**ICE IN HER BLOOD : The Inquisitor Theia Trevelyan Saga**

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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rating:</th>
<th>Explicit</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Archive Warning:</td>
<td>No Archive Warnings Apply, Graphic Depictions Of Violence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Category:</td>
<td>Other, F/F, Gen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fandom:</td>
<td>Dragon Age: Inquisition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationship:</td>
<td>Female Inquisitor/Josephine Montilyet</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Character:</td>
<td>Cassandra Pentaghast, Sera (Dragon Age), Vivienne (Dragon Age), Female Inquisitor (Dragon Age), Cullen Rutherford, Leliana (Dragon Age), Solas (Dragon Age), Varric Tethras, Dorian Pavus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Additional Tags:</td>
<td>Friendship</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Series:</td>
<td>Part 1 of ICE IN HER BLOOD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**ICE IN HER BLOOD : The Inquisitor Theia Trevelyan Saga**

by *veridium_bye*

**Summary**

The story of an ice-haired woman tasked with saving Thedas. Young, inexperienced, sheltered, but willing to try. Her life is one of love, friendship, mistakes, and iconic sarcasm amidst dangerous times. Her name is Theia Sofia Trevelyan, and she is already done with your bullshit.

These are stories from her world: her love story with a most exceptional Ambassador, the Inquisition's rise and fall, and the love stories that unfold around her.
“I…uh, well,” Theia cleared her throat.

They were convened around the requisition table, a makeshift meeting point for the end of the day’s excursions. Sera sat off the edge of it, hunched and casual. Cassandra stood upright with her arms crossed, yet to disarm herself or get out of her heavy armor. Vivienne, poised and thoughtful, also stood by ready and willing. Theia was in front of them all, rubbing her hand with the other absentmindedly.

“How are the rifts looking in the valley northeast of us?” Theia came back to the present, motioning towards a Scout. Her face, like all of theirs, lit by abundant candle and torch light surrounding them.

“Your Worship, there’s still some stirrings and we caught two sightings of demons, but the valley has quieted down significantly since you closed the first few,” the Scout replied.

Theia nodded, peering down at the table. “Good, we’ll keep pushing then. That will be tomorrow morning’s first task,” she asserted.

Sera watched the Inquisitor carefully, like a cute wild animal had made its way out into the clear path before her.

“I always get kicks when it’s us girlies, yea? Who knows what fun we can get hip deep stuck-in. I say we go down to the village pubs and find us some non-demony trouble. Fun trouble, right Inquisitor?” her legs swung out energetically.

“Absolutely not,” Vivienne chimed in, her hands resting on her sides.

“I agree with Vivienne. We need rest, and gallavanting into the town will hardly set the example the Inquisition is expected to,” Cassandra joined in.

Theia put her hands on her hips, her shoulders and ribs aching. “Sera, normally I would be amenable, but—”

“Oh, stick it, you’re only marchin’ after Viv’s snobby skirts and Cassandra’s boot-lickin.’ C’mon, I’m sure you are the big lovey dream for all those girls down there,” she teased, shoulders shimmying a bit out of jest.

Theia blushed self-consciously. “Sera, I don’t think that’s a good idea.”

Vivienne’s eyes showed a spark of curiosity, as did Cassandra’s now. Theia looked at them all one by one, and felt even more like climbing under a rock and hiding. Or letting the cave spiders have her, whichever was most in-reach.

“Whatzis?” Sera asked, quickly jumping forward and snatching a piece of paper tucked between Theia’s back and her belt. She hopped away from Theia’s swinging hand that tried to recover it from her instinctively.

“Sera! Stop!” Theia sounded like a frustrated older sibling more than anything.

It was a little too late, though, unless Theia saw fit to turn Sera into an iceberg. Vivienne and Cassandra watched, but didn’t want to get their hands dirty…yet.
Sera turned and held the letter to her face. “Yugggh, this thing smells like a flower’s asshole!” she commented, trying to undo the meticulous folding. Theia jumped on her and reached for it, but whereas Theia went high, Sera went low, and dodged her maneuver.

“Sera, I order you!—”

“Heh heh, this tissue paper came from Lady Josie! I knew it!” Sera declared, hopping on top of the requisition table.

Theia froze in her tracks, and her arms fell to her side loudly. “Ugh, Sera, please,” she groaned loudly.

Her eyes veered to look at Cassandra and Vivienne, who stood quietly for a moment, stone-faced. Oh great, now they must think I’m a philandering girl. There goes any and all authority for this trip. I’m never going to live this down.

Theia’s nerves were compounded when she saw Cassandra put her hand to her mouth lightly, and what looked like a grin appeared. Then, giggling.

Vivienne’s eyes rolled. “My dear, you assume much about your abilities to hide personal intrigues from us,” she said, coming forward and sitting on the corner of the table.

“Cassandra! You owe me your dinner ration!” Sera yelled, still perched on the table like a mountain top from which she would declare all of Theia’s dirty details for all of Thedas to hear.

“It seems that I do. I did not think it would be this easy to discover the truth,” Cassandra’s voice indicated the smug smile she wore.

Theia turned and began pacing. “This is ridiculous. That was a report on the diplomatic affairs from the past week. Josephine’s parchment smells like that, everyone knows it!”

“My dear, just pull the splinter out, already,” Vivienne advised.

A pause occurred, where Theia stared at everyone and vice versa, waiting for the break down.

“Here I thought an excursion with us women would be so much more pragmatic and sensible. Remind me next time that Iron Bull’s jests and Solas’ “insomnia” is EASILY the right way to go,” Theia gave up, throwing her hands in the air. Surrender, sweet, sweet, surrender as far as Sera was concerned.

“So, how she kiss? Is it all prissy and puckery or does she got a secret weapon?” Sera crouched down and made eye contact with the Inquisitor.

“We—” Theia was cut off.

“Oh, please, Sera, women like Lady Montilyet are hardly that simplistic in nature. If anything, our Inquisitor should gird her loins and prepare to be educated. A former bard is a weapon master in more ways than one might expect,” Vivienne mused, her arms folding. Ladies were ladies, and depending on who you talked to, that could mean one of a thousand different truths. Vivienne sided with the one where prisoners weren’t taken, and love was as sharp as a staff blade.

“Please, both of you, Theia is the only one that can speak from experience.” Cassandra turned, as did they all, to stare Theia down. Cassandra would be lying, though, if she said she did not wish to hear the romantic tale she was sure was awaiting being told.
Theia’s chest tightened. “I, um—”

“Don’t be ashamed, Inquisitor,” Cassandra kept at it, trying to do her best to encourage her friend. Too bad it was more of a mortification.

The suspenseful silence stifled the air as Theia thought of how she could escape this ghastly situation. The thoughts and nerves swarmed in her head and her cheeks felt like they were on fire.

“…I HAVEN’T DONE ANYTHING, OKAY?” she finally trumpeted. The subsequent silence gave way to every Scout and Camper’s eyes turning towards their area, curious. Theia growled when she felt like the interrogation had grown even bigger, and she turned away from the table reclusively.

Cassandra’s eyes widened. Vivienne looked unsurprised…unsurprisingly. Sera bit her lip, trying to hold it back, but eventually it blurted out: the dooming, unforgiving laughter.

“She….you…whats….ah, you poor…girly…” she said through her laughter, losing breath out of her lungs and causing her to gasp.

“Sera, you sound like a dying Bronto, please, maintain decorum,” Vivienne sneered, a hand motioning upwards. With a snap of her fingers, the map under Sera’s feet grew a layer of slippery ice. Sera couldn’t tell until her feet were swept out from under her, and she landed squarely on her ass.

“Viv! you bi—”

“—'Beautiful, rapturous creature, thank you for reminding me of my duty to set an example as an Inquisition ally.' Why, you are welcome, darling!” Vivienne was never one for lack of control.

Meanwhile, Cassandra’s attention was squarely on the Herald. “Your Worship, I apologize. I did not know things were so…fundamental,” she tried to walk the situation back, but the embarrassment had been done.

Theia was quiet, reeling. “No, no. You all had to pry. Now you get to deal with my dirty laundry with me.” Her voice grew vindictive, and she turned to face them, unafraid. “It’s not that…I don’t want to, or anything. It’s just…complicated.”

Vivienne’s eyes narrowed. “In what regard?”

“In…well…”

“…Oh, she means…” Cassandra said, turning to Sera.

“Simple, she don’t know how to uncork the bottle or string the bow. Pity, maybe it’s good and all that we didn’t unleash you on the pub girls,” Sera’s voice was still clever, but a touch more sympathetic.

Theia sighed. “Yes, well, consider that disaster avoided well and good.” She went and sat at the table now, and put her head in her hands as her fingers sifted through her long, light hair.

“I have no prior experiences with women. I know…basics, but, I have no clue as to how to translate them to…someone else’s…” her eyes squinted a bit as she tried to come up with a euphemism quicker than Sera could say it the brutally honest way.

“It’s a pity women are given lip service about their rights in dignities and yet encouraged so little in
actually implementing them. Men are fragile creatures. Imagine if we found one more thing they become an accessory for, besides running the Chantry, saving Ferelden, killing demons,” Vivienne observed harshly.

“Well, that is besides the point,” Cassandra tried to digress the conversation.

“I don’t need to be told what to do, I just need to get to a point where I feel comfortable doing things. It’s hardly a worldly matter worthy of Inquisition deliberation out in the middle of the desert,” Theia was beginning to close off.

“Now, listen ’ere, Inquisitor. I know you got all this shite together every day and all, but this is one problem you can’t just stone-face into gettin’ fixed. Whatchya gonna do, wander back into the Fade and ask a despair demon what’s the deal?”

“I do agree, for once, with Sera. How else can you feel advised without letting on that you are actually daft?” Vivienne’s head tilted.

“I disagree. I think it best you talk with the Lady Ambassador about your anxieties. She is not anyone to be afraid of in matters of personality.” Cassandra wanted to see her friend be happy, and feel a connection to someone who could keep her that way. Josephine was as good of a choice as anyone for that cause.

“Maker’s breath, We haven’t even kissed yet, and you want me to divulge that I don’t just know little to nothing, but that I actually do not know anything about how to…act…that way?”

“It’s sex, Inquisitor, not the Harrowing.”

“I know that well enough, Madame.”

“Well then, you were incorrect, you know one thing about it.”

“Ugh,” Theia let her head rest on the table. She was reaching her limit, and that was only if she hadn’t ran past it already.

Cassandra sat beside Theia and put a hand on her shoulder. “I meant what I said, Inquisitor. The best course of action is honesty. Lady Montilyet will appreciate your candidness, her job is to decipher countless deceptions and double-dealings.”

Sera chuckled. “Yeah, make it so raw and in front of her face all she sees is you being cute, then boom, take your shirt off.”

Vivienne and Cassandra glared at Sera, who in turn rubbed the back of her head and stopped talking.

Theia’s voice was muffled against the wood. “I don’t know why I let this conversation get this far. I’d rather let a Venatori fillet me for breakfast,” she lamented.

“Who knows what the future yet holds, my Dear. In a day you may be begging to philander into bed like a newborn deer out in the woods,” Vivienne slid off the table to stand on her two feet.

A moment passed before Theia sat upright again. “Fine, then. One final word from each of you, and then we go to bed and forget this ever happened. What would be your one sentence of advice or insight into the prospect of loving a woman? Only one sentence. No back talk, no illustrious context. That’s it. Sera, so we can rip the bandage off, you go first. Have mercy,” Theia held her breath, against her better judgement.
Sera was about to mouth off, but then she stopped herself. Memories and awkward sensations of the past filled her bones, and she felt suddenly compelled to be sincere.

“Don’t make her feel like she’s ought to be thrown out after you had her, Inquisitor. Women are a lot, but they’re not garbage,” she said, with a facial expression that was almost intimidating and forceful.

Theia’s eyebrows raised, surprised and relieved. “Very well, it was not my intention to. Vivienne?”

Vivienne sighed sweetly. “My dear, go slow, and do not expect more than you can give, for pity’s sake. Goodnight,” and with that, she turned on her hip and walked to her cot resolutely. Done and done.

Theia nodded a few times, wondering whether to be touched, or insulted. As often was the case with Madame de Fer.

Her eyes finally locked on Cassandra’s, who looked almost bashful.

“I do not consider myself well-versed in any way, my Lady. But, if I were to speak on my own experience, I’d say words are just as powerful as motions. Use that to your advantage when you feel out of your depth.”

Theia smirked. “I believe you know just how capable I am of talking myself out of a ditch, Seeker.”

Cassandra shrugged, “Yes, but you also talk yourself into them, sometimes.”

A gasp came from Theia’s throat.

“And besides,” Cassandra added, “if your bluff face is anything like it was last night, you are going to need your communication skills.” A chuckle was held back as she spoke.

“Okay, alright, we’re done here. No more roasting the Inquisitor over the camp fire. Beds, sleep, night walking, whatever you all do with your time!” Theia stood, waving her hand around, before grabbing Josephine’s letter from the table and scurrying off with it.

Sera stood next to Cassandra, and dusted off her hands. “Shite, I’m not gettin’ that oily stuff off my hands for a week.”
Chapter Summary

The Lady Inquisitor has since returned from her most recent expedition in the east. Finally having some time to herself after a tiring day playing diplomat, she has retired to her chambers for the evening. Little does she know she will have to endure one final audience that tests her ability to be brave, not in the face of demons and darkspawn, but dangers of a more emotional nature.

The mountain winds billowed against the stone walls of the Skyhold fortress on a night beaming with lucid potentiality. From her balcony, she could hear humming and stirring from the grounds: people’s conversations climaxing into jubilant yelling and teasing. They sounded so far away, as if a mountain separated the two irrevocably tied worlds.

Theia was dressed antithetically to her usual wear. The woman who couldn’t be found in anything but armor, metal and hide, muscle underneath reinforced garments…little did anyone know that when sleep drew near, Theia slept in a tunic dress as feminine as any Orlesian woman would select. Though it was simple: lilac in shade, one of her favorite colors, and almost shapeless save for the sash tied multiple rounds around her narrow waist. No sleeves, but twisted over her shoulders and joined together in the back.

This was a side she did not let just anyone see, for fear that she her youth would show and with it, her inexperience. The perils of leadership weighed on her nimble shoulders; every day she reminded herself of the seniority even her own council represented in her life. She had spent so much of her life either a recluse or a runaway, and neither circumstance credited her with heroine capabilities.

Thoughts swayed in her mind like aching branches on an old woodland oak. Luckily, she thought, no one would disturb her for the next several hours out of respect for her rest.

Theia sighed lightly and reached up over her head, untangling her hair from the select few pins keeping it up off her shoulders. One set of fingers combed through and shook it all free of its shape, and the thick waves of platinum hair fell around her angular face.

Maybe, a side of her pretended she was a Princess or a Comtesse in a beautiful castle she ruled with kindness and sweetness. No violence, murder, or duplicity, just peace. But no one could say for sure.

She returned inside her room and approached her desk, eyeing the piles of paper and her overused wax seal now dried over from the evening of dispatching couriers. The tips of her fingers rested on the flat, wooden surface, her index finger tapping pensively. These could technically wait until tomorrow morning, she thought. As if the Maker sought to curb her procrastination habit, she heard the heavy door to her chamber open.

Curious, Theia turned and eyed the top of the stairs. Whoever it was sought her late in the evening. Perhaps Dorian, slightly tipsy again, and wanting a “third party” opinion on his most recent debate topic; or maybe one of Leliana’s people, with a new scintillating message. Either way, they would meet the Inquisitor in a rare show of style and conduct, and that made her nervously grab at the shawl on her desk chair and wrap it around herself, covering her upper body from her hips upwards.
No. It was the Lady Ambassador, she first recognized with her face and hair. Josephine’s piercing eyes eagerly spotted the Inquisitor, showing a sense of benign purpose. Though, she waited to announce herself until she was at the top of the stairs. When she did, her voice wasn’t as focused and deliberate in tone as it typically was.

Theia couldn’t even notice that, she was too busy being internally gobsmacked at what the Lady was wearing. An opaque, black, long gown, presumably for sleeping in. The quintessential puffy sleeves were cut to a short length, no longer than midway on her upper arm. The front was a sleek, more contoured. The v-neck was modest, only exposing her collar bones, but what Theia couldn’t see was that the lack of plunge was made up for in the back. Good thing she didn’t get the full visage at first, probably.

Theia was looking in all the wrong places for a platonic visit from a Council member, and she snapped out of it quick enough, she thought, not to give her nerves away.

“My Lady Ambassador, um,” she anxiously snugged the shawl tightly around her, “what may I do for you?” she asked.

Josephine eyed her, intrigued at where her look had initially gone before making eye contact with her, but she was there for a reason. Reason first.

“Your worship, I came to ask a favor of you, and I apologize for it being so late in the evening,” she said. Theia couldn’t know for sure, but it almost sounded as if there was also nervousness in Lady Montilyet’s voice as well. It felt like it could become a game of “blink first,” but she didn’t underestimate Josephine’s ability to have the upper hand. Especially since Theia gave in so quickly to her pull.

“Oh, of course. Don’t worry, I wasn’t much for sleeping tonight, I—“ Theia blushed quickly at the awkwardness of her response that sounded like a half-assed innuendo she in no way intended.

“Um,” she closed her eyes and took a breath. “I meant, that, I have a lot to think about, and I wasn’t ready to let go of today, so, please feel free to voice your concerns.” Theia stepped backward until she had the desk between them.

Josephine nodded politely, trying to find the right words, and for once in her life, stalling. “I wished to inquire if, well, if the messengers had successfully sent you my letters while you were deployed out in east,” she asked. There were, indeed, nerves behind her words.

Theia gasped softly, having remembered the terrible time she had with her “fellow women” when Sera had found the note stuffed in Theia’s belt, and declared it before the entire camp. Residual embarrassment lined her cheeks, compelling her to look downward.

“Oh, of course, I…yes. Yes they did.”

“I see. I was hoping that perhaps they had been lost, since…you declined to respond.”

“I don’t know what to say, since I know it would pompous to say I was too busy to do so,” Theia answered honestly. Oh great, so now she must think I actively sought to ignore her.

Josephine’s posture sunk a bit, confirming the effect Theia had feared her words would have on her.

“My Lady, when you said you insisted we exchange letters and personal communication during your excursions, I did not get the impression that it would be so one-sided,” Josephine’s tact came into play, undoubtedly an act of self-preservation efforts on her part.

Theia looked up immediately, and shook her head. “No, I did not mean that!” an urgency in her
voice. Josephine stopped herself and watched her, surprised at the enunciation of her emotions.

“Lady Montilyet, I…” Theia stepped forward, arms falling to her sides without thinking. The shawl slid downward off of her sloping shoulders, exposing her night dress. The motion caught Josephine’s eyes, like Theia’s were before. The shoe was now on the other foot, so-to-speak.

Theia stopped herself from saying something foolish, again. Frustrated, she rubbed her face with her hands. “Forgive me, I am more tired than I thought,” she said through her palms.

Josephine had no trouble waiting. In fact, she wished to side-track for a moment.

“Inquisitor, I had no idea you carried such clothes with you. Were you intending for something else this evening? I could retire,” she said, even though next to nothing would get her back through that door. Theia looked up, and suddenly realized that her casual demeanor had betrayed her. She grasped at the shawl and pulled it back around her at once, before making eye contact.

“No, not at all. This was something old and buried underneath my things. I was wearing it because I had no other option,” she covered her ass as well as could be expected, which, was not that well. In her head she could hear Cassandra’s warning to use her mouth to talk herself out of discomfort, but it proved harder in the moment to pull off.

Josephine couldn’t help but grin. She knew from being raised with an artistic soul such as her sister what was authentic, and what was shyness. That, and her years being an elite diplomat on the national stage, but who was counting that?

“Well, for something forgotten, it sure fits and looks exquisite. If you ever wish to find a reason to wear it beyond off-time, I would encourage it,” she said confidently, her arms going to her hips. Her figure became all the more tantalizing to Theia when she let her boldness into her mannerisms.

But, at the concept of wearing more dresses and frilly things regularly, her head shook vehemently. “No, no. I think it best if it remain our little secret, actually,” her voice shaking with modesty.

“Fair enough. Anyway, I will cease writing to you so as to unburden you with more correspondences. I should have figured the capacity of which you are already expected to communicate,” she was resolute, and whereas Josephine did curate some hope in the situation, her cerebral nature was tying up loose ends quicker than the wind.

Theia went back into damage control mode. Use your words, use your words, she told herself. “Josephine, I want you to write to me. It’s just, I get so…overwhelmed.”

“Overwhelmed? With what in particular, Your Worship?”

With all the thoughts and words I could say to you but feel too insecure to try, she thought to herself. “I, er, you know…?”

Josephine eyed her. No, she really didn’t.

“Just…the…everything. The traveling, the requisition orders, trying to save the world and also be there for the townspeople and villagers. Fielding the tensions between allies when they bicker or have different ideas on how to solve a problem. It all gets to me, secretly, and sometimes I just need my evenings to decompress,” bullshit, bullshit, bullshit.

Josephine’s mouth opened, as if she were to respond with a monologue of her own, but she just
nodded and hummed an affirmative sound. “I see.”

Theia could feel her ass being singed by all the white hot lies she was pulling out of it. How could Josephine even give her the time of day when all she had to give is smoke and mirrors to protect herself? Somewhere inside her mind, she suspected the Ambassador also could detect that she was full of it, and it made her that much more disheartened.

An awkward pause filled the room, and both ladies looked away, trying to find something to salvage in this non-starter of a conversation.

“But, my Lady, I would be regretful if you stopped. I deeply enjoy your letters, even if I neglect to respond, they are most entertaining and fruitful. Plus, it’s good to know the goings-on here, and not just through a need-to-know basis. Please, if you ever find yourself needing to vent or write your thoughts down, if you find the spare energies to send them my way, I promise you they will not go unread or unappreciated,” Theia was trying her hardest to pull a hail mary when the match had already been called. She wanted to approach her, take her by the hand, hell, even get down on her knees and plead for a second chance. Like a Knight or Warrior after the heart of a well-born lady. Unfortunately, there was no room in this bloody dress for a handkerchief to offer as a token of devotion. Armor, 1, dress, 0.

Josephine thought to herself for a moment, a hand rubbing the other arm as she did so. Finally, it was chin up, direct eye contact, and an answer.

“I will, but they will lessen in frequency, as you might expect. Finding the free time to do such things is scarcely in my life as of late. You are not the only one who must manage time while also preserving a sense of inner sanctity,” Josephine approached the desk, her eyes surveying the piles of letters and paperwork that had befallen it.

“I suspect you wished to delay all this until morning. Have care, for I need these two piles dispatched as soon as possible,” she knew by handwriting, parchment color, and emblem, how to identify a paper from 20 paces. The Inquisitor’s desk was no match.

Theia managed to make a sorry grin appear on her own face, and she rubbed her shoulders against the chilly air. “As you wish, My Lady.”

Josephine watched her, before humming another affirmative sound in her throat.

“Tsk, tsk. Well, I must return to my personal chambers. If you need anything of me, well, I suppose it only fair that you have permission to approach me as I have you, tonight.” Josephine pivoted on her hip, veering towards the stairs and walking in such a way where Theia felt her heart would stop.

Take me with you, a voice inside her head hungered. It made her want to slap herself out of it.

“Theia,” Josephine said out of the blue, stopping in her tracks for one final time. The sound of her first name made the Inquisitor flinch. “You look beautiful in that dress. Perhaps you are right to not wear it out in the open. Too many would be besotted beyond productivity.” And with that, the Lady Ambassador kept going.

Theia watched the back of her neck intently. Everything about her was driving her crazy.

“Good evening, My Lady. Sleep…well…” she hesitated, but at least she got it out.

Josephine was gone as wondrously as she had arrived. When the sound of the door shut echoed up to her, Theia’s ribs released the mountains of pressure she had bottled between them.
“Stupid, daft, pompous, ugh, Maker…” she cursed under her breath, slapping down the shawl on her chair. The gust of wind it propelled made several of the papers on her desk fly up and out, scattering like her hopes and dreams for that conversation to go the complete opposite of how it ended up.

Watching the papers fall, Theia angled her head back, looking up at the ceiling with torment.

When she finally got the will to move, Theia walked over to her bed. Crouching down, she sat on the floor, legs folded under her. Quietly, she reached under her bed, on the side she normally slept, and pulled out a wooden box. Small, but not useless.

She opened the lid with her thumb. First she was greeted with the smells that Sera complained about for days after she had snatched the letter. Flowers and spices, potent but welcomed into her lungs. Her fingers strummed through the half dozen or so letters. Some were more melancholic, some joyful, others a mixture of several emotions. Either way, Theia coveted them as if they were deeds to lands and wealth beyond measure.

Holding the stack in her two hands, Theia exhaled hopelessly. “One day, My Lady, I will be woman enough to tell you the truth,” she said out loud. Her index and middle finger traced along the line of Josephine’s name, elegantly written without bleeding or stains from dripped ink. The preciseness both scared and thrilled her down to her very core.
A couple of weeks has passed since the Inquisitor’s conversation with Lady Montilyet about their personal correspondences going unreplied on Lady Trevelyan’s part. She wishes to make her truth known, but still hides behind her anxieties over what others will think. Though she approaches Lady Montilyet with her own ideas of a conversation, the topic shifts, and she ends up getting a sweet bit of advice.

How long had she been there? I’m a fool, she thought to herself, pacing in front of Josephine’s bedchamber door. Two weeks had passed since their awkward conversation in which Theia completely showed her ass and Josephine was a forgiving angel in a black dress that could murder men on sight out of rapture. That silken sheen over the top of her thigh and hip…

Theia groaned, aggravated with herself. Just knock, just do it, she said you could, certainly she’s awake, she is always at her office early.

She stopped in her tracks and stared at the door knob, a raw moment of silly courage taking hold of her backbone. Just do it.

Knock, knock, knock, knock.

The silence was overwhelming for Theia’s nerves as she tapped a foot on the stone flooring. What if she’s asleep and I woke her up? Does she sleep? What if she finally got to now but I ruined it? Shit, Maker, I’m an ass—

The door opened.

Behind it was a slightly familiar face. It was a chamber maid, pretty and sweet looking, hair neatly tied back and house dress neatly sewn. Of course Josephine would ensure her maids were well-kept and happy.

“Your Worship!” the Maid said, surprised. “What are you doing here? Is something wrong?” she asked.

Theia shook her head rapidly. “No, no. I was just seeing if the Lady Ambassador was free, I, uh, had something to discuss with her before this morning’s War Council,” wow, nice save.

The maid’s eyebrows raised, and what was once openness was covered up by modest virtue. “She is here, My Lady, but she is dressing. Can you wait or come back another time, that is, if you aren’t busy?” the maid was clearly well-trained and versed in the priorities of modesty.

Theia was about to respond, sorry she ever tried this. But, she was overruled.

“It is alright, Berenice, I am almost finished anyway. The Inquisitor clearly has some important purpose for being here.”

The maid turned back to look over her shoulder, still keeping the door 2/3 of the way closed. She then returned her gaze to the Inquisitor, and curtsied quickly. “My mistake, Your Worship, please
come in.”

Theia grinned forgivingly, nodding back at her before being ushered in. Her eyes went to the door and then to the furniture: a plush looking loveseat, a royal purple in hue, with a pink, pearlescent shade of metallic embellishment. She gazed at the bed, her cheeks instinctively warm. It all matched, as it crafted with the same woman in mind. Of course it was.

Though, in a blink of an eye, Theia caught a glimpse of Josephine’s head of hair behind screen panels. It was undone – a rare sight indeed – and its waves of cavernous black looked like they would knot around fingers and never let go; they could get lost forever trying to untangle themselves.

“Inquisitor, you sure have a way with timing,” Josephine breathed, motioning like she was putting her arms through a garment. She then reached for something on a nearby table, only her outreached hand exposed. She wrapped the fabric around her waist. A clinking sound, like that of a belt, made itself known.

“I apologize for intruding, Lady Montilyet. I hope you don’t think me inappropriate,” Theia admitted, turning to the side so as to give a semblance of privacy to the Ambassador. Though it pained her tempted eyes.

“Not in the least. It was I, after all, who gave you permission to do so. Call it even between us for unorthodox visiting practices,” she remarked as she exhaled, having sucked in her diaphragm to get the best fit of her waist belt.

Josephine emerged from the panel screens, dressed in her quintessential gown, though her gold stockings were missing. “I hope you don’t mind if we discuss whatever your matter is while I finish dressing?” this was quite suggestive for Josephine’s typical demeanor.

Theia’s mind went blank. What do I say to that? Ah, yes, I was planning for that, anyway. Josephine had a knack for putting her up against the wall.

“Uh, no, by all means. I shouldn’t expect you to stop your morning all for me,” Theia replied, turning and walking a few steps away.

Josephine smirked. “Your Worship, you have no concept of just how many people would take that as a given if you were to arrive at their personal chambers,” as she sat at the foot of her bed and reached back, pulling stocking and collecting it around her thumbs, so as to slip on her foot.

“Yes, but that does not mean—“

Theia gulped as she caught the image of Josephine’s bare leg hoist and curl itself up from her skirts. Her skin gleamed even when it felt as though there was no light source besides small windows. Dammit, dammit, dammit.

Theia cleared her throat and adjusted herself. As Josephine’s hands slid her stocking all the way to the mid-point of her thigh, she knew she had to pull herself together.

“My Lady, I wished to revisit the conversation we had a couple weeks ago, concerning your letters,” Theia managed to spit out, hands moving up the sides of her hips insecurely.

Josephine stopped her motions, looking up at the Inquisitor with curiosity, the kind of look that said I thought this had been resolved. She then reached down and slid her second stocking on the other leg. The act was no less engrossing for Theia, but it was trumped by her anxiety that she would have to keep talking.
“Go on, then” Josephine mused.

Theia’s hands played with each other in front of her, her index and thumb rubbing either side of her other palm. Her eyes flickered from various objects in the room, perhaps looking for a steady thought space.

“I feel embarrassed that we left our understanding the way I did. You deserve honesty and candor from me, after all you’ve done. Not just for me, but for the Inquisition,” she started off strong, confident-sounding, even. Maker only knew when the first crack in her voice would happen, but for now, she was going to ride it. Providing Josephine didn’t have a third leg to dress.

“Inquisitor, you hardly owe me sentimentalities, especially those you do not wish to give on your own volition,” Josephine responded, standing up and adjusting the plumes of sleeves on her arms. She was playing unimpressed, but deep down something inside of her was surprised – and a tad impressed – that the Inquisitor would be so bold.

“No, you see, that’s the entire point. I do wish to give them. I have…nothing but sentimentalities to give. They’re my best quality, really,” her heart was fluttering and she was trying to gain sympathy via self-deprecation. Maybe it would work on others, but for women like the intimidating Josephine Montilyet, Theia felt it was more useful to show confidence and take charge than hide behind modesty. Inconvenient for her as it was.

“Um. Okay. Here it goes.”

Josephine’s eyes narrowed, wanting so badly to decipher what it was boiling behind the Inquisitor’s eyes.

Theia cleared her throat, trying to feel official and in control.

“I like you, a lot. You are intelligent, and capable, and kind. I respect you deeply. You are someone to admire and at the same time, you kind of…terrify me.”

Josephine furrowed her brow, and her lips parted lightly as she was caught off guard by the end of that otherwise sweet sentence. Theia immediately felt the twinge of regret at not being able to pick her words.

“I’m sorry…again. I don’t know why I’m so bad at this,” she said honestly, rubbing her forehead and turning to look away and maybe regroup.

An unexpected giggle was heard from Josephine’s mouth. “My Lady, you skewer yourself on the sword of authenticity. Have you ever thought about developing your diplomatic persona?” Josephine inched closer to her. She had been meditating on what exactly held the Inquisitor back from assuming the mighty nature of her role, and perhaps she had found it.

“My what?” Theia responded, her gaze returning to Josephine.

The Ambassador shook her head. “As I suspected. You did not have the training or exposure I and some of the other allied women have in playing the Game, or fielding rhetorical challenges. It was one of the first lessons of my early days working for the then-Ambassador of Antiva. She was a shrewd woman, but she knew how to spin her charms. She taught me that certain circumstances do not call for us to bear ourselves completely, but to artfully play the cards we have in order to best present ourselves and our capabilities,” Josephine’s words were masterful and clever. Theia hung on every last syllable as if she found the key to a gold mine.

“I see. Well, everyone expects me to be honest. I don’t really know how to do that and also pretend
to be someone I’m not,” she spoke with a sweet vulnerability, but to Josephine, that was pretty much
the precise problem.

That made Lady Montilyet chuckle. She took hold of Theia’s hand and led her over to the loveseat,
and beckoned her to sit with her. Theia followed her like a loyal puppy, of course.

“Lady Inquisitor, you have many gifts. Some quite blunt and problematic, like that mark on your
hand. Others are more discrete, more nuanced. You, as a woman of distinction, have many more
cards to play than you take inventory of.”

“Like what, exactly?” had she really been paying this close attention to her? Pfft, of course, it’s her
job.

“When I approached you in your room and you wore that dress, you looked like a humble but
powerful Goddess. I think the men and women of the Inquisition would agree. You have the ability
to entice and lead. You do not have to be purely an eyeful, nor do you have to be utilitarian in nature.
A marriage of the two sides of you would yield the utmost productivity to our cause.” Even though
Josephine had seemed to be the dual-opposite of her friend Sister Nightingale, in that moment she
spoke with a tone just as lethal as anything that ever came out of the Spymaster’s mouth.

“Oh. But that dress was just—“

“I know what that dress was, and it was not a humble hand-me-down resigned to the back of your
drawer.”

“It was!”

“Inquisitor.”

Theia’s chest tensed and the looked at her lap, her knees apart and seat wide. She leaned over and
rested her elbows on her thighs.

“Everyone looks to me to be something bigger than I am. I can’t fail them,” she said simply. There
was the core of Lady Trevelyan’s behaviors and fears, in one somber admonition.

Josephine’s eyes softened with compassion. In Theia, she saw so much raw potential, so much
compassion and ability to create new and wonderful things. But, for the sake of her survival, she had
to rethink how she could conduct herself in these spaces where success rested on people both
witnessing her realness, and believing in the lore that surrounded her.

Josephine put her hand on Theia’s knee, an attempt to comfort and connect.

“My Lady, you could not have grown into a heroine without having the raw makings of such a
person. You can bend and break nations to your will, but you do not have to throw yourself against
the tide and stone every time to do so. You would do best to take care and have some awareness
of…alternative methods.”

Theia’s eyebrow raised a bit, the sound of that being so…tantalizing. She didn’t deny that
Josephine’s words struck a chord with her. Maybe she was right, and it was time to rethink old
strategies. Instead of adhering to an idea of what she was supposed to be, she could try being
someone she was capable of becoming.

“I will certainly contemplate this advice, Lady Ambassador. I am thankful for your congress,” she
replied softly, looking at Josephine’s face, seeing so much wonder, so much warmth. It made the tips
of her fingers hunger and tingle with interest.
Josephine couldn’t help but smile. “Good, I am elated to hear it. I was not being sarcastic about the
dress either. If you schemed enough, I’m sure you could bring the entire Hall to its knees by simply
entering the room. And that is when that mouth of yours strikes.”

The reference to mouths made Theia’s eyes flicker to Josephine’s lips, if only for a half-second.

“My Lady,” Theia said, “I hope you don’t mind me noticing, but I believe this is the first time I have
seen you with your hair down. Am I to suspect you do not always practice what you preach?”

Josephine tilted her chin. “Ah, it might just be, My Lady. I suppose the saying goes, ‘do as I say, not
as I do,’“ she said, a tone of playfulness to her.

“Rest assured, my thoughts of you have not depleted in any fashion.” Theia stood up from her seat
and turned to face Josephine, still seated. Politely, she bowed to her. “I should take up no more of
your precious alone time, Lady Montilyet. I will see you later, do take care.” She paused just to look
at her one last time.

Josephine’s eyes glimmered as they watched her. Out of nowhere, she took hold of Theia’s right
hand. Gracefully, she held the back of Theia’s hand to her lips, and let them kiss it ever-so-lightly
and discretely, an absentminded eye could almost go without seeing it at all.

“I am always at your Service, My Lady,” she said, holding her hand for half a moment more, before
letting it go.

Understandably, Theia was ready to fly out the window and be swallowed up by the Breach if it was
still there. Pity.

The same maid who had checked her at the door opened it up for her departure. She hadn’t the heart
to turn back and be cheesy, so she hastily made her exit. Though as soon as she heard the door shut
behind her, she went to the nearest wall and leaned against it for support. Maker, have mercy, she
thought to herself.

If anyone would make a jaded Andrastian pray for once, it would be that woman.
On the eve of an important diplomatic banquet at Skyhold, Lady Theia Trevelyan chooses to debut a new side of her leadership style. The choice sends heads turning, eyes staring, and mouths gaping. Everyone wants to know what she’s got planned, and when they find out, what inspired her to transform herself. Buckle up, buttercups: Theia’s a grown ass woman.

The day was winding down at Skyhold. Stirrings of dinner banquet preparation brought the Hall and surrounding structures to life. Tonight was particularly important, an enunciated moment in the week. The Inquisition would be welcoming an audience from several key nobles, who not only brought the prospect of alliance, but the funds and outfitted troops that came with it. She had been briefed in the War Council on how she would have to assume the role of a dignified figurehead tonight, and while she expected to be overcome with nerves in the hours beforehand, something had shifted.

Her friend, Cassandra noticed as well.

They stood observantly on the balcony of the Inquisitor’s chambers. Cassandra leaned over the railing, eyeing the mountain scape before them. She had already chosen her attire for the evening – as if she had a plethora of options – and was regaled in formal, though understated, armor.

“What are your thoughts going into this banquet?” the Seeker asked. Theia had hung back, leaning up against the stone wall, her face thoughtful though patient.

“I’m thinking that this will be a change of pace for me, and I hope for the Inquisition as well,” she said, pondering just what that could mean.

Cassandra peered over at her, curious. “What are you conniving?” she asked, suspiciously.

“Nothing that will jeopardize what we’ve worked for…I think,” Theia responded, stepping forward and away from the wall. She cradled her arms, softly wrapped in the velvet of her casual clothes. Her hair was tossed up in a top bun, though it would be messed with later.

“Inquisitor, I’ve sensed a shift in your attitude these past few days. Is something the matter?” Cassandra stood up and faced her friend. “You know I will be here to listen.”

Theia had a crooked smile, looking out at the horizon that was rapidly darkening before their eyes. “I have made some new decisions as to how I wish to be perceived and understood as a leader. Josephine helped me see a new way of… coping,” she explained, though her voice became a bit shy when she mentioned the Ambassador’s influence.

Cassandra’s stomach sank a bit, not out of negativity, but confusion as to just how this all came about. “Have you and the Ambassador…?” she suggested, an eyebrow raising in curiosity.

The Inquisitor shook her head. “No, not at all.” With that, she turned and walked back inside. Cassandra followed after her as she went to her desk. Theia pursed her lips, picking up some of the many documents providing information and context for tonight’s gathering. Her eyes perused,
though she had read and indulged them multiple times.

“I respect that you are exercising restraint, given the anxieties you have mentioned before,” Cassandra remarked, leaning her shoulder up against the bookshelf. “Do you suspect she reciprocates your feelings?”

“If she doesn’t, she sure has a hilarious way of displaying platonic wishes,” Theia replied, the image of Josephine’s eyes gazing up at her as she kissed her hand, debonair like a Diplomat would be written about in a romance serial.

Cassandra smirked, though her face remained stoic. “Well, then, the world is your beacon, my Lady.” It was refreshing and always welcome to hear optimism and playfulness from Cassandra. After hours of deliberations and logistical talk, it was good to simply talk as peers.

Theia nodded and set the papers down back where they were. “The sun is now completely set. I must prepare myself for tonight’s theatrics. If you’ll excuse me, friend,” she said, approaching the Seeker and placing a hand on her shoulder in friendship. The Seeker grinned, bowed her head reverently, and soon she had withdrawn from the Inquisitor’s chambers.

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The Hall was lit with warm, effervescent light and richly colored fabrics lining the floor and walls. Drapery thick and gathered together like giant, splendorous curtains. The construction efforts were not completely finished at Skyhold, but the Ambassador and constituents were able to make the Hall look like it had been inhabited for generations. Adorned with gold and bronze-colored accents, the chairs and tables were as inviting as they were lavish. Ornamental, but astere.

The fray of faces, most masked in Orlesian attire, was particularly abundant tonight. It was early in the party; the Inquisitor must enter and receive the audience of nobility before dinner was to be had. Lining the walls, familiar figures observed. Cullen stood beside Leliana, eyeing the couplets and groupings of talking mouths.

“I wonder what is keeping the Herald. She normally does not take much fanfare for these events,” Cullen remarked, holding a chalice of wine to his mouth. He took a pensive sip, not wanting to get too tipsy before the night’s affairs had been dealt with.

Leliana sighed lightly. “I would say our Inquisitor has some of her own machinations in play. I can almost sense it. Old habits and instincts tell me so,” Leliana mused, hands behind her back.

Cullen’s face grew concerned. “She isn’t going to try anything that will leave us liable, will she?” he had distaste for humoring aristocratic nonsense, and if she was going to just exasperate it, he wanted to know. “She didn’t mention any ulterior plans in her reports.”

“Of course she didn’t, that would have made it useless. You clearly have not let Lady Josephine and I rub off on you and your sensibilities, Commander, as our leader has,” she remarked, looking back at him from the cover of her hood.

Across the room, Varric was greeting the Seeker. “Seeker Cassandra, fancy meeting you here. I shouldn’t say that, because when are we not invited to these chicken pens?” Varric jested.

Cassandra made a more restrained disgusted noise. She couldn’t help herself. “Varric, do not make this more arduous for me than it already is. For both our sakes, could you pretend to fit in?” she shifted her weight from foot to foot. The Inquisitor was to enter at any moment now, and the prospect of what she had in store made her intuitively nervous.
“Rest easy, Seeker. I am wading the pool of calm waters, so what if a shark takes off my foot? Not that I need it as far as you’re concerned.”

“Varric.”

“Cassandra.” Varric nodded and made his way away from the clearly suspense-filled Seeker Pentaghast.

Farther up the Hall to the right-hand side of the Inquisitor’s throne, Josephine stood ready with her notes and traveling clipboard, though, she had it without an installed candle. The place was lit up well enough for her to see words from 20 paces out. She smiled in the direction of various faces, waving and greeting like a true veteran of the situation. From across the way, she made eye contact with Leliana, whose face was a mix of seriousness and curiosity.

Their look was short lived, for the sound of ceremonial drums hummed and send vibrations through the room. They were solemn and uncomplicated in rhythm. Cullen and Leliana’s eyes instinctively went to the humble door leading to the Inquisitor’s chambers, though nothing came of it. They felt the momentum of eyes shift to the great hall doors leading outside, as they heralded – pun unintended – a double door entrance.

Boom, boom, boom-boom, went the drums.

When the doors had fully opened, there stood one woman: the woman of the hour. Adorning her body was a onyx-black gown, the thick and lush fabric snuggly fit to her body. The neckline was off the shoulder, though structured in its hugging of her shoulders, back, and chest: just enough cleavage showing to be interesting, though not obvious. The sleeves were long, in fact they went all the way down to the floor, and laid along with the modest train. They were cut to where her forearms were exposed, and free to move and motion without them. On the bodice was silver metallic embellishment, designed with the shape of a corset in mind, lining the sides of her waist but leaving the front to be simply, elegantly black. The skirt was full, but not debilitating, and hardly went beyond the scope of her shoulders.

From the neck up, her aesthetic was equally as fiercesome. Her hair, swept back out of her face, kept in a voluminous up-do. The pale blondness of her hair shining like honey in the firelight. On her forehead rested a simple string of beads, shimmering the same hue as the silver embellishment of her gown. It was not a crown, tiara, or even lavish head piece – it almost looked as a modest halo of beaming light framing her face.

Her face shimmered along her cheekbones and her eyes were lined black. Her lips were left nude and natural, so as to emphasize attention to her piercing purple eyes from which she could be the utmost persuasive. The room rumbled into silence, and it felt as though the air almost disappeared completely from the symphony of inhalations.

There she was: serious, a standalone, a heroine in her own right. A mystery all the same.

For a moment she stood tall, eyeing the myriad of faces she could not discern from one another, except for the few of her allies she managed to see.

Cassandra was gobsmacked. She had no idea this was the trick she had up her sleeve. Her face was even more priceless when compared to Varric’s, whose smile was that of a proud man, as if he were watching a close friend or mentee who as finally aware of just how magnificent she was

Dorian had to hold back his remarkable laugh. “I do say, my best friend is about to have a body count greater than she ever could in five expeditions worth of siege,” he whispered to Vivienne,
who’s face was expressionless for the sake of politics. Though, a grin did sneak at the side of her mouth. “My Lord Dorian, ‘tis but a wonder you expect anything from her but giggles and jest,” she said defensively of this girl whom, regardless of naïve politics, had endeared her to the point of sticking up for her like an older sister.

The moment had passed for everyone to get their shit together, for the Lady Inquisitor had begun her walk to her seat. The seas of bodies parted in her way, leaving the middle path completely ready to welcome her feet. Her gown treaded heavily on the stone behind her, her hands joined together in front of her, though her shoulders were straight and back like a proper lady.

Leliana’s eyes were wide, and it took a lot to make that happen. She turned and looked at Cullen, who seemed mesmerized beyond recognition. Quietly, she elbowed him in the side, jolting him back to his senses. “The game is afoot, Commander, look alive.” She then looked back at her friend, the Lady Ambassador, with new suspicions. A perfectly tailored gown, the posture of a royal, and the smug look of such? It was either Vivienne, who wouldn’t be able to get away with it without her knowing…or someone much closer, more aware of how the Spymaster collected her intel. Someone remarkable inspired this.

At the midway point of her walk, Lady Trevelyan’s chin turned and she made eye contact with her allies, nodding slightly in their directions as much as she could with a soft, sly grin. She didn’t want to give too much of her disposition away just yet – she was holding all cards close to her chest.

Eventually, she made it up to the shallow steps that would lead to her seat. She didn’t have the bravery leftover to look at Josephine for more than a few seconds, which she used to bow her head in respect, before approaching her throne. If she had the gumption, she would have seen the look of awe in Josephine’s eyes, that even she couldn’t hide behind diplomatic walls. Sure, she had pulled a few strings, but at Lady Trevelyan’s insistence she had been uninvolved in the rest of her plans and details. She had no idea that the Inquisitor would be this inspired.

The Inquisitor, poised and professional, gathered her skirts at her sides and spun around to face her captive audience. A pin could be heard if it was dropped from the balcony. A pause, as she stood there, staring them down with an ambiguous look of wonder.

The room ebbed again with another wave of energy a she smiled, holding her open hands out in a welcoming gesture. “Ladies and Gentleman,” her voice echoed with confidence, “Thank you for indulging my air. I am pleased you have honored me with your company this evening, to attend to important matters of peace and collaboration between us, the Inquisition, and some of the most commendable names in Orlais. Welcome, friends, to this hallowed Hall. I am eager to meet my guests.” She then smoothed the back of her gown with her hands and sat at her throne, posture straight and back arched away from the chair.

The room was all but undone with wonder. Faces began to turn to each other, whisper comments, remarks, and questions, though the noise remained respectful of her presence, a feat in and of itself. It did not take long for two Inquisition troops to approach her, and, bowing, they announced their guests of honor.

“My Lady Inquisitor, allow us to introduce the Comte de Versant, his son Ser Antony Versant, and attache, Ser Cayne Longwin,” the Scout said aloud. The bodies of the other partygoers stepped back and hugged the walls so as to provide a floor for the nobles to stand and be recognized.

Three men stood regally behind the troops. At the Inquisitor’s nod, the troops disbanded to go stand along the wall as well. The Inquisitor’s three Councilors watched with varying levels of anxiety. How would she handle any curt remarks or judgments on how she entered or conducted herself? Would she be able to play the Game all the way through? Undoubtedly, the rest of her allies and
companions watched with an equal sense of nervousness.

The older man, Comte de Versant, bowed gallantly before the Inquisitor, who sat on the gilded Andrastian throne. It was a choice not true to her own feelings, but a strategic one, one which would frame her stature in the most dominant, and promising way for this specific intent.

“Lady Inquisitor, Your Worship, I am afraid you have won all negotiations by simply the manner of your presence this evening,” the Comte charmed, standing with a noble and proud posture. His son, who looked no older than 18, stood behind him, looking for shy but still serious. Their attaché stood even farther behind, and was more modestly dressed, though he looked about middle-aged and experienced in these matters.

The Inquisitor grinned and gave a nod, her seat was tilted diagonally and her posture was almost poetic, her hands resting softly on her lap. “Comte de Versant, you flatter me with your compliments. I am sure I do not wish to use up all of your time in the service of my vanity,” she responded with an air of passive playfulness.

The Comte chuckled. “You are as efficient as you are exquisite. You are also correct. I have come to negotiate an alliance between myself and your cause, one which would align you with men, coin, lands, and the ear of several smaller though capable houses who would see our bond as a rallying call to the force of peace,” the monologue was already beginning. Leliana, Cullen, and Josephine remained on edge. It always started out sweet, right before the bite.

“’Tis an honor to be able to even contemplate such an agreement, Ser. Surely such a temptation on the hearts of man would come with equally salted taste,” she navigated directly to the point, though it felt like a winding, endless road of rhetoric.

The Comte’s face grew more stoic, but the tone in his voice was still amenable. “Lady Inquisitor, the House of Versant only wishes to exalt the good in this life, and do it through modest means. I bring with me no ulterior motive or desire for selfish power. Only that you would listen with an open mind…and open heart, to my suggested recompense,” he was leading onto something daring, and Josephine could smell it. No noble admitted to modesty without counterintuitively exposing his arrogance.

The Inquisitor’s brow raised in curiosity. “Oh? And what might be your wish then, good Ser?”

A pause of suspense lingered in the room as the Comte turned and faced his son for a moment, who looked as if he had grown paler in a matter of seconds.

“My son, the heir to the fortune and holdings of the Illustrious Versant name, wishes to extend his hand in marriage to you, the Herald of Andraste, in order to honor the memory of the woman you are named for, and continue the legacy of both a legendary House, and a legendary force.”

The room went up in proverbial flame with the voices that erupted from everyone’s mouths. The open-air critique of the gesture had begun. Some had suspected as much, others gasped at the audacity to suggest a union such as this.

But it was the Inquisitor’s face, ardently striving not to break character, that was the point of focus for the Council as well as the allies in company with them. Cullen’s eyes had widened, and he felt the urge to pull a dagger and duel for the Inquisitor’s honor out of principle. Leliana held herself back, interested in how this would go, though in her mind’s eye she was calculating all they had to lose if this would turn sour. This agreement would be a considerable advancement for the Inquisition’s forces and resource capabilities. She worried that, even if Lady Trevelyan had a strong performance out the gate, that follow-through would be her downfall.
Josephine, though, was the true conflicted body to watch. In her chest, butterflies went wild, and she was fielding thoughts of jealousy, concern, and at the same time a honed focus on the logistics of the situation. She had to either come up with a diversion, out-maneuver the Comte, or decide that it all wasn’t worth it. The gears were going faster than light.

All of this complex reaction took place in the quickest of moments – they had to, for the Inquisitor’s tact rested on her ability to not be overwhelmed or out-played.

She swallowed her spit and felt the dryness of her mouth, and her palms broke a light sweat that she carefully hid.

“Comte de Versant,” she paused, managing to force a smile that could both cut through a tree and charm a cat out of its wits, “your son’s offer speaks to the dignity and integrity of both himself and his family. To recognize the value in Marriage, not only as a contract, but a relationship of equals and potential, is demonstrable of the House of Versant’s flourishing stature.”

Back in the audience, Varric nudged Cassandra. “What is she going to do? Marry a noble’s puny son for the sake of land?” he whispered, though not as quietly as he could.

Cassandra sighed under her breath. “I am not sure what she will do, only that the Council has the reinforcement power for whatever decision she makes…at least, I hope they do,” she was nervous for her comrade and friend. Forced marriage was detestable, though a mark of the society in which she lived and revered. Perhaps they were all foolish not to expect this for her, as she became a target of numerous proposals the day she became Inquisitor.

Dorian was almost entertained out of his socks. He trusted that his friend could out-wit anything and anyone, but still, to be so openly propositioned? The noble must have something up his sleeve. His eyes went to Vivienne, who was calculated in expression. She knew this game all too well, and had managed to keep herself out of company she disdained this long. She trusted the Inquisitor could do as she did and remain in power.

Leliana’s eyes narrowed, unsure of what direction this was going in, but hoping it was what she thought it was. Her face came closer to Cullen. “She is going to flip his premise back on him.”

Josephine watched Leliana mouth words to Cullen. She seemed to understand what was in the works, and it made her hold her breath for a moment.

The Inquisitor continued to speak.

“That is why it leaves me in a forlorn state of purpose, that I must respectfully decline your offer.” There went the room again, hushed whispers and bodacious talk.

The Comte’s face turned, but his son looked as though he were hiding relief. Lady Trevelyan took note.

“But, My Lady Inquisitor, surely you cannot deny the acquisition of the resources we have to give – the absence of them – would leave your forces without considerable support,” the Comte kept pushing.

That’s when Josephine made her conversational entrance. “My Lord, the Inquisition has ties and mutual relationships with many Houses and communities across Thedas. While we jubilantly wish for you to join us and them in this effort for the world, we must also understand the limits our leader has as one woman tasked with the responsibility of such,” Josephine voice was masterful, as if she had expected this all along.
“With respect to you, Lady Montilyet, I feel as though this rejection is of more personal opinion than adequate appraisal of value,” the Comte audaciously suggested. His son looked at the back of his head, visibly concerned for how far his father was willing to go.

“My Lord, do adjust your perspective with me,” The Inquisitor intervened, holding a hand out. The Comte turned once again to where she sat.

“I do not pretend to deny that this is a deeply personal choice for me,” she admitted at first. She could feel all the eyes singing into her face. She could also bet that all of her advisors were holding their breath as long and mercilessly as they could.

“You see, I had not wished to divulge this, since this circumstance was of a deep meaning to me and my journey in this life. But, you see, since I value your efforts to travel here and share congress with my people, I should be ever inclined to share,”

From way in the back, Sera leaned toward Dagna who stood at her side. “She should just set his small clothes on fire and freeze his son’s hair off, yeah? That would send him runnin,’” on the spectrum of discretion, Sera represented the end that didn’t even try to whisper. Dagna held in a laugh.

The Inquisitor continued. “Some weeks ago, I was walking and partaking in meditation in the garden, where the Chantry sisters observe prayer and chant. They grace us with their presence and uphold the resolve of all of us here. I draw from their energy and look to them for support in times of despair. This day was of particular phenomena, however, because as I was approaching the altar to Andraste, I heard a voice. A woman’s voice. It echoed like a soft wind, but it was there, I swear on the Maker’s will itself.”

Cullen looked ancy. “Is she serious? She doesn’t pray–” he whispered to Leliana, who once again quietly elbowed him in the ribs.

“She came to me and took me into her embrace, warm and forgiving. I felt a connection to the energy that had saved my life and bestowed this honor on me. It was Andraste, visiting me once more. I hadn’t the courage to talk, though I was more than willing to listen to her orders, as any humble servant would. She took hold of my hands,” the Inquisitor held them out as if she were to be shackled, “and said to me these words. “You are to depart from my path, my child. You will hold yourself chaste, and marry no one.””

The third wave of voices rung through the hall. A commandment, directly from Andraste to her Herald? Unbelievable, and they were there to hear the testimony! A site which would be written and recorded to survive the ages. A miraculous moment in time.

Just as the whispers began to take root, the Inquisitor took back control when she stood from her throne. “I know that I appear with the stature and regalia of a monarch, but that is not who I wish to be remembered as. I adorn myself with the will of the people, to represent a change for peace, a cause for justice. I only wish to serve as Andraste did, and for her to shape my purpose. Surely, Ser, you wouldn’t wish for me to sacrifice my faith as a fellow Andrastian, in order to cement an alliance of good?” She stepped forward, until she was at eye level with the Comte.

The Comte was left without words. He was up against the wall. To demand severance from the words of Andraste before a heap of Orlesian nobles would be political sudden death. Still, he desired much from the union, and what power and leverage he could stand to gain.

“Your testimony humbles me, Your Worship, but I am but one man in defense of his family’s future. Surely you can see the worth and piety in that path as well as your own,” he responded.
From behind him, he son finally spoke. His baby face framing his equally youthful voice. “Father, if I may,” he interjected.

The Comte turned and eyed his son, but he nodded generously.

“Your Worship,” the young man bowed, to which the Inquisitor nodded in return. “As much as it would captivate me beyond measure to marry you, I must attest to my inability to do so. You see, many years ago, I was betrothed to the daughter of another house, House Ginneva. There were contracts signed and agreements toasted to. While I am not lost on the responsibilities of my family, I must also address the standard for integrity you have most kindly observed in us. To break that agreement would contradict your compliments.”

The Inquisitor’s spine tingled with shock. What a brave man to diverge from the wishes of his father, who obviously did, in fact, have self-centered goals for himself.

“That is a commendable choice, Ser. Please know you have my full support in your endeavor,” the Inquisitor responded.

“But, Your Worship—“

“Comte de Versant, my Lord, are you suggesting you wish to stand by your choice to break contract with another Noble House, creating a liability for the Inquisition which would have to deal with the consequences of her choice, thus disqualifying any and all benefits you or the Inquisition would stand to gain from an alliance built on the presumption of honor?” Lady Josephine’s voiced diced through the air like a butcher’s carving knife.

The Comte looked over the Inquisitor’s shoulder at the Lady Ambassador, who’s eyes looked as if they were capable of singing his own.

A pause of reflection.

“No, My Lady, I do not.” He turned and faced the Inquisitor, who’s polite expression played on the contrast to Josephine’s ferocity. A good cop, bad cop pair for the ages.

“My dear Comte, there is much to relish in the event of an alliance between us beyond the mere desires of two bodies, flesh and blood. A righteous cause, one which mends the past mistakes of our land, and imagines a brighter future for those who need it most. You have one of the most powerful women in Thedas imploring you, to make good on your conscience as best as any man of your stature and aplomb can do. All of Thedas looks to you,” she schmoozed like a siren.

The Comte exhaled sharply, turning to look one last time to his son, before returning his gaze to the Inquisitor, eyes defeated an framed by a shining, metallic mask.

“Your words move me, Your Worship.”

He turned and, like a true enjoyer of fine taste, took hold of a chalice that was on the nearest banquet table. Lucky for him, it was full of wine. He held it out in the air, and looked at the Inquisitor, a smile forming on his lips.

“The House of Versant dedicates its might and vigor to the forces of the Inquisition! To peace! To Andraste!” A fray of hands went up, chalices within them all, as the mood of the room swooped into one of merry happiness.

From somewhere in the back, clapping began. Dorian, rigorous and thoroughly entertained, spurred the pandemonium.
The Inquisitor smiled broadly, and bowed her head multiple times in the direction of her clapping, jovial crowd. As the noise started to wane, she took hold of a chalice herself that was specifically handed to her by a servant, and she held it up just so. “To the Inquisition!” she exclaimed, and took a sip, as did everyone who had a pulse.

The audience had been dismissed and now the banquest feast had been in full swing. Mingling and conversing were in full effect. She had greeted and small-talked with too many people to count, and their personas started to bleed into one another. Thoughtfully, she ensured she could at least greet all of her allies and her advisors, touching base even if for a second.

“My darling, you are a marvel that makes this castle look like a wooden barn shelter,” Vivienne said to her as she charismatically kissed her cheek in greeting. Lady Trevelyan laughed softly in response, but was quickly taken hold of by Dorian, who hugged her from behind.

“My Lady,” he joked, “I was wondering if you could tell me where I may find the Herald of Andraste? I can’t seem to find her, I typically notice her via the lack of barren skin and washed hair!” he clearly had gotten into some wine.

The Inquisitor laughed some more, but was forced for the sake of propriety to break from his hold. “My dear Lord Dorian, perhaps she has fallen down a well and may yet be in for a bath after all!”

Dorian laughed aloud some more. “Or, maybe Ill find her ten feet up Andraste’s skirts!”

Vivienne glared with a look of “would you keep your voice low, you philandering ass.”

Lady Trevelyan quieted down, eyes shifting to ensure no one of vital important heard him, before whispering: “I always did fancy a Goddess under her small clothes…”

“My dear, I have trained you well. Be off, go crumble empires down to their foundations, and then burn that down, too,” Dorian was as giddy as a goad in an elfroot basket.

Another couple of hours had passed and the dinner, along with the candlelight, was beginning to dim. The Lady Inquisitor was set to retire shortly. She made her way towards the end with her bed chamber door, and was flanked by Sister Nightingale as she did so.

“My Lady, that was quite a show you performed for us. Perhaps my promise to train you in the ways of a Bard are no longer necessary,” she said warmly, linking arms with her so as to display a close bond, an infallible one.

“My dear Leliana, you warm my heart beyond recovery. Thank you, for everything you do,” Lady Theia was beaming with triumph.

“Tell me, Your Worship, the origins of your inspiration? Perhaps we may bottle it up and commodify it,” Leliana was well-meaning, but she was also swimming for details. An influence that could so sharply change the course of the Inquisitor’s behavior must be either honed in on, or defeated for safety’s sake.

“I thought of this on my own time, Leliana, I’m afraid you mustn’t bottle me up, though.”

“Oh, you’re being too simple-minded. Surely there was someone or something that caught your eye.”
Suddenly it made sense. After she spoke, she caught the glimmer in Lady Trevelyan’s eyes as she held her chalice to her lips, eyeing the direction of Lady Josephine absent-mindedly. Leliana watched her as she snapped out of it, returning to the conversation. But, the secret had been told.

“Leliana, I have all of you here to influence me. Surely it was supposed to go into effect some time,” Lady Inquisitor was divulging nothing, and everything at the same time.

“My Lady, you are astute. I will leave you to your plans. Good evening,” Leliana made off like a cat with a mouse.

—

Now, really, it was time to retire. Bowing and nodding, she made her final descent towards the door, when a voice stopped her dead in her tracks.

“My Lady, you are truly a tour de force,” Josephine approached her, giving her the once over but looking like an approving friend while doing it. For the vying eyes, surely.

Lady Trevelyan turned and grinned. “We both know who I have to thank for the momentum,” she said head tilting. “Thoughts and criticisms on the show?”

“I will save them for tomorrow. You deserve to relish your victory in the ring.”

“Ah, I see. Thank you. I will look forward to tomorrow’s discourse then. Do not spare me of any harshness.”

“I never do, My Lady.”

Quietly, Lady Trevelyan came closer to Josephine, and took hold of her hand almost like Josephine had back in her room so many days prior. She held it with both of her hands, cupping it like she was saying goodbye to a dear friend. Her smile was opaque in its sentiment.

A moment, and then she had let go, and was through the door and gone to bed.

Josephine watched her go, and turned away from the groups of people in order to investigate the lingering touch. It was a small paper, folded tightly, small enough to go unseen when exchanged in close hands.

She bit her lip ever-so-slightly. Too many eyes to unfold it here. She discretely exited to through the door leading to Vivienne’s balcony room, and hid behind it for just a moment. Hurriedly, she unfolded the paper, which had on it written only this:

“Personal meeting needed. My chambers. 6 hours pass.”

A meeting, 6 hours from now, in her room. The Lady Ambassador couldn’t arrange this differently, nor did she want to. Her heart fluttered, though she did not let herself get ahead of her own logic.

Instead, her mind’s eye recreated the vision that laid out before her when those doors opened to reveal a woman after her own heart.
Chapter Summary

Lady Theia Trevelyan awaits a visit from the woman who has evaded her charms, but the consequences of her diplomatic persona remind her that business is never done for the Inquisitor. While many things come to a head in her life, she must also stand face-to-face with what endures as well. A night to remember, in many ways than just one.

*LIGHT NSFW*

It felt as though a thousand pounds of stone and mortar had been lifted from her decorated chest when Lady Theia Trevelyan made her way up her stairs. Her heavy, illustrious gown replaced the weight, though. It should be noted that, for all its cumbersome fabric, Theia felt like a Queen with it on. When she finally arrived at the middle of her room, she was quiet, still. Then, putting her hand to her mouth, she cracked a smile, fiendish as if she were a child who got away with stealing cookies from the kitchen. A soft, innocent giggle erupted from between her teeth.

She had done it, and now, she could be the leader she always had within her.

Joyfully, she went to the bed and jumped, falling on her back and bouncing when she landed. Still giggling, she looked up at the ceiling, feeling boundless and unstoppable. Surely she would have to deal with many questions and smart comments from everyone, but that was tomorrow, and she was victorious.

A few moments passed and her giggles and joy gave way to contented fatigue. She heard the door to her chamber open. A maid had entered, presumably to help her with her gown. She had been unused to such rituals; this was the first time since she was a young girl and un-awakened to her magic, that she had anyone help her with her garments.

“Welcome, and thank you,” Theia greeted, sliding off the bed and walking towards her tall mirror. Turning towards it, she assumed the position as the Maid greeted her with a bow and made her way to her back, hands getting to work on the strings binding her body into the gown. Theia’s chest and waist ebbed and flowed with the momentum of the Maid’s hands.

“My Lady, if I may say so, you caused a stir in the Kitchen and servant’s quarters tonight. They are saying you are a Goddess, that you floated into the room like a spirit of goodness,” the Maid’s soft voice was like a dove.

Theia smirked, though the air was pushed from her lungs by a soft yank of the corset untangling itself. “I am nothing like that, Miss. I simply played with tools I was given. I don’t want anyone working for me to think me above and beyond reproach,” Theia replied with humbleness and sweetness.

The Maid had made it through the last row of corset webbing, and was shimmying the first layer off and downward towards the floor for the Inquisitor to step out of it. “My Lady, you’ve made all the daughters of the Inquisition forces have something new to daydream about becoming one day. I think that is hardly something to dismiss,” the Maid could scarcely be a more than a few years older than the Inquisitor herself, though she spoke with a wisdom and warmth beyond both their ages. She
held out her hand for Theia to take hold of as she stepped out from the pile of gown on the floor, before gathering it and setting it carefully on a nearby chair.

Now, for the second layer of structural support garments, attached around her hips and bustling her chest and ribs.

“What is your name, Miss?” Theia asked, feeling relieved, like her body was allowed to expand like a sponge into its original shape.

“My name is Corsica. My family is from a small village northeast of here, in Fereldan. I came here following my Husband, who enlisted into the troops,” she said modestly, pulling the second layer over the Inquisitor’s head.

“And your husband?” Theia asked.

“He was stationed in the Approach, at the Griffon Wing’s Keep. I received a letter from him last week, he was well. I hope he is now,” Corsica let more of her softer side show. Now all that remained for her to undo was the muslin that was lightly tied around Theia’s body. She loosened the stop of its bodice and let it fall to the floor, revealing Theia’s nakedness underneath.

Theia eyed herself shyly. It was different when she was a child, being dressed and undressed like this. The ceremony felt more vulnerable.

“What sleeping garments would you like, Your Worship?” The Maid turned away and went towards the Theia’s dresser.

“Oh, um, probably the deep blue dress. It’s thin, silken, with a plunging neckline,” Theia felt self-conscious in saying she wished to wear something so revealing. She still awaited Josephine if she would take her note and come see her in 6 hours. Perhaps she could get away with the premise that it was comfortable to slumber in. But, whatever Corsica’s thoughts were, she hid them demurely.

“As you wish,” Corsica said, opening a drawer and sifting through until she found it. Untangling it and holding it out in front of her, she returned to the Inquisitor’s side. She then gathered it between her hands, preparing to slip it over Theia’s head. Theia bowed and slipped herself through the hole quietly, and helped her adjust it so it lay just right on her body.

“Perfect, thank you,” Theia replied, gazing at herself in the mirror again, now more comfortable in her skin with a layer of clothing on it.

“Do you wish me to help undo your hair and clean your face?” Corsica asked, hands together in front of her dutifully. To this, Theia shook her head in a friendly fashion.

“That won’t be necessary. I can surely do one thing competently,” she joked.

Corsica grinned, and curtsied one more. She took the gown into her arms and folded it around her forearms. “Alright, My Lady, then if it is alright with you, I will retire.”

Theia nodded affirmatively and reached for one of her earrings so as to start de-embellishing herself more.

“My Lady,” she heard Corsica whisper as she approached her, to where her mouth could reach her ear. “That man that came with the Comte de Versant and his son. He disappeared after the banquet began. He is not in their quarters and seems to have done so on purpose. Sister Nightingale wished me to tell you, along with the assurance that people are looking for him actively,” her hushed whisper was almost silence, as if someone was watching and she did not wish to let them know.
Theia’s neck stiffened, though her face remained expressionless. She held the earring in her hand, thumb rubbing the stone as she processed these details. Then, as if she had been told an endearing secret, she took hold of Corsica’s wrist and rubbed it reassuringly. “Thank you for your assistance, Lady Corsica. I bid you goodnight.”

Theia lounged on her bed, laying on her side as she eyed the dial. Five hours and some more had passed. Soon, hopefully, Josephine would come. Though with the added knowledge of the attache’s gone missing, she wondered just how safe it was to have high-ranking people sneaking through Skyhold alone. Perhaps she should go herself, and head her off in her journey. But then, she thought, perhaps the man’s whereabouts were no big deal. Perhaps he had gotten drunk at the pub and passed out in some dank corner. But then, why would it take this long to find him? Unless, of course, he did not mean to be discovered.

Theia rose from her bed and stepped out towards the fire. Over her shoulder, she felt the open space of the second-story attic floor to her bedchambers, and the stone façade that lined its flooring. It was only accessible through the door beside her bed, which led to the small room with a casket of wine and some herbs for burning incense. It was hardly a labyrinth, but the wood up there was old and noisy. If someone sought to plant themselves there, they would have to lay still for hours. Theia didn’t feel the presence of anyone there.

So many thoughts, so many curious thoughts. Theia’s mind reimagined the audience in the banquet hall. She pictured the man, quite, though seemingly in-the-know about something. For an attache he was pretty useless. His boots – thick leather, and an even thicker heel, like that of a hunter – told a different story as to his talents.

Two knocks rang from the downstairs door. They were discrete, but their vibrations were felt by Theia’s feet. Her deep thoughts disappeared, and instead the butterflies in her stomach took hold. For this moment, she would have to trust Leliana’s people to find their man.

She seemingly snuck down the stairs and opened the door. And, exquisitely, there she was. Lady Josephine had also dressed down for the remainder of the long night. Her night dress was pearlescent white, with an empire waistline that gave way to a shapeless bodice and skirt down to the floor and then some. Although, the lack of shape was a deceptive play on modesty, for as she stepped forward, the upper thigh-high slit let itself be known.

Theia eyed her with a naïve kind of hopefulness as she closed the door behind them. Josephine didn’t say a word at first, only keeping unapologetically committed eye contact with the Lady Inquisitor. It was Theia who would speak first.

“Josephine, I had hoped you would come,” she said in a low tone, before beckoning her like a noble hostess up the stairs with her. Josephine followed, nerves dancing up and down her spine and shoulders. She looked beautiful, pleased with herself, confident. The Lady that had been hiding underneath so much fear and pressure...well, that pressure had given life to a beautiful and strong gem.

“I must admit, Your Worship, I am curious as to your premise for tonight's meeting,” Josephine played, and played well. “I had thought we agreed to save a debrief until tomorrow. You cannot be that hungry for my criticisms,” she mused, walking further into the center of the room, before pivoting on her hip, turning to look back to Theia.

Theia grinned coyly at first, following the Ambassador, but stopping to lean her hip on the back of
the couch facing the fireplace. “It is never too soon for honesty, Lady Montilyet.”

“I know, your dress speaks volumes for how…transparent, you wish to be,” Josephine bit back. The flirtation sent a shiver up Theia’s back, one she hid for the sake of her ego.

So, when Lady Trevelyan’s posture straightened, to the point where her back arched in that certain way, like the way it did when she sat on her throne, it made Josephine almost driven wild. What a game of facades this had become.

“Lady Montilyet, you divert the conversation like a master. Or perhaps a siren,” Theia remarked, eyeing the fire flickering all over richly-colored wood. The light hitting her features, illuminating along the lines of her bold bone structure, was captivating to Josephine. Perhaps captivating to everyone, and she was simply one of many eyes that hungered for the artistry of the Inquisitor’s being.

“My Lady, I feel as though my remarks are right on target with where you wish this to go, if I may suggest so boldly,” Josephine responded, stepping closer to where she was. Theia watched her from the periphery of her gaze, expecting her to stop her approach at some point…but she didn’t. Then, as she felt the contact between her lap and Josephine’s thighs, her heart stopped beating with anticipation and the same time, riled with intrepidation.

So, when Josephine reached a hand back, and without so much as a word undoing her hair from its tousled bun, and using the same hand as she traced her fingers lightly on the line of Theia’s cheekbone, down the side of her jaw, to her neckline, Theia was coming undone faster than the corset to her gown did.

At the feel of her fingers, Theia rolled her eyes closed, chin lowering to look away bashfully. A hungry, shallow breath released from her parted lips. She felt the arrival of Josephine’s hot breath on her skin as her lips closed in on Theia’s cheek. Josephine had a sly grin on her face as she did so, and it lingered even when her lips sunk into place on Theia’s soft skin.

“Josephine…” Theia breathed low, eyes flickering open. When Josephine pulled back to look into her eyes, she let out a small gasp. For there they were, dancing and flickering, Theia’s infamous purple eyes. Though, their color was emboldened, pastel shades of purple intermingling with deep, royal hues like that of her furniture and garments from Antiva. It looked as though the electric powers the Inquisitor wielded were kept in the reservoir of her irises themselves.

Theia gazed back at her, feeling the scintillation of energy act like a current behind her eyes. It did not distort her vision as much as people would think, though it made colors more bold, lines blurred, like the world became an oil painting of colors that were as alive as they were. With this vision, Josephine was all the more irresistible, and all the more intimidating.

Josephine wondered if she was uncomfortable, and took a step back. Though, she was stopped halfway through by an eager hand which went to the back of her waist, holding her there, still.

“I’m alright, it happens,” Theia said, blinking for a few seconds. The color in her eyes calmed into the more familiar shade they had always been. “I never quite learned how to control some of the aspects of my abilities. It’s not dangerous…well, to anyone I do not wish to harm. It’s like a special kind of mannerism,” Theia explained. She hoped Josephine wouldn’t come all this way, and dare this much, just to be turned off by a Mage’s quirks. Though, she wouldn’t blame her.

“That…” Josephine whispered, a smile appearing on her lips, “is the most enrapturing thing I have ever seen.”
At that reaction, Theia blushed, and smiled back.

"Josephine, I cannot tell you how much I have wanted this, but, I must be honest with you," she said, taking hold of Josephine’s hand that had rested on her shoulder. Kindly, she held it between both her hands, like she did in the banquet hall, resting them on her lap. “I am hesitant to embark on something physical, since, I have no real experience in such…behaviors. I had secret flirtations in the Circle, but, nothing ever like this. No one like you…” the “you” at the end breathed like a whistling whisper off of her tongue as she gazed up at the beautiful woman who seemed to unfold her soul before her.

Josephine listened with compassion and warmth emanating from her body in spades. It meant so much to her to see this woman who could level rooms of snarky nobles be so vulnerable with her. She knew she was capable of so much – literally and rhetorically – and to have her open herself up like she was just one well-meaning woman…priceless. Addictive.

“Theia,” Josephine said her first name, for the first time. The framing of her thick, dark, wavy hair around her face added to her authenticity. “You put on such a good show. I do not wish for you to believe I only want your persona, and not your real, true self. I want all of it, but first and foremost, I want your sincerity.” Josephine had chewed on the thought for days: what if the Inquisitor thought she only liked her when she pretended to be someone infallible and gloriously charming? She had seen those qualities already. She didn’t just feel attracted to who she could be – she was attracted to who she already was.

“Then, you do not mind that I’m a little – well, considerably – wet behind the ears?” Theia asked, trying to add a side of humor to break the embarrassment she was fending off inside herself.

Josephine giggled softly at the adage she used. Then, she nipped the casualty in the bud. Reaching a wandering hand up the side of Theia’s dress, letting the gliding silk crinkle and release under her touch as she made her way to the one of the shoulder straps, with the aim of letting it slip off her shoulder. “As long as that is not the only part of you that is capable of being so.”

Wet.

Theia’s face heated up with excitement. This supernaturally phenomenal woman was A-okay with her not having experience worth a damn to bring to the table. She wanted to taunt any and all men in Thedas with her luck. But no, don’t be so juvenile, she told herself. Just be present, be yourself, don’t screw this up, for the life of you!

“Theia, you’re thinking too much,” Josephine said, as if she could listen in on Theia’s mind. Truthfully, it was the look in her eyes that gave it all away.

“Fine, then, make my mind go quiet,” Theia teased, the hand she had resting on Josephine’s waist before went back to the spot it had found, and pulled her in. She sat more on the back of the couch, and spread her legs to make room for the roundness of Josephine’s hips. Josephine came willingly – no, exuberantly – along for the ride. She rested both her hands on Theia’s chest, lips nearing hers with a longing to taste.

When Josephine felt Theia’s hand find the slit of her dress, and her slightly cold palm feel up the side of her hips and up to her waist, pulling some of the fabric up with it as it took its place just under her shoulder blade, she knew it was a go.

Their lips collided like a reunion after a battle. First, closed and quiet, and then Theia parted her lips, desiring more, so much more. Josephine followed suit, and their necks and jawlines intermingled together as their kiss became ever-passionate, ever-rhythmic. Theia had wanted to do this since she
first inhaled the smell of flowers and spices that flowed from her as she would walk past. First as if she were a curious teenager, and then eventually as a captivated woman who hungered for the carnal knowledge of another. And now they were here.

Their eyes closed, their bodies enmeshed together, silk-on-silk, flesh-on-flesh.

A gentle moan came from Josephine’s throat as her arms wrapped around Theia’s neck. There wasn’t an inch of either of them that wasn’t up against the other.

Theia felt her grip on her tighten, and her legs instinctively wrapped around Josephine’s waist for leverage. The warmth of the fire made its home on her back. They could do this all night and she would be satisfied beyond measure. Maker only knew where the hours would lead, though.

Then.

Crick.

Theia’s left eye shot open like that of a disturbed animal out in its territory, territory which had been trespassed upon. Her grip on Josephine’s waist now tightened out of protectiveness, a jolt in energy that Josephine felt and reacted to. She opened her eyes and pulled her lips just a centimeter off of hers, brow furrowed in alarm. Theia’s eyes were dancing purple again, like lightning. Although, this time, the were the center of a face of anger and alarm.

A growl loomed in Theia’s throat, still bracing Josephine against her. Quickly, a hand went up to the between Josephine’s shoulder blades as if she were to dip her in a dance. But, she wasn’t being dipped like that. As quick as, well, lightning, Theia had pulled her over her side and over the back of the couch. Left shoulder first, Josephine fell onto the couch seat cushion. She gasped in shock, but had no time to ask for answers.

“You disgusting pig of a man!” Theia growled, stepping away from the couch, hands at her sides. Quickly, the erupted with purple static that mirrored the shades in her eyes.

“Theia, wh—“

A dagger came flying, blurred as it spun directly for Theia’s chest.

As soon as she felt the momentum in the air it caused, Theia shot her hands up to chest-level. The lightning current between her palms reached out and extended limbs of lightning strands around the dagger, paralyzing it mid-air. It still spun, but at a much slower pace, and suspended.”

She watched it for a second, before looking back up at the attic level. Her eyes burned with color. “Cheap, cowardice, thuggish,” she growled some more.

Josephine sat up, though not straight so as to expose herself to the apparent dagger fire that was coming from the attic.

“Theia waved her hands in opposite directional circles, as if she were shoving the dagger away. It did so, but pointed in the intruder’s direction, and it shot off just as fast as it had came. It met no human target, just the wall, but had landed within inches of the man’s head.

“Shall we have another audience greeting, Ser?” Theia’s voice roared like a lion cornered. She held her palms out flat, and the lightning disappeared, replaced with frost.

“GaAHHH!” a deep voice cried out.
A trick learned from the Circle, but emphasized by learning from Vivienne.

Theia wielded her arms above her head, and they were finally able to see the body of the man who had managed to hide so well until he obviously became too tempted for his wits.

Down went her arms, and his bodyweight slammed against the ground. Then, dragging, as Theia approached the door to the attic ladder. One more drop, a heavy fall onto stone floor, with a cry out in pain.

“Theia, what are you going to do?” Josephine asked nervously, now resting on her knees on the couch, hands gripping the arm rest.

One of Theia’s hands stopped frosting, and she rotated its wrist. The door opened with its movement. There, behind it, was a man being held up, only the tips of his toes making contact with the ground. His chest and arms were frosting as her hand was. He didn’t move, his face reactionless, though his eyes were angry and defensive.

“Ser Longwin, what a surprise.” Theia greeted. Waving her fingers towards herself, as if she were telling a child to come along now, he came forward towards her. He was as frozen as a sparring dummy out in the field.

“My Spymaster’s men have been looking all over for you. They had no idea you desired different sleeping accommodations. Surely if you had expressed yourself, we could have made satisfactory plans,” Theia had her persona back on, though it was emboldened by a fierce protectiveness of herself, but primarily Josephine. Her eyes still shone with power.

“Oh, my mistake, how rude of me! I should let you explain yourself. How does Vivienne do this again? Ah, now I remember.” With her free hand, she snapped her fingers assertively. With them, the half-frozen ice around his mouth broke.

“Y-y-you…t-t-trifling….m-m-m-age…” he shivered, giving her the answer she so aggressively dared him to give.

Josephine stood now at her feet, thinking they were out of the preeminent danger for now, as long as the man remained a human popsicle.

“Theia, you knew about him?” she asked, walking around the perimeter of the couch and arriving at her side. She did not doubt that she would be safe at the side of the woman who acted like a lightning rod.

“I was warned about a missing attache in the grounds. I wondered if he was ambitious, but I did not search for him myself. Something told me that if he did dare to come for me he would make himself known just in time for me to have some…fun,” Theia said with a tone of seriousness now. Her irises had calmed.

“Then, do not do any more harm. I will fetch one of Leliana’s people at once, they should be no farther than outside the door to the hall,” Josephine said, moving for the stairs.

“W-w-w-hat a wh-wh-whore you—“

“That is enough!” Theia said sharply, a wave of her fingers re-sealing his mouth in ice. “You are a guest in my hold.”

Josephine stopped, eyeing the man, feeling a pang of fury develop within her own self now. But, reason pervaded, and she left to fetch someone.
They stood concerned as a triad of women, Theia, Josephine, and Leliana, by the fire of Theia’s room. Theia held a chalice of wine in her hand, her arm bent upwards towards her shoulder as she listened to Sister Nightingale.

“Once the man fully thaws out, we can know all of the intentions he had for tonight,” Leliana said.

“He could not have honestly believed he could assassinate the Inquisitor. Not here, anyway. It was surely suicidal,” Josephine said back, arms folded tightly.

“I do not think he wished to kill me. It felt more like a reprimanding,” Theia chimed in.

Leliana tilted her head with intrigue. “You think this was a counterstrike for refusing the Comte’s proposal? Would he really go that far?”

“I think he was calling my bluff. The man was obviously sent with the intention of witnessing… something. You saw me out there, I was lit up like a peacock. If I had a lover…” Theia paused anxiously as her eyes flickered in Josephine’s direction, “surely, he or she would not have been able to resist me. Ser Longwin knew this, which is why he probably volunteered himself to hunt me.”

Leliana listened carefully. “It would make sense. I suppose we will know for sure in the next few hours. Your gameplay did well for you, Inquisitor, but it also raised the stakes of backlash. Now that people no longer believe you to be a well-meaning, though naïve individual, your actions will have new consequences.”

Josephine sighed. “I should have known better.”

“You, my dear, had a lapse. It happens. But, I am concerned as to whether it should… keep… happening,” the topic shifted to cast the spotlight directly on Josephine and Theia.

Theia’s face tilted. “Leliana, I said I may not marry anyone, not that I couldn’t have any relations at all,” she countered.

“Yes, Inquisitor, but now it appears that Andraste would let you have your cake and eat it, too. Plausible for a Divine, rocky for an Inquisitor.”

“So do I really have to keep myself locked away at all congenial hours of the day?”

“No, but we must find a way to avoid these future indictments on your character. How else should we do so, without you blaspheming in open air and defended by shields and swords?”

Theia was growing frustrated. She turned and walked towards the balcony opening, looking out at the view that was blackened and undiscernable.

“I must remember that lives stand in between me and the enemy. They protect my endeavors. You are right, Leliana,” she said, defeated.

Josephine watched the back of Theia’s head with fear. What did that mean? Would this have to end before it really began?

Leliana sighed and turned towards the stairs. “Whatever you design for a solution, Inquisitor, I hope to hear it in several hours for the morning Council. We’ve detained a personnel from an important Noble, he will want an explanation. We must decide how this will be punished. Good evening, both of you,” Leliana’s eyes softened as she nodded in Josephine’s direction. Surely they would discuss
this later, one-on-one. But she did not wish to embarrass her friend in front of the Inquisitor, not after what they had been through.

That left the two alone again.

It felt like the longest time before Josephine finally had the urge to end the silence.

“Theia, I am so sorry that I did not practice better judgement,” Josephine stood and approached her back.

“Don’t be sorry, if anything, I should have warned you something was awry.” Theia sounded closed off. It made Josephine’s chin tilt in concern, her expression soft and vulnerable.

“What is on your mind?” Josephine asked simply.

Theia remained silent for a bit. Her eyes looked down at the ground, and she bit her lip heavily, an expression of anxious emotion. “Nothing.”

“You are always thinking of something.”

“Josephine, drop it, please,” Theia snapped back, defensively. She stepped further out onto the balcony, arms folding.

Josephine blinked in surprise; she had never been curtly talked to by Theia like that before. Something must be troubling her beyond persona, beyond cover. Perhaps if she just pushed a bit more. It was risky, but maybe the same woman who had exposed her most intimate nature to her an hour before, would do so again.

“You eyes…when you discovered him. You looked as if a vengeful storm would erupt from your chest,” Josephine admired, leaning against the beam.

Theia smirked unhumorously, nodding with more frustrated energy.

“You know what I saw first?” Theia asked, though Josephine was too worried to answer wrong. “I saw the sheen of the dagger first. He aimed like he was playing darts in the pub. In that moment, I —“ her breath escaped her, and she had to inhale roughly to recapture it. “In that moment all I could feel was your exposed back, your skin, being between me and his throw. It made me furious. How dare he!” her voice grew into a roar again.

Josephine took a step forward. Her gamble paid off.

“How…how dare he try for me as though you were collateral damage. How dare he come after something…someone, who means so much to me, as if you were nothing to lose. You are everything to lose!” she spun around and faced Josephine, mixed with rage and despondency.

Josephine shook her head, coming closer. She extended an open hand towards her, aiming for her cheek. “Theia, the situation was handled. He was no match for you. You are safe, as am I. There is no one here—“ she noticed Theia’s posture stiffen and start to pull away, her face stressing with what looked like the preamble to tears. She paused to take it all in.

This in turn made Theia even more self-conscious. “I’m so sorry,” she breathed, turning away and walking towards the railing of the balcony, hand covering her mouth. “I am so petulant. I let the emotions of the situation cloud my judgement.”

She stood solemnly, feeling the cold air against her skin, the silk of her dress doing nothing to
insulate warmth. The loneliness that undergirded her existence was starting to cave in. The pressure to be, the pressure to succeed, all bearing down on her bones. The isolation was deafening, incapacitating. She had been unwise again. All of the victory the evening had yielded was disqualified. She had yet another mess awaiting her in the morning. The post-traumatic stress was hunting her like the man did, only with animalistic teeth and the grasp of a monster. Lurking, waiting, opportunistic as it had always been.

Then, as it was all about to finally snatch her soul, she felt the sensation of hands wandering from her back, around her ribs, making their way around and creating an equator of new warmth around her waist. Then, the feel of a cold, soft, heart-shaped mouth resting on the base of her neck. A chest adorned in silk against her upper back.

“Shh,” the lips breathed on her, creating goosebumps. “Come back to me, Theia.”

Theia’s eyes welled with tears, and she closed them harshly. A moment of darkness, of contention. Then, when she opened them once more, the tears released from them gave way to clear vision. Even in the darkness of the night, she saw the way the moon created a rigid outline on the mountain peaks. The soft humming of air over them. The cold, coarse stone railing beneath her touch. She was safe, she was up high and away from the world, but at the same time, grounded.

She let a hand rest on the barrier around her stomach made of Josephine's arms. When she made contact, that’s when Josephine knew. She was back. She was home. But the anger was still visiting, and that was okay.

“If anyone tries to call you a whore again, I will electrocute them beyond recognition,” Theia swore rigidly, her chest puffing up with fury. In contrast, Josephine hummed into her skin.

“No one can call me anything other than yours,” she whispered back.
Scum of Man

Chapter Summary

Inquisitor Trevelyan survived a night of unforeseen peril at the hands of an ill-tempered, would-be assassin. The following morning it becomes imperative that she stop the situation before it undoes all the diplomatic theatrics she has put in place around her reputation and that of the Inquisition’s. In the process, she becomes all-too-familiar with the consequences of womanhood.

They had only managed to sleep a few hours. While Leliana had departed her chambers with ample time for them to get 5-6 hours of sleep, Theia’s nerves kept her up another two, and Josephine opted to stay up with her. While Longwin presented a meager threat to her safety and that of Josephine’s, it was the rupture of sanctity he represented that unnerved her. He had found his way into her private quarters unchecked and undetected, and remained there for hours.

He was there when she had undressed herself, when she welcomed Josephine, when they…kissed. The thought of his eyes conveniently pleasured while he awaited his moment to strike, left her both enraged and disturbed.

When they did manage to fall asleep, it was atop the sheets of her bed. There they lay, looking as though they had fallen asleep daydreaming: Theia’s head resting on top of Josephine’s abdomen, chin tucked, one arm resting on her own stomach, the other resting above her head and slightly over Josephine’s chest. Josephine’s head rested on a traditional pillow, head tucked betwixt a mess of bedhead curls. Her body was curved towards Theia’s, protectively. Their bodies still clothed, their skin unsullied from sweat. No erotic deeds had been done, beyond storytelling and innuendos exchanged between two hearts now assured that the other felt the same way they, themselves did.

Morning light broke forth from the curtains and reached for them like an old, bittersweet friend. The first stirrings of consciousness came from Theia, who’s limbs began to stretch and twitch with energy. Extending her legs out, before curling back up against the detected warmth of Josephine’s body, her eyes began to shift awake. She had quiet dreams despite her night of terror, ones she could easily forget if she didn’t pay attention. She was grateful for it.

As she began to awaken, she could hear a soft noise, a groan coming from above her head. It was Josephine, reacting through her sleep to the Theia’s movements. Theia blinked a few times, clearing her vision against the sharp daybreak. As her eyes adjusted, she fully realized where they were, and how they were, and it was a most welcome and intimate solace. Moving an arm, she pushed herself up off of Josephine’s stomach, and gazed up at her. A crooked grin appeared on her face as she was greeted with the sight of a woman who was just as exquisite while asleep, as she was awake. Though, she had to take note of just how calm and off-guard she was in this light.

Her body was still tired, and head still groggy, as she pulled herself up to lay beside her. She carefully tucked herself under Josephine’s chin, curling up against her, eyes positioned so as to take in the slopes of her body. The ripples of silk added rougher terrain on the surface of her otherwise soft and supple shape. Temptation got the best of her as she began to trace a few fingers around the peaks and indentations of her hips and stomach, feeling the irresistible need to know her.

They had kissed, held each other close, hell their lips wandered like wayward travelers on each
other’s limbs, but they didn’t go beyond that. A part of Theia was glad they didn’t. She didn’t want their first time to be to spite some piggish man’s crime.

She heard Josephine’s groggy voice groan once more, and her hand fretfully retreated and tucked itself underneath her. Her eyes went directly up to Josephine’s neck and chin, the only parts that were visible to her from this angle. She watched the muscles in her neck swallow, and she feared she had awoken the beast.

Theia grew concerned over the time. Surely they would both need to get clothes on for the day’s events, and perhaps Josephine would want to bathe, or attend to other needs before the morning Council or the investigation into Ser Longwin. She teetered on the choice of whether or not to wake her up. Anxiety got the best of her, as moved her head away and watched Josephine’s face, rubbing her chest comfortably.

“Josephine,” she whispered, “are you awake?”

Josephine’s lips parted as she inhaled deeply. Theia kept feeling her chest, and eventually her eyes were ever-so-slightly open.

“Mm,” the Ambassador hummed low, “did you have another nightmare?” she muttered.

Theia looked at her, confused. “What do you mean? I don’t remember having any dreams.”

Josephine squirmed a bit, stretching her arms above her head momentarily, before letting them rest at her sides. Her eyes closed again, but she was coherent. “You…talked and argued in your sleep,” she breathed.

Theia’s heart ached at the revelation that her sleep was anything but quiet. Her cheeks grew warm at the thought of talking in her sleep, unknowingly saying whatever came to her subconscious.

“What was I saying?” she inquired, fearing the worst.

Josephine’s eyes opened, this time committed to being so. She blinked twice, adjusting to the morning light. Her dark, voluminous eyelashes batting like butterfly wings. Her lips pursed as she tried to recall.

“You sounded like you were fighting. You said Cassandra’s name, like she had gotten lost, and you needed to find her. You also ordered Sera to get out of range. You groaned and moaned some, and your arms moved around. You calmed when I stroked your hair and held your hand,” her fatigue removed any chance of a filter or euphemism for Josephine. Her candor revealed the truth and only the truth.

Theia’s chest hollowed with a melancholy she knew all-too-well. She knew the explosion at the Conclave affected her memory in some way, but she also felt that the memories she did have were all the more colorful and real since being sent through the Fade. It did not bode well for someone steeped in war and combat, violence and death.

“Josephine, did you get any sleep at all?” her mind went from her own mind to wondering if Josephine stayed up all night being her comfort rather than getting her own, much-needed rest.

The Ambassador nodded once, and said a higher-pitched “Mhm” back. Gently, she pulled a strand of Theia’s hair out of her face and tucked it behind the Lady’s ear.

Theia eyed her lips, getting lost in her own thoughts, but being sure that it would happen to the visuals of Josephine’s features.
“You are doing it again,” Josephine breathed, now rubbing her face with her hand. Theia eyed her defensively. It made her smirk. “Overthinking. Just breathe. Today will happen as all difficult days do.”

