now part of the new village.

They also had potions and food, but the people were the important part. Or so I believe. It will still take two days to make the simplest of shelters, but in the meantime, no matter how long the negotiations went on for- the people would be provided for and have something to look forward to.

The blockading soldiers did not have the authority to stop anyone from doing charitable acts and moving against the mages would ensure a swift defeat. All they could do was shore up their lines and ensure no one got in rather than out.

In truth, I believe the Herald's barely concealed rage and protective urges may have spurred the Marquis to a more favorable agreement on our side than he'd once intended.

We were given leave to use his lands for our efforts as long as we paid a small tax on the property. It was negligible, really.

Nik decided this tax would take the form of a sample of whatever goods were made in Haven that month. Such as a single jar of each food that was produced, a single swatch of cloth or leather. A single tuft of sumptuous rabbit fur or a single slab of Druffalo meat for every one butchered.

It is obvious that to anyone, this would be a useless collection of samples worth nothing except to a host of refugees. And it was made plain that this was all we had to give.

Our coin is bound up in efforts to save Thedas, as are our people.

The Marquis accepted the offer of samples each month of food stuffs, that he has decided to donate to the starving people in his own territory.
It is difficult to say if this is a truly genuine act of charity or if he simply wished to belabor the point of his good intentions to erase the stain that this entire ordeal would put on his name.

Regardless, our people are cared for, the Marquis is making preparations to leave, and the Herald…

The Herald is meeting with the people of Haven. To avail them of the situation and plan the next steps for the upgrades she wishes to make to Haven.

Her anger at this display of selfishness is well-deserved, I must admit. To use a time of tumultuous upheaval to attempt to lay claim to something that you were only to happy to leave alone before… to anyone who did not know the true motives behind all of this, it would seem the height of evil.

But I saw how he evaluated her. The questions he asked about her 'heresy' and disbelief in the Maker and Andraste.

I saw his surprise when she did not deny any of his accusations and in fact confirmed and leaned into the insinuation that she was using her power for personal gain. And I also saw that when he had taken her measure and realized that whether or not she was pious, she was getting the job done-that he did not leave in as humiliated a state as he should have for how things ended.

His purpose here was to test the Herald. To see if the rumors were true and if they were, if they even mattered.

It seems to me that the answer was 'no' on that count. It does not matter if the rumors were true. It does not matter if she does not believe.

She will do what she has to for the people of Thedas. And Marquis DuRellion will sleep more soundly for knowing that, I think.

I do wonder…if the Herald already knows this. She is always so clever, so observant. But she was so genuinely angry, as well…

Hm. Perhaps not.
Four days after the Marquis leaves, we have a bit of an incident.

I'm trying my best to mediate, but when the Herald shows up, I'm just relieved for the company in the midst of all the shouting.

"What the HELL is going on?" her voice echoes out across the space between the two groups of Templars standing before the Chantry. She chose her moment pretty well. Considering there was a lull as the two opposing leaders stared each other down just as she approached.

"Lady Herald," the Templar that had been recommended to Samson by the Herald herself is the leader of the loyalist faction, as it were. She turns to her and salutes while bowing, in the way that seems to have caught on amongst the denizens of Haven. "I apologize for the unrest, I was attempting to resolve this issue before you had need to get involved."

"Why was I not informed that you were resolving the issue at all, Lysette?" she asks.

Lysette stands to her full height at attention and her loyalists follow her example. "My apologies, Herald. I intended to abstain from putting strain on you."

"Good intentions, bad execution," the Herald replies. "The moment you knew this was likely to spill over, I should've gotten a report. Now I'm twice as stressed as I would've been because I didn't see this coming. So."

She steps up into the space between the two factions and turns toward Mattrin, who is leading the separatists.

"Who are you, and what is the problem?" she asks.

Mattrin faces her and spits at her feet. There's a gasp and a clamor that goes up in the surrounding crowd- and we've gathered quite a large one.

The Herald seems unimpressed and unruffled. Doesn't even startle.

"I do not acknowledge your authority, here!" he says. "The Templars in this village should leave to rejoin the Chantry, and leave behind all this heretical nonsense."

"Okay, and the problem with that is?" the Herald asks.

"Milady, he wants us all to leave," Lysette informs her.

"Oh, I see, that is a problem," she replies. Then turns her attention to the separatists entirely. "You can go wherever you want, but you won't kidnap anyone who doesn't wanna go with you, Templar or not. So you may as well just go."

"We were trying to!" Mattrin hisses. "This loyal dog of yours wouldn't let us go!"

The Herald turns to regard Lysette with a raised eyebrow and unimpressed expression. "Wanna run the problem by me again, Lysette?"
Lysette looks distinctly uncomfortable as she tries to explain. "I was only trying to persuade them otherwise! And they kept poisoning my men's minds with arguments and pleas and I have lost at least ten men since they began."

"People who change their minds aren't 'poisoned', they might be ignorant or making hasty decisions, but it is a choice that they have made and we will respect that." The Herald speaks generally to everyone. But mostly to Lysette. Then turns her attention to Mattrin's group again. "That being said, pressuring people to join your side based on your own beliefs is also terrible-stop doing that."

"We'll not allow you to drag our brothers and sisters into the Void with you!" he insists. "If we must fight to save their souls, we will do so."

Lysette's contingent put their hands on their swords, and then Mattrin's people do the same in reaction.

The Herald huffs slowly through her nose and puts her hands up, gesturing at both groups. "Both of you, step back. Get away from each other. This can be resolved without the chest-beating and dramatics. Lysette, you obviously feel like these people are bullying your men into making bad decisions, and I will take that into account."

She turns to Mattrin again and addresses him, then. "And you obviously feel as though it is your maker-given right and duty to try and lead as many people away from temptation and heresy as is possible, and I will also take that into account, if you just calm the fuck down."

Shockingly, everyone seems to see this as a middle ground they can agree upon and the two groups back away from each other by about three steps. Not much, but enough that the Herald now has room to pace around between them from one group to the other.

Which she proceeds to do, immediately. Possibly to create a sense that the space is being taken up? Be a bit difficult to step into someone's walking path if you're a polite person.

"Now. The issue as I see it here, is that you are both working off of a different perspective of right and wrong but also completely different ideas of what those moral values mean, so allow me to make things a lot simpler for you." She stops in the middle of the gathering and turns toward the crowd. "Now the average person just gets by with the moral rule of 'don't do anything stupid and get caught by the guard' or 'try to follow the rules in the Chant if you can' and either way, they interpret these rules pretty simply, but sometimes very differently."

She paces toward Lysette. "For instance, a person might interpret 'don't do anything to get caught by the guard' to mean...don't do anything at all that could be illegal or harmful. While another person might see this as...just don't get caught, no matter what you do."

Then paces back toward Mattrin. "And you might follow the rules of the Chant in different ways because the words in the Chant mean different things to you. Like, hell. Andraste worked together with a bunch of different people, including Elves- she accepted their friendship and their companionship and yet still today, ya'll can't pay them a decent fucking working wage and chase them off any land you find them on."

I think she's enjoying this a little too much.

"So if you read in the Chant that Andraste merely led the Elves, this might make sense as you see it from a conquering perspective- but Andraste wasn't a conqueror, was she?" She says. "She was a liberator. So some of you might think of Andrastians as conquerors and some as liberators. But it
seems like no matter which way you perceive her, you all tend to think that being Andrastian means you have the authority to do whatever the hell you want to whoever the hell you want."

She gestures at Lysette, then Mattrin, as she speaks. "Two entirely different groups of Templars. People gifted with authority over mages and only the common man in the cases where they must be protected from mages or the mages must be protected from them. In every other case, no authority can be exercised, it's outside of their jurisdiction. But so many people respect them as a symbol of holy power that they can get away with just about anything."

She spins on her heel to address Lysette. "Lysette sees this whole set-up as unfair because when she tried to do the same thing they did, they got it in their minds that they could just leave and take her men with them. And as she was only trying to convince back the men she lost, she sees this as theft because those men occur to her as her property. Which is how anyone with authority sees the men under them, really."

Before anyone can respond, she snaps around to face Mattrin.

"And Mattrin believes that he is the only one here who knows the true will of the Maker because of course he can't be wrong, he's a Templar and the fact that other Templars disagree with him is irrelevant." She says while gesturing emphatically at him.

"So. In the end, the only way to be completely fair to both sides is if both sides make concessions, but Templars are Holy or so they believe, and such things are in the realm of the secular so." She gestures by shrugging and throwing her hands up. "The only ways for them to resolve their differences is to put down the shields and talk like people or start a holy war that might completely destroy the Chantry and Andrastianism altogether! And now, I hate the Chantry. I haven't made that unclear," she says.

Then she steps forward and crosses her arms and says, "but Andrastianism is just a religion. And I have nothing against religions all by themselves. So if we're going to save Andrastianism from being completely fucked over by a holy civil war, maybe you guys should just consider yourselves laymen until such a time as you rejoin with the holy body of your very holy order."

"How would you suggest we proceed, my lady?" Lysette prompts.

She seems a bit soured on this whole thing since the Herald began. One thing you can say about the Herald, she's fair. She sees the good and bad in everything and everyone, even if they're her allies and enemies.

Mattrin is also sour, but after hearing that the Chantry may be in danger by their particular schism, he's quieted down a bit.

Oh. I see. She used his overinflated sense of self-importance against him. Now he believes that he's the one thing holding the Chantry together and keeping it safe.

And Lysette is an honorable woman. She's just been told that she's far more arrogant than she thinks she is, and she's trying to keep herself in check.

I've never been able to make those sorts of wide, sweeping speeches that will convince everyone of something different- but the Herald seems to come by them honestly. As if it's natural like breathing or sleeping.

"I'd suggest you stop shouting at each other with like fifteen people behind you and meet sensibly in an open forum where your problems can be discussed fairly- but since you won't consent to that
because Mattrin believes your ideas have no merit, I have an idea."

And then she spins on her heel, walks over to the doors of the Chantry, toward me. I step out of her way and she stands to my right, where she turns back around and gestures at Lysette and Mattrin to step forward.

"No, not all of you, damn it- just them," she has to correct when the rest try to step forward.

Once the two of them are in the center of the space, she gestures at them. "Now. Debate. Lysette will present her case, Mattrin will present his- then you'll both close your eyes and turn toward your own group of people. The people who want to switch sides will then do so and without repercussions and at that point, you will give up everyone on either side as beyond helping and go your separate ways peaceably, yes? And when this is all done and over with, anyone who wants to go with Mattrin can get on the boat with me and mine and we'll all sail to Orlais together and I will escort you personally to the Chantry."

Mattrin is disgruntled and makes a face at that, but he stays silent. So I think that's a yes.

Lysette stands tall and takes a deep breath, and nods to the Herald. "Yes, my lady."

"Good, now speak."

Chapter End Notes

Every saturday now I'm not only updating here but also for my story on Patreon! I'm hoping I don't just up and forget like I sometimes do but hell, so long as it's still on the weekend and before the month ends, it counts, right?
Preparations were underway for our trip to Orlais, and of course as usual, Nik simply had to do everything she possibly could to take stock of the situation in every single village in the vicinity.

Finding better lodgings for the new refugees until their new village was entirely built- figuring out how they were to fit into the grander plan for the inquisition, and-

Of course she had to arrange the facilitation of converts. She did not like it, but I could see from the way she behaved in the moment that she truly respected the beliefs of the people attempting to worship her.

She simply did not like the power it gave her over them. Her opinion was that people aren't holy, gods are. And if anyone ever claimed to be holy, they were lying.

I am of much the same opinion, I suppose.

But they wanted her blessing to join the religion and she had to induct them into the new order of Andrastians with a ceremony.

Cassandra spat something about hypocrisy and Nik replied with something along the lines of 'It isn't hypocrisy when you respect other people's beliefs. Even when you think you know for a fact they're wrong- you say nothing' and then well.

Then she moved on to Eth'an, at which point she became aware of a certain problem.

There are many orphans in all of the villages and she'd encountered a fair few of them, but it seems she assumed someone would take care of them. Officially.

The closest thing there was, of course, was the Chantry and the Sisters therein who would feed the orphans- but only...certain...orphans.

At least until Sister Giselle instated herself as Andrastian Advisor and Revered Mother of the Chantry in Haven. At which point, all of the children were brought into the Chantry and set to be raised in the cloister.

Nik didn't like that.

To be factual she did not like any of it.

The fact that children were left to roam around, hungry and dirty and ill or hurt- with no one to care for them.

I believe she blames herself for not getting involved sooner, but she hadn't the chance before now. Every time she's been in Haven till now, she's been...incapacitated for half or a third of the time she spent inside the walls.

And when she was ambulatory, she had to see to the running of an entire organization. The Justicars needed training regimens, codes of conduct, armor, weapons...and the Inquisition had demands upon her time as well.

Until now she hadn't the delegates to give the extraneous work to- so of course now is when she would discover the other underlying problems.
She assumed that there were already places for them in Haven. Or perhaps Eth'an.

Because the children were keeping out of sight, she hadn't had cause to think about them until it was safe and they were finally out and about, playing in the streets.

This morning she stopped still and stared at a child playing with their friends for a few moments before walking over and asking if they had parents and whether or not they wanted something to eat.

The child was…thin. Pale, malnourished and sickly.

They were an orphan, of course. Who got meals from the Chantry now, but was also expected to live in the cloister and follow its rules.

Due to Chantry law, Orphans are traditionally raised to be brothers and sisters or adopted out in a program headed by the Revered Mother of that Chantry.

Nik attempted to negotiate with the new Revered Mother, but Giselle was insistent that Orphaned children could benefit from a holy lifestyle.

And now.

"Mummy, mummy," a slight Elven child tugs on Nik's sleeve. "Do we have a house?"

Well, now she's adopted all of them.

"We do indeed have a house," she replies with an upbeat tone of voice. "It was a house that was built wrong at first. I couldn't figure out what to do with it, but now I think it'll suit you guys perfectly. We'll put a second floor in, section it up into rooms- but until that's done- I'm gonna set you guys up to stay in the sorta-Chantry over in Little Haven."

"And you think that is better than the one they just left?" I ask as we walk.

A small Vashoth child is holding my hand. I didn't encourage the closeness, but the children seem to think I'm friends with their new mummy and therefore that I should be their friend as well.

So interesting how a child's mind works.

"I think taking shelter in a Chantry run by people who take my opinions on child rearing seriously is better than in a place where people get flogged for the littlest mistakes, don't you?" she asks.

"Oh certainly," I reply, jolting a bit and stopping when one of the human children settles herself on my foot. Arms wrapping around my leg. "Ah…hello."

"Hi," she replies. Staring expectantly up at me.

"He doesn't know the games, you should probably save it for someone else," Nik stops and turns back to tell them. "I'm sure there's lots of people in Little Haven who'll do the walking game with you."

'The Walking Game?' What is that?

"Who doesn't know how to play games?" she asks as she gets up off of my foot and dashes over to plant herself on Nik's instead.

"Lots of people know only how to play their own games," she replies. Then begins walking, with a
child attached to her foot.

Ah. The walking game.

"You don't make fun of people for not knowing something, or point it out though," she says sternly while looking down at the child hanging from her leg. "You show them what they need to know and include them in your fun."

At last count, I believe there were...six non-mage human children. Two mage children who were immediately sent to Somnitempus with strict instructions for their care. Three Elven children and one Vashoth.

The Herald of Andraste has just adopted twelve children in one afternoon.

"Besides, it's not just the punishments," she says as we walk inside the boundaries of Little Haven. "I grew up in a religious household only half of the time I was growing up. I spent the summers in it and it was still enough to really screw me up. Being religious like that is something that adults need to choose. Children should be educated in their culture and religion and then allowed the choice whether or not to follow it. Trying to make them feel guilty for every little indulgence is wrong."

Talking about the most intimate of subjects, her deepest secrets- is nothing to her. As she has said in the past, she is an 'open book' ready for reading.

Now that I've accepted that she could be a formidable ally and that I do wish to ally with her...I'm wondering if perhaps this blase attitude she has toward her own feelings is because she does not-exactly -have them.

I've seen them in the Fade but could it be possible that she feels them without...having them? That she is able to mimic emotional reactions in order to make up for a deficit in her own being?

Or is she truly so well past all her problems she can discuss them casually with anyone?

"Here we are!" she chimes in a high-pitched voice as we approach Little Haven's Chantry. "Callia, you in there?"

The doors are wide open, all day every day. To allow in all-comers at any time.

There are no priests in this particular sect of Andrastianism. Only 'readers'. Those who read the Chant of Light and interpret it for those who are uneducated in deciphering holy texts.

Nik made one off-hand comment about the Priesthood being inherently corruptible and they immediately restructured their entire religious framework to compensate for that belief.

I don't think she makes those sort of comments around them anymore.

"Lady Herald!" Serah Callia Dane comes walking out of the Chantry to greet us. "What can I do for you?"

"These are my kids, I just adopted them," Nik says. "Can you look after them till the Orphanage is all fixed up?"

Callia's expression is one of utter delight. "I would be honored, my lady!"

"Okay good, but-" Nik cracks her neck and grimaces. "No beatings, no isolation, no punishments
that involve any kind of pain or humiliation. Let a kid stew alone for a few minutes, then talk to them about why they misbehaved. If they repeat it, tell me and I'll handle it. If I'm away, I'll assign someone to that job. They're to eat every day, three times a day and they need someone to give them affection and play with them when I'm not here."

Callia has a pad of paper at the ready for times such as these. It is why she was appointed head of Little Haven through popular vote. She simply took up the job and was recognized for her efforts. She hurriedly marks everything down as Nik speaks.

"And if you could have someone go over to Somnitempus every few days to check on two mage kids I sent over there to make sure they're doing alright, I'd appreciate it." Nik says and then shifts on her feet. "I'm not going to be able to spend a whole lot of time with them, so I need you guys to be their community. Help them with their schoolwork when they start classes with the tutor I'm gonna hire- watch out for them like they're your own kids."

"Absolutely, of course," Callia replies. "Their every need shall be tended to."

"No, I mean-" she gestures helplessly. "Yes, but no. Don't treat them like holy chosen children, either. That gives kids complexes and screws up their sense of self-worth. Just treat them like the kids around in Little Haven. And if you've been treating those kids badly, maybe stop doing that instead of just creating this behavioral divide or something."

"Children are to be cared for and taught, but not punished," Callia works out. "Is that what you mean?"

Nik squeezes her eyes shut and then opens them. "Know what, I'm gonna go ahead and just say 'yes' considering that's not a religious belief it's just...common sense. So yeah. All children. Always."

"Understood, Herald," Callia replies, grinning. "Will you be back from Orlais in time to do the marriage ceremony for Jessiah and Veroka?"

"...I dunno," she replies. Strangely enough, shyly. "It's probably better if you find someone else anyway. I've never presided over a marriage before. I'd have to use the words I learned from a totally different religion that I no longer even believe in anymore."

"Any words you deem worthy would be acceptable, Herald," Callia replies. "I will tell them if they wish to be married by you, they will have to wait until you are home to hold the ceremony."

Nik nods and makes an unhappy face. "Yeah, anyway." She turns her attention downward and smiles at the children waiting by her feet. "Aren't you all so well-behaved and polite for staying quiet while other people are talking. Who wants something to eat?"

A chorus of excited 'I do's' and Nik is ushering them into the Chantry.

"She's wonderful, isn't she?" Callia asks me as I move to follow, Vashoth child still clinging to my hand.

I glance aside and lean down to detach my hand from the child and push her gently toward the open doors.

She rushes inside after the other children, leaving me alone with the Reader.

"Do you think so?" I ask. "A lot of people seem to agree with you."
A look filled with distrust is leveled at me. "Do you not?"

"I think there is something that is definitely *special* about her," I reply. "Wonderful is not the word I would use. Fascinating, perhaps. Wonderful implies a certain…" Searching for the word, I glance up into the Chantry and see Nik ringed by hungry children waiting for their snack as she messes about in the pantry on the far end. "Well. Wonderful is not a word I would associate with her. It seems too simple."

"You are right," she agrees easily. "Perhaps something more like 'breathtaking'."

Still too simple. Incomprehensible is a word I would use. And it is still limited.

She is perfectly understandable and completely confusing.

"She doesn't believe she is the Herald of anything," I say. "Why do you persist in treating her as such?"

Curling her notebook close to her chest, she smiles. "Everyone has crises of faith now and then. Holy figures probably aren't any different. After all, Andraste cried out for any gods who would help her when the Maker found her. She didn't know what to believe."

From Callia's point of view, an excellent point.
"She's been crying," Miera says to the Herald with something like delight. "She's moving more and she cries as loudly as she used to."

"That's great, hey little one," the Herald coos at the small baby that's been passed into her arms. "Do you think you can get better enough to start talkin' to mom again soon?"

The baby's lips puff and then suck inwards and puff out again but she doesn't make a sound.

"Awww, I love baby babble," the Herald pouts.

Miera laughs, "she will be better by the time you get back from Orlais, yes? You can hear the babble then."

"Yeah," the Herald sighs. "Going to a boring meeting with a bunch of priestesses who are probably going to call me a heretic and then kick me out. Such fun."

I walk over to trace a finger over the baby's cheek. "They are always so soft," I say.

Miera agrees, "yes, I have been doing as the Herald said and applying the lotions to her skin every day. It seems to help with her sickness, as well."

"Yeah well having healthy skin makes everything else in your body much easier for you to take care of," the Herald replies. "And little babies need as much help as they can get when they get sick," she coos at the baby. "Because babies and the elderly are at more risk of illness becoming deadly than anyone else. So you've gotta put in all the extra efforts. Oh!"

She turns to Miera and asks, "you're remembering to keep her bundled up at all times when you're outside, right? With a blanket over her head very loose but tight everywhere else?"

Miera nods and gestures to take back the baby. "Of course, I always remember to dress her in warm clothing, too. I had no idea that illness thrived in colder temperatures."

The Herald pouts, but hands her over. "It's more that they thrive the colder a body is to a certain point. The only time a person with a fever should be cooled down is when the Fever is so high it's becoming dangerous. Where I'm from, we use thermometers to determine how hot a person is, internally- and then if they're getting close to a hundred and eight degrees Fahrenheit, we cool them down any way we can. Because if we don't, their brain and other organs kind of, cook, inside their body."

Miera pays rapt attention to the explanation. "Fascinating. You don't think Viva will get that hot, do you?"

"Probably not," the Herald replies. "It happens in rare cases. But if she feels really hot to the touch, you can put a cool cloth over her forehead and try to bring the fever down with medicine. Ren will be able to accommodate and he won't mind if you wake him up or anything if it happens in the night."

"Thank you Herald, I have to go and see to the children but I'm glad to see you're well," Miera bows a bit.

"No worries, tell them mommy loves them and will come to visit before her trip to Orlais," Nik
instructs.

Miera smiles and leaves the room.

The Herald sighs and leans back until she can sit on the chaise behind her. "Well…you've been quiet."

I look up from shuffling the papers in my hands around- I was trying to find a particular report. "Have I? I suppose I am simply focused on my duties."

"Or your duties are distracting you from something you don't wanna think about," the Herald hedges.

I glance aside at her and sigh before walking over to sit next to her, reports settling in my lap as I push back my hood.

"I suppose it is foolish to hide from Holy insight," I tease. "Do you accept me unto your divine following?"

She rolls her eyes. "God please don't remind me of the Scions Pledge right now."

I chuckle lightly.

"You're deflecting," she says. "You don't have to talk to me, but you can't ignore your problems forever. Eventually they catch up to you at the worst times."

Nodding, I reach up to toy with my braid. "I suppose you are right. It is only…it feels so silly."

"Nothing you feel is silly, unless you're feeling silliness," she replies. "Lay it on me if you want."

So I think about it for a moment and I wonder if it would be… "Will you promise not to be offended?"

She quirks an eyebrow. "No, but I can promise to tell you why I'm offended and help you work it out if it worries you so much. And not punch you in the face for the offense."

I'm surprised into a high-pitched giggle and then subside into silence. Thinking.

The Herald waits, patient as she ever is when there are important matters to discuss.

"...I'm not sure what to believe anymore," I say. With a suddenness that surprises me.

I've been avoiding putting voice to my concerns, even within myself. Struggling to avoid saying that I doubt in a time of such turmoil and confusion.

"Doubt is natural," she replies. "You have a brain, and if you believe the Maker created you, then he created the capacity for your doubt and it serves a function."

I nod. But only to acknowledge the words. I don't accept them. "Faith requires that I not doubt the Maker. If I have no faith, then I…"
"Who told you that?" she asks. "Doubt is required for faith to exist. Otherwise you'd just be blindly believing in what you think is an unassailable fact. That's not faith."

I look aside at her again and tug my braid. "What d'you mean?"

"The sky is blue- do you know why?" she asks.

I shake my head.

"That's because it isn't blue," she says. "There are scientific reasons why it seems blue or why it seems red at sunset and pink at sunrise. Do you need to know the why's to know that it is, in fact, blue?"

"I can see it with my own eyes," I reply.