Theia was touched, but she also knew she had underestimated (yet again) Lady Montilyet’s ability to get inside the head of those she needed to. “And how, Ambassador, do they happen?” Theia retorted cleverly.

Sitting up, Josephine shook her head, purposefully making her hair fall out of her face and collect at her back. She eyed the windows before looking back at the beautifully disheveled woman she had shared a bed with. “With us wishing we could be back here the entire time, surely.”

That made Theia smile. “Well, we don’t have to wish in vain just yet.” She made her way over to her, coming up from behind and anchoring her body on her folded legs, one on either side of Josephine’s hips. A hand carefully gathered Josephine’s hair, letting it rest on one shoulder, while Theia’s lips honed in on the other. Her kisses were sweet but ravenous. Josephine couldn’t help but lay her head back, still yearning for sleep, but also desiring more of the same good stuff they had been doing before they had been so aggressively interrupted.

“My love, you do not have every power in the world…though, I would imagine you will come very close before this is all concluded,” Josephine tried her best to fend off the sensory overload of Theia’s body at her back. Her hand sent itself up Theia’s left thigh, pushing the fabric of her night dress up further and further…until, she just couldn’t sit by anymore.

Driven to impulse, Lady Montilyet turned around to face her lover, whose face looked disappointed at the idea of no longer getting to taste her. Rising onto her knees, her hands went to Theia’s shoulders, and she pushed her with enough momentum to have her fall back on the bed flat, head supported by a tousled pillow. When she had the Inquisitor where she wanted her, she crawled up, swinging a leg across her hips so as to seat herself on the muscle of them. Theia looked like the Maker himself could barge in and she would tell him to kiss a Dragon’s ass. Well, it didn’t take much for her to want to do that anyway, but with this she would add a kick of a stiff boot. Josephine’s thigh rested bare, the slit of her dress working its magic.

“You know I can’t trust you with these,” Theia giggled, reaching her hands up and interlocking her fingers with Josephine’s. “Do you ever embrace a move without countering it with something better?”

“How did you think the Inquisition’s political power came to be? By me simply taking the first approach at its face value?” Josephine smiled. Touche, Ambassador. “You can always rely on me, Inquisitor. Whether it be knowing the next step…or keeping you on time for your engagements.” And with that, Josephine dismounted from her victorious seat, and slid out of bed like a true Lady would if she had gotten away with murderous seduction.

Theia relinquished herself to rolling over on her stomach and taking a firm and regretful bite out of the corner of her pillow.

And so, the difficult day did begin.

“The Comte says he knows nothing of his man’s whereabouts still. He insists he told his “Attache” to keep close, but he disobeyed, evidently. My men have dug up some shallow intel on him. Ser Longwin has some ambition in his character. Recounts of his trappings paint a picture of a
determined, narcissistic man.” Leliana stood overlooking the Council map at her usual place beside Cullen. Cullen had been briefed on the situation, though he chose to remain more in the dark about certain…aspects of the circumstance.

“So, he did go hunting,” Theia remarked, hands on her hips.

“The Comte gambles with much to have such an unpredictable and temperamental man as his right-hand,” Josephine remarked bitterly. Having her personal matters conflated with matters of diplomacy was disconcerting at best, mortifying at worst.

“Yes. And, he found what he was looking for, which makes it worse,” Leliana said.

Cullen made his opinion heard, which he felt was otherwise irrelevant. “Couldn’t we simply swallow the loss and look for support elsewhere? The Comte has overextended himself, he has shown us he is not as reliable of an ally as he would have us believe.”

“The dodge would be manageable in the short-term, though it would echo throughout Orlais. People will want to know what spurned a de-alignment after last night’s events,” Leliana spoke once more, turning her discerning gaze towards the Inquisitor. “No, we must find a way to make him come willingly. Something coercive will speak of corruption, and breaking away will almost outright admit a mistake was made.”

“Have you interrogated this man yet, Inquisitor?” Josephine questioned.

“No, but I am scheduled to before I receive them in the throne room. The Comte insisted,” Theia wasn’t looking forward to such having these men gathered together. Too many dim wits in one room.

“Then, I would suggest you…entice his fantasy, if you can. The man was all-too ready to disrespect you and myself, even under your roof. He clearly does not harbor respect for women as he should, but you can play that to our advantage.”

“So, what? Dance for him? Dirty talk?” Theia didn’t mean to be so short, but the thought of “playing” anything for this man filled her with nausea.

Josephine’s brow furrowed, and she shook her head once. “Of course not. But, if you can appease his ego, he may fall for your perceived harmlessness. Poor excuses for men often take the poorer excuses from women for their behavior.”

Leliana nodded. “I am with Josephine on this. She and I have seen his kind of masculinity before. It thrives off of an assumed superiority grounded in nothing but shallow opinions and grotesque imaginations.”

Cullen sighed, growing impatient. “Might we also speak of, oh, I don’t know, some Inquisition concerns in this early morning hour?”

The women all eyed him critically. He had become used to it by now.

The man was chained up at the wrists and sat down in the middle of the prison cell chamber. Theia approached with an indignant swagger in her step, her body now armed in metal and leather, boots thick enough to match his own, step-for-step. She stood next to a soldier, whose hand was resting on his sword. “Your Worship,” he bowed reverently. “We do not have much time. The Comte is impatient for the hearing. They were set to depart for Val Royeaux this afternoon.”
“I see. He still demands much despite the sins stacked against him,” Theia remarked, her arms folded. “Thank you, soldier. I shouldn’t be more than a few minutes.”

With the soldier posted at the door, Theia approached the man. He had long-since thawed out from her attacks, and was looking like ten miles of Crestwood back road.

“It isn’t a common occurrence to have rodents be kept in jail here, but for you, I made an exception,” Theia insulted him, made him believe she was there to put up a fight.

The man didn’t bother to bow or now. He gazed up at her with a look of disgust. “Your kind always act as if the rules bend to your whimsical desires,” he hurled an insult right back.

“My kind? Are you referring to Mages? Or Women? Or, perhaps both?” Theia retorted, pulling up a chair and sitting in it backwards, resting her arms on the back of it.

Longwin spat on the ground. She had her answer.

“Ser, I am disheartened to see you do not appreciate your visit to my hold. Such a pity to know my actions are disapproved of by a man such as yourself,” her voice changed. It became more impressionable, more like one you could toy with.

“Grrruh, you showed no respect for “a man such as myself” when you froze my chest nearly to the point of suffocation. It dumbfounds me how they let such a girl lead an Inquisition,” he grumbled bitterly.

“My Lord, do you think me incompetent? I was told by multiple men in the highest ranks here that they would follow me anywhere. Battlefields, fortresses, caves, beds…Oh-ho-ho, whoops, I did not mean to mention the last destination,” Theia giggled under her breath, convincingly, for someone who had no idea of her real character. She tightened her legs around the back of the chair she sat on.

Longwin eyed her, skeptical, though enticed. Men with simple minds and hungry egos were so easy.

“Oh, Longwin. Longwin, Longwin, Longwin,” she hoped she would never have to say his blasted name again after this day. “Certainly you understand me and my mind’s eye. You hunted me into my bed chamber without detection. You are obviously one astute and intelligent man, to do so in the throng of the Inquisition’s forces.”

“I killed a few and climbed the wall. It was hardly heroic,” he was curt, cold. Her blood viscerally boiled at the thought of this man taking lives away just to be a voyeur. She had to hide it, though, for her sake as well as everyone else who remained alive and reliant on her to get things done.

“Modest men with nothing to be modest about always did pose a weakness for me,” Theia’s chin lowered as she stared him down, her purple eyes that once wanted to scourge him were now seeming to want more.

“Lady Inquisitor, you beguile like a witch’s pet,” he cursed, gritting his teeth at her. “You want what you cannot reach for.”

Oh, that was it.

Her face turning, Theia stood up from her chair. “What I reach for, My Lord, is already being handed to me on a gilded platter.” Suddenly, she threw the chair to the other side of the room, and when it made contact with the ground it erupted into a cluster of ice. Reminiscent of his last several hours of captivity.
“You have the audacity to intrude on me and my people, trespass into what isn’t yours, insult my Ambassador of noble birth and profession, and dismantle an alliance which strives to bring peace to a nation in chaos. Why, so as to have another trapping on your wall of horrors? To assuage the sleepless nights of a vile man and his fragile, breaking vanity? To re-live some glory days gone past?” Her voice was deep and seething. She approached him and stood of his kneeling body.

He grumbled under his breath like a dog cornered.

“The way I see it, you are at my mercy, and not the contrary. It is you on your knees, in my jail, awaiting your destiny. If I were the ruthless and foolish woman I suspect you think I am, I would have a limb cut from you. But as I am a woman of hope and forgiveness, I am willing to collaborate,” her words were sharp and spit landed on his face more than once.

“You are a dishonest and misleading harlot. To think I would serve your leadership would be just as much of a executioner’s block as the real thing.” He responded with a sinister tone.

Theia’s eyes glazed a bit with passion, and she crouched down to eye level with him.

“Only small, insignificant men count themselves spurned by the likes of women like me. I am your worst end, aren’t I? A woman who seeks the company of other women, who sprays fire like rain over her enemies, who’s spit might as well be wyvern venom.” Her face was hardly more than 6 inches from his. He stared at her nose and mouth, not daring to see his helpless reflection in those terrible eyes.

“Here’s the deal, you scum of a man. You take my offer or you are at the mercy of my girlish whims. I will announce in the hall that you were caught fending off a mercenary in my bed chambers. A mercenary who was planning on assassinating me, the Inquisitor, the Herald of Andraste. I explain your detention by saying we wished to first conduct and investigation before going public. You bring aplomb to yourself and the House whose banner you serve. You become a famed hunter yet again. Go along with it, or see just how elementally disturbed I can be with the addition of a Mage’s staff.”

The man held his breath, neither showing an affirmative or negation at the Inquisitor’s proposition.

The Inquisitor reached aggressively and grabbed the back of his head, yanking back on his hair so his chin went up and he was forced into eye contact with her.

“Do you fancy your destruction, My Lord?” she whispered, her mouth closer to his, her breath bracing against his face with a fury. “Because I can think of many ways to do so, watching you fume and at the same time hide the disgusting throbbing in your trousers.”

At once, Theia jerked her hand away from his head, releasing her grip from his skull. She mockingly spat off to his side in disgust. She then stood up, scuffing her boot heel along the stone so as to toss some dirt in his lap, and turned to exit.

“Oh, and one final addendum, Ser. If I hear you insulting or gossiping about my Ambassador, or any of the women who I consider allies or service to the Inquisition, you won’t be able to drink a chalice of wine without burning your tongue to tastelessness. That, you can count on.” She peered down at him from over her shoulder, but didn’t bother to stay to witness a reaction.

—

The Hall was quieter than the night before; the visiting nobles coalesced in a more casual manner, though some were privy to the hearing and arrived to witness. The Inquisitor entered the room from
the door to the courtyard, and walked deliberately to her throne. The Comte bowed his head, having been standing before the steps to her seat, awaiting her arrival. Josephine and Leliana also approached, side by side, having come from the direction of the Council room. Josephine made eye contact with Theia as she took her seat, hoping she would get a look of reassurance.

Theia nodded in their direction, an then turned her attention to the Comte. “Good Ser, I am having your man, Ser Longwin, escorted from the cells as we speak. He will be here momentarily."

“Your Worship, may I ask why this was all done? Last I was told, he was missing.”

The Inquisitor leaned back and rested her hands on her armrests. “It will all make sense in due course, my Lord.”

Like clockwork, two soldiers approached with the prisoner. Well, alleged hero, as she would try to spin.

“Longwin, what is the meaning of this? Why are you in shackles?” The Comte questioned, though his man did not have time to answer if he wished.

“A solemn formality, my Lord. He is to be released. He was detained for investigation after my men found him tracking a mercenary assassin, who had designs on my life in the early morning hours as I slept. I owe Ser Longwin my life, it seems, and I am apologetic that he had to spend hours in the jail cells pending inquiry. Please understand, incidences such as this must be handled with great care, so as to preserve the reputation of the Inquisition and myself.”

Theia was an artist, truly. It turned her stomach to feign admiration for this man, but she kept her eyes focused on the prize.

“My Lady!” The Comte remarked, gasping with shock. He turned to Longwin. “Is this true? Is that why you stole away without so much as a word?”

All eyes were on Longwin, who’s grimace was hardly readable. He eyed the Inquisitor, who in turn stared him down with a forcefulness. Her words, her threats, her power. It was disgusting to him, though in the current day and age, useful as well.

“It…is true, My Lord. I did not wish to jeopardize your safety, so I pursued alone. I was fortunate to have the support of Inquisition personnel, or else I may have…met my match,” his words’ double-meaning was a troublesome one for Theia, and Josephine as well.

“Oh! Thank the Maker no one was hurt!” The Comte spoke with a special kind of obliviousness, one which the Inquisition council would look back on whenever they needed a good laugh. “Your Worship, thank you for protecting my attache and for having integrity in the face of danger. This makes me all the more thrilled to embark on an alliance.”

The Inquisitor nodded, and with her hand, waved toward the troops flanking Longwin where he stood. One of them motioned towards his shackled wrists, and, using the key, unbound him.

“I am sorry you must depart Skyhold on a note such as this, my Lord, but rest assured we shall toast to your impact on us here,” The Inquisitor stood, and bowed her head respectfully.

“My Lady, you leave me in awe. We shall depart today forever improved by your friendship.”

She managed a diplomatic smile, textbook in execution, before stepping down from the throne. “I appreciate that. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I have important business to attend to.”
Back in Josephine’s office, Theia sat on the chair by the fire, posture sunken with patience long gone. From behind, she could feel Leliana’s aura of all-knowing wit approach.

“Inquisitor, we obtained the signed papers marking the alliance as official. Lady Montilyet is overseeing their departure from the courtyard. You have secured our prize,” she affirmed, standing at the Lady’s right side.

Theia gazed up for a moment, before her contemplative eyes returned to the fire. “Thank goodness, I was thinking I might have to do a “just kidding” on being visited by Andraste.”

“If only more would, it would save Scribes a lot of trouble,” Leliana replied. She approached the companion chair not too far away and sat on the edge of the armrest, eyeing the Inquisitor with a mixture of concern and intimidation.

“Tell me, and tell me once with honesty – was last night an anomaly, or do you have intentions?” with all of this going on, Theia had lost sight of the fact that Sister Leliana and Josephine shared a pre-existing friendship. She heard the words of an intrigued Spymaster, with the voice of a defensive confidant.

“Leliana, rest assured, I do not have any duplicitous feelings towards Josephine. I couldn’t hide them from her if I tried. I meant what I did,” Theia laid her head back on the chair, feeling the conservative cushion of it, she was so tired that she thought she could doze off.

“We shall see. I do not take such promises lightly, Inquisitor. I will be watching, as you well know.” Quietly, she arose once more, and saw her way out of the office.

The gears in Theia’s mind turned with fatigued stress. Now she had to keep herself in line like a courting teenager, as well as be the leader of the Inquisition. Okay, sure, fine, but first, a power nap.

She closed her eyes and felt the warmth of the fire on her face. Almost perfect, but not quite as good as the real thing, which in this case was the heat of Josephine’s body as they slept in the early morning tranquility.
Inquisitor Theia Trevelyan is in the midst of a vigorous advancement on Suledine Keep and the Sarhnia Quarry, both epicenters of Templar activity in the Emprise du Lion region. An unexpected turn in her luck leaves the Inquisitor’s life at risk. Her fate concerns the investment of her allies and Inquisition forces.

The aching limbs of violence stretched themselves before the Inquisitor and her allies in a cold and bitter scape. Emprise du Lion had been an irreverent mistress to convince.

They were in the thick of combat – Theia, Lord Dorian, Seeker Cassandra, Solas – each representing a stress point in an outstretched and frothing circle of defense. Surrounding them, maddened Templars lay siege on them like walls of a stoic fortress of flesh and bone. Their vibrations of lyrium madness shook through their chests and ribs like caverns of mortal potential for sin.

Mage staffs twirled and twisted in their explosive acrobatics: lightening currents intertwining with those of ice and fire from Dorian and Solas’ respective directions. In betwixt the melee was the Seeker, wielding a sword aflame with a corrupted rune’s wrath. She moved with a quickness and unforgiving ferocity, knowing the abilities of three Mages would level any and all threats to her weak spots.

They were encroaching on the territory of Suledin Keep, said to be the lair of a formidable demon and its Templar lackeys. They had been making steady progress with Inquisition forces up the mountain, even to the point of ridding Valeska’s watch of darkspawn. But, the advance into the peaks of the Sarnia quarry proved a labor of blood and toil.

Theia’s chest hollowed with brutish potential as she wielded her charged hands up in the air, energizing a lightening keeper spell to trap several Templars at bay in an enclosed circle of magic.

“Theian!” Theia yelled from over her shoulder as she thrust her staff in the direction of Templar moving on Cassandra’s flank, sending a shock of ice his way.

Dorian’s chin perked up, but with instinct he locked on the bundled Templars paralyzed by lightening, engrossing their bodies in immolating fire.

Relieved that the maneuver they had longed practiced was pulled off, Theia turned and her eyes found Solas. He had secured a position near an overbearingly large tree, its trunk limbs reaching out through the un-level snow drift. Solas sent a charge of barrier protection through the air, and Theia saw the danger make itself known: two Templars charged toward his back from about 10 yards away. She didn’t doubt that he already knew of their heavy-footed approach.

An adrenaline grin fell on her lips as she held her staff tightly in her right-handed grip. She lowered her chin and began a brisk sprint in his direction. An unknowing bystander would say Solas was the target of her charge, but she knew, and he did, too. Solas twisted his staff above his head, anticipating her approach, he let his staff blade strike the ground. A sheet of ice erupted from its contact, extending itself in the enemies’ direction.
At a precise moment, Theia outstretched her hand to him, and Solas met her grasp with his, forearm on forearm. That is when she dropped her tailbone down on bent legs, the rush of momentum taking some of the wind out of her gut. Her eyes narrowed once she had secured contact now towards her true targets. He swung her down and across the sheet of slippery ice, bracing her weight just long enough to ensure a precise landing and then release. Her bent legs made contact with the ice, and she slid now on it with the inertia she had created in her run. At the right moment, Solas let go of her, and she continued sliding full-speed at them, aiming for between the two.

She let her spine bend back as she pulled her staff to her chest horizontally. She was going to do more than just pull a trip-up. She took a breath and remembered how Cole advised her: “exhale before the thrust.” And she did so: impaling the Templar to her right in a groove opening between his armor connecting his upper equipment to the legs. The sound was a mix of a crunching of bone and a squashing of flesh.

She wouldn’t let the other one go, though. Using her first target as leverage, she yanked on his weight, proving just enough to turn her around on one thigh and let the other leg slide out from under her and slow her speed. Her eyes locked on the remaining Templar in her sights. In an underhanded grip she pried her staff blade from the man’s body and held it over her shoulder like a spear. She allowed herself another exhale, muscles relaxing into the maneuver.

As her sliding came to a slow stop, she took aim and threw. Her staff surged with power from the heat of battle, but it proved just aerodynamic enough. The blade found a target in the neck bone of the Templar, cutting clean through, out the bottom of his jaw. Solas turned from fighting others in front of him, to see that the blade had done its work, and he watched the man choke and fall a mere two feet from him. His face was resolute, like business had concluded before it even began.

Theia was now still on the ground and resting on her knees, her chest heaving and hollowing rapidly with air. Strands of her drenched hair stuck to her parted lips, which were, like the rest of her face, splattered with a mix of salty sweat and blood. She watched as Cassandra appeared to cut down the last Templar in the area, grotesquely falling onto his side like armor stuffed with straw and muslin.

Dorian and Solas stood with wide stances, anticipating further attack, but the air grew quiet with conflicted loss. The snow flurries falling around them became the prevailing dance. Solas did not calm like Dorian did, though, his shoulders rigid with sense. It was not quite over. He peered out at the landscape before them, seeing nothing, but feeling an impulse: a decision to strike.

Then, he knew.

Urgently, he turned to see the Inquisitor, who had stood up from her place in the snow. She made eye contact with him, which told her in a split second everything she needed to know. Her face dropped, but it was a hair too late.

From behind, the overhanded reach of an rogue dual-blade soared above her own stature. Solas threw his hands forward, sending a current of fire in their direction, hoping Theia would know to dodge out of the way. She always did before.

Theia felt the incoming force of the attack and ducked towards her left shoulder, exposing her ribs in a fatal mistake as she attempted to dodge the fire attack. She twisted her spine clockwise, aiming to hit the ground as quickly as possible. Her vision blurred from the quick movement. All she could sense next was the agonizing strike of pain in her right side, spreading from the middle of her torso to the side.

Theia screamed, the sharpness of her cry cutting through the winter like a glacier collapsing into the sea.
The assassin appeared fully out of the fade cloak he had managed to keep himself safe with. He knew his target and he knew her well. But, the fire finally hit its target as well. His bladed lunge was pushed back, making the wound he was able to inflict on the Inquisitor wide, but not as deep as it could have. His armor and face were lit up in flames.

The Inquisitor collapsed to the ground, and in doing so cleared the path for her allies to finish the job. Dorian roared with a guttural, visceral growl as he cast an ice spell on him, freezing his body whole. “Seeker, now!” he yelled, but Cassandra had already begun her advance. Swinging the sword over her head, she sliced the man from nipple to navel, clean in half.

The now-corpse ruptured in ice and frost.

When she had followed through with her swing and stood still, Cassandra’s mind immediately went to the Inquisitor. They all rushed to her side, Cassandra crouched next to the side where her wound was. Theia had her eyes closed with tension, and she was trying to stop herself from breathing fast and shocked. One hand covered her wound that had bled enough to stain the nearby snow, her other remained in a fist.

“Inquisitor! You must let us see it,” Cassandra half-way ordered, grasping at her hand. Theia’s leg jerked up involuntarily as the pressure of Cassandra’s hand was felt. Her breathing also jumped with it.

Solas stood over them and at her feet, watching with a look of concern. “The blade hit deeper than it should have. It may have severed an organ,” he said in his quintessential monotone.

“She needs a surgeon immediately, she cannot carry on the advance,” Dorian agreed.

Cassandra eyed them both, alarmed and afraid. They had endured multiple scares for the Inquisitor’s safety and life, and it never got easier. It was a concern that they knew was reciprocated by her had it been any of them who was the target of the attack. Her gaze went back to Theia, who finally opened her eyes.

“D-D-Dorian,” she grit her teeth in agony. “I…I need you to…” her left hand reached out and grasped his wrist. When she did so, she made him feel the warmth of her pyro rumble from beneath her skin.

She was asking him to cauterize it.

Dorian looked with concern. “My friend, it will put you in even more agony to do so, and we do not even know what has all been inflicted on you,” he said quickly. That clearly did not bode well with the Inquisitor, for her half-distracted hand now made a fist that pounded lightly on the back of his hand.

“D-Dammit, Dorian, t-that is an—aAAGH!” she wailed, her body flinching upwards, her chest curling around the wound before it collapsed back down in the snow. The pain and the freezing cold were overwhelming her senses which were already in shock.

Dorian’s heart ached with an urgency. He looked to Solas, who spoke. “She will undoubtedly go unconscious from the pain, or worse. Perhaps, though, the anchor may interfere on her behalf, if she is pushed to near-death,” he advised.

Cassandra interjected. “If we were warriors in the field, this would be the first response when far from a camp,” she was fretful for how much it would push Theia to unbearable agony, not only from a deep wound, but a deep burn from the hand of a Mage. It was not the isolated branding of an iron.
“Just do it already, please!” Theia cried rapidly. Her breathing hadn’t waned from its ferocious pace. She knew pain had been something she had endured before beyond expectation, but she could not stand to bleed out from a wound out in the middle of enemy territory. Triage was vital.

Theia and Dorian made eye contact as he reached he hand to gently hold itself above the deep red stain in her armor. “Hold steady, friend,” he said in a low tone. Solas had taken hold of her legs at just below her knees, Cassandra her arms.

Theia’s eyes watched him with determination, and her jaw bit down like it could chew through raw serpentstone.

The fire’s warm preamble grew from his palm. He had to build it up so it would be just powerful enough to keep it quick, like a flashfire, but not enough so as to surge through her flesh. She trusted him with something so critically measured. A few seconds passed, and Theia knowingly closed her eyes.

At the Drakkon’s rise campground, the Scouts and Troops flinched at the sound of an unholy scream. It was sudden, and as quick as it erupted, it was gone.

The disturbed ravens took flight.

–

The door of Skyhold ushered in a small contingent of troops in the early morning twilight. Densely attired men and women from their origin in the west. Though, they carried with them a jam-packed wagon that looked ominous in purpose, as if it were a hybrid of a supplies dispatch and a prisoner’s processional. Beside it, Seeker Pentaghast rode in on an armored Forder, face stoic and reserved.

When they stopped in the middle of the Courtyard, Cassandra dismounted immediately. Handing off her ride to a soldier, she approached Cullen, who stood on the steps of the first set of stone stairs.

“Seeker, I was surprised to receive a raven that you would return so soon. Did something happen?” Cullen greeted her.

“Commander,” Cassandra nodded at him, “You read my note on the injury of an important ally? That ally is the Herald. I kept my words encrypted so as to keep enemies off of our trail, should our messengers be intercepted.”

“Maker, you brought her back? It is that serious?” Cullen responded, alarmed, like he had wanted to be told sooner. A common reaction from the Commander.

Cassandra turned and watched the troops unpack the initial wave of rations and supplies. “We need healers from the infirmary to meet us in the Inquisitor’s chambers at once. And the lead surgeon. Quietly. We do not need pandemonium to erupt in Skyhold.” Cullen was off immediately, and with that, she approached several of the troops who had traveled with them. “Quickly, while there is scarce few people out, let us get her inside,” she ordered secretly.

The troops did as they were asked, and began opening the wagon’s back cart as if it were padlocked with ten different contraptions.

Meanwhile, up the stairs and walkway to the throne room, Josephine walked expediently towards the grand doors, towards the sound of bustling bodies and unloading carts. “I have no reports of a returning party en-route from abroad, why are receiving one so early?” she asked Leliana who followed behind her.
“Josie, now, before you go outside, I must tell you—“ Leliana’s prelude was interrupted by Josephine’s voice.

“No…” she said, a deep, boiling tone to it.

Josephine was about to nearly fly down the stairs, breaking decorum in every which way. Leliana quickly came around and flanked her, wrapping an arm around Josephine’s waist and bracing against her considerably momentum.

“Josephine, I know,” Leliana whispered, the sympathy in her heart aching for the expression in Josephine’s eyes, the expression of pure fear and desperation. She empathized all-too-well. But, she also knew such a scene would be costly. Josephine’s distress would almost surely confirm to everyone who was the injured body.

“Let me go, Leliana!” Josephine squirmed to break free from her friend’s arms. She thought it was ludicrous that she dared to hold her back as her Love was being unloaded from a cart like a slaughtered animal.

“No, Josephine, you must go to her chambers,” Leliana advised quietly, taking a step forward, bringing Josephine with her progression. Josephine ripped away from her and shoved her in her shoulder briskly.

“You deny me my liberty to run to her side? Tell me, Leliana, tell me now. Is she….is she…!” she breathed, a concoction of anger and tears brewing in her throat.

Leliana held her hands up in an appearance of surrender. “My man sent a raven last night with a message that said she was alive. She has been badly hurt, a dagger wound in the side that cut deep, and received triage in the field. She failed to recover in a timely manner, and her weakened state posed a security threat to both herself and the encampments in Emprise du Lion. They chose to send her back for treatment. Now, please,” Leliana pleaded. She couldn’t bear the look on Josephine’s face, the look of devastation at what was kept from her, how she was being ordered around like an overly-emotional child.

Josephine watched the commotion from a distance while she could, over Leliana’s shoulder. Her eyes than went to her friend, the Spymaster. “Once I am at her side, so help me Maker, not even Corypheus will hold me away from her again,” she seethed, before turning and stomping her feet in anguish in the direction of the Inquisitor’s chambers.

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Leliana’s chest exhaled the tension it had held since she first received reports that the Inquisitor had been badly injured. She knew she would have to make penance for keeping it from her friend, who expressed nothing but trust and good intention. As she turned and oversaw the humble processional, the Inquisitor looking unconscious as she lay on the mat that was being carried by the Seeker and two other soldiers, she had many reasons to hope that she would survive. It would be a long morning.

—

Sensations of cloth and fur were the first to be felt. Plush and still. Then, the cold openness on a barren chest that breathed low. Then, the weight of long-closed eyelids. A heavy head.

“Varric, you bastard, stop cheating!” the Seeker’s feistiness rang out from the area of couches surrounding the fire. She sat hunched over her lap, interested in the spread of cards on the table between her and the rogue Dwarf.
“Seeker, I cannot cheat someone who is already doomed to lose,” he said in jest, undoubtedly a sleek side grin on his lips as he said so.

“Ugh! You are corrupted beyond sense,” she retorted.

“Now, now, Seeker, you represent the pillar of discipline and determination, why so easily defeated?” Dorian’s sarcasm now, gushing as always. He leaned up against the mantle as a spectator, or at least, one who did anything but sit quietly and spectate.

“No sideline coaching from you, Tevinter,” Varric scolded half-heartedly.

From her left side, closer, much closer, another voice. “Will you hush it? Herald is sleepin her pretty arse off so her bod can heal the wicked hole in her gut!”

Sera. As always, with the jubilant volume that betrayed her good intentions.

The weight of her eyelids was lessening, though her stillness gave the false impression that waking up was a welcome thing. She let herself have more time to become coherent before she made her consciousness known. Besides, it sounded as though her surroundings were way too entertaining to disturb.

“She is not the only one who is getting some much-needed slumber,” Vivienne’s rich and posh voice now. Curious as to who she was referring to, Theia sensed no one beside her in bed. Why would there be?

Unless…Josephine.

Her purple eyes shot open with as much force as she could muster, which was…not much. Softly, she inhaled, though her ribs on her right side sent sharp pain that curbed her breath. Her head and neck had been adequately propped up with pillows, though the rest of her body laid level. Hands rested on her sides as if she lay on a funeral cushion.

Her fingers stirred with motion as she moved her hand up to rest on her stomach. When it landed, she felt the bandage that wrapped generously and securely around her abdomen, covering her breasts as well. The compression of it added to the stiff feel of her body.

The Inquisitor tilted her chin to where she believed Sera was, and indeed, there she was, sitting on the floor and making subtle repairs on her bow by the looks of it. Killing two birds with one stone: weaponry repair and recovery company.

The Inquisitor swallowed, but her dry mouth yielded little of its remaining moisture.

“S…Sera,” Theia whispered, a bit of sweetness to it.

Sera’s face perked up in a flash, and her mouth erupted into a smile. “Inquisitor! You woke up! Bastards, I told ya!” she said, looking back at the people by the fire. The Seeker immediately stood, as did Varric. Dorian pulled away from the wall. They all stared at her like they were about to descent like birds onto something shiny. It was Vivienne who played the voice of reason.

“Now, now, friends, do not choke the Herald’s air so to make her fall unconscious again,” she warned, remaining seated by the loveseat against the stair rail. There, on its cushions, a bundled figure was still sleeping, black hair loosening from what once was a meticulous up-do. Her body was turned away from them and against the back cushion, a single blanket wrapped around her body.

The allies all eyed Vivienne, stopping in their respective tracks.
“Thank the Maker, we were concerned,” Cassandra said softly, her hands toiling nervously.

“Psh, I knew you would beat this, Lightening Bug,” Varric’s nick name for the Inquisitor was an all-too-welcome greeting. It made a small grin appear on her lips.

“I did as well. No one could die after having been touched by the hands of a master like me,” Dorian crossed his arms confidently.

That made Theia finally attempt to talk. “Yes, Dorian only after…” she had to take another shallow breath, “I nearly did it myself while you…” another breath, “got sentimental.”

Their faces all twisted with concern and platonic affection as the Inquisitor’s humor returned to them. Trying to rise to the occasion even more, Theia’s arms moved to push her body upwards, so she could sit up. Though when she tried, another sharp spike of pain lurched itself from her side, and she collapsed on that side back onto the bed.

“Inquisitor, don’t—“ Cassandra stepped forward, but as interrupted by Vivienne.

“Hush now, my dear,” she said to Theia, “only trifle with what you must.” She then motioned a hand towards the amassed pillows behind Theia’s neck and shoulders. They vibrated and glowed with magic as she plumped them up with one hand, and with the other restructured them so as to prop her into an upright position on their own. Once it had all settled into place, Vivienne snapped one set of fingers, and the magic dissipated.

Theia titled her head towards Madame de Fer. “Thank you,” she hummed.

Vivienne nodded with a refined softness.

Her body ached, and her chest braced against the tight bandages. Her hair felt dry, like it had been washed for her, but not given any lingering attention for the sake of practicality. Her lips also felt dry. There were many discomforting aspects of the position she was in, but for all of their annoyances, it warmed her chest to see her allies, her friends, having stopped their days to attend to her.

“How long have I been asleep?” she asked quietly, now better able to look at all of them in the face, instead peering down her nose at them.

“Three days, Your Worship,” Cassandra replied.

Three days?! Andraste’s ass, what had happened? She knew she needed surgery, but to be knocked out for three days in Inquisition time was ridiculous. What became of the Suledin Keep? Was their camp near the quarry still there? Her eyes flickered with concern at them all, as she wanted answers.

Cassandra obliged. “Our holdings in Emprise du Lion have remained sound. The Iron Bull and his Chargers were dispatched upon your return to provide reinforcement, as well as Blackwall, to investigate traces of the Wardens. Solas visited as well, but he is in his office now; he probably has had enough hours of watching you sleep in recovery for one lifetime.”

Theia was relieved, and felt her body relax some more. Good, because it wasn’t like it was going anywhere.

“The Commander is in his barracks working, and Leliana is up in her tower fielding reports from the region. All seems to be still, for the time being. Once you are well, we can re-embark and finish what we began.”

The idea of leaving for that dreaded ice scape filled her with a sense of dread like no other, and Theia
sighed with what little breath she had to spare. “I eagerly await the chance,” she replied sarcastically.

“Seeker, don’t rush in with the military jargon when she’s barely been awake for more than 5 minutes,” Varric said, eyeing Cassandra.

“Varric.” Cassandra was not in the mood. Typical.

“I am beaming to know you are well, my friend. Tell me, has pyromancy become less disagreeable to you since it led to your life being spared?” Dorian approached her bedside, pushing a button of hers with adoration.

Theia sneered at him. “The Anchor led to me being hurled through the Fade and you don’t see me suddenly cozying up with demons and the Archane,” she replied smartly.

“Ah, but you don’t have to admit to us what you do in your down time,” Dorian chuckled.

Theia shook her head, she couldn’t resist smiling. “Thank you for saving me, ass.”

His chuckle grew into a soft laugh. “Any time, friend. Maker knows I needed more tales to beguile with in the pub.”

Their conversation was halted by the sound of rustling from Josephine’s direction. They all turned to watch her, anxious to see if she had been awoken by their noises. Vivienne eyed her with concern, standing up and stepping towards the stairs.

“Friends, I dare say we should let our Heroine’s most loyal and devout bed company have her due, alone,” she directed them to politely follow her.

Varric smirked, touched by the new felt tenderness in the air. He turned to the Seeker. “It is rather perfect isn’t it?” he asked.

“What is?” Cassandra rejoined.

“Oh, nothing. Just, that Lady Trevelyan charms all men of Thedas into the laps of her skirts, and she runs for those of the other ravishing maiden in the room who could appreciate such a woman better than any of the rest. That, Seeker, is what we call sweet irony.”

“Ugh.”

As they all ushered themselves out, nodding and bidding farewell for now, Josephine rolled onto her back now awake. She watched the figures depart, before jolting up with what that must mean: Theia was conscious, finally.

Her eyes widened to the size of saucers when she looked and saw her, indeed, eyes open and body breathing.

“Theia!” she cried, shoving the blanket off of her lap and leaping to her side. “Theia, my darling,” she said warmly, taking a seat at her side in bed. Every nerve in her body wanted to jump on top of her, kiss her to the point of madness, but she knew the pain that would cause. Instead, she let a hand or warm restraint rest on Theia’s forearm.

Theia couldn’t help but smile like a giddy fool when Josephine approached. “Josephine,” she replied with her name and her name only, breathing low and shallowly. It paired well with the fluttering of her heart beat (not).
“Do not worry about moving, my Love. You need to recover. You endured surgery three days ago, and you’ve been asleep ever since. You did not even talk or have nightmares. The healer must have given you something truly potent,” Josephine reported, posture meticulous as she recounted the Inquisitor’s last three days of lucid life.

“You were here with me the entire three days? Didn’t you have work, commitments to…” Theia had to stop to breathe again. Josephine noticed.

“I had my staff bring any messages up here to me. I hope you do not mind, I borrowed your desk as necessary to write. But, yes, I remained here. I did not even sleep in my own room. Leliana brought me food, and I washed my hair when I washed yours.”

Theia was astonished. To hear that a woman with such nobility and prestige humble herself to the point of both working as a Chief diplomat, and a bed maid, the work of multiple people in either of those factions...all for her? She must have really scared the life out of Josephine, and that made her heart sink.

“I’m sorry I put you through this. We were in the thick of it up there. I wasn’t smart as I should be.” Theia muttered, taking hold of Josephine’s hand, her thumb stroking the back of it.

“When Solas came to see you, he explained what happened. He said you were a force to be reckoned with, and that the rogue’s attack was a mistake they all failed to react to, not just you.”

“Yes, but I stalled in the midst of battle. I don’t know why. It left me vulnerable.”

“He said you had no way of knowing what was to happen.”

“Ugh, it’s my job to…” her chest moved up and down as it tried to keep up with her conversation, but failed to. She stopped to breathe in as deeply as she could.

“These...these bandages...they are tight as…” she breathed.

Josephine watched her struggle and it gnawed at her sympathies. It made her imagine how she looked the first night after she was through surgery. Her face was pale, lips nearly white from the loss of blood she had endured. She looked like she was approaching death, not recovered from its grasp. It devastated her beyond rebound.

“They must compress the sutures for now. You will be able to have them redressed in a looser fashion tomorrow, when they check on the healing.”

Theia’s breathing calmed, but it did not elate her to have to endure for another day what felt like a giant rock on her entire upper body.

“Relax your muscles, love. You do not need to argue now. I understand,” Josephine comforted. “While the cut was deep, no organs had been damaged. Just prolific blood loss and minor infection,” just minor infection, just major blood loss. A few days ago, they were dire details that were anything but “just” simple conditions.

“As you wish, My Lady,” Theia breathed, sinking back into her cushions.

Josephine smiled tenderly. “I can read you a tome from your library, or bring you more water. Or I can send for something light for you to eat, to keep your energy up. I can also—“

“Josephine.”
The Ambassador broke her chain of thought and looked back at her lover, who had a face that said “you’ve done far and away enough.”

“Yes, My Darling?”

“This…this will not be the last…time, that I come back to you…looking like…a piece of scrap meat,” Theia’s voice turned more serious. It made Josephine’s heart sink into her stomach.

“Theia, do not—“

“I…want you to know, though I, I will not always be…unhurt….I will always…..always come back, to you,” she couldn’t believe she could say these words while not crying or falling apart. Perhaps it was the bandages, literally and figuratively, keeping her together.

Josephine’s eyes started to glimmer, the look of a woman who had shed tears too often in the span of three days, but nevertheless found more in store.

“My Love. Please, you do not have to labor yourself anymore for me. I know. I know.”

“Then…come here,” Theia swallowed, her hand reaching up to Josephine’s shoulder.

Cautiously, Josephine crawled forward, and framed her body around Theia’s un-moveable shape. She tucked her arms below her head as she laid on her side, legs bending. Her face was close to Theia’s shoulder, but she took care not to lay on her in any way.

Sweetly, Theia interlocked her fingers with Josephine’s, and did it with a firmness that meant she would not be letting go any time soon. After what she had been through, all of the sensory aspects of her injury, then camp in the snow…the sheer pain of laying there in the open air while people poked and prodded her, argued over a plan of action. Then, the bumpy and slow road back to Skyhold, one she was unconscious for most of. Then, the last lucid images of faces and sounds of alarmed voices before, she assumed, she was put under for surgery.

In the energies of all those horrible times, Theia desired viscerally for two things: 1). To know the safety of her allies in the field, and 2). To know where Josephine was, and if she was safe as well.

Her breathing quieted and stopped resisting the bandage’s limitations.

“Note to self…” she breathed as one last comment on the situation, “get to third base before a new and…hazardous voyage.” Theia could at least hope to get a laugh from Josephine, since she could only imagine the suffering and duress she had endured waiting for her to wake up. The truth of their decision to wait to be intimate until after her return was a matter of limitations and logic. They had only started their romantic relationship two weeks prior to the departure for Emprise do Lion, after all. Their commitment to taking it slow easily devolved into a “hindsight is 2020” situation, though, as Theia and her allies traveled. Theia wouldn’t tell her right off the bat, but once they had crossed the halfway point from Skyhold to Emprise du Lion, she was kicking herself for not bedding her before she left. Romance and courtship be dammed.

The only thing left to be salvaged from the tragedy of that decision was to make it into self-deprecating solace.

It was only a smirk, but it was something.

“My love, you have…interesting, priorities.”

Indeed she did. Indeed, she did.
All Wrapped Up

Chapter Summary

Inquisitor Trevelyan is recovering from her severe injury dealt at Emprise du Lion. Her week at Skyhold filled with medical attention, oversight from her allies, and being kept from any and all “fun” has wore on her, though. Thankfully she gets to have some attempts at mischief when her lover, Ambassador Montilyet, offers to help with something outside her typical duties.

“I am surprised you are minding yourself this well, considering you have always been ready to jump to the next excursion,” the Seeker said, walking slowly alongside the Inquisitor. Lady Trevelyan looked underdressed beside the armored friend she had escorting her along the short courtyard path. For the past week the bandages were her interim small clothes garment, but when she was finally allowed to start walking and do some of her own minor healing spells on herself, she couldn’t be held back in her room by anyone or anything.

Theia smirked softly under her breath. She wore thick resting pants to insulate her legs from the air, and a muslin overshirt to cover her bandages. Around her shoulders as a thick blanket of bear fur, one she held close to her aching muscles. Her pale hair was tied up in a mess of a bun, though a couple braids intertwined made it look intentional – Josephine’s doing, to be sure.

“I know. I could almost pass for Cullen, sulking and wrapped in fur like this,” she joked in return. “Surprisingly, I have found these last couple days to be…comforting,” She was finally able to breath, talk, and walk without heaving for breath. The healers let her bandages be loosened as the sutures began to heal.

“Good. You need those kinds of days, as we all do. Only, you have the more difficult task in such a goal.”

The made their way to a set of steps leading to the stone hallway, and the Seeker outstretched her forearm for the Inquisitor to brace on as she made her way up, her body tensing extra when her right side was being propelled upwards. Her face was as unaffected as it could be – she had been humbled enough by her body for a while.

When they came to the door leading to the great Hall, Cassandra stopped to gaze back out at the Courtyard. “They have taken good care of this place. It provides a valuable place of solace,” she remarked.

“Yes, though, if I see one more bushel of elfroot, I think I’ll start grazing like a Druffalo.” Theia’s humor was laden with fatigue from being messed with, supervised, and escorted every which path she took. She always considered herself an extrovert, though the attentiveness everyone gave her, as if she was more their ward than leader, made her heart heavy. She wanted to be depended on again as a source of strength and solidarity. It was difficult to keep in mind that their care for her was just so, because she was indeed just that.

Still, walking the garden for what felt like the 500th time that week was becoming more monotonous than healing.
As they made their way back to the hall, Cassandra stopped and shifted her weight. “I am afraid I must go back to my duties. Should I ask someone to escort you to wherever you wish to go further?” Cassandra asked with care.

“No, friend, I can find my way to my own chambers. I want to rest, and read some of the reports from this morning again.” Theia wasn’t tip-toeing back into her responsibilities. From the moment she could sit up on her own volition and move her hands without a twinge of connected muscle pain punishing her, she had been receiving her own reports and letters once more. She couldn’t stand the thought of her advisors piling on her own correspondences on top of their own.

“Inquisitor, are you certain? The stairs are steep,” Cassandra cautioned, eyeing Theia knowingly. Toughness and austerity were like a second dialect to the Seeker.

“I can manage. If I fall, I’ll simply laugh all the way down at the tragedy of my existence,” she laughed softly.

Cassandra shook her head, “At least that makes one of us capable of doing so,” she replied, before nodding her head and departing for the Courtyard.

Theia watched her go for a moment, before turning sorely on her hip and sighing. How much longer before she can be rid of this pace? She had been injured before, but nothing that caused more than a limp, or an arm to be in a sling, or her head to ache for a couple days. Having a flesh wound was more trouble than it was worth.

She had the urge to yell up at the sky, “Alright, now it’s either having an Anchor that opens and closes doors to the Fade, OR it’s debilitating flesh wounds. Not both! Got it?”

Skyhold responded with reassurance in the wake of seeing their injured leader. This was the woman who survived an avalanche, and encounter with a possible arch-demon, who traveled through time magic. She could certainly best a battle wound. And, with the way the story was spun, no one besides her close allies and Council members knew the true severity of her circumstance, or how close she came to danger.

No one had cause to fear. Oh, well, besides the prevailing reasons that loomed over them like an apocalypse…you know, because it kind of was one.

The journey was embarrassing for Theia and she had no witnesses. Each step had to be reached with both feet before she could move onto the next one. A hand went protectively to her patched up side as she pressed on, wincing and grunting with frustration. When she got to angry she had to remind herself there were people nearby who’s primary job was to run in the direction of her voice if they heard anything suspect.

It felt like eternity had passed when she finally reached the top, but In actuality it was no more than 5 minutes. Theia was injured, sure, but she was also unreasonable in expectations.

She took a moment to collect herself, steadying her breathing as her gaze went to the spread of papers laying atop her bed. She had three important letters to dispatch today, including a discrete status report to The Iron Bull who remained with his men in Emprise du Lion. The letters they returned were amply entertaining for the Inquisitor during her bed rest, scribbled with sidenotes and exaggerations:

“Boss, demons are here up the ass and Templars are running around looking more mangey than the
actual wolves. The wolves also hate us. It’s some frozen crap up here. I’m starting to think you got the better end of the deal,” one line from Bull.

“We requested more heavy clothes to go under our armor. The Dalish’s “bow” can’t take down enough rams in time. Also, watch yourself with those compression bandages. The heat will get you if you’re not careful,” a note from Krem.

“Everything is faring well and we are remaining steady, and eagerly look forward to your return. Rest easy, Inquisitor, you only have one body to arm,” a sincere and warming note from Blackwall.

She slowly approached her bed, tossing the bear fur onto a nearby chair. The brisk air embraced her upper body and sent goosebumps up and down her arms. Even if it was cold, as she slid out of her muslin shirt, she felt better. Just having the bandage wrapped around her body like a corset and her slacks made her feel like the injury wasn’t as bad as it was.

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A couple of hours had passed, with the Inquisitor sitting on the side of her bed, sifting through notes and fulfilling her paperwork duties. Her flow was broken by the sound of a door knock.

“Please come in!” she called out, but fearing her voice wasn’t heard she flicked one of her wrists, and the downstairs door unlocked and went ajar. Her eyes went back to the lines of text in front of her.

It was Josephine and one of the healers who were tasked with keeping the Inquisitor alive. Surely, she did not get paid enough for such a responsibility, and the Inquisition was known for paying well. Josephine was behind the elven woman, who bowed respectfully, holding a roll of new bandages and some cloth for washing.

“Your Worship, it is time to change your bandages,” the woman advised, holding the materials out. Theia had insisted after the third round of bandage changes that she would do them herself. This was the first time she would do so, though.

Theia slid out of bed very carefully, and walked lightly over to her. “Thank you, Anya. You have taken good care of me,” she greeted, taking the cloth and bandage into her own hands.

The woman named Anya smiled. “Thank you for being a cooperative patient. You are a welcome respite from the soldiers and their…mouths,” she said, knowing Theia wouldn’t take offense. In fact she agreed: nothing could be more vitriolic than the words of an injured soldier, and she could only imagine how they sharpened with the sight of an elven mage.

“Tell me if they cross a line, please;” Theia placed a hand on Anya’s soldier. “I know I keep asking, but, I mean it.”

“Of course, My Lady,” Anya said, nodding again. She turned and greeted Lady Josephine, before departing from the bed chamber.

Theia went to her bed and tossed the supplies on it, reaching for the place in her bandage that secured the outermost end of it.

“I’m starting to think if I kept these on they’d become a second layer of skin like a creature’s hide,” Theia joked with a darker sense of humor than usual these days, no doubt from her impatience at not being able to resume her life as it had been.

Josephine grinned, “You’d look more like Corypheus by the sounds of reports,” she countered.
“Ugh, you’re right, nevermind.”

Theia had started to unravel herself from her binding, but she was stopped when she felt Josephine come up behind her and place a hand on hers. “Theia, I was wondering…”

“Hm?” Theia looked up, brow furrowed with curiosity.

“Would you…let me re-bandage you?” Josephine’s voice was sweet and hopeful. Up until that point, she had witnessed all of Theia’s re-bandaging and check-ups, but she had always been surrounded by healers and personnel. It was hardly a discrete ritual.

Theia froze in place as she was caught off guard by Josephine’s request. “I, uh, well,” she cleared her throat and looked down at her body. “You know what to do?”

Josephine smiled. “I watched like a hawk, and I asked questions. You do not have to humor me, I just…felt an impulse.”

“Sure, Josephine, I don’t mind.” Theia’s voice was warm, humbled. She guided Josephine’s hand with her own to the bandage end and then surrendered both of her arms gently above her head. This made Josephine’s face glow with both nervousness and glee.

Attentively, Josephine exchanged the collecting bandage between her hands as she reached around and around Theia’s waist. Theia watched her movements and kept quiet, the stillness of her face and body at the mercy of Josephine’s touch.

“I am flattered you stepped away from your desk in order to tend to my grotesque and boring battle wounds,” Theia teased, feeling her chest and ribs grow into themselves with the loosening.

“I had a moment, and when I saw Miss Anya heading to your chambers, I took the risk. I am happy it paid off,” Josephine hummed, though she grew quiet as she came to the end of the bandage. Then, she say the compression cloth square that clung to Theia’s side from the endured pressure. Her eyes flickered up to Theia’s, almost as if she were asking for permission. Theia grinned and stayed still.

Gently, ever so gently, Josephine’s right index and thumb fingers picked at the corner edge of the cloth, and it cooperated, damp at her touch. She pulled it away slowly, the sticky sound of its detachment yielding to the sight of an intimidating wound.

The sutures had done their job and had since been removed, at least at the insistence of Theia’s opinion. Once she was out of the woods she could tend to the healing herself with the insights of a couple trusted healers, Anya being one of them. The wound itself was leaving a hefty scar, about 2-2.5 inches in width at its widest point. The wound stretched from the front of her right upper ribs and slid downward towards her hips. It looked like a giant cat had clawed at her.

The tissue was healing well, but the paleness of her skin made every blue, red, and purple hue of bruise and scar known.

It was a quiet moment of aw when Josephine uncovered it all, and finally got to get a clear look at the remaining damage. She couldn’t even process the fact that her lover was topless in front of her, baring herself in the open air, still her same beautiful self but now with war telling its story on her body with a vengeance.

Theia picked up on the irony of it, and when she saw the concern and pause in Josephine’s expression, she sought to break the tension.

“Well, that’s not exactly the look I imagined you’d have when you first saw my bare breasts, but, I’ll
take it,” she teased, holding her waist and chest still as her hands went to her breasts shyly.

Josephine heard her words and blinked rapidly, snapping herself out of it. “Oh, uh, My Lady,” her instinctive rhetoric kicked in. “I mean, Theia, I—“

“It’s alright, Josephine. I understand. But, it looks worse than it is,” Theia comforted, leaning into her lap some more. Josephine felt her weight and became even more self-conscious. Everything felt like a trap into embarrassment. Is this what Theia felt like on a regular basis? Because it was most unsavory.

She managed to step outside of her own thoughts as she watched Theia reach a hand down, pressing the open palm of the hand sans anchor onto the scar. The hand began to glow lightly. It wasn’t anything special, no magical fix-it method of erasing her wound. But, the healing nature of it was just enough to protect from infection and ease the course of healing slightly. That would have to be enough expediency for her. She was comforted by knowing she could do something to help it along besides lay here or there, waiting.

After a moment, the glowing ceded, and she released her hand to fall to her side. She made eye contact with Josephine, who had watched in wonder.

“Do you ever get bored or unimpressed with having these abilities? Like it is simply another limb or sense like taste or smell?” Josephine made conversation.

“Hah, when I get close to it, I ask Dorian to make something interesting happen. Then we go off somewhere and play around. I learn a lot from him, he…learns something from me, I don’t know what, but, I have to think for the sake of my ego.”

“Ah, I see. So that is where the sparks of fire and ice in the tree line just southeast comes from.”

“Um, yeah. We…we try to remain discrete.”

“Try?”

Theia nodded with surrender. “Alright, but you have to admit, it looks rather badass.”

Josephine gave her a look. She had seen a lot of “badass” things if all that required it was elemental magic and the sound of two people being way-too-impressed with themselves for their own good.

“Very well, if you say so,” Josephine said, reaching for the new fresh cloth and folding it into a shape like its predecessor. Theia smirked at the lack of impression she made.

“Oh, that reminds me,” Theia teased further, “the healer actually recommended to me a new position for re-applying my bandage.”

“What? But she did not tell me—“

Theia bit her lip with mischief, and before Josephine could react with reason, she reached her hands and placed them on her shoulders, pushing her back on the bed she had been leaning on. Josephine’s breath escaped her mouth abruptly as she went down. She was confused, then intrigued.

“Theia, what are you doing?” she asked, eyes narrowed and peering down her nose back at her.

Theia was gambling with her believability and allure whilst nursing a wound that made her groan when she sneezed. But, she wanted something to be salvaged in these days of practical vulnerability.
She got her left leg up first without much soreness, and used it to anchor the other, weaker side. She bit bit her lip to hide the difficulty behind an expression of thoughtfulness. It was rough, but she got up to where she wanted to be. Josephine’s hands didn’t know where to go: do they keep her in place? Do they help her?” Do they reach for skin? Where?

Her contemplation bought Theia time, and she was finally there, straddling her woman’s hips, exhaling the tension from her jaw. Josephine knew that had to ache.

“Theia!” Josephine said, her hands finally resolving to fall on Theia’s hips as a gesture of support. “What has gotten into you?”

Theia breathed, the lack of forgiveness in her body perturbing her. “Doing some physical therapy?”

“Oh, please,” Josephine tried to sit up, having her arms reach behind her and push her chest upwards against Theia’s upper body. She didn’t mean it through her concern, but her lips came in close contact with the Inquisitor’s.

“No, really, I needed to stretch my hips. I promise,” Theia breathed, putting her lips within an inch of Josephine’s, breathing hot air as her hands rested on Josephine’s chest as soft as she could while also lightly depending on her body for support.


“You honestly thought I could resist you for a full week? Even with a giant gash in my side? Josephine, please,” her words danced on the entendre of rebuff and begging…the worst and best kind.

“You know what you are doing and you know it is unwise. Now, if you can get on our right side, I can help you down and it will not risk…” Josephine began to shift her weight forward, as much as she could without forcing Theia’s fragility into an unintentional fall or slip.

Theia beared down on her seat, she was not giving up easily, Her hands went to Josephine’s hair, fingers hungering to get lost in the ribbons of black curls that remained secured in her classic bun.

Her shoulders curved into Josephine’s body. She had her effectively pinned enough; even with the wound, Theia had the build of a Knight-Enchanter in training, and it was not frail nor compact.

“Josephine, I have a secret to tell you,” Theia breathed on the skin of her lover’s neck as she left kisses in its path, “you have a topless and besotted woman on top of you. Choose your next move carefully,” she said low, irresistible, enticing. She couldn’t see it, but she could feel it: Josephine closed her eyes, the buried desire she had kept in the midst of stress and duty coming to the fore.

“That woman,” Josephine exhaled, her hands moving to Theia’s sides with care not to hurt her “is after my own heart. But she is also recovering, and is being attended to generously by the hands of her lover who is also a busy and demanded-upon Diplomat. Perhaps she should rethink her advance for now,” Josephine pulled her head back enough to make eye contact with Theia.

Theia’s chest raised as she inhaled with longing and disappointment. A pause, while she scanned Josephine’s conflicted face. She knew she wanted her, but something in her gut spurred at her: not now, not like this.

“As you wish, Lady Ambassador,” Theia whispered. She was about to pull away and slide down, but the back of her neck was caught by Josephine’s hand. Suddenly, Josephine’s mouth was to hers, in a quiet, still kiss. One with conviction, one that was relentlessly waiting for it to be able to grow into something beyond itself.
Theia kissed back, letting the consolation prize flood her veins and her nerves like a forest fire. She could feel her magic oscillate, and in her left palm, the Anchor’s energy stirred.

Ten seconds of bliss, before back to the reality of it.

Josephine helped her slide down gently, until Theia was back on her feet in front of her. Instead of pushing her fully away from her grasp, she tenderly wrapped her legs around Theia’s upper thighs, securing her stance in front of her. Smiling knowingly, Josephine grabbed the cloth again, and, finishing the folding, tilted her head as she pressed it on the wound with a fully-open palm. Now, it was time for the bandage.

Busying herself, Josephine’s hands held the roll of bandage as she began unraveling it. Theia took the opportunity to wrap her arms around Josephine’s neck loosely, keeping her close. Even though she did not get what she originally wanted, in that moment it felt like the alternative was proving to be better than expected. She enjoyed this side of Josephine, a side where you could see just how truthfully and intimately she cared for the good. That is when the thoughts started interjecting themselves in Theia’s stream of consciousness: those terrifying, enthralling, deadly, enlightening words.

I’m falling in love with you.

When she had found the end of the bandage knot, Josephine paused, and let her hands fall heavily on her lap. Her face was lost in thoughts.

Concerned, Theia let a hand caress the Ambassador’s cheek. “Hm?” she hummed, her eyes looking for truth in Josephine’s.

Josephine gazed up at her for a moment, before a pang of weakness enveloped her again. She let her hands grasp at Theia’s ribs, and her face went to her abdomen. Deeply, reverently, lovingly, she kissed the indent between Theia’s lightly-sloping abdominal muscles.

The act sent butterflies racing in Theia’s stomach. Not even the subtle ache it caused in her wound was noticeable beyond a fleeting sting. Her arms enclosed their grip tighter around Josephine’s neck, her own lips falling to rest on the top of her head.

“My love,” Theia whispered into her hair, “I don’t remember this part of the bandaging process.”

Josephine’s lips parted from Theia’s skin as she laughed lightly. “Some healing touches go beyond manual direction.”

Eventually, the Lady Ambassador was able to finish what she started. While her execution was not, the end result was nothing but textbook. And no one knew just what her secret ritual had been to get there.
Mistress of The Inquisition

Chapter Summary

While the recovery process has been arduous, Inquisitor Trevelyan is ready to disembark and return to her primary responsibility of battle and conquest for the Inquisition’s side. One night stands between her and her departure, and one final wish of her love creates a disturbance in the short-lived respite she has enjoyed. It is back to reality, and perhaps not all of what helped her recover was meant to survive, after all.

The eve had finally arrived: tomorrow morning, the recovered Inquisitor would return to the front in Emprise du Lion to help finish what the Inquisition started. The Iron Bull and his Chargers had done well to maintain their holds and even put pressure on the quarry stronghold, but now, the game was going to be on again.

Her scar still looked sort of beastly, but it was dormant for the most part. The soreness in her side had largely subsided save for a weary ache when she overworked her abdomen in rehabilitation training. The surgeon warned that the blade had cut through some of the muscle, and would take time to rebuild its strength and durability. If she could manage, she would stretch out at the end of her days before going to sleep.

Theia stood in the Courtyard, observing the last bit of packing for their early morning departure. The lucid evening was giving way to opaque night, but the light fringe of blues on the horizon left them with some light to finish up under. Theia wore her rest clothes, a step up from a top made of bandage and pants that felt like a pelt. For all who witnessed her, she looked completely back to normal.

“Inquisitor,” Cassandra approached, “It seems that we are all set for the morning. The dinner will begin soon. I will not be there, however, as I wish to get some rest.”

Theia grinned and nodded back to her ally, who stood at her left side now. “Understandable. I have sent you all across this countryside defending my broken ass,” she teased.

“Hopefully, this time I will not have to bring you back in two pieces.”

Theia chuckled and waved her away playfully. “Don’t tempt me, Seeker, I have a penchant for trouble.”

Another woman approached, coming to stand on the Inquisitor’s right side. Varric called her Ruffles, Leliana called her Josie, but for the last two weeks, Theia had been fighting every urge to refer to her as the woman she was falling deeply in love with.

“Inquisitor, I see you are prepared for the morning’s events,” Josephine greeted, leaning her head forward and nodding at Seeker Cassandra with warmth.

Theia looked down and eyed the two pieces of parchment that had been in her hands, reporting stock levels of supplies, rations, and weapons. “Yes, at last, back to business. Something tells me the crew up there will be more than willing to let me return to my position at the front line.”

That made Cassandra smirk. “Lady Montilyet, Inquisitor, I will retire. We shall see each other in the
morning, Your Worship.” Then, a withdraw back up the courtyard stairs. With her exit, Josephine inched towards Theia’s side a little closer.

For the past couple weeks, the Ladies Ambassador and Inquisitor scarcely spent private time apart from one another. Indeed, most nights Josephine spent in Theia’s room, and simply woke early enough to steal away into her own bedroom to prepare for the day. Those early morning goodbyes were evergreen in their bittersweetness, but the day would brighten up as they were able to work together, pushing for the end of the day when the night would take hold of the sky and they would take hold of each other. And while they had not yet crossed the threshold into sexual intimacy per se, the nights they spent together were soaked down to the bone with adoration, intimacy, and vulnerability. Hours of conversation, storytelling until the light breaths of sleep could be heard from the other’s chest, ravenous embraces in the temperamental firewall.

Josephine had quickly become Theia’s closest confidant of her emotions, and had gained access to many sides of the Inquisitor that had remained shut away from prying eyes and mouths. People began to take to heart the assumption that wherever Lady Trevelyan was, Lady Montilyet was not far away, and vice versa. Surprisingly, the question of just how many of the Inquisitor’s goings-on were that important to diplomacy was not brought up as much as it could have. Perhaps no one thought to dare either of the formidable women’s tempers with such a critique.

But, back to the conversation at hand.

“Who is all going with you this time?” Josephine asked, watching the men pack.

“Dorian and Cassandra only, well, and some troop reinforcement of course. We have Warden Blackwall and Bull awaiting us. I would just bring Cassandra, but I need Dorian to help with rehabilitation training and to be my back-up if I falter.” Theia sounded so professional, so authoritative, even as she admitted to her weaknesses. Her and Dorian had been doing their forest adventures as soon as she was able to reliably wield a staff without buckling over, and he had been helping her recover her dexterity when casting and using a staff as a bladed weapon. Some days were more arduous than others, and there were multiple nights where Theia would return with a limp or extra soreness. But, it made her stronger, and she knew she would have to be rough on herself in order to prepare for the lethalness of the Emprise du Lion’s grasp once more.

“I understand. I have half a heart to warn Dorian that if he lets anything happen to you, I will have all of his garments re-sown in that ghastly plaidweave.” Josephine’s irreverence towards Dorian was part impatience with his vanity, and also an ironic fondness. He was Theia’s close confidant, and he had been there when she needed him most. Though, there were times when he would run his mouth, and Josephine would feel like banging her head against her desk, wondering why Theia couldn’t pick better friends.

Theia laughed under her breath. “He would adore that, I’m sure. You know he insists that you secretly love him and are using me as only a coddled stepping stone on the way to your true paramore?”

“Oh, please.”

“Tell me once and tell me honestly, my love, I will forgive you–”

“Theia!”

The Inquisitor couldn’t help but let a jubilant laughter erupt from her chest as she folded her stock papers and slid them under her belt. “My love, the sooner you grow a patience for sarcasm, the better for your health.” Theia snuck a caressing hand on Josephine’s cheek, discrete and easily missed if
you blinked. A small token of sweetness before turning towards the stairs.

Josephine sighed heavily and followed after her. “The sooner you have respect for my worries, the better for your health. Corypheus isn’t the only temper you should take caution with.”

“Oh, a threat, Lady Montilyet? In my sanctum of Andraste?”

“Andraste would understand the consequences of one’s trifling.”

“Well then, let me know what she would wish my punishment to be,” as soon as they had the cover of the stone stairs on the second level of the courtyard, Theia reached a desirous hand around Josephine’s waist and pulled her close, backing herself up against the stone walling and her Love up against her.

Josephine gasped like a true lady, aghast at the intention but aroused at the boldness. Her hands went up against Theia’s chest, feet trying to not trip. Their mouths came within an inch of one another, and Josephine couldn’t help but grin. Her eyes couldn’t evade the touch of sadness in them.

“She would say you did not have to go.”

Theia eyed her longingly, surprised even with her audacious move that the Ambassador would admit such a thing in the open air of the fortress.

“Josephine,” Theia comforted, a hand moving upwards and adjusting a fallen strand of Josephine’s curls. “I will be careful. I promise. You know me, I always come back from a fight.”

“Yes, but for how long? You came so close this time…”

“I was healed and recovered. Cassandra brought me back herself. I have so many allies around me at any given time. I wish you would have come out to watch me rehab train, you would feel so much better having seen me back on my two feet.”

“Training practice and the thick of battle are two different things, my Darling.”

Theia let air release from her lungs. Thoughtfully, she pursed her lips, her forehead leaning into Josephine’s. “I don’t know what you want from me. I must go. You are one of my advisors, you help make all of this possible. You act as if I want to leave you,” she swallowed with nervousness.

Josephine could see her emotions were muddying the waters for them in this moment. She had tested the air with her sentimentality and had seen just how stressful it could be. It made her stomach turn with anxiety. Could they sustain this? The leaving and going, with the emotions of lovers, and the diligent duty of allies?

“I am sorry. I know you have to do this. I have moments of shortsidedness.” Josephine curtailed her admonitions for now. Pulling away from Theia, but locking a hand with hers, she beckoned them to keep walking.

Theia grinned sorely. As they approached the second round of stairs, stairs she now walked without pain again, she thought of a way to lighten the mood. Maybe now she would ask.

“There is something you could do that would bring me great honor and happiness. It’s small, but, that only means less work on your part.”

“Hm? And what, exactly, is that?”
Josephine stopped in her tracks, and eyebrow raising as she looked her lover in the eyes. “You…you cannot be seriously suggesting that?”

Theia shook her head in confusion. “What do you mean?”

“Enter at your side…like a mistress of your house?” Josephine stepped back, a tone of temper in her voice.

Theia immediately felt the shift in mood, and trying to retain some semblance of control, she gripped onto Josephine’s enjoined hand and guided her energetically to a more sequestered corner of the upper courtyard, by the door to the Gardens.

When they arrived at their destination, Theia turned and faced her.

“Josephine, I did not mean it like that.”

Lady Montilyet’s eyes narrowed. “Then how? Is this really how you want this to be?”

“I am confused as to what you mean, but, if you’re referring to you being at my side and everyone respecting it as such, then, yes?”

“Gah!” Josephine turned around and paced with frustration. Theia was even more confused now. It was like oils slipping out of her hands and her trying feverishly to re-collect it into a bottle.

“You spent your early childhood in the walls of a noble house. Tell me, did you ever remember banquets where the man would enter with a woman at his side?” Josephine’s voice became her curt and exacting side.

“Um, yes. A few.”

“And on how many occasions was that woman their wife?”

Theia shrugged her shoulders impatiently. “I don’t know, I was a child? I could not ascertain—“

“No worry, I can give an adequate estimate. Hardly or none.”

Theia sighed with exasperation. “So, your point is that you’d be like a mistress…to…an unmarried woman?”

“Oh, would you just listen!”

“I am listening, I suppose I’m just dumb?”

Josephine turned to face her, a moment of tense silence consuming the air around them, as she warned herself in her mind to keep her voice low.

“Theia, you forget that I have my own reputation to maintain. I am the Chief Diplomat of the Inquisition. I am the eldest of a noble family. I am an accomplished politician. Everyone attending that banquet tonight will greet me, even with all of my accolades, and you know what they will see? A woman entranced by the shadow of another, enveloped in intrigue and idle lust.”

Bashful anger began to brew in Theia’s chest. “You’d function your life around the thoughts of gossip-starved people than what would make you happy?”
“Parading around Skyhold as your mistress would make me anything but happy.”

“I never asked you to parade, only that you would walk into a damn dinner with me. You do it with Leliana and Cullen all the time!”

“Yes, as the Council, it is so different a situation. That is hardly comparable to an implication that I am now the Mistress of the Inquisition.”

Theia went silent, caught off guard by that specific string of words. She had clearly let the intimacy and quietness of their last two weeks cloud her judgement, but she never meant to disrespect or degrade Josephine’s position. Perhaps she had spent time in a noble home as a small child, but all the knowledge she had of goings-on in the lap of luxury came from stories and books in the Circle. The idea of entering a gilded and warm dining hall with the woman she adored and respected by her side, like the heroes in heroines in her story, touched her. But what those stories did not infer was the political and diplomatic affairs of two women who had dedicated their lives to a Holy War.

“Josephine, I know I haven’t opened up much about my past or my time in the Circle, but, you should know that I mean it when I say my noble birth was about the most “noble” aspect of my life. I was not a child that wanted for anything, that is for sure and for certain. But the minute I became myself, I was ostracized. They sent me to the Circle as soon as they could, and there I stayed, until the rebellion when I was on the run and at the mercy of wherever we could go and remain safe for a night or two. The outside world and the gilded walls I thought I was supposed to belong in were closed off from me. So, forgive me if I am not well-versed in the elusive underpinnings of walking into a fortress banquet hall with the one person I care about most.”

Theia put her hands on her hips and stepped to the side, eyeing the floor, trying not to grind her jaw into dust.

Josephine’s postured had softened, but the temper in her was still thriving. As much as she longed to understand Theia’s perspective, she saw the bigger picture in play, and she could not concede her obligations for the imagination of anyone.

“Theia, you must remember that not all situations will take care with the truth of your life. It is my foremost responsibility to advise you in these circumstances and I will happily do so for as long as you wish me to. But this includes saying no when you so desperately wish me to say yes.”

“So your true wish after all is to steer me in the right direction, and not be with me because you sincerely wish to.”

“You would say that to me after all I have done, after all I have endured in the wake of your endangerment?” Josephine’s voice took a higher, more emotional pitch. Her voice cracking with emotion.

“If that was so hard, surely being seen with me in a formal and non-flippant fashion would be effortless.”

“It is my responsibility to avoid such errors in decorum, Inquisitor. I cannot oblige if I am to remain true to that.”

“Yes, thank you. I will watch my mouth from now on then, to be sure.”

With that, Theia bowed her head with a burdened stoicism. “I shall see you at the banquet, Lady Ambassador.” The Inquisitor then walked away with a brisk step towards the stairs.

“Theia! Ugh,” Josephine called out to her, but for naught. As she was left alone, the anxiety of the
night filled Josephine’s body with dread.

She is leaving tomorrow, and that might have been our last conversation.

When Inquisitor Trevelyan entered the Great Hall, the banquet tables pushed together in the middle of the room all together so as to unite one table and one force of voices, she felt all eyes turn to her. She wore a simple grey set of a coat and slacks, similar to her resting clothes but with a tad more embellishment. As she came to her seat at the head of the table, she smiled broadly. The lines of people she adored – some more ferociously than others – greeted her with warmth in return.

“My friends, thank you for honoring me with this gathering. As you have known, I have spent quite some time having the audacity to be injured.” A rumble of chuckling reverberated through the room.

“But, alas, the Healers and surgeons are too good at what they do. And for that, I have welcomed them to dine with us tonight, to regale you in stories of my fallibility.” She picked up her chalice and held it out towards the subsection of faces to the left-hand side of the table, at the several personnel who had so wonderfully oversaw her recovery. Anya’s kind face being one of them.

Her eyes then returned to oversee the rest of the densely-packed table.

“We return to the front in the early dawn, but now, we enjoy each other’s company, and relish the life we’ve been given. And that is what I drink to tonight!” The room erupted in voices and people putting their lips to their drinks along with the Inquisitor. After all was said and done, she took her seat, and the feast was there for all to sink their teeth into.

Meat, fruit, and various other tastes had been plated and mouths chewed on both gossip and dinner like a feast before a battle. Theia made easy conversation with those seated closest to her: Vivienne and Dorian being among them. Cullen and Sister Leliana were paired together on the right-hand side, further towards the middle, strategically placed so as to pick up on anything and everything of importance. Lady Montilyet was seated on the left-hand side, betwixt the nobles, as was her specialty.

The imagery marked the farthest positioned the Inquisitor and the Ambassador had been, and for the longest, without engaging with one another so much as a nod or a wave, or a tacit smile.

“My friend, I am thrilled to be heading back into the snowy desolate hellscape the South has given such an illustrious name. Though, I will admit, you owe me at least several generous favors,” Dorian joked, chewing a bite of meat on the side of his mouth.

Theia smirked, sitting back fully in her chair. She had taken a break from eating, though her appetite had vanished an hour or so before she even sat down. “Dorian, I will be at your beck and call, every demon, every giant, you may use me as your shield.” Their party banter was fact becoming legend in the halls of Orlais. Surely, they would get numerous invitations to soirees and parties if they survived the war.

Theia would not favor his clever company, though, out of respect for the rest of her company. She tilted her head in Vivienne’s direction and smiled. “Madame de Fer, my people are still scouting for the remaining Circle Tomes you told me about. When we have a general idea, I will secure them myself.”

“My dear, thank you. It will be most relieving to have custody of them again.”

Theia nodded reassuringly before reaching and trying to take another forkful of food. She knew she
needed her strength for the morning, but every time she motioned for food, her stomach turned sour.
The nerves rattling from her conflict with Josephine were gnawing at her. It was made worse every
time she took a gander at Josephine’s seat, and saw her smiling and giggling with her textbook allure.
The noblemen seated on either side of her were beguiled, pouring her wine for her, while she
sweetly grinned in return.

It made her want to set their bogus masks and hates aflame, and it took a lot to make Theia crave pyro.

Leliana watched carefully as she caught the Inquisitor looking again in the Lady Ambassador’s
direction with a look as if she had just ingested a sour gulp of wine.

“They have quarreled” she said in a hushed tone, leaning towards Cullen’s ear.

Cullen, robustly chewing a mouthful of food like any sensible soldier would, eyed Leliana through
his periphery, the scoffed. “Leliana, you’re getting court intrigue in my peas, again,” he said low and sarcastic.

“Cullen, you’re always happier with food in front of you, why not look like it,” Leliana countered.
“This effects the productivity of the Inquisition, much to your dismay. A distracted Diplomat means stressed negotiations. A distracted Inquisitor means a possibly dead Inquisitor. Take care.”

The Commander swallowed his bite and took another sip of wine to wash it down. “They are both adults. Perhaps this will embolden the Inquisitor to refocus on her responsibilities at hand.”

Leliana’s heart and chest stiffened with stubbornness. She knew all-too-well the consequences of arguments between two lovers cast into the thick of the Game and the Battlefield. She recalled a few times in her life with the Hero of Fereldan, and how a spat or fight turned into angry energy utilized in the thick of combat. Sometimes it would end in…very deep and apologetic embraces, and others, cold shoulders in the night. Either way, the situations always made her feel a pang of regret for losing focus on what mattered.

The sympathy in her bones that ached for Josephine, and by extension the Inquisitor, left a sorry taste in her mouth as she ate.

Theia once again ripped her eyes from the sight of Josephine hard at work with her words and mannerisms, and she decided there was no more room for food tonight. She took a deep breath, another gulp of wine, and looked at Dorian.

“My friend, I fear I should retire. You should feel free to as well, since you and I have the same plans tomorrow.”

“Me? Retire? Inquisitor, I should sooner die and be made a martyr in the Chantry! Go, be boring and sleep,” Dorian patted her on the shoulder, making her smile bittersweetly. Calmly, she rose to her feet, causing everyone to stop and turn their attention towards the tall figure of the Inquisitor.

“My friends, I am afraid it is time for me to follow in the footsteps of Seeker Pentaghast and prioritize my rest. I am sorry to be leaving such warm and rejuvenating company, but please, stay as long as you like, and do not get into too much trouble while I am away,” her words were tender-hearted, like her chest had been aching with sentimentalities all evening.

She did not look for too long, but if she did, she would have seen Josephine’s face sink from a face of charm to a face of concern. She did not let it stay that way for long, but the fact that she let it stay at all was telling for her friend, the Spymaster. They had quarreled, and it was not left on good terms.
Everyone mumbled and worded their goodbyes to the Inquisitor as she bowed her head in respect and sought her way out to her bed chambers for the evening. The dinner continued to run its course until late, and eventually, the Hall quieted and darkened.

Theia sat on the railing of the balcony, her feet over the edge and hovering over the 2-3 story drop, perhaps more, but she wasn’t going to see for herself. She wore a long-leeved night dress of dark ring velvet, one that hugged her body like armor, but twice as deadly to look at. She had wore it two separate nights while Josephine slept over, once she could wear more “high-maintenance” garments over her bandage. Josephine adored it, and could hardly keep her hands off of the smoothness and richness of Theia’s body wrapped up in the texture of luxurious velvet.

Perhaps, tonight, she wore it for herself, because the touch of Josephine’s hands and the smell of whatever body oils she used still lingered in its stitches.

“Inquisitor, if I may have a word,” Leliana’s voice broke through the quiet night like a nocturnal thief. Theia was surprised, but did not let it show in her body. She continued to gaze out at the mountains.

“Inquisitor, I did not even here you come in,” Theia greeted, her shoulders rolling back.

“I have my own entrance style, you know as well as I,” Leliana responded, coming out into the balcony, standing beside Theia’s seat on the railing.

“What is your concern, then? Another man going missing with a mission to stick me with a dinner knife?” Theia reminisced for a moment on the last time Leliana was in her bed chambers after hours, with a similar look of concern and nervousness.

Leliana smirked, hands behind her back as she looked out as well.

“Inquisitor, I watched you and Josephine tonight. You were not as engaged with each other as you have been these past weeks. Has something happened?” she went straight to the point, in typical Leliana fashion. Theia appreciated it, even when it felt like a punch to the gut, a body part that was a stressful one for her as of late.

“We were seated far away from each other, surely to skip over that many people just to have dinner banter would have been arbitrary for the both of us,” Theia tried to put up a front, but she knew Leliana already had her eyes and teeth waiting to get into the jugular of the circumstance. Perhaps this was just formality.

“Inquisitor, I know the face you made when you watched her mingle. It was not one of polite consideration, it was one of seething jealousy. Jealousy after a couple has differences and does not successfully put them to bed before night festivities. If I was still a Bard, it would have gone on the top of my report to my patron.”

“Leliana,” Theia said, flipping her legs around and hopping down from the railing, “There is so much for me to focus on right now than this, and I am not sure what you hoped to get out of me tonight, but, I beg for your mercy in this,” she peered at Leliana from her side, a face of sincere fatigue.

“What happened to make you two so estranged? Surely the meaning of this last night before your travels would make you want to cling even closer.”

“Leliana.”
“Inquisitor.”

Theia sighed and turned away, stepping towards the other side of the balcony, trying half-heartedly to get some space. Leliana watched her, knowing she was close, but also with the fact in mind that Theia would put up a fight. There were layers to this Inquisitor, many for the sake of self-preservation, but also ones for the sake of duty, of respect.

“Whatever you say, I only ask for honesty. Your truth will not break my respect for you, your dishonesty will,” Leliana advised, remaining where she stood, stalwart.

There was a silence, while Theia pondered her options. She knew Leliana would find out sooner or later what had transpired, whether it be from her mouth, Josephine’s, or the mouth of one of her people. Their argument was in a quiet corner, but not in a secured room. Surely it garnered someone’s attention.

Fine, then.

“I asked something of her that insulted her position. We could not see eye-to-eye on it, and I left it there.”

“What did you ask?” Leliana became concerned, as it she was about to hear something grotesque or cruel. A defensive and loyal friend through and through.

“I asked her to enter the banquet hall with me tonight, at my side. And she—“

“She declined because she does not wish to be diminished to the position of a leader’s mistress.”

Theia swallowed. “Yes, but, that was not my intention, because—“

“Because you were not familiar with such nuances, and genuinely wished for her to enter as your beloved equal. She could only see the ramifications on the big picture of it, and rebuked your sentimentalities, which in turn made you upset.”

“Leliana.”

“Inquisitor?”

“If you knew what had happened, why did you come to interrogate me?”

“I did not know what had happened, but I do know how to fill in blanks. I also know my friend and colleague extremely well.”

Theia folded her arms tightly and shifted her weight between her feet. “Well, then, what is it you wish to say?”

Leliana let the silence take the helm before she responded. Though her hood was covering most of her head and some of her face, Theia could still make out her lightly-colored, luminescent eyes as she scanned out at the sky and landscape. She still wasn’t sure if she was about to get told that it was “say sorry” or else, or if she was about to start crying. It was very obscure and uncharted territory between the Inquisitor and the Spymaster.

Finally, the verdict.

“I know I have kept the details of my past and life with the Hero of Fereldan to my chest, Inquisitor. Most of that has been for the sake of security and austerity. Some of it has been for my own, personal
sake. However, when my experiences are useful, I put them to work. You have depended on me for that, no?"

Theia was caught of guard, not really sure how to read the situation. She nodded once, curious as to where this would all lead.

“She and I traveled together, even after the events of the Blight. It is weird, to have a life after an event such as that. You swear to yourself not to get attached to anything or anyone, and then you do. Everything in your mind’s eye is screaming at you to reject, to turn away. And then, she appears. She changes everything. Then she survives, and the disaster you planned for is evaded...for the time being. In the meantime, you must piece together a life, a purpose, again. Still, half of you is already grieving her existence in your life as you watch her assume her destiny.”

Leliana had approached the railing once more, looking away from Theia, who watched and listened like nothing could tear her away from witnessing such an insightful testimony from someone she revered and was terrified of all the same.

“Loving a woman who’s fate is to stare death and destruction in the face and smile is no easy task, Inquisitor. I know. And Josephine does not even have the luxury of walking at your side in the field, weapon unsheathed, with the ability to fool herself into thinking if something comes for you, she can be the wall between you and that danger. The motivation and aggression that takes hold when you walk that path is unlike any other. You feel invincible, and at the same time, ready to be obliterated like scrap metal. Yet, the reality is, you leave her every time you throw yourself into the lion’s den, and she waits as much as she works.”

“Leliana, I—“

“But she is still a woman of formidable power in her own right. She still has the weight of empires on her shoulders. She is one of your mouths, one which parleys and negotiates on your behalf, on all of our behalf. She does vital work for us, and is depended upon greatly. And when she is not our Diplomat, she is someone’s daughter, sister, heir. The future. Surely, she cannot part with that either, while her heart aches for you to be alive with every day that passes in your absence.”

Theia stayed quiet, fearing if she tried to interject once more, Leliana would fly away like one of her ravens.

“I know you meant well. It touches me, actually, thinking someone would want to adorn and hold my friend close in such a way. But, in order to understand her anger, you must also understand all she has to lose. If she fails, if she sells herself short, and then, if she loses you.”

A pause of silence. Theia finally felt like the floor had reopened to her.

“Leliana, I cannot even begin to describe the feelings I have for Josephine. Every time I do, my mind just overwhelsms itself beyond reason. But, perhaps she has the right idea. I cannot bear to make her into some sort of lustful figure, but I also can’t deal with not being able to claim her. I do not mean to possess her as an object, but...I look at her, and I want to tell the entire world she is mine. Mine to love, mine to protect.”

“I know, but such things are not always possible. You have a choice, as we all do, when we choose to love women who have destinies greater than their own whims: do you still choose to love her when she cannot belong to you, or will you let her go, to fulfill that destiny alone?”

The words hit Theia’s heart with a pang of misery.
“I will say this, Inquisitor,” Leliana came closer, until only about a few feet separated them, “Fulfilling a great fate alone is hardly comparable to doing it with someone you know, who will always be at your side, ready to fight, ready to do what must be done. She will be regretful tonight, alone, in her room. I know her well enough to say that you leaving in the morning with this being your parting terms will rob her of sleep. Go to her, if your choice is to not back down.”

“It cannot be so easy.”

“Some things are so easy, we make the worst mistakes in overlooking their importance. I will retire now. Thank you for talking with me, Your Worship.”

Leliana bowed her head, her expression one of a friend warning another of her risky decisions. After all the time, Theia was awe-struck to be so confided in by a woman she believed beyond such interactions. It made her admiration and respect of Leliana grow ten-fold, and it was already amassed beyond measure.

Theia went and sat on the couch in front of the fire, anxiously staring at the burning wood. She could go to her, she could slam on the door, she could get on her knees and beg for Josephine to forgive her. She could swoop in, wrap her in her arms, and kiss her so deeply that her body would come undone. She could talk and talk and talk for hours with her, without tiring or growing uninterested. She could sift through and play with her beautiful hair, practice intricate braids and twists. She could read books of poetry and prose to her as she fell asleep on her lap. She could step forward, rip her night dress off her body, and lay herself out for the taking. The world was at her feet, the feet of a remorseful lover.

Or, she could crawl into her own bed, leave the fire to run its course in the fireplace, leave the balcony doors open like she always did to breath in the air, and then, when she felt sleep draw near, she could blow out the remaining candle on her nightstand table.

And that is exactly what she did.

In the morning, she would awake, and encase her body in thick, metaled armor, while the night sky still embraced itself in darkness. She would comb her hair into a tight bun, without personality. She would pack her satchel with herbs and some meat jerky from the kitchen for the long road. She would stomp her heavy, equipped legs down the steps, and through the Great Hall, where bodies of sleepy troops would be flurrying around and preparing to leave. She would find Seeker Cassandra, who was ready and fiery as she always was, unburdened by the early morning fatigue that seemed to run amok with everyone else. She would greet her, before slipping on her riding gloves, stretching them out with her fingers.

She would look up at the façade of windows on the front of the Skyhold hall, wondering just how long it would be before she woke up. Or if she was awake still. Just for a moment, before a soldier would bring her ready horse to her to mount. When that would happen, she would mount unceremoniously, turn to the men taking control of the wagon, and nod once. A nod of “we’re moving out.” Then, she would take her place at the front of the wary processional, beside Cassandra on horseback. Dorian of course, in the supply wagon, sleeping amongst their weaponry. Always the best spot to be in, he would say.

She would be gone in what felt like a swooping, unforgiving morning wind. But, not before she had stolen away into Josephine’s empty office. Leaving a single note on a small piece of torn parchment, sealed by a small stamp of wax, crimson in color.

A note that said only one line that was everything and not nearly enough.
“My equal, my advisor, my friend, my confidant –

I am sorry.

T”
Fate Unsealed

Chapter Summary

Josephine Montilyet isn’t easily caught of balance, but with the morning of her lover’s departure to the front lines encroaching hour by hour, she is left to her own devices and thoughts. Stressed sleep ends in a dream that fast becomes a nightmare, which then turns into an omen. Lady Montilyet can play the Game as well as anyone, but what happens when the rules distort themselves beyond recognition?

The night was agony, and as soon as the festivities had concluded, Josephine felt free to finally worry about the pressing issues on her mind, rid of having to put up a façade to those around her that she was the same engaging and lively diplomatic mind she was. She had watched the Inquisitor all evening at dinner, though she couldn’t tell for certain whether she was surveilling her in return. The two men on either side of her seat seemed bent on distracting and charming her, and their mediocre attempts to do so were obnoxious at best.

So, when the Inquisitor retired early, and left the Hall for good, Josephine’s heart sank through her chest again. No word, no nod, no anything. It was the antithesis of how they had been for weeks, and being rebuffed so harshly with so little time left between now and her departure instilled a sense of panic within her.

After the revelry had been spent and she, herself retired to her own chambers, she realized just how alien it felt to be in her own room after what had transpired. The bed had been made for weeks, untouched and unneeded. At best, she would come here to nap on the couch or be dressed/bathed in the morning. Even her personal correspondences took place in her office.

The room was cold, not in the normal way. It felt like a hole in the wall, lonely, impractical. Nothing of her was here, save for letters and a few small gifts she had tucked away in her trunk. There were no imprinted memories, no lingering aromas or sensations of her. She was traceless.

Josephine sat at the side of her bed, poised and collected in posture. She was finally alone and still, having to reckon with just how much Theia had swept up her life and senses beyond repair. She had flown to her side at the revelation of her injury, doted on her, oversaw her care, without being asked to do so once. It was a responsibility she gripped on for dear life in the face of so much unknown.

Her trance of emotions was broken by the sound of her door opening. It was her maid, Berenice, who obviously did not expect to see her Mistress in her room so late in the night. She flinched at the sight of Josephine on her bed. “My Lady!” she quickly curtsied in recompense, “I did not… expect…” her words escaped her mouth before she could think, maybe, it wasn’t wise to say your Mistress was expected to be sleeping in the bed of another.

Josephine sighed silently and nodded dismissively. “Yes, Berenice, I know. You thought I wouldn’t be here.” She slid off her bed and went to her clothes trunk. Untying and unwinding the clothes from her body herself, before Berenice could do it for her, she tossed them onto the nearest chair and reached for the trunk lid, opening it with frustration.

Berenice quickly tried to play catch up, reaching for the side of her trunk where all of her night clothes were neatly folded and organized by color and fabric. Josephine stood upright and did not
wait for ceremony, taking off more layers as urgently as she could before she was only in her neatly-tailored smallclothes. It felt as if it were a whirlwind, getting her into her night dress, a simple grey number with light embellishments down the side of her waist, and the classic puffy sleeve style of her attire. Once she was all fitted and adjusted, she turned now to her smaller and more ornamental desk, eyeing the bottle of ink and quill, and nearby parchment. She contemplated impulsively that she could just send one final note, or sneak one letter into her supplies trunk for her to read when she was out there. Perhaps she could preserve her pride and say what was on her mind.

Josephine stopped herself, though, when she remembered just how unpredictable Theia was with writing and correspondence of personal nature. The lack of response would make her nervous, even if Theia did not mean it hurtfully. This time, she might intend to leave her hanging, and that was worse.

Hours passed without sleep coming to provide escape. She laid in her bed, only one sheet drawn of three, eyeing the ceiling like she wanted it to talk to her. Tell her stories, comfort her nerves, play with her hair, pull at the fabric of her night dress in temptation. Slip a hand underneath it and grip onto her side as it slept beside her. There was nothing, no hot breath, no cooing sounds of dreaming, or distressed rumbling to comfort.

Oh, she had made a mess of her, that foolish woman.

How could she expect her to level herself down to the stature of a Mistress? Of a courtesan? Even if she was uneducated in the consequences, she should have conceded once it was explained to her. How could she insist on something that Josephine could not afford to do in good conscience? She could see the letters from her Mother now: “What are you gambling with, taking the bed of the Inquisitor? Is there something you’re after, or have you been blinded by infatuation?”

Perhaps it was both. Perhaps neither.

She should have reminded herself, back when she was tending to her in her sick bed, that playing with something so powerful would burn her. If only she could have remained intent on reality as she watched her sleep, her paleness ill and not porcelain, her hair tangled and tousled from being pressed to a pillow. She had to have known what she was doing, that Theia. Laying there, being so beautiful, even when she had endured injury and surgery.

But no, this was Josephine’s fault. She should have kept on her feet, not given into fancy or fairytale tropes of ardor. If she had just resisted the urges, looked away every time the light of the Council room window cast on her face and cheekbones in that picturesque way, kept talking when her purple, iridescent eyes had looked into hers. Beguiling her every sense and nerve. The gaul of her.

Such women only bring trouble.

Sleep finally came to visit, but it was a restless guest. A half hour slipped away, but it was yanked out from under her by the sensation of fingers in her undone hair. A sharp inhale as her eyes opened wide, perhaps she had come to see her. Looking over her shoulder into the nothingness, the truth bore itself open to her. No one had come. No one was there. Just the unraveling hours of night, leaving her without mercy, just like she had done.
Another hour lost to light, easily-broken sleep. Feet scuffed along the floor outside her door. She sat up again, waiting for the shadow to come to her door and stop. But, it went by with rigor. Perhaps the guard, or a servant sneaking off to bed.

Back on the pillow she went, resting on her side, curling her legs up. As more time passed with no disturbance, she gripped onto her pillow even tighter. It was soft, almost like her, less bony and shapely, but…if she could close her eyes and pretend, it was almost like the real thing.

Almost.

–

Sleep stayed for the remainder of the night, though it was the kind that felt like your body merely turned off for hours and your mind kept going.

A dream, just one. But once was enough.

The colors were warm golds, browns, and reds. A Hall, a beautiful, lavish surrounded her. It was robust like those in Fereldan, but the sun and the warmth felt familiar, like home. She was wearing dress like the ones she used to wear in Antiva, with a purple colored layer underneath of durable fabric, and then a silken sash wrapped around her waist. Her sheer sleeves bunched together at various points down her arms. A barren neckline exposed to the sun-kissing air.

She was walking towards the center of the room, where there was a glorious porcelain-stoned fountain. It gushed spirals of water; architecture was reminiscent of the grand fountains in Val Royeaux. She grew more curious as to the true location of this place, now seeming to be a fluid space of all Thedas’s visual influences on her life.

Then, as she turned to look back, there she was. She was beautiful, glowing, almost unhuman in measure. Her dress was white and shining in the skylight. It made her complexion almost look warm, tan in a way. Her abundant hair, sleek and straight as it had grown down to the bottom of her waist. A generous portion of it was resting down her right shoulder. She wondered why it felt familiar to her, this image of an other-worldly and benevolent blonde woman. Then it hit her.

She was reminiscent of Andraste. The Herald of the Maker’s woman, built in her image.

Her eyes were closed, soft and devout. Her face was unstressed. A strand of beads strung in and out of the top of her hair. Jewels hung from her ears, rings on her hands that were coupled together in front of her waist, elbows bent as if she were readying for prayer.

“Theia?” Josephine called out, as if the room became vast and cavernous. Her voice echoed.

That made Theia’s eyes open for the first time, and then went straight to hers, knowingly. They were her signature purple irises, confirming to Josephine that it was really her. When her gazed locked on Josephine, a benevolent grin appeared on her lips.

“Josephine.”

Walking towards her, Josephine wanted answers. Why was she dressed like this? Where were they? What had happened to put them there? For some reason, she believed Theia would have all these answers and more, as if she was at fault.