"That's right, and if you're looking for it, you could see evidence of the Maker everywhere," she says. "But it isn't obvious. Which requires you to have faith that it is the Maker's will. But we can't even trust our eyes to see the true color of the sky. We doubted and we discovered, we doubted and we believed. Whether you believe in something religious or if you doubt a fundamental truth of science- the only way to really find the answer is to go looking for it. And Faith is when you find the answer and believe it's true, even if there's a chance that you got something wrong."

She shrugs then and curls her legs up into her body, wrapping her arms around them. "A scientist will try to prove the same principle over and over again, and even if it comes out the same way every time, he doubts so he searches, on and on. Having Faith in the idea that he can find the answer and it will all make sense somehow."

"But doesn't doubt mean, that you do not believe?" I ask.

"Doubt and disbelief are two different things, I mean they've got two different words and everything!" she exclaims. "Disbelief happens when everything is over and you've quit trying to find the answer. Doubt is what spurs you toward finding the answer."

"But there is no answer," I reply.

"Maybe not to the question 'does the Maker exist' but there sure as hell is an answer to 'Should I believe in the Maker' isn't there?" she asks.

And I realize in that moment that she is right.

The problem isn't that I disbelieve in the Maker's existence…it is that I no longer know what my part in his plans are. I no longer know what it is he wants from me. And that could mean that I was never right about my vision, about the Blight and Yvette and…all of it.

"I don't know what he wants from me," I say.

The Herald laughs. "Absolutely fucking nothing. He's a God with his back to the world. I don't think it's him you've ever been dealing with. Who is the one who wants him to turn back around. Make humanity seem not as bleak and filled with evil as he thinks they are?"

I look up and across at her very slowly as that realization crystallizes in my mind.

She is right. The Maker has only ever seen Andraste. How arrogant was I to believe he had sent me a vision?
But the Maker's Bride…the one to whom we owe our salvation. She wanted me to help the warden to save the world, because she loves and cares for each of us, sins and all.

All she has ever asked is that we share the Chant with the world, believe in the Maker and be good to each other.

*She* sent me that vision, not the Maker.

This changes...*everything*.
Varric POV

Chapter Notes

I still have a backlog and the itch to write for this story so my anxiety is still pretty high but I'm trying to control myself and only write now and then and maybe finish a chapter every few days instead of like three chapters every day which is what I WANNA do because that'll just kill the fuck out of my hands...

Anyway, I'm miserable, the world is bleak but at least soon we'll get that orange dick out of office.

Loadin' up the boat took a lot of time.

Especially seeing as Schemer insisted we bring extra food, clothes, blankets and other shit, for no apparent reason.

Whenever anyone asked her what she was doing, she'd hum and shrug and smile at them. We got the hint after about five times.

The Nightingale and Scribbles decided to let her do whatever it is, so it must be part of some kind of plan. She can't tell us everything all the time.

Chuckles is hovering, as usual. He doesn't like it when she makes plans. Plans mean danger and danger means she's probably going to end up with a sword in her face or something.

I can still remember how she stepped between the Seeker and a prone Templar once, demanding that she stand down even as her blade was coming down.

The Seeker had to throw herself backward to avoid cutting the Herald down. Yelled at her for that for a solid five minutes as Schemer worked to stem the Templar's bleeding and sew up his wounds.

The Templar was out, hurt so badly he would've died without her intervention even if the Seeker hadn't cut him up one more time.

She did that with a few mages, too. When people ran off in different directions, trying to give our people the slip- she followed and she stopped some of them from killing them. Offered 'em a place in Eth'an, free and alive if they'd just surrender.

Warm beds to sleep in. Food to eat. If they'd just...put down the staff, stop the fireballs and the lightning...

For some of 'em it sounded like the Circle all over again and they still fought. Died. But a few.

A few surrendered and they lived in a special area of Eth'an with the healers and other mages because Schemer thought they might not feel safe around non-mages or Templars.

Now that Somnitempus is up and running though, most of the mages from Eth'an moved over there. I wonder if those guys are there, too.
"S'always around her, never leaves her alone," one of the Templars on deck is muttering.

I'm nearby, but...eh. Sitting behind a barrel on a mount of rope. Comfortable resting spot and good for hearing things other people don't want me to know about.

"Doesn't seem like she ever minds, isn't that strange?" another replies. "She hates it when people get in her space. I know, I was there when she was healing in the tents when she first woke up. Instructed everyone to keep at least an arm-length away unless they were handing things off. Said it made her 'anxious' and 'closed in'."

"Maybe it's different because he's her healer, or something?" a different one says.

"No. Something else is going on," the first denies. "I don't like him and I don't like how he never leaves her alone."

I've heard sorta the same thing over and over ever since things started to settle down.

People don't like that so many nonhumans are cozying up to the Inquisitor.

That's how they see it, too. 'Cozying up' like she's being manipulated.

Void and Stone, if they only knew.

"Everybody below deck!" Schemer calls out from across the deck. "We don't want to be in anyone's way."

"Still talks like she's in charge of us," one of them mutters. A new voice.

"Until we're handed off to the Chantry, she's the only official around," the first voice snaps back. "And it's not like she's been shirking her duty to the people. We wanted to leave because our work is elsewhere, not because she was doing a bad job. Heretic or not, she's sealing the Breach. We can follow her lead until we get handed off."

There's a lot of grumbling, but everyone ambles off.

Interesting. Seems like Mattrin's gripes about the Herald being a Heretic are only part of the reason why all his Templars wanted to leave.

Hell, at least five of them switched sides once the debate was over. Two came to them from the other side- but that's a three man gain. We're still missing a lot of the ones who started out with us, but it's better than Lysette was going to get on her own.

You can't beat the right decisions into people. Schemer knows that. You gotta let 'em make the choice and live with the consequences.

Weirdest thing, really is that she's always so certain of that. Even when people do things she doesn't agree with and hates- as long as it's not hurting anyone but them, they have that right.

Getting up out of the ropes, I easily lope over to the stairs going below deck.

"Oh!" one of the servants we're bringing on the trip almost barrels into me. "I'm so sorry Messere Tethras!"

"Ah, no problem," I reply. "Going somewhere in a hurry?"

She flushes. "I..."
"Where are you goin' beautiful?" one of the bodyguards on the trip comes walking up behind her. "Sorry about the fuss, messere, just takin' this one back to the barracks."

I whip Bianca off my back so fluidly and quickly that she's in his face before his hand can make contact with the servant's arm. "Wanna know somethin' funny pal?"

He backs away and holds up his hands. "I-I wasn't-"

"I've got the full authority of the Herald of Andraste when it concerns matters of business. And the Servants on this trip count. Consider them mine and off-limits. Understand?" I say.

He nods quickly. "$I-$ yessir, o'course."

"You're damn lucky I wasn't the Herald and that she's not around to see this," I say as I put Bianca back in her place. "You'd be missing your balls."

His skin goes ashen.

"Didn't really think it through, did you?" I ask. "Get lost, and don't do this again. Or I'll tell her about your other little misadventure and you won't get away from her."

He nods again, and again, as he backs away and eventually scurries off toward the barracks.

I turn to the servant. "Running toward the Herald's quarters?"

She nods shakily.

"Next time, instead of running- stand your ground," I tell her. "Remind them of how much the Herald hates this kind of thing and that if they don't leave you and your friends alone, someone's gonna tell her they were hassling you. Weakness excites them. Strength is gonna confuse them. Maybe even scare them. And always make sure somebody you're traveling with knows what's going on. One of the other servants, alright?"

Again, she nods. "Thank you Messere Tethras." She thinks about it for a moment, and licks her lips slowly as she considers something.

"Ask," I say. "Whatever it is, go ahead."

"Can we tell other people?" she blurts. "That we belong to you and the Herald, whoever it is they might be…afraid of?"

I've got a lot of enemies, but the kind of people bugging these girls aren't going to be the sort that can lash out at me through them. And if they do, for some stupid reason- they'll be easy to crush.

Safest possible way for these girls to go around in a place like Orlais where we've got barely any power.

I'm gonna have to make more business connections here than I thought.

"Sure," I say and nod. "But start with my name, and then work your way up. That way, even if someone's not afraid of me, because they think I'm just the business guy or a thug- they'll realize you're being protected by the head of a mercenary army and a ruling voice in the Inner Circle of the Inquisition."

"Yes sir," she curtsies a bit and then runs off back toward the servants quarters.
Guess she's alright with how everything worked out. Still should probably tell the Herald but…if she kills one of our bodyguards before we even get to Orlais, there might be problems.

Maybe I could arrange to have him ah…switched out? Once we get there. I'm sure I can find somebody better for that job.
"You don't have to wear it," Varric says from across the room. Behind a screen. "If it bothers you so badly, just say no."

"I am not...bothered as such," I reply. "I...am confused."

Nik had outfits sent to everyone in our party. New armor for the bodyguards, new dresses and suits for the servants...something for everyone. Including myself.

"Confused about what?" he asks. Walking around the screen, now fully dressed in his new outfit. "It's part of being in Orlais. I knew Schemer was going to have to dress up and play doll. Didn't really think about her dressing everyone else up, but that's just what she does, isn't it? Looks after everybody else first."

"It isn't simply a fancy outfit," I say and gesture at it. "It has been perfectly tailored to flatter my waist, make my shoulders more pronounced and flare at my hips."

"Right..." he nods. "You're not used to bein' dressed up in something that's meant to make you attractive to the people on the street. But that's what big-name people in Orlais do. The Servants have these new outfits that kinda match. They're black and green with dark red accents. We're a unit, and we look good. Because we reflect on her. On the Inquisition. On each other."

"Standing out is dangerous," I say. "People who notice you, as an elf, or a mage- or both- they don't like that you stand out."

"We won't stand out," he says. Walking over to pat me on the arm. "We'll actually blend in. It's camouflage, Chuckles. Put it on and hide, or leave it off and get noticed. Not the other way around."

...he's right. My momentary panic caught me off-guard. I wasn't thinking clearly. I could only keep thinking of the way everyone would look at me in this. How they might notice the becoming way my body is fitted into it and then see my ears and be angry at the audacity. See my staff and be frightened into action.

But I am with the Inquisition. I am their Arcane Advisor. They will expect me to dress above the station they assume I have for being an elf and a mage.

I've hidden myself for a year by looking unassuming and small and powerless. And it worked.

But it seems I've forgotten when I used to hide in plain sight of the upper echelons of Elvhen society. Dressing in silks spun from starlight and dripping with liquid gold. Smiling through gritted teeth and exchanging pleasantries with nobles I was planning to plunder or kill.

In order to survive Orlais, I'm going to have to go back to that. And I believe that is what frightens me most.

"I don't like the person I am in these sort of clothes," I say quietly. "I've had to wear them before."

"Some kinda mission at a Noble party?" he asks.
"Many parties," I reply. "All of them in which I had to hide who I was behind a pretty mask. I suppose everyone does that in Orlais."

"If it's any consolation," he says. "Pretty sure Schemer's miserable about that. I mean, you heard what she said when she gathered everyone together. 'No matter who I have to be to make sure you're all safe in Orlais, I need you to trust me?'"

Yes, that was… odd.

She was obviously upset, though she was holding back her emotional storm with careful hands. Eyes slightly moist but not enough to really imply she was about to cry. Shaking fingertips pushing her hair behind her ears and then dislodging it as though it bothered her for it to be there.

And then again and again over the course of the discussion in which she answered questions and informed the servants that they could stay on the ship if they liked.

(I might have to 'hurt' you to save you. If someone accuses you of stealing, I'll have to have you taken away to a secondary location and held there to keep you safe. And if you're accosted by someone sexually, I might have to act like I'm angry you're shirking your duties to get you away from them.)

It was a very long discussion that seemed to unsettle her deeply.

She has all the power she could possibly need to protect them in Ferelden, but not here. This is new, uncharted territory.

A place filled with people who have been likely whispering lies into everyone's ears to turn them against her.

I reach out and pick the outfit up off of the bed. "Fine. I can accept that it's necessary. While we are in Orlais."

The second we are back on this boat, I will rip it off.

It isn't that I hate being the Dread Wolf, really. It's that…

I enjoy it. And that has always frightened me.

Cassandra POV

Nik and I argued about the outfit choices she had picked out for me. Too many dress-y options.

(You need to be intimidating but elegant. Cassandra. This is Orlais and while you might've been here before, it's never been as part of a ruling Council in Ferelden. There'll be more expected of you especially where it concerns looks and conduct. I hate it as much as you do, but I'm sucking it up and going with it because we need as much support as possible in Orlais to keep the Chantry off our backs while we save the world. So. Put something on. I don't care which one, just choose.)

The absolute worst part is that she's right. I hate it when she's right.

…she always seems to be right.
So I tug at the ends of my... 'skirt'...and attempt to put my discomfort with wearing it all out of my mind.

For Ferelden, for Nevarra, for the world. I can wear a...dress armor suit that looks more dress-like than it should.

And now I am picking up her odd habit of making up words and jamming two together to make new ones.

The 'skirt' of the dress armor is similar enough to other skirted armors I've seen. Pants underneath of a soft material that breathes well so I will not be overheated. The skirt itself is made of braided cloth- overlapping in a spear-like pattern. The longest of them ending just between my knees.

My breastplate is shaped more closely to a corset than anything else. And there...is lace. Lace around the top of my breastplate, and across my shoulders.

I am not soft enough for Lace.

"Hey look at you," Varric calls out across the deck of the ship.

Solas has finally emerged, ready to go. I see Nik took painstaking care with everyone's attire.

I do not feel so terrible, knowing everyone is being subjected to the same indignity.

He looks better than I expected. I thought perhaps some form of doublet or something similar to what Varric is wearing.

Varric's outfit is reminiscent of...well. The heroes in certain novels I happen to read.

Like the pirate in that story written by Madame DeLaney- with the billowing shirt and leather coat. All done up in black and red. With gold jewelry.

Honestly seeing Varric in something so fetching is irritating.

But no, Solas is dressed in something, far different.

"A robe?" Varric asks. "Or no, a cloak, right?"

Solas smiles enigmatically. "A robe with a hood," he says. "Cloaks do not traditionally have holes for sleeves."

The shirt he wears underneath is dark blue. So dark it is almost black. Something with a flared collar that peeks out above the robe.

I must admit it is quite flattering on him. He looks like a mage, but like a dark, mysterious one.

Mysterious may be how I would describe Solas, but 'Dark' never entered my mind until now.

"Did some work on your face, too?" Varric asks as Solas settles next to him.

It's true, he's wearing something smoky and dark around his eyes, something shiny on his lips to make them stand out.

He shrugs in answer.

"Hm." Varric settles back into silence.
We are all waiting for Nik and her servants.

As we wait, I glance at my companions again. Looking at the small details, as I was taught so long ago to do with everything I saw.

Solas has put caps on the tips of his ears. Something silver with embedded blue gemstones. Is *that* what Nik had commissioned by the blacksmiths that required…what was it called?

Something to do with water…mah…Marine…something.

And Varric's jewelry is indeed gold, but there appear to be red gemstones set around the rim of the hoops.

We cannot afford rubies and sapphires but I do not think Nik would use them, regardless. She seems to prefer the pretty but inexpensive things you can use just as easily as the expensive ones.

Something we share in common.

Varric is the same as usual. Solas is…not.

Something about his manner is different. He stands taller, chin higher- eyes more direct and challenging. It is almost as if his personality is just as changed as his clothing.

Perhaps he simply feels more…confident.

I could stand to have more armor. All I have now is…small, round pauldrons on my shoulders. Gauntlets with swirling designs cut into them and lace peeking out of the forearm-length ends.

My boots at least are covered with Greaves with the same swirling designs. Hopefully it will suffice in case trouble finds us. And it *always* finds us.

"Here she comes," Varric mutters as the servants begin to file above deck.

Their manner is also different.

Nik took them down below even before we reached the docks and began instructing them somehow. I see now what she said.

Josephine and Leliana taught the servants what would be expected of them in Orlais. Nik must have given them special instructions. Because I have never seen this before.

The Servants file out in rows, of mixed men and women- two rows. And then those rows turn to face each other and take two large steps back.

Between them, Nik steps out into the light and the effect is…strange.

She seems almost underwhelming but also forbidding and unnerving at once.

In a black dress, plain and simple. With a single crimson ribbon tied around her waist. Wearing a circlet that has her hair woven into it- and beads in the net containing her hair, like teardrops of blood.

Her ears have a set of dangling earrings, also reminiscent of blood falling from a wound.

Her face and throat have been painted a brighter white than her natural skin color, lips bright red. Eyes much darker and smokier than Solas's with more pronounced eyelashes.
Cheekbones that are somehow far more pronounced than ever before, giving her somewhat of an elegant but gaunt look. Almost as though she is a corpse wearing her own blood as jewelry.

A beautiful, eerie transformation.

And yet she is still dressed so simply.

She walks to the end of the line of servants and they step back toward each other, stop where they meet in the middle and then face her back. Following her when she walks.

Stopping before us, she flicks her eyes over each of us and smiles. In a way I have never seen before.

"I hope you are all comfortable in your armor," her voice but not her voice says. Smoky and dark. Slow and indolent. "Because we are about to enter the battlefield and I need you at your best."

"Lead away, Commander," Solas replies. In an equally different voice.

She glances at him and they lock eyes for a moment before she turns away.

It was a moment of understanding, I think. They both share in their…whatever it is they are doing.

Did they plan this? Why not the rest of us, then?

I do not like it when Nik makes secret plans. It always leads to trouble.
Chapter 91

The pageantry doesn't bother me. Really I'm into dramatic entrances and pretty costumes- I wish to god I was wearing a tailcoat instead of a dress but really, dresses are fine.

Suits, dresses, tailcoats which feel like are a combination of both of those things- I wear them to different kinds of events and on different days when I'm feeling different ways.

Today it wouldn't matter how I feel, I have to look as glamorous as possible. Trans and nonbinary people may exist in Thedas, but I know nothing about their status in Orlais or what their fashion is like.

Even Josephine said they usually just wear a suit or a dress, there's no special fashion for them that she knows of.

Because they're not persecuted here for existing. There was no need to separate themselves out and create new labels and clothes and words and rituals and whatnot.

So their status is unofficial- the same as everyone else's.

But are they glamorized? Vilified behind closed doors where nobody sees by certain people? Maybe just made fun of like the one farmer in a family of bankers?

I don't know. So I can't take the risk that someone would use that against me. I can't do anything with that here. There are no discrimination laws.

There might not even be discrimination, who knows. But until I do know, better safe than sorry. And nobody can just tell me there isn't discrimination- because they might not know. The privileged don't notice or they actively partake and lie about it. Either way.

Which means femme all the way, with a slight touch of queerness that they wouldn't even recognize for what it is.

The march to the Chantry was very dramatic. Very impressive.

Bodyguards walking outside our procession and keeping people away from us as we walked. Two lines of servants walking behind me. Solas on my right and Varric on my left. Cassandra dead ahead, escorting us.

Everyone stopped and stared for just a moment before resuming what they were doing before we showed up.

I think the fact that they paused at all, means that they couldn't control their surprise and fascination. Which means I have their attention. Even if they're hiding it after the moment has passed.

The Chantry itself is…as grand as any old Catholic church I've ever seen.

"There is gold filigree on that damn building," I say lowly as we walk. Vaguely pleasant look on my face. "And gems encrusted on the doors. How many people could we feed if we dug it all out of there and sold it?"

"Depends upon the quality of the meal," Solas replies back in his new…uncaring and playful and
somehow flat tone of voice. "Something cheap and plentiful could feed everyone in the poor quarter for a year, perhaps."

I think about it for a moment.

He chuckles, "you wouldn't get away with it, Nik."

A shiver rolls down my spine. Not only is he allowing his analytical self out to play more often- he's also just...being really weird.

He was acting strange before we got here, all through the Crossroads really. Both before and after I found that...focus- the thing I did not know I was giving him, thank you very much- but after he'd been...

Nice. Nicer. Sweet, really. Like he's trying to think of me when I'm busy and tired. Bringing me plates of food when I miss meals and other stuff like that. But...

He's also so distant. It's like he's trying to be as amicable but also impersonal toward me as possible. Maybe hoping I don't misconstrue everything he does for me as friendliness? I've had that problem before. I've been decent to people I hated because you know, they're people- and worried that they'd think I didn't hate them anymore.

It always gets me that people will just...take cues from your behavior like that. In situations where it can't possibly mean what they want it to. Someone clearing off a guest bed for you because you've got nowhere else to go doesn't mean they like you, necessarily.

Especially if you get into regular screaming matches and you know they hate you. They're just being a decent human being.

God, the way she acted like nothing was wrong and kept trying to talk to me even though I just wanted her out out out-

"You don't know that," Varric says just as quietly. With an open smile on his face. "She could cut the gold up into tiny pieces, scatter it all over the place...have someone sell the jewels in another country- Antiva loves jewels."

I giggle a little and then go back to my sombre-sweetness. "I think it's a possibility we should consider if things don't work out the way I'd like them to."

"And how exactly is that?" Solas asks. "What are you hoping to accomplish with those supplies?"

"Sh," I shush him and put a finger up over my lips without touching them. "Secret. You'll see soon though."

"So there is a plan," Varric mutters. "Good. Now if I could just figure out what you're doing..."

We reach the doors then, and Cassandra steps back to stand directly in front of us while the front two bodyguards move up and open the doors for us.

I turn around and address my servants, "everyone wait out here for me to come back. If it takes longer than a half hour, go ahead and go to the Inn and we'll meet you there when we're done."

They nod in unison, half-bowing and half-saluting in the way that Navette first started doing. It's caught on something fierce.
At least it's not a full bow or just a salute. I guess? It somehow feels less offensive because it's both less and more than either of those things. It's its own thing that people created themselves and picked up. Less horrifying than using the existing systems and whatnot.

When I turn back around and walk in with everyone else keeping pace with me- I realize they knew to wait for my cue to start walking. Even Cassandra probably heard me turn back around and took that as it.

It's like we're all hyperaware today, not just me.

Everyone is going to be exhausted and cranky when this is over. I should send someone ahead of us to the Inn to prepare food and baths for everybody so we can all relax before we're forced to spend time together outside of this meeting.

And then I'll cook pastries for fun because my anxiety will be through the roof and it'll have nowhere to go.

…or I could start writing again. Use paper and quills…ugh. Maybe those drawing pencil things that are basically just a stick of graphite? That's how I draft all my proposals and stuff.

"Here evil comes," someone says grandly from a dais in the middle of the room.

I would applaud the dramatics but considering where they're coming from, it just ticks me off.

"Standing before you is the pretender," the Revered mother says loudly. "Who presumes to know the will of the Maker and Andraste."

"Not really," I call out. "Just mine. The will of me. A person who is not Holy in any way."

There's a little pause of confusion that goes through the room as the Revered Mother tries to parse what the hell I'm doing.

So I step around Cassandra and she and the other two stay behind as I advance and walk up onto the Dais with the Revered Mother.

She doesn't move from her central spot, but that's okay, I don't need equal space. This'll work better if I seem small and unimportant. Humble and meek.

I am all of those things, but they don't know that yet. I can't be brash like I usually am in Ferelden. I need to make them unafraid of me and my influence- but I also need some of them on my side.

The best way to do that is to apply both logic and emotional reasoning. Make a case for why I'm not the evil they think I am, then make everything about my sincere feelings. About saving Thedas, about the people of Thedas who I'll be saving. All of it.

"You'll be gratified to know that I don't claim any holy power," I say to her when I'm up there. Loud enough for everyone to hear. It is echo-y in here.

"So you…admit to your heresy?" she asks in as authoritative a voice as she can muster.

"Heresy only applies if you've ever been part of the religion to begin with," I reply. "I was just some person who got stuck with this," I say and raise my left hand. Letting the glow speak for itself. "And people appointed me with the title of 'Herald of Andraste'."

"Such appointments must be recognized by the Divine!" she declares, now more sure of herself.
"Justinia is gone, and we must find a new Divine. But until then, your 'title' is invalid."

"In this Chantry, yes," I reply. "But we have our own Chantry in Ferelden. Chantries actually. And while I don't like being the Herald of Andraste, I can also see the necessity in the title existing."

I turn to the rest of the room filled with Sisters and Mothers. "The people are afraid. They're terrified. They're hopeless. If it makes them feel safe to call me by a title that doesn't really exist, then what is the harm in that? I'm not pulling on Chantry resources. I have an Andrastian Advisor to oversee all Chantry operations in Haven, a Revered Mother like yourselves. All my title is good for, is soothing fear and giving hope."

"Yes and those people whom you give hope to, betray the Maker and his bride by believing your lies!" she insists.

I turn and tilt my head. "Lies? Like what? Like... 'I am not in any way godly or holy' or 'I'll protect you from the Breach because I'm literally your only hope with this damn mark in my hand that's probably gonna end up still killing me'? I've never claimed any power. I have always maintained that it's just a title, and you know what?"

I step up onto the dais a little further and face the Revered Mother. "Any God who knew his children were lied to and taken advantage of in such a way- any god worth worshiping, would have mercy and understanding for his poor, misled children."

Turning back to the room, I finish with, "whether I lied or I didn't, whether I'm holy or I'm not- doesn't really matter. You hold true to the belief that Andraste loves you and wants the Maker to take you to his side when you die. Which means you must also believe that the Maker cares about you. About the People."