Theia did not move as she watched Josephine approach her, only her eyes followed her. When she finally came to stand a foot away from her, she could see more details in her complexion and built that felt…off. Her face was glowing as if she were made of stone, not flesh and blood. There was no
blush in her cheeks, no wrinkles around her eyes or forehead. No scar. No stress lines.

It was like she was a talking, breathing idol.

“Theia, what has happened?” Josephine pressed.

Theia’s face remained frozen for a moment, before she finally blessed her with a response.

“What do you mean, Josephine? I am here, as I always have been. Why do you fret so?” this was not the tone Theia had always shown. There was no kind humor, no musing, no empathy. It was the voice of someone who did not see much reason for toil or questioning.

“Where are we?” Josephine countered, eyes narrowing as she clamored for some form of information, some form of clarity.

“We are in the heart of the Inquisition.”

“Skyhold?” Josephine felt like she was being duped. There was no way in hell this was anywhere near Skyhold or its mountains.

“No, deeper. The heart,” Theia repeated, her voice expressionless.

Of course it would be something cryptic and artistic. Put a few feathers and gaudy decorations and she could swear she was in her sister, Yvette’s imagination.

“Fine, I…suppose. Then, why are we here?” her voice was short.

Theia did not respond immediately. Instead, she graced Josephine with a soft smile, though it did not match her eyes in expected exuberance.

“My dear Josephine, we are always here. Whether we are physically, or spiritually.”

Josephine’s chin tilted.

“If this is some form of religious vision, I am surprised you, someone who does not pray or worship Andraste, would be used as its muse.” She could imagine how much the undisturbed and unpossessed Theia would feel about being used as a body double for some pious dimension of reality.

Better that then the Fade demons, perhaps.

Josephine’s impatience was starting to grow. She wanted either out of this place, wherever it was, or she wanted a full explanation, and she was getting neither. She tried to turn away, to go back to evaluating the location for exits or open doors. Her wrist was caught by Theia’s outstretched hand, though she did not sense it move from Theia’s side at all. It was just…there, enclosed on her skin, adamant but gentle.

“Josephine, what you seek is not anywhere else but here in front of you.” Theia’s eyes softened, as if she was sympathetic to Lady Montilyet’s temper, though concluded it to be useless.

“Oh, so you are the door that I am looking for?”

“In a way,” Theia responded.

“Well, that’s…typical,” she let a faint growl vibrate from her throat. “And how is it that I utilize your door?”
Please don’t say it I have to kill you first, for Maker’s sake.

“Kiss me, Josephine.”

Oh, great, even worse.

“Absolutely not. How do I know this won’t make it worse? I do not even know if you are truly who I think you are.”

“You would wonder that anyway even if I had convinced you of my true self. If you kiss me, I can show you who you are truly fighting.”

“Is…is it a demon?”

“Josephine.”

Josephine sighed heavily, rubbing the back of her head and eyeing her surroundings absentmindedly. She had no idea this kind of supernatural phenomena would come into her own life, she only heard stories from the allies when they would return from adventures. Although, she couldn’t be sure if this was “the real thing,” or just the result of too much wine at dinner. Either way, she knew something was afoot.

“Fine, I’ll oblige. But if you turn into something that desires to murder me, I will be sufficiently furious,” she warned, eyeing the woman.

“Josephine, I am only here to show you what you risk, what you fear, and what you must let go of. What those things are, only you can know for sure. Kiss me, please.” Theia’s voice was monotone, but it asked much.

Josephine took a breath, riling up the courage to do something that every nerve in her body told her was a foolish idea.

Cautiously, she leaned in, one hand going to her Theia’s cheek with care. At the touch of her fingers to her skin, she felt the warmth of her body, the most familiar thing about this vision of her. It was a short-lived solace as her lips made contact with hers, their soft, almost-clay-like feel remaining still as she kissed her.

Nothing happened…at first. A couple seconds went by with an awkward, hushed air. Then, she felt what could only be compare to the feel of fog blow into her face coolly. Even though she had closed her eyes for the kiss, at that sensation Josephine immediately opened them. A voice inside her told her not to move her lips.

From what she could see, it looked as if Theia was…eroding. Like a sculpture of sand that had dried on the shore in the sun, a gust of wind had fallen into the surrounding air. Theia’s hair began to wisp and flow in the air along with the inertia, though her body remained still. The length and voluminous locks of platinum blonde waved and flowed around them in an almost protective way.

Then, it started to shrink. The long lengths growing backwards towards her head. Josephine’s eyes stared back at her face. Now, she could see pores, scars that had faded with time but were still there if you desired to search for them. Then, her trademark scar that went down her left eye. The jewels on her ears dissolved and disappeared as well, leaving her ears bare. The crystals in her hair remained, though.

Josephine was now trying to track the changes, reaching a hand to touch the gown she thought she was still wearing. The plush fabric she was expecting was now a light, almost muslin-feel, but still
almost white in color. The modest sleeves and neckline dissipated into straps over her shoulders and nothing more, a layer of sheer fabric enveloping the first layer of opaqueness. No more rings and necklaces, only a gold arm cuff on her left upper arm, the arm that was supposed to have the anchor. The arm cuff was Antivan in design, and she could tell from just the shape of it.

Her observations were curtailed briskly by the feeling of Theia kissing her back, with love and feverish adoration. Theia’s hands wrapped around her waist, pulling her in as if she had been walking to her and had finally met her body with her own.

Josephine closed her eyes again, feeling in more familiar territory than she had been the entire time. Though, even in the closeness of Theia’s embrace, she felt there was still something different about her. Different about them. There was a contentedness reverberating from Theia’s body that Josephine intuitively felt.

As quickly as she had zeroed in on her, Theia pulled away. Her eyes were bright and the smile she wore was matching the joy in them. It was as if the soul in her had returned, had taken back what it rightfully owned.

“My love,” Theia hummed reverently. Her hair was shoulder-length now, the shortest Josephine had ever seen it. It was simpler, but still stunning.

“Theia? What happened?” Josephine asked, eyeing her up and down, trying to get ahold of just what was going on, and why her lover had suddenly turned into some shapeshifting creature who shapeshifted into…different versions of herself? Oh, Maker.

“You are pleading ignorance with me, woman. You were supposed to take me down to the docks to show me the lights an hour ago. You work too hard! Come on, let’s go, I’ve been delaying dinner for hours now and I’m starving!”

Theia took hold of her hand, and began to pull her along. Her voice was melodic, hybridized with a laugh.

“The docks? We are in Antiva now? What happened to the heart of the Inquisition?”

“The Inquisition? Josephine, the Inquisition has been disbanded for a while now. Did you fall asleep and have an odd dream or something?” Theia called back to her, still guiding her woman down the Hall of mixed visions.

“Disbanded? Wait, wait just one! Moment!” She broke free from Theia’s exuberant hand, and stopped dead in her tracks. Theia turned around and also halted, gazing back at her with confusion.

“We were at Skyhold! The Inquisition was still very much in existence! Your hair was at your waist! And we were nowhere near the Antivan ports! What is happening and why am I here?” Josephine was damn near meltdown mode.

Theia listened to her attentively, as though she suddenly understood why Josephine was so upset. The confusion gave way to compassion.

“Sweet Josephine,” Theia answered, “once you see me for who I am, in addition to what I must do in this life, then you will know. Remember who we each are, and who we must be. They are not always the same, but both have needs and desires, and that is nothing to be ashamed of. It will become clear with time.” Theia’s voice began to echo ever-so-lightly, as if the void around them were expanding further into itself.

Solemnly, Theia extended out her left hand, her anchor hand, towards her. As if she was asking her
to join and keep going. Just as Josephine was about to touch it, though, Theia’s hand began to crumble like clumps of half-dried mortar to the floor. The breaking climbed all the way up her forearm and up into her shoulder, before the Hall began to darken. In an instant, it felt like all the light that had consumed the space had vanished.

She reached out farther and with a bit of franticness. “Theia!” she called out, but it was all coming down on them. Then, Theia was gone, fully engulfed in the expanding void. The ground gave out under her feet, and she instantly felt the dreaded sensation of falling.

Her eyes broke open wide, and she lurched up in her bed immediately at the sight of her room. Gasping for air, the strands of her hair stuck to her forehead, bound in sweat. She was in her room, she was at Skyhold, she was alone. The night was still in the sky. None of it was real.

For a split moment in time, though, she had almost been convinced that it was real, and that the toil and of Skyhold had been a long and faraway dream.

She did not bother with sleep after that ordeal. Expectantly, she sat on her loveseat, hugging her knees as she watched the light turn from night to early morning twilight. Surely, Theia and the rest of the contingent had awoken, and were preparing to depart. A part of her wanted to run out and catch her before she was gone. Another wished to lock the door, and wait for her to pass over like a troublesome storm.

The conflict kept her frozen on that loveseat. The dim fire embers in her fireplace were the only thing keeping her company.

So, maybe she thought she would come to her. Maybe she hoped for it. Perhaps she desired for her to burst through that door, be apologetic…not even that, just there. They could argue some more, become furious, and then have it out in bed like all those haughty romance novels Seeker Cassandra read. What a first time that would be, engrossed in their mutual aggravation for one another. It would be a story to tell one day, one of many from this era of their lives.

The dream’s imagery haunted her peripheral imagination. The sight of her face, perfect like an immortal being, and then watching it give way to who she had always known Theia to be. The duality of her nature, as a Herald of Andraste, and as a woman who was the helm of an Earth-shaking force for peace. She didn’t know which side of the coin to be more intimidated by.

Did she at least manage to do one thing right in this whole mess? If so, what was it? Because that would be the key to knowing where to go from there. Her lover was leaving in the cloak of night, armored and ready-minded for perils of and spoils of war. Undoubtedly she would bleed more for this cause before it was all over.

Berenice made her morning entrance quietly and less curious now; she knew when to leave well-enough alone. Dutifully, Josephine rose from her place on her loveseat, and went to the panel screen in the corner of her room. She would dress, she would tie and gather herself into being the same person she had always been. Maybe then the day would bring solace.

She made her way through the Great Hall to the door that held her office behind it, just as the last traces of horse footfalls and neighing rang from the Courtyard. She knew that Theia herself was long gone, always at the front. Now she was safe to move about.
As she walked though, her friend Leliana was returning from watching the departure. Her pace quickened as she tried to catch up with Josephine’s figure.

“Josie! I did not see you out there, did you miss the departure?” Leliana called out, finally coming close enough to carry on a more discrete conversation.

Josephine looked back, rubbing one of her eyes with fatigue. “No, I slept in later than I wanted to.”

“You mean, you did not spend the night with the Inquisitor?” Leliana’s question was bold, but no one else was around that would be troublesome if they overheard. Too early for drunken nobles and too late for the pub crowd.

“No. I did not see her at all.”

“Oh.” Clearly, Leliana’s advice went unfollowed. Even though she felt sorry that Theia did not take the chance she felt she should have, she had to at least relinquish herself to the fact that the Inquisitor was deeply conflicted and had more to weigh in her life than one night of tumult.

Still, the defensiveness for her friend rumbled with emotion.

“Josie, if you need anything, you have only to ask,” Leliana said comfortingly. It was very kind, but not potent enough to cure the situation of its sadness.

“Thank you, Leliana, I appreciate the sentiment. I must go to my office now and open the first round of letters. An early start is just what I need to…refocus,” she exhaled as she finished her sentence. There was a nod from both women as they departed each other’s company for their respective duties.

Walking into her dim office space, she looked first at the two chairs surrounding the fireplace. She eyed the chair that Theia favored every time she came to visit and tried her best not to linger on it, though the ache in her chest did not play by any rules. The quicker to her desk, her sacrosanct area in this hold, the better.

Making her way around its perimeter, she glossed over the stacks of dispatched reports and letters, some in well-made parchment with formal filigree, others roughly-handled like they had survived the elements. They were all vital to her job, to her purpose, and her efficacy.

All she expected, except for a strange and small square of paper folded and sealed with red wax.

Her brow furrowed as she picked it up, the note small enough to hold secure between her thumb and index finger. The seal was hastily done, only half-legible. But, the slightness of the Inquisition’s eye symbol was salvageable. Her heart sank. Only a few people sent her letters with this seal, and she knew Leliana would not have a reason to.

Theia.

At first, she wanted to toss it in the fireplace and let it suffer a flammable fate. What could she possibly have to say in this piece of scrap paper that she couldn’t say to her face last night? Was it really too much to ask that she own up to the situation and regard her with some dignity and integrity?

The fuming questions silenced themselves immediately when she impulsively ripped it open, and eyed the two, short lines of words—

“My equal, my advisor, my friend, my confidant—
I am sorry.

T’

Oh, no.

Her chest concaved like a ruin of stones, her shoulders hunching over as her face erupted in tears. She gasped at first, quietly, but it was there. Even though her face said she was trying everything to keep it together, the tears fell unabashedly and vigorously from her reddening eyes.

She turned to her bookshelf, approached it with a need for mercy. She leaned up against it head on, eyes closing and creasing as she desperately wished for a way to keep herself together. How dare she? How dare she, for once in her cursed life, say so little? Theia was a chatterbox, she loved metaphors, sarcastic quips, illustrious stories. She was a textbook bullshitter. Why now, with all the seriousness and heartbreaking diction? There were all these questions, but Josephine already knew the answer: because she really meant it.

She pivoted on her hip so as to lean on the bookshelf with her side, a hand holding up the letter to her gaze as she went over the words again and again. What she wouldn’t have given to just have her stand in front of her and say them to her face.

So help me, Maker. So help me, Inquisition. If this is the last thing I will ever have of her…

She remembered the part of her dream where the being who took the face of the woman she loved warned her:

What you risk,

what you fear,

and what you must let go of.

What restless nights these will be.
Welcome Back to Goodbye

Chapter Summary

The distance between them has grown, and now Lady Inquisitor Treveyan and Lady Ambassador Montilyet must find a way to move forward somehow in their lives. The Inquisitor comes to terms with aspects of her life and the life of the woman she’s falling for - and how everything seems to fall out of place. A return to Skyhold after a hard-earned victory in Emprise du Lion awaits her with the difficult answers she seeks.

The camp was bursting at the seams with laughter and relief, feelings that were all-too-rare in such settings. It was the day of all days: they had captured Suledin Keep, for good. The arduous advancement had brought them to the epicenter, wherein Theia, Cassandra, Dorian, and The Iron Bull battled with the self-proclaimed “Choice Spirit” once and for all. While the Inquisitor had concerns over her shape and ability to be as good as she was before her injury, her success in the battle proved to her that she was inches away from a complete recovery.

Wine jugs and sacks were passed around to encourage the merriment of all. Not too much, to ensure that guard could be maintained. But, for the Inquisitor and her allies, the wine was as therapeutic as it was recreational. Everyone had bandages and scrapes to tend to, and perhaps one night where they could pretend they were the Kings and Queens of the Maker-forsaken winter wasteland they found themselves in could be just as healing as herbs and cloth bandages.

The keep was not outfitted enough to be worthy of such a celebration – surely the grandeur of a snow-filled camp of hide tents and wooden tables would more than suffice.

“Boss, you really had him there with that…ice…thing you did. It was fantastic!” The Iron Bull roared, patting her on the back, so much so it pushed the breath out of her lungs and made her choke in recovery. This was not an uncommon phenomena when the Bull was feeling congratulatory.

“Bull, you have the best way with words!” Theia chimed back, always trying to be a good sport.

“Ahaha! You're damn right! If only Krem were to come to his senses!” off in the not-too-distant scape, you could see Krem shake his head as he tended to cleaning his armor, surrounded by most of the Chargers.

Theia chuckled and took another sip of wine from her humble cup. She was not planning on getting too intoxicated that night. Tomorrow morning was move-in for the Keep, as well as outfitting Valeska’s watch. Blackwall returned to Skyhold two days prior, having been fielding Darkspawn and Templar skirmishes in her absence.

Somewhere, hopefully near, Dorian was recounting some of the newer troops with the latest and most dramatic news from the front. A battle with a 3-in-1 demon sounded like the final battle with Corypheus if you were to listen to Dorian Pavus go on and on about it. The romances of battle were amiable only to a certain extent for Theia, especially when the said battle was within the previous 48-hour period.

Theia’s eyes perked up as she saw a certain personnel walk past, and she turned her head to flag them down.
“Messenger! Are you sure there’s no more correspondences from Skyhold?” she said, feeling futile but at the same time, harboring a raw strand of reckless hope that perhaps something was being kept from her that would make this night all the more sweet.

The scout turned and nodded her head quickly. “No, ser, not since midday. We have sent all the necessary dispatches about the events of the day already.”

“Thank you, I’m sorry I’m such a nervous wreck,” Theia humored, before turning back to the fire and gazing at it with indifference.

From her right side, also utilizing the campfire for light as she cleaned her sword, Cassandra noticed the Inquisitor’s behavior. “Leliana warned me in passing before we left that something transpired between you and Lady Montilyet. Is this why you keep hounding the Messengers like you’re expecting the worst news of your life?”

Cassandra’s words spoke life to the subliminal anxieties Theia had managed to suppress well enough to capture a keep from the clutches of a demon and liberate villagers from oppressive murder in the Sarhnia Quarry. All in a day’s work for a jilted lover who happened to be Lady Inquisitor.

“Not at all, Seeker, I was simply inquiring as to if we had a note from the person I’m playing a chain mail round of Wicked Grace with. Surprise, it’s Varric,” she gave a front of pure, unadulterated sarcasm.

Cassandra smirked under her breath. “Inquisitor, even I know you do not have the patience for such hobbies.”

“You never know, I am a woman of many wonders.”

“Yes, and many habits.”

Theia eyed her friend and comrade from the side, lowering her posture and resting her elbows on her thighs. “We had a disagreement. It is hardly the end of the wo—you know what, nevermind.”

As the Seeker sheathed her now sterling and clean weapon, she placed it to the side of her and put her attention fully on the Inquisitor. “Well, whatever has happened, I wish you the best of luck. You have remained steadfast and focused even with all that is in your mind’s eye. Your dedication is appreciated, as you can see,” she motioned towards the small clusters of troops and scouts who finally had a night to bask in the accomplishments of their work.

“If anything happens, you know where to find me,” Cassandra said, standing up, still in all her armor and ready for anything. Theia nodded at her simply, and she was off. Did the Seeker ever enjoy a late night of casualty? The world may never know.

That left the Inquisitor surrounded by many, but lonely all the same. It wasn’t that her people always left her feeling that way – it was the circumstances of her departure from Skyhold, and who specifically she left behind on less-than-stellar grounds, that left a hole in her chest. It had gotten to the point where the first person she wanted to tell the down and dirty details of the day, just so happened to be the person farthest away from reach. And now, that person was probably scorned beyond affection.

Theia gazed up at the stars and wondered just how much longer it would be before love would stop driving her wild. When she was a child, the adults made marriage and bonds look so professional, like a transaction. Then, when the truth of everyone’s socially-accepted infidelity came to light, then it was a polarity between feeling nothing and feeling everything like some animal.
Then, in the Circle, it was all about filtering what you did feel for the sake of self-preservation. In the rebellion, it became survival.

Only when she had the courage – some of it was probably recklessness – to pursue Josephine, did the grey area of it all become clear. With it, came wildness.

They would return to Skyhold in the next few days to switch shifts, re-stock, and return the Inquisitor and her team to headquarters. She didn’t know whether to be excited, or scared shitless.

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The days passed by so slow at first before she found a rhythm again. For Lady Montilyet, work was as much part of herself as anything. Once she was able to throw herself back into her duties and not anxiously look up every time someone with an average build and height with blonde hair darkened her doorway, she could almost fool herself into thinking everything was fine. At least, if you didn’t count the small scrap letter Theia had left her being in her right-hand drawer, for whenever she could steal a moment of unproductivity to herself to be emotionally masochistic.

The reports came in the following morning that Suledin Keep was now a stronghold for the Inquisition. No major fatalities, no major disasters. She was alive, they all were. When she first got a copy of the report, she remembered how relieved she was to know it wasn’t going to end this way. She was going to see her again, and even if that filled her with rage and hurt, it filled her with something.

Her dreams were never quite a rambunctious as that one, the night before they left for Emprise du Lion. Part of it was her refusal to sleep for more than 4-5 hours at a time, much to the chagrin of Leliana, who had taken to checking on her during off-hours in the night. Another aspect of it was just how unafraid Josephine became of such visions.

Josephine did not bother writing, mostly out of self-preservation. However, she also wanted to give them both room to really sit with what had happened, and the implications of their relationship. Distance makes the heart grow fonder, right? Well, at this point, their hearts should be pretty damn fond.

As she sat at her desk, doing what she did best, she heard Leliana enter from the Council door.

“They are returning in two days time, I imagine, from the reports,” Leliana greeted, gauging a preemptive reaction from her friend who had remained rather closed-off about the whole thing.

“Sounds par for the course. It will be good to move onto the next major challenge,” Josephine remarked distantly, not even bothering to take her eyes away from the letter she was writing.

“Josie, is that all you feel?”

“Should I be feeling more?”

Leliana shook her head at the Ambassador, wearing a sympathetic grin. “My mistake, I suppose.”

As Leliana exited, Josephine bit her lip pensively and sat back in her chair. There was so much unknown, and this would not be an easy landing.

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It was a fog-ridden morning when the signaling horn rang through the air at Skyhold. The path from the front gates to the main entrance was cloaked in what felt like opaque mountain clouds. It proved
an ominous and rather intimidating ambiance for when the Inquisitor arrived. Theia, armor-clad and on horseback, was ushering in the group of troops and wagons of trappings. She was closely accompanied by Seeker Cassandra and Lord Dorian flanking her on each side on their own mounts.

The Inquisitor, wearing a cowl hood that had kept her head warm as they traversed the freezing mountain paths, was relieved to be “home.” For an Inquisition epicenter, it also proved the most stable and welcoming home she had her entire life. Being greeted by the sight of the battlements, weaving in and out of the foggy air, and the dimly-lit windows of the Mage tower and the guards quarters, was heartening to say the least.

Coming to the center of the courtyard, which was lined with people who had come down to see what was arriving, The Inquisitor instinctually looked up at the slope of the Hall stairwell. There, she saw Commander Cullen, looking as reliable and tired as ever. Leliana, intrigued and vigilant as ever. But no one else. By that, she meant no one who looked like the one person she had been anticipating seeing, for better or for worse.

“Welcome back, Inquisitor,” a young man from Master Dennett’s stables approached, taking hold of her horse.

The Inquisitor grinned and patted her horse’s neck. “Thank you very much,” she replied cordially, tossing the reigns down lightly and slipping her feet out of her stirrups. Dismounting without fuss, she turned to face the direction of her allies, who had also dismounted.

“Well, friends, we are home,” she remarked, unstrapping her riding gloves and slipping off the first of the two.

“Indeed. I shall spend the next two days thawing out everything other my smallclothes,” Dorian responded with travel-weary snark.

“Dorian, if you are so off-put by the elements, perhaps you would consider armor that does not expose the most thermally vulnerable parts of your anatomy,” Cassandra retorted.

“Ridiculous! How else would I stun my enemies who envisage their impossibly attractive nemesis?”

“Ugh,” said, well, you know who said it.

Eventually, Inquisitor Trevelyan was able to climb up the stairs and into the Hall entryway. Greeted by Cullen, who reminded her of the reports of soldier and casualty numbers from their other holdings spanning across Thedas, some which needed her confirmation. Leliana, who would prime her later on the intel that had since gathered on various areas of interest.

Two out of three Advisors. Two out of three faces.

As they entered the Hall, Theia took off her cowl and gripped it along with her gloves. “Tell me Leliana, how is she?” her voice was audibly softer now.

Leliana began to speak, but she stopped herself and took a short breath. “You did not go to her. That is all she has told me. She will not discuss it at all with anyone. Not even me.”

Theia took a deep breath and looked around, half-scared an arrow would come flying at her in vengeance. “That’s not good, is it?”

“In a word? No.”

Leliana quickly departed the Inquisitor’s side. A warm welcome indeed.
Up in her bed chambers, she was garnering the resolve to go look for her. She knew that the Lady Ambassador wouldn’t step away from her desk for just anything, nor did she retire early from a day’s work. This was all Theia’s fault.

In one minute she had convinced herself to go and do it, and in the next she would stop herself. At the root of her indecisiveness was the fear of what awaited her on the other side of this search: would she be angry? Would she be resolute in her distancing? Would she send her away? She had to reassure her own self that she could endure whatever she was walking into.

Theia made her way downstairs to the Great Hall. The first place she would look, just to be sure, was her office. Peering in through the door, there was no one. Okay, so, that only leaves so many places the Lady Ambassador would feel appropriate in going to.

The Library. Nothing.

The Requisition office. Nothing.


People were starting to notice that the Inquisitor seemed to be on an at-home quest on her day off. Not finding who she was looking for, she would sigh heavily and make her way back to the center of the grounds. That left only one place left: her chambers. She wouldn’t have guessed that Josephine would simply go to her room to wait out the storm of her return, but, perhaps she did not want to be found after all.

Theia walked slowly down the Hall path leading to the door which would bring her closer to Josephine’s bedroom. She battled with herself in her mind about whether or not it was wise.

Would it be worse if she never tried to see her, though? Not only had she left without a word, but now she would return without one? Something inside her said it would definitely be over in that case.

So, when she made her way to the Ambassador’s door, she felt the nerves in her throat and chest go haywire with the potential disaster that lay before her.

Knock, knock, knock.

The silence felt maddening as the butterflies in her stomach did back flips. Girding herself against whatever was to come.

A noise: the door opening, wider this time.

It was her.

Seeing her face, her beautiful, deep bronze skin, those piercing eyes that had haunted her in her dreams while out in the field. Her shorter hair curls framing the sides of her face. She knew how they would smell if she put her face to them.

Josephine knew from the moment she heard the knock just who it was. Having retreated to her bed chambers proved just out of the ordinary enough to pique the Inquisitor’s curiosity after all. Sometimes the quickest way to gain her attention was to make her come looking herself. She always
did look for trouble energetically.

But, admittedly, the second she saw her face, all of the breath that had preserved itself in her chest escaped like in on a getaway mount. There she was, at her door, like a suitor come calling. No flowers, but, her being alive and well was good enough.

A silence filled with so much. Theia’s mouth opened, but she hesitated at first. So much to say, so much owed.

“Lady Ambassador.”

Josephine placed a hand on the door flat, blinking quickly as she finally heard her voice say something so…polite.

“Inquisitor. Welcome back to Skyhold.” She did her one better: an admittance to location and a greeting of warmth. It was Theia’s move.

Theia’s chest tightened, her right hand rubbing her opposite forearm. “Oh, uh, thank you. I…I came to see if you were well. I, uh, didn’t see you in your office, and wondered if—“

“I am well, thank you for asking.”

“Oh, good. I had…hoped you were, um, well. That’s good.”

Another pause, the awkward tension prevailing. Josephine eyed the Inquisitor with a façade of blissful, unassuming geniality. Inside, she knew just how difficult this must be for Theia to be at her door, trying to piece together something that was falling apart at the seams.

“Oh! I had also wanted to ask…” Theia tried to continue.

“Hm?”

“If you had received the note…I, um, left you at your desk.”

“Yes, I did. Thank you.”

Theia nodded, biting her lip with aggravation. Oh, great. So that was the verdict. Wonderful, well, I’ll just go cast myself off into a Fade Rift then, ta-ta!

“…And? Thoughts, opinions? Critique of my handwriting?” Theia wanted something but she didn’t know what that was exactly. Perhaps emotion, like some form of admittance that what had happened resonated with Josephine, instead of hardening her. Her fear that Josephine had tucked away the parts of herself she had laid out in front of Theia’s eyes and ears for weeks with fearlessness was roaring between her ears.

Meanwhile, Josephine was all wrapped up the polarities of her truth. Yes, I did, and it tore me apart for hours. I had to choke back tears every time I remembered that it existed. Sometimes I just wanted to tear it into tiny pieces and toss it in the fire. Sometimes I had to fight the impulse to sleep with it under my pillow. You wrecked my balance. I can never forget that.

“Lady Trevelyan, come in for a moment, would you?” Josephine rejoined, opening the door enough and stepping to the side. Clearly, Theia had come here for answers, and while Josephine wasn’t going to give them all, she could at least stop pretending that what happened, didn’t.

Theia walked in, feeling like she could just as easily be kissed as stabbed. All bets were off, as far as
she was concerned.

Turning around to face the Ambassador as she closed the door behind her, she knew it was inescapable, whatever her fate was in this moment.

“Inquisitor, I—“

“What happened to Theia?”

“…Lady Trevelyan.”

Theia held her breath and nodded with surrender. “Fine.”

Josephine stepped closer, folding her arms stiffly. “I want you to know that I have the utmost respect for you and I will continue to follow your leadership with loyalty and admiration.”

Theia’s heart sunk. So, there it is. She continued to listen, although the white noise of anxiety in her head was rapidly growing.

“I hope that you will share my sentiment, that I wish this to be as easy and comfortable for us as possible. A working relationship of respect and cordiality is worth its weight in gold, and I believe we have done well with that—”

“So, this is where it ends?” Theia cut her off, now left with nothing to lose in manners and delicate dancing around nerves. Josephine caught herself, and sighed quickly.

“…Theia, you must understand. You had to have known when you departed that this would be my conclusion. That this would be the right thing to do, naturally.”

“Naturally.”

“If all you are to do is repeat my words back to me, I will consider this conversation redundant.”

“Maker’s ass, Josephine, you’re not speaking to one of your assistants or staff. You’re speaking to the woman you shared a bed with and felt up in the ambiance of candlelight and wine!” Theia’s voice grew louder with frustration.

“Oh, please do contain your temper. Or, you can be sure that everyone in Skyhold will know our personal matters like it was published in the fortress periodical.”

“Good, I hope so! Because then they will know just how horrible it is that you are letting go of something like what we have.”

Josephine growled under her breath. “You did that when you left me to go to battle with your last words to me being distaste and disagreement. After all I did to show you how much it affected me to watch you leave. You did this to yourself!”

“I was hurt and foolish, Josephine! I left that note to give you some truth to that. Obviously, you did not think much of my words.”

“No, because they were a knife in my side! You hardly provided comfort or solace!”

“And what did you do? Spent the entire night beguiling and conversing as if your day was going business-as-usual. I was tearing myself up on the inside thinking of how badly I screwed up, and watching you act as if…as if it didn’t matter!” Theia’s arms animated her anger as she spoke.
“I was watching you the entire time, do not be ludicrous! You were the one sitting there at the head of the table, giving your happy dinner toast, elated to share company! I felt like a tossed-out lover left to the machinations of the Court!”

“If you had seen the face I was making at those men seated beside you, you would have sworn I was possessed by something malevolent,” Theia said, her voice cracking now with emotion.

“Oh, I see, so I was just supposed to know? Am I supposed to take notes on the surveillance, then? Tell you names, give you the topics of conversation, a minute-by-minute interpretation of the scene? Be your Bard?”

“You’re circling around, Josephine, and you know it.”

“Maybe I am,” Josephine yelled under her breath, her voice low and intimidating.

Theia turned away from her, placing her hands at her hips and stepping with tense legs as she took a break from this fire-with-fire dalliance. The silence brewed with emotional recklessness. Josephine could feel it, along with the welling of anxious and enraged tears preparing in her chest. The worst possible moment for her to be pushed to tears was right in front of her.

“Can’t you see this is only for the best? Our lives…would be like this for as long as you and I have responsibilities greater than our own desires. We belong to causes bigger than ourselves. I am at your service as an Advisor. This never would have grown into something sustainable.”

Each word hit Theia like an individual sword strike. The words she hoped she would never have to hear, but nonetheless was terrified of. It made her injury feel like it might as well have been a paper cut.

“Josephine, I came back with the intention of telling you…” Theia let escape from her mouth, but she stopped herself briskly, so as to save them from something truly agonizing. Her voice had calmed, softened with melancholy.

“What? What were you going to say?”

A pause, while she deliberated on her feet whether she would give into temptation, give into her temper, or just let it go.

“Nothing. I just…” she turned to face the Lady Ambassador, chin up and shoulders straight for some measure of dignity. “I know what I did was unwise. I know what I expected of you was, too. I never wanted you to be my object. I only wanted to celebrate with everyone else just how happy I was to have you. Now that I have obviously lost you, there will be no need.”

Josephine’s heart felt as though it had stopped for good. She remained stoic and kept-together on surface-level, but underneath she was grasping for something stable in a collapsing space. Her dream was echoing.

“Josephine, I…” Theia approached now, making Josephine’s chest do backflips with nerves. She froze in her position, awaiting what it was Theia hoped to accomplish. When she stood closely in front of her, Theia reached a hand up and put it to Josephine’s cheek with a sorry tenderness. “I know you could never be owned, or kept, or controlled, and that I share that fate as well. But, for what it’s worth, it was enough for me to know you’d be there when I returned. It was never my desire to objectify you, because I fell for the way you were indominable. But…when I did not see you this morning, it was far more devastating than knowing that I could never hope you would belong to me.”
And with that, Theia boldly brought her lips to Josephine’s forehead. Josephine closed her eyes, coming undone rapidly, trying with immense difficulty to preserve herself enough to watch her depart. Feeling her lips on her skin, no matter the location, was like trying to hold onto something impossibly feral, impossibly boundless.

Theia did not bother to make eye contact again, for the sake of her own nerves and façade. She left through the door resolutely, shutting it behind her with respect to noise and forcefulness. There she was, Ambassador Montilyet, left to her own devices once more.

A single, aching tear fell from her eye and streamed down her cheek. This was going to be agonizing to endure. She had thought Theia would come back with energy, determined in her opinion. Knowing now that she had softened, that she was ready to compromise. It made her feel like she had ran when she should have walked.

Oh well. Too late now. Perhaps the band-aid had been ripped off for the better. She kept trying to remind herself, as she tried desperately to let go of the way she smelled: like dirt and sweaty grime, but also like a light and sweet bundle of herbs. Herbs she had always carried with her on her travels. Herbs like those she burned for incense in her chambers.

Something that you risk, something that you fear, and something that you need to let go.
A week has passed since Ladies Trevelyan and Montilyet resolved that a working relationship would be best. Turns out, though, the agreement has proven hard to keep for one of them. An argument comes to a head, and both are left with more questions than answers…but not before giving into the chemistry that never put itself to rest.

“You have got to be kidding. That is the third time she’s dodged me,” Josephine’s frustration was becoming less and less demure by the days. A timid staffer stood in front of her desk, hands cupped together.

“My Lady, she said she cannot skip training out in the forest. She did say if you wished to convene for matters, you are more than welcome to come meet her, there.”

“Oh, did she now?” Josephine halfway-hissed, grouping a stack of papers together harshly and tossing them to the side. Sitting back in her chair, she knew just what the Inquisitor was after, and it made her blood boil.

For the past week since her return from Emprise du Lion, the Inquisitor had gone from being timid, to being self-inspired into irreverence towards Josephine’s needs of her. She could almost track with a chart just how much she had incrementally pulled away from her own Ambassador in terms of interpersonal relations. Josephine should have known that Theia would decipher a grey area out of a “functional, professional relationship” commitment.

The Inquisitor had now avoided one-on-one meetings three times now in the span of a week, was polite but impersonal in War Council meetings, and responded to letters and notes with sparse words. Of course, if it was anything Josephine had zero patience for, it was perceived immaturity. Sure, she was getting business done, but the avoidance was tiring on her nerves and abilities like nothing else could.

A moment to think.

“Well then, she wants me hiking into the great wide countryside for business, thinking a prim and proper lady would never oblige…fine. But, I can hardly wear a diplomat’s robes,” she resolved, tapping her armrests and bounding up from her seat.

“My Lady?” the staffer asked after her, looking slightly scared at what she might have just instigated. The phrase ‘don’t shoot the messenger’ became ‘don’t do anything disastrous on account of the messenger’s report, please, she doesn’t get a vacation from this.’

“Not to worry, Claire. And, do not send word to the Inquisitor that I will be meeting her on her own territory. It is imperative that we keep our leaders thinking on their feet,” Lady Montilyet marched out of her office and in the direction of her bedchambers. Playing hard ball seemed to be on the Inquisitor’s menu as of late, and if it was anything Josephine could counter, it was hard ball.
It was a warmer day than usual, and Theia was enjoying it for what it was worth. Soaking in the sunlight was a welcome bonus to having some training time. Dorian, Vivienne, and Solas remained at Skyhold, though, making this a rare solo trip to practice and maintain shape. Usually she preferred the company of someone else to bounce energy off or engage in banter, but she found that once or twice a week alone to her own devices was useful as well for her spirits.

The small valley they had found for Mage practice had become a neat little getaway: there was a wood table with a bench, a barrel full of wooden sparring sticks the length of Mage’s staffs, “specially” cut for such a purpose. Theia had a stack of a few tomes she had brought with her in her knapsack, for reference or a reading break.

Her overcoat and top was tossed onto the corner of the bench, and she was only in her top smallclothes and a pair of leather training pants. Her hair was tied up in a sweaty and messy bun. She had been at it for close to an hour, practicing pole maneuvers with a straw man as her enemy. Knowing how to wield a staff with a blade able to kill was just as important to her as wielding its magic, and had gotten her out of numerous sticky situations in combat. Plus, practicing what she learned from the Seeker and Iron Bull as they did their own exercises back at the courtyard made her inspired to be more hands-on in her own style.

The thicket brush crunched and rolled with the sound of footfalls from the main pathway, and she stopped herself from taking another half-hearted swing in order to see who approached. Perhaps one of the Mages wanted to tag along after all.

The figure of a woman in pants and a coat, hooded, became visible. It was not immediately familiar to her the clothes she wore or the stature of the person. As she drew nearer, she details of her body became more visible: the black jacket looking like a hunting coat, made light and durable, but flexible. The matching pants were skin-tight, and the boots that matched them were not the most rugged, but seemed to serve their purpose well.

The woman now stood at the mouth of the pathway into the valley, and stopped, leaning onto one side as she uncovered her identity by taking down her wide hood.

Theia’s mouth opened with a gaping smile, eyebrows raised with fascination.

“Lady Josephine Montilyet! in such rare form,” Theia called out, seemingly pleased with herself that the Ambassador had managed to take the bait. Josephine’s face was not completely discernable due to distance, but it was not pleased in the slightest.

“My Lady Inquisitor, in common form, avoiding her responsibilities,” Josephine called back, and began walking closer.

Theia chuckled under her breath, reaching her training pole behind her back and seeming to use it as a backscratcher. “I did no such thing, surely no one would believe you,” she teased, also approaching her. They tacitly became intent on meeting at a middle-point, and the table proved the perfect spot.

They came to stand on opposite sides of said table, quite symbolic for the conflict at hand.

“Please, Theia,” Josephine breathed, a bit out of practice in hiking through wilderness, “what is the meaning of this? You are escaping your responsibilities as if you have a choice in the matter. Do you think I have the plague?” Josephine’s stance widened as she put her hands on her hips. The look of her full figure, out in the open and gloriously contoured with hide and leather, proved difficult for Theia to not be distracted.
Josephine couldn’t deny that seeing the Inquisitor’s bare abs and shoulders doused in sweat and primed from exertion wasn’t...inconvenient...to be met with as well. But, her temper would see justice for the perceived slights. The visuals simply provided more adrenaline.

“Josephine, I have signed and read every dispatch from your office. Things are hardly falling apart,” Theia retorted, putting the pole behind her neck and resting it across her shoulders, her arms wrapped around it and resting on the wrists.

“That may be true, but having congress with your Chief Diplomat is just as, if not more important. I thought we had come to an understanding,” Josephine’s head tilted curiously.

Theia eyed her as she spoke, before looking down at the ground. Biting her lip, she nodded and pulled the pole off of her shoulders, letting it rest up against the table.

“Perhaps my mind has changed since our last understanding,” Theia spouted back, stepping a couple feet closer to the Ambassador. Her closing in set off Josephine’s flight or fight response. She could take the visuals from a certain distance, but when they became more...proximal, she became more...well, let’s just keep calling it “inconvenienced.”

“And how did they do that exactly?”

“You know, thoughts, pondering, self-reflection.”

A pause, and a very exasperated look from Josephine.

“...Theia, what is your middle name?”

“It’s Sofia.”

She was about to quickly retort, but a half second of reaction swept across Josephine’s face. Sofia, that’s beautiful, that’s...oh, dammit.

“...Theia Sofia Trevelyan, you need to get to the point before I level this entire forest for lumber.”

“Fine, I’ll help you. Would you like them frozen, electrocuted into charred pieces, or burned down in a heinous wildfire?”

Josephine growled. “Would you just...!” she tossed her hands up, fed up, walking past Theia’s left side and further towards the center of the meadow valley.

“It is rather amusing, I must admit,” Theia said, taking hold of the pole once more, and swinging it clockwise in circles like an axe-wielder would their weapon of choice. “You have one of the most level tempers of anyone I have ever known, and the most patience. But with me you go right to destroying ecosystems and making the Earth tremble underneath your grip,” Theia was a couple yards away when she stopped, still eyeing the back of Josephine’s head.

Josephine sighed bitterly. “You have picked today of all days to be a particular kind of...” she stopped herself.

“Say it.”

A look of resistance.

“Oh, come on, Josephine, say it, we’re in the middle of nowhere and I deserve it.”

“...ASS! You are the most enraging, frustrating, annoying ass I have ever met! You make Val
Royeaux feel like a picnic in the Free Marches! Gah! I am so tired of your needling! And yet here you are, letting me stoop so low as to a Blacksmith’s vocabulary when he accidentally hammers his thumb into an anvil. Maker, Theia, do you not see how impossible you are?"

“Quite clearly, actually. You are right in every way, of course, as always.”

“Then why are you so indifferent? Have you no compassion for me anymore? No manners?”

A pause, while Theia looked out at the tree line, pensively chewing on the inside of her cheek. Josephine had turned to stare at her, her cunning and decisive eyes bearing holes into Theia’s conscience.

“Josephine, I simply wanted you to be angry the way you deserved to be at me for what I did. When I came to you in your room, you were a Diplomat resolving a conflict, and then you were a repressed woman with a duty to her integrity. Sometimes, and I know it’s quite loathsome, but, sometimes you just gotta lay into someone.”

Josephine’s brow lowered, and she rounded her shoulders with a skeptic’s posture. “So, you are telling me right here and now, this has all been your scheming to get me to lose control of myself? For the sake of ‘laying into someone’?” Josephine could hardly believe this was happening, let alone that she had fallen for something to juvenile.

“No, but it was my way of giving you a way out of yourself, for one moment, at least.”

“I do not need anyone to do anything like that for me, like I am a child.”

“You are in no way a child, but you are a woman who is too good at what she does sometimes that she closes her own self away for austerity. I have seen who you are, underneath the pomp and façade, underneath the Game’s trainings. You are someone who is just as formidable and exquisite when you let yourself inhabit your own heart.”

Josephine watched her, oscillating between passionate rage and heartache, sentimentality dusted on top to boot.

“Say what you will, but you let your anger show with me not because I am always and without fail the most terrible person – I have references – but, because you’ve grown comfortable with letting me see that side of you. You trust me to know and value who you are even when you let it all fall apart. And, that, to me, tells me everything you neglected to when you sent me out of your room.”

Josephine’s vision began to turn into that of blurry kaleidoscopes of colors as they brimmed with tears. No, no, she could not have gotten to her so swiftly, so unapologetically to the quick.

As Theia began to step closer, she tossed the pole irreverently to the ground beside them, intent on her destination. Lady Montilyet took a step back, gritting her jaw as she tried to keep it together.

“Theia, you are misguided in your efforts, I am who I am for very good reasons. Second of all, I like who I am. I will not change for anyone or anything.”

Theia shook her head immediately. “I’m not asking you to change who you are. I’m only asking you to let be with you while you be that person, and become more of that person as time goes on,” a tone of confidence in her voice, as if she had all the keys to all the locks she would need in this conversation. All the answers.

“What are you saying?” Josephine breathed, a small and rebellious tear falling fast down her cheek.
Theia halted her advanced, and laughed und her breath.

“Josephine, you cannot possibly be in the dark. I know you well enough to understand you are always two steps ahead in any conversation. You tell me.”

“Theia, we have discussed this. I…I cannot shirk my duties for something that is so…so…” the Lady Ambassador, at a loss for words. Perhaps it truly was the end of days.

“…So what? Terrible? Was it terrible when you came to my room the night after the banquet, wearing that dress that would have compelled any man or woman to sign away their lives for you?”

No response, as Josephine looked at the ground bashfully, crossing her arms.

“I know it was terrible when I came back ripped in half almost, but, was it so terrible when we spent the following two weeks hardly separated from one another? All those nights we stayed up, laying all over each other, reading books and talking? Was it agony for you?”

At that point, Theia had inched closer, and reached a hand out to Josephine’s cheek, in order to lift her gaze back up to hers. At the attempt, Josephine rejected it, jerking her face and shoulders out of her reach as she stepped back, eyes glued to the grassland under their feet.

“My love, you let me in once, and I know you want to do it again. I can see it in your eyes, even though you’re trying your hardest not to look me in mine. Why do you fight this?”

“Because! My dream, and you, you left me! You could have been gone forever and all I had was one line of words on torn paper. Then I saw you, and you crumbled at my feet, and…agh! Maker’s mercy,” Josephine’s decorum was cast to the breeze, boundless and beyond return. Her tears were flowing more rapidly now as she turned her back on Theia, hugging her arms to her as she covered her mouth with her open-palmed hand.

Theia lost track of what she was talking about rather quickly. A dream? When, and what of? Was this why Josephine had been looking at her as if she were going to break like glass in front of her eyes, even when she was spitting poison with anger? Perhaps more had gone on in her absence than she knew. But, as she heard crying sounds come from Josephine’s direction, all she could see was the shoulders of a formidable woman be curved and quake with sadness.

This brought back a rather sad and chaotic memory into her mind, but she was now experiencing it from the other side of it.

Josephine regretted having ever had the audacity to come out to the valley. Something inside her knew it was unwise, but her temper and desire for answers prevailed like always. Now she wanted to be boarded up in her office, locked away and back to her own boundaries of behavior. Even with no other witnesses, it was as if she could feel all eyes on her, and the dread that came with it…unbelievable. The lingering security she felt around Theia made her want to run into her arms, like she would wanted to have done weeks ago. But she fought it, fought it like she had one thing left to lose, which was always her dignity.

So, when she felt a bare and strong arm swing around her shoulders and across her chest, and another wrap around the upper half of her waist, she felt like her sinful desires had become hallucinations. Not this time; to her chagrin, the feeling of Theia’s warm skin was no dream, no illusion.

Theia secured her arms around Josephine and stabilized her shaking, pulling her back snuggly unto her chest. Theia was slightly taller than her by 2-3 inches at most, so it proved rather fitting. Her
mouth was at the top of Josephine’s head of soft hair, and the smell of its oils and perfumes, the
longed for inhale of it all…it was perfection.

Her lips softly kissed the side of her brilliant head, and she whispered.

“Josephine, come back to me. I’m right here. Just come back,” her voice was low, a lull that could
charm a snake to lay itself under the footfall of a horse.

Josephine’s crying voice quivered and gasped for air in the midst of irregular breathing. Her words
broke her heart all over again, but how bad could it have been when time had hardly passed for it to
start repairing itself. In truth, her heart had always been ready to fall apart for her.

A moment passed while Lady Montilyet’s crying quieted. The familiarity of these words meant less
shock, less immediate reaction, but they were safer and more trustworthy. And, feeling her embrace
was enough to make her feel safe to keep crying, keep being ridiculous. So, when she finally hushed,
it was a mixture of comfort and rationality that she couldn’t just stay there forever. Much as she
wished to.

All the while, there was Theia at her back, arms around Josephine and not going anywhere any time
soon. She remained quiet, wondering if it would be better to just let her cry as long as she wanted.
She had so little room and time in her life to not have it all together, perhaps the better thing was just
to do it and have someone there to witness and protect her. So, while the maneuver was similar to the
one Josephine had pulled on her, there were different intentions in play. Theia was the kind of person
who needed someone to take her outside of herself. Josephine was someone that needed to help her
be at peace within herself.

Once Josephine’s tears subsided, and she was instead resting her chin on Theia’s forearm around her
chest, she closed her eyes and sighed. She hadn’t done it with all awareness, but in her crying, she
had rested her arms on the one Theia had around her waist.

“I apologize,” Josephine whispered, her voice soaked with tearful somberness.

“Don’t be, ever,” Theia whispered back, once again softly kissing her hair.

“No, I…I should not have come here.” Josephine, against her wants and desires, broke away from
Theia’s hold with a gentleness. Turning her shoulder around, she looked back at the Inquisitor, her
face dry but slightly swollen, eyes still lingering with redness. She self-consciously wiped her face
for good measure.

“Josephine, I provoked you, it’s my fault,” Theia tried to reel her back in, she could feel her breaking
away and rebuilding the walls as fast as she could. She will never belong to you, she could hear
Leliana’s voice warn. She will never just open or be vulnerable when you wish her to.

She cannot afford to.

“Well, no matter the fault, I need to return to my Office. I apologize for the interruption. Please, do
take my advice to heart next time we must meet for diplomatic concerns,” Josephine’s muttering
voice was trying to hard to reclaim some stability. When she finished her sentence, she began to walk
away, trying to leave with as little fuss as she could.

“Josephine!” Theia said after her, reaching and taking hold of the hand she had closest to her.
“Josephine, is that all? Is that really all?” Theia could not believe that she could just bear herself and
then walk away from it, as if she had no claim to it once it had been expressed. It was something to
let go of, like all weaknesses, once they had been brought to bear.
Josephine stopped and looked at Theia from her side. Her eyes lingered on her face with an aching sentimentality. Is that all? No, not by far.

“Yes, Inquisitor. Please, let me go.”

Theia’s face dropped into an expression of melancholy, her chest hollowing out of breath. She sighed lightly as she released Josephine’s hand, letting her arm fall back heavily to her own side. Josephine’s eyes lingered on her for only a moment more, before she pursed her lips and slipped her coat hood back over her head. Then, she left.

As she walked, more questions than answers flooded Theia’s head. What was she talking about? A dream? And why was it so important? But most of all, Theia wanted to have her back. She wanted her to finally see that it was only ever going to be her, no matter what happened. Surely there would be a way, she would find it, if she had to.

She saw the colors in Josephine’s eyes. This was anything but over.

–

Josephine finally made it back to Skyhold, seemingly without letting anyone on as to where she had went or why. As she kept to herself, she also tried to reorganize her emotions, if even such a thing was possible.

She had made it to the feet of the final set of stairs when her quick gaze spotted Madame Vivienne standing at the entrance to the hall, speaking to two other nobles, presumably beguiling them for one motivation or another. Good, she could just sneak by…

“Lady Ambassador, in such atypical attire for the midday,” Vivienne greeted out of the corner of her all-seeing eyes. Josephine’s spine tingled with dreadful anxiety as she stopped herself.

“Madame Vivienne, how kind of you to notice. I was…merely out for a walk, to get some fresh air and perspective. Offices can be quite stifling, as you know,” Josephine pulled that response out of her hat. Although, Vivienne would hardly be satiated.

“If you’ll excuse me, Ser, I have some quick business to settle with our Chief Diplomat,” Vivienne nodded gracefully in the direction of the two men, but did not wait for sentimentalities or sucking-up to happen. Effortlessly and quickly she was at Lady Montilyet’s side, arm-in-arm, and walking towards the door to her office.

“Lady Montilyet, if I may be so keen as to infer, I think we both know where you decided to venture today,” Vivienne said, in a discrete tone, but ever-so-debonair.

“Madame, I am sure I have no idea what you are referencing,” Josephine retorted.

“Of course you don’t. It’s only nature, to not know where one’s going before they already arrive. We are but human beings.”

“Life is peculiar in that way, I suppose.” Josephine couldn’t dread this anymore than she did, she was sure.

As they approached the door, it was enough manners.

“Lady Montilyet, I have come to your side to offer some council, surely you do more of the giving than receiving in that area. Nevertheless, we all need some from time to time.”
“And…your council would be?”

“For a woman as…tall as you are, you sure let the opinions of those in your shadow eclipse your needs. You desire something? Go for it. To presume limitations is to presume lack of control.”

“Madame de Fer, I am sure you understand the ramifications of my position. I am not simply a noble woman, or an Advisor.”

“Yes, and I am not simply a Mage of the Inquisition. I did not get to where I am by appealing to the opinions of lambs who wouldn’t survive the first ambush of wolves.”

“I appreciate your perspective as always, Vivienne, but I must insist on my own conscience in matters that are a more personal, and private nature.”

“My dear, where we are, nothing is private. But that saves you an exponential amount of energy, now doesn’t it?”

“Perhaps not as much as you would think.”

“I am hardly ever inaccurate, Lady Montilyet. It’s my specialty. Yours is being a woman without reproach, whom stares in the face of battle lines and calls for radical and unapologetic sense. Be that woman not because others say you are, but because you say you are. Opinions die with men, truth dies with women.

They made it to the office entrance, and Vivienne broke away in order to face Lady Montilyet head-on. Cordially, she took her hands into hers, as if they had been the fondest of childhood friends as girls.

“Be as cautious as you will, dear, but the woman I watched sleep after hours of not separating herself from the woman she loved? Even when she knew it would cause whispers? That was the boldness we all know you are capable of. Trust me, I know what it is to be a great woman, and have the quickest way to her heart be the safety of another person. It is possible,” the way Vivienne spoke of things, you’d swear all of Thedas could fall like dominos if she wished.

As Madame de Fer left, Josephine re-entered her office. Sitting down once more in her chair, she found herself more at odds with her feelings than comforted. It was much to assume she had so much capability, so much audacity to play with in her position. As tempting as it was to humor Vivienne’s perspective, surely it would not apply to a Chief Diplomat as the lover of the Inquisitor.

…Right?
Safe Travels

Chapter Summary

Things remain at a stand-still between the Inquisitor and Ambassador Montilyet, but their responsibilities do not. An opportunity to secure mining resources prompts an excursion to eastern Montsimmard, and Lady Trevelyan takes advantage of the mission’s diplomatic premise to utilize the woman she loves for her professional and political savvy. This journey has much in store for both of them, however, and soon it becomes clear that all bets are off with who has the upper hand.

“Tell me again why this is in any way necessary,” Theia asked, sighing as she read the report again, looking for some semblance of a loophole.

“Ser Ferndale controls a great deal of mining and weapons manufacturing in the eastern Montsimmard region. His request for attending a Soiree in return for access is hardly like conquering an entire region laden with Red Templars and Venatori,” Josephine advised, standing in front of Theia’s desk in her chambers.

“Josephine, you know how I enjoy beguiling the minds of feeble men like any…well, what did that one call me? A ‘Mage bitch’? Yeah, a Mage bitch. But, does this really require me to personally attend with everything else going on?” Theia leaned back in her seat and onto her right side.

“Inquisitor, I know your status garners some controversy, but your reputation for your tact, intellect, and ravishing beauty all but make up for it ten-fold. One night adorning the halls of an important noble with even more important resources would hardly phase you, I am sure.”

“Oh, now you’re just trying with blatant flattery. I am absolutely devastated you think me vapid enough to fall for it.”

Josephine grinned, shaking her head as she took a note on her clipboard paper. “Tell me you will attend, please? You can bring any of your allies with you, Ser Ferndale is hardly a disagreeable man.”

Theia nodded, ready to bite the bullet, as unsavory as it was. But, as the sound of Josephine’s concession, her eyes lit up with yet even more mischief.

“Anyone?”

Josephine, half-paying attention as she wrote: “Yes, yes, anyone.”

“Fine. Josephine Montilyet, will you accompany me on an important mission for Inquisition affairs?”

Josephine paused sharply in her writing, eyes widened, as she looked back at Theia. The Inquisitor had that iconic and infuriating grin, like she was getting away with murder. The Ambassador thought on her feet about how to get herself out of this one.

“My Lady, I said any ally, I am your Advisor.”

“Sure, an Advisor in alliance with me and the Inquisition.”
“An alliance holding on by a thread should the Inquisitor fail to stop grading on her Ambassador’s last nerve,” Josephine retorted, setting her clipboard down and crossing her arms in defiance.

“Josephine, don’t go signing your resignation letter. It would hardly be something lewd in nature. I simply want you there to be as you are: diplomatic, political, brilliant, charming. Surely, my beauties as one woman cannot satiate an entire Soiree.”

“You sell yourself short, Inquisitor,” Josephine’s voice was more frustrated than sweet.

“Be that as it may, I will not go underprepared for something I do not even wish to participate in, in the first place. You will not be my only company. I will also bring Seeker Pentaghast, Solas, and Madame Vivienne.”

Josephine eyed Lady Trevelyan with a look that said I know what you are up to but there are not enough hours in the day to hold you accountable.

“Fine. The trip should not be more than a day’s ride. We will stop three-quarters of the way in order to dress for the event. We should be able to leave and be back in 3 days’ time, hardly an absence worth grieving over. The Soiree is tomorrow night, we will leave early tomorrow morning. Plan on wearing something…interesting.”

“You know best of all just how many interesting articles of clothing I have at my disposal, Lady Montilyet.”

And with that, the final notes were made, and Josephine withdrew from the Inquisitor’s quarters. This should be, as the Lady Ambassador said, interesting.

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The two ladies’ armistice had gone well, though Theia had taken to a new sport beyond avoidance or begging: using her wit to egg Lady Montilyet on for her amusement and to prove that she was not simply messing around with idle lust or infatuation. Knowing just how to counter Josephine’s air of confidence, the Lady Inquisitor took great care in walking that fine line between flattery and argument. Trouble was, she was provoking someone with just as much wit and cunning to offer in return.

All of this said, it had been paying off as far as she was concerned. But, this particular circumstance would unfold with ample surprises for them both.

“My dear, I am elated we are getting a chance to play the Game in such a quaint fashion,” Vivienne greeted the Inquisitor at the base of the Courtyard steps. There in front of them awaited two carriages, modest but sophisticated in design, enough to garner attention without being grotesquely lavish. The party would be escorted in them along with several guards and scouts on horseback, some undercover as Lady Nightingale’s eyes and ears, of course.

“Madame Vivienne, I am as ecstatic to know you will be in accompaniment. We will need all of your foresight for this event, because my patience will not be in abundance, to be honest,” Theia responded, adjusting her riding breeches and feeling around her belt for where she stashed her gloves.

“My dear, you won’t be in the carriages?” Vivienne responded, sliding her illustrious traveling cape up and over her shoulders, securing it with the clasp resting in between her collar bones.

“No, I think it best if I am more prepared for whatever the roads may hold. Seeker Cassandra will also be on horseback, as I’m sure you could expect,” Theia was not one for overt pomp and
circumstance if it meant leaving her feeling like a sitting duck. Besides, all the more room for the
Ladies and Solas to enjoy the view.

“Alright, well, do not forget who we are supposed to be delivering to Ser Ferndale. I’ll give you a
hint, it is not a dirty and battle-ready Inquisitor with horse straw in her hair.” As Vivienne
approached the carriages, a servant carrying her luggage behind her to be packed, Solas approached
Theia as well.

“Inquisitor, am I to assume I am to ride in one of these carriages?” he asked, dressed in his modest
traveling clothes, and barefoot.

“I’m afraid so, Solas. Simply for appearances’ sake. Maybe it would be good for reading or rest?”
She asked, trying to make it up to him.

“Oh, I was not complaining, I was merely discerning for sure whether or not I was welcome to board
one. I did not want some snobbish soldier or lieutenant trying to tell me where to be,” without fuss,
he nodded and departed for the carriage behind the other. Theia’s eyebrows raised with surprise, not
expecting anything less than a story or two about how he once saw carriages adorn the paths to
Denerim in the Fade, and that he found them to be overly-expensive, slow, and unwise for travel.

“Well, um, good,” she called back, before securing her gloves on her hands. The Seeker had already
packed her luggage and was waiting but the grouped pair of horses for the Inquisitor to mount, and
for them to be on their way. All that was remaining was the Ambassador. And, shortly, the wait was
over, for down the courtyard stone stairs came down a woman dressed in her trademark purple hue,
this time coloring a sleek velvet gown and hooded cape. The long sleeves were puffed and gathered,
of course, and patterned with something similar to a silk brocade pattern, but less annoying on the
eye.

Theia looked over her shoulder to see the figure elegantly walking down the steps alone. She had
sent a servant with her luggage earlier that morning to be packed in an efficient fashion.

“Lady Montilyet, just in time for us to make our departure,” Theia greeted, politely holding out her
hand for Josephine to take as she made her way down. Josephine took it, but only for the remainder
of her stair steps.

“Lady Inquisitor, I am never late.”

“I did not suggest such. You can ride in either carriage, there is more than enough room.”

Josepine gazed at the two carriages, seeing Vivienne in the first, and assuming Solas to be in the one
behind that. “Which one will you and Lady Cassandra be in?” she asked, turning her face back to
Theia.

“None. We will be traveling on horseback.”

“Are you sure that is wise?”

“Yes, we will be prepared for anything. You did not expect traveling with the Inquisition to be so
simple?” Theia eyed her before grabbing her elven cowl and slipping it over her head.

“No, but I was just wondering, for posterity.”

“You’re welcome to hop on with me, if you wanted a real adventure,” Theia chuckled under her
breath, adjusting a few fly strands of hair under her hood.
Josephine scoffed bitterly, “I’d rather I condense myself in one of the trunks than be at the mercy of your riding style, which I am sure is as reckless as it is provincial.”

“That’s not what a woman in the pub said a few nights ago.”

“I’m sure she had little to say at all on the subject.”

“No, she was too busy collecting herself after hours of euphoria.”

“Bold to assume it lasted more than 5 minutes.”

“Inquisitor.”

Seeker Cassandra’s voice broke the war of words that seemed to be heating up beyond saving, as she stood in front of them. They had inched closer and closer to each other with each new retort, until it looked as there would be either an amorous embrace, or a stabbing.

Theia saw the Seeker standing there and immediately stepped back, clearing her throat. “Yes, Cassandra?”

Josephine looked away, trying to hide her heated blush amidst the fabric of her hood.

“Inquisitor, I was merely saying we should leave. The morning frost will be worse within the hour and it will make visibility on the road very difficult.”

“Ah, yes, right. Well, Lady Montilyet, you heard the Seeker. Time to get going.”

Josephine rose her chin back up to the level of a Lady. “Thank you, Seeker, I will board the carriage now.” Briskly, she left them both, aiming for the front carriage with Madame Vivienne, who she was sure would have hours and hours of more…Advising, to give.

“Am I to be relieved that you chose a mount to travel on?” Cassandra asked, watching Lady Montilyet leave.

“I’m not sure even that will stop her from making me want to get run over with a carriage wheel,” Theia responded in a hush tone, fretful that she would be heard.

The two women mounted their horses soon after, and rode towards the middle of the two carriages as they embarked on the journey towards eastern Monstimmard.

The excursion was about halfway to the estate, and the frosted woodlands were proving generous with the incline and elevation levels. The party was at a brisk though cautious pace, ensuring that they would get to their checkpoint in time to stop, stretch, and put on more formal attire. The Lady Ambassador had secured a night’s stay at the Ferndale estate, so the group could truly unwind and enjoy themselves.

They had made their way through the first of two main mountain passes, and were now making their way across a wooded valley, on a wide path. The valley was more amicable terrain, but it also made them more susceptible to attack from farther up the canyon facades. The Inquisition banners meant many things to many people, but most of all it meant wealth and supplies.

Conversations had ebbed and flowed from politics, culture, fashion, history, to wherever else Madame Vivienne’s mind had thought to go. Theia could not be sure what Solas was doing to pass
the time, but, one peek into his carriage window and she saw him with his eyes closed as if he had been sleeping. Good, at least someone was getting some respite.

“These paths are more secure ever since we settled the Graves and the Emprise du Lion regions. Less chance of running into a Red Templar shipment or Venatori band,” Cassandra remarked as her and the Inquisitor’s horses strode next to one another, ahead of the carriage processional. Both women had slumped riding postures from fatigue, but remained alert.

“They have to get to the Western Approach somehow, though, and these roads are known for being desolate,” Theia responded, looking out at the canyon before them through her cowl. “And, if not them, there’s always bandits looking for opulent carriages and large luggage,” the cynicism in her voice was almost as ice-ridden as the terrain.

“You are right. Perhaps I should not—”

Cassandra was cut off by the sound of an arrow striking through the air, and hitting the ground right in front of Theia’s horse. This caused Theia’s and Cassandra’s horses to rear up in alarm, though their steadfast natures had them quickly collect themselves, ready for combat. Theia tightened the reigns with one hand, and reached back to grab her staff with the other.

“What, jinx it?” she said to Cassandra, before turning her horse around and heading towards the carriages. Quickly her horse jogged through the yelling of the troops around them as they readied into position. Using her staff, she knocked on the carriage roofs.

“Vivienne! Solas! Trouble!” she yelled, before circling back around and kicking her horse into a canter up to the front.

Vivienne kicked the carriage door open like it had been asking for it. “Oh, of course,” she said, staff already in hand as she leapt out. From behind her, Josephine looked out the window.

“Lock up the doors and windows, darling,” Vivienne said to her as she closed the carriage door behind her. Josephine listened, though not because she wanted to. Part of her wanted to see the action and know what was going on, but she also had to remind herself that she was logistically useless.

The Seeker had unsheathed her sword and held it battle-ready from her seat in the saddle as three sword-armed bandits ran down the embankment at them. Quickly, she spurred her mount into a gallop as she took off towards one. As she got closer, she swung her sword low, cutting through his abdomen and sending him falling to the ground. Her attention quickly turned to the other one of them who had continued running, and as she pulled her horse’s head around she saw what had become of him.

Solas, having opted for elevation, stood on the roof of his carriage, wielding his staff with a rigor. He had frozen the bandit, perfect for Theia who had locked the man in immolate fire. He was no match for both fire and ice, but definitely not for the addition of electricity as Vivienne stamped the ground with her staff, igniting the remaining three visible enemies in lightening paralysis. Cassandra came back around and struck another of them down with her greatsword, when a flash of three arrows landed around them.

A horse wailed as they all collected themselves, trying to spot the direction of the arrow fire. A portion of the troops had descended upon the surrounding perimeter to track them down, but until then they were sitting ducks. From within the carriage, Josephine sat anxiously as she tried to listen for any sound, any voice telling her things were alright. Then, an arrow shot through at an angle, coming first through the roof and getting stuck in it. She gasped with shock, jumping and pushing
herself into the corner of her seat. She had locked and closed all windows and doors, but that did not mean much to arrows, or blades, or any weapons for that matter.

The sound of a man dying off on the hillside northwest of them confirmed to Theia where the archers were. She turned to Cassandra as the Seeker took off in the direction of the yelling. Troop reinforcements had found their problem.

Shortly after Cassandra’s horse took off, though, the second wave of foot combat came charging down. This time, four swords, a rouge dual-blade, and a very burly man with an even burlier axe.

“Oh, fantastic,” Vivienne could be heard, as she drew a line in the snow with her staff blade and readied herself with a wide stance.

“Inquisitor, ice barricade!” Solas yelled, twisting his staff above his head as he was about to set trap of ice circle. Theia nodded and set her staff across her saddle as she needed both hands. Energetically, she wielded frost power up above her head, and the ice wall erupted with noise and crushing power. The wall expanded just as two of the men had stepped on it, impaling them with icicles.

Grabbing her staff from her lap she rode around to the side of the carriages closest to the onslaught, putting herself in between the two sides. Vivienne set off a lightening gather, restricting the men to a grouped area or else be electrocuted. Theia sent fire flares after all of them, killing one, and leaving the second badly injured. That left the dual-blade – a particularly sensitive kind of enemy for Theia and her scar on her side – and the axe-man.

And that man was heading straight towards Theia, on a mission. Wielding the axe over his shoulder, he took his first swing at her, flying horizontally so as to slice her upper body from her lower while seated in the saddle. Before he could hit flesh, though, Theia’s spine bent backward underneath the swing, feet loosening from the stirrups as she swung a leg over and dismounted. Her horse took off in the direction where the archers and most of their troops had gone.

“Alright, friends, how many Mages does it take to kill an ax-throwing brute?” Vivienne called out, swinging her staff behind her and conjuring a spell.

“Hopefully, the number won’t be reduced to a fraction,” Theia called back as she grabbed her staff and held it horizontally up above her head, blocking another ax strike as it hooked onto her staff handle.

“You are mine, blonde wench!” he growled at Theia, preparing for another swing.

Solas’s eyes glowed blue as he froze the rogue in place mid-advance. Resolutely, he jumped down off the carriage and lunged with his staff blade as he landed, skewering the man in the chest. When he broke out of the ice spell, he was dead, falling to the ground like a sack of wine. Solas pulled out the now bloodied blade and turned his focus onto the ax man, who Theia was in the middle of brutal hand-to-hand combat with. Vivienne was casting electric shots as fast as she could, up, around, and over her head like an acrobat. He took up his own, ice shocks chilling and sundering the mountain of a man as he did his best to take a slice out of the inquisitor.

Another swing, this time just barely skimping across the left side of her face, taking her cowl as it caught onto the axe blade edge. She let out an exhale of surprise, but kept trying her best to defend his ravenous swings and maneuvers. Good thing she had taken so much time with the poles in practice training. He was heavily-built, and she was tiring.

Yet one more relentless swing, the man growling as he did so. He was tiring as well, and his life was
waning under the barrage of Mage fire. But he would not walk-back his advance, and he was after his prize.

Theia was being progressively backed up against the carriage, and when the man once again locked his axe with her staff, he used it to his advantage and pushed her back up against the carriage’s side, punching the wind out of her lungs. She would not give in, though, and continued resisting the weight behind his attack. It was a brutal moment of tension as he inched in closer and closer to her neck, Theia baring her teeth as she did her best to hold him off.

Then, she felt the window open from behind her head. A rock, the size of a fist, came flying out past her cheek and at the man’s face, and hit his right eye squarely and with quite a force.

“RaAAHHHH!” he roared, falling back and unlocking out of the hold he had on Theia. Jumping forward and free from his grip, she swung her staff over her head, casting another ring of immolate fire beneath him. His screams turned from mourning his eye, to feeling the burning fire singe through his bandit armor.

In unison, all three Mages worked to finish him off, ice, lightening, and fire overwhelming him until he took his last aggressive and brutish breath on his knees. He fell forward into the snow, his axe falling at his side.

The setting quieted now to just the sounds of their heavy breaths of exertion, and Theia scanned for any other incoming attacks. Nothing. Then, her attention turned towards the lack of sound from the northwest hill. She quickly ran to the front of the processional to better see, and there to her relief, was the Seeker trotting back. The contingent of troops walking behind, trudging through the snow.

“How many did we lose?” Theia called out, as Cassandra approached speaking distance.

“None, but we have two with arrow injuries. We will have to stop sooner to get a healer,” Cassandra replied, sheathing her sword.

“That’s not bad. We will do so,” Theia then whistled for her horse, who came cantering down from the hillside, and safely returned to her.

Walking with her horse back to the carriages, Theia regrouped with the other two Mages.

“We will proceed, but stop sooner for Healers. You can board the carriages,” she said, strapping her staff back onto her back.

“If it is all the same to you, Inquisitor, I am fine walking. I would rather be ready and willing, anyway. My humoring of banal carriage travel has subsided into dissatisfaction,” Solas responded before going to gather his things. Ah, there was the opinion Theia had expected. Vivienne nodded without fuss, but now with a couple inconvenient blood stains on her traveling gown, as she headed back to her carriage.

Josephine, all the while, was impatient as she waited for someone, anyone, to release her from her captivity. She burst forth from the carriage door in a similar robust fashion to how Vivienne did, only this time utilizing the unlocking mechanism.

“Inquisitor!” she called out, gathering her skirt with one hand and holding onto the door with the other as she stepped outside. She had an alarmed look on her face.

Theia had just watched the remainder of the troops, including the two injured and carried by their peers, when she turned and saw Josephine walking towards her. She had not forgotten about her traveling partner, and to be frank was instinctually relieved to see her safe, but the array of
responsibilities surrounding her required her to be Inquisitor, and not simply Theia. Well, Inquisitor with a wit.

“Lady Ambassador, it is a relief to know you survived,” Theia responded, stepping towards her so as to help close the distance.

“What happened? Who attacked us?” Josephine stopped and faced her, uncovering her head from her hood.

“Meager bandits, a rag-tag men looking for a good time. Why? Did you recognize any from home? One looked like my cousin, Peter.” Theia’s sarcasm was tireless.

Josephine sighed, and put her hands on her hips. “Cut it out, for once. Was anyone hurt, did we have any deaths?”

“No, just two injuries that we will have to stop sooner than later in order to treat. We should still be par for the course, but fashionably late. I’m sure your revered noble will understand,” Theia mourned the loss of her cowl as she felt the cold air embrace her ears and cheeks, undoubtedly causing them to turn slightly red.

“Oh, that is…that is a relief.”

“Indeed. Now, if you will kindly re-board the carriage, we can be on our way in just a moment,” Theia nodded with a polite grin, before turning and starting to walk away from the Ambassador. She was several yards away when she heard Josephine’s voice yet again.

“Aren’t you going to thank me for saving your life?” Josephine called out, not quite done with the sparring of words. This time, she had powerful ammo.

Theia stopped in her tracks, and shook her head as she fought the urge not to laugh. “Lady Montilyet,” she said, turning around and looking over her shoulder, “thank you for expediting a process that was already on its way to completion.”

As the Inquisitor tried to leave again, she quickly realized that she was still under direct enemy fire.

“That is not how I recall it. When I saw you, you were, how they say, between a rock and a hard place?”

“That is not what it was.”

“Madame Vivienne?” Josephine called out knowingly. Witnesses were as good as gold and a sharp blade.

“Darling, the rock may as well have been Blessed Andraste’s fist giving a sucker punch as far as you were concerned!” Vivienne’s voice rang in through the winter air like a Chantry tower bell, and just as humbling.

Theia slouched with impatience at the sight of Josephine’s self-satisfied smile.

“What unholy plague will you unleash on me if I were to admit it was just so, then? Did Sera send you with a jar of bees?”

“No bees. Just cold, unforgiving, priceless truth. And a drinking story for the Soiree tonight.”

“Oh, Maker, Josephine!”
“No no, no need to beg, Inquisitor. I know when my powers are justly recognized.” The Lady Ambassador walked with a swagger back to her carriage, smoothly taking the hand that Vivienne offered as she boarded and shut the door behind her. The conflicted emotions of Theia’s attraction to the way she walked, and the burning feel of embarrassment, was enough to make her wish she could revive the ax man to put her out of her misery.

“I loathe you,” Theia muttered.

“What was that, Inquisitor?” Josephine’s voice called out from the open carriage window, in a tone of vengeful whimsy.

“Nothing! Nothing,” she called back, rubbing the back of her head. This was going to be a hopelessly long journey.

Theia continued walking with a face of pure exasperation that didn’t even break as Cassandra brought her her horse.

“Everything alright, Inquisitor?” she asked, tossing the reigns into her hands.

Theia sighed heavily as she made her way to the right stirrup, hooked a foot in, and mounted.

“Yes, everything is…splendid,” she said, a growl under her breath as she turned her horse around. And, in a moment, they were back on the merciless and spiteful road.

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“How did she even get ahold of that rock?” Theia pondered out loud with a resentful tone, about a half hour later as they rode. Cassandra eyed her with confusion, but somehow, knew the question was not for her in the first place.

“What happened to being a pacifist? She took that man’s eye out, for Maker’s sake.”

“I am going to be mortified at this soiree and I do not even care about this soiree.”

“For once, I hope the event has a secret fade rift.”
Kiss and Tell

Chapter Summary

While the journey to Montsimmard has proven more perilous than originally expected, the allies soon find themselves at their destination. However, soon both the Inquisitor and her Ambassador realise the bandits were merely a warm-up for what lay ahead for them, as Theia runs into an unexpected old friend who proves key in outsmarting the Game. This strains Lady Montilyet’s reliance on Court machinations.

The stop for healers happened an hour and a half after the attack. It was a small village nestled in the western end of the mountain range, and luckily the armor the troops were outfitted in meant the arrows did not hit deep. After about another hour of cleaning and bandaging, they had re-embarked.

Unexpectedly, sparring between the Ladies Montilyet and Trevelyan subsided after the bandit attack. Once Theia’s temper had calmed, and the fun of having the upper hand waned, both women had turned their mental attention to the evening ahead with their respective responsibilities.

They finally arrived at the checkpoint 2/3 of the way in their journey, to stretch and change into their finer clothes. All of the women wore beautiful gowns, opulent and sophisticated, except of course for the Seeker who opted for formal armor. Solas, outfitted in formal attire, proved to have an expression of self-indulgence as he continued walking on their path towards the estate. It was a pleasant surprise for Theia.

The ride was smooth for the rest of the way as they found the stone road, and when they approached the Estate the Inquisitor noticed the mining camps off in the horizon, lit by torch fire and encampments. It was a sizeable operation, Josephine was right. Having that kind of backing would be a considerable boost to their equipment and armory numbers. But at what cost? Surely, a noble would not invoke an appearance by the Inquisitor herself without having the audacity to ask for more. Time would tell.

They pulled into the front façade of the Estate’s main hall, which was humming and brimming with goings-on. Theia noticed the Orlesian taste abound in the architecture: white columns with blue accents, windows tall and ornamentally designed. Undoubtedly, the company would match the décor in personality. When the carriages came to a stop, she watched as an attendant opened the door for her, and she accepted the outstretched hand whilst keeping the cloak over her.

When she was out, she saw her allies grouped together in front of the other carriage, and she quickly joined them.

“We’ve made it. Now, time to play,” Theia said begrudgingly, quickly scanning their surroundings. Madame Vivienne and Lady Josephine were already in their respective personas, effortlessly making sense of the whole thing.

“Calm down, my dear, you’re at a soiree in Monstimmard, not the Approach,” Vivienne comforted, grandiosely walking up the front steps ahead of them.

“That does not mean there will not be more than enough venomous stings to avoid,” Solas commented as he, too went up the stairs and braced himself for the looks of “what is that, an Elf?”
and “May I have another chalice of wine?” all evening.

“Solas is right, and quite frankly, if I have to use my sword I will think this evening actually worth my time,” Cassandra, now proceeding up and away, leaving the two remaining ladies to have one last sparring match before the evening really began.

Theia bit her lip nervously and turned to Josephine. “I am sure you cannot wait to go in there and tell them all your story of heroism from today,” she said, feeling out the skirt of her blue silken gown.

“Inquisitor, if I sought out to besmirch your name, I would be doing as much damage to myself as to you. It would be like a warrior degrading the capability of his horse before marching out unto the front line,” Josephine tactfully responded, adjusting the skirt of her dress just so. Theia noticed and, eyeing the beauty of her tonight, couldn’t help but smile softly.

“That is so kind of you, to compare me to a war horse.”

“You have the stubbornness of one, I thought it only fitting.” At that, Josephine’s smug face gave way to a self-satisfied giggle under her breath. Theia gazed at her in discrete wonderment as she did so, remarking at how she glowed more than the metallic gold color of her gown ever could.

“You look amazing tonight,” she let out of her mouth.

Josephine looked up as if she was expected to retort to something savvy, but the genuine comment caught her off guard. She, too smiled, and for a moment they shared authentic pleasure that was all-too-rare nowadays.

“As do you, My Lady. Now, shall we see what game is afoot?” she said, turning her shoulders toward the entryway. Theia nodded, and together – though a respectful distance apart and with the posture of geniality – they made their way into the would-be viper’s nest.

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Their entrance and announcement proved to be just as much fanfare as they expected. The party was centered in the main gardens, a vast rectangular area bordered by parlor and dining rooms brightly lit by candle and fireplace light. The gardens themselves were lit using strings of lanterns hanging from the rooftops, and the fountains shimmered as they sent water flying in beautiful shapes. The place was well-populated tonight – as if by word of mouth, they were told some illustrious company was expected – and wine and food were in copious supply.

Masterfully, the Inquisitor managed to mingle her way through the crowds, awaiting for this Lord Ferndale to make himself known. They had been greeted by his wife, Lady Adalia, and his attache – who actually looked and acted like one – but no Lord Ferndale to be seen. The game was in play, and thus anything was bound to happen.

The night went on as all allies went about their separate ways. Cassandra, avoiding as much social interaction, especially after being introduced as a Princess of Nevarra. Solas, keeping to the sidelines as well, observing the court intrigue with keen eyes. Madame Vivienne, embracing old compatriots and fellow Game players, acting as if this entire party was truly for her. It might as well have been, the way people were lured into her existence.

A couple of nosy Noblemen, some gossiping noblewomen, and a few teenagers who had some bold moves of flirtations, nothing really out of the ordinary for the Inquisitor. Which is why when she was poked on the shoulder by a stranger, she turned around with the same “face” she gave all the rest. It was a woman in yet another Orlesian mask, smiling and dressed with an understated personality in
“My dear Lady Inquisitor, I had hoped you would be here!” the woman said with a tone of familiarity.

“My Lady, I am flattered,” Theia responded, holding her chalice of wine to her lips.

“You do not recognize me? I thought surely you would,” the woman replied.

Theia eyed her curiously. “I am supposed to recognize a lot of people nowadays, My Lady. That does not mean I do not falter from time to time.”

“Oh, you must know. Here, come with me!” the woman took hold of Theia’s arm and began pulling her to one of the surrounding parlor rooms that had temporarily been empty of people. Theia didn’t know whether to yank away, pull out a weapon she did not have, or go along for the ride and see what happens. Before she could make up her mind, though, she was pulled into a corner and backed up against the wall. The lady took a breath and removed her mask.

Suddenly, it was like a flashback all the way through time, to the early days of the rebellion. Theia felt like that runaway, frantic young Mage once more, always ready for an attack. Only, now, they were a bit older and in the throng of an Estate Soiree.

“Olivia, is it really you? You cannot possibly be here!” Theia said, trying to keep her voice low.

Olivia smiled and nodded her head. “As real as anything! I have been brought here to entertain the wits of some mush-brained nobles. When I heard you of all people became the Inquisitor, I had to find a way for our paths to intersect. It is really you! You look beautiful!” she said warmly. The two women embraced with excitement. This was a circumstance they once believed would never happen in a thousand ages.

When they broke away from each other, Theia placed her hands on Olivia’s shoulders. “Tell me, how did you get to safety? Are you still casting?” she asked frantically. Fate had separated them early on in the days of the rebellion, but they both originated from the Ostwick circle. Both fled and sought protection in small numbers of fellow Mages for a time, before the increasing danger caused splintering.

Olivia took hold of one of Theia’s hands. “I am well. Come, walk with me, there is much I wish to tell and ask.”

The women were arm in arm as they perused the marble walkways along the perimeter of the gardens. Theia learned of Olivia’s journey to where she was now, how she went from being a healer to traveling with merchants and offering to harvest and sell herb medicines for a time. Then the Conclave explosion happened, and all Mages essentially became Apostates. She went on the run again briefly, before charming the ear of a Nobleman. Now, she was living comfortably in Montsimmard, though she gave up ambitiously pursuing magic to be more palatable for her company she kept.

“I cannot believe you! You were always so accomplished and determined in your studies,” Theia commented, watching the ground as they walked.

“I know, but in these times, dear, Mages must either rise into power or fall into discretion. You and I have chosen our paths,” Olivia patted Theia’s hand that rested on her hooked arm.

“Tell me then, who is your Noble patron? He must not be too insulted by magic.”
“I’m afraid I—“

Josephine’s decisive approach interrupted the private conversation.

“Lady Inquisitor,” Josephine bowed, “if I may have a word?”

“Lady Montilyet. Olivia, may I introduce you to the Chief Diplomat of the Inquisition, Lady Josephine Montilyet of Antiva. She has generously accompanied me to advise me in the dealings of Court dynamics. Subsequently, her job is never done.”

Theia smiled with pride as Olivia nodded her head. “My Lady, it is a pleasure to meet you. I hear the most charming stories of Skyhold.”

Josephine greeted her in return, “Pleasure to make your acquaintance, Lady Olivia. Am I to understand you two…know…each other?”

“Why, yes! Lady Theia and I…lived in the same place, for a long time. Basically roommates, in fact. She and I go way back,” Olivia said cheerfully, as if only such happy memories came from such complicated days.

Theia shook her head. “You were so noisy every night! Casting and experimenting. I barely got a wink of sleep for two years before you moved down the stairs!”

Olivia laughed demurely. “Of course! All the best happenings occur in the cover of night, dear.”

Josephine’s spine tingled at the sound of a term of endearment coming from this woman she had just now met, towards the woman she…well, she…dammit.

“I am sorry to have disturbed you catching up, My Lady, but I only seek a moment of your time,” Josephine turned to Theia, who then turned to Olivia and grinned.

“I will be but a moment, Olivia. We have so much more to talk about,” she said before she went off with her Ambassador to yet another intriguingly empty room.

When they came to a space of privacy, Josephine’s face turned to her quintessential one of concern and nerve. “Inquisitor, you were arm-and-arm the Lord Ferndale’s mistress. I did not know she was a Mage, but your friendship has made re-evaluation necessary.”

Theia blinked with confusion at having been inundated with so much new information in the past half hour. Perhaps it was time to lean off the wine. “Josephine, back up a minute. I thought you didn’t know who she was?”

“I know everyone, Inquisitor. And when I do not, Leliana does. Lord Ferndale is quite…fond, of Lady Olivia. She has a similar status to the one Madame Vivienne had with the Duke de Ghislain. He does not make any critical decision without her insight. The kind lady you knew once is now elbow-deep in cunning and stratagem at any one time.”

Theia took a breath and gaze out the window, towards the area where she left Lady Olivia alone.

“So, what do you suggest I do? I haven’t seen her in years, and she is the first person I have come across from my days in the Circle who is alive and well,” she said sentimentally.

“While cultivating her good favor would be most beneficial, not many people know she was a Circle Mage. They believe her to be have many talents, but not someone who used to be kept away for fear of her powers. Such a revelation could disrupt some delicate plans. You must redefine the nature of
your relationship in the eyes of the Nobles so as to not call into question her background.”

“Okay…so…I either flirt with her, or I…flirt…with her?” Theia pieced it together, much as it made her stomach flip at the thought.

Josephine sighed with chagrin. “The Nobles hunger for two expressions most of all: betrayal, and lust. Since you cannot use the first, you must deal the second with conviction.”

“All right, and if she does not play well? What then? Also, I’d be flirting with the Lord’s mistress, which logic says is the most ridiculous choice to make.”

“Affairs have different rules. He surely cannot expect her to remain faithful while married and gallavanting off to wherever his heart and other extremities, take him. If anything, you flattering her vanity will make him even more keen, since you will essentially be complimenting his taste in finery.”

Theia inhaled deeply and rubbed her forehead with her hand. This was a lot of pressure all at once, and she didn’t know whether or not she should even pay attention to the fact that the woman she had fallen for was now advising her to chase after another woman. All for the Inquisition, right? “Into the Darkness, Unafraid and a sexual mercenary.”

Meanwhile, Josephine was all-too comfortable in the gear she was in. Yes, Theia had nestled herself quite deeply into a soft spot, but, this was the Game. The adrenaline of it all helped her avoid the cold hard facts. She hoped she wouldn’t come to regret it, but with the gamble they were making, surely her work would bear fruit and be concluded as necessary machinations.

“Josephine, do me a favor when we get back to Skyhold, and burn all other invitations to these events that we have on the docket,” Theia said as they began their walk back into the pit.

Josephine couldn’t help but giggle slightly at the frustrated tone.

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Once they had re-entered, Theia immediately found her way back to Olivia’s side. It wasn’t all that hard – once they had made eye contact, it was almost as if planted magnets in their skirts pulled them together. They went back to their activity, arm and arm, walking the estate halls. Eventually, they had wandered off into more secluded off-shoot of the garden walkways. Lady Olivia subconsciously displayed her familiarity with the grounds in doing so without admitting outright that Lord Ferndale was the man she called her patron.

Down some stairs, they came to a balcony view of the mountains, emblematic of the local mining industry. Olivia guided them to the balcony railing, where they both stood and looked out at the picturesque evening view. Now, removed from the maddening crowd, Olivia had more room to be herself.

“Theia, I must tell you the truth about why you are here. It has a great deal to do with me,” Olivia admitted, turning to face her. “You see, Lord Ferndale…he is my patron. When the Inquisition formed, and then with you as leader, I insisted that he help. I followed all of your stories like my life depended on it. Your embracing of the Mage Rebellion made my life – a lot of people’s lives – better. I could finally embrace some of my past instead of shuffling it away into obscurity.”

Theia couldn’t believe what she was hearing. All those discretion and innuendos, and here she was being brutally honest.

“Olivia, I…I am touched that you would do so much to help me, help the Inquisition. Am I to
assume, then, the possible treaty for the mine is your doing?”

Olivia took a breath and looked out at the mountains once more.

“Lord Ferndale has vast holdings and equally vast fortune. He can spare some for a necessary cause. But, he was already leaning that way anyhow. I pushed for this so as to ensure it, and also see you. I would surely not travel all the way to Skyhold without letting on my sympathies, or my identity, outright.”

“But you said yourself that the Mages joining us made life easier for you.”

“Yes, but I do not have the stature that you or Madame de Fer enjoy. My bluntness is a risk I am not willing to take now. I have so much at stake.”

“Olivia,” Theia took hold of her hands comfortingly, “there is so much you can do in this life besides be a Nobleman’s pet. You can join us in Skyhold, we could always use another talented Mage. I remember how driven you were, and I refuse to believe that Olivia is gone.”

Olivia became emotional, even to the point of quiet tears brewing in her eyes. She looked down at their joined hands timidly. “Theia, you remember what it was like, on the run. The Templars chasing after us like they were hunting for sport. The people who would give us water and then call the dogs on us. I cannot even risk going back to that life, it has scarred me. I miss being fearless, I miss being reckless, but I can’t.”

Olivia turned away and went back to standing at the balcony railing, but Theia quickly put a hand on her shoulder and turned her back to facing her.

“Olivia, I remember as well as you, but would you rather suppress yourself like an ornament than embrace all of who you are? This is a time of change, and we have the choice to embrace it or hide, waiting for our destinies to be decided by everyone else but us. Now is the time to step out of the dark, and take back what years of Templar brutality took from us, our agency, our goodness, our convictions.”

Olivia scoffed, eyes flickering between Theia’s eyes and lips as she spoke. “You make it sound so easy, as if everything is right in front of us, being held out to us for the taking.”

“I won’t lie to you and say it is. It has been hard, but, we have each other. Those bonds that had us at each other’s backs defending each other from Templars and bandits, those bonds are real,” Theia had lost track of her original goal in charming Olivia. Now, it was the authenticity of former rebels, caught in the midst of unforgiving change and the unknown.

Olivia was and had always been very fair and very sweet to look at. Her rich, golden hair tied up showed her soft, oval face off to the world. Her almond eyes and broad cheekbones used to light up rooms, especially when she herself would light up with her love of casting. Now, it was all powdered and prim, palatable to Nobility. Maker only knew just what else they had done to her to make her that way.

But, as Theia looked into her eyes, she had a glimpse of it: the endless amounts of stress, of anxiety, of opportunities taken and lost. It hurt her heart to know someone who was as close to an old friend as she had, was now accustomed to such harshness.

“Theia,” she said softly, weakly even. “I have missed you so. You were always the most fancied girl in the Circle. Everyone would have given all their coin just to…” her voice faced to a whisper as her mouth veered in closer to Theia’s.
Olivia’s lips then went for it, kissing her with a melancholy that she had never felt before in someone else’s embrace…well, save for one.

Theia’s flight or fight response kicked in, only curbed by the reminder that this was her goal, right? Seduce the Lady Olivia, get the good side of Lord Ferndale. But, as she felt Olivia pull her in, she felt dirty, cheap, and deceitful. Undoubtedly Olivia was trying to reclaim a piece of her past, and not act on long-stifled love. But, the feelings remained in her chest, and got worse as it went on. She did not kiss back, but she did not do anything to stop it. Her stomach sank so quickly it felt like it would fall through the floor.

Little did Theia know that along the upper level of the garden walkways, her ally Solas was sneaking a glimpse. Clearly, Theia had motivations and needs that night, and he wondered just what she was accomplishing. He was careful to watch while not bringing attention to himself, though he could not stop Lady Josephine from arriving at his side to see what got her attention. She had been looking for the Inquisitor and thought perhaps Solas had an idea. Well, he did, and it wasn’t the best.

As Josephine watched, her heart skipped a beat. Suddenly, watching it be real, the Game felt like it had bit her hand that had been feeding it. What a bitter and spiteful kind of play it was. In her rising anger and jealousy, she felt the voices of injustice loom in her mind: I told her to charm her, not this. Well, I did, but…I…did not think she would pull it off. Why am I bothered? I am not anyone who should feel possessive…but, how could she?

“Apparently the Inquisitor has taken quite well to the ins and outs of Court dramatics,” Solas remarked, making light conversation with someone who he had always politely regarded. He could also feel the waves of conflicted emotion reverberating from her body, telling him everything he needed to know about how she truly felt about this sight.

Josephine was quiet for a moment, her face stoic.

“She does, and I am aware. This is good for us,” she answered in a sad monotone.

“Good for all of us? I wonder, Lady Montilyet,” Solas replied with a softness as he nodded towards her, and quietly withdrew from her side. She kept watch, waiting for something. Waiting for the end, but it lingered.

Then, after a minute, Theia finally pulled away. Bracing on Olivia’s arms as she looked at her longing face. “Olivia, I can’t do this. I…I have other commitments, and I do not wish to lead you on when my intentions are not true,” there she went, unraveling the rouse, like the honorable and foolish person she was.

At that admonition, Olivia began to laugh bittersweetly. The reaction caught Theia off guard. Was there no end to it?

“My dear Theia, you presume much about the fragility of my sensibilities. I do not seek such foolish things. Rest assured, I do not feel slighted.”

“Oh…um, good. I was worried that…”

“You had stolen my heart? Rest assured, you have already done that with someone who is not me.”

Theia eyed her for a moment, preparing to rebuff, but she was cut off.

“Come, Theia, walk with me some more. I have brought you here for a reason, and that was not to secure meager treaties. Those are already well and done. Tell me of all the juicy details of being Lady Inquisitor,” Olivia now sounded back to being “herself,” as if this had all been a momentary
lapse in emotion. As if she had taken one of her Orlesian masks off, and it was now squarely back on her face.

Theia turned with her and followed her, intuitively scanning the facades of the garden railings for faces or eyes. She looked where Josephine and Solas had once stood, but, much to her blissful ignorance, there was no one. At least, not anymore.
Something does not taste right in the wine at the Ferndale Estate. While Theia rejoices in a presumed diplomatic victory, a revelation turns the negotiations on their head. Suddenly, Theia is reminded of how a Mage can get herself into trouble all-too-quickly at the hands of nobility. Though, as most things are with Orlesians, nothing is quite as it seems.