I think that's bullshit, as I told Leliana, but they believe it.

Leliana was having a crisis of Faith, which meant she was open to other perspectives. And... Leliana needs something to believe in. Something that can fuel her kindness and optimism. Otherwise she gets... well.

Probably could've convinced her that gods weren't real or at least that the Maker wasn't real if I'd really wanted to. She was that vulnerable.

And that's why I didn't.

"So if I did lie, then the Maker will forgive his children. And if I didn't, then it's just a title and it means nothing and the Maker will still forgive his children." Shrugging, I walk back down to stand on the floor between the pews. "And now I will allow Seeker Cassandra to speak for me any further. In your Chantry I am not an official, but she was appointed by the last Divine. I believe it is her right to speak on behalf of the Inquisition here, not mine."

There's quiet as everyone looks around at each other, whispering as everyone begins to speak to their neighbors. Creaking somewhere behind me.

I turn to face forward again, between Solas and Varric. And see the Revered Mother gripping the pedestal so hard that the wood is groaning.

I'm pretty sure Solas is holding in his smirkiness, because he looks very serious but I can see the way his eyes are trying to crinkle around the edges and I think he's enjoying this.

Varric just seems vaguely warm and sweaty.
'Warm' as in personable. 'Sweaty' as in anxious.

He's Andrastian. This whole plan must feel pretty weird to him. I'll do something nice for him when we get home-

The doors behind us get thrown open again and when I turn back, someone I should've been expecting but actually completely forgot about, walks in.

"There you are," Lord Seeker Lucius's visage says to me. And steps forward.
Chapter 92

Chapter Notes

Everything is so stressful and so much is happening...

All Unwritten updates today. 3 chapters for the price of one.

Shit shit shit.

I inhale deeply when Envy- wearing Lucius's face -walks in.

Okay so I didn't… wholly forget him. I just sort of pushed his existence to the side in my mind, because um…he was just supposed to show up and then leave. Small altercation, in which I would need to defend a Reverend Mother and it's over.

You don't punch nuns, dude. You just. You just don't. I'm not even Catholic and I hate the Chantry but monks, nuns and others of the sort are just…off-limits for punching unless they've done something really heinous. Like child molestation or murder or something.

And sure the Chantry is corrupt, but there's no telling if that woman who gets punched is actually one of the corrupt ones or if she's just frightened and confused and spreading it around.

He's getting closer to us and my body is stiffening up.

"The Herald of Andraste," he says with a grand air of contempt.

I'm a little surprised when Solas steps in front of me and Varric takes Bianca off his back.

"Lord Seeker Lucius!" Cassandra steps around them to walk up to him. "What…why are you here?"

"What I do is no concern of yours," he says while shouldering past her.

Something pulses in my left hand. It feels like anger and indignation that matches mine. Like…someone else, feeling the same as me, but also not the same as me. And the Seeker's visage…ripples, for just a second.

"Touch her again you demonic shitstain and I will rip you to pieces," I say. I hadn't even realized I'd started moving when Solas caught me with his arm.

A very dangerous demon is very close to one of my people. I don't like that. At all.

Cassandra and I do not get along. But she is still mine.

"I'm not here for her," he says as he approaches. "I'm here for you."

He unsheathes his sword and I'm pushed back behind Solas again.

"You are hereby under arrest for the impersonation of a holy figure," he says.
I groan. "I'm not impersonating anything! And even if I were, you have no authority to arrest me."

"I am the Lord Seeker! Leader of the Seekers of Truth!" he says. While approaching very slowly. Solas is still backing me up and I'm pretty sure I felt a barrier flutter up just then.

"No, you're not. You're a demon," I reply. "My mark just told me so, really unnervingly."

Solas stops and looks over his shoulder at me with wide eyes. "What?"

"It made his face ripple, and there was demon underneath," I reply. "Uh-oh. I'm high again. The magic filled me up faster than usual. Why did-"

I slurred a little and it made me realize it.

"Nonsense!" the Revered Mother declares as she steps down from the dais. "Lord Seeker Lucius is a righteous man-"

And then I see it, the moment she's going to be too close for me to save her. And he's not going to punch her.

He's got a sword in his hand.

I leap before Solas can stop me and knock her to the side just as the sword swings her direction.

"Revered Mother!" Cassandra steps between us and draws her own sword.

Lucius's clangs against hers.

"You are a Demon," she spits. "The Lord Seeker would never attack an innocent- and certainly not a Cleric of the Chantry!"

Envy begins to change, then. Into his true form. It's like...being seen for what he is and exposed maybe...forced him out of the Seeker's shape?

I know he's being forced because he's shrieking with rage the whole time.

There are other screams and noises as everyone runs away, but his voice is so gratingly horrible it carries over the din.

"I will destroy you! I will become you!" They shriek as they assume their real form.

Solas is already there, and the Revered Mother is gone, when the hell did that happen-

No. Focus. Focus on what's happening.

Of course Envy wanted me. It never made sense for him to pass by a Holy Icon in the making just because he had someone already embedded in the Chantry at the highest levels- he should've wanted more, it should've been the whole reason he showed up.

But in the Game it was just to...announce something. That the Templars weren't with the Chantry anymore and to...make some kind of spectacle.

But Envy isn't really that dramatic. Envy is a quiet, in-drawn breath when you see the guy you like kiss another girl.
The ugly feeling in your gut when someone gets an achievement you've been shooting for.

I've never really experienced it, but I know what it is and what it feels like. I've heard the stories from other people I've listened to in times of need. I know what it is and dramatic isn't it.

People who feel envious might get dramatic about it, but Envy itself?

This makes so much more sense!

"Nik," Solas's voice and his face appear in front of me and I jolt. "Can you focus, now?"

Oh shit, we are not where we were a second ago. Envy is tearing up the Chantry, everyone has pretty much left or is cowering somewhere because they couldn't get past the demon-fight and I do not remember moving.

"Sorta," I say slowly. "It's hard though."

"You were so inundated with Magic, I am shocked you were lucid enough to speak and then tackle someone out of the way of a sword swing," he says. "The Mark spoke to you again?"

"Yeah kinda. But it's the same as before, there was no voice," I say.

We'd kind of decided I must've been hallucinating or something. Solas found no evidence of consciousness in the mark.

Either that or the Spirit of Excitement is what I'd 'heard'.

But what I felt was definitely coming from the mark.

Envy shrieks with rage when Varric pins its feet to the floor.

"You should help them," I say.

"I'm staying with you," He says. "Nik, it wants you."

"I know that," I reply. "But they need healing or barriers or something. So just…I dunno, toss one over there."

He sighs but he turns and whips his staff around in an arc. A barrier flies through the air and lands over Varric. Then another one as he spins it again- toward Cassandra.

Envy's next attack bounces harmlessly off of it.

And then he's crouching next to me again and he notices me staring at him with wide eyes. "What?"

"You are such a show-off, even when you don't mean to be," I say admiringly. "There's no way in hell you aren't at least a little gay."

He makes a face and tilts his head at me. "I'm not happy at all at the moment."

"No, it's-" I flick my hands and shake my head. "Reference to a thing that doesn't exist in the same way here as back home. Fuckin' forget it, but you're totally queer somehow."

I push myself into a standing position and he steadies me. "You should stay down."
"No way in hell," I reply. "If I'm crouching, I can't get up and run as fast as if I were on my feet."

"You shouldn't be running anywhere, the magic in your system could be tearing you apart inside," he says. "We need to find a place to hide you and keep you there."

"Solas, this is a Chantry," I say matter-of-factly. "Anywhere I could hide could get ripped open by Envy if it really wanted me. We just need to end this fight fast. Before he can hurt anybody."

"We are not doing anything, you are staying here," he says.

I flip my head back on my shoulders and groan. "Why are you so bossy."

And then Envy escapes the Chantry with a loud scream and a bang of the doors and suddenly everything is a teensy bit sharper.

"Cassandra, there's people out there!" I shout as she stares out the doors, frozen in a moment of panic.

She snaps her head around at me and then back to the doors, before taking off at a full gallop.

Varric follows behind.

When I go to follow though, Solas stops me. "What are you going to do, exactly? Run out in front of it and let it kill you?"

"It doesn't want to kill me!" I turn around and snap huffily. "It wants to be me! So just…god, shut up and follow my lead!"

He actually looks stunned for a good few seconds, but honestly I don't have the wherewithal to feel sorry right now. Later, I know I'll feel bad about this, even though I can't right now. It's this really weird cognitive dissonance.

So I turn and run and break out of his hold and I can hear him shouting my name and following me but I don't stop.

And when I get out of the Chantry, the door slams behind me and when I look there's three people there holding it shut.

And one of them is really familiar.

"Need some help escapin' the chaperone, yeah?" Sera says as she leans back against the doors to keep Solas from following me.

I blink at her very slowly. "Get away from the door before he incinerates it, you'll burn."

An instant after I say that, ice ripples across the doors.

"Oh or you'll get cut by broken ice," I say. "Come on, I need your help with something."

Grabbing her hand, I pull her out of the way of the soon-to-explode door and her two friends follow us.

"What're we doin'?" she asks as I pull her along.

"You're a Jenny right?" I ask without thinking about how to explain how I know that. "Can you spread word to other Jennies to evacuate the area?"
"It's already happening," one of her friends responds. "Soon as we saw the Demon pop up in the Chantry."

"Good, then help me corral it so we can kill it," I say.
I lost sight of her for *ten seconds*. 

As I was stepping out of the Chantry, I saw her running- in the opposite direction of where Envy had obviously bolted.

Naive to think she didn't know exactly where he'd gone and precisely what she was doing, so I assumed she had a plan and ran after Envy instead.

It's come to my attention that Nik's logic…shuts off, in the presence of danger.

Or rather, that it takes a different direction. And that when she is impaired with magical intoxication…she is not exactly as impaired as I believed her to be, before.

As I rush toward the screaming masses of mostly Humans and Elves, ducking between them and surging against the current- I remember.

(...it wants to be me…) She had seemed so certain of it. And I realized that I was not the only one aside from the Seeker in the room that knew how to anticipate Spirits, Demons and magical phenomena to the degree that I can.

I had noticed a curious…tendency, that Nik has. To slow herself down so that other people can catch up. She walks you through her thoughts and explanations but it's difficult, because she has jumped to a conclusion based on evidence that she does not consciously recognize.

She may notice small marks around the edge of a windowsill after something has been stolen and come to the conclusion that the thief was not a servant because they did not use their key. Or strangely and paradoxically, that they *are* indeed a servant. A clever one, who knew suspicion would fall upon them if their key was used.

Then she will look at the rest of the available evidence. What was stolen? A holy totem made of a valuable material, perhaps? Was it religiously motivated or was the theft committed out of pure greed?

I followed her through the process of an investigation in Haven before. Nothing so horrible as murder, but…

All of it was taken incredibly seriously, from top to bottom. Every bit of evidence cataloged, every witness statement taken, every file put away in a specific place in a hidden location that no one knew of but she and her direct assistants.

She took it so seriously that Seeker Cassandra was actually impressed with her work. For someone like the Seeker to admit to admiration for someone she dislikes so intensely, is…

Nik knows how to do things, and do them efficiently. But on occasion, she will slow herself down or take herself out of the picture. Most especially if someone else wants the job or could do it as effectively as she could, albeit in a different way.

The role of a leader has never seemed to be what she wanted. She followed others everywhere.
I suppose it took until now to realize that *that* is what she believes a good leader to be. A follower who only takes the reins when she believes it necessary.

But also someone who resents other people taking *her* reins when she *doesn't* believe it necessary.

Shocking, to realize…that I had been trying to control her. Without knowing what I was doing.

She had ceded control so easily and so often, that I simply assumed when the situation were dire enough, she would listen. But when she did not, I pressed harder. Tried to explain more, tried to appeal to her good sense. Over and over, though it never worked. As if, if I tried *hard* enough, I would finally see results.

Nik was not working off of the same logic as before, so regardless, my attempts were doomed to fail. But not only because of that…because Nik had decided it was time for her to be in control and I had missed the signs. It seems to be that in times of great danger to others- she simply…decides that she is in control.

She is *responsible*. She is *culpable*. She is…*guilty*. For every person's well-being. For all their deaths. Their pain.

The trick to managing *that* is not to control her. Or attempt to reason with her. But to anticipate what she will do-

"Over here, fuck face!" Nik stands on the other end of a courtyard, facing down Envy as I approach. "Come and get me!"

There are entire alleys and corridors and streets being blocked off by carts, barrels and other things meant to slow or discourage escape.

She intends to keep it here and allow us to fight it where people have apparently already been removed from the area.