The rest of the bewitching evening went by as smoothly as Theia could have hoped. She continued to accompany her friend Lady Olivia for a considerable stretch of time, and tongues wagged with intrigue at the nature of their chemistry. In a tacit understanding, Theia and Olivia obliged the eyes and ears of the nobility, enticing them with various innuendos and affectionate mannerisms towards one another. Those who did not know either of the two women would swear they had witnessed the armor of the Inquisitor’s heart at long last found, and Lady Olivia centering herself as the ultimate paramour of the heroine.

At one point, Lady Olivia had grabbed a small branch of grapes from a nearby platter and dangled them over Theia’s mouth.

“Darling, you must taste the finest from these vineyards!” she cooed as she lowered it into Theia’s hungry-looking lips.

“I feel that such a taste will occur much later in the evening, my Lady,” Theia played, before opening her mouth and biting off one of the grapes, unapologetically fueling the subtle eroticism they had cultivated in the evening air.

The surrounding nobles who were mingling all laughed jovially, or stared with unabashed desire.

From a nearby corner, Lady Josephine had also returned to mingling, but her periphery took care to note just how…enthusiastic, Theia’s game play had become. The two women looked capable of conquering the entire Montsimmard region by the way they gathered a following of wagging tongues and hot ears. She had battled with her emotions, but ultimately gave off an attitude of resignation: this was the task at hand, and she must not blame anyone but herself for her weaknesses in executing it.

Then, towards the end of the night, Lord Ferndale made himself known. A rugged-built man, broad shoulders and a slight pudge around the mid-section from too much wine and rich eats, but with the charm of a former Chevalier. Theia could see how accommodating it would feel to be his mistress, even though it would require a great deal of self-sacrifice on a Mage’s part.

When they had been introduced, the Lord and the Inquisitor, he embraced her as if her were an affectionate cousin.

“Your Worship, what an honor it is to see you embellishing our Gardens with beauty and refinement. I am deeply apologetic that I could not join in the merriment sooner, but business called my attention away briefly,” he said, inviting her to take hold of his arm like a gentleman.
“My Lord Ferndale, it is beyond refreshing to be in such illustrious and capable company. Rest assured, Lady Olivia had made up for your absence with her hospitality,” Theia sounded like she had channeled every ounce of noble finishing she had managed to have in her youth.

“My Darling Olivia is renowned for such talents. I am sure you as everyone else in Monstimmard has fallen hopelessly in love with her,” he chuckled under his breath, and the smell of wine was ever-prosperous in it.

“Yes, of course,” Theia eyed her friend, who stood by a small serving table and watched with piqued sweetness, as she took a sip from her chalice.

“My Lord,” Theia continued as they walked through the circles of talking and gossiping, “speaking of business, I assume my presence here has satiated your needs of the Inquisition well enough to encourage alliance?” Theia held onto her skirt as she walked, making sure not to trip whilst being guided by the Lord of the house.

“Your Worship, I would not dream of anything else but! We have more than enough stores to supply the Inquisition, and I have signed treaties affirming such. They will be delivered to your Lady Ambassador in the morning, before your departure,” his handsome voice was singing sweet songs to Theia as far as she was concerned. So, Olivia was right, she had all but gift-wrapped the mining resources in a package and dropped it into her lap. She must have quite the effect on her most magnanimous Lord.

“It warms and humbles my heart to hear it. Now it feels as though this party is even more a celebration,” Theia leaned into him, almost feeling safe in his company, a sensation she was commonly met with. In an endearing way, he almost reminded her of Blackwall, and perhaps that was why she felt so at ease.

After that, Lord Ferndale politely broke away from her hold and turned to face her. “You prove to be a most warm company, Lady Inquisitor. I look forward to our working together. For now, I must return to my wife’s side, and see to our other guests. If you need for anything, let any of our servants know. This is your home for the evening, best take advantage whilst you can,” he said, before putting one of her hands to his mouth and gallantly kissing the back of it. As he departed, Theia felt that sensation in her gut that you feel when you had expected something to go so much worse than it ended up being.

Could it really have been that easy? Could he really be that kind and unpretentious? What was in the water around here?

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Eventually, the party did indeed end, and all of the Nobles who had not secured rooms at the estate for the night were boarded onto their extravagant carriages and sent off back to whence they came. Theia watched some of them depart from her room’s windows, which had a generous view of the surrounding hillsides. She had retired about an hour prior, and after releasing herself from her gown and taking advantage of hospitality in taking a warm bath, she was about as much at ease as she could be.
The respite was short-lived, as she was soon visited once more by Lady Montilyet, seeking updates on the status of the treaties.

As Josephine entered and closed the door, Theia could feel a twinge of butterflies in her stomach – both women in revealing night dresses, Josephine more modest with an over-robe, and the warmth of fireplace light. It was their trademark ambiance, or at least…had been.

“My Lady, am I safe to assume the business has been done?” Josephine’s voice was distant, giving away her desire to simply have the conversation and then leave.

Theia pulled away from the window to face her Ambassador, grinning as she collected all of her let-down hair over her right shoulder.

“Yes, Lady Montilyet. The treaties are signed and will be sent your way in the morning. You may sleep comfortably tonight,” her voice was tired and endearing.

Josephine exhaled with relief. “Good, I am glad your tactics worked. You looked quite capable, I had no doubts.”

“I had some practice.”

“Oh, where?”

A pause as Theia eyed Josephine with that same gleam she had in her eye when she made a crass joke of double-entendre. Josephine quickly caught on as she always did, and shook her head.

“Stop it, you have skills, let us leave it at that.”

“Fine. Anything else?”

“How did Lord Ferndale conduct himself around you? Was there anything suspicious?”

Josephine knew that treaties were not simply signed and delivered with so little fuss. There was something forcing his hand, or perhaps he, like most men, was driven by more carnal tastes.

“He was…perfect, actually. Polite, kind, reassuring. Lady Adalia and…Lady Olivia, are lucky to have him.”

“Oh. That is…good. Do you think he meant it sincerely?”

“I have no reason to disbelieve him, besides him being Orlesian, which…is good enough reason in many respects,” Theia went to the edge of her bed and leaned her hip on it.

From behind Josephine, the door opened once more, and both women looked slightly confused as to who would do such a thing without knocking. Vivienne? No, it was Solas, of all people. Still dressed in his formal wear. Shutting the door behind him, he approached the Ladies with his arms coupled behind his back.

“Inquisitor, I believe we do have cause for concern. Lord Ferndale was not polite out of his own organic nature, but by the effects of a spell. Several, in fact. I caught Lady Olivia slipping what looked like powders into his wine.”

Theia’s surprise at seeing Solas arrive gave way to concern.

“Lady Olivia has not forgotten her education after all,” she sighed, looking away so as to put together her thoughts. Josephine turned to look back at Solas, a feeling of predictive dread in her
chest. So, as she suspected, it would not be as quiet as she hoped.

“So he is entranced beyond free thought?” Josephine questioned.

“It is not as overwhelming or sinister as blood magic would be, but it is just as influential if used in the right ways. I am afraid these politics may be the Lady Olivia’s direct actions, rather than her negotiations.”

“Then what do we do? Clearly she has been at this for a while. Is it so bad that we take our treaties, and then live and let live?”

Josephine cut in. “It is, so long as no one knows of her ways. If it were to be discovered after we enter an alliance of resources, it will look like we used your Mage contacts to wreak havoc on the nobility.”

Solas nodded. “Precisely. Either we must ensure no one finds out, or we end it and see if the Lord will be amiable to the agreement on his own.”

Theia shook her head, a pessimistic expression on her face. “I do not think a man who has realized he has been entranced for however long he has been, would be immediately turned on to an agreement he never pursued of his own volition. Ugh, I should have known better, Olivia was always so cunning and clever. She was a survivor,” Theia’s voice became a half-lamentation for her friend who seemed to play with toys more dangerous than she knew.

“Be that as it may, she represents a fragile link in our chain here. Perhaps you should go to her and convince her to end it, if only for the time being.”

Solas interjected. “While I agree her actions are hazardous, I think if we are to do anything we are to secure her hold beyond error. Nobility will always squander themselves for the affections of beautiful women. She secures important resources for us, and to jeopardize that would be most unwise. If we are not careful, we could leave with no mines and an enraged noblemen who links a deceitful Mage to the Inquisitor herself.”

Theia bit the side of her cheek as she mulled over the logistics of the situation. Backing Olivia’s play would most certainly add a more sinister side to the Inquisition’s efforts, but Olivia had played the Game as best as she could. If she could remain the victor was less certain.

“I will go to her and talk. She trusts me, that at least I know.”

Josephine couldn’t help but feel a vindictive burning in her throat. Oh of course, so trustworthy to Lady Olivia, they’re basically best friends. How fortunate for us.

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It had been a couple of hours since the meeting in Theia’s room, and she had found herself wandering the dark and grandiose halls. As she walked, she couldn’t help but want to kick herself for not better planning this maneuver: she had no idea where Olivia’s rooms would be, or how to find out. Asking a guard or a servant would undoubtedly lead to gossip over breakfast.

She gripped nervously with one hand onto her thick over-robe as she turned another corner, which looked the same as all the rest. This time, her eyes caught the look of fireplace light way down at the
other end of the corridor. Could those still be considered the bedchambers? This place was so huge, and the way it was designed made no sense. Who didn’t like the idea of having one location for sleeping, one for eating, one for company, and then maybe a garden? Orlesians seemed to be gratified at the idea of trying not to enter the same room twice.

Carefully she walked on bare feet towards it, and gradually she could better make out what looked like the entrance to a study or library room. The walls facing her had large, hung portraits of men and women, and tall, thin windows. When she finally graced the entryway, she turned and saw the two tall lounge chairs facing the fire. Quietly, she eyed the floor, and caught a glimpse of skirts long enough to rest on the floor. Olivia? An insomniac noblewoman? A despair demon feeling restless? Your guess was as good as hers.

Theia suddenly felt a nerve tell her to leave immediately, and she began to turn and head back down the hall, when a voice came from the chair with the skirts.

“You have trouble sleeping as I do, Inquisitor Trevelyan?” a woman’s voice, older, deeper than Olivia’s. At first Theia could not trace it back to anyone else she had encountered, until she heard the way her mouth sounded when she said the word “Inquisitor,” and it clicked.

“…Lady Adalia?” Theia eyed over her shoulder.

A soft laugh from under the woman’s breath was heard, before she stood from her chair and turned back to gaze at that would-be intruder on her quiet time. There she was, Lady Adalia, similar in age to her husband, though she could be no older than 40. Her hair was greying ever-so-slightly at her temples, but she was otherwise a beautiful and intelligent looking woman.

“Inquisitor, I would assume you’d have a better sense of your surroundings than to be surprised by a woman at her own fireplace.”

“I, uh, do…usually. But, I did not think you would be here after such a long night.”

“Perhaps the real reason you were caught off guard is that you were expecting to find someone else.”

Theia’s eyebrows raised as she tried to find some form of upper hand or even just a level playing field in a dynamic that was quickly turning into one of “and the prey escorted itself into the predator’s den, squarely sitting on its mouth in wait.” She took a couple steps forward to show she wasn’t purely on the defensive.

“I may have, does that offend you, My Lady?”

“Not in the least. Many people go bump in the night after our dear Lady Olivia. I suppose I assumed you would have more on your mind than such a venture, but, she continues to surprise me with the wideness of her net.”

“You think I am after Lady Olivia?”

Lady Adalia smirked, coming around the chair and closer to where Theia stood. “My dear, I do not think, I know. Which is why I am here, to intercept you on your mission and bring some truth to this otherwise black-and-white circumstance you perceive.”

Theia was now far and away clueless, which on the outside looked like open-mindedness, and on the inside looked like Maker I swear I would sooner grow three heads than play around in Orlesian nonsense again.
“Alright, well, then explain why you knew you would find me, and what it is you wish to share. I am listening.” Theia folded her arms as she spoke.

Lady Adalia observed the Inquisitor’s guarded posture, and could only smile with melancholy.

“My dear, Olivia’s powder and tonic tricks are anything but secrets to me. In fact, her talent for them is why she is here, and not her attractiveness. I found her while we were traveling through a small village on the way to the Free Marches, while she was still a Merchant’s apothecary. I bought some herbs from her, more for pity than anything. She was so young and dirty, like a turtle dove that had flown too far away from home. I had no idea she was a talented Mage, which is when I came across her months later, hungry and without work, I tried to find use for her in our household as a maid or seamstress,” Lady Adalia’s voice was soft and sincere, like she was telling the tale of a martyr.

She continued her story while Theia listened intently:

“When she came to me begging for mercy one morning, I was alarmed to find she had set one of the cooks on fire as he tried to take her for his own. The man had burns all on the side of his face and chest. She had done a number on him, but the bastard deserved it. Although, she could no longer hide her truth: she was a Mage, and a capable one. Against my better judgement at the time, I allowed her to stay. In return, she became protective of me as her keeper, and would come to my ear with suggestions and solutions to some of my...most prevalent problems. I usually turned her down, but one day I had been pushed to the point of no hope, and she had become my only option of survival.”

“What happened?”

Lady Adalia sighed, looking down at her hands with nervousness.

“Lady Inquisitor, Olivia was not the only one who had a man willing to force his will upon her. Only, she was not as foolish as I was. I married the man that tormented me.”

With that confession, Theia’s eyes widened in shock. So, their beloved Lord Ferndale was not so kind and respectful to his core as she had wanted to believe.

“Lady Adalia…” she began, but her halfhearted retort was cut off.

“Do not feel pity for me, Your Worship. I do not live in that darkness anymore. Lady Olivia came to me on a day when he had beaten me and bruised my face so deeply, and begged me to let her charm him. She said she could create a whole new husband for me, something I would only get if I murdered him otherwise. This was months ago. Now, I am treated well, cared for, and a hand has not been raised in anger since that first day she slipped something into his morning wine. Lady Olivia saved my life, and I have seen her rightfully compensated for doing so.”

“My Lady, your story humbles me. I would not bother wandering out here to decipher the truth, but, the treaties he signed... those are not from his own desires. The Inquisition could be implicated if it is made known their resources were secured with the magic of a loose Mage, one I knew while in the Circle.” It was not the issue of morality that it used to be, seeing Lady Adalia’s face as she told her truth changed all that for her. The man could impale himself on a pitchfork for all she cared, but the Inquisition’s business required her to think beyond her own opinions.
That made the Lady of the house chuckle under her breath as she shook her head at Lady Trevelyan’s seriousness.

“My dear, there is no danger. As long as I and Lady Olivia are here, Lord Ferndale will never adversely affect anything ever again. Besides, your cause is a noble one, and you will be justly aided for it.”

“So…in the morning…?”

“You will share breakfast with us, and then leave as you wish, treaties in hand. We will keep running this Estate and satisfy our agreement, Olivia will be safe here, and you will continue to be our blessed Herald.”

Theia paused as she was about to say something else, realizing that quite frankly, this situation was beyond trying to change it or redirect purpose. Olivia was right – she was not going anywhere, and could not take risks for the sake of her own, and Lady Adalia’s safety. She had gone from being a wayward Mage in the thick of violence, to a safe and utilized talent with a noble cause.

“Well,” the Inquisitor cleared her throat, “I suppose that settles it, then. I will be returning to my chambers, Lady Adalia. Thank you for talking to me.” She then artfully bowed her head, turned around, and head for the exit.

“Goodnight, Lady Inquisitor. I hope you find the rest of your night more peaceful,” she heard Lady Adalia say as she withdrew.

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The door ached shut as Theia was now safely back in her room, where she was greeted with a dozed-off Ambassador sitting in a chair by the fire. Seeing her made her smile, and it went against her instinct to leave her alone when she nudged her on her shoulder. Feeling the touch, Josephine’s eyes flickered awake quickly and she immediately turned her head.

“Inquisitor, did you…?” her voice was hoarse with sleepiness.

“The image Solas saw was not all there was to it,” Theia said in a hushed tone, sitting back on the opposite chair’s armrest and facing Josephine. “I encountered his wife, Lady Adalia, in her study, where she was waiting for me to find her. She knows everything. Actually, she’s the one who gave permission for her to start all this,” Theia let a yawn escape from her mouth that she covered with her hand.

Josephine’s brow furrowed with curiosity.

“Does that mean we are safe to accept his “word” even if it is manipulated by magic?” Josephine leaned toward Theia as she spoke.

“Yes. The man is a brute, apparently. He beat his own wife without consequence. Lady Olivia suggested a solution for it, and now they live in domestic bliss.”

Josephine was horrified at the revelation of Lord Ferndale’s true demeanor. Such a man deserved nothing less than a cruel fate, even by her judgement. Still, the way his wife and alleged mistress resolved the problem was quite impressive to her.

“Now that I think of it, the Ferndale estate started growing and recovering after years of accrued debt
on the Lord’s part most recently. That must have been when she started slipping powders in his wine, and took control of the bills and income,” Josephine nodded slightly as it all clicked in her head.

“It is quite clever, actually. No one would question such an amiable and happy man as to what informs his good mood,” Theia watched the fire, dumbfounded at just how much she was still being surprised by people’s actions in this life. Though, to be surprised by the alliance of two women who both faced violence and uncertainty was a more pleasant shock to have than most others she experienced.

“Well, then we may actually have some time to breathe after all of this,” Josephine breathed, leaning back in her chair. “I should retire now. We will surely have a weary day of travel tomorrow.”

Dutifully, the Lady Ambassador rose from her seat and began towards the door with a tired gate. Theia rose as well and accompanied her.

“To think, this morning we were ready to toss blades into each other’s backs, and now we have convened a perfectly nice debrief. Wonders abound,” Theia tried to lighten the mood.

“Do not grow complacent, Inquisitor. A new day brings a new Game to play. But, by the looks of how you charmed Lady Olivia, that is hardly a threat to you,” Josephine replied.

“What exactly did you see, Josephine?” the first-name basis taking hold now.

“I…” Josephine rubbed the back of her head as she stopped in front of the door, “I saw enough. I did not surveil you as you probably expected I’d do.”

“So, you saw the kiss then?” Theia boldly went there. Even though she saw no one in the gardens, by the way Josephine danced around the night’s events, she felt it only made sense that she had saw things she regretted.

Josephine was silent for a moment as she thought about how to answer. Perhaps it was her tired mind and body that compelled her to cling to honesty.

“I did. I was not offended, to be sure.”

“Why would you be?”

Another pause as Josephine eyed the room, once again trying to find some way to out-maneuver Theia’s precise words.

“What I meant to say was, I advised you into specific behavior and I am not regretful of doing so. You did your duty and followed my advice, and that is all I could ever ask.”

“You know as well as I do I took no pleasure in it,” Theia inched closer out of habit, now feeling self-conscious about her behavior at the party.

“It is of no relevance if you did or not. We had a task, and we accomplished it. That is our duty. Now, we can move onto the next one.”

Theia smirked. “You know, when we finally put our tempers to rest, we can be quite efficient.”

“That has been my assertion all along, Inquisitor, I am relieved you finally see the light.”
“Oh, it is crystal clear.”

“Good, I was worried I would have to ask for a raise in order to make time to educate…you…”

Josephine’s voice had hushed to a low whisper as she felt Theia’s face encroach on hers. It was all-too-alluring of a scene, the woman who made her chest ache all night as she watched her capitalize on her ability to charm and intrigue. Theia’s tiredness had took to her mind, and she acted upon the desire to be close to Josephine now without the mouthy nature she had displayed in the previous days. Now all there was, was a visceral motivation.

Just as Josephine was willing to let herself fall into it, she placed a gentle but affirmed hand on Theia’s chest, stopping her advance. Her eyes made direct contact with hers as she gave her that all-knowing look, that look of this is not wise, as much as I desire it.

Theia paused for a moment, feeling her hand block her, and she sighed lightly. Opening the door for the Lady Ambassador, who promptly nodded and withdrew, she felt like she had thrown a futile swing in the dark.

This was not how she predicted this journey to go. Or, maybe it was. The optimistic and cynical sides of her heart battled over the conclusion. But, whilst that war waged on, the Inquisitor was to close a door yet again and resign herself to sleeping alone.

The morning’s breakfast went by without a hitch, and the Ladies Olivia and Adalia proved wonderful company for the Inquisitor and her allies to humor whilst they reeled from a long night of Game playing. Lady Olivia remained ever-affectionate of her old friend, who made it known that she was aware of her true purpose in remaining at the Ferndale Estate. It was then that Theia promised she would send supplies and stock for her apothecary reserves ever so often, to ensure that she would never run out of her “tools” in dealing with Lord Ferndale.

“But my dear, won’t that implicate you and your good name?” Lady Olivia pulled back from their embrace as they stood in front of one of the Inquisition carriages.

“Olivia, do not make me give the “before I was Inquisitor, I was a rebellious Mage on the run for my life” speech,” Theia teased back. This made Olivia laugh with a hint of soreness. At last, the day they thought would never come – the day when they could make bittersweet jokes about their days on the road – was before them.

“Be sure to send letters as well, then. I hunger for the intrigue of a Holy War stronghold,” Olivia released the Inquisitor from her hold and returned to Lady Adalia’s side, who stood with her benevolent and unassuming husband.

“Farewell, Inquisition! Safe and quick travels!” Lady Adalia called out as they boarded their carriages, mounted horses, and embarked on foot. You can imagine which allies chose which mode of transportation.
Chapter Summary

Their journey back to Skyhold after a particularly eventful diplomatic mission has a few remaining surprises in store for Inquisitor Trevelyan and her Chief Diplomat, as dangerous weather patterns force the group to find shelter and wait out the storm. However, when life gives you lemons, you make lemonade. A chance to breathe and escape the constraints of running a war may prove more beneficial than expected.

“I cannot believe that woman would put her own neck on the line for the life of a Noble, after all she had endured. It is truly extraordinary,” Cassandra remarked, riding once again at the Inquisitor’s side. The Soiree had hardly been memorable for her, but the actions of Lady Olivia even had her piqued curiosity.

Theia nodded her head, as if she had been telling some far off story or fairytale, trying to pass it off as truth.

“Olivia has been through a lot. I can hardly blame her for thinking this is a small price to pay for safety and security. She – we all – deserve a dose of that after what has happened,” Theia referenced all Circle Mages in her statement, and her mind strummed through horrible memories of that era in her life as if it were a short serial booklet.

“I suppose so. Still, should anything happen to her, it now implicates an agent of the Inquisition. Any wrongdoing will face justice,” Cassandra had become a cooperative listener now to Theia’s lamentations on the life of a Mage. While she still was fiercely loyal to the ideals and virtues that were instilled in her for her entire life, the way Theia articulated her position made it difficult for anyone to not see her side of things.

The group stopped in the same village where they had the previous day in order to stock up and ensure they were prepared for the big stretch of travel. After an hour or two, they were back on the road, traveling wearily down the paths in which they had originally traversed. The thick fog they had encountered on their way to Monstimmard was no longer in residence in the valleys, and the warm sun made the banks and mountain caps of snow blinding with their brightness. All of the allies were relatively quiet, tired and ready to be back in their own quarters at Skyhold. Save for a few fleeting conversations between the Inquisitor and Seeker, and between Madame Vivienne and Lady Montilyet, the group made their way in with scarce changes in noise level beyond the footfalls of horses and the trudging of carriage wheels.

The tranquility was short-lived, however, as they eventually came to the front of a rather menacing looking thunderstorm bearing its weight over the mountains. The clouds were massive, dark, and took the tall mountain peaks hostage as they overtook the range ahead.

At first, this viscerally excited Theia, whose lightening powers began humming underneath her skin as they started to see some lightning strikes stretch and strike through the clouds. Her eyes started to dance with color, even though she tried to look as concerned and reserved as possible.

Josephine caught a glimpse of the Inquisitor’s face that glowed with energy from her irises, and it made her smile out the corner of her mouth as she rode past her carriage window.
“She always does look rather ethereal when her eyes do that,” Vivienne remarked as she read the book she had brought to preoccupy her. Her comment caught Josephine off guard, and she quickly adjusted her posture and went back to reading letters that had been received while they were still in Monstimmard.

From the northeast side of the valley, Solas approached the caravan, and came directly to the Inquisitor’s side as she stopped her horse.

“Inquisitor, I carried out a light scouting of the storm ahead. The rain looks torrential, and that means the possibility of mud slides and other disasters. Those are worrisome enough factors with cavalry and foot soldiers, but exponentially so with carriages. I suggest we divert off the road and find some mountain village to stay the evening in, and wait for it to pass over the range.”

Theia pulled her cowl back – a spare from her luggage – and held her breath as she overlooked the storm clouds advance vigorously.

“This will set us back a night, but we were expected to be gone for upwards of 3 days anyway. This is not a hazard worth tempting. Seeker,” she said, turning her horse’s head so she could look back at Cassandra, who road next to a group of troops. “Do you remember an offshoot path anywhere near here we can try for lodging? Surely there’s logging and merchant transit towns embedded in these mountains somewhere.”

“I do. There is one about a quarter mile further, but it is steep, and we will need to be cautious. Who knows where those bandits we faced came from, but they were well outfitted and armed, like they were near the source of their resources.”

“Damn. That’s going to take us into the edge of the storm. Well, it’s either go for it or be consumed by a mudslide, I suppose.” The carriages had caught up with them and halted, awaiting orders.

“I will walk ahead and see what village I can find,” Solas said, turning around and heading back out into the woods.

Theia rode her horse up alongside the carriage with Vivienne and Josephine.

“We are going to stop for a night and wade out the storm ahead. Solas is scouting for the nearest village up the mountain path. Be ready for any disruptions,” Theia nodded to Vivienne, who straightened her posture.

“Anything for you my dear. Even if it means roughing it with some mountain loggers who drink more ale than water,” she said indifferently.

Theia rolled her eyes with a humorous attitude, before her eyes went to Josephine’s, who were more cautious. The anxiety from the bandit attack still lingered with her. She looked as if she was going to say something, but she merely nodded at the Inquisitor. In return, Theia quickly turned her horse back around to usher the group back into motion.

“Alright, look alive! We have to get in and get out of the storm before it takes hold of that mountain,” she yelled for everyone to hear. They pushed forth with urgency. To make this work, they would have to enter the edge of the storm and just as it would get bad, turn into the path and up the mountain path. It would be down and dirty for time, but if they played it smart, it would save them a great deal of grief and danger.

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The storm seemed to want to cut them off at the pass, because when they entered the perimeter of it they were smacked with an onslaught of hail and freezing rain. The clear skies they had enjoyed for the majority of the journey felt like faraway memories as Cassandra and Theia shielded their faces and eyes under their cloak hoods, horses stubbornly persisting through the storm.

“It has to be up there, just ahead!” the Seeker pointed, and through the barrage of rain Theia could see a road turnoff. Maker, finally, she thought to herself. But the slope was steep, and the rain had turned most of the snow on the roads to slippery mush. Getting the carriages up would prove an ordeal.

The Inquisitor ended up securing her horse with makeshift leather straps from the equipment trunk to the carriage, adding a third horse to pull the weight as she helped troops push from behind. Vivienne did her best to help levitate the carriage out of sinkholes and pits whilst still sitting inside, and the Seeker did her best to maintain a direct path forward as much as possible.

Pushing shoulder-to-shoulder with some of her crew, Theia couldn’t help but laugh under her breath. “Brings you back to Haven, Lieutenant?” she yelled through the snow at the man beside her, who couldn’t help but grin through the exertion.

Josephine’s face never left one of the carriage windows as she watched the journey up the path. She wanted so badly to go out and join them, but feeling more superficial than of any use for manual labor, she stopped herself. Had she done so, Theia would have of course told her to go back inside and out of the cold with her quintessential protective attitude. And, if it was anything the Seeker could not take then, it was dealing with the storm and the two ladies bickering over who could push the carriage farther.

They were at this for the better half of an hour, before a leveled off path finally brought itself to their feet. They had made it around the façade of the mountain, behind the side of its peaks that were bearing the brunt of the storm. At last, the falling rain and sleet dissipated, and the night calmed enough for them to hear their own thoughts even. When the worst of it was behind them, Theia reclaimed her mount and continued forth with them, hoping that her friend Solas would reunite with them and give them some good news.

It was about a half hour past that when he finally returned, looking like he had merely taken a leisurely mountain hike.

“Two miles ahead is a logging village. Big enough to have a pub, inn, and a sturdy main street. Seems to be safe enough, but it is populated for a mountain town. Women and children included,” he reported to Cassandra and Theia.

“Well, it’s better than nothing. Hopefully we will not be unwelcomed company. Cassandra, have the men fold and put the banners away. Tonight we are merely traveling gentry seeking shelter from an aggressive storm. Thank you Solas, feel free to board a carriage if you are feeling cold or tired.”

“Unnecessary Inquisitor, but the offer is appreciated.”

Theia smiled softly before turning and looking back at the caravan. She was proud in a way that her crew had been so dedicated to the safe passage. She would look forward to getting them off the road and, Maker-or-whoever willing, in front of food and drink to nourish them.

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The village had a warm and inviting energy about it, one that set Theia’s mind at ease as the pulled up in front of the Inn entry. The collection of carriages and troops made many eyes and faces turn but
no one approached them yet with hostility. Theia could feel the tiredness in her chest ache for reprieve as she rolled her shoulders, dismounting and pulling her horse’s reigns up over its head.

“Lieutenant,” she said to the same man she had pushed the cart with up the path. “See if they have a stables round back, and if you would be so kind as to take the horses in and see to their welfare?” she asked kindly, willing to wait with her mount while he stepped inside to inquire.

“Yes, Inquisi—um, yes, my Lady,” he had almost forgotten they were all there under the guise of anonymity. Theia couldn’t help but smile with compassion as she sent him off.

Meanwhile, Vivienne and Josephine were stepping out of their ride, careful not to tread mud on their hemlines. Old habits of manners die hard.

“Ah, a shack, but a well-built shack,” Vivienne couldn’t help herself.

“Where are we?” Josephine went to the Inquisitor’s side, unhooding herself as she approached.

“We are in what looks to be a lumber village. No need to fear, we will spend most of our time sleeping, anyway,” Theia responded, patting her horse’s neck.

“Ah, I see. Well, I am satisfied that my estimate of 3 days will not go corrected,” Josephine replied, looking around and seeing the troops start to unpack their luggage from the carriage. “Oh, please be careful! Do not hurt yourself! Here!” She rushed over, holding her skirt out of her footpath as she lent an arm to take hold of one of the boxes alongside one of the soldiers.

“My Lady, you’re too kind,” the soldier responded as she carried it to the steps. Theia watched as the woman who she kept underestimating, show her just how foolish she was to do so.

The Lieutenant soon returned, and took the horse’s reigns from the Inquisitor.

“Everything is arranged, my Lady. We have rooms for everyone, and stalls for the horses.”

“Thank you, Lieutenant. Be sure to come back straight away, I am sure dinner and drink will be on me tonight.”

The Hostess of the house proved a most audacious and spirited woman, who had no problem at all renting rooms out to the likes of opulent company such as Lady Trevelyan and her allies. She was quick to point out the rooms had thick walls for “privacy,” as well as sheets that were clean enough to eat off of. What you would feel compelled to eat off of bedsheets, Solas was left questioning especially.

As soon as they had all their immediate belongings sent to the appropriate rooms, Theia decided to wander down to the pub floor to check on the troops. They all for the most part were hunched around generous platings of food and wine, undoubtedly sore from the evening’s trials. It made her content to know they would at least have some rest before continuing on.

From the corner of her eye, she spotted Josephine, who looked quite out of place in her sophisticated traveling robe as she sat by herself along the pub bar, holding a modest chalice in her lap as she listened to the in-house Bard tell her tale. Her face spoke of a complex nostalgia.

“Lady Josephine, and here I thought it would be impossible to see you in the pub back home,” Theia approached, taking the seat directly next to her.

“Theia, you think so little of my sense of humor and entertainment, do you? I may be noble, but I am not a prude,” she retorted, taking another sip of wine.
“Forgive me, I am not the brightest torch in the room. Well, save for my green, glowing hand.”

“Not being bright and being insufferably sarcastic are two different things, my Lady.”

“Oh, thank the Maker, I would never have had time for the introspection.”

“Agh! Keep trying to charm me with your arrogance, Inquisitor. It is a script I have encountered too many times to be phased.”

Theia peered over at her drinking companion, and was pleasantly surprised to see of all things, her posture slouch. It was almost as if she was enjoying herself, and letting down the walls of a Diplomat without having to be argued with to the point of madness. It softened Theia’s attitude for jest.

“Tell me – is this Bard any good?” she changed the subject, trying not to let on that she had been staring. At this question, Josephine giggled with flattery.

“I have no worthy opinion, I was hardly well-versed during my days in the profession,” she chimed modestly.

“Oh, come on, you must have some insights into how effective her performance is.”

“Well, her diction is very good. The story is...a bit dry, but I cannot imagine the tales of a humble mountain village being as savory as those of Val Royeaux. Five assassinations, two affairs, and three illegitimate children are born before breakfast time there,” she couldn’t help but let laughter bubble from her as she spoke. Her laugh was accompanied by Theia’s, and they enjoyed a break in conversation to continue watching.

A long moment of quiet peace lingered between them as they observed the goings-on of the well-populated pub. The Inquisitor couldn’t help but grow curious as she watched the troops eat generously.

“Was that your doing?” she asked Josephine, who in turn demurely confirmed it.

“I wanted the men and women who pushed me up a mountain to eat well and drink to their heart’s content. My way of making up for my inability to help,” she lamented, tucking an ankle behind the other.

“Josephine, you are anything but unhelpful. Think of it this way: you saved their leader’s life with a hard-thrown rock. If anything, you’re why they still have someone to escort.”

“Oh, how kind of you to admit the truth at last! I should have known you would only be honest while we were put up in the middle of nowhere, where there are no substantial witnesses.”

“I suppose there are bigger concerns. That, or an hour of sleet in my face has humbled my ego.”

“Ah, I see. We should conjure storms over Skyhold more often.”

“No need, we have one being brought by a possible arch-demon and a would-be God. I think we will have our fair share of inclement weather.”

The two women gazed at each other with the look of deep respect and fondness, with no wit or backhanded comment. Here, far away in some remote village where no one could tell who they really are, they found a piece of temporal freedom and candor.

From a distance, one of the troops looked over the soldier of her comrade, eyeing the women as they
enjoyed each other’s company.

“Cooper, I think the Herald will finally get into the Ambassador’s skirts tonight,” she muttered.

“Oh hush, Isidora. I bet you five coin she locks the door in her face again!” he spit back, a mouth full of food.

“Deal! You always sellout for bets you’re gonna lose. You have the luck of a raven in a snowstorm.”

“…Shit, do you think the raven we sent to Sister Nightingale will be alright? She will be livid if it perishes…”

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After about an hour being entertained by the pub, the ladies retired to their individual rooms. The troops stayed behind, opting to blow off some steam. As the night got older, the noise from below the inn floor did not subside; in fact, it had livened, and now the sound of live music began to echo through the floorboards. Lady Josephine tried her hardest to get some sleep, but it was evading her as the echoes and vibrations of music and heavy, drunken footfalls kept her attention. She missed the quiet stillness of Skyhold all the more. She had even pulled a thin pillow over her head, but to no avail.

Tap, tap, tap.

She peeked her face out from under the pillow as she thought she heard a knock on her door, faint in comparison to the loud noises from downstairs. A pause yielded no result, and she rolled over.

Then, tap, tap, tap.

Jerking up with half-hearted frustration, she slid out of bed and stomped her way to her door. This better not be some man looking for a good time, or getting lost on his way to a latrine, she thought to herself. Her fears gave way to relief when she opened the door to see the Inquisitor, hunched and sneaky in posture, dressed in slacks, a coat, and boots, like she had been up and at work all this time.

“Josephine, good, you’re awake,” Theia whispered.

“Theia, what in the world…?” Josephine breathed with sleep in her voice.

“They are dancing downstairs, get a dress on and come have fun with me!” Theia’s excitement was unshakeable. Even in the middle of the night, after dragging a caravan up the mountain, somehow she had the energy for more foolishness. Well, her famed abilities had to have come from somewhere.

“Theia, it has to be the early hours of the morning, not sleeping is most unwise,” Josephine scolded, holding the edge of the door against her chest. At that, Theia rolled her eyes.

“Oh, come on! We have one night where no one knows our names. Didn’t you ever daydream about what it would be like to go somewhere fun and not have to worry about a gilded dagger at your back?” Theia’s chin tilted with sincerity.

A slight pause of silence while Josephine eyed her in return. Once again, Theia was tempting her into something where her mind was screaming no, but her heart was saying why not. She had rejected every attempt thus far, but, even she had to admit the circumstances were way too good to pass up.
“Agh, fine, give me a moment to find something that isn’t…overdressed,” she growled, shutting the door on Theia’s victorious smile.

After a few minutes, Josephine opened the door once more, now dressed in a dark green dress that was probably supposed to be a night dress, but in this specific company could pass for pub attire. The skirt was tea length and made of a warm fabric that also comprised her short, bell sleeves that were her style. Theia couldn’t resist giving her the once over when she returned to the hallway.

“Please tell me you plan on wearing that back at Skyhold,” she teased, taking her hand and guiding her down the hall towards the stairs. Josephine allowed this almost certainly due to the fact that she had already given into staying up in the middle of the night to do Maker-knows-what in a rural pub.

“I will do no such thing, and I hope there will be no important witnesses to this,” Josephine retorted, keeping close to Theia’s shoulder.

Eventually, they did find the stairs, and the brightness and noise of the pub floor became all-the-more enveloping. There were stringed instruments being strummed wildly and in a stomping beat, helped along by what sounded like small drums and even the high-pitched whimsy of a flute. They made their way down and were greeted by several merry and lively people, who ushered them into the main room. The chairs and tables had been pushed up against the walls to make a suitable dancefloor, with the band in the far right corner opposite the bar.

Josephine couldn’t help but smile at the endearing and carefree nature of it all. The people were all smiles, all energy, as if they had spent the day in celebratory revelry. She stood against Theia’s arm as she, too, stared in wonderment.

“Come, let us get some more wine!” Theia said over her shoulder at her, before leading her to the bar to grab two of the set-out wine cups. Handing one to the Lady Ambassador, she clinked the cups together and took a deep swig of it. Josephine cleverly grinned as she sipped hers.

They stood against the wall for a moment, watching the couples dance around the room in dizzying twirls and turns.

“When the Circles rebelled and we had to be on the move, the first night in new villages were always our favorites. We could pretend we were wayward maidens or some runaway servants, and we would find the nearest dance hall or lively pub and have a night out,” Theia said in Josephine’s ear, “I have such a fondness for them.”

Josephine listened, and her heart softened a great deal to hear a memory derived from what she could only imagine was an otherwise terrible time in her life. Theia’s days before the Inquisition were unknown to her for the most part, as she scarcely talked about them without it being a witty comment.

“Did you dance well?” Josephine responded in Theia’s ear now.

The Inquisitor shook her head. “I stepped on many a drunken man’s foot. Some I was sorry for, others…not so much. My favorites were always with women, though. They were more forgiving.”

“Well then, perhaps I should rescind my hand before I extend it. I may not be so merciful.”

Theia turned and eyed Lady Montilyet with a captivated interest. “Oh, not so fast, I’m sure a dignified woman such as you could make a woman out of me,” she leaned into her, a hand sneaking around her waist as she pulled her off of her bar seat. Josephine gasped with gleeful surprise as she was let down, and she let the Inquisitor take her hand and lead her out onto the dance floor.
When they found their point of entry, Theia turned to face her, extending her arm out like a gentleman. Josephine smiled and curtsied, before taking her hand and feeling her other grip around her waist. As Theia pulled her in, she held tight to her like she was about to run away at any moment.

“Ready?” Theia mouthed to her as their faces became separated by mere inches.

“Always,” Josephine mouthed back.

And then, they began the dance. Turning and twisting around, and side-stepping like two jubilant country maidens with nothing left to lose, they danced around the room to the tune of the lively music. Josephine couldn’t help but laugh as they found their rhythm, her training as a Lady ensured that all of her movements were as graceful as could be. But, even she had to admit that she was out of her element.

With the quickness of their movements, Josephine’s hair started to let curls loosen out of her provisional bun that she had put together before coming out of her room. Strangely enough, she did not seem to care one bit.

Energetically, Theia spun her out so as to twirl her, and Josephine did so with ease. She moved like a vision, her skin and hair glowing in the amber-hued firelight that abounded the room. She returned to Theia’s embrace and they kept going, and going, and going.

At one point, Theia had felt Josephine slip on one of her feet, and her arm around her waist broke her slide as she veered off into what almost looked like a dip. The quickness of it made Josephine gasp as she was pulled back onto her feet. It was a rare and fleeting moment of clumsiness for the Lady Ambassador.

Soon, people in the hall began to watch them as they made their way around the floor, beguiled by the tender sight of two women so obviously engrossed in one another.

The song was winding down to an end, but Theia felt ambitious for one more move she used to do back in the day. Quickly taking both her hands and cradling Josephine’s waist, she lifted her straight up above her head. Josephine gripped onto Theia’s shoulders as she laughed like she hadn’t laughed in months, looking back down at her as she felt her strength underneath her.

One spin around, and Theia released her grip sharply, letting Josephine fall and into her arms. Josephine’s hand reached around Theia’s shoulder as she landed softly back into her grip. Turns out that height difference had many charming utilizations.

Josephine’s hair was now, literally and figuratively, down. And with that, the song concluded.

Theia snuck a warm and discrete kiss on Josephine’s cheek as she held her in her arms for that brief moment, and Josephine was not about to rebuke her this time. The adrenaline in her veins was doing a dead sprint both away and towards her heart, and that rush had Theia to thank for existing.

Of course, Theia had to release her from her grip, and ever-pleased with herself she took hold of Lady Montilyet’s hand and escorted her off the dancefloor. Both women breathed heavily in the aftermath of their dance, but their respirations entered and departed their broad and unapologetic smiles.

“Tell me, my Lady, if there is anything to equal that experience in any ball room of Orlais?” Theia asked as she guided her back to her seat, and took her place beside her once more.

“Nothing at all comes to mind, my Lady. You have finally left me without words,” Josephine
giggled back, wine fresh on her tongue.

“Good, let us see how long we can make it last. You are irresistible when you are laughing.” Theia let a hand go to Josephine’s hair, folding some of it back over her shoulder so as to better see her face, and that addictive, joy-filled smile.

The sensation of her hand made Josephine’s stomach come undone with butterflies as she made eye contact with the Lady Inquisitor’s purple irises. She was ravishing – the way her braided hair was tied up into a bun, messy and falling out of itself. The way her pants and coat fit her frame and the way her boots sounded on the floor as she walked that walk. The way her face looked when she caught her, like she had been prepared to do so all along. It mirrored only the way she looked so unreal in her dream she had all those nights ago in Skyhold while she was away. In that moment, every bone in her body ached to realize what she had been robbed of in that dream: her authentic, unwavering, and unbreakable self. The way she would feel if she would not, in fact, crumble to dust and sand before her eyes. The way her arms would be everlasting, if only for one night more.

“Theia, I…” Josephine said, entrenched in these thoughts of unresolved ardor.

Unknowingly and light-hearted, Theia turned to look at her, one eyebrow raised in curiosity. “Yes, my Lady?”

Josephine was about to say something, but, then she reminded herself just how much she had filled their time with talking. Talking, arguing, rejecting, out-witting. What is the talking just…stopped? And there it did.

In a split second, Josephine had both hands on Josephine’s face as she pulled her in for the most reckless and unplanned kiss of her life. Theia did not kiss back at first – mostly from the shock that she would surely drop dead from – but when she did, it was with an equal passion. For a moment, the noise and rambunctiousness of their surroundings had faded away into the distance. It was only them, Josephine finally letting her walls down, and Theia there to welcome her freedom.

“Oh-ho-ho!” a voice roared from behind the bar. Their escape was short-lived as surrounding men and women began clapping as if they had been cheering them on. Theia pulled way to see Josephine had started laughing again, the blush in her cheeks unavoidable to the eye. Theia looked around with a self-conscious grin, before pulling Josephine into her chest and lap.

“Come on,” she whispered in her ear, “let’s go dance somewhere else.”

Gingerly, she took hold of Josephine’s hand, and the two made their way back towards the entryway and up the stairs. If this was all some mad, wild, unbelievable dream, Theia was going to soak in every ounce of euphoria she could. As far as she was concerned this kind of moment was only going to happen once.

And as for Josephine, well, the bashfulness subsided to thrill as Theia took charge. Following after her, she felt as though the confines and commitments of being an Ambassador were outside, locked out, and she could take a calculated risk. But deeper still was her desire to have Theia to herself again, and finally after so much back and forth, so much endured tension.

All bets were off. Well, except for one.

From the corner of the pub there sat two tipsy Inquisition troops who had carefully watched the women retreat for a more private exchange.

“Hah! What did I tell you Cooper! Pay up!” Isidora laughed, holding out her palm with delicious
victory.

“Andraste’s tits, I don’t believe it,” Cooper grumbled, reaching back for his coin purse. Well, there went another round of ale.
A Detour (Part Two)

The night is far from over, and with a chance for two women bound by obligation and status to the Inquisition far from the prying eyes of anyone worth fearing, the long-simmering connection between them comes to an unprecedented boil. Sometimes, differences in tempers and perspectives are best resolved with anything but words.

NSFW: EXPLICIT CONTENT

The darkness of the hallway set Theia’s nerves on fire as she felt the allure of being somewhere with Josephine that did not compel them to display honor or maturity. As soon as they had enough space between them and the stairwell, she pulled her in by the sides of her waist, turning them around and locking her lips with hers in a hungry and uncoordinated way. At first, Josephine was concerned with the potential of running into someone in the hall, but when she was lured in, her senses went immediately wild at the taste of Theia’s ravenous mouth.

Was it four doors? Five? Theia tried to make sense of their surroundings with her eyes closed and body hopelessly devoted to getting at every inch of Josephine. Either of their rooms would do, at this point. An empty room, even, just somewhere that could offer a locked door between them and the outside.

Josephine, not to be underprepared or clumsy if she could help it, opened one eye and spotted what looked like her door. On a mission, and now with a target, she pushed Theia’s body forward with vigor. Her hands gripping at the leather of her overcoat. She faced no pushback or resistance from Theia, who was willing to follow her momentum pretty much anywhere if it meant she got to keep her lips on hers. Finally she had aimed the Inquisitor’s back up against the door, and pushed her up against it sweetly.

Theia felt the door at her back give a little, which told her they had arrived at their destination. She reached a hand back to open the door with the iron mechanism, but in truth she was just grabbing at anything she could figure was the locking/unlocking object. At once she felt the door give way to her weight, and she fell back into the room. Luckily for Theia, this was not one of those tropes wherein the amorous lovers mistakenly fall into someone else’s room and have to bashfully retreat so as to maintain some semblance of dignity. Lady Josephine was out of her regular form in many ways tonight, but she had not let her precision for details waiver.

Theia pulled Josephine around and inside, kicking the door with her boot heel shut as they maintained their embrace with fervor. Their hot breath and gasping for air escaped their kissing without much care as to how graceful it was.

At once, the Inquisitor grabbed Josephine’s waist like she had done when they danced, and lifted her up above her head. Only this time, Josephine’s legs parted and wrapped around her waist, ankles locking and securing their grip. When she was tightly secured on her body, Josephine pulled away from Theia’s lips to peer down at her, her hands holding her face between them as she breathed from exertion.

“Theia,” she breathed, her eyes bouncing between the Inquisitor’s lusting eyes and her lips.
Now even more emboldened by the sound of Josephine saying her name, Theia’s hands reached along Josephine’s thighs, sliding under her dress skirts with intention.

“Love, you’re doing again,” she breathed, calling their memories back to all the times they had caught each other starting to spin in their thoughts. Josephine remembered, and it motivated her to return to the kissing rather persuasively. Well, that, and the feeling of Theia’s hands encroaching on her hips, skin-on-skin.

As she did so, Theia moved towards her bed, walking with renewed conviction as she carefully came to the side of the bed and lowered Josephine onto her back atop the rustled sheets. She released herself from Josephine’s arms and legs as she hoisted herself up over her, straddling her waist and sitting up. Her hands went immediately for the clasps and buttons on the front of her overcoat, though she could not give a care as to how many she would break off in her hurry.

Josephine felt the cushion of the bed under her, but her back arched away from it with a need to be closer. Watching her start on her coat, she bit her lip with a grin.

“Theia, you have many coats,” she bossed, before reaching her hands up towards the middle of her coat’s waist, and ripping it apart in a truly unexpected impulse of wastefulness.

Feeling her waist now bare and cold, Theia smirked at Josephine’s recklessness. “As you wish, my Lady,” rolling her shoulders out of the now useless coat and tossing it to the floor, leaving only her smallclothes and her pants remaining. She returned to Josephine’s lips once more, bearing down on her like every inch of her skin was hers for the taking. Josephine’s hands went up around her back, fingers slipping underneath her smallclothes and gripping as she braced into her body and her touch.

Soon, Theia’s lips began to wander with tenacity. First, down the side of her soft face, down to her neck, greedily kissing every exposed inch she could find. Feeling Josephine’s hands on her made her want to feel the same, with all senses.

The Ambassador could not help but roll her eyes closed as she felt her breath on her sensitive skin, laying her head back and giving her access to all the surface area she could.

Then, a sentence broke from Theia’s mouth.

“Josephine, you name it, and I will do it,” her lips now traced along her collar bone, all the more exposed as her sleeve had been pulled off her shoulder. Josephine was overwhelmed at the prospect: while she talked a good talk, she was just as inexperienced as Theia had been in this particular activity. Sure, she had the knowledge of what could happen between two bodies of the same anatomy, but, she never indulged personally.

“Mi amor,” she whispered, a hand guiding Theia’s eyes to hers as she looked down at her. “I do not wish to go beyond what you are comfortable with, even though you say you are open,” she said sweetly, her ribs curving into Theia’s body with the need to be touching.

Josephine had only used that endearment once before, whilst she was still helping Theia recover from her injury. She had watched her ache with pain for most of the night, trying to find sleep in discomfort. After hours of in-and-out consciousness, the Inquisitor had felt Josephine’s hand in her hair, softly stroking it out of her face. Mi Amor, she whispered, so low she must have thought Theia could not hear. But she did, and the emotions it conjured now were of the utmost devotion.

“You have no idea how long my body has ached for you. How long I have wished for just the chance to…taste you,” Theia let an undercurrent of moaning go along with her words. This made Josephine blush feverishly, seeing the colors in her irises begin to dance like they always did when
Theia got riled up over something.

“Then…” Lady Montilyet replied, her hands going to the front laces of her dress and beginning to undo them, “who am I to deny you just this once?” she cooed playfully.

Even though it was everything she viscerally wanted, Theia could not help but remain focused on the hesitance in Josephine’s demeanor. Tenderly, she touched Josephine’s warm face with one hand.

“Hey, look at me,” she whispered, inviting her gaze up from the dress to her lover’s eyes. “If you ever wish me to stop, tell me, alright? I mean it,” she promised, her body now looming over her with a protectiveness and security that she had always felt compelled to give where Josephine was concerned.

Josephine’s eyes gleamed as she heard Theia’s promise, and it made her feel all the more safe to proceed.

“I promise,” she said low, “now just kiss me.”

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In what felt like a second of time, but also with the vastness of eternity, Theia had gotten Josephine out of her dress and down to her smallclothes. Where they had once rolled on top of each other, now they sat in the middle of the bed facing each other, bodies statuesque and scarcely lit by the aura of a couple candles.

Theia took great pleasure in this ritualistic tenderness, her arms cradling Josephine’s ribs as she kissed down her bare and bronze-glowing shoulders. She was like the sun, an everlasting and powerful energy from which life could thrive even in the most hopeless of places. Theia pined for her like the moon would for such companionship, forever chasing after her embrace all across the span of time and space.

Chest to chest, Josephine adoringly watched her worship her frame, hands resting on Theia’s lap that was folded up against hers. She had always fancied being treated this way, revered in in the heat of a lustful interlude. It made her feel like a goddess, like she glowed with the unwavering goodness of some ethereal woman. The next moment, she felt Theia’s hands reach for her smallclothes over her chest, and lightly slip between them and her skin under her arms. Theia pulled away to look at her, asking for permission.

Josephine smiled, looking down at her lap demurely, before reaching her arms above her head. Theia then obliged, slipping the light-fabric up over her head, revealing her bare breasts and chest to her. The sensation sent an eruption of butterflies doing acrobatics in Josephine’s stomach – this was the first real time she had been intimate with anyone – but seeing Theia’s sweet eyes look back at her with reassurance, and not shock or horror, helped.

Theia couldn’t help but smirk, though, reacting to just how surreal it was to be doing this. Her hand dotingly rested itself on Josephine’s cheek.

“Do you dare forget how exquisite you are?” she spoke softly, reverently, putting her forehead to hers and closing her eyes. Her head lowered then, her mouth going to the top of Josephine’s chest, down the middle of her breasts, kissing her and tasting her skin as she worked a straight line down to the middle of her stomach.

Josephine bit her lip at the string of words she had always wished to hear when she let all the walls come down. Now, she was quite literally bearing herself wide open to this woman, who met the risk
with such rich and uninhibited warmth. Her hands went up along Theia’s sides, and she felt the coarseness of her scar as they skimmed up her ribs. She lingered on its feel, reckoning with the way this war had claimed her body.

Both bare-chested and quiet, they spent some time learning each other, witnessing and comforting their shyness until one would suggest a progression. Eventually both had no clothing on to speak of.

It was then that Theia pulled Josephine to her, kissing her and breathing her in as she laid herself back, beckoning her to climb on top of her. Feeling her legs and pelvic bones bear themselves down on her own made her skin between her thighs tingle with anticipation, and even more so when she felt Josephine’s hips start to grind rhythmically into them as they kissed. Josephine was more timid in her movements at first, feeling the attention on her as she now was the one straddling the other in the stillness of the night.

Theia gripped on Josephine’s upper thigh and hip region and pulled her movements in deeper and deeper, feeling the wetness of her sex growing harder to ignore. She let a deep moan escape her mouth and reverberate into Josephine’s mouth, and this encouragement made the Ambassador almost come alive with a new kind of energy. Hearing her, feeling her being so engrossed in something she was doing to arouse her, made her want to push her luck. Reaching a hand down between both women’s bodies, she reached for the top of Theia’s warm folds and traced her fingers along the entrance of it.

This, in turn, made Theia’s chest feel like it was going to jump out of her skin, the bodaciousness of this woman, who she thought was above lewd reproach, propositioning her next move as if this was her machination all along. It made Theia go crazy. She was sure if she were to open her eyes the electricity in her pupils would almost lash out at the sky like the lightning storm in the mountains. She widened the space between her thighs, making more room for Josephine’s body and her touch, though one thigh could not help but grip around her waist at the sensation of anticipation.

Josephine kept toying with her a bit longer, even going to far as to let the tip of her index finger slide into her ever so fleeting, feeling the wetness she had developed. It compelled Theia to growl with disagreement as she let it escape her with ease – she was willing as she could ever think to be.

“Josephine,” she moaned, pulling her lips away from hers, “If you don’t play fair, I will not even try to,” a carnal tone to her voice as she eyed her.

Oh, dare me into a corner? Josephine did not let anyone do that, no matter the task at hand. She would maintain her ownership of the upper hand as long as she wanted to.

“Hush, mi amor, the cards are in my hand,” she cooed, before sliding two fingers in with a vengeance between Theia’s folds, watching her face react as she did so, her mouth hovering a mere couple inches over hers. Theia’s eyes rolled back into her skull, a hand going up to grip on the wooden headboard, her grip causing it to ache under her muscle as she did under Josephine’s.

A higher-pitched gasp escaped her mouth as she now had the back of her other hand over her mouth, biting onto her middle finger with tension as Josephine worked her hand of cards like any Antivan would: without mercy. The rhythm of her wide strokes in generous, slow circles sent nerve firings up and down Theia’s abdomen that ebbed and flowed with the reaction from her touch. Surely, she would not be this easy out the gate? Had Josephine truly won her body over by being so distant, and then all-at-once upon her? Perhaps this had been the longest and most nuanced dance of foreplay, these past few weeks. All she knew, regardless of its efficacy, was that all that flew through her mind was her name.

“Yes, yes, like that,” she moaned up at the ceiling, feeling Josephine’s teeth grade on her collarbone.
Josephine’s hand had honed in on her most sensitive area after she pursued just the right angle, the right amount of pressure. Of course, she could not help being as eager as she ways to make contact, and a few times her directness caused Theia’s body to jerk in sensitivity, and Theia herself to smirk with patience.

“My love, like this,” Theia whispered, a hand pushing Josephine to sit more upright, giving her more room to work with. She eyed Theia with curiosity, a face of oh no, you’re not stopping me now. But there was no need to fear. All Theia wanted was to slip a hand down herself.

Her cold hand sent a shiver up her spine as Theia lightly massaged at her entrance, warming and priming her touch to be welcomed with sweet, sweet sounds of humbling. The Inquisitor couldn’t help but mischievously grin, nibbling at her own lip. When she felt enough temptation had been done to the Lady Ambassador, who’s eyes tried to remain on her with determination, she entered her inner sanctum of flesh and heat, strumming along the upper part like a stringed instrument.

“Oh, Maker,” Josephine breathed with a high-pitched tone underpinning her words. She inhaled sharply as she felt the oscillating nerves in her hips and legs react. She kept her fingers inside Theia but they had quieted while she processed all this new feeling.

“Getting a taste of your own medicine?” Theia said, and quickening her pace ever-so-slightly as her hands flipped in up-and-down motions.

Josephine laughed through her breathing. She was, in fact, impossible. Her ego was telling her to resist being so easily overwhelmed, but at the feeling of Theia increasing pressure against her ever-quivering self, she braced with a hand gripping onto the headboard.

“Theia,” she exhaled, “I am going to return every trick you put me through,” she said playfully spiteful towards her lover.

Theia snickered with a sinister depth to her voice, “and you think that is supposed to deter me?” the wetness of her now beginning to slide and slip down her fingers into the palm of her hand.

“I know how you work under pressure. Match my pace,” Theia instructed, a hand supportively holding Josephine’s ribs up above her, ensuring enough space for both their hands to be at work. Josephine inhaled sharply, but the order she was given intrigued her. Slowly, she took up her finger movements again, translating the clockwise spin of Theia’s hand within her own.

Theia’s neck muscles tensed as she felt her touching reconvene. Her eyes closing again as she moaned at the feeling of her tempo quicken with hers in unison. She was always a fast learner.

Her voice and tension under her skin grew and grew as their maneuvers became even more in synch, and quickly it became a competition as to who would last longer. Josephine even began tacitly suggesting pace changes and differing shapes with her strokes, and what originally was something new and even clumsy, became a conversation without words or clever quips.

Josephine tried her best to maintain her posture, but as the pressure within her built itself up, her back rounded into Theia’s touch, and she held herself up only with the grasp of the headboard and a prayer. As much as her pride detested it, she became too overwhelmed to continue the matching pace, her hand retreating from Theia and gripping onto the sheet. Her breath became more and more rapid, and Theia did not skip a beat whatsoever, even as Josephine’s upper body lowered down of her, her face hiding in the crook of her neck.

She was fighting it until the end.
Theia focused her touch on Josephine’s clit, hell-bent on the release she craved to inspire like nothing else.

“I just want to hear you,” she whispered against Josephine’s ear, her thigh bending and securing her hips in place as she kept at it, deeper and deeper.

Josephine had been trying so hard not to give way, but as she felt the energy build at the back of her throat – the prelude to the release that was coming at her with a forcefulness – she bit down on Theia’s neck to offset the loss of control in her body. Hearing Theia’s command was merely the enticement her body needed to come alive.

Slowly, then all at once, her body became consumed in the fearlessness of her climax. Her moans grew sharply loud and full of her breath as she braced into the pillow beneath them, waves of irrevocable ecstasy running wild from clenched toe to gripping hand. Her chest and upper body bore down on Theia’s skin, up and down, low and deep.

When it subsided like waves receding from the shoreline, there she was, laying on top of her with a tired euphoria that was unlike anything else in the world. Her hair, laced with perspiration, clinging to her back and shoulders as she hid her face in Theia’s neck and collarbone. Her breathing would eventually steady, but not after a minute of tantalization.

But, like she had been before, Theia was there to catch her.

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It had been about a half an hour since Josephine could see stars in her eyelids, and she yet remained on top of Theia, her chest laying on top of Theia’s pelvic bones, gazing up at her with a look that could only come from works of fiction the way it embodied romance.

Theia’s legs were lovingly wrapped around Josephine’s torso, one draped diagonally across her exposed back. The sheet between them only strewn over her hips.

Josephine laid her cheek down on Theia’s soft skin beneath her bellybutton, not daring to break eye contact. They had been talking as they did many nights in the past, intertwined in each other. Only now, it was also whilst basking in afterglow.

“You really do not mind that I…?” Josephine hummed with care, a hand sliding a palm down Theia’s thigh.

The Inquisitor smirked with content in her voice. “Josephine, unless you were planning on leaving me high and dry after this, I imagine we will have future opportunities to get even,” she tilted her chin to rest on her own shoulder as she gazed lovingly down at her.

“It took this long for it to happen the first time, mi amor, I would not tempt fate,” Josephine responded. She did not yet know fully what to expect, only that this night had further complicated any attempt to distance themselves from each other. Josephine would never simply reject a relationship wherein intimacy had been afforded, especially with Theia, who had done everything to prove to her that such an exchange would not go unappreciated.

“We could always go until morning, I am known for my follow-through, after all,” Theia said in jest.

“Theia, you know it concerns me to think I did not satisfy you, and yet there you are, dancing on my nerves,” Josephine lifted her head up, seemingly ready to rectify the situation. To this, Theia shook her head once, a hand running lightly through her raven black hair.
“My Love, I said I wish to take this slow, and I meant it. After weeks of thinking you would never let me so much as slouch in your direction, I consider myself quite satisfied.”

“You are not lying?”

“Do you think I would dare your temper after you’ve seen what my pale, bare ass looks like?”

“Agh, Maker, that mouth of yours,” Josephine lightly slapped the side of Theia’s pelvic bone.

The truth was, even as Theia hungered like anyone would for gratification, hearing Josephine’s voice as she reached climax was quite enough to leave her in awe and glowing with bliss. Her protectiveness of Josephine outshined her wishes. And besides, a part of her was kind of turned on at the idea of pursuing it longer.

Theia chuckled under her breath. “In an ever-elusive moment in history, Josephine Montilyet is forced to take a woman she hath bedded at her word. All of Orlais will be torn asunder by morning!” she whisper-yelled, holding back even more laughter.

“If you talk any louder, you would give the Bard downstairs something to truly inspire her verses with,” Josephine muttered, unamused.

“No, Love, you did that well enough with your…should we call them octaves?”

“Agh! You–!” Josephine lurched up immediately, and hit Theia’s gut with the nearest, lackluster pillow she could find. Theia flinched in reaction as she stifled her laugh with one hand, and tried to block with the other. Quickly, she sat up, tightening her thigh grip around Josephine’s waist, and without so much as a moment’s duress flipped her unto her back, pulling herself up on top of her, seat squarely on Josephine’s abdomen, though she tried her hardest not to do so with clumsiness.

Josephine let out a gasp of surprise as she was swiftly outplayed, and, looking at the woman now atop her body, her eyebrows raised with inflated vanity, she tossed her arms above her head in begrudged surrender.

“Ugh,” she exhaled, a subtle growl escaping her throat.

“I’m sorry, I couldn’t resist,” Theia smirked, loosening her legs a bit and pulling back, taking hold of Josephine’s hands and pulling her up with her. “I just wanted to see that look on your face, that look when you’re sincerely surprised. It’s so rare.”

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“Ugh,” she exhaled, a subtle growl escaping her throat.

“The Inquisitor scoffed. “Is that what I am to you? A rival?”

“If you were my rival, Theia, you would scarcely have a chance to pin me in any position,” Josephine’s eyes narrowed, an enticing look of wit that made Theia feel fire in her belly. She leaned her face into the Ambassador’s discerning expression, eyeing her with a flirtation.

“If you were mine, I would lay my staff at your feet and beg for reprieve,” she whispered deep, before her teeth took hold of Josephine’s bottom lip, tugging at it playfully. Josephine’s eyebrows raised with allure.

Pulling away from her bite, she couldn’t help but smile as she shook her head. “You show little resolve for someone who is to face supernatural danger. Promise me you will not give into defeat
when it actually matters,” she cooed, placing a hand on the crook of the Inquisitor’s neck.

“Only rivals who are under-prepared for a real fight believe such a blatant expression of weakness,” Theia whispered, eyes flickering like the reflection off of a dagger blade with sharpness. her lips falling into a melancholy frown as she was reminded of the few hours they had left to be here.

“Ah, touche, you have bested me in this duel, for now.”

“Then take a breath and return to me,” Theia’s voice softened as she tried to retain some happiness in her mood. Every sparring match of theirs, as far as she was concerned, ended in a draw.

A moment of peace and quiet, before Theia reached a hand as she laid back on the bed, inviting her to crawl up and lay eye-to-eye with her. Josephine accepted the invitation, laying her body up against Theia’s side, feeling her arm wrap around her shoulders and keeping her close and safe. Their skin still glistening lightly in the dimming, tiring candlelight.

“Do your fears mean you will leave me again in the morning without hope for anything else?” Theia asked with honesty after the silence, an ache in her voice as she wondered what was to become of this.

Josephine sighed, her chest halfway laying on Theia’s side, her forehead parallel to hers.

A moment of contemplation permeated in the air before there was a reply.

“Before we decide that, I need to share with you what I kept from you all this time,” she whispered, her fingers interlocking with hers. Theia looked at her with confusion as to what she was referring to.

Then, it all became clear. Josephine finally opened up about her dream, her nightmare, her hybrid hallucination she had while Theia was in Emprise du Lion. The way she looked like Andraste herself, the way she invited her to kiss her, the way she eroded in the air like sand until she became more like herself, but simultaneously not. The way she spoke ominously of everything she was to show Josephine in visiting her in her sleep: what she risked, what she feared, and what she needed to let go of. All the while, Theia listened quietly, offering only the comforting stroke of a thumb on the back of her hand.

Once Josephine had come to the end of her story, she paused with anticipation and anxiety.

“Well, that does explain a lot about your behavior towards me, I’ll admit,” Theia said at last, scooting in against her more.

“I am glad it at least makes sense to someone, because I am still at a loss. Especially with the last part, the three truths I was supposed to decipher. I cannot for the life of me figure out what that refers to.”

“Perhaps they are all pointing to the same truth, just with three facts about its existence,” Theia let her eyes close as she conversed, the beckoning call of sleep starting to become less ignorable.

“Then what is it? I am at the end of my patience with it,” Josephine traced a finger thoughtfully along Theia’s chest.

“Maybe it’s me, maybe it’s our relationship. Maybe it’s you, and who you were before you joined the Inquisition,” Theia thought out loud, inhaling the smell of Josephine’s hair as she spoke. The smell of flowers and sweat was even more relaxing and addictive.

“Theia, that does not help as much as you think,” she grumbled, resting her cheek on Theia’s
shoulder. She, too, now, was feeling sleep encroaching on her.

Theia couldn’t help but laugh coarsely under her breath, and she rubbed her hand up and down Josephine’s shoulder for solace.

“My love, dreams do not simply come to us with a step-by-step interpretation. They are from the depths of our subconscious, showing us what we are too distracted to face in our waking days. I think you should do as the person who looked like me said in your dream, and let time make sense of it.”

“But…that is…most inconvenient,” Josephine groaned softly.

“I know, but in the meantime, I offer myself and my body up as a most modest way to pass that time.”

“Oh, how generous of you, my Lady.”

“Only for you, Love.”

Josephine’s breath stopped, as she took a second to let it sink in. No matter what was to greet them in the morning, she had to accept that Theia was always going to pursue her. She was never going to be solely hers to have, but that would not stop her from taking every spare moment she could to prove to her. Her running from it was only going to prolong the pursuit.

“Josephine, you are overthinking when you should be sleeping,” Theia muttered, falling more and more into blissful sleep.

With mere 2-3 hours before dawn, Josephine closed her eyes and accepted the solemn truth of the moment. For one night, she told herself – for one night, no one could take anything from her and call it rightful duty.
A night of rebellious passion, like all the rest, eventually gives way to morning. Theia and Josephine are greeted with the boundaries they have crossed and must now make sense of it. Stubbornness and pride cause a great deal of friction in the process, and it soon becomes unavoidable how much old habits are holding both women back.

The daylight broke through the thinly sewn curtains of the room, and the snowbanks that surrounded the town made for an even brighter reflection of the young sunlight. When Josephine awoke, she felt the warmth and strength of Theia’s chest and waist at her back, as well as her arm tucked under hers and held close to her chest. Her dark hair was strewn all over her head and pillow, coarse and oiled from a night of exertion.

Her eyes blinked several times, trying to clear her exhausted vision.

“Don’t say a word, I am trying to pretend it’s still night out,” she heard Theia mumble against her back. She felt the Ambassador shift her weight as she tried to wake up, and knew all-too-well from experience what that meant. Josephine always rose first.

“Theia, surely someone will come looking for you when they…” a yawn escaped her lips and into the side of her pillow “…when they find you are not in your room.”

“Surely they know where to find me,” Theia’s arm tightened its hold on Josephine, snuggling her in closer.

“Mm, I am afraid you underestimate Lady Cassandra’s ability to blow matters out of proportion,” she replied, laying her head back against her.

After a brief moment of reluctance, Theia propped herself up on her elbow, rubbing her face roughly with her hand. She sighed with apathy. “I see we fell asleep as women and woke up as agents of the Inquisition. Funny how that happens,” her smartass morning attitude in full force.

At that moment, Josephine’s prediction came true. A concerned and energetic knock came at her door.

“Lady Ambassador! Are you awake? The Inquisitor is not in—“

“Cassandra, it’s alright!” Theia interrupted whilst fending off Josephine’s hand which went to cover her mouth. “I, uh, arose early, and had…uh,” Josephine was putting up a fight, “had some…diplomatic affairs to…Josephine” she whispered Lady Montilyet’s name, who seemed to be trying her hardest to smother her with a pillow.

“Oh, my…mistake, Inquisitor. My apologies for…disturbing your work…” Cassandra’s skepticism was just as acidic even through a locked door.

Once it was believed that they were alone once more, Josephine sat up and uncovered her face out of her hair. “Theia, I swear by the Maker, it is as if you want us to be flagrant and foolish!” she hissed, covering her chest strategically with the linen bedsheet.
Theia laid back onto her propped elbows, not bothering with any modest covering. “At this point, Josephine, I’d be surprised if the Avaar didn’t know about us,” she mused, rolling her shoulders under her weight. She watched with amusement and temptation as Josephine wrapped herself up in a blanket resting on the nearby chair as she headed for her clothes trunk.

“Might I suggest something in red to match your cheeks,” Theia teased, sitting up at last, trying to garner the willpower to leave the bed for good.

“Or red to match my temper, more like,” Josephine bit back, opening the heavy lid and sifting through the fabrics with rigor. “there is so much to do when I get back to Skyhold, that storm cutting off communications has probably set me back in days,” she buzzed with stress as she found another traveling outfit, grey and warm with fur trim, as she then searched for a pair of smallclothes linens.

“Josephine,” Theia snuck up behind her with tenderness, pulling down the makeshift neckline of the blanket she had wrapped herself in down in order to kiss her bare shoulder, “you must walk before you run. Take a breath,” she hummed.

Josephine had halted to feel Theia’s lips on her skin, and her fury was curbed by the lingering sensation of desire in her bones. How convenient, one might say.

She groaned softly as her hands worked on finding the hole in the top of her smallclothes top. “If you insist on making your presence here known to the entire village, you can at least help me put my garments on,” she said decisively, sliding the blanket off her naked body and handing the top to Theia.

“I would be happy to, although I would be off-put if your maid was this handsy every morning,” Theia joked, slipping the top over Josephine’s head, and fastening the lace in the front with care.

“Would you like me to do your hair, too? I have two styles for you to choose from: a bun tight enough to withstand hand-to-hand combat, or…a bun that can withstand a snowstorm.”

“No, I am sure I can manage that part on my own, thank you,” Josephine said hurriedly, stepping through and pulling up her underskirt and securing it around her waist.

“Josephine,” Theia stopped her mid-turn around, grasping her face kindly in both of her hands as she finally caught the Ambassador’s eyes for more than a fleeting half-second. “Just breathe, just be with me for ten more seconds,” she inched into her with her waist.

Josephine’s eyes flickered nervously before they honed in on the face before hers. “Mi amor, I—“ she stopped herself from what was probably going to be a trivial complaint of some form. “Theia, you cannot blame me for feeling nervous at the thought of them seeing you scurry out of my room.”

“Which is why when we do make our way downstairs, I will be at your side, shoulders back, dressed and in shape for our departure. Really, Josephine, what is the harm in being unashamed? We are still in a remote location, where no one truly knows our identities. Humor me, just this once, and see how awful it really is,” Theia was ready to stare the risk in the face and spit on its shoes. After the events of the night prior, nothing could stop her from feeling assured in her convictions. But, she could see in the way Josephine’s eyes creased and looked toward her lips with contemplation, that it was a tough sell even still.

“Theia, I told you before, I cannot and will not be your mistress, even as proud as you are to be seen with me. I have my own career and livelihood to protect,” her voice was slower, sorrier in tone.

“I meant what I said in my note. You are my ally, my colleague first and foremost. But you are also the woman that I…”
A pause, while Josephine’s eyes narrowed and fixated on her. Theia looked down at the ground, biting her lip. It was not that she did not sincerely feel the way she did, or that she was ashamed of it. It was the thought of bearing her most intimate feeling about the her, to risk being rebuffed for the sake of propriety that made her stop.

The break in her words told Josephine everything she needed to know about how Theia would finish that sentence. Instead of waiting for her to finish, Josephine reached a hand around the back of Theia’s neck, pulling her lips into hers, kissing her with an immediacy and sincerity that defied the walls she seemed to be reinstating.

Theia gave way to passion as she returned the kiss, her hands combing into Josephine’s thick hair with no hope of untangling themsevles. She pushed Josephine back against her heavy trunk, just enough to make it crick with added weight. The sound alerted them both, and Josephine pulled away ever-so-slightly. As she breathed into Theia’s face, she could not help but feel torn.

“I have spent my entire life being groomed and conditioned for my work, my obligations,” she said in a hushed tone, still holding Theia close to her.

“And I have spent the better part of my life being reminded of how little I would matter whilst locked away in a Tower. We are more than what has been instilled in us. I wish you could trust me in that,” Theia replied, her thumb stroking Josephine’s cheek slowly. She waited for Josephine to retort, but she was met with silence as Josephine looked away, pursing her lips with conflict in her eyes.

Theia released the breath she had been holding in her chest, breaking away from her hold and tracking down her clothes she had strewn all over the floor. Silence, silence, and more silence. She knew what it meant when it came from a woman who was armed with words and rhetoric beyond compare. Here they are again, the arrow pulled and in position, but no release, no commitment.

“To think I believed that last night would change anything for you,” she muttered, picking up her slacks and setting them below her knees, stepping into them briskly and yanking them up to her waist.

“No, Josephine, please,” Josephine stood in her place, but longed for Theia to return to her arms, even as she looked like she could go without. It was anything but that.

“No, Josephine, no ‘please,’ this time,” Theia replied, finding her smallclothes top and sliding it over her head and then slipping her arms through. “Let it be known that the Inquisitor can campaign across all terrain and best the most malevolent of demons, but when it comes to the heart of one Diplomat, she does not have so much as a prayer,” she grumbled as she found her broken overcoat, decisively sliding it on and finding the one or two buttons that did not snap off. She could make do as long as it got her back to her room, where she could find something else to wear.

From across the room, Josephine watched her fume, her eyes a blue and green mixture of regretful beauty. Her hands gripped on the rim of the trunk behind her as she watched Theia harden herself before her.

“You ask more of me than you know,” she lamented.

Adjusting her shoulders under her coat and grabbing for her boots, Theia shook her head. “If you had only ever stopped to listen to me, you would know that I ask for so little.” One boot on, then the other, and they scuffed the floor roughly as she stood up straight to look back at Lady Montilyet.

“It’s so ironic, actually. You deny me because of your fear of being misused, but you used me last night, in the most merciless and devastating way. You push me away, but then you can’t resist the
pull between us, and you let it happen for one moment...then, just as I think you’ve realized...you’re busy building your walls up again.”

Hearing that made Josephine’s heart plummet into her stomach.

“Theia, no, that is not fair–”

“Josephine, for once, I am not inviting a war of words this time. I am sorry to have taken so much of your morning. I will see you downstairs, I suspect we will depart in the next half hour. In fact, we will, because I order it so.” Her voice was laden with ice.

Josephine stayed quiet, a solemn nod to her decision. As Theia left out the door, shutting it with tenacity, she couldn’t help but think of just how much she had started resenting the way their arguments always ended with one of them leaving in a fury or distressed. She stood still for a moment, her eyes scanning towards the bed where so much had transpired in one night. One night, one hour, one second, it seemed, was all they ever needed in order to set the other off balance.

As she dutifully picked up her gown and began preparing to slip it over her body, Theia’s words echoed with agony in her head. Perhaps she was right. Perhaps the greatest crime she had feared had already been done, and she was the perpetrator and not the victim.

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The carriages had been equipped and pulled out to the front of the inn. It was a crisp and clear morning, though yesterday was demonstrative of the fact that clear mornings often gave way to disastrous afternoons. The town bustled with morning chores and business.

“I want you to know, my Dear, the last time I got so little sleep was...well, I will tell you one day when I feel I have forgiven the situation,” Vivienne scoffed as she slipped her gloves on, strutting down the entryway stairs. Behind her was Solas, knapsack in hand and eyes keen as always.

“Tell me Solas that you enjoyed your evening?” Theia asked, clinging to one possible strand of optimism.

“Inquisitor, I had wine spilled on me twice while walking through the room, got called an epithet by a drunken man, and one of the legs of the desk in my room broke under the weight of my three books.”

“Okay, but...it was...good?”

“Inquisitor.”

“Alright, fine, fine. It was terrible. We will never return and I will erase this place off our map as soon as I can return to the Council room,” she said with exasperation as she grabbed another luggage trunk, propping it between her arm and her hip.

“Inquisitor,” Solas insisted, “the night was endearing, I will admit. Spontaneity ever so often is good on the nerves. Or, at least, it is alleged to be. By the looks of yours, however, I imagine you would provide a different testimony to such an assertion.”

“You have no idea,” she huffed.

“Actually, I do, which is why I commented on it.”

“...Right, thank you Solas. Your insights are always properly timed,” she said with a smile of
Approaching the back of the carriage and hoisting the box above her head, she pushed it towards the soldier who was atop the roof securing belongings. At that point, all that remained was for everyone to get on a horse, get in a carriage, or be ready to embark on foot, and by that point in the voyage Theia could care less what each person decided.

Madame Vivienne once again chose the carriage, and as Theia adjusted her riding gloves for yet another long stretch on horseback, she watched as Lady Josephine came down the stairs in her grey dress and cloak. Her face looked as if she had done something regretfully mean, like stolen a teddy bear from a small child, as she first glanced in the Inquisitor’s direction. She was met with a harsh stoicism on Theia’s part, before the Inquisitor turned away and walked single-mindedly to her horse.

Josephine sighed under her breath, before relinquishing herself to the confines of the carriage once more, but this time electing for the second one so as to ride by herself. Vivienne was more than preoccupied with her own thoughts, and far from being slighted, planned on utilizing the remaining travel to catch up on sleep in privacy.

Within the two ladies secure in the carriages, Theia saw fit to mount and ride up alongside the Seeker.

“Should I even ask what this morning was about?” Cassandra mused, resting her forearms on the saddle horn.

“It was as I told you, Seeker. Unsavory matters of politics,” Theia responded with a saltiness in her words, settling into her saddle seat.

“One day, you will have to tell me how you manage saving Thedas and digging yourself out of interpersonal disasters,” Cassandra quipped, before straightening her posture.

“That assumes I survive both of those circumstances and, quite frankly, I may throw myself to the first in order to avoid a demise at the hands of the second.” Theia gathered her reigns and turned to look over her shoulder. “Alright, let’s move out!” She called, and quickly the processional was in transit once more.

As much as their track record would suggest otherwise, the first half of their day went by without a problem. The mountains were the kind of quiet that only happens after a storm has its fill. The snow was deeper in some parts, but the trails remained manageable. They would stop one last time to stretch and water the horses, and then at last, a final push for Skyhold.

Josephine watched the mountain peaks and woodlands pass her window, deep in thought as the hours went by. Did she really go through all of that, to finally have one perfect night, and throw it all out as if it were so easy? In reflection, there was so much she wished she could have said. She wished she could have had the audacity to go after her, grab her by the wrist and demand she stay.

Theia tried her hardest in the meantime to distract herself from the same exhausting string of thoughts and regrets. Trees, evergreen and tall, were starting to bore her as she looked for anything to catch her eye and her fancy. Turns out, in the middle of a cold mountain range, not much turns up that is really remarkable. At least, remarkable enough to distract you from the burn you feel when a woman hangs you out to dry.

Midway, and they had come across an agreeable valley let-off that coalesced with a frozen-over river. The carriages pulled off to the side, and Theia and the Seeker dismounted from their horses and
allowed them to forage for whatever they could find under the powdery snow. Stretching and rubbing her back which had a dull ache, Theia gazed across the vastness of the territory.

“Alright, ten minutes, and then we’re back on,” she said to the Seeker as they walked.

Troops pulled out their kanteens and even took to sitting in the snow. One even found the humor to make a snow angel. It was rather endearing to watch as the Inquisitor leaned on the side of Vivienne’s carriage, arms folded. She could not wait to be back at Skyhold, back in her bed, and see the troops reunite with their people. This trip was just begging to be concluded; there could not possibly be anything left to surprise her.

Well, she thought.

A few more minutes passed before everyone prepared to get going again. From her periphery, Theia saw one of the Scouts launch a raven into the air, and its path forward down the trail told her that they were going the right way, and their destination was not too far.

Heading back for her horse, the sounds of rushed footfalls sounded off behind her, along with the drag of a cloak. Curious, she looked back over her shoulder to see the Lady Ambassador, having abandoned her carriage for some reason. Her face remained expressionless as she watched her approach, tensely digging one of her boot heels deeper into the snow.

“Inquisitor,” Josephine said as she halfway-jogged through the snow.

“Yes?” Theia responded with surface-level indifference. As Josephine came to a stop in front of her, she merely blinked.

“I…um, hm,” Josephine was off to a less-than-auspicious start to what Theia could only assume was an opinion, or declaration of knowledge, or a qualm. “I wish to see more of this landscape, the view from my carriage is very…unsatisfactory.”

Unconvinced and quite unimpressed, Theia she started walking away again, shaking her head. “My Lady, you are welcome to walk, if exercise is what you are in need of,” she replied, making it to her horse’s side. Methodically, she pulled the stirrups down into position and collected the reins back into her left hand.

However, Josephine did not relent.

“No, I, I think I should experience it fully on horseback,” her voice had some nerve to it, though by the way she carefully treaded, Theia could tell she was self-conscious about her proposition.

Gripping onto the side of her saddle, Theia’s gaze went to Josephine, and it became clear what she was after.

“Oh?” her voice couldn’t help but let onto a subtle amusement on her part. “You do know what that entails, right?”

“Yes. Otherwise, I would not have asked.”

“Do you have much experience riding on scout cavalry, and not simply a noble stable pony?”

“I have been astride many types of animals, Inquisitor. Some easier to tame than others.”

“A stubborn war horse or two, perhaps?” Theia referenced her joke that she made back at the Estate. Her temper was still at a light simmer. Josephine could not help but smirk.
“Oh, those are my most favorite of all.”

A slight grin now on the Inquisitor’s lips. “You have a lot of nerve, Lady Ambassador.”

Josephine adjusted her hood, letting it fall around her shoulders. “I know. It comes with a humbleness that I…I sincerely hope you can appreciate, Inquisitor.”

Intrigued, Theia stepped away from her horse, holding out an inviting hand towards Lady Montilyet that was quickly accepted. When her body was close to hers, Theia took the opportunity to have her lips close in slightly farther, the maneuver hidden behind a tall and broadly-built horse.

“If this is your way of apologizing, I am unimpressed,” she whispered cleverly. Before Josephine could retort, she hoisted her by her waist up over her head, and onto the saddle, seated sideways like a Lady. Something she had become quite proficient at.

Josephine kept her eyes on her as she was lifted up, and when she was mounted she shifted her weight to find a comfortable position – methods not unlike the ones she used last night.

“Strange, for disappointed, you look oddly excited,” Josephine commented whilst the Inquisitor slid her foot in the stirrup and pulled herself up, swinging a leg around and taking her place behind the her.

“Any woman would be, to show off her “reckless and provincial” riding style,” Theia said into her ear as she discretely pulled Josephine in closer to her, until her back was snug against her lightly-armored chest.

Josephine smiled softly, easing into the feel of her. As Theia reached her hands around her and adjusted the reigns, she braced against her as the horse moved under them, taking on the extra weight with ease.

From a distance, Cassandra watched while mounted beside the carriage with Madame Vivienne, who was also witnessing the event.

“How chivalrous of the Inquisitor, I must say,” Madame de Fer remarked with an understated interest.

“Indeed. We shall see how long it takes before one of them pushes the other to the ground and takes off in a gallop,” Cassandra smirked, before she, too, spurred her horse to continue on.

Theia softly kicked her horse into a soft jog, returning to the processional and taking a nearby lead in the lineup. While it was not the utmost comfortable position to be in, Josephine was satiated by the feeling of Theia’s arms around her, and she secured herself as well as any woman could. The strength and confidence in Theia’s frame was more than enough insurance for her.

Ever so often, one of the Ambassador’s hands would rest itself back on Theia’s right thigh, or her head would lean back just a little farther than it had to onto her shoulder. All under the guise of remaining secure in her seat, of course. Whenever she did so, she could see out of the corner of her eye a grin appear on the Inquisitor’s lips. The ride did little to expose Lady Montilyet to the full grandeur of the outdoors; her eyes scarcely broke away from their main interest.

Some time had passed like this, before Josephine dared to talk.

“Theia,” she whispered, her head leaning back on her shoulder as her eyes remained on the horizon.

“Hm?” Theia responded, looking ahead as well.
“I am sorry. You were right, and I am sorry.”

Theia couldn’t help but raise an eyebrow and eye Josephine from her periphery. She did this briefly before turning her attention back on the road, seeming to be unphased. It made Josephine hold her breath in anticipation.

Then, as she was so stuck on watching her face for a reaction or response, she felt a hand reach under the cover of her cloak and wrap around her waist, open-palmed as it gripped protectively across the front of her waist. The sensation made her heart skip a beat, and she had to stop herself from smiling from ear to ear. There was no point in keeping a cover if she was looking like a beguiled girl who was being escorted by her beloved Knight.

Biting her lip to contain her relief, she looked down bashfully for a moment to collect her sensibilities. Both of the women knew what lay ahead at the end of the road physically, but figuratively and metaphorically it was anyone’s guess. But, for the mean time, Theia was encouraged knowing that Josephine had consented to entering the Skyhold fortress in such a way as to say she was comfortable enough to trust her quite directly with getting her back home safely.

The rest could sort itself out for the remainder of the day.
A return to a Skyhold brings the Inquisitor and Chief Ambassador Montilyet back to reality, but something has irrevocably shifted past the point of no return. Entering on horseback together hardly speaks of a platonic ambivalence, after all. The trajectory is interrupted by a new challenge on the horizon: Adamant Fortress, and the Grey Wardens. The room for indecisiveness is rapidly shrinking.

The towering walls of Skyhold reached for the skies, and its might extended along with it as the group finally made their way through the first gate and across the bridge. Theia could feel her grip on Josephine’s waist – which had scarcely left its spot for more than a moment or two at a time – grip slightly tighter in anticipation of letting her go. Josephine did not avoid this; in fact, the security she felt there against her chest and in the saddle was a memory she would hold closely tucked in her heart for the rest of her days.

“Ah! At long last, our fortress invites us back into its arms,” Vivienne called out from her carriage window. Riding her horse next to it was the Seeker, who could not help but grin with relief as they had finally returned from a most temperamental excursion.

Soon, the roaring sound of the second gate erupted through the cavernous mountain air, opening itself up for them. The shadows it cast as the sunlight behind the fortress flickered through its square patterned holes reflected on their contented, tired faces.

Pulling into the courtyard, Theia’s eyes scanned the stairwell and walkways for any Advisors or allies who had gathered around to be a welcome-home reception. Cheerfully, Varric waved to her from the fence guarding the upper yard, and then her eyes also found Iron Bull who nodded austerely in her direction.

She saw Leliana standing at the very top of the stairs, hands at her sides, looking like she had just managed to make it in time after the horn had blown, announcing their arrival.

The Spymaster’s discerning green eyes locked on the sight of her friend in the lap of the Inquisitor, in a rare show of creativity for the Ambassador who had upheld decorum like it was her most valued virtue. This made her intrigued as to just how much the reports she had collected from the Scouts’ ravens left out.

Back at the Courtyard ground level, Commander Cullen approached Theia’s horse, as she gently pulled the reigns until the animal halted.

“Inquisitor, glad to see you have returned in one piece. There are reports on your desk that have collected in your absence, but, I assure you nothing out of the ordinary has occurred here as far as our military is concerned,” he said light-heartedly. It took him a moment – and Josephine using both her hands to toss back her hood – to realize Theia’s accompaniment was of particular familiarity to him.

“Oh, Lady Ambassador, I—“
“What, Cullen? Did you not see me here? Was my dress so adequate a camouflage?” Josephine teased, a smile on her lips softening the blow.

Cullen sighed and shrugged his shoulders. “Perhaps seeing you in such a casual shape left you unrecognizable to the unwise eye,” he jested back.

Theia couldn’t help but bite back a laugh, resting her pursed lips on Josephine’s shoulder for a moment as she tried her best to not egg either side on with her reaction. Swallowing it, she raised her face and spoke.

“Thank you Commander, I’ll see to my duties at once. I’m especially looking forward to the any scouting reports we’ve received from Hawke. Has there been any word?”

“A report came in early this morning via Raven. Leliana will be able to provide insight after you read it.”

“Thank you, that is just what I was hoping to hear.”

As Cullen nodded and withdrew from the conversation so as to check in with the troops that had come with them, she released the reins from her hands and dismounted, landing gingerly on the ground as her concern turned immediately to Lady Montilyet who remained seated. She reached her hands up, and when Josephine took hold she braced the tension of her fall as she slid off the side, landing rather tucked between the horse’s side and Theia’s chest.

“I suppose that in return for this, you must expect me to avoid you to balance things out?” she asked quickly, while she still had her in front of her, and most of her attention.

Josephine let her hands linger on Theia’s upper arms as she listened to her question. She looked past the Inquisitor’s soldier, at her friend’s pale and observant face as she watched them from above. Exhaling, she turned her eyes back to her.

“No, but, do allow me to attend to my duties. I am sure we both have quite the workload awaiting us,” she spoke decisively.

“Fair enough. Happy writing, my Lady. I will have the treaties delivered to your office as soon as I can,” Theia said, before letting her break free from her hold. She watched the Ambassador collect her skirts as she walked briskly towards and starting up the stairs. Then, it became time to unpack, debrief, and become acquainted with the next challenge at hand.

Before that, however, some more warm greetings from good friends. An arrow shot from the upper level grounds, hitting the ground right beside Theia’s feet. She did not flinch one ounce of weight, however, and in fact looked as if she had been expecting it.

“Ah, so you missed me after all, Sera?!” she called out jovially, slipping her riding gloves off of her hands. From that point, she could see Sera’s petite stature stand up from a crouched position. Sera gave a smug grin in return for the happy remark.

“Inquisitor, back from the clutches of those fancy pants in Monty-lard. Good to know,” Sera called out, before walking back to what Theia would assume was her room in the pub…or the Undercroft.

Theia turned around and was met again with a friendly face, this time Dorian as he swaggered to her side coolly. “My friend, I do hope you will regale me with every inch of intrigue you encountered on your journey. The way you entered atop a thundering steed with a fair maiden at your side tells me you had quite the time,” he mused, crossing his arms.
“Dorian, it is good to see you. I never thought I would meet people who would make me miss how grounded you are,” she giggled, slapping Dorian’s arm with a riding glove.

“Inquisitor, if I am to be your standard for human candor, then I suggest you take up more drinking,” he replied, a warm smile appearing on his lips.

“You’re right, I should. Perhaps tonight.”

Theia patted him on the shoulder before she made her way over to the carriages, catching the last of the boxes being unloaded. She stood at the Seeker’s side as she did so.

“Seeker, thank you for accompanying us. I am always honored that you put up with me and whatever trouble follows me around Thedas.”

Cassandra shook her head. “It seems as though the Maker wishes me to bear witness to all of your entanglements. I can only assume this is the more mild of circumstances we will find ourselves in,” her observant personality shining through her words.

“Well, whatever happens next, be sure to not hold back if you ever want me to get my shit together.”

“I never tried otherwise, Inquisitor.”

—

The War Council meeting that took place an hour later brought an important decision to the center of all concerns. Theia had found her way to the piles of parchment at her desk, and indeed a scouting report had found its way from Hawke’s hands to theirs. The Adamant fortress was confirmed as being used to house the Grey Wardens while they worked to prevent future Blights by utilizing blood magic, compelled to do so by the widespread Calling evoked by Corypheus. This conclusion left little outside options available besides direct siege.

“This has to happen fast. If the Western Approach was an experiment, they must be nearing full execution,” Leliana said, walking around the corner of the table in a pacing maneuver.

“Cullen, your opinion on the age of the fort makes sense, but that still means we need considerable manpower,” Theia thought out loud, her hip leaning on the edge of the table as she eyed the region south of the Hissing Wastes, where Adamant embedded itself through the ages.

“Yes, but we have that now. And, given some more time to prepare, we can be even stronger,” the Commander insisted.

“I can continue communications with nearby nobles who have resources for transporting and fortifying siege equipment. The fortress will require usage of more than just foot soldiers and archers,” the Ambassador spoke as she wrote.

“We need trebuchets, something to break down the door, and infrastructure to support backlash,” Leliana fed off of Josephine’s thought process.

“They’ll be expecting us, with that despicable puppet at their side acting on Corypheus’s behalf. Warden Clarel has gotten herself in deep,” the Inquisitor holding her thumb against her chin.

“Yes, but she is one woman. A woman with power, but one person nonetheless. The Wardens are protective of their ranks, but they are not all without reason. Thought it may be too late to salvage the Templars, the Wardens may yet hold hope,” Leliana would wager, even with her lover off in the great wide somewhere, that there were more than just the Hero of Fereldan who would stand for
“Very well. I want training to buckle-down with the troops. We march within the week, as soon as Hawke and Stroud return to confirm any last intel. Until then, we should send a Raven to ask if they can confirm possible locations of back passages for scouts before they withdraw their mission. Commander, let me know if I can assist with any restocking efforts of food and raw materials. I will work with Dagna and the Blacksmith to make sure we have everyone outfitted properly. With the latest shipments of Silverite and Dawnstone from Sarhnia region, Dagna and I should have some fun. I will see everyone tonight for supper.”

With that, The Inquisitor convened the meeting, and the Council members were free to go back to their duties. The looming anticipation of Adamant took hold of the air soon afterward with a most brutish grip.

—

“So, you await a return to battle once more,” Josephine’s voice echoed from inside Theia’s bedchamber, out to the balcony where she stood watching the sunset down over the mountains. The Inquisitor’s arms were folded as she stood in contemplation, although now her visitor called her attention to the present moment. Perhaps she was the better for it.

“Alas, I fear the only times we will ever have for each other are either during haphazard diplomatic affairs or the eve of my return to danger’s most welcoming breast,” Theia played, pivoting on her hip so as to look back at the Lady Ambassador, who was making her way out to join her. She had changed back into her gold and purple robes, looking as if they had never rode across snow-capped mountain valleys or danced on the floor of a sweaty, packed dance hall.

“You tease, but I know it weighs heavily on your mind. I’ve seen the look in your eyes before missions are begun,” Josephine lamented, at last arriving at the Inquisitor’s side.

“Oh? Are you suggesting I’m not always a peach to be around?” Theia continued to press a sense of humor into a conversation that Josephine clearly wanted to be serious. It was a confirmed suspicion when she saw Josephine’s eyes, giving her that look of quit it.

“Theia, a moment of honesty,” Lady Montilyet suggested.

Theia’s chest tensed with the pressure of the breath she held onto, trying to put together her thoughts. Her face let down the façade of wit and was now authentically in-touch with the brevity of the situation.

“I have always been ambitious in my studies, Josephine. Being a powerful and capable Mage has always been a goal of mine. Thinking about what the Wardens are gambling with, and how many people they have probably already lost and yet stand to lose, it makes me feel hollow to know such choices can be made if people are scared enough beyond sense. Blood magic is…controversial, to say the least. I cannot deny I feel intimidated by the risk of encountering a legion of Grey Wardens with the capabilities Blood Magic bestows.”

“Surely, though, the extent to which they have been able to master it has not been fully realized yet. I am not familiar as you are, but my impression of the process is that it takes time and ritual investment.”

“True, but what has yet stood in the way of Grey Wardens when they are being hunted down by time and death?” Theia shifted her weight between her feet as she talked.
“History would say the worst and most depraved of enemies,” Josephine replied, turning around to face the Inquisitor from the side. “This is why the Inquisition exists, and this is why we must succeed in our endeavors.”

“You make it sound as if there is no other possible outcome to be realized.”

“That is because there is none. If we fail, that is the end.”

“Look at you, gloom and doom before your first glass of wine with dinner.”

“Agh, it has been a long day, perhaps my sense of humor has gone to bed before I have.”

Theia grinned and turned back, walking inside to her desk and eyeing the papers she had been working on. “Tell me, Josephine, were you ever intimidated by me?” Theia asked from over her shoulder as her hands moved to organize the parchments into more tidy piles.

“Of course, who was not? You were—are, the Herald, after all.”

“Yes, but I mean me as a person. You know, underneath all that fame and superstition.”

Josephine’s eyes narrowed as she followed after her, standing a few feet away when she answered.

“I suppose so, but...in a way, I sympathized with you. When I first laid eyes on you, my first thought was of how young you seemed. Yet, your eyes and words spoke of experiences beyond the limits of your youth.”

Theia’s eyebrows raised as she turned around to face the Ambassador. “I suppose it went away then when you realized just how imperfect I was.”

“No, it merely changed to respect. Intimidation prolonged is simply a sign of underlying insecurity within oneself. Rarely is it the pure objective existence of a given person.”

“I am sure you have had many experiences to teach you that wisdom,” Theia sat back on the end of her desk, hands gripping the table surface edge. “I must say, listening to you talk makes everything feel like a matter of winning a chess game. Like the next maneuver is just right in front of your face.”

Josephine smiled softly, coming in closer until she was close enough to take hold of Theia’s hands that she watched tensely grip on the table. It was always one of the easiest ways to tell if Theia was hiding stress, the way she dislocated the feeling into other limbs of her body just so.

“People who master talking do not always master action. This is why entities like our Council are so vital, they combine both into something truly forceful,” Josephine comforted, intertwining her fingers with hers.

Theia paused before responding, her gaze lowering so as to watch their hands interweave together. Her mouth opened, but she let out a breath, stalling just a few seconds more.

“You know when you make me nervous, I can feel the anchor?”

“Really? It is that responsive? I thought it just reacted to the rifts.”

“No, it is embedded in my nerves, I think. It almost acts in concert with them. Back at the pub, that night...I felt it under the skin of my palm.”

“Should we be concerned? Has it always done this, Theia?”
“Yes, it is hardly new. I just thought it was a funny thing. First my eyes, with their colors, and now this Anchor. I’m like a walking light beacon of emotions,” she joked half-heartedly. A moment of silence compelled her to see what Josephine’s facial expression was, and when she saw the concern in it, she could only smirk bitter-sweetly.

“My Love, only one of us can be the somber one. The other must spur their temper until eventually they bite back and snap out of their sadness. I thought we rehearsed this enough for you to get the cue.”

“Theia, mi amor, if it were me in your position you would be there to hold my hands and comfort me through my despair. Let me be of service to you in that way,” Josephine muttered, leaning her upper body into hers, until their foreheads touched.

Another moment passed of melancholy. Theia had wrapped her hands around Josephine’s waist, and in turn the Ambassador’s hands rested on her chest.

“Tell me you will come to me tonight. I don’t care how busy you are, bring your work. Let me watch you work with only the bedsheets to drape this body of yours. You can use my back as a hard surface to write on. I don’t care,” Theia asked, the sweetness aching in her voice.

The invitation warmed Josephine’s face, thinking of the quiet peace that would surround them if they could just fast-forward to that distinct moment, paying no mind to dinner or socialization. This interim visit could turn into an entire night of them, and they could reclaim what they had found in the mountains, keep recreating it over and over.

“Theia, until the night you leave for Adamant, you will not fall asleep alone. This I can most definitely arrange,” she smiled.

Theia’s eyes glowed with happiness that she was trying hard not to have burst forth from her body like a dozen crazed butterflies.

“Alright, but, you stick me with that quill of yours and you will be at my mercy,” she replied, biting her lip.

“I wouldn’t dream of it, surely,” Josephine nudged her nose against hers, “but if it happens, it happens.”

–

Dinner was less ceremonial than if there were visiting dignitaries to entertain. When it was simply the Inquisition, people walking between tables, grabbing food as they mingled, and there was no toast or heavy-handed ritual of entry for the Advisors or the Inquisitor herself. Theia liked these dinners best; she could be more of herself, and she was allowed to let her guard down. Whether or not she did so.

From her seat at the end of one of the banquet tables, the Inquisitor watched as the laughter and casual conversation warmed the room, and it made her less restless than she was when she was huddled up in her room, deep in thought about the upcoming siege on Adamant fortress. She had to decide which allies would be at her side, explore schematics for armor and weapon reinforcements with Dagna in time to have them crafted, see that any and all back-up plans should anything go awry were properly agreed upon. Her head was always submerged in the preparations of battle when it came time to prepare.

“Inquisitor, why do you look as though you just climbed out of a pit of demons just to find someone had stolen your last dessert pastry?” Varric’s warm and humoring voice sounded off by her left ear.
Snapping herself out of her mind, she turned and smiled.

“Varric, is that a question or a testimony of guilt?” her voice ached with bittersweetness.

“You know me, I never admit to anything unless it enhances my ability to get out of an even worse mistake,” he chuckled, patting her on the shoulder with his hand. “This is the first dinner you’ve gotten to just relax, and you’re doing anything but.”

“I have a lot on my mind, and I am tired from the morning’s ride. Surely Dorian and the rest of you can make up for the absence of my poor jokes and sarcasm.”

“Honestly? That task might be more daunting than the one with the hole in the sky. Take care, Inquisitor, to take your breaks where you got ‘em,” Varric smiled and headed back to his seat. His life had made him an exceptionally qualified judge of the wits and character of women who were tasked with saving people from imminent danger.

Scanning the room, she noticed two of her Advisors were missing from the Hall. The Commander had ate and gone back to his barracks without much fuss or wasted time, which meant Leliana and Josephine were the only two remaining who hadn’t shown themselves. She had hoped it wasn’t due to anything that would inspire a lecture on safe sex or “How to Love In Time of Apocalypse 101.” But, knowing the Spymaster, it was probably just that.

Indeed, even with the echo the tower created, Leliana found it the most trustworthy location to invite her friend to so as to talk about private matters. They sat beside each other on the bench by her work table, the Ravens cawing and fluttering wings as they awaited their evening meals.

“So,” Leliana sat back against the wall, “you have found an exception to your many rules and regulations of behavior, no?” she had been closed off from Josephine while caring for her duties, sure, but that did not mean Leliana did not care, or that she would stand idly by while she watched her friend embark through uncharted territory.

Josephine tucked an ankle behind the other, sitting with proper posture, even as her face and shoulder softened thinking about the complexity of her situation.

“I have so many differing opinions and perspectives in my mind about what is best. First, I have my own, which says I should not jeopardize what I have worked so hard for. Then, I have words like the ones Vivienne said to me, saying to be unapologetic and unburdened by the idle minds of others. Then…”

“There’s her.”

Josephine’s lips pursed as she made eye contact with her. “And she is so determined and assured in this, I almost forget I am supposed to be the expert on Diplomacy and Politics.”

“There is truth to that, Josie, but you must also take into consideration just how fast she has had to learn how to maneuver and present herself. You learned through years of practice, diligence, and repetition. She has learned via the motivation to survive.”

“Then why am I here? To be a snobbish reminder that the opinions of rich nobles are more important than they actually are?”

“No, you are here because without your abilities and knowledge, we would founder. We cannot simply support the weight of military power and spies and expect all of Thedas to see us as more
than a splintered group of violent rebels.”

Josephine rubbed her hands as her thoughts raced. Her eyes wandered, trying to make some sense, some kind of linear thought.

“I wrote to Mother of my…circumstance.”

“And?”

“She is curious at best, ruthlessly judgemental at worst. I defend her without fail, but even I must admit Yvette’s distaste for Mother’s critical nature is not completely unfounded.”

“Your Mother is a shrewd woman who expects her daughters to be the same. It’s not a crime to hope the girls you raise into women are courageous and independent.”

“Yes, but I have dedicated my life to honoring that commitment, and now just as I have found one thing that does not align with those goals – or, perhaps, complicates them is more precise wording – everything starts to go awry.”

“Josie, perhaps the Inquisitor is right, and you are running before you should walk. Pulling a muscle before the sprint is hardly wise,” Leliana sat back from the wall, resting her hands on her knees.

“I just wish something would arise, some kind of sign, then. Something that shows me I am acting in the right ways, especially after that dream I had.”

“You had the last three days happen to you and you still need a sign? Maker, Josie, no wonder she is ready to chew through wood.”

“Leliana, spare me,” Josephine put her face into her hands as she hunched over her gathered lap. “I am simply trying to do what is best for everyone involved.”

“I know all-too-well your motivations, Josephine, which is why I did some diplomatic work of my own.” Leliana stood from the bench and made her way to the tower railing. “Sera! You may come upstairs now!” she called down.

Sera, being the person whom everyone could always depend upon to make a remarkable entrance, opted out of the stairs. Instead, she swung up and over the railing, having jumped from the library railing up to the third story with ease. Josephine blinked at the abruptness of her appearance, watching the rogue elf swing a leg around the wood rails and hop onto the ground.

“Spymaster, my pleasure. Lady Josie.” she nodded to both of them, scratching the side of her hip.

Leliana couldn’t help but grin with empathy for Sera’s mischief and dexterity.

“Sera, why don’t you tell my friend here what you took great care to find out using your contacts,” Leliana gathered her hands behind her waist as she turned to look in Josephine’s direction.

“Sure, though, I gotta admit my friends are real curious now, somethin’ about women gettin’ all cuddly with other women. They were more than giddy to help,” Sera grinned, leaning back on the rail.

“Leliana, what did you and Sera do?” Josephine said curtly, rising from her seat in order to stand level with them.

“Hush, Josie, just give us a chance,” Leliana shook her head, opening the floor again for Sera. “Go
ahead.”

“Nobles are all in a tizzy about who catches the Inquisitor’s eye and arse, no doubt ‘bout it. But we dropped some hints here and there, nothing dirty or…anything, about a certain diplomacy-woman catchin’ her eye. My people say that there’s no sign of trouble or hurt feelins in their ranks. We seein’ nothing too scary or concerning on our end, and our end tends to be where you get to see the Bronto’s backside of all the intrigy-stuff. Assassination plots, poison’ins, orders to spit in wine, spyin,’ that sorta stuff.”

Josephine couldn’t help but hold her breath as she did her best to make sense of what Sera was saying. When it all came together – after about 10 seconds of critical thinking – her attention turned to Leliana.

“So, you trial-ballooned an affair between a Diplomat and the Inquisitor to see if there would be any backlash? I should have predicted you would do something like this,” the Ambassador folded her arms.

“If you had, you would have stopped me. Sometimes it is useful to be overlooked; besides, it is my trade to go undetected,” Leliana grinned out the side of her mouth with smug accomplishment.

“This is simply a select few rumors, though. More than triple the amount are sifted through before midday in Val Royeaux. We both know everyone gossips about the many possible suitors the Inquisitor may have, such discourse is fleeting and intemperate.”

“Yes, but you may use that to your advantage. But, I would advise a more confident approach than hiding behind the ebb and flow of Court gossip. Use your abilities to your advantage – what do you do best? You arrange and strike accords.”

Sera couldn’t help but be slightly perturbed at the nausea of aristocratic talk.

“Josie – if I could call ya that for a second – Josie, listen. You got your head so far up in the crust of the pie you don’t see how the dish gets baked. The people like it when they see their own selves in you people with all the power and riches and…whatever it is you spend your time playin’ ‘round with.”

“Sera is right – if you reinforce your play.”

Josephine found herself amused underneath the tension of the situation, seeing Leliana and Sera working together, seeming to converse across two separate dialects.

“Alright, alright, I see what you are trying to get across. Thank you Sera, for taking the time.”

“It’s all good, Ambassy-der. Any time gals need help gettin’ together, my bow is ready,” she chirped back. She then nodded a farewell to the Spymaster, before grabbing at the railing and hopping over.

From below, a very unnerved Solas could be heard asking – in a tone that said it had not been the first time – to use the stairs. Then, a giggle that quickly grew more distant, as Sera made her exit.

“Leliana, I must say, I am surprised that you would be so forthcoming in your encouragement of this…relationship. I thought you’d sooner see one of my suitors hung off from a banner pole than nudge them closer in my direction. Tell me, have you taken a page from Seeker Pentaghast’s novels?” a smile on Lady Montilyet’s face grew as she teased.

“Josie, I am fiercely defensive of you. But, I can also see how this makes you happy. Perhaps I see it more than you do at times,” Leliana stepped closer now. “I have discussed this with the Inquisitor,
but, I wish for you to know it is possible to love someone in these times of great peril. It may not always feel that way, but it is true. I trust you to be smart and decisive enough to do what must be done, otherwise, I would not have invited you to join us here as an Advisor.”

“You asked me here to be a Diplomat, not to entrench my personal affairs at the heart of a historical force for peace.”

“Yes, and the Hero of Fereldan was tasked with ending a Blight and defeating an archdemon, and must now find a way to survive that which comes for all Wardens with absolution. I still expect letters from her, as she does from me. I still trust her love, as she does mine.”

“Yes, but I am not you. I am not a woman hardened by war, savvy with such matters. I have so little to share in her experience besides intelligence and compassion.”

“Do not even think of that, Josie. I have watched your eyes turn dark with tenacity as you’ve defended that which is most important to you. You may not shoot an arrow or wield a sword, or cast magic, but you are powerful and formidable beyond question. Is that why you have held back so much from this? You fear she will distance herself from you?”

“No. Yes. Maybe–Agh!” Josephine began to pace, rubbing the back of her head with anxiety.

“Maker, Josie, is there nothing you will not let get in the way?”

“It is not that I am meaning for it to happen, Leliana. Nothing would make life easier for me than to simply forget all of these intricacies and inferences and simply be at her side, simple-minded and careless. You must understand that I am configuring with both my nerves as an Ambassador and as a woman who is unfamiliar with such fervent feelings.”

“I see.” Leliana stood by her side, her face softening with compassion.

“Yes. So, forgive me of your heroic tales of love on the front lines do very little to assuage me. It is not that I do not appreciate it, it is that I do not see myself in the reflection of such experiences. And…I fear that she will stop seeing me in the reflection of her own journey, her own histories. Where does that leave me, then?”

Leliana looked away, trying to avoid Josephine’s discerning stare as she compiled her thoughts. Clearly, her friend had been spinning about this to the point of emotional exhaustion. It was a wonder how she hid it so well – well, it was Josephine. That would be an answer enough.

“Josephine,” Leliana spoke her full name now, “If you do not go for it, you will never truly know. All you will be left with is the certainty of both of you moving on, and that reflection of yours will indeed dissipate. I know you have an adoration for certainties, but, is that one you really want?”

Josephine’s chin lowered as she gazed into the void. The question was a good one, for it feeling so obvious.

“Thank you for talking me through this, Leliana. I will take care to contemplate all the information you have so generously cultivated for me.”

Dinner was awaiting them. And, after that, a certain woman would await her.
The morning of their departure for Adamant Fortress compels Inquisitor Theia Trevelyan to practice some of her most intimate rituals in preparation for violence and battle. As she does so, her love and colleague Josephine discovers a side of the Inquisitor she has kept to herself: who she was in the days of the rebellion, and what yet lingers in her life and soul from such tumult.

If a morning dawn could conspire to have as many colors as it could during one sunrise, that would be the morning of the Inquisition’s departure for Adamant Fortress.

Blues, purples, reds, and oranges water-colored the horizon, and Theia was witness to every fluctuation of every hue. She sat on the ground of her balcony, the cold stone underneath her bare thighs, exposed by the gathering of her night dress skirt so as to sit with her legs criss-crossed. This was the morning a warrior Mage would desire to see, if it were to be her last.

In front of her was a small wooden bowl, artisan-made and modest in design: the etches on the side were of Free Marches origin. It was one of the few small objects she had maintained in her possession since they went on the rogue during the rebellion. She remembered how she carried her small possessions – what Olivia would call her “estate” in reaction to her protectiveness of it all – in a dirty cotton nap-sack over her shoulder. A bowl, a knife, some medicinal herbs, and a jar of wax that could be heated over a campfire and used for various tasks, like leaving notes for fellow wayward Mages to find – notes full of intel, like where the nearest water source was, where the Templars were stationed, or what villagers to trust and not trust. Theia always insisted on a paper trail wherever they went.

But, nowadays, paper, wax, and herbs were in abundant reach. But, on days such as this, she still found a use for her bowl and incense herbs.

Ceremoniously, she had gone out to the balcony as the first shades of daylight began to show. Sitting on the ground, she lit the herbs with a soft flicker of fire from her palm, and as they began to smolder, she blew lightly to encourage the burn. Then, placing them in the bowl, the stream of incense and smoke reached up into her face and chest. She placed her hands on her lap and closed her eyes, quieting her thoughts and engaging with the core of her body, the core of her powers.

Soon, the visualizations of her surroundings faded away. She stopped feeling the stone floor and the morning air, as she became enveloped in the raw energy of her body. It was like oscillating currents: centering her storm energy, she felt the static brew from the tips of her fingers and toes, up into her shoulders and thighs, meeting in her abdomen. Then, within her mind, she reached her hands towards the hearth of the ice within her soul, and felt the concert of cool air and rigid cascades of ice and frost in her hair and down her neck. It felt like goosebumps, but hungrier.

In her mind’s eye she then turned to look over her shoulder, feeling warmth on her cheek as she sought congress with the fire now. It was more raw, less accustomed to her devotion and training, but still strong. The heat, in its own way, was formidable simply because she had left it so untouched and unburdened with restriction. But, it had been kept at a distance. She reached a hand out again, almost asking for it to be appeased with her lack of attention. Ravenous, but patient, she felt it
intertwine around her forearm, forgiving.

She grinned with a solemn reassurance.

Mages sought congress with their own selves in many different ways. Some never walked a step without being in conversation with it all, and such people were powerful and capable of balancing their emotions along with the raw momentum of their abilities. Others sought to separate the reactions of their powers from their own, and only when they would figuratively reach out a hand to collaborate would this side of themselves take center stage.

For Theia, her powers were as much a part of herself as any limb of her body or hair strand on her head. She almost recognized it as its own autonomous force, but merely using her body as a conduit of expression. In exchange for such candor, she was able to push her limits more in training. She learned this from her mentor, Lady Faustina, during her days in the Circle. If it weren’t for Faustina, Theia would have been at war with herself perhaps for forever. Having a mentor say it was alright to conjoin emotions and magic, and even healthier to do so, was a life-defining moment for her.

She learned this ritual from her, and she did them before every major battle and major conflict she could. People like Seeker Cassandra and Madame Vivienne, as well as Solas, learned as they traveled with her that on certain nights they could find her in her tent quietly sitting and meditating on the air of incense. Some of them understood more than others, but they all recognized how vital it was for her own soundness of mind and body.

As she felt at last connected with the main triad of her abilities, the all-too-expected disruption in the currents appeared. It was the magic of the anchor, brimming and seething out of place. She had tried many times to understand it, to make it feel more at peace within this captive body, but it wrestled with her. This was not the body of an elf, this was not its desired vessel. Their heritages were in contention with one another, and there seemed to be no hope of reconciliation. Still, in a way, Theia felt almost as if the anchor pitied her. She didn’t know whether to feel thankful or fearful at that intuitive observation.

She took another deep inhale, her lungs filling with a deep aroma of flowers and stems burning.

Just continue this path with me, is all I ask. I can fend for myself.

The anchor’s temper calmed, and with it the green glowing she saw in her closed eyes dissipated, going back to the locale it had occupied in her body and soul. It re-centered itself, and she was contented once more, for the time being. For now, Shemlen. For now.

Her shoulders rolled back and framed her straight and confident posture. Her braid of hair resting over her right shoulder.

She hadn’t noticed, of course, but someone had been watching her for several minutes after waking up alone. The person watched with a soft curiosity, having wrapped her naked body in one of the linen sheets of the bed. Her raven black hair was messy and knotted, but it looked positively beautiful in its tousled curls. She leaned against the archway wall; what was originally instinctual alarm that perhaps Theia had left for the siege without saying goodbye, had given way to heartfelt adoration. This was the first time she had caught the Inquisitor during one of her most intimate ritual practices. Theia never ever tore herself away in order to do such things when they slept together, even the night before Emprise du Lion. As she watched in quiet stillness, she wondered why.

Then, Theia began speaking out loud, and her thoughts silenced themselves out of fear of being too loud.
"We battle like warriors,
Avenge like wolves,
Love like the sea of Amaranthine.
Angry like the storm,
Our blood seethes
Until our justice is yours and mine.
Come to me sisters
In the killing of lesser men,
We drink to their downfall,
And dance to our blessed rise.
For your strength is my bone,
Your oppression my armor,
Your grief my staff blade edge,
And for your protection, I pine.
Guide my hands in war,
And my heart in forgiveness.
For tonight, we fight like Kings
And take to the bed of their Queens."

The words sent chills down Josephine’s spine as she heard Theia’s lamentation. It sounded like something you would promise before drinking from a chalice or slicing a vein open for a blood oath. Something more powerful than any treaty or contract: the commitment of one’s heart and soul.

A moment passed, and Theia let out a deep exhale of release. Her eyes open, the rich purple emboldened by her consortium with her powers. They glowed with ferocity as she looked down at the herbs, their smoke waning.

“You know, I would have invited you if I wished you to witness my radical Mage rituals,” Theia hummed in a calm monotone, reaching and grabbing the bowl, cupping it with one hand as she stomped out the rest of the burning embers.

Josephine felt her stomach drop, fearing she had done something terribly wrong. She stepped away from the wall and grasped at the sheet wrapped around her body.

“Forgive me, Theia, I was only concerned when I woke up without you. I feared you had left.”

Theia looked ahead as she listened to her response. She grinned with compassion, not meaning to come off as angry.

“It’s alright, Josephine. I just…am not used to having an audience is all. It wasn’t my intention to
scare you,” she rose to her feet, turning around and facing her. She tried her best to have a facial expression that was compassionate enough to soothe Josephine’s nerves.

Josephine, meanwhile, anxiously rolled her shoulders as her lover’s eyes met with her own.

“How do I then?”

“Ask what the Fox hunts for.”

“What does that refer to?”

“I’ll tell you, if you ask it.”

A pause, while Josephine nervously shifted her weight.

“What…does the fox hunt for?”

Theia turned and leaned against the edge of her desk with her hip. She crossed her arms, letting a sly smile appear.

“The fox hunts for the hunter who steals her meal.”

Josephine couldn’t help but be even more intrigued, but she had no clue what she was talking about, and it was a rare feeling for her, being lost.

“I…I do not know what…”

“My Love, it’s alright. It’s…it’s language from my days during the rebellion. Me and my group, we had certain…routines. We developed them while we were in the Circle, but then when things changed, we relied upon them for more than just comfort. The oath I recited, we would say at night before we would go hunting, or when we anticipated battle with Templars or bandits. It’s a sort of rally call, so-to-speak. We would chant it together; it was the only chant we revered as much as any Andrastian would revere their own.”

“It…sounds like you desired vengeance a great deal.”

“Would you blame us? We were hunted like bush animals. Survival meant…harnessing something more carnal, more animalistic, in a sense. I was not always proud of my actions, but, I will never regret them with the knowledge of what endangered us all. It kept us alive.”

“You scarcely discuss your life in the rebellion. I suppose I pictured it different,” Josephine took a couple steps closer.

“Not everything the Templars do are within the confines of duty and integrity,” Theia’s tone was cold, reminiscent of a time when her soul was hardened.

“I did not mean to imply that, I am just not used to seeing this side of your demeanor.”

“I understand, trust me, I am not offended. It’s just interesting, sharing it with someone else, someone who isn’t also trying to survive.”
Theia saw that Josephine was still feeling uncomfortable. She stepped away from the desk and approached her, taking light hold of one of her hands.

“So, what does the fox refer to?” Josephine’s curiosity was very robust.

“The fox was one of our codes to refer to ourselves or each other. Instead of saying mage or woman, we would discuss movements of foxes, birds, wolves. Like, for example, if I was to tell my comrade that I saw what looked like a Mage traveling alone with the Templars on her heels, I would say the “Fox hunts in territory where she is just as easily the prey of wolves.” Then, we could go find her, or try to cut off the Templar pursuit.”

“You sound like vigilantes, or mercenaries.”

“We were a mix of both, I could say. It was a way of keeping our identities as secret as possible.”

“How did you maintain that, given you walked with staffs?”

“We stashed them when we had to, and relied upon the magic in our bodies. One person would be tasked with guarding the stash while the rest of us would do recon, or get supplies from a nearby village.”

Josephine walked over to the couch by the fire, the sheet trailing behind her slightly as she sat down. Theia followed her, taking her place beside her, elbows resting on her knees.

“Why are you opening up so easily now, after all this time?” Josephine asked another question.

“Perhaps I am nostalgic, as violent and horrific as it was. I miss the women I traveled with most of all, especially on days when I feel alone or I intimidated by an oncoming challenge. I take comfort in the superstition that if I maintain our rituals, somewhere, out there, they feel it and send their strength to me. And, if they do so as well, I lend my strength to them.”

“Where are they now?”

“Olivia is the only one who I know of her location and safety. There was Veronica, Rosalyn, and Naomi besides us. Veronica took her own path, last I heard she was nestled somewhere in Denerim. We all thought she was foolish to do it, but, she has family there. Rosalyn wanted to be a part of the action, and she left to find her battles and get her vengeance. I don’t know if she’s alive or not, but, that is not a promising detail. Naomi wanted to be a healer, and help the downtrodden, so when we found a village that had taken on refugees she stayed to assist. I returned to Ostwick, looking for survivors, any of my mentors, hoping I could help rebuild some of the security we had lost. I don’t know why, but, after seeing all I had seen, it was as if something trained into me told me to do it. I returned and found my mentor, Lady Faustina, in hiding. She and two other colleagues sent me to the Conclave using the remaining clout they had, and that is how I ended up at the Temple.”

Josephine listened with intention and care. This life she led, it seemed to pose more questions than answers with every divulged detail. Why did her and her friends go on the run? What did they hope to accomplish? Who was she when she was a Circle Mage?

But, as Theia looked at her, and she saw the ache in her eyes as she re-lived it, and she knew it would take time.

“Theia, I cannot possibly know how difficult those times were for you, but I hope you know just how much you inspire me.”

“Inspire you?”
Josephine bit her lip slightly. “Yes. You have had to live through some of the most unthinkable experiences, and even though you have not opened up to me as much as I would hope you could, I know that it is because you carry these memories with a steeled will and heart. Your protectiveness is hard-won and trained. I respect your abilities, and not just those you derive from magic,” her hand went and rested on Theia’s thigh.

Theia’s chin tilted with intrigue. “Even with the tumult of the Mage Rebellion being the topic of disdain and hatred for all of Orlesian nobility?”

“Someone who has a true commitment to an earnest and integral political constitution extends understanding to all sides of a conflict before passing judgment.”

“If only the Templars and the Chantry would practice such mediation.”

Josephine’s face tensed with soreness. These institutions helped define her power and notoriety, but she was no fool. She knew when they misstep, and when they intentionally strode beyond boundaries of decency.

“My dear, you are doing it again,” Theia’s voice cooed as she took hold of Josephine’s hand and pulled her to her. Josephine shook her head and leaned into her shoulder, resting her cheek.

“I deserve to overthink occasionally, mi amor,” she muttered back.

“I will tell you more stories, you must give me time. It is still all fresh in my heart.”

“I understand, truly, I just wish you always remember that you can do so.”

Theia’s arm around her shoulder gripped more snuggly, and she put her lips to Josephine’s hair.

“You fill my life with new rituals, ones that comfort my heart instead of priming me for loss and pain. Forgive me if I wish to relish in them and keep ones from a different time for my own sentimentalities.”

For a moment, it was as if no battle awaited her. No marching of troops, no arming. Just them, in this space and time, with their own private ceremonials.
Chapter Summary

The siege of Adamant Fortress has led to a haphazard and unexpected journey through the Fade for the Inquisitor and her allies. Having made their way toward the rift which will return them to their world, they are faced one with last indominable enemy: the nightmare demon. Faced with an impossible choice, Theia cedes her future for the sake of her comrades, and submits her body and abilities to the task at hand: an unthinkable sacrifice.

The path had been arduous and dank, but at last, they had seen their journey through even past the clutches of the fear demon and towards the rift that would return them to their world.

Sweating and heaving air in and out of her lungs, Inquisitor Trevelyan began the dead sprint along with her allies, seeing most of them make it through the rift sent a singe of relief down her spine. Good, perhaps Varric was wrong, some heroes can survive.

Then, the ground rumbled with a sinister energy that hungered to feed.

As she beckoned Hawke and Stroud to follow her, their faces of horror and caution compelled her to turn and see what stopped them in their tracks. It was the massive Nightmare creature the Divine spirit had managed to fend off long enough for them to tackle the Fear Demon alone. It had obviously recovered from the sundering, and now, its limbs curled and struck the ground with a vengeance.

Her arms fanned out at her sides as she tried to remain on her feet amidst the shaking. She stammered back to Hawke’s side, Stroud not far away.

“We need to clear a path! It will surely devour us all if we cannot find a way around!” Stroud yelled, instinctively gripping at his sword.

Theia tried her best to level her labored breathing as the problem presented itself before them, with time sprinting faster than they every could.

“I will do it! I’ll cover you!” Hawke replied, her hand reaching for her staff.

“Hawke, no!” Theia looked back over her shoulder, her brow furrowing.

“Inquisitor, Corypheus is my mistake. Let me make up for an error that never should have happened!” Hawke insisted, beads of sweat falling down her forehead and down her temples.

“No, let me do it. A Grey Warden must avenge the wrongs we have done to Thedas. It is our duty to sacrifice,” Stroud came closer, unsheathing his sword.

Theia’s mind became a storm of emotions and thoughts. They had made it this far with everyone relatively unscathed, and now at this last moment, a life would be lost. She remembered the conversations, the meaning in both the lives of Stroud and Hawke, who now stood at her side, ready to end their lives for her cause. It was overwhelming. The adrenaline coursing through her veins, the anchor responding to the insurgence by humming in her palm’s skin. She felt an unabated pang of
remorse and sorrow.

“Both of you go. I will cover.” She said sternly, pulling her staff off of her shoulder and holding it at her side, ready for combat.

“You can’t be serious, Inquisitor! You are needed!” Hawke came closer so as to make direct eye contact, but everything in Theia’s eyes told of a woman convinced of her own demise.

“I refuse to let you die, Inquisitor. This is madness,” Stroud joined in.

“Both of you are needed and have been needed before I ever existed to Thedas. The Inquisition can always find a leader to pull rank. We don’t have time to dispute, do not make me order both of you!” she grit her teeth as she yelled, tapping her staff with her thumb, beginning its humming of magical potential.

Hawke’s eyes flickered to the light emanating from the Inquisitor’s staff, and her chest was hollowed by the sense of dread.

“Inquisitor…it’s…it’s been an honor,” she said, roughly landing a hand on Theia’s shoulder. She looked at Stroud, who’s stubborn expression spoke of his unwillingness to cooperate.

“Stroud, let’s go. She says it’s an order,” Hawke squared her posture alongside him. The Warden’s brow raised in distress as he, too, punched his chest with a fist in reverence now.

“Inquisitor. We will not fail you,” he growled with an urgency.

“I trust you. Hawke,” she said, turning to her fellow Mage. “Tell Cassandra she is right. Tell her to push on.”

“I will.”

“Then tell Josephine…tell her…” her voice choked as tears of mixed and fervent emotion welled in her eyes, a one falling from her eye and mixing with the sweat and blood.

Hawke pursed her lips quickly, reaching a hand to grasp the back of Theia’s head. She resolutely put her forehead to the Inquisitor’s, lowering her eyes. She was giving a warrior’s comfort, a warrior’s goodbye, a warrior’s reassurance.

“I will, I swear,” she muttered low, before breaking away and taking one last look at her, nodding once.

Theia swallowed fast, and with one shallow breath, she composed herself. The monster that had lurked in her subconscious, that had preyed upon her weak moments but did not yet have the courage to approach, was taking her down. She was submitting to an end she had always anticipated. But, she was done watching others die for her, even if it was for an idea, a future bigger than herself. She was the one person who could put a stop to it.

And so, she ran. Every muscle in her body seeming to oscillate with the energy of a woman protective beyond comprehension. She swung her staff like a pole spear, cutting and slicing decisively with her staff blade as her comrades ran at each side of her. They were getting there, the path was opening with each thrust and ball of fire she let go from her body. Her irises hummed and beat with colors as she let the magic in her body consume her senses and take hold of her.

She went to her knees, sliding forward as she twisted the staff around, taking off more grotesque limbs. The creature shrieked and squealed to the point of enveloping their senses.
The rift’s light gained fast and fleeting shadows, as from her periphery, she saw one, then two, figures leap forward and into its embrace. A second of assurance gave way to terror as the demon reached for her. She would not be an accommodating prey.

Theia roared with animosity and ferociousness that could outmatch any desert beast, any scourged demon, even ones that could eclipse the sun.

“You want a fight!?” she raged, standing as upright as she could to her feet, and dropping her staff to the ground. Then, clutching the air with her fingers, she summoned a most unholy mass of electricity in her palms. Another growl reverberated in her chest as she compelled the anchor’s magic to combine with the static in her left palm. It had not done so before, needing to be convinced like an autonomous will. But, in this moment, in this time of staring death in the maul and bearing her teeth right back, she bent it into subservience for one moment.

The electric currents glowed green and purple now. This surge could consume her body, obliterate her flesh and bone like dust. That is why she hesitated to push herself. But, if she was meant to fall now, might as well cause an elemental rupture in the Fade to do it.

She finally amassed enough charge in her body, so much so that her senses seem to want to break free from her skin. She felt as though her body, her bones and ligaments, were cracking like stone facades in a temple torn asunder. In that moment, her body echoed the destruction of all the Temples and sacred sites Corypheus left in his wake. She was becoming a ruin.

Now a doomed beacon, she relented her body, heralding the sacrifice with one last mouthful of resistance.

She screamed an un-Earthly scream, sending her arms over her head. The reach of her arms extended with violent branches of electric energy, intermingled with the Anchor’s aggression. The sound of her voice thundered like a storm downpour. Only when the creature’s wailing erupted from its depths did her sound get overpowered.

The creature became paralyzed as its skin and extremities became enveloped in merciless static, encompassing every inch of its being. Then, waves of green light, like the patterns of the Frostback night sky lights, coursed through. The creature had an endless rage, and endless, fearful flood of roaring.

Theia’s eyes were now all purple, all light, and all thirst for death. Her body was shaking, but she had concentrated the instability to her hips as they shifted and rotated under the weight of her casting. In her mind’s eye she could at first see only blinding light, nothing but vastness.

Then, the power started to seek any means of satiation and sustenance it could. It came for her memories, the ones that fed her emotions and her will to live –

Her childhood, the feeling of injustice that she could not yet name. Her life in the Circle, relying on few confidants and friends who knew her better than she knew herself in those intemperate times. The days of being on the road, never knowing when she would become the next kill for fun or ravaged woman at the hands of a man’s sin. Then, the Conclave, and the early days in Haven; finding people who looked at her with hope, with respect. Those adversaries who became allies, who then became friends.

Their travels, their triumphs. The victories that came from the clutches of impossibility.

Her grasp of the sword grip, and the reflection of everyone’s faces as they saw their Inquisitor for the first time.
The feeling of mountain air against the skin of her back.

The smell of her onyx black hair after a night of sweat and incense burning.

A moment of chaotic concert between the Inquisitor’s and the demon’s voices, both fighting off the clutches of death. Then, a snap, as if a hand had rolled over a reservoir of friction and made it snap.

Then, darkness.

–

The air that filled the Fortress courtyard was thick with sweat, blood, and magic. The onslaught of demons felt indominate. So, when the rift broke open further to allow the bodies of Hawke and Stroud to jump forth, everyone examined the sight in their periphery. Quickly, Hawke gathered herself and stood to her feet, looking back and hoping that the Inquisitor would manage to close the rift.

Then, screaming echoed through, and it was not obvious as to who it came from. The Rift began to collapse on itself, but not in the way it normally did when the Inquisitor sought to close it. It was almost as if it was responding to a nearby explosion of power, and being consumed by default. It shrunk and ached, and then, snapped like a fragile neck bone.

The demons collapsed around them, victims of a shockwave of energy.

“Hawke! Where is the Inquisitor?!?” Cassandra ran to her side, wondering why the Fade rift would close without her there.

Hawke coughed up the lingering blood and dried spit in her throat.

“She…she…” she breathed, hunching over and putting her hands on her knees to keep herself somewhat upright.

Cassandra felt the air quiet now, and the weight of the silence proved more frightening than the concert of screams and sword thrusts.

“No…she could not have…” she muttered, taking a step back in disbelief.

“I’m sorry. We couldn’t…we couldn’t tell her otherwise,” Stroud, now, managing to just barely sheath his sword. His voice made Hawke’s heart sink further into her stomach.

Cassandra was brimming with righteous anger and sorrow, and as she grit her teeth, all she could hear was the high-pitched ringing in her ears.

“Seeker!” a voice called from behind. It was Solas, armor bloodied and staff humming with expendable energy as he approached with an urgent march in his step.

She did not reply. To do so would cause another eruption of devastating energy.

“Seeker, I have felt a reckoning emotion that came from the rift closing itself. The rift was not closed directly, it gave into a massive expelling of energy. If it was her, she could still yet survive. I have not seen such a phenomena happen, but, if she gave into her magic, she could have been salvaged by it.”

Cassandra snapped out of it, hearing a hopefulness in Solas’s erudite voice.

“How can we know? And how do we rescue her if she is alive?”
“We wait. I will keep attention to the energies I feel from spirits who will wish to know what released such a shock-wave.”

“If she used her body as a lightening rod, would it make sense for her to be alive after that?” Dorian’s voice now echoed from several yards back. He had listened in, his heart beating fast with anxiety. His friend, his dear friend. If he had only stayed behind and convinced her out of her stupidity.

“I do not yet know. However, considering her body has maintained the power of the anchor, which seeks to survive as well, perhaps she has defied the rules once more. We must regroup, and wait.”

The Seeker couldn’t help but be unsatisfied at the thought of sitting on her hands and waiting for her friend, who was flesh and blood, to make her survival known. It had been a dance she had done one-too-many times in this short span of time, but now, the stakes were raised. She wasn’t simply in the middle of nowhere, or under a mountain of ice and snow. She was in the Fade, physically so. Trapped if she was alive, lost forever if she wasn’t.

“We need to find the closest fade rift, and we need to rescue her,” Cassandra growled, gripping angrily onto her sword, and stomping off through the crowd.

If there was a way, she would do as Theia always teased her for: she would ram whatever armored limb she had against the obstacle until she could move forward. Her friend, her ally, her comrade, deserved at least that.
Theia Trevelyan, in the face of an impossible demonic foe, has sacrificed herself in the Fade to save two allies. The mystery of whether she survived gives way to more mystery than clarity. Turns out, the Fade can take a backseat to the wonders that unfold when the Inquisitor seems to survive the unsurviveable, though how long she can remain just so is uncertain.

The ringing in her ears was enough to wish for death all over again. But, then again – she was able to wish for it in the first place?

It hurt behind her eyes – aching like a migraine with a bitter temper after a night of pub foolishness. She felt the grading of dirt and gravel under her cheek, pressing into her tender skin. Finally surpassing the pain, she opened her eyes, her pupils reacting harshly to the exposure of light and air.

A groan rumbled in her chest as her vision cleared. She lay as the epicenter of a crater, shallow but wide, wide as the creature she had challenged. The fine dirt around her was blackened, powdered like soot and ash. It made no sense – the Fade did not burn like a forest canyon would. What could have created this massive quantity of ash and smoke? It was either a hallucination, or the remains of a body.

Trying to move her shoulder and arm, she felt a twinge of pain in all of her muscles, pain that reminded her of the kind she had in recovery from her last major injury. Only now, it was more embedded in her body than any flesh wound. This pain was nervous, inflamed.

Had she paralyzed herself? Did the electric current she released obliterate her body in such a way so as to leave her vegetative? If so, being left in such condition in the middle of the Fade seemed like a fate much more tragic than death. Perhaps she would become like the Divine spirit – a relic awaiting visitors. Perhaps death was still an eventuality, and she was merely sitting bait.

“To think I believed no foe could ever leave you on your back and defenseless. My, how times have changed,” a voice, a woman’s voice, standing nearby.

Theia’s fight or flight instinct kicked in immediately. Unable to protect herself, whatever it was could have its way with her. She had to think on her feet – or, in this case, off of them.

“Show yourself, entity, or I’ll be forced to be violent once more,” she managed to mutter, the ache in her neck lacing her words with misery.

At once, a body she did not sense approach was next, legs crouching so as to be more level with her perspective. All she could see was the boots, the cherry wood brown of them. They had scuff marks on the sides from wear and tear, and bronze bolt charms up the sides. She had seen them before, being cleaned by campfire light after a day of trudging through mud and dirt.

The hands of the figure clasped together as it remained crouched.

“Roslyn,” Theia swallowed still, “or…your memory of…” she coughed on ash that had collected in
her throat and burned.

“Shhh, old friend, it is a pity you do not know when to rest,” her voice was playful, intelligent. Roslyn’s trademark qualities, other than being an utter brute in combat.

“Why are you here in this way?” Theia’s eyes tried to stretch their gaze as much as possible. She could only see the curls of red hair, strands hanging in the air in front of the being’s chest. The hunting gear, the leather hide vest, it was all as she had remembered.

“I am like you: not where I should be, but where I am needed, like a rag for one’s ass.”

The spirit that would be Roslyn then stood upright, circling around to stand at Theia’s feet.

“Tsk tsk, you always threatened men by saying you could scorch them alive. Had no idea you were willing to do it to yourself.” Roslyn’s Fereldan accent rang as true as its diction.

“I’m…going to pretend,” Theia took a strained breath, “that you are her, and not a masquerading spirit, because quite honestly, my patience for this place is,” she winced, “…beyond used up.”

“Oh, well, that saves me quite a lot of time. Now I can get right to the juicy stuff. I’m here to help you get your shit together, and get out of here.”

Theia tried her best to wiggle and twitch any sense of feeling in her body, but was coming up short. She could only feel the weight of herself pressed into the ground. It was pure, unadulterated frustration and visceral panic that were brewing inside her chest.

“Oh, like the Divine? She was a big help to me. I was begging for this,” Theia spit back.

“Friend, you’re in too great of a need to be smart with that mouth. But, I do say it brings back good memories.”

“Is she dead?”

“Who, friend?”

Theia sighed shallowly. “Don’t cross me, spirit. Tell me honestly. Is Roslyn dead?”

There was silence, no footfalls, no chiding from this spirit who would-be her old compatriot. Theia’s eyes flickered back and force, nervously awaiting an answer. She was trying with all of her remaining energy not to fall apart in herself. The last thing she needed was a mental breakdown after a physical one.

“She perished in the foothills southeast of Denerim. A skirmish with Templar mercenaries. Or, perhaps she died while being mugged in Val Royeaux. Or, she could have also been assassinated in the Imperium while working undercover to liberate slaves. Take your pick,” the voice danced on the blurred lines of truth.

Theia could feel pressure in her throat tighten, pressure from emotion. Her friend, her most passionate and hard-fighting friend. Gone.

“Well that…answers my question…in a way,” she breathed, her eyes glazing over with fatigue.

She felt dirt kicked on her arm from a boot. “I don’t see how it matters, as long as she is here to help your ungrateful ass.”

“Fine, then. I give in. Help me how?”
The being paced with heavy feet, irreverent of the crater they were in, and the power than caused it. For this being, this was unnecessary detail for the situation. “Can’t feel your face? Can’t feel your toes?”

“Not really, except for pain.”

“Yep. You did that. You used your body like a match stick for a lightning storm and you had the audacity to call on me in order to make it worse for yourself. I’m tired of your bossing.”

“What are you…?” Theia coughed again. “Agh! Maker, just get to the point.”

“The point is, pretty thing, you called on my power when I kept telling you no. I obliged, and now I gotta use my creativity in order to fix this for both of us. My fate is tied with yours, for now. I hate it, but it’s true.”

“You…” Theia’s voice rang with disbelief, “you’re the anch—“

“Oh, hush. You always make things so boring and blatant with your mouthiness. Does it matter?”

“…No.”

“That’s right. Now, I’m only going to do this once. It’s a royal pain to convince a spirit to be my projector, find a memory of yours in that dense skull, and do all this work for you. Do a dispel spell in your head.”

Theia’s brow lightly furrowed, twitching with muscle stress and lack of adequate feeling. “You… what? A dispel? How does that help?”

“Just think of it. You don’t have to move an inch, not that you could.”

“I…okay.” Like she was told, Theia closed her eyes and imagined the inner incantation and momentum of a dispel spell. It began as a small thought, but it grew. It grew like spells always did, the familiar feeling of potential expanding into her limbs and body tissue. It was the most she had felt of her body since she woke up, and it left her breathless with relief. But, as she inhaled, the spell left her body like a candle light blown out by someone’s breath.

Theia gasped and choked, her eyes opening wide with shock.

“Y-you,” she breathed loudly, “you were wrong!”

“Hush. I wasn’t. Do it again. You blow out your body like a candle wick, you gotta re-light it like one.”

Theia growled softly. This was frustrating to say the least. She took a moment to gather her thoughts and remaining patience, and closed her eyes to continue the ritual again. Dispel spells were quieter, but they also took a lot of momentum built within oneself. After all, counteracting magic with more magic was like shifting a rip tide away from shore.

A breath, shallow, but durable, began in her chest again as the magic extended into her limbs. The inertia stayed this time, steady, resolute. The nerves in her body turned on fire, but eventually waned into their role in her body. Then, fingers, toes, eyelashes…they were sensational again. Her lungs lightened, and she could now breathe with a tempo.

Sharply, she turned her gaze up to the would-be sky, and her eyebrows and eyes expanded as her mouth was breathing agape.
She lifted her hands up into the air, holding them open and flat.

“What did you do?” She asked, her eyes going to Roslyn’s face.

“Simple, idiot. I had you counteract your own magic. The only person capable of matching your magic is you. Well, in this specific circumstance, anyway. You’d be stomped mud if it were anywhere else.”

Theia’s body began to calm, and as soon as she could, she sat up and shifted to sit on her side. As she looked around at the space she leveled with the destruction of the nightmare demon, she couldn’t help but marvel at the aftermath as if something else had been responsible. As if she was just another bystander.

“Don’t get all gobsmacked and stunned now, Theia. We got work to do.” Roslyn grabbed her arm stiffly and pulled her to her clumsy feet. She stumbled back a step or two before finally stabilizing herself, holding onto the spirit that felt very much real, flesh and blood.

“What are we going to do? I collapsed the rift,” Theia turned and looked at the being.

“Do you remember any of your role and purpose in that world? There was an ass-load of rifts everywhere. We find one, we go through it, we’re back. Got it?” she chirped back, flipping her hair out of her face like a prissy noblewoman.

“Okay, granted, that’s right. But, who’s to say the rift is anywhere near Adamant, or anywhere near Thedas, honestly?” Theia’s eyes caught the sight of her staff, lying half-covered in ashen piles. She broke from Roslyn’s grip and limped to it, reaching down with an aching groan and grabbing it.

“A rift to your world is better than no rift at all. There should be one just in that canyon over there, if my tingly senses are right.”

“Tingly senses?”

“Oh, would you shut it? I gathered only the lexicon of this person in your memory and nothing else. It’s not my fault she has a piss poor vocabulary.”

Theia couldn’t help but smirk at the utterly ludicrous situation she was in. “You’re right, she was always a sailor’s boot of a mouth,” she said with endearment. It also reminded her of Sera, another no-nonsense friend whom she missed, and whom was very much alive…hopefully.

“Yeah, yeah, save the sentimental trash. We have to get going. Or else your friend that Seeker will impale herself to get back into the Fade physically.”

“Cassandra? Shit, you’re right, let’s go.”

—

Their walking was a soundtrack of aggressive stomping and no hearty conversation. After all, what do you really have in common with an anchor personified by projecting into a spirit essence and utilizing one of your memories in order to flesh out its character and expressions? Not much.

The way she – it? – walked, the way it carried itself, was just like Roslyn did back in the day. Theia had to do a couple double-takes in order to remind herself it wasn’t actually real. This wasn’t some dream about being back in the rebellion days. This was the Fade, this was danger, this was near-death experiences gone wild.
“So, you’ve been sitting in my hand, but had this capability all along?” Theia finally let curiosity bite.

Roslyn scoffed. “It takes a specific set of circumstances to make this happen, fool. I merely found myself pinned against the wall with the way you toss your life around.”

“So, Solas is going to lose his mind, if I get to tell him about this.”

“So, Solas has bigger concerns.”

“What do you mean? He’s obsessed with understanding you, with understanding the orb.”

Roslyn chuckled under her breath, a sound that slightly unnerved Theia. “Solas has reasons for his obsessions. I am not to be bothered by his fumblings, or anyone’s. I already have too much to clean up.”

“You mean “we” have too much, considering it’s from my hand that you do it.”

“You, Corypheus’s crotch, who cares. I didn’t ask to be bestowed onto your filthy paw like a fancy piece of jewelry.”

Theia sighed. “Fair enough. But, what I still don’t understand is how I survived the magic I conjured. I did it with the understanding that I would not survive. I’m alive, and not scarred permanently. How?”

“You would be foolish to assume you will arise unscathed from all your trials, babe. But, I will answer your question. You survived because I wished you too, and your lucky ass had enough power in its reservoir to match my desire to see you live. You are a spunky little Mage shemlen, I’ll admit. Not like the other trifling Court entertainers Orlais likes to parade around.”

“…Thanks, I guess?”

“You’re welcome. It is a compliment, though provoked by your reckless casting and desire to be a martyr. I can’t do anything without relying on your body and power in some form, and it pisses me off, but it’s what I got. You use your emotions to feed your abilities, so I was able to look through your memories and muster the potential from them. Don’t be scared if you have some…amnesia, for a while.”

“I guess it’s a small price to pay. I seem to be dealing out memories left and right anyhow. Even if it means my mind gets co-opted for the sake of an anchor preserving itself.”

“That’s the most sensible thing you’ve said all damn day.”

The pair made their way to the mouth of the canyon, and while creature sounds could be heard on either side of them, strangely enough they had traversed undisturbed. It was quite unusual to the Inquisitor, who had hacked and froze her way to the Nightmare demon’s lap like she was cutting down a forest of demons. Perhaps the explosion sent them all running in fear. Hah, the irony, a fear demon’s lair leveled by fear of its own demise.

Shaking her head as she felt the aching bones in her hips crick and crack, Theia stopped and turned to the spirit.

“So, I feel no rifts, and usually my hand pops or snaps when they are near. You got an answer for that?”

“You’re so demanding. I sense it well enough. I don’t have much time, though. I can only project
myself from my mark on your body for so long before I get sucked back in like a bad belch. Let’s hurry our bushy tails up before I get so done with your bossing that I burn your head of hair off.”

“So polite and cordial. Just like Roslyn,” Theia grumbled as they continued on foot.

The coagulated puddles of muddy water under their feet rippled and splashed as they walked, and soon, Roslyn could be seen getting more and more agitated. “It is close,” she whispered, reaching and grabbing hold of a knife she had stashed under her belt. Shit, this spirit was uncanny.

“Okay, well, just tell me when to run and leap,” Theia whispered back, trying hard to make her limp quiet as she walked.

“It’ll be a fight, but we can manage. When we come across ’em, I’ll collapse back into you.”

Okay, thanks for the—“

“Now!” Roslyn turned and chucked the knife. It spun over Theia’s shoulder and into the face of an anger demon. Gasping as she looked over her shoulder, Theia yelled.

“How did you get a knife to…!?” she turned, but Roslyn was gone. Then, a sharp pain erupted from her left arm. Theia screamed as she felt something resettle under her skin, and intertwined in her nerves again. It was like the first time, but less agonizing, as if it had already made a place for itself.

But, the task at hand remained.

She grabbed her staff and began fighting the demon with every ice and lightning attack she could muster. Theia was still very weak, and lacked the strength to out-do the demon with one or two maneuvers of magic. She had to utilize lower-powered abilities and wear it down. It screeched and lunged for her as she kept it going in a circular path, sending ice bout after bout at it. Eventually, it tripped and collapsed over on itself, and with one mystical breath she mustered, she breathed ice into the air as it twisted around her staff blade. A swift and unforgiving jab, and she impaled it with an ice blade. It froze over and shattered like a snow drift in the wind.

She let out another tired breath, slouching in her posture as she leaned on her staff for support. The air quieted, but still leaked and hummed with the Fade’s sinister energy. She wasn’t safe, and she wasn’t home.

“Thank you,” she said out loud, to the entity had helped her all this way, and now took shelter in her body. She had no idea what to make of the anchor projecting itself out of her body, or practicing sentience and possession at the SAME time, but one thing she did know was that she had to return to her world in order to have any hope of figuring it out. Oh, and of course, saving Thedas.

She pivoted on her hip, turning back to their path down the canyon. She could sense it now, the feeling she got when a rift was nearby. She steeled herself, and continued on.

—

The path was long for a person who couldn’t walk faster than her limp could carry her. To pass the time, and comfort her in the face of an aura of fear, Theia pretended the anchor could still talk back to her.

“When I get back, I am so done with this nonsense. I’m going to tell the Rift Mage tutor to fuck off politely. I’m gonna have so much sex with my woman. I’m going to drink like all the men do, and tell them to fuck off when they wonder if I can handle it. I’m at my limit!” she raged. She dragged her feet as she persevered.
Then, a snap from her palm. The anchor was alive and ready. She looked up and saw the glowing behind an embankment. It was there, it was really there. She wasn’t leading her on, or tricking her. She? It? Oh, who cared anyway.

Using her staff as a stepping stick, she hurried as much as she could muster willpower. It got closer and closer, the opening now visible. She rounded the corner, and there it was, amorphous and glowing. Her hand was even more scintillating with energy. She let out a sigh of relief as she approached it, preparing herself for the leap and collapse into her world. No matter where it would take her, she could manage.

“Wait.” A voice inside her head said. It was Roslyn’s voice, but now with a tone of compassion.

Theia stopped in her tracks, turning and looking back, but seeing nothing. So, it was in her head.

“Oh great, now you’ll be able to talk to me? I have enough demanding voices in my day-to-day as it is,” Theia huffed, shrugging her shoulders.

“Shut it, Shemlen. I asked you to stop precisely because I will not be able to talk to you after you cross into your world. I wish to say something.”

“Well, get on with it, this isn’t exactly the safest of places for a heart to heart…or, anchor…to… ugh,” Theia was getting confused with her own train of thought.

“Wow, such eloquence. You charmed a seasoned diplomat with that mouth did ya?”

Theia growled with impatience.

“Fine. I wish to say this one warning: I can comply with your mission well enough. But I will not belong to you forever. I am empowered by my people that have created me and reinforced my power. I will not reside in the flesh of a human. But, I implore you – care for my people. Have compassion for their suffering. The only reason I have not consumed you is because I see the empathy in your being, and I know you are capable of creating peace and understanding. You did not have the power to subdue me, but you had the ability to persuade me. Do right by this, and I do right by you for as long as I can.”

Theia couldn’t believe the intelligence and awareness of this magic. It was believable, sincere, and spoke with knowledge and nuance. How could this be? Was all magic innately sentient? Or was she empowered by the knowledge of Elven consciousness? She would surely have to pick Solas’s brain about this, if he had any idea that this could happen in the first place.

“Fine, of course. I promise.” Theia replied out loud, gripping decisively on her staff.

“Good. Some of them will need your ear more than others. Pay attention.”

Theia nodded in affirmation, before turning back towards the rift. It sent vibrations through the ground with its potential. She took a sharp breath in, and with her grit and might, she broke into a jog. As she got within a step of its façade, she closed her eyes, and braced for the journey as the rift engulfed her.

At first, it was a freezing wind gust that greeted her body and nerves as she fell to the ground. It was rocky, jagged, and scraped her hands as she landed on them along with her knees. She grunted in reaction to the tough landing, but she was awake and coherent enough to get on her feet.
It was a mountain path. The mountains were blackened, rigid, sulfuric almost. It reminded her of the terrain they traversed on their way to Adamant. She couldn’t have gotten than lucky, right?

She turned and pursed her lips as she reached her still-seething anchor hand, closing the rift she entered in. When it exploded and closed, she felt a wind gust again, drying the caked-on layers of soot, sweat, and blood on her face. Walking, again, would be necessary.

She followed the back downward, winding and turning down the mountain side. There were no footprints, no marching trails. If this was the region where Adamant was nestled, no troops had advanced in these paths. That made her very uneasy.

Eventually, the ground evened out, and she sought out a visual of what lay down the path in the valley. No smoking campfires? No fire light at all? Maker, this was basically Haven but with no snow.

She looked both ways, but nothing. For all she knew, she was hundreds of miles away from the nearest person. It would take days to make contact.

Her breathing slowed as she fell to her knees in the dirt and muddied grass. She was so beyond done with being transported to random regions and left to find her way home.

Laying her head back in apathy, she blinked slow, feeling the night air abysmally embrace her face.

“Well, shit.”

Without anything to lose, the only way you can go is up. She reached a hand up to the sky, opened her palm, and growled as she mustered the energy to send a plume of fire into the sky. She held it in for a moment, ensuring it had enough momentum to go up high enough to be seen from a distance. All she needed was one person, one single set of eyes, to see it.

Biting her lip, she held it in. Then, when she finally trusted it, she opened her grip and released.

The fire ball, looking like a flare, soared up into the still sky in liberation. Farther and farther, with each half second she grew more hopeful.

Then, pop.

She sat back on her folded legs. Now, it was time to wait. Wait, or be taken down by something going bump in the night.

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Cassandra mounted her horse with rigor, having made her way to the outside encampments of the Inquisition forces about half a mile from the fortress gates. Her armor was still bloodied from the siege on Adamant’s forces.

“Seeker, you are mad if you think this is feasible. Even if you find the rift, who’s to say you’ll survive going through it?” Commander Cullen walked after her horse as she tightened the reigns in preparation for a gallop.

“The scout said there was a rift 2 miles northeast, and that is the closest to the one the Wardens had opened. If she is alive and able to walk, she will find it first. It is my responsibility – and yours – to ensure her return and survival.”

Cullen sped up and grabbed at the horse’s reign, pulling back and gazing up at her. “And if you are
taken down by demons in the process? Then we lose two important people. Why can’t you simply heed Solas and wait for him to feel interruptions in the Fade?” Cullen couldn’t believe what he was saying, but, if it meant sparing the life of the Seeker, he’d heed any Mage’s complex interactions with the supernatural.

“Commander, my duty is my duty. Get out of my way, or get on a horse and come with me,” she growled, yanking the reign out of his hands, and staring him down.

“You are jumping to action without foresight,” he warned rigidly.

“Maybe, but will you be the one to tell Ambassador Montilyet that we did not immediately run into the face of danger when the only other option meant leaving her to die?” Cassandra’s words cut deeper than any sword she could ever hope to wield in her life.

He stood back, his jaw clenching as he realized it was without hope. She gathered her grip once more, and kicked her horse.

Watching her gallop through the lines of lit tents, he said a small and modest prayer to himself.

As she rode, Cassandra was irreverent of any blocks or difficult passages in her way. She rode her horse over fallen trees, down steep embankments, through ravenous rivers. Surely, two miles could go by quick enough. She came to a hillside, and finally pulled her horse to a halt. She scanned for any hint of light, any sign of a green glow, but nothing. Unsatisfied but still undaunted, she egged her horse back into a stampede pace. Going, going, and going, until at last she found the marker the Scout had left when they had made their way through. She pulled to a stop again, feeling bereft that she could have gotten this close with no sign of a rift. What could have happened? A rift was hardly mistakable, if you saw one there was no doubt what it was.

She exhaled with frustration, turning her horse around to gaze at the view of the small valley before her. If there was no rift, there was no opening, and no opening meant the Inquisitor—if she was alive—would have to travel farther to find an opening. No matter, if she had to go across several mountain ranges, two seas, and three deserts, she would. It was her responsibility.

Then, one solemn, faint streak of light rose from the tree line. It looked like a warning flare, but slightly bigger and less restrained. Her brow furrowed—who would be igniting a warning flare alone, in this valley of all places?

A sinking feeling in her stomach as she finally thought. Could it be her? Maker, please.

At once, she spurred her horse forward, and she made her way down the hillside, the winding path of the road slowly encroaching on the valley floor. She entered the tree line, cantering between the looming pines as the edge of the valley clearing came closer and closer. Then, open air.

She pulled back on the reigns, and her horse rumbled as it half-reared into a halt. Her eyes saw a slouching figure amongst the tall grass and mud. She couldn’t ascertain just what it was, until the light of the moon gleamed off a corner of the armor she had worn.

It was Mage armor, she could tell from the shoulder shape.

“Inquisitor!” She exclaimed, seeing if she would look up.

Indeed, she did. The relief was short-lived, though, as she then collapsed onto her side.

“C…Cassan…” she muttered, before slipping into unconsciousness. The echo of the Seeker’s horse wailing was the last sound she heard. This time, she sincerely hoped this was not a spirit’s visitation.
The Inquisitor has been miraculously recovered after surviving a near-death experience in the Fade, and finding her way back into her own world with the assistance of the anchor. Now, in camp, she must make sense of what has happened. One thing is for sure: her feelings on death, life, and the dance of the two forces has irrevocably changed.

Theia dreamed, but it was a restless one. She felt the surroundings of the Free Marches countryside, the way the air smelled of pine and musk. She felt the humidity in the air but not much else. She was laying horizontally on a blanket covering the uneven ground underneath. It was an encampment of five women, five Mage women, who were spending the night somewhere embedded in woodlands.

She felt someone grab her hand, as if they were resting at her bedside and watching her sleep; the hand was coarse, calloused. It felt warm, though, and caring. She wished she could grasp it in return, but the ability was lost to her.

“Theia, wake up,” the light voice echoed. For being by her side, the person sounded far away. “It’s time to move on.”

Theia groaned softly, trying to express herself but feeling out of balance. The feeling of being lucid and ungrounded left her with few wits to use.

“No!” a roar erupted from her chest, one of distress. She lurched upward, her eyes opening as she awoke to the surroundings of a tent lit by candlelight. It was the encampment near Adamant. The Free Marches were gone, as was her friend. Lost to time.

Beside her sat the Seeker instead, her hand stretched out to the cot as if she had been holding her resting friend’s hand. She let out a sigh of relief to see her awake again, and in one piece. Theia turned to her, flinching slightly as she noticed she wasn’t alone, before her alarm softened.

“Cassandra, you found me,” she adjusted herself to sit upright, the soreness in her muscles making it a slow process.

“Inquisitor, as soon as Hawke and Stroud came back through the rift, I was resolved to find you. Everyone is waiting to see if you survived physically and mentally. They have -- we have -- no idea how you returned to us.”

“I found a rift nearby. Well, she did.”

“She? The Divine?”
“No, Roslyn. The anchor...it, it projected itself. It took a memory I had and used the image of a friend to guide me.”

“Maker, how is that possible?”

Theia shook her head, a hand reaching back and pressing down on the top of her shoulder blade muscle. “I’m not sure, but I must speak to Solas as soon as possible.”

“Yes, he will want to know what happened. He has been furiously scanning the Fade for any sign of disruption, but you must have been too fast in your journey. I do not pretend to understand how it all works, but, he should be able to explain.”

Theia looked down at her body, her chest and abdomen once again wrapped in a compression bandage, only looser.

“When the Healers examined you, they said your muscles had all felt strained and torn, as if you had stretched yourself beyond the limits of your bones and flesh. It is a wonder you survived,” Cassandra shifted her weight in her seat, leaning forward.

“I did a suicide casting, of sorts. The anchor wished to keep me alive, so it utilized some of my magic and preserved me. If it hadn’t, I reckon I would have shattered like porcelain.”

“Why would you do such a thing? You know your duty is here, as our leader,” Cassandra’s questioning let on to her frustration with her friend. It was a confusing combination of emotions, anger and admiration. She couldn’t say she disagreed with Theia’s perspective, only that she fervently wished it hadn’t come down to her own sacrifice.

“I was sick of watching others fall for me. I am one woman, and Thedas has its hands full with would-be saviors. I wanted to save people, not sacrifice them. It was a quick impulse,” she lamented, hunching over her lap.

“Maker, my friend. You do not trust your allies to make their own decisions with their lives?”

“I do, but I am no hardened warrior. I can’t just reconcile the blood shed on my behalf.”

“You may be conflicted, Inquisitor, but you are, in fact, a warrior. I will fetch Solas, and you can discuss what happened with him.”

Cassandra patted Theia on the shoulder gently before rising from her seat and leaving the tent. As Theia looked around at the makeshift Healer’s desk, the flickering candles, and the scrolls of writing, she could not help but be floored at her luck. She had been returned to her forces again, like a boomerang. How many times could she push that luck? Well, maybe it wasn’t luck, but a force greater than herself preserving her body and life for its own sake. Did that make her invincible?

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“Do you remember when I had been stabbed in Emprise du Lion, and you said something about the anchor perhaps saving me from death?” Theia had pulled herself up to sit upright, but she would only be able to do so for a short time. The Healers were right -- her muscles had been pushed and stressed, and would need time to recover. Still, her interest in this conversation helped her muster the strength.

Solas stood by, his arms at his sides. “Yes, but it was simply a hypothesis. I am surprised you remember my comment, since you were convulsing in pain on the ground.”
“My talents abound, I suppose. Well, my friend, I am afraid it was more fact than fiction,” she groaned, stretching onto one side. “The anchor projected itself.”

Solas’s brow furrowed critically. “Projected itself? How? It was imprinted into your hand from the Orb, it cannot separate itself,” he disagreed.

“I know, it didn’t separate from me, it co-opted a memory of a friend and convinced a spirit to give itself over, so it could express itself.”

Solas was silent, puzzled and wishing he could have been there to see it for himself. Such things were not impossible, but imaging it happening to a human Mage stuck physically in the Fade? The odds and circumstances were beyond unpredictable. A side of him ached with longing for it, like a possession lost and corrupted.

“What did she say to you? How did she conduct herself?”

“She said she could only use the words and mannerisms of my friend, like a tool of some sort, or dictionary. She was crass and vulgar, but well-meaning, just like Roslyn was. It was like the Divine’s memory, you could almost believe it if you wanted to.”

“So she was the conduit for your survival.” He stepped closer and took a seat on the chair beside her cot. His posture was straight and separated from the back rest.

Theia shook her head slow, blinking with fatigue. “She held my magic back, perhaps just an inch from crossing the line into killing me. Then she combined with my magic to destroy the demon. I have wondered if it was possible to conjoin the magics, but I had thought it impossible since her power was elven. Turns out she just refused to. Like...like she is sentient.”

“The pronoun of “she” is hardly adequate for such a power. I assume you have adapted it because of her usage of your friend’s memory, but, I wish you to take caution in not humanizing the anchor. It is clearly able to do more than we suspected, however, we must remember the complexities of such a reality, and not what you simply wish it to be.”

Theia pursed her lips. She agreed that it was unwise to curate a humanized understanding and compassion for the anchor, as it was merely a manipulative force of power and magic that was able to feed off her psyche in order to survive. For all she knew, all of its personality and character was conjured from her memory and not its own existence.

“What did she say to you? How did she conduct herself?”

“Of course not. Such emotions are always possible. Choices and actions do not just come from mortal motivations.”

“How do I do that then without lingering on the “what-if’s” of the situation?”

“You conclude that the intentions of the spirit and the magic were carried out, and thus give you closure. These events happened the way they were meant to, and you have a duty to continue on without questioning why it is they occurred in such a way. Such contemplations are merely a distraction from your true purpose.”

Theia sighed, beginning to slouch back onto her cot as her body was growing tired and painful from her position.

“Why do you act as if you knew this would happen, even when I know it was a surprise?”
Solas grinned without emotion, and his hands rubbed themselves pensively. “My friend, when you live a path like mine, you relinquish your pride in mastering what the Fade, and indeed what magic can do. Instead, you look for when it calls upon you to play your part, and you work towards being able to execute such responsibilities to the best of your ability.”

Theia watched him as he spoke, trying to read him, but Solas was always impossible to get a lead on. Even as a trusted friend, and someone she looked up to for knowledge, he was surprisingly closed off.

“The anchor knew of you,” she replied, giving up on truly understanding his preparedness.

Solas raised his eyebrows slightly, his chin tilting in curiosity. “Oh? I see.”

“Yes. She spoke of your obsessions with the orb and the anchor. She said you had bigger concerns, even when I made a point to say how dedicated you were in your pursuit of it,” Theia was in uncharted territory, divulging unknown details to Solas and not knowing how he would react.

A moment of thoughtful silence occupied the room as he looked away.

“She is correct. I have many priorities, as do we all, in being here.”

“Yes, but everyone else is pretty much an open book. You can hardly get Dorian to shut up about his,” Theia managed to joke. She was proud of herself watching Solas smirk in reaction. Making him laugh or chuckle, or even just play along, was a rarity.

“Yes,” he said with a reserved smile, “but that does not mean all agendas are welcomed to be expressed.”

Theia’s head tilted. “Solas, do you not trust me to understand what your goals are? What you hope to accomplish?”

“Inquisitor, my concerns are of no vitality to yours. You have to be resolute in your path, as do I. We share a common goal, and we are collaborative to that effect. What more should there be that would not complicate or strain our working dynamic?”

Theia scoffed playfully. “Oh, I don’t know, friendship?”

“Friendships are subjective, based on who you ask and what your ambitions are for such an exchange of time and resources.”

“I ask for nothing but honesty and sincerity, you know that Solas.”

“Is it really so simple? The Lady Inquisitor herself, bound in alliances fused by simple endearment?”

Theia bit her lip as she tensed her chest, contemplating his question. It was a good point, not all of her connections would be maintained by pure authenticity alone. Some of her most powerful allies would be considered adversaries with a shift in circumstances. Still, she had survived on bonds of friendship and the respect for life it inspired in others, along with herself. It was strange to have what she considered a friendship with someone who would effortlessly dodge such a conclusion.

“Even if I am not to know that which pushes you in life, Solas, I can at least hope that you respect me enough to divulge what you must. I haven’t the time, nor the the option of judging you,” she concluded, resting her hands on her lap in defeat.

“I apologize if this is not the destination you wished for this conversation, Inquisitor. I do hope that
you value our dynamic as much as I do, still,” he nodded in reassurance.

“Oh, of course. And, I suspect that whatever this is in my palm, is pleased we have built such a rapport.”

“Ah, yes, indeed.”

Theia smiled softly. Her friend was mysterious and aloof, but she saw the good in him. It was the one aspect of him she did not have to dig and decipher out of his behavior. She trusted it, and invested her hope in it.

“Inquisitor, before I retire, I wish to inquire as to whether the anchor expressed any other intentions or knowledge? Such detail I would consider valuable to not only my studies, but the Inquisition itself.”

Theia opened her mouth so as to speak, but she paused in order to gather her strained memories.

“She -- it -- said that in exchange for her compliance in my goals, I must remain compassionate to the elves. Apparently I am no match for its power, but it has kept me alive due to its agreement with my personality. It also said that its time with me will not last, and that as long as it dwells in the flesh of a human, it will slowly but steadily rip itself from me.”

Solas rose to his feet and looked at her, a pang of concern now showing in his posture. “You have proven compassionate to the suffering of others across differences. Though, are you not afraid of such a futility might entail?”

“I...have many things to be afraid of, Solas. The demon we defeated in the Fade was evidence enough. Everyone dies, as melancholic as that sounds; fearing your fate seems hardly productive.”

“Inquisitor, death is the bane of mortal intentions.”

“Death does not care for our intentions, Solas, only how our choices in such endeavors bring us closer to its embrace.”

“You remain indignant, for a heroine of your stature.”

Theia shrugged softly. “I stare death in its face every day and smile like a fool. It is only in my being to be ignorant of the repercussions. Some of us are not so lucky, and must carry on with the full weight of our fate on our shoulders, with no end or peace in sight. Like a dog chasing its own tail, even with the foresight that it will hurt when it finally gets its mouthful.”

Solas grit his jaw with discretion. The meaning, the resonance of her words and her unexpected wisdom pressured his understanding of her. She could have been no older than 24, and she talked like an elder, like an epistemological boon. It was a marvel, and a liability, to his balance in this life.

“Inquisitor, your words carry more profundity than you know. Even for a mind such as my own.”

Theia nodded in respect, and also dismissal. Solas returned the mannerism, and made is way out of her tent. As she watched her friend and comrade depart, she felt the energy of the room level off. It was as if he carried his own gravitational force with him, and feeling the pressure of it all was only noticeable in his wake.

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The morning was a reckoning cold. The atmosphere the dawn after a battle was always like this for Cullen. After the momentum of so much violence and aggression, the aftermath showed the true
polarity of what it was to have charged towards death and witness another daybreak. As his eyes perused reports from their personnel searching the Fortress for caches, remaining Wardens, and intel left behind, he couldn’t help but also reckon with the weight of what they had done: taken on the Grey Wardens, interceded their path to devastating power, and both lose and reclaimed a leader prone to flights of reckless endangerment on top of her already perilous existence and role.

Speak of the devil.

“Commander.”

Theia’s rigid greeting heralded her entry into the makeshift strategy table underneath the shade of a large hide tent. She was wearing all-black, a sharply-tailored coat and riding pants, and calf-high boots. The dark fabric contrasted her paleness sharply, only intervened by the purple and red of her bruise spots on her neck, and side of her forehead.

Cullen turned from his view of his desk, seeing the Inquisitor standing tall, the morning after her impossible return. In that moment, his chest gave way to a mixture of remorse and confusion. This woman had seemed to be undefeatable, and yet with each new challenge she felt even more fragile and fleeting. His mind didn’t know how to make sense of it all -- perhaps they should arm a trebuchet with her body, and not a fireball next time.

“Inquisitor, I’m happy to see you back on your feet so early after your ordeal,” his greeting was sincere and warm.

Theia grinned, folding her arms gently, still weary of her aching body and its limitations. She was still in a considerable amount of pain, but laying in the same position and getting stiff only hindered her recovery. Plus, maybe she just wanted to see everyone’s reaction to her walking out and about as if last night never happened.

Her white hair was gathered in a neat and braided bun, done with a secret longing for her lover so many miles away. She looked bathed and clean, but the lingering surface wounds on her skin told a different story of her strength.

“You look like you’re seeing a ghost in front of you,” she said in jest, stepping forward towards the big wooden table.

“I’m simply caught off guard by your ability to stay alive, is all,” he answered with honesty.

Theia smirked under her breath, her eyes wandering to the marked and cut up map in between them. On the point with “Adamant” labeled, there was a resolute, victorious “X” in black ink. So they had done it, and now would look towards the next feat to prepare for. It felt momentous and fleeting all the same, and after her particular journey to this point, Theia would be happy never to set foot in Adamant fortress again.

“I heard the Seeker was rather reckless for your tastes, in searching for me,” she continued, knowing this topic would put him on edge.

Cullen cleared his throat and shifted his weight to one hip, his hands resting on the pommel of his sword in quintessential Cullen fashion. So it was known that he asked for the Seeker to stay behind from a mission which brought their leader back alive. What was her opinion on that? Was he about to be argued with for warning against a choice which saved her in the end?

“I warned her against going off on her own for a destination that could cost her her life, and I do not regret it,” he sturdied himself for disagreement, something that was a common occurrence between
them. Theia let the quiet linger as she stared at the map, seeming to freeze in place. The tension simmered between them as Cullen prepared himself for a duel of words.

“Thank you.”

He blinked. “Inquisitor?”

She eyed him from her peripheral vision, and began to circle around the table towards where he stood. “Cassandra acts with rigor, and she is protective of me. But, I take comfort in knowing someone is there and unafraid to stand in her way sometimes, to ensure she knows the scope of her actions. I cannot say I wished her to follow your direction, because she saved my life in the end. However, if you were expecting a reprimanding, I hope you know it is never my intention to demean your position like that. Now, or ever,” she spoke like a leader. Cullen couldn’t help but marvel at her altruism, her candor. He had been so used to swift and decisive scoldings and sharp tempers.

“I...thank you, Inquisitor. It is my hope to do right by you and the Inquisition, always,” he stepped closer to her. Theia grinned with a warm expression.

“You have led our forces to victory, and with minimal loss. I have many reasons to come to you with ardent thanks. Now, I have one more sensitive topic to broach with you, before you squirm out of your armor. Do we know what the last status update that was sent to Sister Nightingale and the Ambassador said?” Theia’s mind went to the question of just what was understood to be truth back at Skyhold. Specifically, what Josephine knew.

Cullen eyed her with curiosity, but then seeing the look on her face shift, he was reminded of just why she would be so invested in that particular detail.

“One of Leliana’s people sent a missive with a Raven saying you were missing, and that there was a mishap with the fade rift the Wardens had opened. That was last night, about an hour before Cassandra returned with you on horseback. We have since sent an updated report, saying you have returned. We can only hope the Ravens are navigating friendly skies.”

Theia bit her lip as she thought of just how heart-wrenching it would be to be sent into distress and then relief in the same day. Josephine would not be pleased at the recount of her ordeal, and surely it would cause friction, if only with the best intentions.

“I see. Well, that is all I can hope for as well, I suppose.”

“Inquisitor,” Cullen replied, his voice now laced with his understated smartass tone, “for all of our sakes, the next time you throw yourself into the arms of death, at least ensure the Seeker, and Lord Dorian for that matter, are there to help you, instead of threatening to set the entire encampment ablaze with their fury.”

At that comment, Theia lowered her chin as she held back a laugh. “Commander, the only thing I can promise is my inability to make promises in the first place. I will return to my tent. Let me know if there is anything else I must do before we disembark tomorrow.”

And with that, she walked off. The woman who would continue to cheat death and do so with a skip in her step. Cullen would remember her like that.
Women Are We

Chapter Summary

With Adamant Fortress secured, the Inquisitor and Seeker Pentaghast resolve to return to Skyhold. Inquisitor Trevelyan's ordeal yet lingers in consequence physically; now in pain and jaded by the path she has undertaken, she looks for a way to make sense of new feelings and concerns. She relies upon the advice of her friend and ally in order to help make sense of what yet attaches her to her past, as sordid as it was.

Josephine had started to grow fond of walking, especially in her absence. She took one in the early morning and in the early evening to clear her mind and take a break from her work. It gave her a chance to breath, to dare to daydream: something she had not gotten to do in a long, long time, without curtailing herself. Now, she had reason to hope and fancy a future, as fragile as it was.

Returning from her evening turn of the grounds, she was greeted by her friend Sister Nightingale. Her face of concern broke the calm mood she had lulled herself into.

“Leliana, what is the matter?” she said, a sinking feeling in her stomach as her friend stomped towards her.

“My ravens have returned, two at the same time, from Adamant. They must have been sent within hours of each other, and whichever was sent second must have caught up. I am confused as to which one is the most updated,” Leliana’s face was grim as she held out two flattened scroll notes, small so as to be secured to a raven’s leg.

Josephine’s eyes showed growing distress as she took them from her, holding one in each hand between her fingers and thumbs.

The one in her left hand: “The Inquisitor has been lost in the Fade, missing still.”

The one in her right hand: “Everything is secure – all personnel accounted for.”

Josephine gasped with a shallow breath, sounding almost like a choke.

“I will send a Raven to clarify, but until then, we must remain calm,” Leliana tried to stem the worry, but it was almost suffocating the space around them. Josephine’s eyes welled with tears, but she bit her tongue as she resisted the urge to cry without inhibition.

“There’s a chance she was found alive, and the second note was the one assuring everyone was accounted for?” she breathed.

“Yes, and even if the other one was the second sent, that is not to say she is gone forev—“

“It has to be this one. There is no reason they would send a confirmation of survival with her missing.”

“The Inquisitor is…” Leliana stopped and edited her words in her head. “There is still a chance, but it is our responsibility to remain diligent and faithful.”
Josephine’s shoulder rounded as she looked at her friend. She handed back the notes, having no need for them in her own possession beyond clenching them in a fist while she barely kept herself together. Why couldn’t Leliana’s people write more? Or at least write with more clarity?

“I will retire to my room now. Let me know if there is anything you need of me, Leliana,” she rested a hand on her friend’s forearm, before walking past her.

“Josie,” Leliana called after her. When Josephine stopped to look back, she met her eyes with a grin. “Rest assured, I will know where to find you.”

Josephine’s throat stiffened as she held back another wave of visceral emotion. She blinked away the tears and nodded once more, before returning to her path at hand. Leliana swiftly exited the Hall through the door which would take her to the stairs leading up to her nest. There, she would write for clarification, and send a bird as fast as she could. Her best one, her most reliable.

With no one to witness her, Josephine made her way in the opposite direction of her own chambers. Her maid, Berenice, must be furious with her with the way she leaves her bedroom desolate nowadays. Or, perhaps she is relieved at the lack of work to be done. Nevertheless, she found her way to the Inquisitor’s chambers, where she had brought a select few items of her own clothing to store in Theia’s dresser for sleeping. The room was still and abandoned in feeling.

As her tired feet made their way to the right side of the bed, she got lost in her own overthinking. Lost in the Fade? How did she even get there? Where were her comrades, and why would she put herself in that situation? As much as she wanted to be angry, she didn’t have the heart for it. Now, more than anything, she wanted her in front of her face so she could just know she was safe and alive.

In her lamentations, she undressed herself. Letting her robes and sashes fall to the floor, she walked her bare, naked body to Theia’s dresser. Opening a drawer, she saw first the folded pile of Theia’s night dresses, silken and shimmering in the room’s light. Letting a stiff exhale release from her lips, she clutched the dress piled on top with both her hands. She held the fabric to her mouth and nose, enveloping her senses in the lingering essence of her. It still smelled of her body, the incense she would walk through as it burned at her desk. Feeling a slight ticklish sensation, she pulled it away to examine the fabric. Her eyes locked on a singular, solitary strand of white hair that had clung to the silk even after being washed and put away.

“Agh,” she said to herself, eyeing it with dissatisfaction. This wasn’t enough of her to satiate the need she had. It was a scrap, a crumb derived from an entire miraculous body. It would never do her justice.

Eventually, she found her own dress, and slipped it on over her shoulders. The sky had blackened wholly now, and she was left with the aura of firelight and solitude.

She crawled into the bed she had made a home in during their last few nights together before she left. The bed she had not bothered to sever herself from in her absence. She left the side Theia slept on alone – the left side, closest to the door, like she liked to be. Close to the danger, and between whatever came knocking and her lover, she would say. It was melodramatic when she said it in person, but with her gone, Josephine felt the absence. She felt the insecurity of it.

Hugging her shoulders as she sat upright against the headboard, she gazed absentmindedly at the fire that flickered and crackled. There, she would sit for an hour or two, until her mind exhausted itself into sleep.

In her last daydream of the day, it was her – her sitting out on the balcony and engaging in her
rituals. Her voice, poised and sharp, reciting incantations and vows. It was her hair, her skin, her glowing complexion. It was the way her shoulders, broad and angular, held close to her when they sat side by side.

Theia, come back to me.

In her slumbering dream, she was real again, and they were in the middle of an Antivan garden meadow lit up by the abundant sun. Josephine had her head on her lap, the feeling of soft dress skirts beneath her resting cheek. She felt Theia’s hand stroking her curls of hair, and they were listening to their surroundings hum in peace.

“You worry too much, my Love,” Theia coos, her chin tucked as she gazes down at her with a caring and protective demeanor.

“Mi amor, tell me you are safe, and I will cease to worry as you ask.”

No response. No promise. Just solace.

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Watching the crew yank up the poles to her tent, Theia’s eyes were narrowed and diligent. The Inquisitor and a few of her allies were returning to Skyhold immediately, in order to refocus the forces on to the next move. Commander Cullen would remain for a couple more days to ensure their provisional infrastructure would be honored and useful to the remaining Wardens who were now allied with the Inquisition. But as for Theia – and her body that seemed to be beyond the reproach of death itself – it was time to go.

She wore the same black coat and breeches she had on the morning after her return. Only now there was a nugskin hooded vest secured around her waist with a belt for the ride. The façade of a well-equipped leader was believable on the outside, and deeply deceitful from within.

In various joints of her body, her nerves were burning. It was the resonating consequence of her gambit in the Fade that destroyed the Nightmare demon. Turns out, when you submit yourself to the raw and irreversible momentum of your power, trying to recover is complicated in execution.

She hid this from everyone, knowing it would create more pandemonium to go along with The Inquisitor survived sacrificing herself to the monsters in the Fade and crossed a dimension to return to us! Story. She had awoken to the sensations of dancing pain in her extremities that morning; walking and exerting herself seemed to be both a mixture of comfort and irritation for it. Hopefully, her hypothesis for curing herself of it would work: she would return to Skyhold, meditate every morning like she had before leaving for Adamant, and recollect herself into her own body. Until then, it was keeping up appearances of robustness.

Once she was satisfied that her piece of the camp was ripped up and packed, she turned and headed for the council tent. There, she was greeted with Seeker Pentaghast and Commander Cullen, who were consulting one last time before the Seeker would leave with the Inquisitor to return to Skyhold.

On her way, she crossed paths with – of all people – Hawke, who’s attire also spoke of a woman about to hit the road.

“Inquisitor,” Hawke’s playful tone greeted.

“Hawke, I see you are preparing to embark on the next perilous journey,” the Inquisitor came to stand in front of the Champion, her hands resting at her sides.
“Indeed, you can’t keep me from the clutches of danger long. She is a mistress that longs for my haphazard touch, I’m afraid.” Her words evoked a chuckle from the Inquisitor. The two women had come to share an endearing bond, for being brought together in such a concerning fashion.

“Well, when she has had her way with you I am sure she’ll come for my own hide. You are lucky Isabella shares you so generously,” Theia replied, folding a stray of hair back behind her ear.

“Because of your sacrifice, Isabella has the ability to share me in the first place. You will have the gratitude of the fiercest Admiral on the seas because of it, as well as that of a fellow Mage. But now, at least you’ll be alive to appreciate it. Where are you off to?”

“Skyhold. It is time to turn out attention to the civil war, I’m afraid. Without the security of the Orlesian Empire we haven’t the numbers or the resources necessary to equal Corypheus.”

Hawke nibbled at the side of her lip, nodding reluctantly. “I suppose you are right. Well, you, Cullen, Sister Nightingale, and the Ambassador.”

Theia’s heart tingled at the reference to Josephine ever-so-slightly. “Yes, I can hardly rebuff an entire country as much as I would wish to.”

“In any case, I wish you the best of luck. I will be keeping updated on your maneuvers even as I diverge from your path. Tell Varric thank you, and farewell for now, for me. Watch out for him, please?”

“I wouldn’t think of anything less.”

The two women then clasped hands and pulled each other in, bumping chests and patting each other on the back before parting ways. The farewell was painful for Theia, both mentally and physically, but she was glad to have met and known the solidarity of such a figure in her life.

Now, back to the destination: the strategy tent, wherein surely there would be more enticing conversation.

“No Raven? Are you certain?” Theia heard Cassandra ask, seeming to be in disbelief.

“I understand the confusion, Seeker, but my men have got nothing. Leliana’s people have sent another Raven, but we won’t hear back from its route until you are long gone.”

“Leliana never procrastinates communications. The raven may have gotten lost,” Cullen shook his head. “You know as well as I that her ravens never lose course. It must have perished somehow, unfortunately.”

Cassandra turned and saw the Inquisitor approach, her face grim. “No word, and we are supposed to leave within the hour. It is highly unusual.”

Theia approached the strategy table and sunk her heel into where she stood – bracing against the humming pain. “So, that means the last report they have is of me missing, and found?”

“Indeed. Leliana will not be pleased to hear of the break in communication. The ride is long, and we will only have two ravens at our disposal. I do not like the odds of losing more of them to whatever may have taken this one out,” Cassandra crossed her arms as she deliberated their options.

“We sent one saying we are leaving today, correct?” Theia’s eyes turned to Cullen, who nodded in return.
“Yes, so hopefully they will at least know you are alive and returning. But, that being said, round trip from here to Skyhold and back takes days. Days are precious for our operations,” he warned.

“I don’t see how we have any other choice. The bottom line is we are alive, and we will be back at Skyhold. If Leliana has no information, she will stall on important decisions as long as she can, until something is reported. We have to get on the road as soon as possible.”

“Yes, Inquisitor,” Cassandra turned and bid farewell to the Commander. “Commander, best of luck, and safe travels,” she said austerely.

As she walked to Theia’s side, the Inquisitor nodded with a polite grin towards Cullen, then turned and withdrew with the Seeker to where the horses were being kept.

“Are you alright, Inquisitor? You are still walking with a limp,” Cassandra observed as they made their way. Theia couldn’t help but feel frustrated with her situation, and how keen her allies were to notice such subtleties.

“I am alright, it is merely a strained muscle. I’ll be sore from the ride, but, I’m hardly on death’s door,” she held onto her breath against the stirring nerves in her shoulders and back bone. She could not wait to return and lock herself in her room to pay proper attention to these “wounds.”

“I see. Well, if you wish us to stop and rest, be sure and tell me.”

“That won’t be necessary. I am eager to return and truly recover.”

Cassandra eyed her, unconvinced. The Inquisitor was bluffing with her strength, like an animal would bear its teeth whilst injured and cornered. Part of her wanted to press, to find out the source of her angst. But, she resigned to the belief that if it were truly important, Theia would tell her. Perhaps it was more important to have the Inquisitor retain some of her boundaries in light of all she had been through.

Soon after, they mounted their horses. Accompanied by several guards, and leading a stock carriage of important goods and reports from the front lines that were too bulky or vital to leave to scouts and ravens, they were off to traverse across Orlais.

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Their path led them to the southwestern borderlands of the Exalted Plains, a region mired the civil war’s unforgiving touch. Theia couldn’t help but feel the ominous energy in the air as they rode along the mountains’ edge, peering down at the bronze and green colors on the horizon. Just beyond the landscape were what looked like a few plumes of smoke still breathing into the sky.

“Our attention will turn to this conflict once we return and regroup,” Cassandra remarked as the rode along, seeing Theia’s face of concern.

“I wonder what mischief we will have to get into in order to stop all this,” Theia replied, before straightening her posture in her saddle seat so as to look at the path ahead.

“What awaits us, I am sure it will be ghastly and beyond any measure of sense or logic,” Cassandra huffed, resting a hand on her thigh.

Their journey continued, until the Exalted Plains was far and away out of grasp. It was the middle of the night; Theia’s insistence that they continue kept them on the road even into the darkness. However, she wasn’t beyond reasoning: they stopped along a ravine, laying down cots and even pitching a small tent for troops to steal an hour or two of sleep.
Theia couldn’t be bothered for rest. It left her body vulnerable to the pain, and she was not in the mood to show her weakness. She opted instead to sit by the bank of the shallow river, hugging her knees to her chest as she looked out into the wilderness scape. The Seeker soon found her sulking, and came to stand over her left shoulder.

“What troubles your mind, Inquisitor?” she asked solemnly.

Theia let a breath release from her lips, the heat of it creating a cloud of mist in the cold night air. She had a lot on her mind: the pain, the way she exposed herself to death, the anchor’s abilities, the continuing peril she would put herself in. Each new benchmark yielded new questions, and taxed her will to remain optimistic in the face of so much unknown.

“I am the harbinger of a peace-keeping force that will go down in history either as a benevolent miracle or a sordid power grab, Seeker, you tell me,” she answered back.

“You are always contemplative after our battles. I sympathize with you, but you must remain faithful,” Cassandra’s advice was that of a friend, and not just a comrade. She had seen Theia through some terrible moments, and such a track record demanded nothing less than friendship at this point.