The flood I ran against is gone, and there do not seem to be any others within any of the buildings nearby.

A blonde elf stands on a roof, bow trained on Envy as it approaches Nik. There are others on the adjacent rooftops with their own bows, crossbows and staffs.

The Seeker stands behind the Demon, gasping for breath, already dripping with sweat- blood on her brow. Varric near her but apart from the fight, using one of the empty buildings as a shield as he shoots through its window.

Making a very quick decision, I step into the empty courtyard and flourish my staff.

Nik was correct about one thing, even when I attempt to hide my proficiency and power, it…it still bleeds through. And though I continue to abhor that she tried to make a choice for me, I realize the reasoning behind it was sound.

…not that I shall ever, *ever* tell her that.

If I cannot hide, it is best to make my allegiances and limits known. So that others will feel confident that they know who I am and what I believe in. What my weaknesses are.

And as I still do not believe that they will ever *truly* 'get used to it', I should do as she suggested before. Save the displays of extra power for when she is in the most danger. For when we are most
desperate.

I believe now, qualifies.

So I build a barrier. Over the entire courtyard.

It is thin and even with my power it is difficult to hold in place, when my focus is so divided between worrying over what will happen to her-

Closing my eyes, I take a deep breath, and hold the barrier.

I hear everything, there is no way to stop that, but now it is easier to filter it out and focus on my task.

If Nik needs the demon to stay here, then I will keep it here.

Because the only way to ensure that Nik does not injure or kill herself with these plans…is to join her in them. Perhaps in the future she will utilize me without using me. She may begin to tell me her plans, in detail, before something becomes an issue.

And in situations such as these, perhaps…perhaps if I simply attempt to anticipate what she needs and give it to her, that will mean her plans will not fail.

If that means putting her in direct danger, it isn't as though she would step aside otherwise.

Chapter End Notes

For anyone confused about Nik and Solas's behavior, here's a summary:

Nik's logic shuts off when she's impaired to a certain extent, but it shuts off MORE when people are in danger.

Solas can usually use logic even when Nik is high, to talk her out of certain things. He tried using logic, then tried being authoritative which she sometimes responds to when she's all wibbly but neither worked.

He wasn't just being bossy for the sake of it, he was trying out different tactics, and they failed so he moved on to the next.
Nik shouts orders at us as she leads the demon on a chase. Her heeled boots smacking the ground with force and speed as she darts around the fountain and calls out to Varric.

"Pin their feet!" she shouts.

He and other archers up on the rooftops, take her cue. I do not know who they are, but I am thankful for their presence.

A demon this powerful would be difficult to defeat on my own. With companions it is much easier. With this many archers, it may be quick and painless.

The Barrier that Solas is holding around the area surprised me. I knew the carts and wagons were there to keep the demon from escaping but the barrier would also ensure no one else could come inside. A protective measure.

It has occurred to me on occasion that mages would be most useful in the field when fighting demons, but it has only ever been a passing thought. I have never seriously considered it for more than a moment.

Having mages around powerful demons they might bind, is a terrible idea. No amount of trust would be enough. They would not be able to resist.

This show of force is daunting- but it may only be that. Mages are capable of illusions, and making themselves seem more powerful than they are may lead to their opponent thinking twice before trying them.

The arrows and bolts are loosed and the demon is pinned to the ground not only by its feet and hands but also whatever bit of flesh the arrows could penetrate- its torso is stretched here and there, gaping wounds oozing green haze.

Nik stands before it and lifts her marked hand. Frowning intensely when nothing happens. "Are you serious? Nothing!"

The demon pulls at its restraints, shrieking in anger, heedless of the pain it is no doubt causing itself.

"Nik, get out of the way!" I move to stand between she and the demon. "Your part in this is done."

"Yeah I guess, since I can't get this damn thing to work," she spits as she runs toward Solas's position.

My attention turns to the demon and as I slip into my most familiar stance for combat- I feel the world go quiet at the edges.

All that exists is myself and my quarry.

The demon wrenches itself free from the arrows and bolts, shaking them off and healing very slowly- but healing. It will be troublesome if it keeps doing that. So I move forward and hack at one arm still pinned to the ground- putting my shield between myself and its face as it lunges toward me.
The arm comes off and the demon shrieks, backpedaling and hunching in on itself like a dying spider.

"Exploding bolts, Varric!?!" Nik calls out.

Not long after, the demon is chased toward me by the explosion of a crossbow bolt just behind it. Running in a frenzy of pain and confusion, it charges and I stand firm.

When it hits my shield, I worry for a moment. These dress armor bits are not as durable as I would like- but the small shield holds under the strain of the demon's attack. I lash out with the dainty sword I was given to attend the meeting with and find with shock that it has an effect much like burning when it touches the demon's skin.

Before, I cut off the limb so quickly I didn't notice- but now I can see as I stab my sword through its' body that the blade is enchanted and the enchantment burns through the demon as if-

There is lyrium in this blade. Holding the enchantment. Not standard, very powerful- and often forbidden!

"Rrrryearrhhhhgggg!" the demon shrieks and throws me away from it.

Turning and running toward the Herald, it throws everything it has into this last mad dash for freedom and life.

She ducks behind Solas and I can see her saying something to him, but I do not know what.

The barrier around the area becomes smaller and smaller until eventually it snaps into place around Nik and Solas and the demon crashes into it.

Solas's face twists and his jaw works as if he is gritting his teeth.

And then the barrier *explodes* outward- shoving the demon away and giving him enough time to grab Nik and run.

Also giving *me* enough time to catch up to it.

It screams loudly and shrilly as I bring my sword down on its head. But then, it screams no more.

My ears ring with the absence of noise and my muscles ache from the unexpected frenzied activity. But it is over, and over much sooner than I could have hoped.

Breathing, I try to regain my energy. It was... There was a moment when everything I knew to be true was untrue. I was not a powerful and vaunted leader, a Seeker of the Chantry. I was no one and nothing and I wanted to be *something*. I wanted it so badly I was willing to do anything.

In the throes of death, many demons do more to shake your faith than they could ever have accomplished alive.

Looking to my left, I see Solas and Nik sitting upon a nearby crate. They must have come out of hiding when I slayed it.

How long ago was that?

I look down and see my sword embedded in the courtyard's cobbled stones- and a puddle of green haze slowly dissipating into the air.

No demon I have ever fought before has simply left behind smoke.

Wait.

I kneel on the ground, one hand still on my sword and pick up a shard of what looks to be…glass? Something for the demonologists in Haven.

"What is that?" Nik calls out as she comes toward me. Solas in tow.

He looks exhausted, and he must be- he is allowing Nik to tote him around by the wrist.

"The remains of the demon," I reply. "We will send it to the demonologists in Haven for study."

"Can I have a piece?" she asks and crouches down. "Solas, do you think you could figure out why my mark reacted to Envy but wouldn't do anything to them?"

He tilts his head and kneels down beside us to observe the pieces. His eyes flicker with hazy blue smoke within the usually gray area of his eye. Like a storm brewing within him. It is alarming to see, but also familiar.

Regalyan has called on the power of the Fade before to perceive things I could not. But…I asked him not to do it in front of me again. It is very unnerving.

"It reacted because the Mark is meant to control the Veil and Demons and Spirits are from beyond the Veil. But Envy was not a confused spirit, twisted into a shape it did not desire," he says. "It was a demon- who likely existed here in this world before the Breach."

"Envy?" I ask. "Is that what it was? Envy is rare and difficult to catch."

"It was," Solas says. Staring intently at the shards. Picking one up and examining it with his storming eyes. "Very old, but not very long in this world. Perhaps a few years?"

"So I couldn't help it become not a demon because it wanted to be a demon?" Nik asks.

Solas glances over at her and she flinches back a bit and then giggles.

"You…your eyes are…doin' the smoky thing."

His lips part and he turns back to the shard in his hand- the smoke dissipating from his eyes which are gray once again. "Yes…it…preferred its existence as a demon. You could not help it."

"Can't help those who don't help themselves," she replies nearly musically. A lilt in her voice that was not there before.

Solas sits straight up and stares at her.

"Yeah I know I sound completely out of it," she says. With a little quirk of her mouth before turning back to the remains of Envy. "Can we do anything for the…bits? Is this what a demon corpse looks like or is this just bits it was carrying around with it, or what?"

"Do for it?" I ask. "You cannot possibly be suggesting funeral rites."
She squints at me for a moment and I think, she will say 'no of course not'. As she usually does when someone suggests something ridiculous.

"So I should just leave you in the street like garbage when you die. No fire, no burying, no nothing? Good to know," she says.

Then stands to her full height and walks away. Leaving me bereft of all thought.

What?

Solas stares after her with furrowed brows and I ask him, "is the Mark muddling her mind?"

He turns back to me, "I am afraid the explanation is not so complex. She is simply..." His eyes flicker as if he is searching the air for answers. "She is compassionate. To everyone. Sometimes that can be a danger. But compassion for the dead?" He tilts his head and lifts his eyebrows at me. "Seems only reasonable. No matter who it is."

I want to scream, it is a demon!

But just then Nik calls out to the rooftops. "You guys can come down now, they're dead. No more demons!"
Hey! So...I don't like begging for comments.

But I badly need them. Not on Unwritten as such but for literally every other story I write. I'm not gonna be able to update on Wednesday if I can't get motivated and everything that's happening in rl right now sucks and Unwritten is the only thing I can write on rn, it seems like.

So if you could go to other stories of mine that you like and review chapters you never reviewed before and let me know what you like or dislike-- literally anything to get my brain working on those stories, it'd be much appreciated. At this rate, every week will just be 3 updates of Unwritten on saturdays and while I'm sure some of you love that, the rest of my stories are suffering as a result.

It's okay if you don't want to, aren't in the mood or whatever-- this is mostly directed at the people who feel nervous about commenting. I would literally be happy with anything right now.

"Wow this stationary is fancy," I say while flipping the invitation over and over in my hands. "The cardstock alone has gotta be the thickest, most luxurious paper I've ever seen. Not to mention the gold accents which are probably actual gold."

"Probably," Varric agrees from across the breakfast table.

"The question is, what does this Madame Vivienne want with you?" Solas asks from down the table, more near Cassandra.

That's a new, strange development.

Solas is keeping his distance, but also hurrying to attend to my every need when he thinks I'm scheming something. It is creepily supportive and I do not trust it one bit. What is his angle?

And Cassandra is oddly permissive of me and quiet lately. Even after she killed Envy and gave me an earful about running into a battle I had no business being in- it only lasted for a minute before she got fed up and quit.

Cassandra could rail at me for a solid half-hour before my emotional-spirit-bomb went off.

It feels like I broke something or did something so irrevocably terrible or-I don't know!

I don't know and that's what's really getting to me. I always know what I've done wrong. Even if sometimes I don't at first know exactly what it is- I get a hint and then I figure it out.

This time I know for sure what I did wrong. I know and I don't know. Because an emotionally fuelled outburst should've been discounted by Cassandra.

And I haven't really had a chance to hash things out with her because I was trying to give her space
"She wants what everyone else in Orlais wants," I say. "To use or destroy me for her own gain. Either way, she'd win something. But I need to go and get some stuff before we head to the Salon anyway. Cloth, accessories- I brought so many servants because I thought this kinda thing might happen. We need to look even more unified and ostentatious if we're going to a party hosted by someone in the elite."

"It says plus one," Varric says. "I can see it from way over here and it definitely says only plus one."

"Solas will go with me," I say. "He can hear more than either you or Cass could at this kind of party and people will probably mostly ignore him." Then I go over my teeth with my tongue and slide him a glance. "And I am going to doubly need you there to keep the mark from sparking out of control."

"You have not had trouble with the mark in some time. Not of that nature, at least," he says. Looking puzzled.

"Solas." I don't know how to frame this delicately so I'll just spit it out. "We're gonna be in a room with at least like a hundred dickheads who think it's cool to slap around their servants and look down on people who don't have 'noble blood' running in their veins. I'm literally gonna want to kill all of them the second I walk in."

His head tilts up, his eyes flicker off to the side and his ears flick in that way that I know means I just caught him by surprise.

Lips parting before he speaks, he takes a moment to compose himself. "Ah."

"The mark reacts to my emotions, when they're that powerful," I say. "So I need you to keep me from blowing them all up or opening rifts or whatever the fuck might happen if I get really mad."

He tilts his head to the side and swallows before darting a glance at me and then away. "I will do the best I can."

I nod and sigh. "Cassandra, I need an escort to get the stuff, come with me?"

She looks up from her plate in surprise. "You usually take Solas and Varric."

"Varric is going to be busy," I said.

He gives me a look.

"I need you to do something for me and I left instructions somewhere you'll find them after I'm gone," I say. "You absolutely must seem to be working under your own volition."