“If Josephine was here she would tell me I’m overthinking again,” Theia smirked humorlessly, feeling the light breeze in the air make the hood she had over her head wave to-and-fro.

“Unfortunately, I am not one to tell others to cease analyzing the weight of their actions. Leliana would swear I invented the behavior myself,” a grin on the Seeker’s mouth shown in her words.

Theia released her legs, and let one extend onto the ground, the other remaining bent upwards as she leaned back on her hands. “We are poor company for each other, then, I’m afraid.”

“Quite the contrary, Inquisitor. Women like us are hardly understood, and often feared as liabilities or usurpers. It is vital that we have people in our ranks who can interpret what drives us, what calls us to action. It is why I went after you, even as the Commander disagreed. Somehow, some way, I knew you would find a way to survive.”

Theia looked to her friend from her periphery. Cassandra seemed to be the kind of person who did not dwell on interpersonal affairs; at least, that was her initial impression. But, having gotten to know her, and how the romantic aspects of life appealed to her heart, she proved to be a most valuable and compassionate peer.

“I have no desire to usurp or be a liability for anything or anyone. At this point, I am tired of it all, and I don’t know if it is fleeting or something more,” Theia lamented, making herself more vulnerable now.

“War erodes on the spirit like nothing else. It changes you and reshapes your desires and goals in life. I will not pretend otherwise. However, the true damage is exacted when we lose touch with our own inner strength and resolve. You, my friend, have endured much. But, do not forget that just months ago, you were a prisoner implicated in a mass-murder. This year has demanded much of you, but you have risen to the occasion.”

“And you, Seeker? What of your sacrifices?”

Cassandra paused, looking back over the water’s glistening surface.

“My sacrifices are needed and thus not extraordinary.”
“I say bullshit.”

“Inquisitor, I mean it.”

“Seeker, you were the one who reprimanded me, stood in the face of a cataclysm, and pulled forces together to enact change. You are hardly forgettable in this. No one is. All of our allies have committed to something remarkable, and history will mark them as it does us both.”

“My friend, is there something deeper to your troubles, or are you simply arguing for the sake of it?”

Theia’s ribs tensed, and the sensation of pain reacted to her anxiety. She steeled herself in response, maintaining her façade.

“I will only admit this once, in open air. I…I realized something while we were in Adamant, the morning after I had returned. Seeing Roslyn’s likeness, after my mind has been lingering on those days of my life…now I know that the person I was is dead, is dying. I will never be her again. The rebellion was horrific, and our days wandering were full of uncertainty and loss. But, they were not too long ago in actuality. Yet, they feel as if they were eons ago, and the person I was, even farther detached from me. It is almost as if I am my own most foreign stranger.”

Cassandra did not say a word. Instead, she continued to listen, her heart aching at the sound of her friend grieving.

“I have sacrificed Theia, the rogue Mage, the friend, the simple girl, in order to birth Inquisitor Trevelyan. As much as I am empowered in this, I am also straining under the weight. Sometimes, I wish I could just reach out and grasp my former life. Then I would still know it is…was, real.”

She felt the Seeker’s hand rest on her shoulder, and she looked back to see her friend’s eyes filled to the brim with sympathy staring into her.

“Inquisitor. You have changed a great deal from the woman I arrested in Haven,” at that sentence, they paused and recognized just how ludicrous it sounded. That made both women chuckle under their breath at the same time, betraying the somber theme of the dialogue, before Cassandra went on with her point.

“What I meant to say, is, we have witnessed you undergo great change in order to answer your call. It has not gone unnoticed or unappreciated. However, this also means you are not alone in your burden. Sometimes, we must lose grip on old meanings in order to take hold of our true selves.”

“You make it sound so easy, so natural.”

“It is anything but. Though, would you rather resign to the boundaries of who you once were, and never know what you were truly capable of?”

Theia looked back out at the tree line, eyes narrowing. “No, I suppose not. Maybe it's just my desire to feel the familiar.”

“If it is, Inquisitor, you can hardly be blamed for it.”

“I will be forsaken by many things for what I have done, Seeker. Blame will surely not be one of them.”

A moment of silent reckoning befell them, and for a few minutes more, the friends were able to simply exist in a stasis of time and emotion. There was no duty, no call to action, in this time and space. Oh, how few these interludes had become.
And, just as it was beginning to indulge them. Theia cleared her throat and began to stand.

“We should pack up and move on. We have dwelled for too long,” she said sternly, helping her ally up from the ground and leading them back to the troops that had accompanied them. The ripple effect of her dream, her now muddied memories, lacing her language.
These Arms of Mine

Chapter Summary

An uncertain return to Skyhold after breaks in Raven’s messages leaves Ambassador Montilyet on edge. After all, you do not simply hear that your lover sacrifices herself to the Fade, survives, and is just fine. Their reunion raises the stakes on their love and commitment to understanding one another, and new weaknesses and fears take center stage.

The early sunlight exposed a Skyhold fortress brimming with unanswered questions and the anxiety which it evoked within its highest ranks. Sister Leliana had shut herself away in the War Council room, pacing. Her raven had not returned to her, and now she was starting to suspect an orchestrated interruption of Inquisition communications. There was no way her favorite raven would perish or get lost.

They did, however, receive a raven a day after she sent hers – too soon to be a response, though. In it, another one-liner report:

“Contingent returning in three day’s time, she is with them.” With the travel delay, that meant the return party could be arriving any day now. Leliana had sent scouts to anticipate them soon after the message was received.

The words were reassuring and at the same time, ambiguous enough to rile the stress the Spymaster felt at the break in messages. She was always most calm when the ravens were traveling unabated, and the streams of messages weaved together like a conversation. Now, with disruptions in that stream, she worried there were more problems than those she was privy to.

From over her shoulder, she heard the heavy door open, its noise harsh on her ears.

“Any word?” Josephine’s drained voice asked, as she, too, found shallow refuge in the Council room.

“Not since this morning. It did say she was returning with them, which should be of comfort to us all. I suppose we will have to wait and see in what shape she is in. If she was lost in the Fade, it is a wonder she is alive at all.”

Josephine’s discerning gaze panned down to the war map, and specifically in the direction of the Approach were Adamant Fortress was located. To be thankful simply at the notion of her being alive was equal parts solace and dread. How such a pairing of emotions could exist, Josephine did not know.

“Surely, if something had happened to her they would have included it,” Josephine’s emotions had formed a solid shell of calculation. She spent every night locked away in the Inquisitor’s bed chambers where she could release her more unreasonable expressions, but here, out in the open, she had a responsibility to decorum. She was the example.

“It worries me that we have experienced delays and disruptions in our correspondences. We have received all ravens from their side, but they seem to be missing the ones I send in return. I am
wondering if someone, or something, is plucking birds from my skies,” Leliana held her hands behind her back, staring at her friend from the other side of the table. It was odd to speak to Josephine where the Inquisitor would normally stand.

“We can resolve the issue as soon as we know more of what we are dealing with. Unfortunately, our ravens have become rather notorious in Orlais, as you must surely know,” Josephine placed the tips of her fingers on the edge of the tabletop, feeling the coarseness of the wood grain.

“Yes, but they are also good at their task, which means they have been watched and studied.”

“Do not worry Leliana, we will get to the bottom of this matter—“

From a distance, voices raised and echoed into the cavernous hall walls.

Both the women’s heads perked in a split second, and then their eyes locked on each other. They had arrived, “they” being a context they would soon know for certain. Josephine let out an exhalation of hope as they turned and raced for the Great Hall, which would take them outside to view what stirred in the Courtyard.

As they found their way to the top of the Hall stairwell, they saw that contingent had already found its way to a stop in the Courtyard grounds, and troops stirred around the supply carriage and several cavalry horses that had been dismounted and held by stablehands. Josephine turned to her friend, a look on her face of desperation she was trying to restrain within herself.

Leliana looked back at her, assured. “Go, Josie, it is alright.”

Hearing her friend give her the most sincere permission she could ever gain, the Ambassador sped down the stairs, her feet almost burring in their pace as she let her arms spread away from her sides so as to balance her.

She jogged around to the lower level stairs with discretion, and at once was down the many steps without faltering or tripping. She let out a breath of exertion as she found her way to eye level with all of the people, and immediately was faced with a dozen or more different figures all dressed in similar Inquisition uniforms. Her eyes scanned recklessly for anything, any difference in their ranks, but saw no one.

The message said she was with them, now where in the world was she?

She strut herself urgently towards the supply carriage, half-heartedly fearing she was lumped in with the crates and resources, incapacitated by injury again. Or, worse, wrapped in a corpse bag. It all felt silly really – if she was really dead, why would there be so little fanfare? The ravens’ broken pathways had unnerved both her and Leliana into paranoia. But still, when you are faced with the odds of your most devastating fear being possibly realized, no matter how trivial the odds, it can just as easily make you come undone.

She had approached the back of the carriage which had been open so as to unload goods. There was no large body bag, no injured woman, just crates and scrolls. Her breath was part relief, part frustration. Her hand went to her forehead as she rubbed it, trying to decide what her next steps were.

Was she hiding? There could be only so many places she would have gone after arriving. This all felt like some cruel joke.

Turning away to face towards the open gates and away from the groups of people rejoicing in their reunions, she felt her chest tighten more and more with dissatisfaction. Then.

“Josephine?” the voice. It was her voice. Behind her, it was here. She was here.
Forcefully, Josephine whirled around, letting out a soft whimper under her breath as her vision blurred and then locked on the figure of a woman in black riding clothes.

There she was: her pale face, cold and weathered from the traveling, the circles under her eyes preluding a story of violence and arduous days spent traversing land or taking life. Her purple irises glowing even in the shade. Her hair tied back, but lightly frizzed from being kept under a hood. Her body: all four limbs, all upright. No bandages, slings, or casts. Maker, was she real?

They stood apart from each other in stillness as bodies and voices orbited around them, the ground between them becoming hallowed and holy for this one moment. Then, as Josephine’s chest began to heave in and out more and more, reacting to the revelation of her, she couldn’t help but gasp. Her hand went to her mouth as tears began to well in her eyes.

“Josephine,” Theia said again, seeing her boil over. She predicted the meltdown that was about to occur, as strange as it was to see it coming from the woman who’s life purpose was keeping it all together. Some tides are unavoidable. Theia was about to say something, but she was interrupted immediately.

At once, the Ambassador rushed to her, throwing her hands over her shoulders and neck as she pushed forward into her body. The force of her embrace blew the air out of Theia’s chest, and she huffed roughly in both surprise and pain. Her hip joints and shoulder blades especially stung. But now, something else was vastly more important to her. She gritted her teeth to hold back a wince, every ounce of her willpower remaining focused on what was in front of her.

Theia wrapped one arm around Josephine’s waist tightly, the other hand going to hold the back of her head of hair. She lowered her chin, resting her mouth on Josephine’s tense shoulder. She could hear her choking back tears, her breath unsteady in her chest that was now against her own.

“Sh, shh, shh,” Theia whispered against her shoulder. “It’s alright, I’m here.”

Josephine closed her eyes harshly as she buried her face in Theia’s shoulder now, hiding her emotions from all the surrounding witnesses as much as she could. She leaned into her almost to the point of needing to be held up, but the maintained a degree of restraint in that regard.

They remained there without much attention to just how long it would take for them to be convinced they were here, safe, and together. Josephine gripped onto the rim of her hide vest, and some of her coat, as she tried her best to stabilize her crying. Just as she would feel relief, the physical feeling of her being in her arms would overwhelm her again.

Theia closed her eyes as she smelled the florals and oils of her skin under and mixed into her clothes. In that moment, her body relaxed more than it had the last three days. Home was not a building or an Estate, for her it was anywhere where her senses could be enveloped in her.

Up on the stairs where Leliana had remained, she was greeted by Seeker Pentaghast who now stood shoulder to shoulder with her. The former hands of the Divine reunited in their work once more.

“I have never seen her this earnest in public,” Leliana remarked, her heart sincerely touched by the sight of their reunion. It made her own soul ache with sorrowful envy that she was careful to hide. “Perhaps she is Antivan after all.”

Cassandra let out a breath. “She deserves it. for a moment, this became impossible,” she referred to the Inquisitor’s stint in the Fade, and almost-certain demise that it had promised.

“You will debrief me on what all that nonsense was, then, Seeker?”
“You would be wise to go to the source of the intelligence. She has scarcely divulged anything, save for her confiding in Solas.”

Leliana’s brow furrowed. This would surely be an interesting evening, between the priorities of her ravens’ whereabouts and the Inquisitor’s recounting her excursion.

“I will say this to you, Leliana. The Divine yet resonates in our actions, more than we knew,” Cassandra referenced being guided in the Fade by the spirit who impersonated Divine Victoria. Was it really her? Could she ever truly trust what she saw? Perhaps not. But she did know one thing: such an experience would catch Leliana in a rare position of surprise.

Back down in the courtyard, the lengthiness of their embrace was starting to inspire self-consciousness in both women. Josephine finally pulled her head and shoulders away, but kept her body against her. Her arms slid down the Inquisitor’s shoulders.

Theia reached a hand and wiped her lover’s damp cheek with her thumb, the moisture absorbing into the leather of her riding glove. Seeing her face, she couldn’t help but smile with a bittersweet feel. Their noses were so close that they almost touched.

“It’s alright,” Theia comforted, “please don’t cry.”

Josephine was mortified with herself, continuing on like a character in an Orlesian opera. Surely her theatrics would become gossip in the barracks.

“I…” she muttered, feeling the tears seep into her voice. She swallowed them back before continuing. “the reports, they were confusing.”

“I feared so. But, don’t worry about it now. I’m here, I’ve come back to you,” Theia kissed Josephine’s forehead, her lips pressing and lingering on her skin. This provoked another, solitary tear to fall from Josephine’s eye as she blinked closed.

The Inquisitor pulled away just enough to cradle Josephine’s sides with her arms. “Come on, let’s go somewhere safer from fortress gossip,” she said low. For once, the appeal for such privacy was not immediately favored by the Ambassador, who found herself wanting to linger where they were. Part of it was the sheer shock of it all.

Theia had a crooked grin as she kept her arm around Josephine’s waist, and together, they walked back up the stairs and into the Great Hall. Leliana and Cassandra were nowhere to be seen, having clearly withdrawn to somewhere more secure to discuss the Fortress siege.

This left the Ladies Trevelyan and Montilyet blissfully unaware of any matters for the time being. They made their way through the corridor and up the stairs to the Inquisitor’s bedchambers, an all-too-familiar and sacred place for Josephine now.

As soon as they had arrived, Theia pulled Josephine around to face her again, and eagerly kissed her. Josephine was not caught off guard in the slightest – in fact, anything more delayed would have been upsetting.

“Mi amor, surely you must be tired and aching from the journey,” Josephine spoke into the kiss, holding back just enough so as to question it. Every bone in her body said go with it, for Maker’s sake – but she could not avoid her worries.

Theia, meanwhile, was in the middle of pushing Josephine back up against the wall. When they came to their destination – Josephine letting out a breath at the force – she pulled her mouth away, letting her hands remain hungry and wandering.
“Josephine, if you think that anything would stop me short of your denial in wanting to have you, you are mistaken,” she breathed. The aching parts of her body had ruled her long enough, and were now being overwhelmed by the needs she had to be close to her and the accompanying euphoria.

Josephine eyed her skeptically, but it was a shallow sentiment. Seeing the hunger in Theia’s deep-colored eyes, it melted her barriers. She reclaimed some room from Theia’s snug embrace in order to hastily rip at her own clothes, yanking off her belt and ripping open her vest and dress neckline to expose her shoulders and cleavage.

When she had opened herself up enough, she immediately returned to the kiss, her mouth open and breathing recklessly as she craved to know her.

Theia wanted so earnestly to hoist her up and wrap her around her waist, but her body said otherwise. Instead, she kept her there against the wall, her own hands now working effectively to get her belt and vest unbuckled and off her body.

Then, her black overcoat also bit the dust.

It was then that Theia guided Josephine to the bed with her kiss and her ravenous hands. It was still midday light out, and they had never made love in the daylight. This would be a wondrous gift after so much time apart.

“Did you think of me?,” Theia’s voice, laced with a moan as Josephine laid on top of her and kissed her neck, grating her teeth irresistibly along her sensitive skin.

“Yes, mi amor, helplessly,” she purred back, reaching a hand down to softly trace along the front of Theia’s pants. It sent sensation up her stomach, intermingling with ecstasy and agony. Theia was caught off guard by the coalescence, but she wasn’t about to stop.

Distracting herself from the mild alarm, she helped Josephine out of her golden dress robe, leaving only her smallclothes remaining and indefensible from Theia’s hands.

“Show me how you thought of me,” she teased in her deep, sensuous, addictive voice that Josephine could hear in her head even when she was alone. Josephine smiled sweetly, betraying the sly mischief in the air, as she leaned over her lover and pressed her lips to hers, covering for her hand which slipped between Theia’s skin and her breeches. Theia, feeling one, sly finger slip in between her unexpectedly slick folds, let out a longing and repressed moan as she arched her neck away from the bed.

Josephine hovered her mouth and face over Theia’s as she watched her facial expression change, getting priceless satisfaction from it.

“I thought of you enough to flood any port of the Amaranthine,” she played, before her teeth grabbed at Theia’s bottom lip, nibbling on it lightly so as to drive her even more wild.

That was all Theia needed to hear. She gave herself in without revocation. Her nerves were feverish, and she felt the heat beneath her skin growing faster than it typically did when they were having sex. She knew what it was, and it meant she had to be careful.

They continued to make love in the all-enveloping daylight, until the brightness of midday started to give way to the softness of the afternoon hours.

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Strangely enough, one of the possible treatments of overactive nerves in reaction to uncontained
electricity magic may just be climax.

At least, that was what the Inquisitor was contemplating in her head as she laid there, flat on her back and covered in only one white cotton sheet. Her abdomen, chest, and hips were the only parts covered as she watched Josephine, who was sitting upright in the middle of the bed, methodically working her fingers through her own long hair. She was combing through it as a way of keeping herself busy while they talked – and they had much to talk about. She did not bother clinging to a sheet for modesty, and seeing the full and bright figure of her body cast in the sunlight reminded Theia just how much she craved and missed her, and how much her mind would wander to her when she was out on the frontier.

“I do not suppose I blame you for your actions, mi amor,” Josephine continued the topic with a sorry ache in her voice. “I simply wish it had not come to that in the first place. I feel rather inept in passing judgment on a choice I have no authority on.”

“I didn’t do it because of some discrete Fade science or hypothesis. I did it because it felt like the right thing to do.”

“So, you will forgive me for my possessiveness?”

“Forgive you? Josephine, you being possessive over me makes me want to ask you if you, too, are some Fade spirit coming to me in disguise.”

“Theia Sofia, do not test my heart,” her eyes narrowed as her hands started creating a thick and loose braid in her obsidian-shaded hair.

Theia smirked, using one arm to lift her back up off the bed and sit closer and more level with her. Sweetly, she traced her fingers along Josephine’s cheek, her eyes flickering to her lips as she gazed at her in reverence.

“I’m sorry. I can only imagine what I’ve put you through. You have every right to demand me to stay alive and locked in this room forever,” she hummed.

The Ambassador’s ocean-hued eyes softened quickly – she was a sucker today for anything that reminded her of just how much she adored this woman – but she still had so many questions and concerns from this particular mission. It egged her on past silent sentimentality.

“You stood in the face of danger out of necessity to you and your allies, and were brave and selfless, and that is why I—“ she stopped herself, eyes lowering to her lap as she grew shy and self-conscious.

“That is why you what?” Theia scanned her lover’s face for any clues, but her heart couldn’t help but hope she was about to say what she thought she was going to.

Josephine collected herself, biting her lip as her eyes locked on hers. “That is why I love you.”

Theia was quiet for a few seconds before a smile broke her bluff. She chuckled under her breath and kissed her, sweet and innocently. As her lips were still to hers, she answered back:

“I love you, too, my dear. But you have always known.”

They continued the kiss for a moment more, before Theia relented back to the conversation. She knew one thing for certain: Josephine did not believe in a non-linear and undedicated pillow talk. Even if they had just said the three words everyone hungers to hear from their lover for the very first time: a conversation was a conversation.
“I admit, Adamant has left its mark on me. I can’t say that my decisions haven’t changed my perspective. I…I don’t regret my choice, though. There was no way I was intentionally asking someone to sacrifice themselves for me,” she explained, pulling her knees up to her chest and hugging them with her arms as she sat beside her.

“And what of your escape? How did you survive?” Josephine had finished the braid, and unsatisfied with it, let her fingers run through it so as to untangle its strands. She focused solely now on Theia, awaiting the answer she most hungered for.

“I…I casted something that I was sure I would not survive. I essentially made myself into a lightning rod, a conduit force or my magic to surge itself and kill the demon I was fighting. I envy you in not being able to know what it looked like – it was a massive and grotesque creature. I didn’t know how I would kill it without also killing myself, so I…I did something I thought would make it quick for me, and defeat it.”

Josephine’s heart cracked and eroded at the sound of her lover admitting that she essentially ensured her own demise. It left her more confused than assured.

“And then you lived? How does such a thing come to pass?”

“I…had the anchor,” Theia flipped her left hand around and held it out to Josephine, open-palmed, though quiet.

“She – it – projected itself, and came together with my own power. It held me back from destroying myself in order to ensure it, too, survived. It then came to me in a projection of sentience by stealing my memory of an old friend. I know it sounds ridiculous, but, it is the Fade. Mortal rules do not apply,” she rotated her hand around in the air, studying it shallowly, before returning it to her lap.

Josephine shook her head. “Projected? You mean to say it existed outside of your body?”

“No, it…reflected off of the essence of a spirit’s energy. Like talking through a mirror at someone, but, more realistic.”

“Who did it impersonate?”

“You remember when I discussed my friends from the rebellion? It was Roslyn, the one who went off to fight Templars for revenge,” her throat tensed as she reminded herself of what it was like to see her friend, seemingly right in front of her, flesh and bone again. It still stung that it was all an illusion.

“Can it keep doing this? Does it still speak to you?”

“No, it said that once I left the Fade, it wouldn’t be able to communicate like that anymore. It might be for the best, I don’t want anyone thinking I’ve cracked,” Theia rested her chin on her arm.

Josephine was overwhelmed to say the least; she felt out of her depth in discussing such impossible things, and it took a lot for her to feel that way. Perhaps she would take up studying in the library in her spare time – if such a thing existed – in order to know what she was talking about. Being with a Mage was proving to be an educational experience.

As she let her thoughts spin, Lady Montilyet crawled up to sit against the headboard, pulling the sheet up to cover her body and tucking it under her arms. Her slight insecurity with the topic at hand showed. Theia’s head turned to watch her, intrigued by her sudden shyness.

“What makes you shrink?” Theia cooed, eyeing her over her shoulder.
Josephine’s lips pursed, trying to find the words she would feel comfortable saying. Be honest, or be reassuring?

“It is not exactly exhilarating hearing details of when your love almost perished in a violent and supernatural way, I suppose,” her thumbs twitching in her lap.

Theia smiled out the side of her mouth and pivoted on her hip so as to face her squarely. “You never let it show when you’re out of your element. Come on, tell me the truth,” she pushed.

Josephine’s eyes gazed into hers, trying to discern just how she would react if she did admit to feeling overwhelmed.

“I grew up differently that you, Theia. I have no life experience with magic or being a Mage, and my life was kept far away from the impacts of the Circles and Templars. Antiva has a different culture than the Free Marches. And when I was a schoolgirl in Val Royeaux, the Chantry’s grip ensured a very…single-minded outlook on histories. It is an uncomfortable feeling, knowing that I come from such systematically-conditioned biases.”

“You show no such thing. You have always listened to my opinions and experiences. I have just done little to divulge them for the sake of my own skin,” Theia retorted, hands rustling with the sheet that covered her body as she turned, swinging a leg around and straddling Josephine’s thighs.

With care, Theia gripped the sides of Josephine’s waist through the sheet.

“I just hope you will not ever shut me out of your dealings and concerns because you believe me inept in such areas. I may not be someone who can offer an equal intellect or awareness, but I am invested sincerely in what troubles you.”

“I understand when you cannot relate, and that is nothing to be ashamed of.”

“The inability to relate is one matter, the idleness of ignorance is another.”

“Alright, now I know for sure that mind of yours is spinning,” Theia put her forehead to Josephine’s, her eyes beaming with a lighthearted sympathy. “Come back around to me, please.”

Josephine tried to resist eye contact, but feeling her lean in compelled her to. She let out an exhale of tension.

“I know you are frustrated, and that you are angrier at what happened in Adamant than you want to admit. But it’s okay to be upset. I was upset, too, and I still have to show everyone that I can recover and push forward. That is out there, though, and we are here. Here, it’s just you and me, and you are allowed to be a resentful lover who’s woman is reckless with her one life, and just happens to shoot ice from her hands and lightning from her eyes.”

The Ambassador knew a good argument when she heard one, and she had to admit, the Inquisitor knew just to appeal to an unconvinced mind.

“I…I am angry,” she looked off to the side, tears reappearing in her eyes as her voice let one solemn crack split her sentence. “I am so angry at you, Theia Trevelyan!” she cried softly and somberly, a few tears breaking loose.

“Hey, hey,” Theia placed both hands on her cheek, sitting up so as to hold her to her chest. She wrapped her arms then around her shoulders, one hand cradling the side of her head as she cried.

“I am livid! You…you had no way of saying goodbye, I never would have known you were gone
until it was too late, too late to do…do something useful. You made the one kind of choice I dread when I watch you leave, the one I pray you never have to make. You did it, and you are returned to me, but you still did it,” she said against her chest, her voice ebbing and flowing with her sorrow.

“I know, I was foolish, I’m sorry.”

“You were more than foolish, you were…you were..!”

Josephine could be heard swallowing hard, and trying her best to maintain some sense of dignity in a moment wherein she was rapidly devolving into a puddle of tears and mood swings. She bit on the side of her tongue, stopping herself from ranting like a mad woman.

Theia held quiet, waiting for her to say her peace.

“You…you were everything you had to be.” Josephine’s posture relaxed as she gave into the facts of the past, which she could not change, even if her temper would suggest otherwise.

“My darling, I can still be Inquisitor and be a fool,” Theia joked at her own expense, resting her cheek on the side of Josephine’s head as she continued to hold her for just a moment more.

“No, you…you were a leader,” Josephine pulled away to face her head on, her posture strengthening with the ounce of resolve she had left in her body. “You faced a terrible choice, and you spared the lives of your allies. This is your purpose, and not to simply appeal to my delusions of authority over your life and safety. I should not chastise you for doing your duty. I am the fool,” she lamented, wiping the side of her face with the bed sheet.

Theia tilted her head as she listened to her, feeling both touched and dismayed at how much the Ambassador had unbound herself from obligation and proper Courtly conduct. This was the first major battle that they endured whilst carrying on as a pairing, and it hit Josephine harder than Theia expected it to.

“Josephine Montilyet, if you are a fool than Thedas is merely a band of miscreants who cannot tell their shoes from their swords,” her voice was stern now.

“Do not try to deter me from the truth, Theia, I am quite capable of critiquing my actions with precision.”

“You are chiding yourself like a small child for having feelings. The gaul of you, being a human who feels and is impacted by the actions of those she loves! Send an emissary to the Empress at once, surely the punishment will take nothing less than your head!”

“You tease with brutality, mi amor.”

“Maker. Woman, come here.” Theia swiftly crawled her way up, wedging herself between the headboard and Josephine’s back with a leg on either side of her. Reaching out, she pulled her to lay her back on her chest, leaning to the side so as to rest her head back on Theia’s right shoulder. What began as a tense resistance from the Ambassador’s posture, gave way to a heartfelt concession as her body melted into hers. She still maintained a pout on her face for posterity.

Theia let her hands wander down Josephine’s waist, down the middle of it and stopping just above her pelvis. A subtle shiver went up Josephine’s spine in visceral anticipation, but it was not to be realized.

“You have spun more miles in your head than I have traversed across all of Thedas, you know that?”
“It is my job to, my Love.”

“Well, then, take a pit stop and listen to me carefully, alright? No spinning, no retorts, just listening.”

Josephine clenched her jaw slightly with stubbornness, but she relented, staying quiet and nodding once in affirmation.

Theia looked ahead towards the balcony windows as she tightened her arms’ grip around Josephine’s shoulders and chest.

“I imagine for a moment, just one single moment, that we are not here. Close your eyes,” she paused, waiting for Josephine to follow her directions. When she saw out of her periphery that she had, indeed, closed her eyes, she continued.

“Imagine we are not here. Imagine a vast, dark space of mountains and valleys, rigid stones and boulders like they had been sliced with dull daggers. Imagine a large and lengthy stone façade, so high that if you stood next to it, able to touch it with your hand, you’d swear the sun wasn’t in the sky. Then, imagine thousands of soldiers, standing at the ready, square-shaped legions of bodies with armor and weapons ready to do what must be done. There is a tension in the air, so much so you think you can cut it with a knife. Then, imagine the Seeker with her bulky armor and smug frown. Next to her is Solas, with his keen expression and focused hand. Then there is Iron Bull, intimidating and wielding an axe bigger than you and I. There’s Sera, ready to set off arrows like a fiend, and she is cursing under her breath imagining all the demons that wait on the other side of the gate.

Then there are Stroud and Hawke at my side, and we battle our way through the grounds and up to the battlements. We take down not one, not two, but three bouts of demons, clearing the ladders for our troops to flood the walls and back us up in our advance. The night is dark and the sky is a menacing midnight blue, illuminated by Mage fire and rune-armored blades. There’s yelling and screaming, but all there is in this moment is the fervent feeling, the demand to move forward.

We make it to a corridor, and beyond its door, there is Warden Clarel and her men, summoning a massive Nightmare demon out of a fade rift. We convince her of her wrongs, and she tries to salvage the fight, but after we take on a Pride demon, chase her and Erimond up the stairs and into the pavilion, Corypheus’s dragon attacks Clarel. Before she dies, she manages to stun the dragon before it can come for us all. Its collapse takes down the entire pavilion bridge, and us with it. We fall for what seems like forever, and my anchor opens up a massive rift for us all to escape death.

There are all kinds of horrific creatures – deepstalkers, demons, whisps, animals with claws and fangs. Spiders, so many ridiculously large and menacing spiders. We are guided by a spirit who has taken the image of Divine Justinia, though we cannot know for sure it was her or an imposter. Either way, she helps us, helps me to reclaim my memories of the Conclave. Then, she guides us through the lair of the Fear demon, and brings us to one final battle with an onslaught of demons and more Maker-forsaken spiders.

Then, as we finally feel we are free, the nightmare demon that the Divine had managed to sunder reappears, ready to fight. I look at everyone’s faces as they make it through the rift, all except for me, Hawke, and Stroud. Both of them offer themselves to sacrifice for the other two to live. I say no, because in that moment, I look at Stroud, and I see hope for the Wardens to continue. I see a turning point for him and his men, one which will be to the benefit of Thedas. Then I look to Hawke, and I see everything she had been through, everything she had endured, only to risk her life again. I see her willing to leave everything behind – leave Isabella without a goodbye, as I did you – and it’s when I know. I know what I must do.

So, I say it will be me, and I order them through the rift. Hawke promises me she will come to you,
to say the things that need to be said. Things I know she would want Isabella to know if it were her remaining behind.”

Josephine’s closed eyes overwhelmed the creases with tears, a couple of them breaking forth as she kept her promise not to open them. She bit her lip to counteract the tension in her face. Then, she felt Theia’s hand glide up her abdomen, to the space between her breasts where her heart is, and she feels her lover’s palm press down.

“But throughout all that time, and all that violence, and peril, you were always here to me. Right here, where nothing and no one could take you from me. You were with me, right till the end when I thought I was done for. You helped me become powerful enough to slay the demon I thought would surely devour me alive. You were part of what saved me.” Her words, warm and breathing just above Josephine’s ear, were far and away better than any romance novel, sonnet, or poem the Ambassador had ever heard.

“My people trust me to protect them, and I know you trust me to do what is right, which is why I made my choice. I would not be the woman you fell in love with if I did anything less.”

Josephine needed no orders; she opened her eyes and turned her head to look up at Theia’s softened expression. She lovingly wrapped her arm around Theia’s thigh, cupping the side of her knee as she held onto her in return. She thought of what she could say in response to such a breath-taking admonition, but there were no words. Not this time.

She let her forehead rest on Theia’s jawline, closing her eyes again, this time to take in the silence. In that moment, she was no fool.
The continuing issue with the loss of two important Ravens had left the Inquisitor's Spymaster hungry for clarity in the face of so much looming uncertainty. An unexpected guest from Theia's past digs up old feelings and old wounds, which implicate her new power of influence. These revelations spark a conflict of interest, provoking Leliana and Josephine to dig deeper into this guest's true intentions for her visit.

“My ravens are of paramount importance and I will not have their lives be treated like livestock. Their being targets is not only an endangerment of their lives, but for our communications as an organization.”

Leliana’s words were aggressive and acutely upset. Commander Cullen was unwise to suggest the “we will just replace them and move on” method.

“You said there was a select two that were taken down, while others continued their routes uninterrupted?” Theia asked as she scanned the length between Adamant and Skyhold for any clues or locations she would feel suspicious of.

“Yes, as if someone understood just how to dismantle the fluidity of a conversation by retracting certain details. We lost the Raven with a request for clarification as to your whereabouts, and one providing securing your location while you were returning.”

“I can send letters to the houses you passed on your return home and ask if they have have their people hunting Crows to preserve their crop yields. Perhaps it was an unwise individual who simply confused the two types of birds,” Josephine offered, though she could feel the temper in her friend seethed.

“Confusing birds is one thing, targeting our messaging and intelligence gathering is another. I can feel it in my gut.”

“While Josephine does that, Commander, I request that you send notes to our dispatched troops and request any and all reports of delays, disruptions, and missing birds to be reported immediately. They can send a man on a horse, if they must.”

“Yes, Inquisitor. Leliana, forgive me for not having compassion. I am sure we will resolve this matter as soon as possible,” his words were appreciated, but unsatisfying.

“My Ravens are my charges, Commander, I will not be calmed until we detect the issue at hand,” she held her hands behind her waist.

Suddenly, the war council door opened, and a servant had shown their face.

“Your Worship, you have a woman waiting in the Great Hall for you. She says you...well, I don’t know how to put this in any way that makes sense but, she says the Fox has come for supper in the Wolf’s den.”

Theia’s posture went from confusion to shock. “You’ve got to be kidding,” she said. She turned
back to her advisors who all looked piqued in their concern.

“This is important, I must go,” she said at once, before jogging to the door and following the servant in her exit.

Leliana leaned over to make eyes at Josephine. “Do you have any information on what this could be?"

“I…” Josephine stopped herself, not wanting to divulge details that were not hers to give. “It may simply be a visit from past relations.”

“Oh, I suspect as much, but I wonder: just what kind of relation would compel her to run out of an important Council meeting?"

Cullen sighed heavily, taking the papers he had brought with him to share. “Whatever it is, I am sure you will read into it for all three of us, Leliana.”

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Making her way rapidly to the Great Hall, her eyes went from right to left, and then there she was – the posture of a woman standing reverently in front of the steps that held the Inquisitor’s seat. Theia took a breath, walking over like the most curious cat to ever hunt.

“What does the Fox ask for?” she said, standing a dozen feet away.

The hooded figure turned on her hip, and then Theia could see: the raven black hair, thick and straight, brimming under the cover of her hood. The pale face, oval features, the naturally pouting lips. The eyes, brown and battle-weary, with tired rings under them that added character.

“Son of a bitch, the Fox asks to be filleted and served with chips! Theia Sofia, you bastard!” Veronica cried with a robust attitude, stomping over in her thick boots and pulling her friend into a rough and hungry hug.

Josephine and Leliana peered through the crick of her office door, not wanting to interrupt the organic nature of the situation. Cullen, a resentful captive, stood by the fire awaiting his release.

“Veronica, you cut the pomp of this place like a butcher’s knife,” Theia felt herself being lifted off the floor and spun around, and it was an uncommon feeling, but a welcome one nonetheless. She felt her friend laugh heartily as she did so.

“And you’re just a flatterer as always,” Veronica returned her friend to the ground and unhooded herself. “When I heard little Theia-Bird was made Inquisitor of all things, I had to fight myself out of the crapshoot of my life to get to her.”

“You remind me of Roslyn when you talk like that,” Theia said, a pang of heartache in her chest as she remembered her experience in the Fade.

“Roslyn, my, it’s been a while since I’ve heard that name spoken. Have you tracked her? Do you know where she was last?”

“No. I…actually encountered her in the Fade. I worry she is…” she cleared her throat, looking away briefly.

“Ah, shit. Roslyn,” Veronica sounded like she was scolding her friend, as if she were beside them. “She was always so lively, begging for a fight. Remember how many times we’d have to damn-near
strap her down to a tree to prevent her from all those revenge missions she fancied?”

“Yes – and how many punches I took to the gut taking her down mid-sprint.”

Veronica chuckled, rubbing her lips with the back of her gloved hand. “Well, at least we can be sure she died a warrior’s death, not hulled up in a rat hole like some of us have had to do.”

Theia came closer, now standing shoulder to shoulder with her former comrade and dear friend. “Tell me everything. How did you get here? Are you in danger?”

“I am fine. Denerim has proven…dicey, especially since you took in the Mages and the scene became polarized for us who remained in the capital after the King’s dealings with the damn Magister’s plot. Left a sour taste in his mouth for us all, and you know what that does for people who already fancy our hides.”

“I see. Well, then I am glad you’re here. No harm comes to anyone here based on identity, I have made sure.”

“You were always the guardian of our pack, Theia. It made perfect sense to me to see you rise like this.”

“Thank you, Veronica. It hasn’t been easy or glorious all the time, I assure you. Come, I wish to talk in private, away from the gossiping eyes and ears.”

Theia reached an arm around Veronica’s shoulder, and as they retreated behind the door to her personal chambers, Leliana and Josephine pulled themselves away from their eavesdropping position.

“Odd,” Leliana mused, turning to face both fellow Advisors.

“I knew about Veronica. Well, I knew she existed, I did not know she was still alive. She is a former comrade from their days in the Rebellion, a trusted friend,” Josephine let the cat out of the bag. She folded her arms, trying to cover up the visceral defensiveness she felt when seeing her woman put her arm around another.

“I see. So she knows many details about the Inquisitor’s life and past, then. And here she is, showing up here, after how much time has passed between her being named Inquisitor and now?”

“Oh, wonderful, more blackmailing and intrigue. Tell me, again, why we allow her to have friends,” Cullen joked, but with an impatience in his voice.

“All I am saying is that we should be careful just what this woman is able to see and hear from this place. She may be a friend simply visiting for sentimentality’s sake, but she could also be in need of a favor. A favor that may shine poorly on the Inquisition’s neutralities.”

“Neutralities? The Inquisitor damn-near hugged the Mage Rebellion to her chest, and takes no heed to my warnings for safety precautions here.”

“She has a hard-won trust and reporte with all personnel here, Commander, and you would do well to admire her perseverance in such an arduous task,” Josephine’s words were protective as they were insightful.

“Alliances are one thing, but operational image is another. Josephine, if you can, I ask that you ensure nothing hazardous transpires,” Leliana knew she was asking Josephine to harbor some duplicity, but it was for a greater cause than both of them.
“Leliana, I cannot be your eyes and ears like one of your spies. I must also think of the trust between the Inquisitor and I as…a personal nature, as well as professional.”

“Josephine, the Inquisitor is well-aware of the transparency I expect from her as well as everyone. If anything, she would be compelled to understand why we must know.”

“Leliana, please—“

“Josie, I know it is a moral grey area, but we have little choice.”

Josephine exhaled, looking towards the fireplace, then to both advisor’s faces as they seemed to be in agreement. “Fine. I will take note of anything suspicious or of interest. But, if this causes more trouble than it is worth, you will have to answer to my temper.”

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“Naomi is fine, all shy and dismissive as always. She married a guy you know?”

“Shit, really?”

The two women sat on the ground of the balcony, backs up against the railing as they both sipped on wine from modest cups. Veronica had removed her over coat, but was still densely clothed in tracking gear. She carried a small dagger blade attached to her hip belt.

“Yes, and now she wants to pretend she’s a happy little homemaker. I suppose she deserves it after the shit we put her through taking care of our broken asses.”

“I think so. Remember when we would call her “Revered Mother” just to piss her off?”

Veronica choked back a laugh as she gulped her drink. “Yes! Agh, she was always so stiff.”

Theia nodded, looking down at her lap as the grin she wore since she first laid eyes on her friend for the first time in a long, long while. Seeing her this way – so similar to the way she was when they were traveling together – made her feel like she was in the doorway between two worlds.

“I wish we could have known what Roslyn was up to, if she found happiness,” the Inquisitor lamented, staring at the reflection of her face in her wine. She felt Veronica affectionately punch her shoulder, tilting her to the side.

“Theia, she would hit you ten times harder than I if she heard you sobbing about her choices. She hated that stuff,” Veronica crossed her legs as they laid straight out in front of her.

“I know. But still, doesn’t it ache in you to know that our bonds became so stretched and distorted? We thought we’d be at each other’s sides forever, and now look, scattered to the wind like ashes.”

“You got dark with your speech since we last spoke.”

“Can you blame me?”

Veronica sucked her teeth, looking straight ahead as she shook her head. “No, I just know better now than I used to.”

Theia felt the aged bitterness in her friend’s tone, the product of so much reckless endangerment and life on the run. Watching comrades die, old peers betray and also die, and mentors be pushed into hiding. It was hard on them all, and all of the women looked for outlets in different ways. Seeking their own forms of redemption proved too divergent for them to remain as one cohesive grouping.
“So, then, what have you filled your days with? Everyone knows what I have been up to,” Theia motioned to change the subject, unsure of whether that would lighten or further dampen the mood.

“Me?” Veronica took another swig of wine, “I was in Denerim, like you all told me not to do. I found my aunt, but she was too sick to recover. I stayed in her home after she died, up until the guards realized I had been offering safe harbor for apostates. Turns out, that isn’t exactly charity.”

“Veronica.” Theia chuckled.

“I know, I know. But, after that, I went into hiding and stayed in place. I had to ensure the people who relied upon me were cared for. I became a vigilante of sorts, ducking in alleys, using shadows to cover my tracks. The city guards and Templars were fuming about me for months. They call me something putrid, like the, agh, how does it go—“

“Wait, you aren’t what I think you are?”

“Hm? Oh, probably, I get called a lot of things nowadays, friend, much like you.”

“The Crimson Cutter?”

“Ah!” Veronica slapped her thigh, “there it is! Damn alliteration always stumps me.”

“Veronica, the Crimson Cutter has been reputed to have murdered several Templars and even more guards and peasants.”

Veronica’s throat stiffened as she sat her cup on the ground. “Indeed, rumors are merciless as they are abundant, like weeds in a matron’s garden.”

Theia curled her legs under her as she shifted to sit on one side, leaning in Veronica’s direction. “Is that why you are here? Not for old times’ sake, but to get my clout involved so as to get the law off your back?”

“Theia, you are my frie—“

“Veronica, friends are honest with each other.”

“Not always, Theia. Sometimes the biggest secrets are between those who would happily take someone’s life just to see the other safe.”

Theia did not wane, and stared her down. At last, Veronica bit her lip and let it all come to light.

“My murders may be illegal but they were not unwarranted. Tell me what you have heard of the trafficking that takes place in the undergrounds of some of the most lauded cities across Thedas? Not much, huh? That is because city officials have deeper hands in them than they would like to admit. One string pulled loose from the tapestry could be enough to untangle the entire design, if one knows where to pluck.”

“Veronica, I am aware of such crimes. How this implicates you, is my concern.”

“I…my work put myself in between the victims of those rings and their “patrons.” Templars gone rogue, when bored of hunting mages, would take advantage of such commerce. Then there would be the traveling thieves and idle bands of men. Then the politicians. I couldn’t just sit by and watch it all unfold. Some of these people – many apostates, or elves, or downtrodden in some way due to no fault of their own – they would come to stay with me and tell me what they had endured. I found my purpose, Theia, like you have here. Only one of us has managed to evade the shadow of criminality
in her reputation.”

Theia couldn’t help but feel guilty and even remorseful that her life had become such a strident display of luck.

“I have taken many lives, but never without the endangerment of my own. Most of the time I am able to wound or pin a man to a wall and run with the person under my arm. But, not all of my deeds have been clean, and I know that.”

“So, what brings you here?”

“I…I know you have clout with the King of Fereldan, that I will admit. I was…hoping, that, perhaps you could spare some of its precious nectar to speak on my behalf. By a character witness, push for a pardon, perhaps.”

“Veronica! The Inquisitor speaking for the position of a murderer is hardly a congruent image.”

“I know that, but as a figure of Andrastian sacrifice, perhaps it would work! You know how they love to expend forgiveness for their own vanity.”

“King Alistair is not like Orlesian faithful. He is direct and has no patience for appeals to moral relativism, especially as far as we are concerned. Mages have caused a lot of duress in Fereldan, you picked the worst time to become a well-meaning mercenary.”

“Theia, we picked the wrong lifetime to be Mages. That was our first mistake.”

“Do you even practice anymore, or are you simply living by your blade, now?”

Veronica eyed her friend with a bruised ego, and without fuss she picked up her blade she had strapped to her hip. She reached over her shoulder and chucked it towards one of the stain-glassed windows. Before it could hit its target, Veronica let out a sharp and quick breath of frost, and the glass froze over with a thick pane of ice.

The blade sunk in about an inch. Not done, she then snapped her fingers, and the blade lit aflame. The ice around it melted, and sent a sharp crack in the ice façade that went all the way up to the top. She waved her fingers as if beckoning an animal to come closer. The blade went flying back to her hand. She held it to her like a candle, blowing out the flame, and slipping it back into its leather holder. The ice came crashing down to the ground, doomed to melt in the remaining afternoon sun.

Theia sighed, unafraid and unintimidated.

“That answers that question,” the Inquisitor huffed, rubbing her own thighs anxiously.

“It is dangerous to display such abilities in Denerim, you are right. I didn’t even bring my staff with me for fear of being tracked. I trusted you would still feel as I do, and protect me as I did, and would, you.”

“It is not so simple anymore, my friend. We are not simply rogue mages fending for our own asses in the middle of the wilderness. I have an organization at my fingertips, one which leaves me sleepless and stirring most nights. I cannot just jump to your side like we are fighting a thicket of hunters.”

“Every organization in Thedas is guilty of fending for their own, even when justice would disagree. What makes the Inquisition any different? Its plumage is filled with the feathers of opaque dealings just like any Orlesian bird.”
“Yes, but I do not fly with the flock.”

“Yet you look down from the branch high up in the sky, and sneer at the needs of the forest.”

Theia found herself missing their war of words they were always known for back in the day. Before there was Josephine to be her sparring partner, there was Veronica, and their hours-long matches while they hiked through mud, mountain, and sand. Maybe she had a type. Maybe she was just hungry for company that could match her intellect. Maybe…it was both.

“My advisors will be critical at best, punishing at worst. My Commander already suspects me of being a radical underneath all the pomp of the Inquisition. My Spymaster may be lenient but as of late she has had certain concerns harden her patience. Then my Diplomat, she…”

“I know why your Spymaster is angry. The Ravens…they were my doing. Well, a contact I had. I couldn’t risk crossing the border. Thankfully, you have many groups who track your ravens with keen interest. A sack of coin was all it took for one to do my bidding.”

Theia’s eyes widened as she stopped her thoughts in their tracks. What, had she also awoken Corypheus and sent him to scourge the Earth as well?

“Veronica, Maker, you run up bills you have no wealth to pay.”

“I did her a favor. They were being tracked by a bigger predator than me. I intercepted their hunting before they could get hold of what messages they carried. It was a sorry business, but at least now you aren’t being tracked like a weasel.”

“How do I know this is truth?”

“I can provide the messages myself. I am sorry the ravens had to die, but it was quicker than it would have been had they been caught by the Templars.”

“So, it was the red Templars. Dammit, and here I was hoping Josephine’s theory of moronic farmers was true.”

Veronica smirked, stretching out her arms. “They are experimenting on nearly every creature in the animal kingdom. Can you imagine red lyrium Ravens? And they thought we could become abominations.”

“Red Ravens, how intriguing. But, Veronica, my point still stands. I will probably have to protect you from Leliana’s wrath first, and if you manage to survive her, Fereldan may seem like a cake walk.”

“I know of Leliana. I came across her beloved Hero during one of my missions.”

Theia bent her knee, resting her elbow on its peak. “What? Leliana never speaks of her travels, she’s supposed to be undercover and untraceable except for dire circumstances.”

“Yes, well, the Hero is kind of known for, you know, being heroic. You’d faint if you knew just how many revered heroes of days past I’ve come across. But the Hero was the most surprising of them all. She couldn’t help but intercede, even if it meant threatening to kill me if I told anyone she was there. She was gone as quick as she arrived, all cloaked and sulking. Something tells me she’s got a bigger monster after her steps than she wants to have people know. It’s a pity, I hear her and King Alistair had a friendship. You shouldn’t have to run in hiding in the hearth of your friend’s lands.”
“Friends whose hands are forced by others are not always the safest company to keep, Veronica.”

“You know me and my idealism. I’ll fall on a sword before I deny someone a chance to redeem themselves.”

“I know, I always did love that about you.”

A pause, while Veronica turned to look at her friend, who was slouched and tired from knowing that her friends were incapable of staying out of trouble.

“Theia, I…I hope you know that, even with my problems, I did want to see you for my own sake. I missed you, I miss everyone, even though our friendship was in many ways one of necessity. I like to think some of it was real, and that we were tied together by sincere feelings.”

“I still do our ridiculous rituals, before battles and missions. I am just a sucker for it as you.”

“You, too?”

Another pause of aching bittersweetness, as they realized that at least one person was feeding into their traditions. Maybe then, they had fed off of each other’s energy.

“Of course. What else does a fox know better than to stick by her own?”

Veronica chuckled in a deep, rich tone. “Not much else, I’m afraid. We are predictable creatures.”

Theia felt Veronica’s hand on hers now, and as she grasped hold of it, she did, too. With all the chaos she brought, Theia would still be lying if she claimed she was unhappy to see her. It seemed her past was not quite done with her after all.

“Tell me, Theia,” Veronica mustered the boldness, “am I too late to take you up on your confession you made an eternity ago? I know your patience with my demands is long gone, but, would it be us if it weren’t born of tumult and danger?”

Theia’s lips parted as she felt the heat of her blush singe her cheeks immediately. Suddenly she was a year or so younger, less scarred, less aged beyond her years. Her mind’s eye, now seeing Veronica standing there in a forest clearing, during one of their paired off hunting excursions. She had been foolish to use such a stealthy time for an admonition of feelings, especially when she couldn’t seem to put together a coherent sentence.

She offered what she could to the first woman who ever made her soul dance on coals, and like an intemperate wind, she had blown out of her grasp. She could still see the torn emotions in Veronica’s eyes as she denied her. They were both meant for something different, she said, than each other. It was never going to survive.

Theia seemed marked for experiences with women with heroic destinies.

“Veronica,” she stumbled over her thoughts, “I—“

Her answer was starkly interrupted by the sound of her door swinging open and closed. In the worst possible time, it was Lady Montilyet, coming up with a leather satchel of reports for the Inquisitor’s viewing and signage. Perhaps it was orchestrated, but, it was hardly out of the blue enough for Theia to get suspicious.

Quickly, as if she had been caught, Theia stood up, beckoning her friend to follow suit.
“Ambassador, I, uh,” she cleared her throat, walking forward and following Josephine as she seemed to single-mindedly pursue her desk. Unbeknownst to Theia, she did, in fact, see their handholding and sitting together closely in the balcony, and the sight was enough for her to want to crawl into a shell of steel.

“No need for concern, Your Worship, I am merely handing off documents for you,” Josephine briskly tossed the satchel onto the center of the Inquisitor’s desk, in a show of hidden angst on her part. She turned and cordially strode over, so as to be introduced.

“Well, then you won’t mind if I introduce you to a dear, and old friend?” Theia was now putting on the persona of a woman who did, in fact, have it all together. It surprised Veronica to see her be so polished.

“Surely,” Josephine replied.

“Veronica, this is Lady Ambassador Josephine Montilyet of Antiva, Chief Diplomat to the Inquisition. Lady Montilyet, this is Veronica Crespin, out of Denerim.”

“Yes, well, Denerim hopes for me to be out of it, anyway. What a mouthful, you must be a force of nature, Lady Montilyet. A pleasure,” Veronica nodded politely, a cool, effortless smile framing her exquisite face.

“The pleasure is all mine, Lady Veronica. I assume you have traveled far to be here, then, being out of the Ferelden Capital?”

“Yes, I just had to come and see my friend in all of her glory. Theia-Bird was the youngest of us all, and here she is, outdoing all of us for miles.”

Theia smiled bashfully, hearing an old nickname, an endearment for a person she once was, who would undoubtedly not recognize who she had become.

“I see,” Josephine interpreted the nickname with different emotions entirely in her response. “Well, you are a welcomed guest of the Inquisition. I assume you will be joining us for supper tonight? The allies will want you to regale them with stories of the Inquisitor’s days prior to her role here, I am sure.”

“Oh, that would be unnec—“ Theia was cut off by her sweet, exuberant friend.

“I would love to, actually. It has been an age-and-a-half since I have had a proper Orlesian dinner. It would be an honor.”

Theia felt her chest ache with the anticipation of the embarrassment she would feel tonight in front of so many people. She immediately wanted to sit down and write all the most cringe-worthy tales so that she could maneuver the dining table topics far away from anything that would inspire them.

“Fabulous. Well, if you excuse me my Lady, Inquisitor, I would very much like to return to my duties.”

“Thank you, Lady Ambassador. I will see you tonight?” Theia asked a coded question, covered up by the assumption that she was referring to dinner.

“Oh, surely. I imagine we will have many issues and affairs to discuss,” Josephine coded her reply. It was both relieving and grading on Theia’s nerves to hear such a double-edged reply.

As Lady Montilyet exited, she turned to her friend, who had been left on a cliffhanger with the
“Try not to slander my name too far so as to lead to my impeachment,” she teased, trying to lighten the mood, but the elephant in the room remained.

“Never, friend, I only wish to see you exalted like any heroine,” Veronica, on the other hand, wished to sink their heels into the awkwardness. Then, she upped the gamble, reaching a hand and letting it caress Theia’s cheek. The boldness of it evoked butterflies in Theia’s stomach, but not of sheer joy. It was a mixture of shock, wonder, and dread.

“Veronica,” she gently took the hand which she had reached with, “I can’t.”

“Why not? You’re Inquisitor, surely if you cannot appeal to the character of a murdering vigilante, you can take a lover.”

“It’s not that. It’s more complicated. You and I had a completely different life when we were last together. We were…different people.”

Veronica shifted her weight between her feet, inching closer. “Theia, you may be the Herald of Andraste, the Lady Inquisitor, and whatever else you’ve garnered by the edge of your Staff, but I see it in you. You are still my Theia-Bird.”

Theia felt the blushing again. The memories were almost feeling as real as the present moment.

“Veronica, you cannot simply wish everything back into alignment. It is tempting to assume because I am in front of you that nothing has changed, but it has. You must take that to heart.”

“Is it another? Has your heart changed?”

Theia felt her back stiffen at the question. Her and Josephine had spent so much time in the bubble they had created in Skyhold – the implicit understanding had by all around them that they were an item – that she had never thought to anticipate the time when someone outside of that microcosm would think to ask. It filled her with a flight or fight instinct. What if Josephine would still want them to be private? But then, how would she convince Veronica to step off?

“I…I am involved in something, yes, but I’d rather not discuss it.” She knew immediately that the proverbial smell of blood would only make Veronica hunt more rigorously. Hearing her chuckle, she knew the fox in her was ready for a chase.

“Theia, sweet Theia, you are so coy. Fine, if you want this to be a chase, I will happily oblige. You remember how good I was at tracking down just what I wanted.”

“Veronica, heel,” Theia’s euphemism was laced with cold will.

As Veronica made her way to the stairs which would take her back out to the Hall, she sauntered like a true vixen. Theia knew the walk all-too-well, she had been vexed by it out in the thicket many a time, when her attention should have been on picking out animals to kill.

“It is so refreshing to hunt for something for my own tastes again. I shall see you at dinner, friend,” she hummed, before making her way down, not bothering to hear another word of argument from dear Theia-Bird.

Just down the stairs, there was no other than Lady Montilyet, standing next to the cracked open door and tucked in the hallway corner. Hearing the steps, she gingerly tucked herself between the tapestry and the wall behind the doorway. She was clearly in poor practice since her days as a Bard, but she
was not inept.

Watching the figure of Veronica exit, and shut the door, she couldn’t help but feel the pang of jealousy she always got when a woman came calling for Theia’s affections. And there this one was – her body toned and muscular, primed from days of scaling city walls and climbing in an out of cornered fights. She could imagine just how formidable she and Theia would be as a pairing, and it made her want to stick her quill in something.

Her angry daydreaming was curtly cut off by the sound of being discovered. Veronica had stopped in her tracks, far enough from the door so as to not catch Theia’s interest from the other side.

“Tell me, what Diplomatic affairs take place behind a tapestry?” Veronica’s rich voice echoed over her shoulder.

Josephine, embarrassed beyond comprehension, but never one to let blood slip into the water, stepped out from her hiding place.

“My Lady, I was merely ensuring that no one else sought to spy on the affairs of the Inquisitor’s visit with you. Rest assured, I haven’t gained any details or information which would compromise you.” Yes, except for you moving in on my woman, which makes me want to do unspeakable things, but, nothing that would tarnish your own reputation…at first.

Veronica pivoted on her hourglass hips, a sly smile on her lips as she put one hand on her waist.

“That is a relief. And here I was hoping this would be something worth my time. But I have gained nothing but the knowledge of just who my friend saves herself for,” Veronica’s words were icy as she sought to make her exit once more. Down the first chunk of stairs, she thought she was beyond reproach.

“If you have come to beguile the Inquisitor into malpractice of her powers, rest assured, my Lady, you will leave empty-handed,” Josephine venomously hissed back, in a rare show of candor. She came to stop at the top of the stairs, eyeing down at her from a position of authority.

Hearing Veronica laugh softly, though, made her even more frustrated.

“My dear Ambassador,” Veronica looked over her shoulder. “If you think you could ever love a Mage as spirited, powerful, and tormented as Theia, you are more inept than I will ever be.”

“I happen to feel more confident in my understanding of her than you claim to be, and you should take heed not to underestimate it,” Josephine replied.

Veronica turned and shrugged. “The kind of woman Theia is, can only be loved my another woman who knows what it’s like to stand in a ring of fire and laugh at the audacity of men who seek to burn her down. And not for being some prissy aristocrat – for being someone they claim to be an unnatural abomination.”

A third voice now, lighter, but more lethal-sounding, coming from the unrepaired and unconnected bannister above them. It was the Spymaster herself, crouched like a huntress, her blue-green eyes locked on her target.

“Take care, Lady Veronica. You may know how to outpace wolves, but you growl in the face of a lioness now. And she has friends across all echelons of the wild,” she seethed with protectiveness.

Veronica leaned onto one hip, her eyes evaluating the stakes of the situation that seemed to raise themselves with every second that passed by. She turned to the Ambassador, a crooked grin as she
held her hands up in a mannerism of surrender…for now. Josephine’s face and posture were both proud and undaunted, if not feverishly annoyed.

“If you fear me to be after your neck, Ambassador, you are more afraid than you should have admit. I have come for bloodless motivations, and I intend to see them through.”

“Very well, Lady Veronica. I do hope you will prepare to eat your fill tonight,” Josephine replied, her arms folding.

Veronica nodded indignantly her way, turning and eyeing Leliana who remained perched in her place, and as she left, she felt the hairs on her neck stand and fall like against a cold chill.

As the Ambassador and Spymaster looked at each other, both knew – Game be damned, the rules were theirs now, under this roof.
Appetites

Chapter Summary

Veronica's arrival has shaken feathers in Skyhold, and not all of them well-meaning. The Spymaster has locked onto the interloper, with intentions on getting to the bottom of her anomalous appearance. She employs Josephine's bond with the Inquisitor has her lover in order to hack into some sordid context, leaving the Ambassador with a choice to make: will she honor the trust between her and Theia as lovers, or hold true to her duty as an agent of the Inquisition?

Soon enough, the Hall was brimming with preparations for dinner. The rumor that an attractive and savvy old friend of the Inquisitor’s being at Skyhold had caught verbal fire across the fortress, and suddenly everyone wanted to get a peek at just who their honored guest was. Veronica had stolen away somewhere, undoubtedly to find where she stashed her supplies, whilst the Spymaster and Ambassador regrouped in the nest.

Josephine rubbed her face with her hands, conflicted with the situation on behalf of Theia, and their trust.

“Leliana, I am sure she had told the Inquisitor why she is here, I would prefer if I could just discuss it with her.”

“We don’t have that kind of time, Josie, and the Inquisitor has a knack for surprises. I want to know why she is here, and who she truly is. Women like that do not simply travel with every liberty,” Leliana paced, the peripheral image of two Raven’s cages empty spurring her temper.

“Why do you not trust me to find out in an efficient fashion?” Josephine sat by the table as her friend tired herself out.

“Because, I have a sneaking suspicion about her, and I want to get to the bottom of this. I am surprised at you, you heard her make a pass at the Inquisitor and you seem ready to settle into a warm bath with a chalice of wine for the night.”

Leliana’s words hit the nerve Josephine had been trying hard to encase in diplomatic sensibility. Surely, she had told herself, Theia would not simply up and abandon her for the love of an old flame. They had shared too much for it to be that simple, surely. But, even in her confidence, Veronica’s warning stung: could Theia be incapable of happiness with someone who did not directly relate to her experiences? Was she meant for a life of shared tumult?

“I have nothing to gain from steaming from my ears and causing a scene in Skyhold. I do not wish for my personal affairs to be diluted into some haughty romance serial for people to witness in live time. I also know that the Inquisitor knows when to show her cards and when to keep them to her chest. Perhaps she has plans of her own,” Josephine placed faith in the Inquisitor, even with her insecurity.

“Very few of us are immune to the machinations of a first love, Josephine. Perhaps you should take care to consider that,” Leliana’s frustration with multiple situations in her lap was causing her to short fuse with the patience she had in her body.
Josephine’s brow furrowed. “Leliana, I did not come here to be your verbal sparring partner, I came under the assumption that we were dealing with a security issue in Skyhold. Can we remain in tandem, please?”

“Fine. If you wish for your method, go to her and see what you can find out. I intend to have a full report before dinner in two hours. If not, we continue with my tactics,” Leliana alluded to tactics that most certainly entailed capture, questioning, and bribery if needed.

“Alright, I most certainly will. Watch where you step, Leliana, you may ensnare yourself as the prey and not the predator,” Josephine warned, rising from her seat so as to exit down the stairs. Her words caused a break in Leliana’s confident expression, and she turned to look out the thin window by her table. She was going to be single-minded about this, and she felt capable of doing so without mistakes. Clearly, her friend was not so assured.

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Making her way up the stairs of Theia’s bedchamber, Josephine saw before her an Inquisitor busy with washing her hair in a bowl of water. She watched for a brief moment as Theia was busy in her thoughts, distracted whilst she de-knotted her hair with a tooth comb. Her gaze was out to the balcony, but who truly knew where her mind’s thoughts were located.

“Hello, mi amor,” Josephine laced her words with honey so as to have the easiest time with it.

Theia, refocusing on the present, peered over at the guest in her chambers with a soft smile. “Two visits in one afternoon, tell me, am I to be sacrificed like a virgin at dinner?”

“No, I am afraid we have reached a consensus that the chosen is Lord Dorian,” Josephine played, walking over and reaching for the comb. Theia happily obliged, turning around and beginning a ritual of intimacy they had long shared since their first nights together. If it had anything to do with dressing or undressing, untangling or doing hair, and even securing light armor, they had indoctrinated it into their dynamics. Such was the life of two Inquisition officials bound to duty in the long daylight.

With Theia’s back to her now, Josephine felt more room to have an honest face to match her feelings. She carefully took up the task of combing her wet, thick hair, using her spindling fingers as well to make it less painful.

“Do you want something simple for dinner tonight?” she asked, referring to her hair.

“I wouldn’t be opposed to a simple, braided thing. I don’t wish to encourage analogies from Madame Vivienne about how I look as if I was born in a barn,” Theia folded her arms, feeling the chill of the air and the wetness of her neck make quite the uncomfortable sensation.

“Oh, as you wish, My Lady,” Josephine said lightly, finishing up the last strands of untangling. In a twist of casualty, the Lady Montilyet then put the comb between her teeth: a relic mannerism from her days as a school girl, and before that a child learning a skill in Antiva. For a moment, she shirked her duty to question her lover. Certain rituals were sacrosanct.

As she felt her hair being braided and parted, Theia chose to fill the silence instead.

“I’m glad to see Veronica, to know she is safe, at least. I fear she has gotten herself into more trouble than we ever could back in the day, however,” Theia became an open book with Josephine at times, despite evidence to the contrary.

“Hm?” Josephine replied, having the limitation of a comb in her mouth.
“I…I don’t even know where to begin. It’s all sort of surreal? Knowing that your friend went on to become someone bigger than herself. I suppose I can see now why they are all astonished by me, and at the same time, nervous.”

Finishing the thick braid that she would string across and into the bun at the back of her head, Josephine reached another knowing hand for the intuitive hand-off of hair pins that Theia was all-too-ready to enact. Placing several of them in and around the gathering of hair, Josephine finally felt able to release the comb from her bite.

“What exactly has she done to make someone of your repertoire anxious?” she dug deeper, wondering when she would hit sheet rock and not soil.

Theia pursed her lips, feeling the completion of Josephine’s work. She turned and faced her, gently taking the comb from her hands, appreciation in her body language.

“I…I don’t know if I can tell you. You may judge me, judge her, be bound to act on the basis of your duties and…I don’t want to put you in that spot.”

Josephine, feeling a snag in her plan as they once again danced with the obstacle of their relationship: their responsibilities to the Inquisition, and how they could never truly be just people in a relationship.

“Theia,” she answered sweetly, “if it troubles you, surely I can oblige with being a listening ear and not your steadfast Ambassador.” Josephine was deceiving. She had good intentions, but she knew deep down, such a fantasy was in very limited circumstances. And, with Sister Nightingale virtually sitting by the door ready to hear the goods, it was even more duplicitous.

Theia looked at her, believing her, even if the track record of their relationship would suggest scrutiny of such a comment.

“Alright, but, you must promise me that you will trust my direction in this process. I know you are capable and willing to help me in anything, but, this is something I have to oversee myself.”

“As you wish, my Lady,” another deception.

A moment of silence whilst Theia gathered her thoughts happened, and Josephine felt her nerves simmer within her chest.

“Have you heard of that infamous criminal they are trying to hunt down in Denerim? The Crimson Cutter?”

“Indeed, she has murdered and sliced her way through the city guard, Templars, and some of the city dwellers, if I have been informed correctly,” Josephine knew on her own what she was referring to; it was hard to keep up with Fereldan politics without hearing at least one or two notable names being lauded as vicious villains.

“Yes, that one,” a touch of humor in Theia’s voice, “well…I’m afraid Veronica…”

An awkward half-step of silence, before Josephine’s face turned.

“Theia, no…” she replied. But, seeing the Inquisitor look up from her hands, making authentic and sorry eye contact, she knew. “Let me guess, she comes to you for reprieve, to help release herself from the impending consequences of her crimes?”

Theia sighed roughly, setting the comb down on the table by the large bowl of water. She then
“She murders in defense of those who have fallen victim to trafficking. Apparently she has made herself some form of a guardian on their behalf. She does not aim to murder, but, as you can imagine, men who solicit that kind of business are not all polite when they find their activities to be interrupted by the likes of a rogue mage.”

“Still, Theia, you must know as well as I that murder is an opaque crime. King Alistair is hardly in the mood as of late to hear character witness to a Mage, given all that has happened.”

“Yes, but he trusts my opinion enough, just enough, I think. I could see if perhaps he would be willing to commute a sentence, or exile…”

“Theia.”

The air became thick with tension as both women consolidated sides and looked for ways to maneuver. Theia felt the stress in her body ebb and flow like a current of murky lake water.

“Josephine, she is one of my oldest and truest friends. We were a part of a pact, that if anything should happen to one of us, the others would rally around. I cannot simply pretend I don’t feel bound to that. She is one of the people who is responsible for my still being alive.”

“She knows that, Theia, and she is clearly using it to her advantage.”

“Yes, but since when is parlaying for one’s misdeeds using the leverage over another’s life atypical to politics in Orlais? Or Feraldan, for that matter?”

Josephine exhaled, coming to lean on the couch beside the Inquisitor.

“She also knows what happened to our Ravens, something I think she did in order to furnish her appeal.”

Josephine looked at her with a confused face, beckoning for an explanation.

“They were being hunted down by red Templars. She hired someone to take them down before they would ultimately fall into enemy hands. She also recovered the messages they carried. It was an unfortunate situation, but, I’m thankful there was some intervention.”

“Leliana will be livid for weeks. If her own crimes do not damn Lady Veronica, the rage she evokes from her will be enough to.”

“I trust Leliana to be an adult about this, given she carries the weight of an Inquisition’s intelligence on her shoulders,” Theia was not unsympathetic to Leliana’s stress, but she expected integrity from her all the same. She would expect that same standard to be reciprocated.

“Theia, are you seriously contemplating using your stature to negotiate for the life of someone who has riddled her name with blood, even with such a moral cause? I can understand why it is appealing to do so, considering her virtues are in the right place. However, stepping in as the Inquisitor for such a defense brings more consequences than just those for your own reputation.”

“Perhaps it is my role as Inquisitor that empowers me to do so successfully. I am, after all, the Herald of Andraste. I have forgiven peoples’ faults and absolved them of their sins in the name of all Andrastians. Why not Veronica?”

“Veronica is not a proposed ally or power, Theia. She is an old friend, capitalizing on her bonds to
Josephine was caught off-guard by the way Theia narrowed in on her underlying attitude. Perhaps she was not as ambiguous in her approach as she thought. How would she circumvent this now?

“I am merely concerned for you, that is all. We all are, every waking hour of every day,” Josephine referred to the other two Advisors, and by extension all of her allies.

“I think I have proven by now that I am capable of handling myself, as reckless as I can be with the whole “heroism” thing. What is this really about?”

“Theia, it is nothing, truly. I just wish that you would take caution when there is an appeal to your heart,” Josephine’s words were intriguing in their choice, and Theia picked up on it.

“So you believe Veronica to be leading me on to being her shield for her crimes, then?” Theia adjusted her position, displaying more rigidity in her posture as she dug her heels into the situation. Josephine, meanwhile, looked away so as to have more discretion.

“Perhaps. She did saunter in here like a heroine out of Varric’s novels,” Josephine let it slip, envisioning that woman acting like she owned the place made her blood boil.

Theia’s eyebrow raised itself, and she became a mixture of curiosity and anxiety. She, too, recalled Veronica’s face – except, it was when she was trying to make a move on Theia, and feeling the warmth in her cheeks as she tried, and failed, to squirm out of it.

“Veronica is a force of nature, but, it was a long time ago that I approached her with anything resembling….” Theia was being brutally honest now, perhaps out of a hunger to get it off her chest. The way Veronica was systematically cornering her left her with few options as to where to go with all of it.

Josephine’s head whipped around and locked in on her like an Eagle would a mouse. “You admit that you have had an affinity for her in the past?” her tone tenacious.

Theia, slightly flinching at the refocused nature of her partner, leaned her shoulders away.

“Agh, well…” she stumbled, trying to sew words together that would make any sort of sense. “It was complicated. Everything in those days was complicated. We left when the Circle disbanded because we didn’t trust the prospect of staying in place, waiting to be reprimanded and slaughtered because of the violence of some Mages in our branch. It was a horrible time, and simultaneously, romantically reckless. I was a different person, more prone to naïve fantasies of how my life could be. Veronica lit a flame in me, as she did most everyone she encountered. I had never felt so infatuated with someone in my life, and she drew me in so easily. But, when I made my feelings known, she rejected me. It was too much to risk, in her eyes, a love affair while having to ensure the survival of the group. An unsuccessful tryst would have caused a rift. I don’t see how it helped, considering we all parted ways eventually.”

Josephine became more irritated at just how wonderful this siren sounded, how adventurous their shared time together was. It was positively poetic and infuriating. She chewed on the inside of her cheek, trying to retain her open-minded façade. It was cracking, though, and cracking fast.

Theia didn’t have her eyes on her to notice, though. She stared straight ahead, deep in her memories.
“Now, she feels for you what she denied herself all that time ago,” Josephine managed to say, the words stinging in her throat.

Theia sighed. “I suppose so. Part of me wonders if that is even the true intention she has; she could be, as you so succinctly say, out for her own life’s sake. But, with everything we shared, and all that we have been through, I have a difficult time distrusting her. Even with all that she’s done, I do still see the same Veronica I knew on the road. It’s in her eyes, and I know it’s in her heart. She wouldn’t risk her hide to come here if she didn’t trust me to see that and help her.”

“I see.”

Theia turned her shoulders to get a better look at Josephine, who looked ready to spit poison. Theia suspected it wouldn’t be an easy talk to have with her, and she didn’t plan on it happening so soon after Veronica’s approach. She had opened up so little about her past, though, and perhaps this is when it would change. Maybe, now, she could convince herself to fully trust Josephine with her inner secrets and memories.

“Josephine, you have nothing to fear, if that is what you are spinning about,” she comforted, resting a hand on the Ambassador’s shoulder.

Josephine looked back at her, hearing the words she desired to hear the whole time, but they were less potent than she thought they would be. In hearing her reassurance, she also heard Veronica’s caveat about who could every truly love Theia. She knew it was ridiculous to choose between the trustworthiness of her lover and colleague, or the words of an interloper. Still, it rested in her gut like a sour meal.

“I am not afraid of you abandoning me for the skirts of another woman, Theia. I simply hope you will practice caution when deciding what you will do for her.”

“Is that why you look ready to challenge her to a duel like a true and noble Antivan?”

“The Seeker is right, you will be remembered as being hilarious in your tenure.”

Theia smirked, leaning into Josephine’s side, shouldering her in jest. “And you will be remembered for being unimpressed at every turn by my hilarity. But, at the same time, hopelessly in love with me for it, too.”

“We shall see, my patience falls by the hour,” Josephine felt comforted by Theia’s humor and physical touch, though it was a treatment for a symptom of the problem and not the root. Love affair or not, this woman posed a blemish on the transparency of the Inquisition’s politics, and she knew Leliana would bite through stone and mortar to find out.

“Promise me something, Josephine,” Theia took hold of her hand and held it between both of hers. “Promise me you won’t disclose this situation to Cullen and Leliana. At least, not yet. I want to have time to explore my options and think of a way to help the most people I can.”

“Theia, are you sure that is smart of you? They may not be pleased you are keeping secrets.”

“You know as well as I how impossible that is here. Still, I need you to do this for me. It will ensure the safety of both Veronica and myself, if I have time to deliberate. I also want to make sure that everyone’s hands stay as clean of this as possible.”

Josephine was silent, taking in the promise she was being asked to make. If she did, she would probably break it, and what would that do to Theia’s trust in her? She had just divulged more about her life in one half hour than she had done in months of knowing her. Now, just as she had gotten
her to be vulnerable, she stood to burn her.

“Very well, mi amor,” she said, the affection she gave made it burn more in her chest as she said it. As she watched Theia smile and kiss her hand in thanks, she couldn’t help but want to tell her everything and beg for understanding. But, she kept her mouth shut, irrevocably tied to the Game her and Leliana had enacted.

“I have to go and oversee the last of the dinner preparations. If you’ll excuse me, I’ll see you tonight?” Josephine asked, pulling away but lingering at her side.

“Of course. I can only sit on my hands anticipating how beautiful you will be,” Theia’s words ached with kindness.

Josephine grinned, and she made her way down the stairs without another word. She was quiet and cautious in comparison to how her usual demeanor was around Theia in private, and while the Inquisitor noticed the shift, she blamed it on the wrong source.

As the Ambassador was finally out of earshot, and passed both doors and into the Great Hall, she expectantly flanked by Leliana who stood ready for the goods.

“So, any luck?” she said low, walking with her as she made her way back to her office.

Josephine was torn beyond comprehension, feeling the pull of her lover’s trust and the obligations of the Inquisition’s reputation, as well as Leliana’s desire for clarity. If she covered Theia’s back, she could stand to be accused of a nepotistic agreement between them that was a liability for the Council and indeed, the Inquisition. If she told what she knew, she could stand to polarize the differences between Theia and the Council, and alienate her from her good graces.

Leliana’s crystalline stare was burning holes into Josephine’s skin, and by the time she felt most pinned to the wall for answers, Josephine felt her fight or flight response kick in.

Then, out of the corner of her eye, she spotted the woman who was the catalyst for all this mess: Veronica, dressed now in a clean-cut set of a coat and slacks, making jovial conversation with Varric by one of the Hall fireplaces. She looked so effortlessly at home, arms folded casually as she laughed. Her thick, black hair, and her soft and pale skin. She looked like a warrior maiden, capable and clever. The clothes, though, they were familiar – so much so, she could swear that she would know what they felt like to touch. Then, it clicked together: it appeared as though the Inquisitor was all-too-happy to share some clothing for tonight’s festivities.

Josephine broiled, thinking of how smug Veronica must have felt, wearing the clothes of the woman she was after for all to see and gossip. The generosity of a friend would translate into the possessiveness of a tryst in the matter of minutes.

Leliana caught her friend staring at her nemesis of the evening, and she couldn’t resist capitalizing.

“She will without a doubt captivate everyone tonight. I wonder just how big of a net she will cast.”

Leliana’s voice narrating the vitriol in her mind was an effective influence. She turned to her friend, eyes narrowed with temptation.

“Come, Leliana. I feel this would be a more appropriate topic of discussion in my Office.”
Chapter Summary

Things come to a head as the Ambassador has made her choice in alignment between the Inquisitor and the Spymaster with regards to Skyhold's controversial arrival. But when Leliana makes her grand move for justice, she finds she faces more in her way than simple logistics. Theia is forced to take the polarized side she had often been pushed into: once a rebellious Mage, always a rebellions Mage, so it seems.

The Great Hall was once again center stage for the culmination of underhanded actions and hidden sentimentalities. But, to Theia’s relief, she would not have to do much pomp and ceremony in order to have her friend be the honored guest of her hold.

Standing in front of the throne, she welcomed her friend who came down the hall’s walkway, the crowds of people, from nobles, to allies, and Inquisition personnel, took care not to gawk at the visitor as she went past. Her hair, tousled up into a ponytail that looked positively lush and beckoning hands to intertwine themselves in it. Her lips, a cherry pink hue, were too pretty to be taken as natural.

She smiled as she found her friend watching her, and she confidently strode to her, going up the shallow step. In an assured stance, she stood at the Inquisitor’s side, her equal in both height and persona. Theia, kind and thankful to have a friend alive and well, welcomed the company.

“Theia, for you, I’d file through an entire Ballroom with dual blades flying. It is a pleasure, and I am out of practice with beguiling the elite,” she spoke now with more manners, heeding the company around them.

And said company was marveling at the sight: The Inquisitor, standing at the helm of her Hall, with a woman beside her who looked just as proud and powerful as she.

From the side of the room where the Advisors tended to stand and watch the goings-on, there was Josephine, sipping her wine and watching with chagrin as Theia got her chance to stand side-by-side with a beautiful woman for everyone to see. Her unapologetic nature was vindicated. It felt as though Josephine’s maneuvering of her position had come full circle: One of the first conflicts of their bond was her unwillingness to be depicted in such a way with the Inquisitor, and now, she was watching from the safety of the sideline, while another woman propositioned her for the honor.

Mistress of the Inquisition seemed impossibly appealing in that moment, if only out of spite.

Leliana came swiftly to her side after Veronica made her understated, though important, arrival.

“The wheels are in motion. Keep alert for any unexpected developments,” Leliana spoke out of the side of her mouth, her face otherwise posh and diplomatic.

Josephine’s stomach churned with anxiety from what she had done. She played double-agent today,
and it made her want to bathe her entire body until every last inch was clean again. Seeing Theia be so happy and contented made it even worse for her.

“Leliana, I beseech you to do this in a more private fashion,” Josephine whispered one last request.

“Josie, after what she said to you? After she murdered my Ravens? She deserves a public reckoning.”

“We have discussed this, she is not the bloodied criminal we think her to be. She has motivations.”

“And she has designs for the Inquisitor and the Inquisition derived from those motivations. This is a weed that needs to be pulled from its root,” Leliana’s temper had chilled, hardened into a shell of unequivocal focus.

Josephine knew, then, she had armed the most dangerous weapon and believed it to be in the interest of peace. Now, she must sit by and watch as her choices run amok.

Back at the fore, Theia was making introductions between her new and old friends.

“It is a pleasure to make your acquaintance, Veronica, I hear you must have the most delicious stories about our dear Inquisitor,” Dorian charmed as his sly grin gave away his interests in knowing about Theia’s background.

Veronica chuckled smoothly. “I have them in spades, my Lord, but in the interest of her shyness I will need to take care to keep my mouth shut.”

“Such a disappointment, and here I thought the honored guest was here to dishonor herself into infamy,” their dueling charisma was the true spectacle, beyond any secrets Veronica could hope to give about Theia back in the day.

Soon, it was Commander Cullen of all people, approaching and making a rare appearance of insistence.

“Inquisitor, I wish to introduce myself to your friend, if you don’t mind,” he said, nodding robustly to Theia, who in return grinned.

“Commander, I would like nothing more. Veronica, this is Commander Cullen, he leads our forces. He is Fereldan, perhaps you two may swap stories of your experiences?”

Veronica eyed the former Templar with suspicion and at the same time, temptation. “Commander, you say? My, my, an authoritative stature indeed,” she sounded as if her tongue and lips were doused in honey.

Cullen, caught off guard and slightly self-conscious, rubbed the back of his hair. “Pardon my manners, but, I am merely an agent of the Inquisition as we all are. My specialties are hardly extraordinary after a career of service.”

Theia watched as Veronica laid out her rhetorical tools before her like a Blacksmith would his hammer and carving utensils. For her to set her sights on the Commander spoke more of her humor than her sincere attraction; she knew Veronica would rather cast herself into the ocean than be vexed by a Templar, even if there was a “former” before the title.

“I encourage you, Veronica, to mingle with the Commander. I have to have greet others and check in with my other Advisors.”
“Of course, friend, I can think of nothing more delectable on this evening’s menu,” Veronica hummed, before stepping closer Cullen. “Now, Commander, how does one get elected to lead the forces of an Inquisition anyhow?”

Theia could hear Cullen’s authentic tone as he began answering, but it fell out of earshot as she approached Josephine, alone, and looking like she deeply desired to turn into a piece of unnoticeable furniture.

“My dear Ambassador, has something spoiled the wine?” Theia teased, coming to stand by her side now, though their shoulder-to-shoulder stature was much less regal as Josephine battled the urge to turn away and escape.

“No, not at all, Inquisitor. I merely am tired from the day’s work, and am feeling a tad reclusive.”

“Well, I suppose you are allowed to be that way once a year.”

Theia’s sincere smile was like a twisting dagger in Josephine’s side.

“Inquisitor, if I may have a word with you? In private?”

Theia’s brow furrowed as she gazed back at her. “What of? Has something happened?” she eyed the Lady Montilyet, who, dressed in a floor-length gown custom for a semi-formal banquet and not the robes of an Ambassador, seemed to not be full of the confidence such an outfit would invoke.

“It is a recent development that I believe you would be interested in being made aware of, yes.”

“I don’t see how it can’t wait until the end of the dinner. Surely, the responsibilities of the day’s docket can be delayed an hour?”

“Theia.” Josephine muttered her name under her breath, her eyes focused on hers, speaking to the brevity of the situation which she preluded. The Inquisitor, shocked to hear such a casual reference from the Ambassador, suddenly felt a pang of dire concern. Just what had happened?

Well, Josephine was too late in her urgency to be the one to tell her.

Swiftly, the Great Hall doors widened, making room for Sister Nightingale and two armored Inquisition guards flanking her as she walked with in insatiable pace towards the other end of the hall where they were all situated. Concerned to say the least, Theia stepped away from Josephine’s side in order to meet their advance head on. Veronica, always one to sniff out a problem, also watched with keen interest. She knew, though, that this was all for her.

“Inquisitor, it has come to my attention that our guest has quite the record of crimes against both the Kingdom of Fereldan and the Inquisition. I have come to detain her for questioning,” Leliana said assertively, standing with her hands at her sides, whilst the troops that accompanied her readied the chains for the woman’s wrists.

“That won’t be necessary, Sister Leliana,” Theia crafted her speech in order to honor the very public nature of it all, “I have already been made aware of her crimes, and deem it unnecessary to detain her.” Her own confidence covered the fact that she was shocked and infuriated that these details were made known. She could not decide which conspiracy theory hunch was most likely: that Leliana had been spying this whole time, or someone much more visible transferred intelligence. She hoped it was the first.

Veronica came to Theia’s side like she was mistaken for another woman in the street.
“Sister Nightingale, I have been upfront and honest with Her Worship about my actions and record. I have come for sanctuary and counsel in order to best atone for them, not to deceive anyone.”

“And what of your crimes towards us, Lady Veronica? Because of you, two of the Inquisition’s ravens have become fodder for the wilderness. How, then, would you explain such a blunt attack on our communications and functions?”

“I did so to save them from a fate worse than death, and to recover your messages from the hands of your enemies!” Veronica was now offended.

Theia interjected, holding her arms out so as to create a more clear border between them.

“Leliana, all of this can be explained, without the need of an imprisoning.”

“I have to disagree, Inquisitor. She has proven dangerous, lethal, and duplicitous. For the sake of all of our safety, I wish to arrest her.”

The crowds rumbled with words, opinions, and questions. What would happen when the wills of the most lethal and precise woman in Orlais met with the most powerful voice of the Inquisition’s forces?

As the troops stepped closer, following Leliana’s orders, the people would get their answer.

“Both of you men, stand down,” Theia’s voice thundered, taking another step in between her friend and her arrestors.

“Inquisitor, I implore you to step aside so that justice may be implemented in this Great Hall,” Leliana hissed back.

“Leliana, this is no justice, this is an eye for an eye, and we are above that. Stand down, that is an order.”

“An order than is ill-advised and softened by the weakness of a manipulated friendship.” Leliana knew how to put on a show to her best ability, and to her advantage.

“You question my sensibility, Sister Nightingale? If you do, I suggest you say it plainly, and in one sentence.”

The room was quaking with the reckoning energy as the Inquisitor put herself between a woman and what would feel like an impossible force of intimidation. This was, however, her trusted Advisor, someone she revered and admired. It pained her to feel oppositional to her judgment, but she was not about to leave her friend to be escorted out like a common thief, embarrassed and used as a pawn for Leliana’s gratification.

“As your advisor, I beckon you to evaluate the choice you have made harboring a fugitive guilty of slaughter.”

The crowd, again, reverberated with astonishment.

“My friend is a heroine as much as I am!” Theia regathered the crowds attention, making an even more bold claim. “She is misunderstood and persecuted like all Mages working against the tide of legal oppression. As the Herald of Andraste, and the leader of the Inquisition, I pull rank in this matter. She will be sequestered in my own personal quarters, until a consensus can be managed between us all. I forbid you to arrest her, to interrogate her without my permission and presence, and to stand by for my next order as we get to the bottom of this.”
Theia stared Leliana down, unafraid and bittersweet in her strength. Leliana was not a woman you trifled with, but there she was, her junior, and her antagonist in the moment.

“As you wish, Inquisitor.” Leliana’s words were sharper than an arrow’s tip. “I will be in my quarters awaiting such authority to make itself known.” She then turned and, nodding to the guards she would now dismiss, stomped off and through the door which would take her to her nest.

Heads and shoulders turned back and forth to one another as the crowds tried to make sense of what had just happened. Meanwhile, Theia was unbothered by the fanfare. Her mind went directly to her friend who neared her shoulder.

“Theia, I am so sorry, I have no idea—“

“It’s alright. I do. Go to my room, you will be guarded from any and all entry except for my own. I need some time to gather my thoughts for what is next.” Theia had compassion in her voice, but her face and posture spoke of a woman ready to set all of the tapestries on fire in her wake.

Veronica, recognizing this, solemnly nodded, and made her way to the door which would take her to her friend’s chambers. There, she would feel safe, if not a little anxious as to what was to become of her.

When her friend was safely out of sight and secure, Theia’s jaw clenched as she began to make her way for the Great Hall doorway. Feeling the Ambassador coming to her side, trying to stop her, she turned and glared at Josephine’s apologetic face.

“Inquisitor, I—“

“How could you?” Theia growled low, making Josephine fall apart inside all the more. The Ambassador closed her mouth, her eyes pleading for compassion that Theia was so beyond giving. When she turned and continued out the door, Josephine didn’t stop her.

Such forces were beyond that kind of request. The vines of gossip and intrigue in Orlais would be well-watered tonight.

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The Inquisitor rarely hid herself away like a runaway child, but when she did, it was almost always with a bottle of wine from the pub and in the walkways of the Battlements. There, she could intimidate any of the troops and guards to leave her to her own section of it, rest assured that she could guard it from any foe with the temper she had.

There she was, sitting with her legs crisscross, the 2/3 full bottle beside her right thigh. She stared with an indignant expression out at the chunk of horizon she could see through the battlement walls, her head leaned back on the stone she sat up against.

The evening wind was cold and fluid in the air. Otherwise, everything was still.

“You pace and pace and pace in your mind’s hallways. You keep wanting to find the right door. This one, That one? Here, there is where I am meant to go.”

“Cole, I should have known you’d come see me,” she said stiffly, not having the heart to show unkindness to him.

With no fuss, he was there all at once, sitting crisscross as well beside her. She eyed him from her periphery with the impatient affection an older sibling would when their younger brother finds them
fuming about something that had nothing directly to do with them.

“She vexed you. She still does. You don’t want to admit it.”

The Inquisitor took another swig of wine. “Yes, I suppose she does. What of it?”

“She is always searching for home, friend. Her aunt is gone. Her blades are a cold hearth. She wants something more, something she can pinpoint on a map.”

Theia listened intently and quietly. Her chest hollowed out a bit, hearing the forlornness of her friend’s life. She suspected as much, but it hurt her to know it was true: her spirited friend was aching, pained, and tired. Her crimes were catching up to her, and she hadn’t the time to decipher what was her desire to survive, and what was her desire to stop running.

“Does she love me, Cole?”

“A criminal loves amnesty. A thief loves redemption. A bandit loves another day of life.”

“So, like that? Like I am her savior?”

“Yes, but she believes it to be more. Your hair, your smell, the way your nose crinkles in sleep. She’s tucked it all away like rations in the desert to eat, to nourish her body when it’s desolate.”

“Oh, Veronica,” she groaned softly, rubbing her mouth.

“She does not know you. She, too, paces hallways, looking for a way in.”

There were a couple moments of thoughtful silence, wherein Theia was able to enjoy her friend’s company and pretend that a fugitive case was not awaiting her in her own bedroom. Undoubtedly, it would also entail Leliana’s temper and Josephine’s sadness.

Josephine.

How could she do that? How could she break that trust, and so effortlessly? Like playing the Game, not with a genuine lover, but with a conquest. She looked her in her eyes and lied about her promise. A woman of her word? How could she be now?

“She dances with aching feet.” Cole, again, tapping into her tormented thoughts.

“Hm? Who?”

“She keeps practicing. Turn, turn, spin, arms raised, faster, then slower, than faster again. She has mastered every dance but you. You are pacing feet, calloused toes, burning incense in lungs. Breathing, breathing, breathing, but she cannot keep up.”

“Josephine?”

“The fair Antivan who bested all.”

“Josephine.”

Theia sighed again, swiveling the bottle in her hand as she prepared for another chug. Getting her mouthful, she held it in her mouth with tension, then swallowing.

“How do I trust then, Cole? If she does this. I know it’s not easy, but, trust is trust.”
“You are the only thing that would make her take up a Bard’s dagger again. She hates it, it burns to think of the touch, but she’d do it. No, no, no. There’s always a way around. No blood. Her blood. She wants you to stop losing it.”

Another reflective pause.

“I feel so lost, friend. Which door do I choose?”

“The one where you would step bare foot.”

“I’m not sober enough for this, Cole.”

“You never will be. Drunk on wine, drunk on her, drunk on what used to be. Drunk on the pain. You lost and you mourn. Never a chance to sit by a grave and cry. Running, running just a mile more. You are the matron griever. Without you, they would have died, and now you wish to keep them alive just one day more. Roslyn wishes to slap you.”

The Inquisitor let out a humorless laugh. Feeling the ache in her gut – wine, or something else? Regardless, she suddenly lost her taste for alcohol. Maybe Veronica was right after all; no one could love such a woman except another who was there to see her fall and rise day after day.

“The guardian wishes to rest, but her body won’t let her.”

And she always was that: the guardian, sleepless and pale in the moonlight illuminating her watch. There was Naomi, the motherly healer. Olivia, the cunning temptress, the sneaky grasp in the night. Roslyn, the blunt-force hand, the one who led the charge and ensured her people got back across friendly borders. Then, Veronica, the provider and the gatherer – the one who always had one more thought to harvest, one more fear to ensnare and kill.

And then there was Theia: the protector, the guard, the vigilant eyes on the hillside, the voice that would first cry fowl, danger, or to run, the harbinger of disruption.

She sought her hallowed ground on the battlements that were built like her soul.
Having drawn the line in the proverbial sand, Theia now stands at the base of a crossroads. Does she let herself relent to the truth of her past, or lay the demons to rest and hope the future does not burn her the same way? Her decision implicates her friend and former comrade as well, as the Inquisitor realizes the root of the issue may not be her penchant for criminality, but her need to fill a hole they have both left bare in their lives.

As the Inquisitor made her way towards her chambers door, it became obvious to her that she wasn’t alone. She stopped in place to wait for her accompaniment to make herself known, and when Leliana hopped down from the second story railing, she had her vindication.

“Inquisitor,” Leliana said low, coming towards her. Theia couldn’t help but feel like she was just as ready to stab her as to approach for conversation. How many people were greeted in such a way by her, or her people, and were unable to live to tell the tale?

“Sister Nightingale,” Theia greeted back, not backing down.

“Am I to hope that you have reconsidered your stance?” Leliana came to stand at her side.

“I’m afraid not, but you can expect me to ask just what has gotten into you, to pursue someone so single-mindedly that you snarl more than you speak.”