He sighs and nods. "Whatever it is, I guess I'll handle it."

I turn to look at Solas then, who's eyeing me.

He knows this is mostly a ruse- but eh. I actually do have stuff for them both to do. That's my thing. I need something- I don't make shit up, I find something I need and then utilize the people I need gone.

"My servants are...well, some of them are special and they need your help with something today,"
“I say. "Something that has to do with the Salon."

"Must you be so opaque?" Cassandra asks derisively.

"Do you want me to speak freely about all my plans in an open forum, Cassandra?" I ask. "Or would you rather my plans went off without a hitch and the Inquisition win more allies, friends and resources?"

She snorts derogatorily but gets up from her seat. "Let us go then, and get it over with. I have other things to do beside escorting you about town."

I get up and follow her, grabbing one of the pastries I'd recognize as a 'Danish' in my own world, as I go.

This isn't unusual behavior for her, so it's not really like I could garner much information on how pissed she is at me from how she acts.

By the time I've finished the Danish, we're almost to the boutique where I need to get the Fade-touched cloth I want.

It's not legally sold, of course- but they have a back room with black market clientele. Leliana found them for me. As well as five other shops in the vicinity if I need them.

"So," I say as we walk. "On a scale from 'irritable' to 'murderous'- how angry at me are you?"

Cassandra falters in her step and throws me a strange look. "What? Why- What have you done?"

She actually fully stops and turns to confront me.

I give her a look. A look that I hope communicates exactly how much 'huh?' I'm feeling.

"...I screamed at you in a fit of spirit-induced rage?" I ask.

Her face goes slack for a moment and then firms back up. "Is…that why you have been avoiding me?"

"I was giving you space, because you were obviously very angry," I say. "But then I realized too much time has passed and I can't give you anymore or it will never get resolved. So we're going to talk about it either now or whenever you feel up to it. But I had to at least start the dialogue."

She looks away and then back to me, head doing that lolling thing that people do when they're very confused and surprised. It's actually pretty surprising to see her doing it. To my knowledge, she doesn't really get that surprised or confused. She mostly just heads straight toward rage when something doesn't add up.

"I see," she says. "That was…considerate of you. But unnecessary. I have been over that since our return to Haven."

I lift both my eyebrows. "…I can respect that, but I'm confused. I haven't even apologized to you, yet."

She frowns. "Why should you apologize? You were right."

My breath leaves me in a very alarming-sounding wheeze and then I'm standing up straight and hugging myself really hard. "NOPE."
Cassandra flinches back and blinks rapidly at me. "...no?"

"Cassandra," I start with an even tone. But it wobbles as I go on. "It doesn't matter how correct my words may have been, I was not right. What I did was explode all over you. My emotions got the better of me and I was meaner and harsher than I had any reason to be."

She tilts her head and looks down. "Perhaps. But the words themselves...you thought them. They were true."

"That doesn't mean I should've said them to you," I say.

Her head lifts and she gives me a searching look. "You are never shy about telling people what you think they're doing wrong or how they are..."

"You think too much with your anger and not enough with your actual brain," I say. "That is true. But calling you names and shrieking in your face while I said it was wrong. And I have no place to tell you that kind of thing specifically because I also can't control my feelings sometimes. Any opinions I have about you are invalid because they're true of me, too."

She frowns. "Nik...you were effected by a demon."

"Spirit," I reply. "Spirit and Demon are terms for different things. Terminology is very important to me. The Spirit thought it was helping me by encouraging my emotions. It didn't know that my emotions are several times stronger than the average person's and that that's why I keep them all bottled up. I let out what's healthy to let out and in healthy ways. I know better than to let my anger get the better of me and I was still swept up in it."

"Putting aside your affection for monsters," Cassandra says and flicks her wrist. As if to shoo that discussion aside for another time and I agree. Now's not the time.

She hasn't even begun to see them as people yet. Shit, how do I find Cole now?

"What happened to you was not within your power to control," she says. "If you believe it was, you are arrogant. Even the strongest of people can be corrupted by the power of a Demon or a Spirit or whatever it is you believe you face."

"Temptation doesn't exist," I say. "Falling to the dark side, also doesn't exist. People who are tricked into doing horrible things because they hallucinate and the Demons make them...see things that aren't true- maybe they can't control themselves. But all that Spirit did to me was make it easier to access my anger."

She smooshes up her mouth like she really wants to argue, but doesn't think it's worth it. I know that look. People have been making that look at me a lot lately.

"Fine," she says. "Then I forgive you and you should see to it that it does not happen again."

"Oh it's probably gonna happen again," I say. "I'm not gonna lie to you. I'm under more stress than I've ever been under in my life. My brain is pretty much all emotional juice- marinating the meat up there." I shrug. "The only thing I can do is tightly control it about ninety percent of the time? The other ten percent is me furiously trying to put a stopper on an exploding powder keg. But it'll be different. It won't be yelling and screaming and being mean. My emotional outbursts can be like that but more often than not they're eh..."

Breathing in slowly and then letting it out again, I shake my head.
"The darkness creeps in when it's quiet," a familiar voice whispers around us. "I don't like it when it's quiet. I can talk to you, it won't be quiet."

Cassandra goes on guard, but then sort of, droops. Like she's forgotten why.

"Cole?" I whisper and turn on my heel, looking around for him. "Hey Cassandra? Can you go and ask the shopkeep if they'd be willing to supply the Inquisition with delicate materials? I'll be in there in a sec, I just wanna look at that mural over there."

I point at a painting on a nearby building.

She makes a face and looks at me. "If you take longer than five minutes, I will come back for you."

"Noted," I reply.

Stalking off toward the shop we were heading to, she shakes herself out of whatever Cole did to her. She walks tall and straight.

I will need to get in there fast to keep anything from going sideways but for the moment…

"Cole?" I call out and step close to an alleyway, slipping between buildings to wait for him.

And I look up and appreciate the mural while I do so, so I'm not a liar.

"Lies turn to ashes in my mouth," his voice whispers around me. " Why don't you just not lie? Why is it so hard?"

"I can explain that to you if you show yourself to me," I say. "I can explain a lot of things that confuse you. That make it hard for you to help people. And other things you need to know."

I feel the hair on the back of my neck stand up and smile when I turn to face him.

His hat is floppier than I remember and his hair is longer and more lank. But it's Cole. And he's finally here, with me. Safe.

An intake of breath, sharp as can be. "You know me. You know what I am."

"That's right," I say softly. "And it's okay. I even have a friend who is going to like you a lot- in fact, quite a few of my friends will like you a lot."

He glances toward the alleyway's mouth. "Not her, though."

I grimace. "Maybe not yet. She'll start to grudgingly like you eventually, though. Come back with me? Help me and my people and I'll help you?"

A pause as he considers this, searching my eyes for something. "I want to help."

Smiling, I reply, "I know."
It was a surprise to receive a gift from the illustrious Commander of the Justicar order, supposed Herald of Andraste- shortly after sending her an invitation to my salon.

But when I saw the beauty and fine craftsmanship of the dress in the package… I knew I had made the right decision.

The Inquisition, it seems, knows how to play the game.

Or so I thought before she walked in the door.

I had thought her outfit acceptable, though much more drab than I would have expected- but it was seeing her manservant in greater finery than she herself was wearing that convinced me that she does not play the game well.

The dress she sent me must have been designed by someone else. Someone I will have to acquaint myself with if this deal is to go through.

It looks as if it were made of snowflakes and starlight, the dress she sent to me. Small gaps in-between to show off my skin to its best advantage. I look like a beautiful queen of ice and the matching mask and headwear make it clear that is exactly what I am supposed to be.

A circlet of ice, charmed not to melt so long as I can keep magic flowing through it. Wrapped in white leather, nug leather- soft and beautiful, keeping my head away from the circlet itself through a very thin barrier.

The mask is connected to the circlet, and also made of ice. The inside frozen to a layer of nug leather to protect my face.

Truly, whoever it is that designed it, outdid themselves. The enchantments woven into the cloth so that it will spray small flakes of ice and snow when I move…

Even the slight edging of blue around every stitch to give it… that look of shimmering translucence…

Beautiful. A marvel. Look at what magic can do when given direction and oversight.

It is a starkly feminine piece of work, as well. Soft and conformed to the shape of my body- delicate edges of lace and an off-the-shoulder set of silken folds that make me seem smaller. Daintier.

The Herald's dress is not nearly so fine. Made of simple fade-touched fabrics, I can feel them from here. Deep blue that throws flickers of shimmering light- but you can achieve the same effect by using a specific type of fabric and cutting it into little pieces- then layering them atop one another.

It is as if she is simply showcasing how magic might make things more convenient with her own outfit, and how mine might make them more resplendent. If I had any confidence in her ability to play the game, I would assume as much. But…

"He is not my manservant," she smiles through gritted teeth.

Her Elven companion nearby seems to be smiling more genuinely, no doubt within earshot. I can
see both of them with the pane of glass that shows me what is outside but does not show those outside that I am there. A simple spell to magnify and follow them and I have a perfect view of their reactions to each other. Or more accurately, the Elf's reactions to her.

The glass wall was ordered from Serault, of course.

From my position above them in an alcove on the second floor, right near the ballroom- I can see and hear everything. The spell I am using to amplify their voices toward me, also helps with that.

"Your lover then?" the noblewoman before her simpers.

"What? No. He hates my guts at least ninety percent of the time," she replies in a flustered fashion. "He's the Inquisition's Arcane Advisor."

That reaction engenders doubt, but anyone with eyes can see she is more upset about the denigration of his character through refusal to acknowledge his title. It was announced to the room before my arrival from the third floor. I missed it, but there is no doubt in my mind that the noblewoman below, did not.

Strangely enough, the Advisor frowns and turns to regard her with something like confusion or dismay. Interesting.

"I thought they announced us," she says with a frown on her face. "If you need me to introduce you, I can do that. I forget things on occasion, too."

The noblewoman tenses at the insinuation. "I'll have you know I have a very fine memory!"

"I suppose you should be perfectly capable of remembering to address my companion by his proper title, then," she replies.

And oh, I see the curl of it there. The trap she set for the noblewoman was obvious- but executed with such patience. No matter the annoyance she is radiating, she did not yell and her face did not turn red.

Perhaps the Herald is a mite better at the game than it first appears.

The Advisor seems soothed at her expert handling of the situation and drifts further about the room, skirting the edges of the polite conversations happening around him.

Ah, I see. He is here to listen. Such a clever move.

But made by her, or someone else in her party? The person who designed my dress, perhaps?

"Well. Yes, perhaps," the noblewoman replies. "But really, a mage and an elf with power in your organization…it makes people begin to question your methods. Your morals."

"My methods are irrelevant. We're saving the world, I kinda think that's the time to come together as people and get shit done," she says. Albeit charmingly, it is still rather crass. "As for my morality, I have a very low opinion of people who think political connections and morality are the same thing. Harming or helping someone is still what it is, no matter who they are and what they own. I'm gonna mingle some more."

She abruptly turns on her heel and strides toward the opposite corner in which her Advisor is still drifting.
Keeping my focus on her, I wait for the opportune moment to appear.

And as I turn to the stairs— I catch movement and sound and turn my head to look back down into the ballroom.

She is staring up at my place above the party and she says, "I hope you enjoyed the show, Madame De Fer."

…perhaps I may have been a bit hasty in pronouncing her a bumbling incompetent at the game, altogether.

From the way her Advisor is smirking on the floor below, I gather he also knew my position. Did they share information or did they discover it separately?

That Advisor of hers— at first he seemed completely uninteresting. But I can gather now that that is something of the point of it, isn't it?

The way he weaves through the crowd, offering only a short pause and an inclination of his head toward those who shortly afterward would snub him given the chance…

Ah, now this one…this one knows how to play the game.

Perhaps he is responsible for all of this. In which case, it makes sense that she brought him along. Or rather…that he brought her, I suppose.

How delightful to see another mage using their power for the good of Thedas and yet still adhering to a strict power structure.

It gives me hope.
This is the third time since the Commander left for Orlais that there's been a complaint against the servants for 'bad behavior' or 'sassiness'.

Tossing the complaint in the trash bin, I pick up the next. Oh, the fourth.

Quickly filtering through the complaints, I end up dumping a good eight of them. So Twelve incidents in which my servants have mouthed off to the people whose spaces they've been cleaning.

The Commander would be pleased. She seemed downright *giddy* the first time she saw a servant walking down the street shouting at a man to clean up his own spilled food, she had more important things to do.

Part of the new policy I enacted while she was in the Hinterlands had to do with tiers of importance.

If there were medical messes or big messes that had to be cleaned- then you were on your own for the small, unimportant ones.

I'm only glad that human lord, Bann Teagan- I'm glad that he's left with all his people. Took place about two days ago, after the Commander had left. She reclaimed an old fortress or something for him so they didn't have to stay here.

*Eth'an* and Haven are much less crowded now.

Now if only she could find an old fortress for the *Orlesians* that have come to visit…

"Oi," my instructor and business advisor comes through the propped open door of my dorm. "Got that missive from *Somnitempus* you were wantin' - ach that's a mouthful."

"Did you read it?" I ask without asking. It's a redundant question by now.

"They want servants to live in *Somn* - their settlement, and they'd consider it even," she says.

"I can't just start sending Inquisition resources to the other villages. We're not even really allowed to operate in *Eth'an* officially…” trailing off, I think about something Nik told me when I asked what we should do if we had a solution to a problem that the Inner Circle or Council of Laymen would not allow.

We'd been discussing the recent problems the Council'd been having with more than one elf and mage on it- and how the Humans on the council felt about it.

She'd had them stripped of their power and called for another vote and told them to 'get it right this time or so help me god I'll revoke the vote and appoint someone myself'. She'd been so angry that the people had chosen men and women who could not… *adapt* to the situation at hand. People who were quick to denounce the people they disliked rather than learn to get along with them.

When I was first chosen, it was because the Commander had to go out and ask for personal opinions after two unsuccessful votes. They were general votes from the servants. And of course, they openly supported whoever they believed would be in charge.
The Commander is unhappy with that particular trend but she can do nothing to change it. So if the newly chosen Councilors don't work out- we'll have to do that again, only I'll be on the inside of it all this time.

What was it she said?

(Yeah I don't think it matters. You're not even officially Inquisition staff. You're independent contractors. You don't work for us, but with us. If you suddenly decide to walk off into the mountains, there's fuck-all they could do about that without military pressure being applied. So do what you think needs doing. If they give you lip, remind them that you work for your paycheck and so long as everything is still being cleaned that absolutely needs to be- they've got nothing to complain about. Remind them of how essential you are and how easily that could be taken away if they fuck with you in just the wrong way.)

"Alright, but I want a mage on site in Haven that can handle the work we need in case anything ever breaks down and needs a repair," I say. "Those runes are essential to keeping the people in Haven happy, but they're not that important."

Vriella chuckles, "good on you, finally growin' a pair o' brass balls. We'll work our way up to steel, next."

I allow myself a warm glow of happiness at the praise for a moment while I write up my response, but I don't allow it to show on my face.

Weeks of Wicked Grace and training under Vriella Cadash and I am…marginally more assertive now, I think.

"Here, take this to the messenger boy and I'll handle the call from Callia over in Little Haven myself," I say.

It's been days and she keeps asking after a servant to live in and look after the children with that… Orphanage mistress they have. Apparently the children keep making messes and they're not allowed to punish them for it, so they simply keep making more.

Somehow, I doubt that's the effect the Commander wished to have on the children.

"Goin' tae give the missus over there an earful?" she asks gleefully. "Wish I could be there for that. I'm still lookin' o'er that damned ledger and all the little scribble-scrabbles in it."

"I know the former Head Servant was not quite nice, but there is no need to insult his handwriting," I say. "There are so many other things you could criticize, I don't see why-oh."

She shoves the ledger in my face as I turn to go, with my letter in hand. And I see the tight, tiny writing in it.

"Oh I see," I say mournfully. "I was hoping he had at least the one redeeming quality."

Vriella thumbs her nose and rolls her eyes as she leaves. "The only redeemin' quality that man had, is that he didn't throw a fuss when he was sacked."

Arisala POV
It's been a few weeks since the Commander asked me to stay in a paid capacity. Said she could use a bodyguard for Miles. Seeing as he's the only Elven leader of a settlement around Haven and a lot of people might not like it.

Seemed like a good job. Keep the man safe, earn some coin to take back home with me when the time came to go.

Involves a lot of sitting and waiting, watching and evaluating.

"If we can manage to get a farm up and running, the Dalish here will have increased influence," I can hear Miles explaining to the Keeper as they walk the newly cleared land. "To be quite honest, we could just outsource to human farmers and everyone is going to push for that. But the Laymen's council and the Inner Circle both have to consider cost first. If you make it worth their while to trade with you over them, you'll have significant power over yourselves at the very least."

"My people have been growing things since before the fall of Elvhenan," the Keeper replies. "I am not worried about our ability to do this, or even about how much it may protect us from the Shem'len who refuse to house us. My chief concern is my Clan's health and happiness and we have not yet been given a place to settle ourselves."

"I'm giving it to you," he says. Gesturing at the land. "Most it will have to be used for a farm, of course, but there's room along the outskirts for your Aravels. And if you want, you can build actual homes here."

"Our Aravels are our homes, Da'len," she says very sharply.

"You know what I mean," he replies. "A home that will sit still and be yours. Not a house, a home."

"You seem to think sitting still is inherently superior," she replies haughtily. "Curious that you are so eager to keep yourself unfettered, if so."

He pauses in his trek beside her and then starts again to keep up. It happened in all of a moment, but it was a noticeable pause.

"Alright, you've a point," he concedes.

Tweaking the senses in order to use them to spy on people is one of the first things my mother ever taught me.

"As long as you will concede it, I will take it." The Keeper walks tall like a proud oak reaching into the sky. Unassailable by anything but the most powerful forces of nature. "My people, if given a place to settle, will live our way and grow the crops our way. If your Council and Circle people do not like it, they can- as they say, shop elsewhere."

"Sure but then who do you sell to?" he asks. "Other Dalish who are as bad off as you were?"

"We would not charge our own people if we had plenty to give and they had none to share," she replies. "Remember that difference between us and the Shem'len and honor it."

"Well that sounds fine and dandy, till they get it in their heads to chase you off and take the land back," he replies.

She sniffs and lifts her chin, "oh child. Do not be ridiculous. If they have a problem with how we grow our food and how we live our lives- we simply will not be here any longer for them to
"With all the rifts around, do you believe it's wise to strike back out?" he says. "There are countless bandits, rogue templars, rogue mages...it isn't safe."

"Safer than penned in with those who find our existence disagreeable," she replies.

Personally I agree. There's nothing quite like living in a place where everybody hates you. And nothing more dangerous.

That's why we live on the road. Going where the work takes us, settling down only for maybe a couple weeks at a time...

It's a beautiful life.

"Sure, maybe, but considering your other options, just..." he stops and flusters. "Just don't go and get yourselves killed when I'm not around."

She stops too, and turns to regard him. "We have survived this long without you, Child. We will survive a bit longer. Now come, we have much history to go over."

I wonder what they're all doing back home as I get up and follow after them.

Maybe they've found new jobs already. Maybe everyone is dead.

There's no way for me to know.
Welp. I've moved into a new place. It's a mouse-infested shithole owned by my abusive ex-stepfather but the rent is low. So.

*shrugs*

So, maybe it's not so strange to wake up and not find your resident healer hovering around you.

But when that healer fails to show up when you've already had breakfast- and then on into mid-afternoon, near lunch?

You begin to panic a little.

Or I do. I have no idea how anyone else would react. 'Is this my paranoia going completely fucking wild or is this a reasonable reaction'- my favorite game.

It's not like he's never been busy with other stuff before, right?

…I am the stuff. I am the stuff he is busy with, like almost always. He watches me, makes sure the mark isn't going haywire, makes sure I'm not running off to confront a dude with a sword…and the only time he really takes off to do other stuff is in Haven. Or when I'm asleep, maybe?

Wow, that makes me feel bad. I need to institute a time during the day in which I am going to just sit there and be safe so he can read a fucking book, or something.

"Have you seen Solas?" I ask Varric just clear out of the blue at lunch.

He glances up from his plate and actually flinches back and puts down his utensils. "Whoa, you're not feeling explode-y are you?"

Do I look that bad? When I'm anxious and paranoid I tend to turn pale and get glassy-eyed.

Hurrah for dissociation!

"I might be soon, if we don't fucking find him," I say.

It's hard to keep myself detached right now, but I am putting in the effort.

"Alright, calm down," he says and then chuckles a little like he thinks this is funny.

Am I overreacting? People usually laugh at me like that if I'm overreacting. But they also do it when I'm right and they just don't know it yet.

"He might just be out sightseeing." Varric says as he pushes out his chair and stands up.

"In a city with Chevaliers who hunt elves for sport and where there are a fuckton of Templars around?" I ask.
That pauses him for a second and his brow furrows. "You check his room?"

"I had a servant check for me, I'm not invading his space," I reply. "He's not in there."

"Alright, let's just…ask around a bit." Varric smiles reassuringly, "he's probably fine."

It took a half hour to learn that he is most definitely not fine.

A magical explosion in one of the semi-poor districts said to have been caused by some kind of malicious magical artifact was the thing that finally led us to that answer.

We recognized the description of the 'artifact'.

A staff with a strange artifact contained in a rounded ironbark cage on top. It exploded when someone tried to touch it- a mage who was interested in buying it. It was like it was rejecting them.

And when we got to the scene, I may have…lost my cool. Just a bit.

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Varric POV

"Either you tell me where you got this, or I take you back with me to Ferelden and you get to live as a contracted farmer for the rest of your life," Schemer threatens.

"Oi, oi! I jus' found it on the ground!" the hawker protests. "If it's lost, it's fair game!"

"It's not lost, the person who owns it is, so you tell me where you found it- or I will be taking your ass home with me," she says.

"Alright, alright!" he says.

She backs off him a bit- giving him room to breathe.

Honestly kind of shocked me when she backed the guy against the wall and threatened to take him back to Ferelden. Really it's…exactly the kind of threat she'd make.

Guys like this aren't built for hard labor. Not if it doesn't involve a fat paycheck.

She figured out the exact worst job he could never want to do and then used it against him. All after talking to him for maybe two minutes beforehand. Trying to weasel the answer out of him the 'nice' way.

"So tell me," she says. Crossing her arms.

I can see the moment he wants to push it. Ask for some coin. Maybe complain about his treatment- even though she hasn't actually touched him.

"And if you're thinking of gettin' wise and bargaining with us…" I take Bianca off my back and stroke her. "My little darling here is going to get acquainted with your soft spots."

"I-it was over there!" he shouts and points down the street. "Th- that alleyway over by the curio shop!"

"Varric, can you take this guy back to the hotel and put him under guard while I verify his story?"
she asks.

"Sure, and if he's lying to us…" I shrug and put Bianca back in her rightful place. "I guess we'll have a new worker."

He babbles incoherently about how it wasn't his fault and the staff was just lying there on the ground and all's fair.

I don't pay any attention. I get him into the hands of our guards, give them their instructions and then hightail it over to that alleyway.

Schemer's already poring over every inch of it. Chuckles' staff still clenched in her left hand. It's doing that…whatever it's called. That thing where it recognizes its owner? But it should only do that when Chuckles is touching it.

"Hey, it's lit up," I point out.

She glances at it distractedly and then goes back to looking over the alley. "It's the Mark, it's reacting to it."

Ah, makes sense.

Then all of a sudden she stops still and goes rigid. "Varric."

I walk up next to her and peer down the alley with her. And I see it.

There's a heavily armored body nearby. And as we approach, we see the flaming sword on it.

Schemer kneels down next to the body and checks the neck wound—comparing it to the staff's sharp end.

It's sharp and pointy at the bottom but doesn't really have a blade attached or anything. The ironbark is sharp and sturdy enough.

Then she looks at the caved-in side of his head and checks the top of the staff. That rounded cage of Ironbark that holds the artifact inside.

"He fought off some Templars," she notes in a detached way. "But they yanked away his weapon. Possibly after smiting him. He was weakened, couldn't fight back, they took him away."

"Shit, think we should check with the Lady of Iron? They might've thought he was an apostate and brought him in." Honestly it's the nicest answer to what happened here.

"If they thought he was an apostate, they would've just killed him," she says. Strangely cold now. "If they thought he was a loyalist and he said otherwise, and they assumed that meant he was an apostate— they'd have killed him. If they thought he was a random mage walking around and they didn't like it, they'd have killed him."

Ahhh, I see where she's going with this. "So someone took him because…they either know who he is or they need him for something?"

"Look at his face, Varric," she says. Voice dripping with cold malice. "He's one of Mattrin's."

Maker's balls and Ancestor's tits. Not only is that bad because we still have no idea where those Templars went after they left us- the Herald of Andraste showed mercy and compassion toward someone and they just spit on it.
Good people have turned bad over less.

End Notes

Be sure to comment or kudos!

Comments keep me motivated so any amount of words will do. And if you feel too self conscious, you can just communicate in emojis. I had a friend once, we'd have whole conversations in emoji, lmao.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!