There was a moment wherein both women looked at each other as if they had betrayed the other’s ambitions, and they were both disappointed in the other’s shortcomings. This would be quite a sight for anyone to witness, surely.

“I’m not sure what you’re referring to, Inquisitor. I am acting in the interests of us all.”

“Tell me Leliana,” Theia crossed her arms and faced her head on, “since you take so much liberty to utilize the avenues of my relationship, perhaps I may inquire into your own: how would the Hero of Fereldan, herself a mage, feel seeing you chase after one who was only trying to do right by her people, even if it meant sacrificing her life chances?”

Leliana eyed the Inquisitor, feeling like she had been wounded in her side with the way her ribs ached at the mentioning of her lover, her best friend, be used against her in such a way.

“The Hero of Fereldan has nothing to do with this, and you would take care not to use her name so flippantly.”

“Really? I think she does. She and Veronica crossed paths in Denerim not too long ago. In fact, the Hero did so by coming to her aid in a mission gone awry. Turns out our heroes are not above slumming it?”

“If you believe everything she says, you are more unwise than I thought you to be, Your Worship.”

“And if you disbelieve everything she says you are less of the compassionate and intelligent person I
admired you to be.”

“She has selfish motivations guiding her hands, and you say this is a reflection on my character and not hers? You honestly believe she came here with sincere nostalgia and nothing more?”

“Not at all. She had her agenda, but she wasn’t coy about it. I was biding my time to explore options in order to contain the storm she brought here. You opened the gates wide open for the flood waters – you and Josephine.”

“I was decisive, and Josephine acted in the interest of us all, something you should learn from.”

“I have learned a great deal from you today. Which lesson should I refer to first: how to wedge yourself between lovers and take advantage of their trust, make the leader of your organization look like an incapable figure-head, or deny due process of justice?”

“Inquisitor, I—“

“Leliana, be yourself, your honest self, and not the hardened Spymaster you are expected to be. I know somewhere deep down, you have some aching feeling for what has happened today. I can see it as plain as day, though you hide it well.”

Leliana looked away, her eyes narrowing as she made sense of this. The Inquisitor was clearly steadfast in her allegiance, something to be admired, if not concerned for. Loyalty was one of the most valuable commodities in Orlais and indeed, all of Thedas. That which came from an Inquisitor was undoubtedly worth its weight in various quantities of rare metals.

“Perhaps I have been guided by my temper,” Leliana conceded, feeling that Theia had stuck her finger in between her most sensitive of ribs emotionally.

“Leliana, I only wish to understand why you acted to impulsively, why you hunted for the truth instead of asking for it. You mistrusted me, and spread that sentiment to the Ambassador, my lover, in the process. Now I have to clean what was already a mess to begin with. I would appreciate your help, but I need to know for certain that when you look at me, you see a leader and a woman who continues to prove her worth, and not an adolescent child put in a playpen with too many dangerous toys.”

Sister Nightingale listened sincerely, not for the sake of recuperating her ego, but in order to make the anger in her heart end. Was it the ravens that stirred her protectiveness? Was it the absence of her Love grading on her nerves after so many months? Was it the combination of all the Inquisition’s affairs wearing her down? Perhaps it was a little bit of everything, or none at all.

What truth was in front of her face was this: The Inquisitor did not bend when she could have, and even when it departed from her own perspective, it showed a great deal of strength beyond her years. How foolish it was to be surprised to see it from someone who had defied the odds and survived unthinkable dangers.

“You are right, I should have trusted in your knowledge of the situation, and the knowledge you have of your friend’s character. Doing what I do, it can be easy to reduce people to logistical truths, like connecting an objective pattern. Sometimes, I forget that the Maker often comes to us in the likenesses of people we are supposed to help.”

“You are always forgiven, Leliana. I owe you too much to give back anything less. For as much as Veronica has me offering friendship, you do, as well.”

Leliana mustered a soft grin, watching the Inquisitor’s face harden. The energy of the argument had
shifted, and the defenses were being lowered.

“If you are not planning on punishing her, or sending her back to Denerim for her arrest, then, what is your goal? Surely, it will not go unnoticed that she is here, not with such a public conflict.”

“I have my idea. I would gladly take reinforcement, though, if you would be too kind.”

“Of course. Let us finish this, then.”

The two women eyed each other, respect imbued in both their gazes, as they started for the stairs to her chambers. Theia nodded to the guard she had appointed to the door, who gallantly opened it for them.

“Inquisitor, before we undertake this, please know that I take full responsibility for Josephine’s choices. I pushed her hand, and egged her on using the envy she was suppressing for Veronica. I hope you can forgive her, knowing she was only doing what she thought best, for me, and for you.”

“My issue with Josephine is separate from this. She is an adult, and I cannot simply absolve her because she had friends with forceful personalities. If you don’t mind, Leliana, I’d like for that area of this conflict to remain private from here on out.”

“Yes, Inquisitor. I understand.”

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Veronica was sitting on the edge of the bed when they arrived up the stairs, her hands tucked between her thighs. When she saw one woman whom she trusted with her life, and one whom she trusted would take it in a heartbeat, she was unsurprisingly on edge. Had her friend betrayed her, or become convinced to demonize her? Or was this more of that Orlesian game-playing afoot?

“I see my captors have seen fit to check on their pet,” she chided, standing up and meeting them in the middle of the room.

“Veronica, rest assured, there’s no death sentence happening tonight,” Theia put her hands on her hips, situating herself as the third point in this triangulation of formidable women.

“Then, what is the verdict? Are you going to help me, or cast me to the wolves?”

“Veronica, I would never think to abandon you when I could be of help, but you’ve put me into a tight corner.”

“I have? Your Spymaster and Ambassador girlfriend did that when they played their spy game with us. I had behaved myself just fine.”

Leliana’s eyes peered at the woman with stifled malice. “Careful how you speak about dignified people in these halls, Veronica, you will not always get the listening ear you have in the Inquisitor.”

“I know of your listening ears and just how helpful they are, Spymaster.”

“Veronica, Leliana, please.”

Theia turned around to pace towards her desk, feeling the migraine start to kick in as she did her best to re-balance her will. Mediating was not the goal of this, but it had rapidly devolved into a standoff between tempers. All sides felt wronged, and all sides felt deserving of some form of reparation. Hopefully, a resolution would put it all to bed.
Still facing away from both women, Theia joined both hands behind her waist, and gave her pitch.

“I will write personally to the King of Fereldan in the morning asking to plea for exile on your behalf, citing a lifetime of perilous circumstances which have mired your life with a taste for conflict. I will ask for two things in this plea: one, that you are allowed to return to Denerim in order to settle all non-violent affairs, and second, that I be able to conscript you, for rehabilitative work under the Inquisition’s banner. Here, you will find ample work under a moral cause, one which I hope will redeem your character and priorities, whilst also giving you a cause to fight for, for the betterment of all.”

Leliana could not believe her luck – she had done much to garner this woman’s wrath, and now she stood to be gainfully employed here. It was in style with the Inquisition’s methods, but, it was uncomfortable all the same.

“Theia, I cannot simply leave my people in Denerim. They need me, I am their only protector.”

“Then tell them the can find safety here at Skyhold. Bring any people you wish, all that I ask is you spend no more than a day in the Capital settling business. If you so much as delay one night, I will send a search party, well-armed, for you.”

“And what exactly will you be using me for? Another Mage for your gilded tower?” Veronica sounded dissatisfied, if only at the prospect of cuddling up to people who threatened her safety only a couple hours ago.

Theia turned to face them now, an assured leader.

“Take your pick, Veronica, the opportunities abound here. I thought it would be fitting to install you as a keeper for the Ravens, but, I fear my Spymaster may slip something into my wine as penance.”

Leliana was unamused, but also not above such arrangements. “On the contrary, Inquisitor, I could always use more personnel to help care for and protect by avian charges. Veronica, if you so wish, I would happily welcome you into my ranks. I think it would be…most enriching for you.”

Theia watched Leliana accept this hypothetical all-too-readily. She anticipated a thirst for revenge in a more tacit capacity.

Veronica sucked her teeth, trying to summon the grace to endure this situation.

“I suppose, like most of your gained allies, I have been left with little choice. At your word, I will depart for Denerim and return as soon as possible. Am I to expect protection for my travels, considering my reputation?”

“If the King does not ensure some form of a guarded escort – for your safety as well as his people’s – we will send you with an Inquisition guard. Is there anything else you need? An Elven ruin pillaged, or a Civil War ceded?”

Veronica shook her head, smirking to herself as she heard her friend’s wicked humor now.

“You will embrace me in alliance but deny me in affection, then? Is this some sort of “gotcha” then?” Veronica did not bother with gauging what were more private topics. Theia, now uncomfortable again, turned to Leliana and nodded, releasing her from being a witness to an awkward conversation.

As Leliana departed, Theia felt a slight decrease in the weight on her shoulders. It was replaced, though, by the look of Veronica’s adamant will in her eyes.
“Well? What is the heartbreaking dish, then?”

“Veronica.” Theia invited her to follow her around to sit on the couch. As they took their seats, she could feel the tension in the air leaven, their faces feeling the enhanced warmth from the fire.

“I understand that you came here to see me, as much as you came for help. I appreciate your sincerity, and your commitment to our bonds. Surely you must know how much I admired and adored you. I made it perfectly clear that day, out in the middle of nowhere, like a love-struck maiden.”

Veronica failed to hide a grin; the endearing nature of Theia’s words was hard to fend off.

“But…I have to stop running and chasing my tail, as do you. We both want something to stick, something to tell us that the people we were can’t be blamed for what they did, or feeling what they felt. Here and now, I think it would be best for the both of us if we said once and for all, that we forgive it all.”

Veronica felt the ache in her body as she initially put up a fight, looking away and denying Theia eye contact.

“Butia, it is not as easy as you claim it to be,” she muttered in return, perhaps the most authentic thing she had said all day.

“If we sit on our hands for another decade cursing that it is not as easy as it sounds, we’ll never find the time to try, and them how will we know?”

“Theia,” Veronica was hiding it, but in her eyes she could feel tears threaten to well. The Inquisitor had hit a never out of nowhere – she did not remember Theia to be this intuitive, but, perhaps her accelerated life experience had inspired it.

Then, she felt her hand being held once more, and she turned and finally made eye contact again with this woman who had symbolized so much for her. So much regret, and so much hope at the same time.

“Veronica, we have to let go.”

She shook her head, biting her lip as she gazed down at her lap. “I can’t, not entirely.”

“There is so much for us to do that will honor those days, besides gripping onto it all with deadly force. Have you ever thought about what would become possible for us if we stopped feeding our own ghosts, and reclaimed our powers for something different?”

“How? How can we become heroines after being hunted like wild animals?”

At that, Theia smiled encouragingly. “The only way the foxes know how, dear.”

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They stood out in front of the outermost point of the balcony railing, hand –in-hand, as Theia motioned her free palm up and invoking fire from the bowl of herbs. Softly the fire hummed, inspiring a thick stream of smoke to rise and stretch up into the air. Resolute, she turned to look at her friend, who held what looked like no more than a spoonful of sand. Turns out, even though Veronica was a light packer, she did manage to bring something of pure sentimental value: a jar of dirt that she had added to over the course of their journeys. Gently, she reached her palm up over the smoke.

Tilting her palm downward, the small pile fell into the bowl. It angered and slightly stifled the smoke,
but Theia’s flames were never easily put out.

When the stream of smoke healed itself, their enjoined hands tightened in their grip.

“Are you ready, my friend?” Theia looked at Veronica, biting back the urge to cry.

“Always, my friend.” Veronica replied softly, her hair billowing in the evening breeze.

They then turned and faced the incense, closed their eyes, and did the Fox’s chant. The same one verbatim that Theia did to herself the morning she was to leave for Adamant. Only now, it had a more somber and chilling effect when spoken in unison as two voices and not one.

The recitation was slow, the rhythm swinging like a pendulum almost.

When they got to the last line, and then to the last word, Theia heard her friend inhale deeply. “Theia,” she breathed, like she was watching a dragon soar across the horizon, “I can feel her here.”

Theia turned and looked at her, the way tears now streamed down her face, but her expression was stoic.

“Are you certain?” she asked. Veronica nodded, biting her lip as she resisted the urge to break down.

“…Roslyn.” Theia hummed her name, before she, too, felt the enveloping of an austere and strong presence. It was ravenous, fire-bound, and invigorated. It tingled along her skin like goosebumps.

“My friend, you did find peace,” Veronica whispered. Theia, in agreement, found the tears well in her own eyes now. Throughout it all, they never broke their handhold.

Keep your chin up, guppy. There’s a fight in the wind always. She could hear the memory clear as day, as if her mouth was right in front of hers, spitting fire and grit. After all that time wondering, at least, she knew. Their friend was gone, but she was not obliterated. Feeling her embrace them in this, the last ritual, it was as if she was more alive and vital than all of them combined.

Even as it was ending, Theia was emboldened in her identity. The superstition, the intuitive hopes all were all vindicated. They would always rely on each other through space and time, relentlessly hungering for justice and connection. Such women, such people, could do nothing less.

When the incense began to burn out its final, vital embers, they broke the ceremonials for good.

“Thank you for this, Theia-Bird. You have no idea how much I have missed this.”

“I missed it, too. But now, we create new ones.” She grabbed the bowl, and held it in the palm of one hand, the hand with the infamous anchor brewing beneath her skin.

“I think it best if I go to bed, now. If I may ask, how long am I allowed to stay here?”

Theia grinned, placing a hand on her shoulder. “You always have a home here. You are welcome to stay until we know for sure that you can return to Denerim to finish things there. For good, Veronica. I mean it.”

Veronica smiled. “Yes, for good. I promise.”

Veronica pulled her into one good hug, burying her chin in her friend’s shoulder as she felt the meaningful weight of this exchange. Theia gripped back just as tightly to the woman she once swore would always evade her grip. Now, she was here, skin and bone. Nothing left unsaid or unfelt between them as it had been for so long.
Watching her friend go – the friend she had once loved and pined for to be something much more – she couldn’t help but feel the invigorating freedom that closure brought. The animal that stalked her dreams and her actions, both in and out of slumber, seemed to at last be satiated.

The fox had finally, at long last, outrun the wolves.
While fate remains suspended with regards to Veronica's fate, the final piece of the conflict for Theia comes to the fore: Josephine's duplicity. Falling into the habits of their closeness, the Ladies Trevelyan and Montilyet are left to reckon with the deep-seeded unrest in their roles as lovers, and how their needs conflict with the responsibility of the Inquisition's image. What better setting to have such a anxious conversation than in shared waters?

The water was beginning to grow tepid, but it appealed to Theia to feel cold and still. Usually, her bathing took no longer than fifteen minutes -- the Inquisitor had better things to do than soak in bathwater lamenting on the romantics of her life -- but this morning, in a tub brought up and positioned so as to face the balcony opening, there was nowhere else she desired to be.

She was propped up against the taller side of the tub, her shoulders and collarbone resting above the water level, her hair messily tied up in a bun with strands disobediently framing her face. She rubbed her above-water knee as she thought to herself in silence, only hearing the shifting of the water with each movement.

Hearing rustling behind her, she knew just the source of the disruption.

The Ambassador herself was now awake as well, having stolen into the Inquisitor’s bedchambers in the middle of the night, no longer satisfied with the armistice between them since her betrayal of trust came to light. She boldly found her way to the side of the bed she had been exalted in night after night, appeasing and lonely. There, she had found Theia tossing and turning as she tried to catch sleep by its tail.

When their eyes met in the moonlit dark, instead of banishing her from her realm, Theia simply pulled the sheet out so as to invite her to crawl beneath it. They did not touch, or hold each other. Instead, they lay parallel, both women facing the other with their arms folded underneath their faces. After what felt like hours of a quiet impasse, Josephine reluctantly fell asleep. Something visceral and protective within Theia’s body was relieved to watch her ease herself into slumber, and found clemency in it, enough for her to finally slip into unconsciousness for the night.

Now, in the youthful dawn of the morning, the smoke of their dispute was clearing under the sunlight.

Theia did not turn her head to look back at Lady Montilyet as she arose. She knew what it would bring forth.

Josephine eyed the back of the Inquisitor’s head, still feeling like she was treading adversarial territory, even though the enemy had let her sleep between her sheets. Sometimes the most lethal battles came after ceasefires. Pulling herself up and out of bed, she walked without bothering to dress herself, electing to proposition herself as accompaniment in the water.

Coming around and sitting off the edge of the tub rim, she traced her hands along the water’s surface, keeping her face away from any sharp and unwelcoming gaze Theia could give. But, once again, she
surprised her: wherein she expected reclusiveness, Theia looked upon her with relaxed ambivalence.

As Theia sat up more, spreading her legs to either side of the tub, making room for one more aching body, Josephine got the memo.

Swinging her coupled legs around, she slid into the lukewarm water, feeling no shock of temperature. Sitting in her spot and securing herself with her back up against the opposite end, she hugged her knees to her chest. Her hair, long and untied, half-soaked and half-dry as it dipped into the bath. She wrapped her arms around the underside of her thighs, her lips slightly parted as she continued to push forth into unstable terrain.

Cole was right -- she was having difficulty learning this dance.

With a bashful stoicism, they both remained without speaking for a time. Theia’s purple irises would flicker to and away from the Ambassador’s face, trying to find a hint of any strong emotion or fear. But, every time, she found only indifference -- or at least, ambiguity.

When there were words to be said, even the water seemed to ache.

“Thank you for allowing me to stay last night,” Josephine offered a piece meal of thanks, but she knew it was endearing to the symptom of the problem, and not the heart of it.

Theia, face unchanged, continued rubbing her thigh slowly in contemplation. “It is as much your bed as my own, I fear. To deny you would be a cruel grip on technicality.”

“I claim a place not for the bed itself, but for the company I keep within it. If I am to sleep here with no connection to you, I might as well retreat permanently to my own quarters.”

“If that is a choice you wish to make, so be it.”

Josephine allowed her legs to cede more underwater, her shins tucking under the bottom of Theia’s thighs. She pushed further for a reaction, but got nothing. It then became clear to her own self what she was doing: she was egging her on, trying to provoke her temper, her wit, to come forth. Something familiar, to distract her from the hurt in Theia’s eyes.

As Theia folded her arms criss-crossed across her chest, she saw the warrior mage employ her armor.

“Theia, whatever it is you wish to say to me, I beg you to do so. This silence is not conducive.”

Josephine new she was dancing on nerves, and it was only a matter of time before she dug her heel in the wrong one. But, it was a risk she was willing to take.

Theia’s eyes narrowed, feeling the pull of her maneuver.

“Would it curtail the seriousness of my feelings if I gave you what you wanted? Dance when you tell me to dance, divulge when you demand me to divulge. I have paid the price for such missteps.”

“I am not referring to Veronica or the Inquisition, I am referring to what is between us. How I...how I broke your trust in me,” the last sentence ached of regret.

“You are referring to all of it, in fact. I am not to be severed from the Inquisition, or my past. Your actions implicated every part, and not just your bond to me.”

“Then, will you not grant me one conversation?”

“I grant you so many things, Josephine. Perhaps you should examine how you treat what I give up to you.”
The water began to chill in an uncharacteristically rapid pace. Josephine felt as though frost would start emanating from the surface, but it did not come to pass. Looking in Theia’s eyes as the irises flickered, she knew where the instant cold came from.

“Theia, please.”

The Inquisitor pursed her lips, recognizing the instinctive magic she had let slip, and with one shallow inhale she recollected herself.

“I feel as though if I were to release everything I wish to say to you from my mind, the water will freeze and my chest will implode,” Theia admitted.

Josephine brushed some hair back over her shoulder, keeping the rest of her body still in reaction to the situation’s fragility. “Perhaps I deserve to be encased in ice for the week. At least it would keep me out of trouble in a way that you could trust.”

“Josephine, anything short of a dragon is not enough to keep you from getting your hands dirty. And even then, I am sure said dragon would be shocked at how handy you are with a sharpened quill.”

“You of all people understand such dangers.” Josephine tried to flirt humorlessly, but the effect of it was depleted by Theia’s unimpressed face.

A pause occurred while Theia thought about what the best way to go about this conversation would be. Perhaps not in the bath, naked, after a night of sleeping in the same bed without so much as a word. She never claimed to be a meticulous strategist, nor an impartial one.

“You always marvel at my powers and abilities, and act intimidated by them. But, Lady Ambassador, none of my talents are a match for yours. I can hardly wrap my mind around how believable you were, enticing me to open up to you, knowing you had someone on the other side of the door hungry for secrets. I can’t tell what the true design of the problem is: that I have bedded a tried-and-true Orlesian, or that I have bedded you, specifically.”

Josephine felt her stomach drop at the sound of Theia’s harbored prejudice for her own country and its traditions. It hurt even more when she compared it to the consequence of simply loving her, as if she alone could wield the behavior of an entire population of Game players.

“It was hardly an effortless dance. I was cracking and struggling under the pressure, I thought I would fall apart at any moment in pour my heart’s intrigues out to you without so much as a word.”

“Interesting -- you make conflicted look so confident.”

“Perhaps it is from too much practice, and not enough patience.”

“There, I would have to agree, Ambassador.”

Josephine hugged herself underwater. She, too, felt the need to arm herself with some shield of her own flesh.

“I suppose it goes without saying, Inquisitor, that I wish for you to forgive me.”

“Actually, I would love it to be said. Over and over again, with various amendments, addendums, and corrections.”

“Name your price, then, my Lady.”
Theia lowered her chin as her gaze became more piercing in the direction of her lover who had wronged her. In that moment, the tumult of her heart became inflamed. The woman in front of her was the pique of so much of her will: her protectiveness, strength, and hope for the future. Josephine had become a paragon in her mind, and now, in all her glory, she had fallen prey to the imperfect hold of envious love. It was uncomfortable, seeing Josephine on the receiving end of an admonishment -- what do you do when your instinct is to protect your love from your own anger?

“Before I do so, I am dying to know just how well this whole “saving face” method is going for you, Lady Montilyet. From my point of view, it’s as if you have failed to reconcile your human nature with the demands of your profession. You wish us to be unlinked, and yet you take a bite out of everyone who comes pining for me, even my friends who knew me before you did.”

“I do not pretend that I have not developed a protectiveness for you, Theia, and I do not think it fair for me to be blamed for it considering how many perils you have endured.”

“An old flame is hardly as lethal as the Fade, or a Nightmare demon, or a corrupted Magistrate out to destroy the world as we know it.”

“We all have various responsibilities in our lives, Inquisitor. The dangers we face -- that you, face -- do not invalidate the fears of my heart in losing you to anything.”

“I know. I knew the moment I saw your face as Veronica joined me at dinner. I knew when you came to me in the night like a maiden stealing away to her lover’s barracks, discrete like a thief. What I am unsure of is how you continue to pretend you can be that person, and also feign detachment.”

“I used to think it possible. Now, I am not so sure.”

“And all it took was two advances from women of my past, a siege on a Grey Warden fortress, getting sliced nearly in half in Emprise du Lion, and making you dance in a rural pub like a country girl.”

“Such efforts do not go unnoticed, Inquisitor, I assure you.”

“Unnoticed, no. Deferred, yes.”

Theia sat up and away from the rim of the tub, exposing her breasts and upper torso without thinking twice about the cold air. Her infamous scar, now a pale pink with some hints of blue and purple, uncovered itself, reminding Josephine of just how much this woman had gone through in her days and how much she, herself, had been there with unsevered loyalty. The Inquisitor anchored her upright position with a knee that bent upwards, one which she rested her elbow on while her hand went up against her cheek and hairline.

Josephine, intimidated and engrossed in all of her, remained pasted against the tub edge for self-preservation.

“Theia, if you only knew just how deeply I feel for you. How much you drive me crazy, how much you push every assumption and conviction I have to its limits. I made a senseless miscalculation out of envy and insecurity, and I am not here to act as if I am above reproach. You understand me in a way unlike anyone here -- you tell me, am I a liability to you now?”

Theia blinked once as she let a sigh release from her narrowed lips.

“Josephine, what do you see when you look at me? Not when we are outside, amongst our allies. When we are here together, scantily clad, wrapped up in each other. Do you see someone who is in some way always lost to you, or waiting to break away from you? Is that the true reason why you
“Hold yourself back?”

“I hold myself back because the politics of our lives deems it necessary to take precaution.”

“Bullshit.”

“Theia, please.”

“No, bullshit. That, that right there, is bullshit. You can tell me it’s all politics and intrigue until the sun and moon come crashing down. But, that is your armor and not your cause.”

Josephine bit her lip, looking down at the water that presented her with a distorted and somber reflection of a woman who had so little tools to play with in evading the hearth of her unrest.

“You are scared that I am too different from you, too enmeshed in my past and present difficulties, to ever truly belong to you. I know it because it’s what I fear in loving you as well. Leliana was right -- love without belonging, and some sort of ownership for the sake of our egos, is fraught. This requires us to swallow so much of our pride, simply to exist in our truth.”

“I know and am content with never being able to own you, Theia. I was not interested in such an arrangement in the first place.”

“Interest and need do not always match up. Humans are humans. We are selfish and greedy, and we want for ourselves. Especially when that which we desire evades our grasp.”

“You are a person to me, and not a doll or trinket to collect.”

“I am something you fear losing, and that is enough.”

Josephine’s shoulders leaned to one side as she clasped her fingers together in her lap, the water’s noisiness breaking the interlude of voices. Her curls of hair became more went as she had progressively sunk lower and lower into the water, to the point where her shoulders and top of her collarbone were all that remained above the surface.

The impasse had been reached, both literally and rhetorically.

“I wish I could take back the last several days, and return to what we had before I made my mistake. When you looked at me without stinging me with your eyes, when coming to your bed meant being one with you. I know what I have done was hurtful, and wrong. I know that underneath my titles and duties, I am a woman who is struggling to love,” the emotion spilling from her words could have overflowed the tub itself, “But, so help me Maker, if there is anything I desire more than your forgiveness, it is to feel once more the embrace of your ardor and protection. Even if for a singular moment.”

Theia’s stonewalling covered well the torn state of her mind and heart. Josephine’s tone, the sorrow in it, the regret it sent reverberating into the air. It made the water’s coldness now feel unsettling.

“Theia,” Theia grumbled, “you could place me in the clutches of Corypheus himself, and I would still happily wash my doomed body in your bathwater.”

Josephine’s eyes lit up, and instantly shot up to link with her gaze. The cumbersome nature of her sadness, propped up by a gust of wind.

“Come here,” Theia hummed, holding her arms out along the perimeter of the tub. Josephine hesitated, feeling as though it were a trap in order to expose her weakness for Theia’s embrace. But,
beggars could not be choosers. She slid through the water like a mournful siren, laying forward as her stomach and chest fell into that of Theia’s own anatomy. As she embedded the side of her face into the crook of Theia’s neck, she felt the miraculous embrace of her strength. One she never took for granted, even when she made mistakes.

As Josephine dared to close her eyes, she felt Theia’s arms wrap around her ribs, and she knew no armor could compare to their fortification.

“I want you to promise me you will stick by my side, and not lie to me, even when you feel it is in my best interest. A real promise this time, without a double-meaning or a caveat at the end.”

Josephine inhaled, feeling the weight of such an agreement on her shoulders. From here on out, this would mean antagonizing the inner voice inside her that propelled her to be the masterful Game player she was. Now, she had something organic and unsullied to care for, something to defend against the coils of noble vipers nests. It was gratifying and scary all at the same time. She chewed on the inside of her cheek slightly, letting it sink in for just a moment, before she responded.

“As you wish, my Lady,” she whispered against her pale skin, her arms secure under and against Theia’s sides.

“Oh, I do wish. I wish very sternly, in fact.”

A smirk from Josephine now, bittersweet and relieved. “I know, I know. I will never truly live this down.”

“You may, in time, and with the exchange of many generous and opulent favors.”

“As I said, name your price.”

Theia’s thigh rose up and clung to the length of Josephine’s body, making the butterflies return to the Ambassador’s gut as she did so.

“Only one: that you finally allow yourself to love me.”

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Theia’s hands were all-too-skilled now at the inner workings of Josephine’s robes. Tightening and cinching with a mixture of care and confidence, she secured the underlying smallclothes and undergarment around Josephine’s figure snugly. For as quick as she was dressing her, she was all the more efficient with undressing her.

Josephine held her hair gathered over her shoulder as Theia worked behind her, her eyes weaving with her hand-motions.

“When they write stories of you, I will be sure to inform the scribes that of your many illustrious skills, you were the most attentive and thorough chambermaid in all of Skyhold,” Josephine grinned, feeling Theia’s hands work a tight knot that finished the corset.

“You’ll say that, and some fool will translate it as the Inquisitor defying her stature in being loose and promiscuous.”

“We cannot outrun all salacious rumors, mi amor. Some yet crowd our bed at night, even when we feel we have outrun them.”

Theia sighed lightly, handing Josephine her belt and grabbing for her jewelry. “As long as you are
there to show them who has first rights, I am willing to let it go.”

The Ambassador giggled deep under her breath, cinching her waist in leather before taking her shoulder necklace from her love. Sliding it on over her head, she looked upon Theia, who had already dressed in light vigil gear, she resolved that the last task was her own hair.

But, even with such a responsibility at hand, she could not help but insecurely search for uncertainty in Theia’s mind. She approached her, resting her hands on the Inquisitor’s forearms which were folded to her chest, a thumb comfortingly rubbing.

“Theia, I...I hope that you know, I would not blame you if you found it too difficult to love me. I understand that who you are as an individual cannot be severed from your past, and if you ever find you compromise too much of that, I hope you will tell me.”

Josephine’s eyes lowered to the sight of her hands on Theia’s arms, a gaze she kept whilst Theia answered.

“Josephine,” the Inquisitor leaned in close to her with her waist and shoulders, “for as much as you infuriate me at times, you have given me a chance to be the person I could feel was always waiting to walk into the light, but never quite got the chance to. There was always something more important, something threatening our safety and our lives. Veronica and I have shared a great deal, but she doesn’t know who I am now. She knows who I used to be, and the traces of who I was that still linger in my reflection. I need her in my life in order to remind me of that. But, I need you because you remind me who I am, and who I can become. For that,” Theia put her hands on Josephine’s shoulders and kissed her forehead with a solace in her lips, “you are the one whom will always choose, without compromise.”

Josephine was ready to take on any siege or nobleman’s vitriol, hearing these words come from her lover’s mouth. The sincerity and endearment with which they ached -- like a dream, but better. More rich and lavish than any imagination.

“You humble me with your words, my Lady. How can I hope to recover from such tenderness?”

“I’m afraid it is a terminal condition, but one which is bearable given the right treatment.”

“And what of this treatment plan you have in mind?”

A sly smile on the Inquisitor’s lips appeared, and she slid her hands down, gripping the back of Josephine’s waist and pulled her in tighter, their noses side-by side. “Hours of lovemaking, even more hours of fondling, and then an eternity of recovering from the hours of lovemaking and fondling we will surely be exhausted from.”

Josephine, groaning playfully, stood on her toes as she felt the pull of Theia’s strength.

“You are so crass, mi amor, it is a wonder you have any diplomatic clout to speak of.”

“On the contrary, I hear I’m quite a hit in Fereldan.”

“So are dogs, mi amor.”

A chuckle rested in Theia’s throat. “Hey, what’s not to love about a steadfast and capable Bitch?”
With things resolved between Lady Montilyet and Lady Trevelyan, Josephine's attention turns towards finally resolving a long-standing thorn in their relationship. The endearment of it all marks a new turning point in their relationship, and inspires eyes to turn and minds to spin in response. Enjoying the present moment of their triumph, they also welcome a new progression of their next major challenge: Halamshiral.

“Are you sure you are comfortable doing this?” Theia was keeping a hushed presence behind the final door leading to the Great Hall. It was hard to see each other in the darkened stairwell; torches had not yet been lit even though the twilight of the evening was giving way to the midnight sky.

“It is only one community banquet. I am assured that no matter what happens, our entrance will not be the most shocking to people who have joined forces to defeat an possible arch demon, mi amor.”

“The sound of you understating something makes me wonder if I’m lucid dreaming,” Theia ran her fingers through her hair she had let down from her ponytail she had worn throughout the day, attending to numerous responsibilities and tasks. The relaxation in her hair and scalp was a tired sensation after a long workday.

“Oh, stop,” Josephine lightly swatted at Theia’s elbow, before turning her attention to her more casual gown she had chosen for the weekly community supper. A tradition brought on by celebrating construction efforts that seemed to fall into a weekly routine, now it felt more like a semi-formal House gathering than anything. It was a good opportunity to provide visiting dignitaries with a cohesive and polished aesthetic, and nourish interconnectedness within the Inquisition forces across occupations. Anyone and everyone from around the fortress came to laugh, drink, eat, and enjoy good company.

“I know I’m being annoying, but, I told you this doesn’t matter to me anymore. Earlier on when I was fixated on it…” Theia’s thoughts trailed off, feeling as though she had already said her points several times over in trying to convince Josephine this demonstration of affection wasn’t vital in order to earn her love anymore. Perhaps something had changed in the Inquisitor, to where she no longer valued the same irreverence for ceremony or pomp – or, maybe she found new priorities to preoccupy her. Either way, it was plain to acknowledge that who she was when she had become angered at Josephine’s refusal to be public with her, and who she was now, were two different versions of her. A siege on a fortress, stint in the Fade, and a string of near-death experiences could do that to a woman.

“Theia,” Josephine took hold of the Inquisitor’s hand, pulling her back around to look at her, “I am certain this is what I desire. After all you have been through, and all I have dealt with trying to keep these two factions of my life in order, it only makes sense that perspectives change. I am willing to swallow my pride after you have swallowed so much Game playing, elusive interludes, and theatrics. Let me give this to you.” Her voice was the one she had when they were alone – not so sharp and methodical, but tender, and endearing. Though, it still had the regal feel.

“I know, I just…feel like I am coercing you into something you would otherwise swear off of. I don’t want you to believe that you have to put your reputation at constant risk in order to show me
you love me. You have already showed that to me,” Theia rocked onto one hip in her stance, a thumb stroking the side of Josephine’s hand.

“Mi amor, the risk is imbued in the very nature of why we are here. Perhaps instead of avoiding it, we must dance with and seduce it, as with all adversaries in the Game,” Josephine’s clever grin disarmed Theia in many ways, including in discursive matters. But, she knew that already.

“Alright, well, let us get to the dancefloor, then.”

Theia turned and stood shoulder-to-shoulder with her now. She had let go of Josephine’s hand, so as to walk with more discrete intentions. So, when she felt the Lady Ambassador reached and took hold of her hand again, her head turned.

“Ambassador?” she asked suggestively, one eyebrow slightly raising itself.

“Just go with it. The Game favors the intentions of the bold,” Josephine whispered in a surprisingly colloquial way, and Theia could’ve sworn it had come with a wink. Who was this woman, and what had she done with the Inquisition’s Chief Diplomat?

“I trust you, even though my gut says scale through the window and make my escape.”

Theia then reached and pushed the door open. The broad and enveloping light of the hall’s torches and fireplaces made their eyes blink to adjust sharply, but it was no great ordeal. In a second, they had crossed the threshold into the Great Hall, side-by-side as much as they could manage through the single-person doorway. Both women smiled as if they were still bashfully carrying on a conversation with each other, so as to not denote the attention they were very much going to get.

When heads turned and eyes widened, some in point-blank shock and others in a more nuanced surprise – one of “I didn’t think they would actually do it” – they felt compelled to turn their faces from each other and share their grinning with the Hall’s people.

Gazes flickered from their heads to their enjoined hands, linking them in everyone’s mind’s eye permanently with the body language of a couple, and not two smitten leaders.

“Ready, Ambassador?” Theia muttered out the side of her smile, leaning lightly into their handhold.

“Always, Inquisitor,” Josephine waved lightheartedly at who Theia could only assume was a worthy nobleperson, or perhaps a friend who was concerned at their current state of affairs. Or, maybe it was simply for the show of it all.

They walked towards the middle front of the room, right in front of the Inquisitor’s chair, as Theia had been when she welcomed Veronica as their honored guest. Now, it was with a more familiar, though less provincial figure in nature. However, that did not stop Josephine from carrying her head and shoulders seamlessly high and dismissive of any and all idle innuendo.

When they came to a standstill, Theia felt the gust of winds lightly billowing as it felt like every other person wanted to make their way to greet the Inquisitor. It was all to be expected – Theia had conjured a sturdy and pleasant report with most everyone in Skyhold, and welcomed their small-talk as part of fortifying that. Still, she had no idea how it would play out, with the Chief Diplomat not off to the side taking notes, but front-and-center with her. No clipboard in sight.

The first initial greetings were benign in nature, mostly conversations on the weather, fortifications in Skyhold, and how dearly everyone missed the capitol. One would wonder why people would make
the excursion to Skyhold simply to lament on how much they missed the turbulence of Val Royeaux, but, perhaps it was all for the sake of patriotism, and not sincerity.

The Lady Ambassador hardly needed an introduction at all during these greetings. A few knowing comments were sprinkled throughout small-talk from various intrigued people.

“I must say, Inquisitor, I am quite enamored with your taste in finery,” one woman purred as she eyed Josephine from the side, her Orlesian mask providing a cover for her most direct gaze. Theia, not to be outplayed, smiled softly in return.

“My tastes are many, My Lady, but I take great care in not following my Orlesian heritage with slipping my tongue into areas where it is not invited,” Theia responded smartly.

The woman, adjusting her shoulders, clung even more snugly to her Husband who was busy not letting his chalice of wine air out before ingesting it. In the most refined and graceful of ways, of course; alcoholism was only responsible when mired in opulence.

“Lady Ambassador,” the noblewoman diverted, “I hope you will come visit our Villa in the spring. Even if you are no longer based in Val Royeaux, I am sure you will be missing its pleasures all the more when this year has concluded.”

“I could think of nothing more tantalizing, Lady Ursula, except that I intend to utilize my traveling to return home if I can.” Josephine held her hands together in front of her like an appeasing Lady, though her eyes and tongue were both laced with cunning wit.

“Oh, such a shame! I’m afraid the calling of an endearing and irrelevant life comes for us all, I suppose.”

“It may have called for some of us, My Lady, but I am afraid I have received no such correspondence in my life yet.”

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From across the Hall, Leliana was observing the machinations flying and crawling throughout the room like scavenging creatures looking for another bite of something good. She was accompanied by, of all people, Madame de Fer, who she had been consulting with on matters pertaining to the upcoming Ball at the Winter Palace. Although the two women rarely personally collaborated in their professional duties to the Inquisition, certain topics enjoined their intelligence.

“I must say, they do look good together, if not armed with versatility,” Vivienne mused, one arm folded under her chest and anchoring the other, which held her chalice close to her mouth as she watched the Ladies Ambassador and Inquisitor mingle.

“Indeed. It makes me wonder whether or not gossip will reach Halamshiral and the Capitol before the Ball.”

“Are you joking? I am sure several carrier birds and five men on horseback are already jockeying for who will be the exalted messenger of such sensational news.”

“No birds yet fly without permission in my skies, Madame de Fer.”

“My dear, I am sure someone would have trained a pigeon to crawl by now in order to ensure communications.”

The two women eyed each other intelligently, both resigned to the fact that even with such tight
security, they could not contain the knowledge of Josephine and Theia’s coupling for very long. Undoubtedly there would be interested eyes hungry and with silverware in hand when they would arrive at Halamshiral, if they arrangements for an invitation proved fruitful.

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Elsewhere in the room, an even more unlikely pairing for drinking and dining, the Seeker and Lord Dorian were making their greetings to one another. Being frequent traveling companions of the Inquisitor proved more forceful than not in ensuring some kind of report between the two unlikely allies.

Dorian, beguiled with joy for his friend, and thoroughly entertained by it all, leaned up alongside the wall with his arms joined in front of him, rounding his muscular and intimidating posture rather nicely.

“We have come full circle, Seeker, and this time it isn’t one that oppresses in the name of community safety,” he teased, an eyebrow raised as he watched the events unfold.

“Hilarious, Dorian. I wonder how if your next occupation should be official Historian of the Inquisition. The Chantry would be ever so pleased,” Cassandra’s sarcasm was potent and capable. Her own hazel eyes could not help but be locked on her friend, who seemed to glow more naturally than the firelight. This had been a long path, to her being both Inquisitor and this woman who had grown into her leadership and her bravery with reckless abandon. It was both haphazard and admirable.

Dorian couldn’t help but observe some of those emotions on Cassandra’s face, and if he was anything, he was keen on tracking the trail of intrigue.

“I dare say, you have quite the warm sweet-nothings swirling in that mind of yours tonight, Pentaghast.” His ironically affectionate usage of her last name paired well with her usage of “Tevinter” when referring to him out in the field.

Cassandra’s gaze was exacting as she turned to look at her supper companion. “I am unsure of what you mean, and I would take great care not to outdo my patience, Tevinter.” There it was.

“Oh, come now, Seeker, surely somewhere in that labyrinth of armor, what I am sure must be scales reptilian in nature, and good old-fashioned emotional suppression, the woman who extorts Varric for romance novels must have some stirrings in there.”

“Once again, I am not seeing where your point is.”

Dorian scoffed playfully, leaning away from the wall as his shoulders turned to face his friend towards the other end of the Hall, the one with the glowing hand and the glowing hair who always seemed to light up a room – whether or not that was a good thing, depended on whether you identified as a demon or not.

“I think you have a fondness for her.”

“I do, she is my ally and friend. We have shared much throughout these months, it would be difficult not to have a mutual understanding of one another.”

“Not a fondness for a puppy dog, Seeker, I meant the actual fondness worth its weight in sovereigns.”

“What?”
Dorian eyed her from the side. “Fondness: a word referring to a warm affinity for someone or something which denotes affection and compassion. You know, all those emotions you chomp down on for breakfast when you’ve satiated your desire to make babies cry.”

“Dorian, cease your wordplay, before the knife stuck in the seasoned pig becomes the least intimidating exposed blade in the room.”

“Sure, but such violence only erupts when a nerve has been struck. Suppress away, Seeker, I’m sure one day you’ll preserve yourself like a jar of spiced turnips and cheat death.”

Dorian withdrew, undoubtedly to find the source of more wine. Meanwhile, that left the Seeker alone and secluded in her thoughts. Dorian was obnoxious as he was insightful, though, he sought out a different interpretation than the truth. It was a fact that Cassandra had grown close to her friend and ally; she admired her, defended her, and had become invested in her happiness. Indeed, it came with an unfamiliar feeling of affinity that was never inspired by a woman. It had crossed her minds a few times, but always relegating it to the corner of herself where all inconvenient and impertinent details went.

She did know one thing for certain: she would never make it known to her friend that she ever experienced such strange undercurrents of thoughts and feelings. Whatever the source and whatever the goal they inspired, their friendship and camaraderie was more vital to her than any alternative. This infatuation was deadly to that which she coveted so much: an honest, invested bond.

If anything, it was the sheer unabashed way Theia lived her life, the way she adhered to an internal code that inspired something curious within Cassandra. She had never seen a woman be so perilously determined, often at times without rhyme or reason. The way she fought, the way she negotiated, the way she loved. It was something to marvel at, something to respect. Cassandra had assumed too early that she would have nothing to learn from Theia, who in her youth and different experiences in life was once so alien in character. But, in every which way she could have, the Inquisitor had surprised her. Perhaps the Seeker was the kind of woman who loved surprises, and maybe that became complicated when they were embodied by a woman. If she went the rest of her life not truly knowing the locus for such a thing, Cassandra would be content with it.

And, if no other woman evoked such confusion in her that would be alright, too.

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The dinner’s lifespan ran its course without interruption, even with Josephine sitting to the Inquisitor’s right hand-side, instead of betwixt nobles and emissaries. The two women remained connected in conversation throughout the entire sit-down, but were sure to include others in their talks and enjoy the company that was before them.

As plates turned to dishes, Theia couldn’t help but smile with a knew-found rush of adrenaline and joy in her veins. There she was, sitting next to the woman she loved and respected, and they were there together, witnessed by all whom they valued. She would remember this inaugural moment for the rest of her life.

Especially considering what happened next, when her friend Veronica, having long departed and returned from Denerim to become a full-fledged Inquisition agent, stomped her way from the entryway opening down along the tables and to the Inquisitor’s side. The woman had caused quite a stir in being committed to the Inquisition’s forced a little less than a week prior; her beauty alone made several troops turn into blabbering fools, and then when she opened her mouth, several scholars, Mages, and visiting messengers. Cullen was also spotted – by rumor, mostly – watching her train with piqued interest that betrayed his usual estrangement from Mage behaviors.
Theia now had understood what had always made Leliana into a protective and easily-malevolent guardian for her beloved Josephine. Having the close friendship of the Herald of Andraste ensured Veronica’s safety, and Theia liked it that way.

“Inquisitor,” she breathed, handing her a wax-sealed note with an emblem from Lydes, “This just arrived via cavalry messenger. I believe it’s the Duke,” she said, arms folding as she leaned onto one hip.

Theia pushed her chair back a bit, legs spreading into a wide seat as she took the letter and opened it swiftly. Her assemblage of close-seated guests watched in anticipation for any detail or news. Theia, knowing this, managed to hold a stoic face as she read through it. Biting at the side of her lip, she half-closed it and handed it towards Josephine, who took it immediately and did the same.

“Leliana,” the Ambassador said, eyes flickering across the table to her friend, their slight narrowness conveying an answer that only the people who spent so many hours in the War Council room together would understand.

Leliana, leaning back slightly in her seat with her wrists anchored on the edge of the table, nodded ever-so-slightly. Her eyes then went to the Commander, who sat three chairs down.

“He, too, nodded ambiguously, as if he had acknowledged the entrance of an acquaintance into the room. Assured that the word through their grapevine had managed to makes it way to all who were involved, Leliana turned and made eye contact with Theia.

The invitation was secured. There was a new dangerous dance to learn.
With preparations in full swing for Halamshiral, Theia is once again confronted with slight complications brought on by her old friend Veronica's moonlighting job. However, the stress of such a revelation is eased over by the opportunity it makes possible: the Foxes have another reason to hunt together, and their accentuation will hardly go unnoticed in alliance with the infamous forces of the Inquisition's allies. But, first, some formalities of friendship.

The cinching of the measuring tape around her waist compelled her to instinctively suck in her diaphragm. Alterations for tailoring their attire for the Winter Palace was going as expediently as possible, to make up for the lost time in waiting for Duke Gaspard de Chalon’s invitation to arrive via horseback. Now, they were merely two days away from departing for Halamshiral, which would take even more days of traveling, stopping, and ensuring communications between them and Skyhold.

This was the second visit by a seamstress that Theia had to entertain in her quarters, stripped down to her smallclothes and slacks for accuracy’s sake.

“Your Worship, you said last time that you wished for your coat to be a royal purple hue, correct?” the seamstress said, a friendliness in her voice that provided solace for Theia, who was otherwise impatient with the whole situation.

“I’m thinking it may be best for a deeper shade of it, now. Something nearly black, but not. I like the richness of the color,” Theia replied.

“I see. We can manage that, too. And what of the accents like the sash?”

“I am fine with the quintessential gold trim, but can we make the sash something more unique?”

“I think a nice hunter green or teal would go well with the purple, however, it will clash with the décor I fear.”

“You are right. Perhaps then a darker shade of blue, like midnight or the color of ring velvet? Oh, wait, what about just black: something to make the gold standout even more, then?”

“I think that would look splendid.”

“Good. That would be all for my requests, then.”

The seamstress nodded astutely and wrote down the remaining measurements for her to record on her parchment. Rising from her seat, she collected her things and turned once more to the Inquisitor in order to bow in withdrawal.

“I will ensure these orders be followed through on in a rapid and precise fashion, Your Worship.”

“Thank you, it is most certainly appreciated.”
The seamstress took her leave, and now that Theia was alone to re-cloth herself and attend to her duties, she now felt the heaviness of the upcoming affairs in the Winter Palace. Tailoring, formal wear, and exercises in dancing, eating, drinking, and rhetorical talents were all fun, but they were symptomatic of a lethal sphere. Orlais was as unforgiving as it was exhausting.

Just as she had buttoned up her jacket vest, she heard her door open once more. Unimpressed with the entrance of another person, she walked to her desk and took her seat, grabbing more letters for the scanning and perusing that most surely would never be quite done.

“Inquisitor,” Veronica’s velveteen voice rang out as she made her way up the stairwell, hips swaying with weight of a woman who did not give a single care as to the refinery predisposed in her feminine body, “I have a note from Denerim. Seems important enough to carry the King’s seal,” she said indignantly.

Theia’s eyes beamed with piqued interest. She sat upright in her chair, reaching a hand out and taking the letter once Veronica’s outstretched hand was close enough to pass it on.

“What did you do now, Veronica?” Theia sighed lightly, breaking open the seal which indeed held the emblem of the Fereldan King.

“I swear, not a single drop of blood was spilled on my account while I was packing up. Denerim is its own mixed back of blades and blasphemy.”

Theia eyed her, shaking her head before her glance finally made its way to the written words on the finely-crafted parchment.

“Lady Inquisitor Trevelyan, allow me to convey my gratitude for keeping good on your word about your most busybody friend of yours. I hear you are to accompany a rather controversial Duke to the Winter Palace peace talks. May I suggest bringing her along, so as to unsettle the Orlesian air with a Fereldan tongue? You know, besides that Commander of yours. I believe it would be most entertaining. Enough for now. Regards, King Alistair of Fereldan.”

Veronica smirked, folding her arms as she leaned onto the edge of the table. “Oh, that King Alistair. Pity, I had confused him for a boy I necked with in Redcliffe.”

“What? I don’t see how this is my fault. He sent the bloody letter, it’s your business to do with what you wish.”

Theia scooted back her chair, leaning back up against it with both arms falling heavily onto the armrests on either side of her. “You neglected to tell me you were double-dealing as a Fereldan contact whilst also being conscripted as an Inquisition contact. Tell me, how many candles are you burning in your chambers at night trying to decipher which details to report to which party?”

“I am merely a person of interest who has many skillsets that are presently valuable to many parties.”

“Yes, I am merely a righteous chamber maiden to Andraste. Her laundress, even!”

“You always did fancy a good, curvaceous blonde.”

“Veronica!” Theia groaned, tossing the letter to the middle of her desk like a piece of tissue cloth. She stood from her chair now, pacing back towards her corner bookshelves, hands stiffly going to her hips. “How am I supposed to trust you now with all of our intel whilst you play eyes and ears for a King who would have otherwise beheaded you had it not been for me? Especially with Leliana
being your supervisor and superior, are you mad?"

Veronica rolled her eyes, her gaze drifting out to the view of the balcony. She was evading the sincere vitriol in her friend’s voice and body language for all it was worth. She had thought by bringing such a correspondence to her point-blank would soften the blow, and perhaps prove her trustworthiness, but Theia was never one for theatrics or underpinnings. She liked to address the out-in-the-open qualms.

“I do not divulge anything that would jeopardize your work or your allies. I am merely an informant as to the issues which affect not just Orlais, but the borderlands and beyond. The King promised me a great deal in return – generosity I could not pass up. I would have been selfish.”

Theia’s chin tilted a bit as she listened. All-too-easily she knew, then, what compelled her friend to risk her hide again.


“He is overseeing an investigation personally, whilst providing safe shelter and provisions for any and all who need it. It was a way for me to ensure the protection of those whom I was abandoning. Surely, you cannot blame me for such concerns.”

“I do not blame you, only grieve that I do not have friends with less righteous hobbies. Blackwall does it right, you know. Widdles and carves wood all day. I need more like him, unassuming and dedicated to harmless methods of coping with the follies of mankind.”

“Theia, not all of your friends can be bearded, calloused puppy dogs.”

“I can try, can’t I?”

Veronica shook her head, a grin on her lips as she leaned off the desk and stepped closer to the Inquisitor. Her brown hair was braided in rings around her head, robust and neat. She look she had when she was ready for a sparring match, or to seduce someone out of needing a sparring match in the first place.

“Theia, I couldn’t reject a promise for Mages to be protected by the King’s guard. Such measures are almost impossible in today’s climate, given all that has happened. I did what I must, as always, to ensure that those who depend on me are provided for.”

The Inquisitor held her breath, gazing at her friend from her periphery. It was one more thing to worry about and one more thing to balance whilst in the thick of the Game. As if she had all the time in the world to jockey such concerns at a constant, life-dependent pace. Now, her friend would be lurking and possibly unsettling those whose trust and good ears were vital to the Inquisition’s progression.

“What are you expecting to accomplish, then, if you are allowed to go?”

Veronica shrugged. “Write what I see, what I hear, and what I find to be peculiar. Report everything to both you and Fereldan for transparency’s sake. Drink an obscene amount of overly-expensive wine.”

“Hah, right, because the one thing you love is losing the upper hand with your cognition.”

“A woman can dream of being enraptured in gilded walls without hope of sobriety, can she?”

“Yes, if she wishes for her head to be on a spike by morning.”
Veronica turned her attention towards the letter on the desk. She reached and took hold of it, opening it flat so as to skim the writing herself. It was familiar, now, the scribe’s style. She trusted it, and had no reason not to. Though, it did concern her to be tasked with such a job, and in Halamshiral of all places. She wouldn’t dare let her hesitation show to her friend, the one who was always ready to be a guardian to her.

"I will be careful, I promise you," she said, her gaze still on the letter. "If anything, I am extra insurance for your life, and those of your close allies. I know of the suspected assassin’s plot. Any covert security on our part will only strengthen our side."

"Yes, but it will also make all invested eyes and ears intrigued at the sight of us having more spies and backdoor eavesdroppers."

"This is Orlais, Theia. Such furnishing is as typical as the upholstery on the stiff couches they love making ass-dents in."

Theia chuckled under her breath, snatching the letter from her friend’s clutches. "With that mouth, you may as well lock yourself out of Halamshiral and eat the key."

"Don’t worry, Olivia’s honey-tongue will smooth things over if I fail to make the right impression."

"You’re kidding."

"That…was the letter I did keep from you."

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The news of not one, but two fellow and former Foxes converging with Theia for the upcoming Winter Palace ball prompted Theia to send for Olivia promptly that same morning. If she was to travel, she would do so under the guard of the Inquisition, and not a Noble’s processional. Olivia would surely lament being connected to the Inquisition so heavy-handedly, but her Patroness, Lady Adalia, would agree where she didn’t.

They would meet somewhere around midway to Halamshiral, in order to make do with the little traveling time they did have. Raven correspondences assured status updates for the refined and undercover Mage’s progress.

The hefty and densely-guarded caravan of the Inquisition’s people attracted attention from every town and village they passed through. Men, women, and children were all waving hands and chasing to get a look at the famed heroine and her formidable allies. Theia was endeared, but it also brought a sense of inner panic: the pressure to perform, even if all they heard were rumors and headlines in newspapers, was bearing down unforgivingly on her shoulders.

Within a little less than a week, they had at last made it to the hand-off point wherein Olivia would rejoin her former comrades one more time. Theia rode alone with Veronica also on horseback at her side, and Seeker Cassandra for extra support, as they came to a wooded glen where they stipulated that their paths would cross. There, the road heading east and the road heading northeast met, and ensured they would come across their encroaching friend.

“What was your idea of having Lady Olivia join us directly, Inquisitor? Wouldn’t she be more protected under the guise of being a Noblewoman’s companion?” Cassandra asked as her horse’s lumbering stride shifted her fatigued weight in her saddle-seat.

“Olivia is a capable aristocratic persona. I wish to borrow her as a lady-in-waiting figure, both to keep Veronica from running amok with no consequences, and to provide us with a less notable ally.”
Theia was driven by her protectiveness, sure, but she also knew that her allies had garnered celebrity which would make their maneuvers in and out of the Ball more difficult. Having Veronica and Olivia there to flank the tide of eyes, ears, and mouths whilst her and her team did their work would be invaluable. She trusted them and her Advisors to do the job well.

“Olivia was never good at holding a leash,” Veronica commented smugly to hide the fact that indeed, Theia knew her all-too-well. Surely, seeing Olivia would evoke old emotions, ones which would inhibit her recklessness. If she was gambling with the safety of not only her friend, the Inquisitor, but Olivia, she had only that much more to lose. And, nowadays, that was a hurtful feeling to have.

Theia had led then to the glen corner path, and when she stopped her horse, she unhooded her head in order to have a better visual perspective. The countryside of Orlais was beautiful, if not deceitfully simplistic in its charms.

Within fifteen minutes, a well-crafted carriage was pulling up to their meeting point. Escorted by a guard on horseback, and with a footman armed with a bow and arrow at his back, it was clear they were traveling with valued cargo.

Theia turned and looked at Veronica, whose eyes were diligently watching. Suddenly, it had become real: their friend, well, one of them anyway, was alive and in her presence after all this time. The abstract nature of the situation had dissolved to dust.

The carriage halted with poise, and the footman gingerly dismounted from his seat and opened the door. Reaching a hand which was soon embraced by that of a paler one, he ushered out a figure covered in a thick brown, ornately trimmed traveling cloak. The figure turned her shoulders to face the three mounted women who had been chivalrously awaited her arrival, half of her beautifully mousy face exposed but at a distance. Veronica’s chest tightened, and she diverged from her traveling companions when she, too, dismounted her ride.

Walking closer, Veronica unhooded herself, revealing who she was. Olivia had been notified via Raven just who was accompanying the Inquisitor, but she had hardly allowed herself to believe until she was there in front of her face, flesh and blood.

“Olivia?” Veronica said aloud, coming to a standstill a few yards in front of their horses.

Olivia began to breathe rapidly, and she, too, removed her hood to allow her identity to be seen in the broad daylight. Her lips parted, chest tensing up and down as she felt the butterflies in her stomach go wild.

“Veronica,” Olivia’s renowned elegance had broken down into the voice of a woman who was emotionally short-circuiting, “You’re…you’re really here?”

“Ass and ears, Gem.” Veronica gave a crooked grin as she spoke her nickname for the beautiful golden blonde woman who’s most potent weapon had always been the way she had wrapped everyone around her finger.

A soft, relieved, wholesome laughter began to boil over on Olivia’s lips. Her smile was like a vision of pure, unrefined joy. It blurred as she charged towards her old friend, leaping into her arms with reckless abandon. Veronica, always steadfast, was there to catch her. Her arms wrapped around Olivia’s petite waist, the rough hide of her coat and gloves abrasively rubbing against the silken gown her friend had draped on her body.

Through it all, the twirling around, Olivia’s feet off the ground, Veronica ensuring that her increasing
dizziness did not cause them to fall, they both erupted into ceaseless laughter.

From the view of her horse, Theia watched with pride, her chest puffed like a defensive sibling who had ensured her family had been brought back together. It took a long while, but, they were here. She turned and eyed the Seeker, who, in a rare show of candor, had hazel irises reddened by a slight welling of tears.

“Seeker,” Theia whispered, “I do not believe my own eyes.”

“Oh hush,” Cassandra blinked away the collection of water in her eyes before they were too much to stifle, “such sights are never tiresome.”

Smiling, Theia let it go. Her gaze returned to her friends, who had stopped spinning. It was then she took the implicit invitation to dismount. She couldn’t help but chuckle as she approached the two women, who seemed to be ready to hug for the rest of eternity, the world crashing down around them.

“My friends,” she said jovially, “you forget we have an entire palace awaiting out arrival.”

“Oh, shove it, Theia,” Veronica called from over Olivia’s shoulder, “get over here and make it a party.”

Theia, not one to deny such intimidating propositions, happily obliged. Extending her arms out, she wrapped them around both women. The right side of her face went up against Olivia’s hair. From the innermost sanctum of their hold, she could hear Olivia stifling back tears of her own.

“I never thought this day would come again,” Olivia said, muffled, but with precise diction.

“Oh, come on, the world was too in love with us to let us all perish,” Veronica comforted.

“If only Naomi was here, then we could really make the Inquisition troops cry with our goings-on.”

Olivia then broke the mood. She lurched back and out of her friends’ hold, eyes widened. “Naomi? She’s alive?!”

Veronica smirked, feeling released from the power grip of her most sophisticated friend. “Indeed. Living rurally near Redcliffe, where she likes it.”

Olivia started laughing again, softly and sweetly, a hand going to her mouth in astonishment. It was like winning the biggest pot in a Wicked Grace round, hearing that not only had they all three lived to tell the tales of their adventures, but that one of them was also somewhere out there, living a life she could only dream of a mere year ago. The disbelief in her body was enough to send her flying.

“That leaves Roslyn,” Olivia’s hopefulness helped that its lucky streak would continue. But, when her friends looked at each other with grim eyes, she knew it stopped there. Her smile weakened.

“Oh, I see.”

Theia, determined to keep ahold of the joy in the moment, rested a hand on Olivia’s shoulder. “Don’t fret. Roslyn found her peace. We all knew she didn’t have the stomach for a demise in an elderly sickbed anyhow. We are here, and she would be so elated to see us preening for a fight again.”

Olivia smiled on one side of her mouth, feeling the solace of it all, even with the realization that it was now technically a foursome, the Foxes of old.

“Exactly! Besides, little Gem, we have work to do,” Veronica pulled her hood back over her head.
“Indeed,” Olivia resolved, turning back to her carriage and biting her lip with remorse. “Uh, good sir! I will no longer need my carriage or its accompaniment any longer. I will be under the Inquisition’s outfitted protection. Please do send regards to Lady Adalia!” she called out to them, waving a whimsical hand in their direction.

Turning to her friends with a mischievous smile, she crouched her shoulders, like she was about to grab coin and run. “Come on, before they suggest I go back into my gilded pumpkin of a ride,” she snickered.

Playing along, they all took off in a jog back to the horses. Three women hardened and soured by war and death, finding an ounce of humor in their days.

As they found their way back to the horses, Olivia’s hazel green irises locked on Cassandra’s similarly colored, though less whimsically-inclined ones.

“Seeker, a hand!” she called out.

Confused, but not enough to let a woman make a fool of herself, Cassandra reached a hand down over her horse’s right shoulder. Meanwhile, Theia and Veronica had tossed legs up into stirrups, swinging up into their saddles with the gallant nature of thieves.

Cassandra felt the weight of Olivia when her hand secured itself on the Seeker’s forearm, and going along with it, she braced against the petite woman who was swinging herself up onto her horse. Successfully landing with both legs on either side of the animal, Olivia wrapped her arms around Cassandra’s waist and pulled herself closely into her back.

“Go, Seeker, before your sunburn gets confused for blush!” she said over Cassandra’s shoulder. Hearing and feeling the momentum of the other two women’s horses turn and leap into a gallop, Cassandra felt pressure not only but this wild woman who seemed all-too at ease with such intrusions of space, but by her riding companions who would leave her in the dust had she hesitated.

So, with both critical points in mind, she, too, turned her horse and spurred it on confidently into a gallop. Something inside her gut told her this woman had done this maneuver one or two times.

As they kicked up dust on the path towards the rest of the Inquisition’s traveling forces, Theia couldn’t help but look back over her shoulder. The sight of her good friend, a most stern and orderly Seeker Pentaghast, humored by her old friend known for her charms, made her want to stop and really take in the sight. Perhaps it would be the only chance to really appreciate it. Her sly smile matched by Veronica’s, who kept her eyes forward while she, too, couldn’t help but find it all hilarious.

Meanwhile, only one more set of words were exchanged between Olivia and the Seeker during the rest of the return ride. Olivia, holding tight to Cassandra’s armor-clad body, smirked just loud enough to be heard against Cassandra’s ear.

“What exactly is so laughable?” Cassandra called out.

“Nothing, Seeker,” Olivia said against her ear out of practicality, “I just love gifting people with surprises.”

This would be a voyage to remember.
Blade for Blade

Chapter Summary

The night of the Winter Palace Ball is upon the allies of the Inquisition. Tensions are high among everyone as they prepare to do their best with the Game's rules, though, not all boundaries will be respected. With the Foxes deployed, Theia must not only juggle her oversight of her allies, but the safety of her friends who have just been reunited. One thing is for sure: sometimes the greatest and most endangering surprises come from those who would also be considered friend.

The return to the Inquisition forces on rest stop was an ecstatic one. Everyone lurked with harmless curiosity to see just who was being brought back via personal escort on the Inquisitor’s part. Lady Olivia was a positively delicious sight to them all – certain troops cursed under their breath to one another, wondering just how many ravishing and lethal friends the Inquisitor had tucked away across Thedas.

Had she been a siren or a muse spirit before her days as Inquisitor? Did beauties crawl out of the woodlands and mountains in order to become her companions and allies? Such debates would surely keep scribes busy in the decades to come.

Cassandra, having safely brought their guest to safety via her own ride, waited for the maiden to dismount first. After she had her turn to do so, she turned and faced the Lady Olivia, who stood with a proud and undaunted smile beside what she had come to consider their horse. Her kind hand rested on the steed’s hindquarters as she anticipated what would surely be a verbal ice bath.

“Lady Seeker,” she spoke first “your reputation precedes you. I consider myself honored to be able to encounter the body from which such tales are sculpted,” Olivia was masterful, if not cocky.

“Lady Olivia, I – do you always assume such invitations from people whom are in possession of what you need?”

“No, not in the slightest, Seeker! Though I will say it was a great deal of fun.”

“I see.”

“What? You think me a sorceress after your own conscience, too?” Olivia played, knowing full-well the Seeker probably knew all about just what her true profession was at the Ferndale Estate. The straight-forwardness was a surprise to Cassandra, who expected nothing but well-won Game rhetoric from Olivia’s face primed with the pout of an aristocrat.

“Not exactly, though, I will say you inspire caution.”

Olivia stepped closer, her shoulder converging with Cassandra’s as she moved to walk past her, but not before more close-ear words:

“Good,” she hummed, “I like it like that.”

Olivia’s parted lips and purposefully alluring eyes were the last sight Cassandra saw in her periphery before the Lady, dressed in a silken gown with a thick overcoat, knocked against the Seeker’s
armored shoulder as she withdrew from the scene. Cassandra’s eyes trailed over her shoulder with lingering curiosity, before she returned her gaze to what was in front of her.

How did Theia gain such friends, and was it possible for her to yet lose them?

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They had about a half hour left before they would have to re-embark, and they were taking every minute’s opportunity to water and rest the horses, and give the crew some time to stretch out.

Theia herself made her way to the Lady Montilyet’s carriage in order to pay a visit. Coming around to the side to see an open door, she peered in to see Josephine, sitting upright and graceful as she was writing yet more correspondences on her clipboard, one leg tucked behind the other at the ankle. She looked just as poised to be sitting as a library desk as in a carriage.

“My Lady,” Theia greeted with a clever nod, “I see you are taking advantage of the abundant daylight.”

Josephine smiled smartly in return, finishing the sentence her quill was in the middle of crafting. “My dear Inquisitor, you come searching for preoccupation to take your mind off the road?”

“Oh the contrary, there’s nothing I like more than being ridden hard.”

“Agh!” Josephine chided, “You know full well what awaits us at the Winter Palace, and you choose to keep company with a Fereldan whose diction belongs in the bog somewhere.”

Theia chuckled, stepping into the carriage swiftly. Josephine, unimpressed but nonetheless accommodating, slid her seat over to the side so as to make room for her lover to sit beside her. Theia leaned back on the carriage bench, stretching out an arm behind Josephine’s side and along the ridge of the backrest. Her other hand rested on her thigh.

“That is why I seek your company, to remind me. How are you feeling about Halamshiral?” she asked simply, knowing such answers could take many pages of parchment and hours of deliberation beforehand for the Ambassador.

Josephine, nibbling on the side of her lip, turned to look back at her. “You ask that question with us soon to be on the road once more?”

“I am bad at small-talk, you know this more than anyone.”

“Yes, and yet like a bird seeing the transparency of a glass window, you keep trying to break through.”

“Harsh, Ambassador.”

Josephine put her quill onto her clipboard, and then put that on the opposite bench. Sitting straight, and rubbing her forehead with one hand, she felt the fatigue and anxiety that had been long-seething in her body as they had journeyed. Hours of no interaction had only cultivated it more.

“Forgive me, my tongue chides in practice for the night to come.”

Theia reached over and pulled the carriage door closed. Then, with a rotation of her half-closed hand, she magically unhinged the open windows of the carriage until they were now only half-open, giving just enough seclusion to proposition the Ambassador for much-needed solace.
“Come here,” she whispered, her hand that had been resting behind Josephine now waving her to her.

Josephine, worn down by reading and writing for so long, was left without a qualm. She leaned into Theia’s chest, an arm wrapped around her waist. She fit nicely and contentedly up against the Inquisitor’s chest, and the feeling never grew old.

“You are doing it again, you know,” Theia spoke once more, her hand going to Josephine’s hair. She softly cradled the back of her head with it.

“It is with good reason, mi amor. The Winter Palace is nothing to trifle with. Ambassadors and Diplomats train for years for such environments, and even still, they and their constituents can fall prey to missteps.”

“Even so, we have quite the ensemble cast of figures at our disposal.”

“Nothing means less to nobles who have their own machinations close to their chest. To them it can simply mean more heads to ensure an encounter with a sharp ax, or throats primed for more poison.”

“They can give all the excuses for why their wine tastes funny, but it won’t convince me.”

A rare and elusive smirk came from Josephine, who had spent the last several days looking ready to chew through bricks with her bare teeth. Theia smiled with self-satisfaction, tucking her cheek against the top of Lady Montilyet’s head.

“See, sometimes I am hilarious and charming.”

“I can give a concession for such a claim…if only occasionally.” At that, Josephine looked up at her lover, a more relaxed expression on her face. Then, in need of something else other than steady decorum, she pressed her lips to Theia’s. The kiss was soft, fleeting but sincere. Theia managed to make it last long enough to her to tuck a finger underneath Josephine’s chin, before the Ambassador pulled away and sat up.

“You should not simply be tending to my concerns, mi amor. I am sure there are dozens of people out there seeking your eyes and opinions.”

“Yes, but, do they kiss as sinfully as you do?”

Josephine rolled her eyes. “I trust you will not decide to carry out an experiment for that theory. Now, go, before I decide to denounce my occupation and become your saddle company once more.”

“Too late – I think we may yet be outdone by Olivia and Cassandra.”

Josephine’s eyes widened as she watched Theia make her exit; the Inquisitor always did like to leave a savory one-liner in her wake. Josephine’s curiosity almost compelled her to exit her carriage herself and seek out such a sight, but, duty eternally called. Besides, very little happened without Leliana ready to debrief at a later date.

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The rest of the journey to Halamshiral went by rather smoothly, considering the bump in excitement experienced with Olivia’s arrival. Once the afternoon heat had begun giving way to the cool twilight of evening, the group stopped to change into attire befitting the Ball. Theia’s coat, personalized and fitted snugly to her frame, was as eye-catching as promised. Her seamstress had done well with the color combination of deep purple, black, and gold trim.
Everyone else for the most part dressed in the classic red coats, except for two: Dorian, who opted for a coat of a lighter, almost silver shade of blue. Then, there was Veronica, who opted for a Fox’s glove of a dress: black, velveteen in trim, with military uniform style shoulder pads and a plunging v-neckline. The skirt didn’t grip her figure as tightly and sinfully as the bodice did, and for good reason: she had more to hide under there than what was left of her rumored maidenhead.

Olivia, meanwhile, had made the best of the attire which was custom of a lady-in-waiting: a ballgown with an A-line skirt, puffed sleeves spanning the length of her upper arms and hanging just enough off of her shoulders to prompt eyes to notice her show of skin. The gold hue of the fabric made her hair look even more metallic, and when pulled up and off of her neck, she looked like a poised muse for a garden statuette. But, not to be unarmed, she, too, utilized duplicity of fashion in order to hide more useful tools.

Meeting in a semicircle with the allies she had brought along -- Madame Vivienne, Seeker Cassandra, Dorian, and Sera (who lost a bet with Blackwall) -- the Inquisitor adjusted her coat sleeves to keep her body busy whilst her mind spun.

"Alright, then, does that make everything clear?" she asked for good measure.

Veronica and Olivia flanked her, in a provocative insistence of proximity to the Inquisitor, especially amongst the people who had ensured her survival up until this point in time. Though, they felt more like a personal guard than assemblage of like-positioned allies.

"Are we certain being Gaspard’s guest won’t bury us in a hole too deep to climb out of?" Dorian asked, arms folded as he eyed his constituents.

"Surely not. Alliances change five times over before supper in Orlais. He is merely the foot we wedged in front of the slamming door," Vivienne answered.

"This is garbage, why not just find the assassin, kill ‘em in the face and get out? We coulda sent lady fur-pants over here for it!" Sera gestured towards Veronica, who smirked smoothly at the suggestion.

"Our correspondences were intercepted. We couldn’t afford to risk being covert. This is our only option," Theia replied, resting her hands on her hips. "Now, if we don’t hurry, we’ll be teetering on the line between fashionably late, and simply late. Let’s get a move on."

The group all nodded and gave various affirmative responses as they disbursed, making their way down the promenade where the processional of bodies that had arrived via carriages was making its way to the gilded gates.

Watching them leave, Theia leaned toward Olivia. "And what are you two going to do exactly? Pine from the rafters?"

Olivia giggled, turning to Veronica with a knowing gaze. "Ver and I will indeed be in the wings. I did not lose all of my dexterity polishing bottles and potions, after all."

Veronica checked for the very fine and indeed, very sharp blade strapped to her thigh, one of a pair. Assured in its security, she turned her attention towards her fellow foxes. "Don’t worry, we did our dancing stretches, if you know what I mean."

Theia sighed. "Alright, just don’t do anything that doesn’t shadow our lead. Recon, yes, offensive, no."

"As you wish, Inquisitor," Olivia chimed beautifully over her raised shoulder, before going off with Veronica towards the gates. Watching them, Theia felt a mixture of dread, confidence, and worry.
Should they get into any trouble on her behalf, she would most certainly blame herself to the fullest extent. She was, after all, the guardian of the group.

“Are you ready at last, my Lady?” she heard Josephine approach from behind, looking full of defensive bravado in her red coat. Theia grinned, seeing her and feeling comforted to have her, at least, by her side and not going forth to clear the field for her. Charmingly, she took hold of Josephine’s hand and placed it against her lips, kissing it like a gentleman suitor.

“Always, Ambassador.”

“Then, let the Games begin.”

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Gaspard’s welcome was as bodacious as it was slimy to Theia, who for someone who tried hard not to preemptively take sides in any dispute, found it difficult to do so in his company. He stunk of battle-ready boldness, hungering for trophies and bloodshed as if it were all gluttonous collateral damage. Theia loved a good battle, but she also appreciated tact.

“Inquisitor, you beguile me already with your candor,” he said towards the end of their inaugural conversation. Theia, standing squarely in front of him in the gardens where the guests were being received first, held back the urge to send him spinning with her wordplay.

“It is my greatest hope, Gaspard, that you find the value in such,” she replied simply.

“Trouble is I must greet some certain individuals here before the Ballroom consumes our senses. If you will excuse me, I shall meet you in the Vestibule, eager to make an entrance that will dance on the tongues of every noble in Thedas for weeks to come.”

“Ah, yes, dancing tongues. That’s what got me in trouble back in the Circle.”

“Pardon me, my Lady?”

“–Oh, nothing. I will see you inside, my Lord. The game is afoot,” she edited her response well.

The Duke nodded gallantly and withdrew from her company.

Meanwhile, the fellow Foxes were also busy schmoozing, but in a more expedient pace. Greetings, kisses, shallow hugs, all were the preface to Olivia’s work in every social engagement. She took care to be the utmost effective foil for Veronica’s blunt-edge character.

“My dear Lord Postansi, how blessed it is to see you again!” her voice, melodic like a song, as she put her cheek to the man’s, making a light kissing sound with her lips.

“My dear Lady Olivia, it is a wonder they have bothered with renovations when your invitation was more than enough to redecorate the Palace for two seasons!” Lord Postansi replied, embracing her like a hungry fool.

“My dear Lady Olivia, it is a wonder they have bothered with renovations when your invitation was more than enough to redecorate the Palace for two seasons!” Lord Postansi replied, embracing her like a hungry fool.

“Do not be silly, my Lord, the true ornamentation comes from my friend, Lady Veronica,” Olivia gestured to her friend, who looked as uncomfortable with appeasing a man as any Fox would be back in the day. Olivia had always been the most masterful at such a daunting task. Veronica loved isolated maneuvering, not playing a role on some aristocratic stage for all eyes and ears to sink verbal daggers into her chest.

“A pleasure, my Lord,” she cooed back, offering her hand for the kissing. When he took her up on it,
she felt her skin crawl along her skin feeling his cold, damp lips on the softness of her skin.

“And where might I find more of you for my parlors, Lady Veronica? You would be quite the ravishing addition,” he greeted. His dark eyes through his mask reminded her of mud pits she could easy get bogged down in.

“Alas, Ser, I’m afraid someone of my embellishment only belongs in an armory,” she turned her shoulders away from the grouping, done with the topic at hand. “If you’ll kindly excuse me, I have to check in with...uh, someone, very important, and...impatient. Yes, Olivia knows,” she eyed Olivia with a prayer in her gaze. Save my ass, her face said, as she ejected herself from their conversation.

As Veronica retreated, Olivia smiled the smile she always gave when she wanted to distract and recollect attention onto her.

“She is such a quirky and eccentric personality, I do adore her humor. Now, my Lord, tell me of your yearlings this season. Are the primed for the races?” Olivia’s question sounded all in good fun and sport, but she had her agenda to be sure. Postansi was a prolific horse breeder in Orlais, who took a vested interest in supplying the Civil War with cavalry on both sides. His distracted gaze as he managed to offer up a shallow answer gauged perfectly just how preoccupied he had become. Peace talks in Orlais were a euphemism for bad business.

Veronica, freed from such an entanglement, found herself surveying from the railing of the grand staircase. The garden was buzzing like an insolent hornet’s nest. Her piercing gaze took care not to make any one person feel particularly scrutinized, but even she could not help being nosy.

Her surveillance was curtailed by another voice coming from her left side. A man’s voice, more confident than it had been in the past. She sympathized with its Fereldan vigor.

“Lady Veronica, if I may say, you look amazing tonight,” Commander Cullen said kindly, standing shoulder-to-shoulder with the Crimson Cutter herself, not Inquisition agent and valued confidant to the Inquisitor herself.

“Commander am I to imagine you’ve let the Orlesian beeswax rub off on your coat?” she eyed him from her periphery, her rich brunette curls gathered on the opposite shoulder.

“Not in the slightest. My disdain for these things never plummets after more exposure, I’m afraid.”

“Pity, you’d look good with a mask on.”

“I beg your pardon?”

Veronica chuckled, knowing just what would spur a Fereldan to become impatient with someone. She turned to face him now, hip leaning lightly on the marble railing. “It was a joke. You know, something that inspires laughter and good feeling? Perhaps you’ve encountered it once in your life.”

“I have, although my nerves betray my interest in such hobbies.”

“Such a shame, I’ve known Mages with teeth newly knocked in who still managed to find a reason to chuckle.”

“Oh, um, I see. Well, I’m afraid you catch me off guard. Allow me to redeem myself?”

Veronica scanned his face. He was authentic, if not sorrowful behind the eyes. She knew a dozen men like him -- roughed up, steadfast, but always biting on something sour in his soul that took a snippet of his mental focus off of the present moment. She could also smell the ghost of lyrium in his
body almost. An ex-Templar: an archetype of his own creation.

“You may. Although, if it is my skirts you hope to get into tonight, I’m afraid I have no more room for possibly penetrative objects between my thighs.” She slipped her hand under and around his arm, taking the posture of a Lady being escorted by a worthy man. He blushed, almost to the point of matching the redness in the coat he wore.

Clearing his throat, he felt his back straighten with the responsibility of accompanying such a blunt, unforgiving, and engrossing companion into the Winter Palace -- the most undesirable place on Earth, with the most desirable of people.

Veronica was only moderately interested, if only to see just how far down the rabbit hole his aching character went. She had spent the better part of a year getting cozy with the proclivities of men, and perhaps practice kept her mind sharp. At least, that’s what she told herself after the ceased to be entertained by his fumbling in trying to charm her.

As they approached the main level with the gates which would take them into the heart of it all, Veronica’s wandering gaze found an intriguing sight: Just beyond the groupings of several noblemen, she saw what had looked like a hand release itself from the grip of the balcony floor edge. Her brow furrowed slightly as she kept her eye locked on the area, second-guessing her vision.

Though, if it was one thing Veronica had become known for, it was her ability to track and hunt a lead. She turned to Cullen, placing her remaining hand on his bicep with well-intentioned manners.

“Just a moment, Commander, I am afraid I may have dropped a piece of jewelry during my mingling,” she said out loud, enough for anyone who had been eavesdropping on her to hear. His nodding gave her the go ahead to retreat from his presence if only momentarily.

She sauntered just enough to blend into the body language of the landscape around her, keeping her chin slightly tucked so as to provide more cover for her face framed by her lustrous curls. Then, when she had the cover of the roofed balcony edge, she turned her full attention to the task at hand: was that someone, and if so, who were they and where were they from?

Placing a hand on the balcony rail, she leaned over with a guise of wishing to see the sights and view from the second story Garden level. But her duplicity proved fruitful: there was a scuff mark, from a boot, along the marble façade of the wall. It looked like leftover tracked dirt – how careless – so she took the opportunity to keep the pursuit going. Theia did say do recon, and as long as this didn’t end in something terrible, she was well within the confines of her orders.

So what if she had to blur a few lines in that.

When it seemed as though no one would miss her, and the dark color of her gown was well-blended into the evening shading of the corner she was in, she relied upon the slipperiness of the velveteen skirt to swing her coupled legs over the railing and hop down unto the side walkway, cut off by garden walls and hedges to the rest of the guests in the main terrace.

Eyeing over both shoulders, one of her legs sought out the slit in her dress so as to allow for a quicker unsheathing of her dagger. Feeling no presence of danger, she began to walk for the direction she believed the individual had gone.

Her pursuit was short lived, though – her prey had been hunting as well.

Feeling the pointed edge of another dagger reach out towards the back of her neck, she froze in place. Instinctively, she held both hands up at shoulder-level, quiet in her reaction otherwise.
“No threat, just tell me why you’re here,” she said low, clear, and concisely.

Initially there was only silence from the person who stood behind her, and she wondered just what they were after in being so blatantly protective of their position. They must believe in their ability to have reinforcements for their skirmishes should they have it – or they were a part of an offensive, and not a defensive, measure.

She sensed that the figure was now rounding over her left shoulder, coming to face her from the side. From her periphery, she could see a white coat with a hood and stripes; the hide of it looked rough, thigh, armored. It was then she knew, recognizing the attire from ducking into hiding places whilst she ran into their own groups on her travels back to Skyhold.

Venatori.

Now, her blood slightly boiled, feeling the reaction of her old self – the Crimson Cutter – in her body. Venatori scum: abusing and using people and creatures, using their Mage talents to do irreparable harm on the innocent. Her jaw clenched, trying to keep her cool in the face of a dagger blade that could easily out-pace her if she chose to withdraw her own from its hiding place under her skirt.

The face of the individual was mostly cloaked and shadowed, but she saw the tip of their nose and edge of the mouth. The olive skin was a striking contrast to the pearlescent hue of their jacket and the marble surrounding them. As they came to stand in front of the rogue Mage, they took three steps back, now distancing themselves by about two yard’s worth of space. They held out the curved and lethal edge of the dagger out in front of them with a fully extended arm.

“Did you not hear me, Tevinter?” Veronica said again, eyeing them with a precise gaze.

It was then that the individual seemed to be spurned. They let their dagger hand fall to their side deliberately, and after a moment of just staring, unhooded themselves.

Veronica’s heart dropped through what felt like five floors of brick and mortar. Eyes widening, breath stopping, she felt her chest go hollow. For, there she was: the olive skin was not Tevinter in lineage, but Antivan. Her onyx black hair, almost blue in the moonlight, tied up in a slick bun that was deceptively simple for the amount of voluminous hair she had grown. Her oval face, strong cheekbones, and careful almond-shaped eyes were unadorned and undecorated. It was a wonder with such beauty that she managed to have such a discrete occupation, but, she was never a mercenary or assassin’s spirit. She was the healer, the caregiver, the confidant. She was the life-giver.

And there she was, poised for treason.

“Naomi,” Veronica mouthed without voice, her brow furrowed with stress.

Naomi’s eyes softened seeing that it was, really, her old friend and not come doppelganger who appealed to her sentimentality. She sheathed her dagger on the back of her belt. The look of injustice and confusion on her old friend’s face was heartbreaking, but she could not falter in her path. Unlike Veronica, her cause was most personal and most unattached from the politics of Orlais.

Without saying a word, she put one finger to her lips, asking for silence from Veronica. Then, feeling the torn emotions in her chest shelve themselves, she re-hooded herself, and took off.

Veronica watched her as she vanished, quick and on a mission. The Inquisition was already concerned over possible Venatori presence at the Ball tonight, but having it be confirmed and with the help of an old friend was devastating to say the least. Should she tell Theia, and if so, how much
should she say? Did the Inquisitor have room to afford being indecisive in her combat, wondering if each new foe was her old friend?

Did Naomi deserve to die for this? Or was she here for something else? A fox never let on their true motivations in the thick of the danger itself.

Finding her way back to the main area via some climbing and maneuvering in a less-than-dexterous dress, she made her adjustments so as to not let on that she had dodged a scuffle with a Venatori assassin. She walked back to Cullen’s side, which had remained hopelessly open to her company.

Smiling softly, she nodded to the two ladies who had hunted Cullen down for flirtatious reasons. They both looked ready to spit venom at her approach, seeing the Commander’s face light up after so much boredom.

“Thank you for keeping my escort company, ladies, I shall take it from here,” she said, hooking her hand back on his arm. The ladies were about to be more mouthy about it – Orlesians, of course – but she stared them down in such a way to say you may have your words, but I have other sharp objects at my disposal.

When they politely withdrew, she turned to look over her shoulder, scanning for Theia and Olivia. Theia had seemed to already move into the Ballroom, perhaps, or had found her own dark corner to lurk: she was nowhere to be seen. But there was Olivia, dashing and gorgeous, fielding the company of several men who were nothing but ecstatic to see she was able to make it.

Veronica’s heart filled with dread. How was she to tell them there were four Foxes to account for?
On Thin Ice

Chapter Summary

The game is on at Halamshiral, and Inquisitor Trevelyan and her allies must now field threats and violence from multiple sides. Theia's maneuvering brings them face-to-face with Venatori and now they must fight their way through to get to the bottom of one bottle of trouble. The Palace has more in store for them, though, than a Point-A to Point-B battle. Veronica struggles with keeping secrets that could end in one of her friends getting hurt, or worse.

The entrance into the Ball would be gossiped about for years, truly, if you were to believe everyone’s sounds of ghastly shock, complete with hyperbolic comments.

Theia felt her spine tingle with adrenaline seeping into her bloodstream, feeling all eyes on her, all topics of conversation bowing to her presence, as she walked beside the Duke de Chalons. It was the most disconcerting submission of will, to have an entire Ballroom keen on your existence.

“My Lady Inquisitor,” Empress Celene greeted when, at last, Theia had made it to the staircase platform where she was to bow to her Highness. “You are like a cool wind on a summer’s day, the way you have breathed freshness into this Palace. Tell me, what is your impression of Halamshiral?”

Theia smiled her most masterful smile, bowing cordially in the direction of the woman adorned in a lavish dark blue gown and gold embellishment that beamed off of her pale skin.

“Your Highness, it has been a dream. I am honored to be here, truly,” she responded simply. Sometimes, it wasn’t always best to lead with theatrics. The Court was its own multi-headed monster, but Celene, she was someone whose trust must be sincerely earned tonight.

“Most excellent to hear, Inquisitor. Have you met our dear cousin? If not, may I present her to you now: Duchess Florianne de Chalons, of Lydes. She is responsible for this gathering,” she turned to motion to the woman at her left side, also fair, but more petite in build.

Theia nodded her way, too, in an act of reverence. “My Lady, a pleasure to make your acquaintance,” she greeted warmly. Though, in making eye contact with the Duchess, a cold shiver struck between her shoulder blades. The kind of feeling she got when there was an underlying detail, something that presented a kink in the smoothness of the person or the place she was being introduced to.

“Lady Inquisitor, I was unaware you would be gracing our Halls tonight. Such an interesting and entertaining night this shall be. I will be seeing you,” Florianne said, a salted sweetness in her words as she turned and withdrew from the audience.

Theia, watching her go, hoped that if they were to encounter each other again, Theia would be the one unscathed.

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Later on, after Theia had received word from Sister Nightingale about a suspicious Arcane advisor
that had nestled her way into the Empress’s good favor, Theia was making her way throughout the Guest wing, orchestrating a careful concert of schmoozing and behind-the-scenes spying. So many names and titles, and yet, she had hardly took any to heart.

Having scaled up the garden trellis wall to get to the upper floor with the Empress’s library and office quarters, she noticed a doorway with a bloodied path leading out of it. Deciphering the Hala key – and begrudgingly abiding by such locking mechanisms that drove her mad with arbitrariness – she found a Venatori man slaughtered amongst notes and coins. The letter – a correspondence from the Duke to his cousin, Empress Celene – imploring her Highness to rethink her closeness with the elf, Briala, who had managed to attach herself to the title of Ambassador for tonight’s peace talks.

Returning to the Ballroom, Theia had two principle goals: drop intelligence details with Leliana, and track down Briala in order to possibly find out just what Gaspard was so afraid of.

When she did finally find her – pensively all by herself on one of the balconies connected to the Ballroom – she didn’t know whether to be underwhelmed or concerned as to just how harmless Briala seemed at first. That impression was short-lived after Briala opened her mouth.

“Inquisitor Trevelyan, you have such a smooth taste on the tongues of the nobles, even for a Mage with a past that would be otherwise social suicide to carry into Halamshiral.”

“Briala, and you are an elf who is known for being the greatest bedded liability to Orlais.”

“It seems we have both been debriefed on the others’ less-than-savory details.”

“On the contrary, I find yours to be quite delicious, if not confusing.”

Briala grinned, feeling right at home with women who had intellects they did not mind boasting in open air. She folded her arms, her cunning eyes piercing through her mask, enough to assure the Inquisitor that the elf she was speaking to – like nearly every other elf she had met – was worth her weight in salt.

“What is it you come here to find out, then? You seem to understand everything about what I have to lose and gain here.”

“Midnight whispers are hardly enough to make me bend an ear, Briala. It is what I see going on in broad candlelight that interests me.”

“Then, what burns your quick?”

“Why come here under the guise of an Ambassadorship, if not to gain some legitimacy in the wake of a great political disaster? Say, an assassination?”

“My title is fleeting at best in such a case. Celene’s death would be my doom, and I would be a fool to orchestrate it myself.”

“Even with your reported legion of spies and mercenaries at your disposal?”

“Inquisitor, blades in the dark do not win the hearts of the people in the break of dawn. Celene taught me that, even as much as I still disagree with her on…many points. I would be fighting a losing battle. I do, however, admit to my network being formidable. So large now, and not even all elven. You would do best to recognize the worth of such a power.”

“I see. Why branch out?”
“A few interested parties with pasts as intriguing as yours made me an offer I could not deny. Surely, with your ensemble of alliances, you could appreciate such an arrangement. Now, I must return to contemplating. Who knows when I will be called back in to bear my teeth again.”

Theia nodded, having come for and obtained what she was looking for – if not with a few rhetorical detours along the way.

If Briala had recruited non-elves that meant agents of hers could look like, talk like, and fight like most anyone. Diversifying her forces before this event would be smart, if not condemning when brought to light. Still, as Briala pointed out, the value of such a force couldn’t be easily dismissed.

Returning to the Ballroom, Theia made her way through the drove of bodies surrounding her Commander – people who seemed underwhelmed by her own stature in comparison to his, for whatever reason – and touched base.

“Commander, I see your conscription efforts have not gone unnoticed,” she teased quickly, standing at his shoulder.

Cullen, biting back a sorry laugh, returned her gaze. “Inquisitor, you know no end to humor in situations that seem most…exhausting.”

“I’m afraid not. Briala has diversified her group. That complicates tracking who is here and why. I will let Leliana know before continue searching for a certain suspect, but, let our people know when you can.”

“Yes, Inquisitor – but, just who should we be looking out for then, if not elves?”

“My guess is a few select people, strategically placed, and able to handle themselves alone.”

Cullen turned and eyed her, wondering just what kind of person would be good enough – or connected enough – to pique Briala’s fancy out of anyone’s. Theia, too, was just as confounded, though she had work to do.

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Turns out, finding the Arcane advisor – who happened to be a veteran of the Fifth Blight and heinously powerful, but, also loose with keys to servants’ quarters – was more involved than Theia originally estimated.

“Bloody hell, I am mad tired of this shite!!” Sera growled, pulling an arrow out of a dead body’s neck. The reverse-squishing sound made Theia blink once with distaste as she dusted off her hands.

“Venatori, then, as if anyone is shocked,” she grumbled, looking around the courtyard. They had found the dead emissary, done-in by a dagger blade with the emblem of Gaspard’s house. Now, the strings connecting villains and adversaries had become more tangled.

“You alright?” Veronica hopped down from the railing of the second story balcony from which they had all found their way in, having tracked them through the servant’s quarters when she noticed them missing. She had tied her gown skirt together between her legs, exposing them up to her lower thigh, but her calf-high boots did well to cover the otherwise egregious amount of unarmored skin.

Theia gave a slight nod, letting her know that everything and everyone was intact for now.

“They are organized around that wing of the palace under renovation, that must be where they are nesting like putrid pests,” Vivienne spit, holding her warm and oscillating staff in her right hand,
poised for more action.

Theia felt the sweat on her forehead form, chilled in the evening air as she thought on her feet. She turned to Cassandra.

“Well, let’s get a move on. The only good use for a Venatori is pyre kindling.” Theia’s comment made Veronica want to pull her hair out with anxious anticipation of what was to come.

They cut their way through another grouping of Venatori agents, guarding the doorway leading inside and toward wing where they suspected more where hiding out. Veronica was hoping, praying to a Maker she detested, that none of them would be the one that mattered. She hadn’t the courage to tell Theia just yet about Naomi, mostly out of fear that it would compromise Naomi’s safety. If she wasn’t truly Venatori, then she was pulling a rouse, and it was an expensive gamble.

Once they had made their way inside, there was a grand study hall filled with another embedded group of the enemy. Between four mages (one only armed with daggers and her own embodied magic), a rogue archer, and a warrior, they proved minced meat in the end.

Before the end of the skirmish, though, Seeker Pentaghast had found herself in an uncomfortable position: having been slightly cornered, the mage she was battling with swung an entire long table in her direction, pinning her in the space and against the wall. As she struggled with her own brute strength to get herself unstuck, he then cast a glyph of ice, one which would surely engulf her and do her a great deal of harm in a matter of seconds. Her allies all facing their own enemies, she could only manage to make eye contact with Theia.

Once the Inquisitor noticed, her body immediately felt the rush of panic as she thought of what she should do. Her mana was being used up with her current foe, and the distance between them – the better part of the room itself – would mean she’d have to counter with something powerful, fast, and that could travel.

But, before she could do anything, a plume of heather grey smoke erupted around Cassandra’s figure and then the Venatori mage. It thundered low like its own micro-storm, but the noise was brief. Then, from the beams buttressing the ceiling, a golden figure was falling feet-first. It was Olivia, her gown gone, replaced by a cloth and hide jumpsuit of stealth armor. The only thing that remained from her Ballroom attire was the puffy sleeves and braided, lavish hairstyle – Olivia was never one for abandoning an edge of flare.

Landing like a cat on her feet, she was within inches of the Seeker, who was panicking at not being able to see anything around her, and fearing the glyph would overtake her.

“Hold your breath!” Olivia yelled. Her eyes then turned to black, as if an eclipse of the sun. Cassandra didn’t know whether this was supposed to save her, or give Olivia the credit of doing her in. But, she inhaled, and stilled her chest like she was ordered to.

Then, the glyph went off.

The force of the ice reverberated, but it did not break through the orb of smoke turned into a protective and rounded shield. The Ice broke around them, creating a crater. At most, the felt the fierce coldness under their feet, divided by the smokescreen Olivia had deployed.

Once the glyph was finished with its growth, Olivia leaned her head back and gasped an exhale. The smoke released itself, billowing and flowing freely into the atmosphere around them. Their figures remaining as the grey gave way. When it did, Cassandra saw that all of her allies – the Inquisitor, Vivienne, Dorian, Sera, and then Veronica – were watching with alarm.
The Seeker hadn’t noticed it until the smoke had cleared, that she had tucked her shoulders and upper body in toward Olivia’s shorter, but more confident stature. In return, Olivia has gripped onto both of Cassandra’s upper arms, standing on her toes as she did so in order to heighten her protective stance.

Feeling the proximity, the self-consciousness in the Seeker’s bones went wild.

“Olivia, you didn’t tell me you had figured it out!” Theia chided, wiping the bloodied side of her staff blade across her thigh.

Olivia, grinning with pride, turned and looked at Theia from over her shoulder. “You never write like you promised, silly goose!” Then, as if she could only outdo herself, she ripped off one of her puffy sleeves, revealing patented belts of leather with small potion and elixir bottles attached around the width of her arms.

“Try telling a seamstress in Val Royeaux that you need a detractable top-stitch and a fabric that doesn’t cling to animal hide or collapse in humidity, and I’ll show you a professional worth their weight in Dawnstone,” she said, turning away from the Seeker and stepping out of the ice spikes that surrounded them like a lady stepping out from a carriage, undaunted.

“Olivia, my dear, you must share your contacts. I feel as though our tailors must be colleagues,” Vivienne followed after the woman who seemed not only to be a master player of the Game, a feared sorceress, and now a designer of mercenary formal wear? Unbelievable.

Olivia smirked, pulling Vivienne via hooking her arm to hers. “Surely, I was meaning to as you…” their voices became harder to hear as they moved away, but, one could only assume Olivia wanted to know details about how Vivienne managed to make her armor so flexible.

Dorian, endlessly amused, swaggered to the Seeker who, understandably, did not have words that could fit the moment. In fact, her look of shock was still not completely wiped off her face – and her being shocked was an elusive phenomenon in and of itself.

“So, about those pesky thoughts of yours,” he began, but was quickly squashed by the look of lethal willpower in Cassandra’s eyes that seemed to immediately switch on when she heard the Tevinter voice.

Such a guard was not enough for other inquiring minds, however.

“Cass, if you dig girls, dig that girl, ’cause she got you smoked. Heh, right Dorian? Get it?” Sera chuckled, elbowing the Mage in his ribs before following the group as they began making their way further in. Dorian chuckled, shaking off the iciness in his friend’s reaction, and following after Sera.

Cassandra was unable to fend off the mild blushing that coupled rather unpleasantly with the sweat of battle.

Meanwhile, Veronica and Theia had coupled off, if only momentarily before there would surely be another skirmish to dive into.

“Theia, you should know, before we dice up any more of these guys…” Veronica had begun to choke out what she had wanted to say this entire evening, before her emotions could catch up with her and tell her not to.

“What’s going on, now?” Theia said, tiring from the battling.

“Well…” Veronica turned and pulled her to a stop, feeling the resistance in her friend’s body as she
did so. She knew Theia would want to press on and on, unafraid, and ready to get it over with. It was hard to stop such momentum.

“Veronica, this isn’t an adventure serial, we don’t have hours to sit in chat about this while there could be arrows flying at us.”

“It’s. It’s just that…”

“Veronica.”

Theia had started again to walk, following the noise now of men yelling. Clearly, Olivia and Vivienne did not wait for backup. Veronica groaned, rolling her eyes as she took off after Theia. Both women jogged into the library hall, seeing that the fight was already on.

An ice glyph here, pyro flying there, a sword slicing a guy in half, all in an evening’s work for Theia’s kind of party. Making progress into the main wing Hall, they had found the epicenter of the forces. In total, there were eight agents tucked into the Hall like venomous snakes, ready to defend their position. It looked like two dual-blades, one of them the ringleader. Four warrior swords ready for hand-to-hand combat. One remaining mage, after they had killed the two in the hall. One who looked more ambiguous in purpose but nonetheless armed well with blades.

Veronica had zeroed in on the one outlier, believing it surely to be Naomi if she was here.

The group attacked with full-frontal aggression. The three staff-wielding Mages went to work on shifting the playing field in their favor, casting glyphs like a light show. The warriors were well-prepared with their armor at first, but the onslaught proved overwhelming.

Sera had honed in on one of the dual-blade wielders, taking it as target practice whilst the enemy slid and maneuvered across the floor like they were skating on an ice sheet. One triad of flame arrows sent them flying back, though, and she smiled smugly as she rounded out another shot, one which would surely do them in.

Breathe, retract, release. Done.

Meanwhile, Theia was covering for Vivienne and Dorian as they became the focus of two remaining warriors. However, she couldn’t help but notice the one unengaged Venatori semi-circling around, as if they were deciding what would be the quickest and most lethal approach. This angered her, feeling like sitting prey. She cast another guard spell for her allies, before turning her attention on the lingering eyes that followed her.

Veronica’s stomach dropped when she turned over her shoulder to see Theia, lethal as anything, turn her focus onto the one figure she worried could be their friend. Feeling the swinging of the warrior she was fighting, she couldn’t turn herself away without risking a sword impaling her from behind.

“Theia!” she screamed at her, but it was too loud in the room of slicing daggers and spellcasting for the Inquisitor to be broken away from her intentions.

Theia wiped her mouth of the salt and blood that had splattered across her face. Holding her staff underhanded at her side, she advanced towards the one remaining foe, who seemed to have a scarf around their face and mouth. Such individualized style was not common among the uniformed Venatori, but, she wasn’t one to split hairs in this moment.

The figure stepped back as the Inquisitor advanced, making room for a circle of space between them. They began to circle one another again, now both privy to the threat they each posed.
Theia sensed hesitancy, which was peculiar to her. Venatori were fiendish and offensive fighters. Why be so broken away from the formation of the group? Why not fight? Was this one especially hungry to dance with the Inquisitor herself? Or was it a trap?

Theia’s thoughts flew as their circled one whole shape around each other. The agent held their two daggers, glistening in the moonlight from the windows in forehead position, ready to slice and stab a body.

Olivia, more for the behind-the-scenes support, watched from the sidelines of the fighting. This was most unusual, for Theia to distract herself. Even back in the day, she was always for the thick of it, and not easily torn away from protecting allies or having someone’s back. Something was wrong. She turned her gaze to Veronica, who was busy slicing a man’s arm from his body. A final, grotesque blow for sure. When their eyes connected, Olivia’s concern was all but clear, and Veronica knew why.

Veronica spit out some leftover sweat, spit, and blood, before turning her attention to the two women who had yet to attack one another.

“Theia!” she called again, jogging towards them, ducking and sidewinding out of the way of the fighting. Olivia followed, but it was a short-lived pursuit. For as Veronica approached, they both heard Theia’s antagonizing.

“You want something theatrical?” she growled, her staff beginning to glow with power, “fight me, then.”

The figure, quiet but ready, stood still now: no more circling, no more avoidance.

“Theia, stop!” It was Olivia now, but her soft-spoken voice was no good in a hurry.

For, within a second, Theia cast her first spell towards the remaining Venatori: a ruthless surge of ice the size of Theia’s upper body, one she had carefully crafted during training back at Skyhold.

So much for reasoning, then.
Theia's aggression in fighting the Venatori threat at the Winter Palace has caused some unexpected backfiring, revealing a long-ago comrade turned double-agent. Veronica takes a risk to save her skin, sending everyone into a frenzy. Now, the Inquisitor had to decipher why and how her friend would risk so much -- and pressure her into a heated alliance with Briala and her underground army -- just for simple revenge. The night is far from over, and lines have yet to be crossed that will surely be by the end of it.

Theia's focus on the blast she had sent in the direction of her enemy was sharply distracted by the scream that came from Veronica, who had thrown herself in between the Venatori agent and the spellcast. The momentum pushed Veronica across the floor and up against the wall behind where the agent stood, the wall cracking slightly in reaction to the force.

The ice clung to her, sending branches of itself across her body and trapping her against the wall. Once the overwhelming blue light of the cast had given way, Theia saw just what had happened: her friend had sacrificed herself, and for what? For the sake of a Venatori? Impossible, surely.

Both the anonymous agent and Theia shook with surprise – whoever they were had obviously expected to take the attack without fighting back. Next, Theia heard Olivia yelling Veronica’s name, and running to her immediately.

All other foes had been taken down, meaning everyone was now watching at what was unfolding. In a rare show, a would-be Venatori and the Inquisition’s fiercest fighters stood in a room without attacking one another. Though, at this point, something was definitely not right about this particular adversary.

Their instincts were vindicated when, realizing what had happened, the agent ripped – as in, off the seams of its stitches – the hood of their coat off the head and tossed it to the ground. Both daggers also went to the ground, worthless and fruitless. Then, unwrapping her face and mouth from the scarf she had used to keep herself hidden, Naomi revealed her identity at last.

“Veronica!” she, too, yelled. Running to her frozen friend’s side, she reached into a back pocket compartment of her under layer. Her healer intuition had now waned even as she seemed to be working a different kind of job nowadays.

Theia, in shock at the sight that had unfolded before her, dropped her staff to the ground and felt her breathing grow shallow. She had zeroed in on an enemy who was anything but – who was here, not in Redcliffe somewhere being someone’s wife – and in the process, had injured her other friend. Every bone in her body was quaking with dread and fear at what she had done. Her anger and aggression with being under the microscope of Halamshiral had gotten to her – she was acting like a cornered and caged animal, and not a resolute leader.

“Veronica,” Naomi said again, placing her hand on her half-frozen friend’s face, “stay with me, it’s not going to take long.”

Olivia hadn’t the time to lose her cool about the fact that Naomi was right there, in front of them. Her
tears were streaming without fuss, overwhelmed at the situation. Then, she pulled herself away, motioning her hands in front of her abdomen. She was conjuring a dispel spell whilst Naomi did her own ritual.

Theia could feel the weight on her shoulder start to crush her from inside out, its havoc only broken by Cassandra’s voice as the Seeker came to her side.

“Inquisitor, what is the meaning of this?” she asked, roughed up by battle and no patience for nuance.

“N…Naomi…” Theia muttered. Immediately her guttural instinct was to find out how to fix it, how to reverse what she had done, but it was impossible. As she was about to say something else, Olivia cast her spell, illuminating the entire room as she placed her hands onto the frost barrier between her and Veronica’s bodies.

Veronica, meanwhile, was shivering and non-verbal with her expressions. The blow had knocked the wind out of her and left her with no room between the ice and the wall to regain her breath. Her friend really did know how to pack a sucker punch into a spell. However, Olivia’s work was doing its job: the ice began to crack, and unhinge from Veronica’s body. It wasn’t long before it all came crashing down in blocks and chunks around her and Naomi’s feet, and releasing their friend from its hold, Olivia reached her arms out and caught her.

Guiding her onto the floor, scooting some unhelpful ice chunks out of the way, Olivia held her on her lap while waiting for Naomi to take the lead.

“Theia, I need you!” Naomi yelled, a bundle of herbs between her teeth as she pulled out a vial from her boot. The call was like its own dispel, because the minute she heard it, Theia had inhaled sharply. Regaining some sense of purpose, she hurried to Naomi’s side.

“Give it,” she said simply, taking the vial and holding it between her palms. Pursing her lips, Theia sent a singing of electric energy between her hands, encapsulating the vial between it. She was warming and mixing it: to shake the bottle with its temperamental ingredients would risk a small and inconvenient explosion. When she was satisfied with her handiwork, she gave it back to Naomi, who opened it gently. She then lightly poured the oily substance onto the herbs she had in her hand, gathered and bound by twine.

“Veronica, this is going to sting, but we have to get your body temperature up before you stay in shock,” Naomi ordered out loud. Bending onto her knees, she shook her head. “I’m sorry about the dress,” she said softly, before motioning to Olivia to help her out. Olivia, also sorry to see such a gown be ruined, grabbed chunks of the bodice right at the seams on the side of her waist, and pulled with all of her strength. She then lightly poured the oily substance onto the herbs she had in her hand, gathered and bound by twine.

Naomi took no time with formalities, shoving the handful of doused herbs into and against Veronica’s abdomen. Then, clearing her throat, she began a whispered incantation. Her hand underneath her friend’s clothes began to glow through, a warm hue of light shining through. Olivia watched with care, a hand on Veronica’s cold forehead, waiting to feel warmth again.

Theia could not take her eyes off of Naomi’s hand, praying to a Maker or whoever was in charge of this life, that it would work.

A moment passed, a few seconds that felt like ages, before Veronica gasped. The feeling in her limbs was returning, and her arms and legs began twitching into motion again. At last, her eyes opened, and her lips began to calm in their shivering.
“D-d-dammit, T-T-Theia,” she muttered, clinging instinctively to Olivia’s hold.

The Inquisitor couldn’t help but laugh softly with relief, crouching down to get a closer look. Attentively, she brushed the hair out of Veronica’s face, feeling the frost that had dampen certain chunks of it.

“Forgive me, if it’s all well and good, I didn’t aim for you.”

“No, you just aimed for me. Hungry like a lion for a chunk of old meat,” Naomi said, pulling away her hand and wiping off the excess oils on her thigh.

“No one told me you’d be here, Naomi, least of all you.”

From below them Veronica grumbled. “It was me! I didn’t say anything. I f-f-found her, in the g-garden. I didn’t w-want t-to risk…”

Theia, realizing now why Veronica had spent the entire evening looking like she was sitting on her hands with indecisiveness, groaned. Rubbing her forehead, she stood back up, walking over towards where she had left her staff, reclaiming it.

“No one tells me anything anymore!” she said, strapping her staff to her back. “Does anyone else have any juicy details they’ve been keeping from me that may or may not lead to me accidentally killing someone I don’t wish to kill?”

Sera, Dorian, and Vivienne all looked back at her as if they weren’t paid enough to be considered guilty for someone else’s miscalculations. Though, it did help Theia realize just how much she had overlooked their trust in comparison to Veronica and Olivia’s misadventures.

“My friend, I’m afraid this is something atypical of your Rebellion companions, and not us,” Dorian replied with sympathy. He saw the stress in her face, how it had boiled over undoubtedly from weeks of culmination. But, she had to re-center herself: it was her responsibility to stay grounded.

“Inquisitor,” Cassandra chimed in again, unsatisfied with not knowing what was truly going on, “am I to understand she is another of your former compatriots?”

“Yes,” Theia turned and eyed Naomi, who was tidying up herself, “she is the only other one to survive. I have no idea as to why she is here, though, and she has neglected to relinquish such details.”

At that comment, Naomi scoffed. “Theia, I did what I had do. I am not here for some Holy cause as you flaunt yourself for.”

“Naomi, please,” Olivia said sweetly, cradling Veronica in her arms like an older sister, though her dancer’s frame was endearingly insufficient to hold Veronica’s broad build. “Don’t blame Theia for being surprised. Not all of us were graced with your presence beforehand.”

“You weren’t supposed to in the first place. Veronica was simply nosy, and foolish.” Naomi looked down at Olivia’s kind face, disarmed by the sincere hurt in her eyes. She sighed heavily, standing up as well. Her steps ached as she went and grabbed her daggers, sliding them into their thigh holders.

“They killed my husband,” she finally admitted, her shoulders softening.

“They?” Theia folded her arms.

“Venatori. They were traveling from Redcliffe and stopped at our cottage demanding treatment for
skirmish wounds. One was mortally wounded, but they insisted I heal him. When he died like I expected him to, they killed my husband as penance for my failure.”

Veronica’s breathing had grown quiet, and she leaned up and off of Olivia, supporting herself as she sat on one side of her hips. “They killed Heath?”

“Yes. I tracked down anyone I could find who would help me claim my justice. That is when I found an elf, Briala. Or, actually, I found her people. We crossed blades as I was trying to take down a few of them stopped in an inn.”

Theia turned to Cassandra. “And there we have the source of Briala’s “expanded” forces,” she then gazed back at Naomi. “Does Briala know we knew each other?”

“She knows. I had no choice. It was my price for being equipped.”

“Equipped with what, exactly?”

“People, contacts, resources, travel.”

“So you’ve turned into a renegade assassin?”

Naomi shook her head. “I hunted the people who killed my husband. They were being used here. I was finally on the end of my journey, and here you come, kicking up dirt and sand.”

Theia growled, taking a step forward. “I don’t exactly have a choice, do I, Naomi? I am Inquisitor, it’s not like I can just skip out when lives depend on me solidifying alliances.”

“You’ve done a shitty job of keeping that martyrdom complex in line, haven’t you?”

“Oh, Maker, I—” Theia was interceded by Cassandra, who had turned to face her, hands on her friends’ shoulders as she held her back from going even more offensive on Naomi, this time with intention. Everyone instinctively moved in some steps, in case their famed leader would need multiple arms to hold her back from self-induced duress.

“Inquisitor, this is not the task at hand. I suggest quarantining this woman until after the Ball has been concluded, or detain her for questioning, perhaps? She did admit to selling her connection to you in return for access to contacts,” Vivienne suggested, diplomatic and cold. While this was all idly entertaining, the Palace was not rid of its evils yet. At her words, Theia stopped resisting Cassandra’s hold. She pulled back, putting her hands on her hips as she looked down at the ground. Great, another friend who would need her protection and support. Maybe the romanticism of being Foxes had worn on her to suggest such an outlandish thing.

“Fine. Sera, do me a favor and bring Naomi back to the Commander in the Ballroom. Tell him she is a person of interest but is not guilty of anything warranting malice.”

Sera sighed, strapping her bow back behind her. “Arse-biscuits, Why me?”

“Because I trust you. Now, go, please.”

“Hold on just a minute, you think I’m going with you? What about Briala? You don’t think she’s going to wonder where her contact went?” Naomi stepped forward, trying to intervene on her own behalf.

“Naomi Ambrosia,” Veronica rose to her feet, clumsy a bit at first but steadied by Olivia’s helpful
hand, “you will come with us or I will have your arse kicked so far across Thedas people will think
you’re an astronomical harbinger of the Maker’s return.”

Naomi turned, a face of betrayal in reaction to Veronica using her first and middle name to scold her
like a child. Then, seeing her shake off the leftover ice from her gown, she realized she was the one
that put Veronica in such a position to be her shield. She demanded her silence, and for that she was
willing to give her life. It would have devastated Theia and ruptured their groups’ bonds forever, for
something so simple as revenge.

“Fine,” she turned and faced Theia one last time, “but this isn’t the last of our disagreements.”

“Oh, I look forward to it. You better hope someone tosses me back through a Fade Rift,” Theia
spared like a scorned sister, watching Naomi follow Sera out the Hall walkway.

“You better keep up, Vinny-tooree,” Sera could be heard saying from the hallway, and then it could
be assumed the rogue made her work for her pathway back to the Main wing. Theia hoped and
assumed Naomi would strip down out of that ridiculous uniform before being escorted to Cullen’s
custody, but, at this point she would be ambivalent to the shock of all the Court to see the Inquisition
harboring another enemy of the State.

Resigned to what was to come – whatever it was – Theia stretched out her arms and turned to her
allies. “Well, forgive me. Let us finish all of this.”

“Every time you say that, Inquisitor, you add an extra hour onto our workload here,” Dorian teased,
before they found their way down the balcony façade and back onto the Garden grounds. There,
they found Briala, preparing to scale the walls herself and investigate the loss of her missing people.

“Inquisitor – known for your quick handiwork, I see. You have delivered on your reputation.”

“Indeed, Briala, and I came across your special little agent playing dress-up as a Venatori. When
were you going to tell me she was my former comrade, when we’d be sliding and swinging across
the dancefloor?”

Briala smirked, shaking her head as she felt the bitterness in Theia’s tone slice through the evening
air. “If you think judging me for accruing intelligence from unlikely allies is fair, Inquisitor, you are
more Andrastian in form than reports would say. A true hypocrite.”

“What were your plans for her, then?” Theia surveyed the gardens as elves began to disburse from
the shadows, moving towards the bodies of both enemy and friend for investigation.

“Give her what she wanted, and get what I needed. She was a capable healer, and worthy fighter.
And, she would know your more sensitive areas should you prove…disagreeable.”

“You honestly think she would have betrayed me?”

Briala laughed now, finding humor in the darkest of moments. “Inquisitor, surely you have
encountered just how upset she is.”

“Of course, her husband is dead, and she is now thrown back into this life she never wanted, all
because of you.”

“No, I was referring to her anger for you, Inquisitor. Dead husbands are a sorry business, but, she
was spitting nails about a certain ice-haired friend-turned-Herald-of-Andraste.”

Theia growled. “Why?”
“Find out for yourself. You can have her, as I’m sure you’ve detained her into your charge. Now, in return, am I to expect some collaboration?”

The toe-to-toe conversation was interjected by Vivienne, who was growing more and more annoyed with Briala, even if she proved useful to reinforcing Empress Celene’s power. “Inquisitor, are you seriously going to sway your side for the sake of a friend who was willing to sell your soul to the Amaranthine tide?”

Theia folded her arms, sighing heavily as she looked back to her allies. She had already came all this way to help Celene, and to solidify her hold on the Empire. Gaspard was an…entertaining sojourn, but, Theia’s intentions had remained strong. The only variable left was whether or not she would make it favorable for Briala. She had a choice to make: was Briala more valuable as an ally close to the Empress, or a rogue in exile with something to prove?

A moment, precious in its value, passed before she came to her conclusion.

“Fine, the Inquisition will bolster you. Just don’t make a mess of it, I am not feeling particularly generous tonight.”

“Excellent. One chance is all I need, Inquisitor.”

“Would Celene agree to that observation, I wonder?”

Briala’s eyes narrowed. A fair shot – a low one, but fair. She knew she had done enough to spurn the anger of ten women, let alone one with power and something to prove. She nodded to the Inquisitor, and saw herself out to oversee body recovery briefly before surely returning to the Ballroom.

Theia and her companions made their way across the garden grounds, finding the gateway which would take them back to the Vestibule. The evening didn’t even feel halfway over, and already Theia was ready to go home and hide in her bedchambers for a month. Since when was it a good idea for her to go out?

Meanwhile, towards the end of the group of slightly fatigued allies, Olivia walked tall beside Veronica, who limped slightly.

“You know, it is your fault for not wearing something more appropriate,” Olivia said, an air of whimsy in her voice typical of an affectionate friend who meant no real harm.

Veronica sighed, stretching out her right arm that still felt cold and numb slightly. “You? You of all people telling me that I shouldn’t have dressed so superficially?”

“Forgive me, Ver, but did you see what I showed up to the fight with? It was hardly unbefitting.”

“Oh, quite right, remind me to shove ten potion bottles where the sun doesn’t touch and call myself a clever little Mage rogue.”

“You’re just upset because Theia nearly blasted you through the Veil.”

“Yes, and? All of you are two inches away from being sheaths for my daggers.”

Olivia giggled, now, a warm and deep tone of a clever woman. “Now, now, Veronica. Do not lose all of your regained bodily warmth through that wide mouth of yours.” Olivia turned to look back at everyone walking in front of them. Such professionals, apex fighters, and surely at their wits end with the tomfoolery Theia’s little rag-tag group of friends had put them through. She thought to
herself just how kind it would be to send flowers, or perhaps bake some bread for them some time. She had missed being able to do such simple acts of fondness.

As she eyed the back of their heads, her eyes caught Cassandra’s as she had turned her head to look back at her. Thinking she wouldn’t be there to look back, Cassandra’s eyes widened a bit, feeling caught in the act of staring.

Olivia, touched by such an act of innocence, grinned and gave a little discrete wave in her direction. Oh, Theia would surely hate this, she thought to herself. How delicious.
A Last Dance

Chapter Summary

The evening is coming to a close at the Winter Palace, leaving everyone with some very conservative room to breathe. While some find some solace in its revelry, others take the opportunity to learn a bit more about each other after some...formalities had been lost in the thick of battle. Theia and Josephine get their time to shine, meanwhile Olivia proves more surprising to a certain Inquisition warrior as time goes on.

Well, a duplicitous Duchess, an in-house Fade Rift, secret plot to kill the Empress and let all of Orlais descend into open chaos, and a firm backstabbing into Gaspard’s plan had proven to be just the kind of party Theia and her allies had been in for that night. But, at the end of the line, she had kept her word: having found a very precariously-placed elven locket in Celene’s safe, and framing her alliance with Brialia in a certain way, meant not only Celene’s throne was secure, but her relationship with a powerful Elven spymaster was as well.

And with that, Theia had her alliance.

After addressing the very concerned crowds as Inquisitor, Empress, and now Marquise, the women disbursed to their awaiting accompaniments. Theia took the time to retreat to one of the balconies, though she was not as alone as she thought she would be. Morrigan – the Arcane Advisor who had proven most helpful in pursuing the Venatori threat – arrived at her side.

“The whole of Orlais makes drunken toasts to your victory while you sequester yourself to a lonesome balcony? ‘Tis most fickle that you would do so, considering your efforts on their behalf,” Morrigan asked, her velveteen voice most captivating.

“Even the most dedicated of heroines deserves a reprieve, wouldn’t you agree, Lady Morrigan?”

“Yes, but women of your stature may yet leave a world in tatters whilst doing so.”

“I’m sure you would have first-hand knowledge of that, seeing as how you both are one and fought alongside multiple of the kind.”

Morrigan snickered. “Indeed. ‘Tis the sordid underpinnings of my story, surely you have heard.”

Theia turned and faced her, one hand resting on the balcony railing. “I have heard many things about many people, but I prefer to know the might of a person at the risk of embellishment, that to understate their excellence.”

“A most scorned answer, Inquisitor. Tell me, am I to believe you will be this bitter to work with when I travel to Skyhold and become your official liason to the Empire?”

Theia’s eyebrow raised, slightly surprised at such news, but not upset. She could use all the help she could get – or, she used to think so, before her friends decided to pile on top of her like falling domino pieces.

“Surely not, I am told I am quite fun in the midday. This Ball simply caught me on my off-time. I am honored to have you come on board, Lady Morrigan, and I can assure you it will not be time wasted
Morrigan smirked, amused by the woman’s humor, so seasoned and jaded for her age, but, warm still. “Such a gracious answer, from someone who I am sure has had her fair share of proposals and propositions of good faith.”

“We can never outrun our likenesses, I’m afraid.”

“Never. ’Tis unfortunate, but, it does a great deal to humble you. I shall reconnect with you at Skyhold, Inquisitor. Do take some time tonight to reflect on your good fortune.”

Both women nodded to each other, before Morrigan sought her exit from the balcony.

Theia turned to face the balcony view, feeling the slight evening breeze send an unsettling chill down her back from the cold. She usually embraced the cold, but tonight, her fatigue made her a ready target for any and all surprises. The Orlesian air was eerily familiar to her, though she had not spend much time in this region of the country in her life. She remembered only two excursions to the Capitol as a small child – her Mother detested traveling with her due to her “mood swings” which came with magical consequences – but those memories were colorful, blurry, and heated: feeling sensitive in her fairness under the hot sun and the illuminated architecture, wondering if people would tease her like they did back home and tell her she was so light that she would blind the horses.

Recalling the self-consciousness in her early years that would imprint and echo throughout her adulthood, now, it caused her to grin sorrowfully. Now, she was a shaker of Empires, hunter of evil, and temptress of malevolent forces. Now, she was almighty. Yet, she still felt like deep down, she was that little girl, fair and prim. The little girl that would inspire strangers to stop and gawk at her for being as pretty as a little porcelain doll.

At least now, the Doll was well-armed, and at last sick of the status quo.

Her daydreaming was interrupted by the feel of a poised hand up against the back of her waist. She blinked once, touching back down to the ground in her mind’s eye. Turning her chin, she saw Josephine’s face, and her initial alarm immediately melted away to calm. It felt as though she had hardly seen her love all evening, with her scaling walls, fighting mercenaries, and slaying demons. It felt like the compartments of her life were all right next to each other, and strangely separated at the same time: in one room, a heinous enemy, and in another, her lover charming some vapid noblemen. The whole thing was quite a whiplash if you weren’t careful.

“Inquisitor, are you alright? Dorian and Cullen have finally allowed themselves to consume enough wine to merrily demand your company for storytelling.”

Theia couldn’t help but chuckle. The image of those two of all people, arms around each other and finding some relief from the evening’s sordid activities, filled her with a kind of solace.

“I’m afraid I would be a great killjoy for their illustrious stories,” Theia replied bittersweetly, turning around and sitting back on the railing. Her hands braced on the edge of the marble. Seeing Josephine smile gave her even more relief.

“You take yourself too seriously! Perhaps you should join them in their drinking games,” Lady Montilyet knew the night had been long and exhausting, but she did wish for Theia to enjoy the Court’s intrigues for what whimsy they could offer. The opportunity was especially lucrative for Theia, the heroine and rescuer of the Empire.

Theia shook her head with a sorry grin on her lips. “Too much to think about, I’m afraid. The wine
would merely unseal my mind’s lips when they should stay shut.”

“What happened? I mean, besides what we know to have happened, of course.”

Theia sighed. “Naomi was here, acting as a double-agent. Veronica knew and kept it from me, and
now we have Naomi detained for questioning. She may have sold intel about my past to Briala,
which is why I backed her play.”

“You were blackmailed into an alliance?”

“Not necessarily. Celene’s throne was my priority. Briala’s backing sweetened the pot, and she knew
that. Naomi must have just been an insurance policy for the deal.”

Josephine’s brow furrowed as she processed all this new information. Her mind worked like a well-
oiled machine when she was in the thick of the Court’s gameplay.

“We will see just how much she has cost you. If anything, any information she has on you is trivial
in comparison to how much you have proven your dedication to the Inquisition, and Orlais’s
interests. If anything, your life before the Conclave is as much legend as it is salacious gossip.”

“Strangely, I don’t find that comforting.”

Josephine bit her lip slightly, feeling the sadness in Theia’s tone bounce off her attempt to improve
her outlook. She stood shoulder-to-shoulder with her now, also sitting back on the railing. She
reached a hand and gently placed it on top of Theia’s, which was tightly gripping onto the marble
railing like she was secretly trying to crush it with her strength.

“Theia,” Josephine said low, just enough for Theia to hear and tilt her chin.

Looking into Josephine’s assured, but compassionate eyes, Theia’s sternness conceded to it. She
knew exactly what her lover wished to say in the moment.

Come back to me.

She managed a crooked smile, a most heartfelt effort to say thank you to the Lady Ambassador for
trying. Theia knew just how unapproachable she could be in these moods, and knowing she had at
least one or two people – well, now maybe more than that, but, no more than one or two who she
would welcome in return – that could reach in and pull her out of her mind was relieving to say the
least.

“Josephine Montilyet, I believe I have come all this way, toiled all evening, and all the while, I have
not gotten the chance to dance with the most captivating woman in Orlais.”

Josephine smirked, hearing Theia’s attitude return. She pulled away from the railing to face her over
her shoulder, chin held high with flare.

“Just Orlais?” she said in return.

Theia shook her head, smiling fully now.

“Dance with me, then, and humble me in my understatement.”

“I would love to provide such a correction,” Josephine responded sweetly, taking her hand and
pulling Theia off of the railing, close to her so as to embrace for a waltz. Feeling the preparation,
Theia stopped her, placing a hand on Josephine’s upper arm.
“Oh, no, not here. I want to see the Ballroom light dance on your skin. Please tell me I deserve something so wonderful,” Theia caressed Josephine’s cheek with the back of her hand, chin tilting so as to add another layer of sickly-sweet charisma to her request. At the touch between her hand and Josephine’s face, she felt the slight insurgence of warm blushing Josephine was taking great care not to let on.

“Are...are you certain, My Lady? The Court will be bodacious,” Josephine eyed her with an innocent hopefulness now, and not the calculating demeanor of a Chief Diplomat. Theia was always good at breaking down that shell of hers.

“Of course they will, but they can sit on their swords for a five-minute song. What if I twirled you like I did back at the pub? You think they’d catch themselves on fire?”

Josephine found herself giggling at such a wonderfully haphazard idea. “Oh, yes, definitely. Let us go test out hypothesis, shall we?”

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The evening at the Winter Palace was not quite done with memorable moments for the Inquisition’s allies. Theia and Josephine’s entrance to the Ballroom floor made everyone look, enticed by the way they looked together: glowing and proud, like they had never spent so much time stifling their ardor for one another in the face of so much social uncertainty.

Vivienne watched, endeared by the sight, and she made eye contact with Leliana who stood tall in the opposite hall. She grinned discretely, nodding in the Spymaster’s direction with approval.

Leliana, impressed with her own work, had ensured that most of the hefty rumors of their romance had gone untold. Their entrance, then, was a delicious surprise for the ending of the evening. All who were congregated had turned and edged towards the railing, watching as the women coupled off and joined the several over pairings in preparation for the dance.

“You ready?” Theia asked her now trademark question to her lover, taking up the position with her hand on Josephine’s waist and the other clasped with hers.

“Always, my Lady,” Josephine cooed in return, feeling the spotlight on them, and it felt glorious.

The music began – a lovely, slightly bouncy two-step rhythm. They moved together like seasoned veterans of such an activity, and indeed they had practiced hours in preparation for this particular night. Theia never complained about her choice in practice partner, though.

They were beautiful, they were enrapturing. They would be the vision to coalesce with the other details of the night that would be spun, interpreted, and embellished by everyone around them for weeks to come. Two of the most influential and powerful women in Thedas had saved the last dance for each other, and were unapologetic for it.

From a section of the upper level Ballroom, Seeker Pentaghast watched with her hands gathered behind her. Once again, they had emerged victorious, and Theia was able to snag a moment for her own joy. Even in this Viper’s nest, the happiness and genuine solace was palpable to her close friend. Cassandra was tired, aching underneath the over-embellished and arbitrary formal wear she had been forced to wear. Some injuries were hastily patched up and rolled in wraps underneath the velveteen and cloth: it felt like a most trivial conservatism. She wanted to go, as much as she was happy for her friends to be finding enjoyment in the remainder of the night. These scenes were always detestable in her eyes.

“They do look exquisite,” a voice from over her left shoulder chimed, and she felt an encroaching,
friendly presence arrive at her side. It was Lady Olivia, polished and cleaned up after the night’s events, and wearing a new and simpler gown, still beautiful and tasteful. She had also neglected to resume wearing an Orlesian mask.

“Lady Olivia,” Cassandra’s cordial monotone greeted in return. “I trust you are well recovered from our earlier ordeal.”

“Quite well, Seeker,” Olivia’s voice was like a song. “I trust you are not affronted by my fighting tactics.” She referred to the way she utterly saved the Seeker’s ass via her work of potions and smokescreens, something she knew she would never feel bad for, but nonetheless had to amuse herself.

“Surely not. I fight alongside some of the most talented Mages in all of Thedas, such innovation is hardly a shock to me.”

“To be frank, Seeker, that is not what your facial expression told me when the smoke cleared.” Olivia’s sly and poised grin bled into her words, provoking Cassandra to eye her from her periphery. The woman would have an ego about this for weeks, surely.

“Besides,” Olivia continued, “It is not my abilities that I believe you to be affronted by, anyhow.”

“Then what, pray tell, would I be affronted by, since you seem to know me so well?”

Olivia watched her friend dancing, feeling the sympathetic joy she had for her bubble in her heart. It was unbelievable to think they were here, that four out of five of them were here, and alive to tell their stories. Olivia had always felt underwhelming in comparison to the statures of her friends: Veronica was always so strong and careful. Then there was Theia, talented and charming. Naomi was a capable and resolute healer. Then there was her, who beguiled and charmed her way into safety, and not via the strength of her blade skills or her ability to lead a world-shaking force for change.

But, those days of doubting herself were coming to a close. She had feared becoming involved again, becoming reckless with her own lot in life. Now, tasting all she had to gain by simply tossing her weapon into the fray, she knew that her days of bearing her teeth were not over. She was not over.

“I think you have conclusions about who I am, what my tastes are, and how trivial my personality is. I see the way you sneer at the other Noble ladies, the way you believe it all to be nonsense.”

“I would not be so dismissive, even as my personality would lead you to believe I am that cold.”

Olivia smirked. “I do not think you cold, Seeker. I think you confident, a bit smug, and entirely too quick to judge in your dealings with people. But, cold? That is a tad too far for my estimate.”

Cassandra, taken aback by the underhanded compliment, turned to face her more directly. She knew somewhere, Leliana was watching and would be chock full of playful comments for her when they returned to Skyhold, if she had the patience to wait that long. Even so, she chose to associate and engage with this woman who was so clearly different from the façade she let on. Or was she?

"If your opinion of me is so unfavorable, why insert yourself in my company, then?" Cassandra cut to the quick of it all, not one for rhetorical dancing to match what was taking place down on the Ballroom floor. This made Olivia chuckle under her breath, feeling her intentions be detected by the intelligent and discerning woman she had at her side.
"Perhaps I wish to know what makes you tick? I know you search for such things, 'tis your profession, after all. Can't you appreciate someone's curiosity as to what makes someone the person they are, given the adventure and thrill that seems to surround them?"

"Our lives in the Inquisition are hardly pure thrill and adventure. It is tiresome sacrifice. Surely you can see it, the way the Inquisitor must have changed from the person you knew before the Conclave." Olivia turned and looked back down at her fair-haired companion-turned-Herald, watching her dip her dancing partner so elegantly. A smile appeared on Theia's face, faint, but visible to eyes that knew where to look for it. In that, Olivia knew her answer.

"It may come as a shock to you, Seeker Pentaghast, but in this woman I still see the friend I had. On the run, and in the Circle. She was always bursting at the seams with potential -- it merely took the right conditions to inspire her to become herself. Such is all of our paths, after all. She found her way to her destiny, as did I."

"I am...surprised, you feel so resigned." Cassandra rolled her shoulders a bit, stretching out the fit in her uniform. The discomfort she felt in it was hardly coy, but, it did fit her well from an outsider's perspective. Her tall, nimble posture was shown off, unburdened by the armor she clung to in more ways than just physical.

"Are you also surprised that a little button-nosed brat like me can handle herself in a pinch?"

"Not precisely," Cassandra retorted, "more curious as to how you find the energy to carry yourself with such…"

"Versatility? Technique? Masterful poise?"

"...I was going to say whimsy, but, thank you for saving me from having to describe you with such a word unironically."

At that, Olivia couldn't help but giggle under her breath. She watched her friend dancing with her lover, the way they moved was like the most refreshing breath of cool air to her lungs and chest. The way Theia looked so comforted and distracted from the night’s perils, told her everything she needed to know about her entanglement with the Chief Ambassador.

Cassandra, face imbued with austerity, also had her eyes on the pairing. "They have struggled a great deal to arrive at this point. I am happy for them," she remarked in the otherwise quiet moment of watchfulness.

"It is quite unusual, and I must say, hopeful, to see you just so," Olivia looked over at the Seeker, who's face had involuntarily softened. "I wonder, if even the most hardened and calloused warrior souls such as yours can be endeared by such tranquilities."

Cassandra smirked with a conservative amount of humor in her face. "Mages using the word tranquil without a tone of judgment or horror is a rarity in my life."

"Before those with your political and social alignment imposed it on us, Seeker, I imagine many of my kind used it in a rather joyful and reckless way, like any positive adjective. Such is the way of history," Olivia turned her chin to look down at the dancefloor once more, "words change meaning, and are scarred as our bodies are in the end."

Cassandra was caught off guard by the depth and poignancy in Olivia’s words, do defiant of her trend in the evening of being jubilant and light-hearted. It piqued her curiosity as to how deep her character actually dove into the darker sides of life, and just how much injury she kept under wraps,
beneath the masks and fabrics.

“Forgive me, Lady Olivia,” Cassandra conceded, “my remark was…undue.”

“No harm, Seeker. There is nothing offensive about the truth, if one merely has the courage to insult it face-to-face, rather than besmirch it in the shadows.”

“I…can understand such a virtue.”

“I trusted you would. Now, if you excuse me, I must continue my mingling rounds before the evening concludes.”

Lady Olivia then bowed graciously towards her conversation partner, her chin tucking most as she did so with the utmost trained sophistication. Everything about her was if it had been scripted in poetic verse – a fine-tuned machine of art and charisma. Cassandra had no idea if even this conversation, as blunt as it was, had been merely another cog in her wheel of machinations.

Turning away, but finding one last comment to make, Olivia looked back over her shoulder briefly.

“Oh, and Cassandra?”

Curious and surprised at the usage of only her first name, the Seeker turned her gaze towards the posh figure of her.

“Your welcome for saving your skin back there.” And with that, Olivia made her retreat, satisfied that she had done well to both surprise and unsettle the Seeker in her comfortabilities. It was strange, feeling like the oil that ironically attracted water. Cassandra had no idea what made Olivia so interested, but with every encounter, another assumption was crushed to dust.

Perhaps it would be most beneficial to learn more about her in the days to come, should they need to continue working together in some logistical capacity.
Chapter Summary

A return to Skyhold once again brings a bittersweet reprieve for Inquisitor Trevelyan, who must now manage her friend's betrayal among her other duties. However, following up on Naomi's situation yields more danger than she originally anticipated, which jeopardizes the security and trust between her and her Advisors. Theia is forced to make a decision which could stick a knife in the alliances she has carefully cultivated with those who have less-than-sympathetic views of Mages' conditions.

The morning was crisp like an apple, and sweet to the bite, too. Skyhold was a welcome sight and feel after the events at Halamshiral, and when everyone had returned, it was as almost every pair of lungs had joined in a collective sigh of relief. There had been multiple of those kinds of morning returns -- but this one, in particular, was welcomed.

Theia did not spend much time on the trip home being calm and quiet, however. Between Veronica and Olivia’s jesting, and insistence on advising how she would deal with Naomi who was being kept in a prisoner’s carriage of all things, she had scarcely found time to contemplate the issue in solitude. When she tried, she would be found by someone like Cassandra, or Dorian, who would also give their most illustrious opinions. It was hardly a break that Theia wanted -- but some momentary quiet? Was that too much to ask for? Apparently so.

Now returned to their beloved fortress, Theia found herself eagerly wanting to retreat into her quarters for some introverted deliberation. Once she oversaw the initial unpacking, and Josephine’s dismount from the carriage -- such a worrisome lover, the Inquisitor was -- she turned and made her way up the stairs to the Hall. She was briefly intercepted by Leliana, who was one of the first people to withdraw from the traveling party to retrieve correspondences.

“Inquisitor, are we to have our Council meeting this evening?” she checked in, walking beside her.

“Of course, why wouldn’t we?” Theia responded, fatigue and easy confusion in her voice.

“Well, I wondered if we were to discuss the matter of your friend tonight, or if you would want to resolve the issue beforehand. She is quite...tenacious, no?”

“Yes. I’m afraid Naomi has a personal issue with me. I may have to handle it myself. However, I would welcome any insights you all may have to give, within reason of course.”

“Surely. I will see she is kept comfortably in custody until you wish to confront her. Rest well, Inquisitor, you have done impressively, given the circumstances.”

“Thank you, Leliana. That means much to me, coming from you.”

The two women exchanged looks of mutual respect, before Sister Nightingale made her exit for her own office in the nest. Theia rubbed her tired eyes, feeling like everything was still rushing her from all directions. Maybe an hour or two to herself would help the dust settle. Without so much as a word or acknowledgement, she went to her quarters. This time -- and most atypically -- she locked the door behind her.
Laying across her freshly made bed, she stared up at the canopy fabric with a headache now ruining her one chance at respite. The seclusion had done little to soothe her stress -- in fact, it made her more anxious to think people were needing her, or looking for her, or missing her. Clearly, the over-exposure to others’ needs and agendas had worn on her. Who was she to demand rest from it? The Inquisitor was supposed to be endlessly ready for such things. Perhaps Naomi was the last straw, and she had been on the edge of this for a long while. She knew that the endless training and priming for the Ball had been wearing on her patience, but like this?

So, what was she to do with Naomi, then? Blame her for pushing her over her own limit? Certainly not. But, that left the matter of Naomi’s anger, for whatever reason inflamed enough to inspire betrayal. Though, if she was willing to be a double-agent within the ranks of one of the most lethal organized forces in Thedas at the time, perhaps she had alternative designs for what intelligence she was willing to give.

A Fox never sold its own out. Surely, even in her grief, Naomi would have held true to that. At least, as long as she didn’t have some kind of belief that she had been sold out first.

Rising from her position, Theia looked out at the aching sunlight of the day reaching into her chambers. Somewhere, undoubtedly, Veronica and Olivia were sitting with their friend, comforting and trying to understand her motivations. They would try their hardest to be her foil, as if her life depended on it. This had to end.

Resentment for it all ached in her muscles as she pulled herself out of her traveling clothes, feeling the release from the thick leather, which had left blue and red impressions on her skin from the close fit. Reaching into her dresser, she found less heavy-duty attire for such dealings: an olive green coat and matching breeches, and before long she was securing her black calf-high boots to complete her ensemble.

Theia knew she had to find some ounce of clarity in all this, for her own sake as well as everyone else’s who had to work with her. The Foxes had only recently reunited with her: Theia also had to think of her Inquisition personnel, who had stuck by her side through some of the most impossible of conditions as well. Their dependency on her was paramount.

Making her way down to the Hall, and following the path through the door which would take her to the below-ground-level prisoner cells, she found exactly what she expected: Olivia, who had stowed away with them with generous permission from Lady Adalia, and Veronica, now in hunter gear once more. At the sound of footsteps, they both turned and eyed the corner doorway, and their faces relaxed and filled with hope at the same seeing the Inquisitor make her appearance.

“Theia, and here I thought you’d save it for a dramatic audience in the Hall,” Veronica sighed, folding her arms sternly.

Theia came forward, standing now to complete the triad of them, before gazing into the cell which was decently furnished for a prisoner’s quarters. Leliana had kept her word, and it softened the blow in seeing her friend behind iron bars.

“Naomi,” Theia greeted solemnly.

“Theia. Or am I to call you Inquisitor? Would you prefer Your Worship?”

“My name is fine.”
Naomi scoffed. “How gracious.”

Olivia turned and gazed sorrowfully at her friend who had gotten herself caught between a rock and a hard place; seeing her like this was tough for her to take after just being reunited, and it brought back difficult memories of when all of them at one point needed to be fished out of some mess, or broken out of some jail cell. Those memories were not kind when rekindled.

“Naomi, why are you so spiteful?” she asked, the sweetness in her voice a tactic to disarm her. Naomi was privy to it, but not immune. Olivia was a soft-spot for the group, after all, and sometimes she was downright manipulative about it.

“Theia knows as well as I, though she plays fool.” Naomi’s eyes narrowed as she kept her calcified expression on the Inquisitor, her former comrade, and now thorn in her shoe.

“Naomi, I haven’t the sincerest clue, and quite frankly, you betray yourself by playing so coy. I remember you and your bluntness as well as any memory of my life. What’s changed?”

Veronica observed the conversation, also interested in why Naomi was diverting away from the meat of it all. Certainly, at this point, her pain and struggle would make her even more straightforward, and not someone who was using questions-as-answers, and deflecting like a Game player.

“Agh,” Naomi growled, turning away and holding her arms under her chest. The sound she made reminded Theia of how Josephine, another fearsome Antivan-born, would grumble with frustration. The prisoner paced anxiously, wanting so badly to be rid of all this. She now wished she had stayed behind and lamented her husband’s death like a hapless widow. Her penchant for action was her curse, like all of theirs.

“I see the way you both have pined and cleaned up after the mess Theia left behind. What of your feelings?” Naomi whipped around, pinning the angst on their two fellow Foxes. “I seem to remember a time when you both were as enraged as I was. Little Theia-Bird, flying out of our nest and leaving us for the crows, right, Veronica?”

Naomi’s words instilled heat in Veronica’s cheeks, and she lowered her chin to gaze at the floor in sensitivity.

Naomi, unsatisfied with such a meek reaction, turned now to the Temptress of their group. “And you, Olive. Crying and inconsolable without your guardian to back your plays in the inns and Manors? Where hath your rage gone? Pummeled into one of your parlor powders?”

Olivia bit her lip, feeling, too, the shame of these memories now being uncovered like relics from a time long since past.

Theia’s heart began to ache, realizing just all the hidden memories she was not there to witness: the images they all carried, and the emotions they had suppressed. Naomi, then, was their champion: the one who held tight to the injustice, canning it and shelving it for a later season.

“Is this why you’re so malicious, then? To gain something back that you think I took from you all?”

“No, Theia, it’s--” Olivia was interrupted by more of Naomi’s venom.

“Of course, you twit. We made a pact, a solid oath, wrought in blood and sweat. Then, when things got tough for you, you scurried off like a child to a matron’s skirts. Faustina cradled your crying ass and you went to the Conclave, ready and willing to sell everything we had down the river. Shame on you, posh, porcelain-painted coward!” Naomi then punched the iron bars, creating a most punishing racking sound that echoed through the chamber. Theia flinched, not out of fear, but of
reckoning.

She eyed Veronica, who in turn had not removed her eyes from the ground. “I see. Well, now that it’s out in the open, we can discuss it and put it to rest like we should have.” Theia resorted to the logic of a leader and a strategist to counteract Naomi’s fierce pathos.

“It needs nothing, now. We all understand just what happened and why it called upon you to leave us behind. We all took our own paths anyway, it was inevitable, surely,” Olivia tried her hardest to smooth other the conflict, but her usual tact was broken and disheveled by the raw pain that lingered in the air.

“No, Naomi is right. This...this was something we harbored, and now, for our sakes, we must deal with it.” Veronica’s words were mournful, sad, and without a clever facade.

“At least one of you still has some courage.”

“Naomi, that is unnecessary,” Veronica spat back. “You think you speak for us all, but you haven’t the faintest idea what Olivia, or I, or even Theia has gone through to survive to this point. You skewer Theia for a martyrdom complex, but you are carrying a bigger sword in your ribs than she is, and she’s the bloody Herald of bloody Andraste!”

Naomi was caught off guard by Veronica’s temper, and it humbled her briefly. Theia, on the other hand, was relieved to finally have gained some context and mercy in the situation.

“My friend,” Theia turned to Naomi, now an adversary in the moment. “There was more to it than my fears, though I admit the life we led began to scare me. I flinched, and I had my reasons, but I did flinch. For that, I am sorry. I had no way of knowing the Conclave would end like it did. For all I knew, it would end, bring peace, and I could return to you all with the good news. I had reason to hope, and then it was obliterated.”

“You still didn’t write, or come back to us even for a day. We waited for weeks in the same region before disbursing like whipped dogs to our corners. You left us with the mess to clean up, while you were housed and exalted like a heroine. Well, Theia, I patched up every limb on your body, stopped you from bleeding out like a slaughtered pig, broke your fevers, sucked poison from your veins. Where’s my heroine story? Where is my pedestal? Who rewards the one who kept the Inquisitor alive while she floundered and tramped through the countryside, a humble rogue Mage ready to murder as any idle criminal?”

The words that were laced with the malice of a scorned woman was enough to level an entire field of matured wheat, and the three Foxes on the other side of the cell barrier felt the shift in gravity.

Theia, eyeing the unlevel, cobblestone floor, felt the flux of guilt in her veins. It was like her bones had become iron, cumbersome and cold. The silence after such a monologue was enough for her to want to turn her whole body into stone.

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“Theia,” Olivia muttered, placing a hand on the back of her friend’s bent elbow, “you do not have to feel ashamed for doing what you felt to be right. We all made poor decisions in our days, to survive. You happened upon something bigger than yourself, and you deserve what you have now.”

The divergence in Olivia’s opinion from Naomi’s temper diced the air.

“It wasn’t like I chose all of this, Naomi. It was a freak accident that aligned me as the unfortunate carrier of this anchor in my hand. It ruined all chance of neutrality for me. I went from being a political prisoner to Inquisitor in what felt like the blink of an eye.”
“You were always so ambitious, so capable,” Naomi mocked, “I wonder what it’s like, having the way paved for you whilst you have not a care in the world for those who have to carry on without you.”

“Naomi,” Veronica approached the cell bars closer now, making empathetic eye contact with her, “this won’t bring Heath back to you. I know you’re hurting, I know this is painful, but Theia did not take him from you.”

Naomi spit, fury in her lips. “You think this is about my slaughtered husband? What, am I some pitiful Bard’s tale, now? You of all people should know the righteousness of my anger, Veronica.”

“I know, I see it and I feel it. But you have carried this infected wound in your heart for a year now. It is time to let go. We have all had to release ourselves from the demons and ghosts of our past. You must do so, too. Think of your conditions as a Mage.”

Veronica’s last comment made Theia’s eyes flicker with interest. It reminded her of something she hadn’t factored in. Her focus was interrupted by more of Naomi’s malevolent arguing.

“I must do nothing. I have come for what I needed. I merely need to be released and sent home. I never wish to see this cursed place again for the rest of my days. For all I care, that blasted arch demon can consume the world.”

“Dear, you certainly don’t mean that.”

“I do bloody mean it, Olivia! For Maker’s sake, must you always drown the situation in honey and stick it on a silver platter for dirty fingers to grab at?”

Suddenly, it all became finally clear to Theia. Seeing the glimmer of uncharacteristic color in Naomi’s brown eyes, the way they simmered with tension and conflict. She turned to Veronica at once, her hands pulling her hair out of her face and up into a makeshift ponytail. “Veronica, get me the keys to her cell.”

Veronica had jogged to and fro from the wall with the hanging cell keys, anxiously returning the set to her friend who without a work unlocked the doors. Naomi stood back, cautiously and like a cornered animal, ready to pounce to protect her life. Theia slipped in, making just enough room in the doorway for her to enter, as if opening the door wide would allow her to escape.

She securely shut it behind her, slipping the keys through one of the holes to Olivia’s awaiting hands. “Naomi, I know you’re in agony,” she said comfortingly, a diversion from what had been her angry and frustrated self.

“Anger does not even begin to describe. I am infuriated, I am distraught, I am ready for my justice.”

“I know. But you must let go. Come to me.”

“Are you mad? Why would I embrace such a manipulative, duplicitous, cowardly…”

“Because, my friend, I love you. Remember our oath? Your injustice is my injustice. Your pain my pain.”

“There you go again, with your machinations.”
Naomi began to side-step, trying to dislodge Theia from her strong stance in front of her. Theia remained undaunted, her feet standing their ground. With no break in her wall of defiance, she saw Naomi begin to sweat with tension and frustration.

It was boiling, now.

“Theia, be caref--” Olivia was interrupted by a strong, but caring hand from Veronica, landing on her shoulder and beckoning her to be quiet. It was then they both knew now just what Theia was after. Olivia’s eyes widened, now even more frightened of what could occur.

Their observant gazes returned to the scene at hand: Naomi, beginning to form tears in her eyes, hunched defensively in her posture.

Theia’s irises began to glow purple, for once though, it was not a welcome sight. She was letting her power brace against what she felt from Naomi’s body: the carnal misery, the undergirded hunger she had let fester in her body against her better judgement. Her body became a host to it.

“Naomi, please. Just come to me. It’ll be alright.”

“No!” she hissed, backing now up against the stone wall.

“If you don’t come willingly, I will come to you, then.”

Before Naomi could reply or build a defense of any kind, Theia rushed into her, wrapping arms tightly around her friend’s restless and aching body. Naomi let out a wrathful scream, like she was being tied down against her will, against something sharp and uncomfortable. Veronica and Olivia watched with bated breath as the violence took a turn.

Theia’s eyes surged with the current she held in her body. Her friend was fighting an inner turmoil, a most insidious consequence of her pain, a Mage’s pain. Feeling her body fighting off her resolute grip, she felt it even more now: the demons, the energies, that had been stalking Naomi for months, guiding her hand, and her blade.

This was not the Healing, caregiver soul she knew. This was a soul tormented by her grief.

“Hold tight, friend,” Theia whispered, a lace of static on her words and between her teeth. Closing her eyes and digging her face into the crook of her friend’s squirming shoulder, she braced.

Then, a sharp pulse of static shock, as if one had grazed a hand across charged fabric causing a pop of overwhelmed energy. Though, it had encapsulated their bodies together, bright and pearlescent purple. Veronica and Olivia braced backwards, Veronica taking hold of Olivia’s hand.

In the air, there was a shrieking sound, and then it multiplied into many. The dispute in Naomi’s body had taken to the air around them, crying out in vain. Theia sent a shock through Naomi’s battered system, the heat of which was the disdain of any and all Despair demons. She felt her friend’s body go limp, as she expected it to -- electrocution was no easy infliction.

She held her upright, straining in her arms and waist to hold her friend’s deadweight as she felt the relief in her frame.

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“Naomi, stay with me,” Theia hummed, stretching out her fingers against her body. Then, sensing the presence of the anger in her, still standing against the onslaught of the heat it was immune to, she bit her lip as she summoned frost up and down her arms and hands. The anchor pulsed with tension, feeling the demonic insurgence and wanting to react. Theia knew the anchor was of no use, so she tried her hardest to focus on the ice she was conjuring as a way to feel some sort of innate
The frost extended from her skin onto Naomi’s, growing and conquering the curvature of her shape through her clothes and into her pores. Another vengeful screeching sound cracked and waned through the cell air.

A moment passed, and then, silence. Feeling the release, the final release, Theia inhaled sharply, retracting the frosted limbs of her powers back into her body. Naomi was now fully unconscious, her head swinging backward from the lack of strength in her. Theia reached a hand to cradle it, and, guiding the weight down towards the cot Leliana had supplied, gently laid her friend out on her back, head against the humble goose-feather pillow.

Olivia, urgently wanting to know if the ritual had succeeded, pulled the door open and hurried inside. Veronica walked in after her, more intrepid.

“Is she alive?!” Olivia cried, going down to her knees next to Naomi’s head and shoulders, placing a hand on her forehead and then against her cheek, feeling for any kind of vital warmth.

“Yes, but she’s weak. They have play around in her body for a while. I think this would have been the tipping point,” Theia crouched next to Olivia, gathering Naomi’s hands onto her abdomen, making her look like she was about to a corpse for the pyre and not a recovering patient.

“Oh, Naomi,” Olivia lamented, resting her hand on her unconscious friend’s shoulder, “she should have told one of us. Being alone with this is the worst possible way to handle it.”

Veronica, standing behind them both and overseeing the fraught sight. “I’m sure she felt the loneliness and it convinced her no one would help her. After all, none of us were particularly contactable.”

“Still, if I had known—”

“Olivia,” Theia said solemnly, turning to her and resting a hand on her friend’s thigh. When she returned her gaze, Olivia knew, much to her chagrin. There was nothing they could take back now, the past was long gone. Now, what was in front of their faces, that was all that mattered.

Feeling forlorn about it all, Olivia pursed her lips, and she leaned her head on Theia’s shoulder and gripping her friend’s upper arm for solace. Theia rest her cheek on the top of her head in return. Her days of being the Foxes’ guardians may not have been over -- they simply shifted and evolved to make room for who she was now.

“It’s alright,” Theia cooed, her eyes instinctively on Naomi as she held Olivia close.

“How are we going to spin this for the Inquisition’s people?” Veronica’s mind was on the logistics, and not simply the sorrow of it all. She thought ahead -- it was what she was good for in a pinch.

“The Commander -- wasn’t he a Templar?” Olivia pulled away to look back at Veronica’s discerning gaze. “He can’t know. If they find out we’re housing a Mage at risk of demonic possession…”

Theia sighed roughly. “They will be livid if they find out I kept this from them. She will be incredibly susceptible in the next 48 hours without her defenses. She needs healers who know what’s at stake, and that will be a liability.”

“Maker, what a bust to have the Healer of the group be the one screwed over,” Veronica began to pace, thinking of what would be the best route. “She’s too fragile and noticeable to transport
undercover. Leliana will fork me down like tonight’s supper meat.”

“She needs to stay. I can oversee her care. Theia, do you have one, maybe two trusted Mage healers who could be sworn to secrecy?”

Theia’s brow furrowed. “I have Anya, she helped me recover from a wound without blabbering off to her friends.”

“Send her my way, then. I can see what I can supply on my own, so the Inquisition legers won’t show any changes in resource supply. Veronica, I need you to make a distraction happen in the mean time. Seduce someone, hunt some wild animal, start a bar fight, anything.” Olivia rose to her feet, decisive with her plan.

“Why do you always pin me with the dirty duties?” Veronica folded her arms.

“Because everyone expects it from you. Theia will bring undue attention if she acts peculiarly.”

“You still gloss over the fact that if this gets out, and I was complicit, it will look like I’m harboring abominations or something,” Theia rose, too, turning to face them both. “How do you suggest I claim deniability?”

“Does anyone know you came down here?” Veronica asked.

“No, not that I know of. Leliana tracks everyone, though.”

“Then, until she’s out of the woods, dodge any and all specific questions. If Leliana interrogates, don’t lie, just neglect the entire truth of it.”

“Veronica, dishonesty with my people has risen sharply since you were conscripted, you know that, right?”

Veronica shook her head. “You know what must be done. To suggest lying is above anyone here on the payroll is ludicrous. You’re merely protecting an innocent, and that is far and away a more noble cause than the vast amount of reasons people have for being here.”

“Don’t insult my people so casually, Veronica. They’re partly responsible for your life.”

“Yes, and the endangerment of it, too.”

Olivia eyed Theia with hopefulness as the two women sparred, pairing Veronica’s tenacity with her softness. It was a most persuasive combination. It almost blocked out the image of an enraged Inquisition Commander busting through any and all doors to find out just why the Inquisitor was hiding possibly demon-corrupted Mages in their own walls, as if she hadn’t proven herself to be a radical sympathizer already. Theia closed her eyes and rubbed her face with both hands -- the closure she had sought out had turned into its own monster.

“Fine. But don’t forget I am still Inquisitor. I have my own duties to oversee besides playing Fox again. Don’t screw this up, Olivia, please. I will send Anya here tonight. If the creatures resurface, tell me at once. I’m the only one of us powerful enough to fend them off.”

“Humble, I see.” Veronica snuck in the jab.

Theia turned to Veronica and her eyes narrowed. “I don’t exchange my powers for men’s cheap blades and call it an equivalency.”
Veronica’s jaw tensed. The suppressed insecurity she had within her body over her lack of dedication to her abilities stung when it was acknowledged out in the open. Theia knew this.

Olivia smiled with relief, trying to lighten up the tense exchange. “Thank you, Theia. I should only need a day or two to really see if she’s saved.”

“You have a day and a half at most, after which I will be forced to make a decision I do not want to make. Please, make this work,” Theia ordered, eyeing her friends one last time, before withdrawing from the cell. As she left, Olivia watched her go, before turning her attention to Naomi.

“Friend,” she said towards her, “what have you gotten yourself into?”
Stolen Sleep

Chapter Summary

Inquisitor Trevelyan is keeping a secret, and while said secret recovers in the Skyhold prison cells, she grows too curious to wait for another day. Troubled and stressed beyond measure, she finds that letting go of past demons is proving more difficult than anticipated. However, in times such as these, one can rely on friends to both complicate and comfort the situation.

A day had passed with a suspicious air of anticipation. The Council meeting was an opportunity for Theia to instill a diversion for her advisors, and cover for Naomi during her recovery. She still feared Leliana knew everything and was holding her tongue, either to see if the Inquisitor would rely upon honesty, or to see how far this would go.

That night, Theia’s concern couldn’t be put to bed. When the middle of the night provided the utmost darkness, she slipped out of Josephine’s slumbering arms and put on some dark and simple resting clothes to help camouflage her as she snuck her way down to the Prisoner’s cells.

There, down in the cold and cavernous chamber, she found Olivia asleep on a cot on the outside of the cell for her own safety. She was bundled in a wool blanket, oddly formal in contrast to her surroundings. Maybe she had went and grabbed it from her own belongings. As she briefly stood over her sleeping friend, she saw an embroidered emblem on an exposed corner of the blanket. They were a series of letters, “C.A.P.C.P.” She only knew one person with such a need for that acronym. But, in that moment, it did not register in her fatigued and preoccupied mind.

Turning her attention to the occupant of the cell across the way, she took the keys beside Olivia and found her way into the cell, slowly and carefully opening and closing the door so as not to create any loud noise which would bring attention. The Prison guards had been dismissed earlier that day using an underhanded request on the Inquisitor’s part -- though, she did not think they would actually do it. It surprised her, and at the same time, left her relieved that this would ensure privacy.

Coming to her friend’s bedside, she saw that she was still unconscious. She immediately felt guilty for inducing such a state, though, the alternative would have been exponentially more torturous. Naomi’s face was peaceful, if not stoic. Her hands still rested on her abdomen where Theia had placed them. She looked freshly cleaned with a washcloth, her hair lightly glistening with lingering moisture. Olivia and Anya were doing their best to ensure her survival and care.

Theia leaned down and sat on the floor beside her, up against the wall and beside Naomi’s head and shoulders. She anchored her elbows on her upward bent knees. Resting her head back on the wall, she rolled her eyes clothes and let out a sigh of duress. This was a most unpleasant business, even if seeing her friends safe and close by had been something she had desired for so long. Naomi’s anger aside, she had missed and longed for her friends even when she had denied seeking them out.

Theia could remember a day back at Haven where the thought occurred to her to send for them, to send Leliana’s trackers after them. She then stopped herself, fearing the trackers would end up dead, or even worse, that they would find her former comrades dead. Perhaps she avoided it because she feared that ultimate disaster: how could she continue on, knowing she had left her first allies, her
friends, for dead? Theia was a brave woman, but she was also curtailed by fears of her own failure.

Her eyes remained closed as she thought back to all those wild memories. Naomi was indeed responsible for patching up the Inquisitor’s ass even when it seemed most hopeless. She had kept her alive and well even when their situation was so sordid, she felt convinced any day would be her last. Always following after Olivia when she did her machinations, tracking and hunting with Veronica so as to ensure she wouldn’t get caught by Templars or bandits. Naomi was always there after the chaos subsided, steady as a horizon line.

Now, she was here, and she was lost in more ways than one.

A voice, aching and gravelled, broke her contemplation in the dark.

“You always sulked like a...a wounded dog, at night,” Naomi, her head tilted to look at her restless friend, eyes slit open ever-so-slightly.

“Naomi,” Theia hummed, not looking surprised, but on the inside ready to dance in reckless celebration. She tilted her head, too, towards her friend on her cot. “I am so sorry.”

“Theia,” Naomi breathed, “you have nothing to be sorry for.”

“I do, I really, I--” she didn’t expect it so suddenly, but tears began to well around her purple irises that were steeping in remorse. She bit her lip as she felt her voice crack and ache. “I cannot forgive myself for leaving you to suffer like this.”

Naomi managed to shift the weight in her chest, settling in more comfortably even in her weakness. The windowless chambers underground yielded little light for them to see each other fully, but the light that had bounced off one remaining torch in the hall was just enough for Naomi to see the tears form.

“Theia,” she whispered, “demons had come for me long before you...you ever ran away.”

The Inquisitor’s brow furrowed with sadness as she turned to look at her, a gasp under her breath at the admittance. How long before? Was she still with them when they began tempting her and seeping into her subconscious? Why didn’t she say anything?

“I don’t understand.”

“I…” Naomi took a breath, feeling the frailty in her frame and muscles. “When they first sent me to the Circle, I was reckless in my powers. I was so in love with it, even when...when they tried...to teach me to h-hate myself. They threatened…” she gulped, feeling dryness in her throat, “they wanted to make me tranquil, so as to preempt any danger I could p-pose to the Circle and to the Tem...Templars.” she swallowed again, head resting heavily on her pillow.

Theia’s eyes widened in horror. Naomi had never told this story, not to anyone, and now she was hearing it after all this time. It was a wonder they never knew or picked up on such a history with her, she had done such a masterful job of putting on this facade of a well-meaning and pragmatic Mage who always wanted to be a Healer.

“So, what stopped them?”

Naomi blinked with heavy eyelids, before her gaze reconnected with Theia’s sorrowful eyes.

“I offered to dedicate myself...to healing...and I proved my worth. In return for saving...someone’s life, I was allowed to remain unchanged.”
“Who’s life did you save?”

“...cannot say.”

Theia let her legs rest straight now. She was puzzled, but, perhaps some details must always remain secrets. Naomi had managed to keep her truth close to her chest for this long, maybe for her sake, she deserved to have some dignity remain.

“I wish you would have sought any of us out, when you knew it was this bad. I know it can be hard, but, surely you knew I would never turn you away.”

“I...I didn’t trust the Inquisition. Not until you brought in the Mages, they...they needed you. But, by that...time, I had already allowed...my anger...to set in.”

Theia sighed. “So there was nothing we could have done, except now?”

Naomi looked at her, a face of apologetic agreement. She had spent too long stifling what was coming for her soul, and when the time came to choose whether or not she would seek out her former allies or let them control her moods, that was when Heath was murdered. His death crossed the line for her, and it felt as though the following months were all an enraged and bloodthirsty fever dream.

Now, feeling the most at peace as she had been in a long time, she finally felt able to look at her life with some clarity. Well, when she could have time to recover from all of this.

“I...will always be a...liability,” she said bittersweetly.

“That’s not true at all, Naomi. We can support you, give you a purpose, you can move on.”

“I have been...haunted...for y-years. This is only buying me time.”

Theia’s jaw began to clench as she felt the impasse they were heading towards, and she was not having any of it. Naomi being so resigned in her doom was everything Theia had always dreaded when it came to any of her friends: not being able to help, not being able to convince them of their value. She was responsible, she was the defender, but how could she do that when the lives she was protecting refused to believe in their own worth?

“You cannot...have me here...they would never....never...allow it.” she cleared her throat weakly, feeling at the end of her energies for talking. She knew Theia would want to anger until the sun rose about this, but now was not the time.

“I need...rest, Theia. You should return to...to your bed. I am alive,” she said once more.

Theia’s eyes were increasing with tear production, and she rubbed her face with her hands, resisting the urge to growl and wake up dear Olivia. She hid her face for a moment, trying to recollect her thoughts, refocus her opinions. Naomi was silent and demure about something she should have been honest about, dammit. Maybe then this could have been avoided. She felt betrayed by her friend’s self-preservation.

“Fine. But this is not the end of this,” Theia grumbled, motioning to rise to her feet. As she did so, she saw out of the corner of her eye that Naomi’s hand was fidgeting. Now on her feet, she turned and watched it: Naomi was trying to grasp for her, to comfort her.

Theia blinked harshly, trying to scare away more tears from her eyes as she placed her hand on Naomi’s wrist, stilling her. Their eyes met again, and Naomi’s heart ached seeing Theia’s tearful
paleness in the scarce firelight.

“I mean it, Naomi. This is not the end,” she said, her voice cracking with crying.

“Shh,” Naomi stuttered, “go to….go so sleep,” she sighed with difficulty.

Theia nodded in obedience, pulling away and feeling every bone in her body disagree with her detachment. She made her way through the door again, agonizing over not making a sound. Turning to see Olivia, still fast asleep, she held her breath and felt her chest tense with misery. She wanted to break down, sob like a child, and let go. But she was needed, her strength was needed. Damn it all.

She placed the keys back where she found them. Just before she was going to walk out the door and back into her bed chambers up levels from where this all was, she cursed under her breath. This was so terrible, this was so painful.

Rethinking her choice, she went to the side of Olivia’s cot, and pulled at the blanket. She heard Olivia groan in reaction to the disturbance, and she looked over her shoulder to see Theia standing above her, looking like a child who had experienced a nightmare.

“T-Theia? What…?” she groaned, rubbing her sleepy eyes.

“Olivia…” her voice cracked again, her cheeks soaked with salted tears. When her friend realized the depth of her emotional pain in the moment, she lurched up.

“Oh, sweet thing,” she whispered, pulling out the blankets, “come here.”

Theia crawled and tucked herself as best she could -- thank the Maker Olivia was petite in comparison to her tall and muscular frame -- and curled herself towards her friend. As they split the one pillow she had, Olivia nestled back into between the covers, their foreheads touching as she rubbed Theia’s arms.

Theia’s eyes were half-closed as she tried to compose herself.

“I don’t know what I am doing, Olivia. I am failing everyone,” she cooed, her throat thickening with the feeling of weeping.

“Shh,” Olivia replied, sweetly kissing her friend’s forehead, before slipping an arm underneath Theia’s shoulder and pulling her into an embrace. “You are doing so well, my dear.”

Theia nestled her head into the crook of Olivia’s nimble shoulder, feeling the bony nature of her frame and being comfortable in its hold all the same. She felt her friend start to stroke her hair. Being cradled by a woman 5 inches shorter than her was proving more comforting than she would have estimated.

“You lie well,” Theia sniffled.

“I do not. It’s actually my worst talent,” Olivia cooed.

“Why did I leave you? Why am I such a coward?”

Olivia tightened her hold on her dear friend, feeling so sorry and sympathetic to her in her time of grief. Olivia had spent many a night abroad, wayward and not knowing where her next meal was coming from, hating herself for the same reasons. She knew what it was like to loathe yourself for doing what was necessary for survival. It took time, but eventually she accepted her past choices, and now she wished Theia would do the same.
“You are the bravest of all of us, Theia-Bird. Hush up with your nonsense,” she said, a melancholic grin on her lips as she spoke.

“Hmph,” she heard Theia huff.

Olivia rustled on her side of the single-person cot, adjusting the way the blankets fit around her body and tucking her bare feet underneath, feeling her toes grow cold. “What are any of us but a bunch of siren Mages who’s misadventures toy with men’s emotions and spurn Empires to have disdain for our existences.”

Theia inhaled with emotional exhaustion on her tongue. “I suppose a bunch of fools, for one. Pretty little fools.”

“But, pretty, nonetheless.”

Theia grinned on one side of her mouth. “Is that all we should aspire to, then?”

Olivia cozied her face into her pillow. “Certainly not, my dear. We should be a hardened warrior, a leader of an Inquisition, a beguiling assassin, an overly-romantic potion master, and a talented healer with the best intentions.”

Theia stayed quiet, chewing on the point Olivia was trying to make. They had done more than survived, even when it felt they were hip-deep in the consequences of their haphazard choices. They had made people of themselves, stuck by their convictions, and found ways to preserve their virtues even when the odds were stacked against them.

“I hear you overthinking, Theia. It is the truth. Now, dry those tears of yours before they freeze over like that one time,” Olivia’s grin expanded, picturing such a hilarious memory.

Theia couldn’t help but smirk, wiping her face on the pillow cover. “I swear, it was an accident,” she giggled under her breath.

“You looked like an ice Queen,” Olivia giggled, too, but was louder. She was always bad at concealing her silliness. The two women shared a brief concert of giggles and sly smiles, feeling embraced by their memories.

“Olivia?” Theia said once they had calmed down. Her friend, eyes closed as she was beginning to desire sleep once more, hummed in return, as if to say what is it, my dearest beloved friend?

“Wear exactly did this blanket come from?”

Olivia gave a cheeky smile with no teeth as she placed a hand on Theia’s face.

“Shhh shh, you’re upset, my dear, close those eyes and find rest.”

Theia, smirking as she slapped her friend’s hand away, cozied into the sheets and sighed. “I see, well, I’ll ask again in the morning.”
An Olive Branch

Chapter Summary

Theia is faced with a choice in light of Naomi's condition: to keep the truth of her frailty under wraps, and out of reach for the Inquisition's allies to deliberate, or to confess and hope for allegiance and collaboration. Either way, her decision to protect her friend will place her in an aggravated opposition to her Commander, and will prove whether or not the loyalty she has to her past has remained fortified after all this time and struggle.

Before dawn broke, Theia made her withdrawal from the prisoners quarters and back to her own private one. Olivia had scarcely slept more than a sparse couple of hours, and her keen attention towards Naomi as she remained unconscious made sleep feel too indulgent. When Theia left, the last thing she saw was Olivia preparing more medicine on the floor with nothing but her own lap, a pale of water, and the magic in her body to make do. The Healers could only spare so much without it drawing attention.

She wondered how they would take it if Naomi’s condition took a turn, and it made her head and heart hurt. When she found her way back to bed, she found Josephine soundly asleep, though her outstretched arms towards Theia’s side of the bed let her know that her body and warmth were both missed.

She crawled in, just enough to lay flat on her back with the blanket over her torso, and kept her mind busy with her anticipatory thoughts.

Leliana’s caveat from a time that felt so long ago echoed in her mind: “Whatever you say, I only ask for honesty. Your truth will not break my respect for you, your dishonesty will.”

Telling the Spymaster, and perhaps one of the most sympathetic people in the Inquisition toward Mage conditions, about her imprisoned friend who was susceptible to demonic possession at any given hour felt like the true test of that unspoken promise made between them. They had been stretched thin before, but not like this. Electing to not only keep her, but assimilate her into the Inquisition ranks for the sake of her own protection? She could only imagine the concert of objections.

She is a danger to everyone and herself, she must be sent away!

If people were to hear that we have not only allied with the Rebel Mages, but are housing would-be abominations, it would damage the hard-won esteem and clout we have managed to construct for ourselves!

Darling, it is rather unfortunate, but innocent life must be protected. Do as your conscience as a leader dictates, and not that of an emotionally compromised young girl.

None of this was to be born.

Hearing Josephine roll a bit, groaning softly as she began to awake, Theia grinned softly. She must make quick work of this, if she were to do it at all. Rising from the bed, she made her way to her dresser and carefully pulled clothes to wear for the day. Josephine had stirred, but she did not rise. It
gave her enough time to slip out of her nightdress and into her smallclothes, followed by her breeches and underlayer which would be tethered in her vest. Finishing up the last straps and the belt on her waist, she combed her fingers through her tousled hair. It would have to do for now -- business started early on this day.

Once she had snuck out of her chambers, it was a rather unceremonious walk from her wind of the Hall, through the series of doors and the revolving stairs of the library tower, to the Raven’s nest. It was early -- the sky a powdered blue with a paired chill that made the fog of her breath show -- but it was late enough to catch Leliana in the midst of her morning prayers at her altar.

Hands anxiously palmed against the front of her thighs, Theia took a breath as she approached. Her presence was felt, of course, and thus no surprise. Leliana halted her whispering incantations and peered from her periphery.

“Hello, Leliana,” Theia was the first to speak, coming to stand a mere few feet away from where Sister Nightingale had bent onto one knee.

“Inquisitor, what do I have the pleasure of your company for, this early in the day?” she asked as she lowered her gloved hands to her side. Rising to her feet, she turned to face her head-on, the soft candlelight illuminating the sides of their thoughtful expressions.

“It...concerns Naomi,” Theia’s fatigue meant her trademark wit and circuitous remarks were barren today. The weight of her heart and her mind took precedence.

“My men spotted you wandering down to check on her in the night, though I assumed it was merely the choice of a doting friend. Is she well?”

“She...is alive. The fact that I cannot say much more is the reason I have come to you. May we step aside?” Theia gestured towards the bench by the window. The pain in her eyes told Leliana that the request better be followed, lest she cause further distress.

(Of course,” she answered, before walking to the wooden bench and taking a seat. Theia followed after her, her knees kept together as she took her place.

“Leliana, I...” Theia’s chest tensed a bit, and she tried to steady herself. “Naomi is...she is not like Circle Mages our age. She was brought to Ostwick under suspicious circumstances, ones which ended up being far more serious than any of us knew. This morning, when I visited her, I had to…” she took another breath, her hand rubbing her jaw. “I had to exorcise her.”

Leliana’s brow raised, and for someone who was usually level in her reactions, that said something. She tilted her shoulders more towards Theia, anchoring her forearm across her thigh. “How is it you did so successfully?”

“I do not know. All I know is that I tried, and it seemed to work. But, Leliana...she never endured a Harrowing ceremony. She never did because she was deemed too unstable to survive it. When they brought her to us, she was supposed to be executed. In return for her life, she promised never to practice high-level enchanting or combat. That is why she is a Healer. That is why she is so susceptible. Her Harrowing would have been a death sentence.”

Leliana, usually quiet and precise, let out a soft sigh. “My goodness.”

Theia took a breath and straightened her posture. Her hands clasped fingers tensely on her lap. “I know if Cullen, or anyone else were to find out, she would be cast out or worse. But, for the life of me, I cannot oversee either of those things. She is one of my dearest friends, she kept me alive when
nothing else could. It is because of her that I stand here now.”

“Then why was she at Halamshiral, if she is so fragile and predisposed to possession?”

“Her husband was murdered by Venatori, and she sought revenge. It was not simply her volition -- the demons had co-opted her grief and propelled her to do so. She had more anger for me than I had ever known or suspected, to the point where she was almost malicious. Naomi was never malicious to anyone or anything in her life. That is how I knew.”

Talking about it made Theia feel closer to tears than she originally anticipated, and it compelled her to quiet down. Her face was deadpan to protect the truth of her emotions.

Leliana remained quiet for a moment, staring off into the space in front of them as she processed all this new information. Despite her penchant for omniscience, she had respected the Inquisitor’s boundary line; none of her men were in the prisoner’s quarters all night, giving Theia and her companions the privacy they needed. Now, as these details came to light, she felt righteously rewarded for it.

“You have kept to our agreement with a most genuine dedication, Inquisitor, and for that I am grateful,” she admitted after a moment. “And I feel compelled to help you in whatever it is you deem appropriate as a resolution. That is, if it considers the safety and survival of the Inquisition and its people.”

Theia felt her stomach flip. So, Leliana would pledge assistance, after all. That meant, though, that she needed to have a plan in place. She had scarcely gotten far enough in her mindset to have one on hand, much to her chagrin at her lack of faith in her own Spymaster.

“The plan...the plan, is well, keep her alive and with me and the girls as much as possible. I do not have much else in mind, at the moment. I am running on little to no sleep and an ocean’s worth of survivor’s guilt.”

Leliana chuckled sweetly, reaching a hand and resting it on the Theia’s shoulder. “You and me, both, Inquisitor.”

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The morning Council meeting would prove an interesting one -- but then again, when did it not? As Leliana and Theia entered side-by-side, alluding to the fact that they had met beforehand, Cullen and Josephine looked on with varying degrees of curiosity.

“Good morning,” Josephine grinned as she finished a line of writing on her parchment.

“Yes, good morning, everyone,” Leliana grinned as she rounded the edge of the council table, taking her place and departing from the Inquisitor’s side. That left Theia standing as she always did, alone on one side and ready for the brunt of the day’s matters.

“I trust your first night back at Skyhold was a restful one, Inquisitor?” Cullen made smalltalk, a well-meaning smile on his lips. As Theia gazed back at him, she couldn’t help but feel sore and self-conscious that she was probably about to wipe that expression clean off his face and attitude for the day.

“It was...well, it was something,” she sighed, folding her arms. As her eyes scanned the table she made passing eye contact with Josephine. Josephine, who knew Theia had stolen away from bed in the night, who could assume it was to tend to Naomi’s imprisonment and perhaps other secretive behaviors. Though, she would not indict the Inquisitor out in the open air amongst fellow advisors,
just the fact that Theia knew she could was enough to make her feel all the more aggravated.

As silence filled the room, Theia knew she had to make a decision: tell the Council and defy the agreement she made with her friends, or keep it and defy the plan she had made with Leliana. She trusted Leliana’s judgement more than most anything, but then again, the girls had trusted her ability to protect them like she always had done. If this would fall apart, and Naomi would be forced into danger, she wouldn’t be able to forgive herself. She struggled with it enough as it was, knowing that her friends suffered in her absence a year ago -- an absence which would change the course of their lives forever.

“I have to make an announcement, as well as a series of orders, before we are to start this meeting,” she said as she placed her hands on her hips. Rolling her shoulders back a bit to remind herself of her confidence, she scanned each other their faces before she lowered the boom.

“My friend, Naomi, is currently ailing from a very serious illness. Should she recover, I would like her to be enlisted into the service of the Inquisition as one of our senior healers. If she doesn’t…” she paused, stiling herself, “well, my announcement will matter little.”

“What has she taken ill with, Inquisitor?” Josephine asked, her chin tilted.

“She…” Theia nervously glanced in Cullen’s direction, noting the authentic concern and compassion on his face -- she was skeptical of how deep it went. “Naomi has had a difficult life, and has had this condition for most of it. If she manages to heal, it will still prove worrisome, but my concern for right now is that she lives.”

“Inquisitor,” Cullen spoke, now. “Is she not a Mage from the same Circle you were assigned to?”

“Yes, we all are from Ostwick.”

“And she is a Healer?”

“Yes, that was her specialty. She practiced diligently for years, secluded from the rest of us for most of it.”

Cullen’s eyes widened a bit. “Is she the Mage they…”

Theia locked eyes with him in that moment, and at once she realized the unfortunate nature of Templar exploitation: it was all interconnected, and came with a rather communicative grape vine of gossip. She did not know enough of the outside world during their time in the Circle to assume Naomi would have had any kind of reputation or aura of mystique around her.

“Cullen, she was--”

“She was taken in after almost destroying an entire section of a port city. They transported her from Antiva all the way to the Free Marches so that she would be removed from densely-populated areas. They called her the Antivan Abomination-in-Waiting, in reports.”

Theia’s could feel her heart almost stop beating. Cullen’s inciting of Naomi’s objectification spurred her viscerally to anger. “Did they also say she was orphaned from a young age, forced to live and process her powers on her own for years before anyone paid enough attention to her?!”

“No need to argue, everyone,” Leliana calmly intervened, tilting in the direction of Cullen’s side of the table. “There will be substantial safety measures set in motion should she recover and report for duties.”
“How can there be safety measures for a demonically possessed Mage?!” Cullen whipped his head around to stare back at her. “There is no recovering a Mage’s soul from that kind of damnation. Her sentence would be death, unequivocally, unless we allow her free reign to murder and destroy everything we have built!”

Josephine, feeling her physical position as the mediator between Leliana and Cullen, who had now represented two spectrum ends of political and social sympathies, took her chance. “Leliana has the best interests of all those in the Inquisition without reproach, Commander. If she and the Inquisitor have devised precautions, I think it best if we consider the sensitivities in the situation. She is, after all, the Inquisitor’s friend and not simply a wanderess.”

“Friendship does not mean anything to demons, nor does precaution,” Cullen growled a bit, now. Theia matched his energetic conviction as she stepped closer to the rim of the table.

“I saved her from the brink, and I cannot abandon her now. Not again,” she asserted as her voice grew deeper with resentment.

“You have taken care not to abandon every Rebel Mage who has entered out gates, Inquisitor. Where does the line get drawn in the sand? When innocent people are murdered because we allowed them to be exposed to a Mage without proper control of herself?”

“Cullen, all of us are a danger to one another in some regard, as well as to ourselves. You must trust me, Naomi is not the kind of person to be thoughtless as to the security of those around her. She has cared for me when no one else could. I owe my life to her, and you owe her your Herald of Andraste!”

The room went quiet as all four people exchanged tense glances. Theia was not backing down -- she had gambled with the trust of the girls and she would not walk away with anything less than a consensus that she could take back to them with relief. Leliana had remained stoic throughout this initial argument, but now she took it as her turn to negotiate.

“Commander, we all understand your reasons for hesitance here. After all, no one is asserting that Mages are completely benign in their potential to hurt people or even kill them. I believe this is more a matter of trusting our leader, and our people, to ensure responsible provisions in these times that are so uncertain. All of Thedas is shaking down to its foundations, and it is time we all learn to negotiate new proximities to one another that have previously been forbidden. The fears we have developed for each other and the unknown must not defeat our abilities of compassion, for the Maker bestowed both upon our consciences.”

Josephine flashed a grin in her friend’s direction, clueing into her agreement. “My sentiments, exactly.”

Theia and Cullen had been too busy staring down one another to fully embrace Leliana’s poignant monologue. Cullen wished he could find the words to express himself without antagonizing the Inquisitor based on her age and relative inexperience. He also wanted to remain professional, but such things were near impossible for a man compelled to reject the possibility of abominations on account of his trauma and personal injuries.

Plus, putting a Mage out on account of a Commander’s personal biases was the antithesis of the leader he wished to be. Theia as a leader, however, had proven a most difficult and ongoing test of that commitment.

“You would subject the Inquisition forces to her possible violence, knowing the full extent to which she is vulnerable?” he asked, a rigid monotone in his voice.
“I subject you and the forces to the possibility of my violence as a Mage, Commander, and yet these walls still stand tall.”

“A Mage who has endured her Harrowing is different than one shut away like a raw, untamed resource to exploit,” he grumbled in return.

“Naomi is anything but raw and untamed. If she is fortunate enough to survive, she may prove it to you herself.”

Josephine set down her clipboard of parchment and her quill, electing to have her hands free as she tactfully persuaded the fissure to close itself. “Commander, Inquisitor, I believe it best if we agree to respect one another’s position on the matter and suspend final judgment until we know of whether the young woman will make a recovery. There is no harm in allowing an ailing soul to heal.”

“Exactly,” Leliana agreed, “I say we allow her a couple more days to recuperate, before we finalize protocol.”

“Fine, but on my word if anything happens from it—”

“That will be a word too many, Commander. Thank you,” Theia interrupted, squashing the lingering hostility. If there were to be a curt last word to the conversation, it would come from her mouth and her mouth alone. They two strained allies gave each other one final glance of strained patience, before Theia turned to face the table once more.

“Now, if we may get on with the morning’s business.”

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From one tumultuous room to another, Theia eventually found the time in the early afternoon to visit the prisoner’s chambers. Once again, she saw Olivia upright and hard at work measuring glasses and servings of medicines for Naomi to sustain herself. Approaching with a soft, sympathetic grin, Theia caught her eye.

“Theia-Bird,” Olivia grinned, dusting her hands off as she stepped away from her cot as her makeshift work table, “any word?”

“Yes, actually,” Theia came to stand at her side, peering into the cell to see Naomi still sleeping. As she watched her, her face grew sad.

“She is stable,” Olivia instinctively comforted, “I have felt no interruptions of disruptions in her magic all day. Her face has also relaxed, as if she may be finally resting.”

“That is a relief to hear. Do you think she may wake up soon?”

“I am not sure. You remember our textbooks -- demonic possession was a singular outcome. It is hard to know for sure what will become of her given she has staved off possession so many times, now. She is an anomaly,” Olivia admitted as she wiped her forehead with the side of her wrist, her hair tangled up in a bun with a long strip of fabric securing its shape.

“Damn,” Theia sighed, folding her arms. “I suppose Veronica has visited, then?”

“Yes, several times. She is suspicious, Leliana seems to be more permissable with her breaks than she usually is. You wouldn’t happen to know anything about that?” Olivia eyed her with a raised brow. She has suspected Theia had gone back on her oath to Veronica for ultimate, unionized solidarity, but she did not disclose it to Veronica herself. She elected to wait for the admonition to
come from Theia’s own mouth.

“Leliana...well.” Theia made eye contact with Olivia, and her soft hazel eyes disarmed her penchant for detachment. “I did tell her. I had too much to lose in betraying the trust of my Spymaster, Olivia. But it ended up helping our cause in the end; Leliana helped me lobby for the Council to grant an extension on Naomi’s stay.”

“You told the entire council?!” Olivia’s eyes widened and her lips parted. Midway through her response she had to stifle her yell so as to leave Naomi undisturbed in her resting. “Theia, the Commander knows her circumstance?”

“Yes, but he has promised to withhold judgement until we know if she is to live. I had to make do, Olivia, I cannot simply be a Mage in the wild anymore.”

“But he may yet decide he can still be a Templar who can take Mages’ lives into his own hands and claim it to be the good of the innocent,” Olivia hissed a bit, placing her hands on her hips. “Theia, you gamble so liberally for someone who claims to have so much to lose.”

“It is because I have so much to lose that I make the gambles no one else can afford, Olivia. Naomi has not only my protection, but Leliana’s and Josephine’s, and even Cullen’s by obligation. She will be safer here than anywhere else in Thedas.”

“I hope, for your sake as well as hers, that your risk pays a reward, then.”

The two women stared at each other, sorry expressions of anxiety on their faces. Theia presented a confident facade, but underneath the veneer she was grinding her teeth hoping and praying her risk would bear fruit. She did not need another reason for her friends to break from her loyalty forever. Even as Olivia proved sympathetic, she knew all people had their limits.

She would hate to realize theirs, after all this time and struggle.

“As for you, Olivia, I have some news.”

“Yes?” Olivia sighed, “Is it Lady Adalia and my most devout Lord calling for my return?”

Theia smirked, shaking her head. “Yes, but they are amiable still. I have written personally for an extension of your visit, and the personal touch humbles even the most possessive nobles. You are to remain here for a fortnite more at the bare minimum, and I have granted you a post in the study tower to practice Apothecary work.”

Olivia’s golden hazel irises illuminated, a response to her heart skipping a beat with awe. “Theia, you are teasing my sensibilities after so many hours awake with Naomi, aren’t you?”

“Certainly not, Gem, I would never think to lead you astray. You have a place here, and work with compensation. That is, if you wish to accept.”

Olivia started to giggle, placing a hand to her mouth as she stifled the noise. “Oh, Theia, nothing could keep me from it short of the Maker’s hairy hands!” she then reached and threw her arms around Theia’s shoulders, hugging her close. Theia wrapped her arms around her waist, also chuckling in the face of Olivia’s joy. It was a welcomed respite from the tension of the day, seeing her friend elated at new opportunities. At least she could provide this for her, amidst all this sorrow.

As they hugged, Olivia rest her cheek on Theia’s shoulder and smiled. “Together again, and up to no good, huh?” she teased.
Theia smiled crookedly, rubbing her friend’s back. “Always and for eternity, my friend.”

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